

STOLEN RUSH

LOST DAUGHTER OF A
SERIAL KILLER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

C.M. STUNICH

Finding out you're the daughter of a
millionaire true crime novelist isn't all it's
cracked up to be.

When I was two, I was kidnapped.
Kidnapped by a loving family, sure, but still
kidnapped.

Now, my biological mom wants me to live
with her on the opposite side of the country.

Her ... and my new stepdad and his jerk of
a son: Parrish.

Wannabe tattoo artist, languorous rich boy,
pouty mouth.

Starting a new life on the West Coast sucks,
especially when there's no love lost between
me and my new family.

Oh, and my biological father? Did I
mention that he's a serial killer who wants
me to play his games?

Find the right clues, follow the right trail, or
someone I love gets hurt.

But what if he's just kidnapped someone I
hate instead?

Parrish Vanguard is a royal asshole.

The question is: does he deserve to die?

With the help of Parrish's best friends—
Maxx and Chasm—I have to risk
everything to save a boy who considers
himself my sworn enemy. Even if I save his
ass, he'll never thank me.

Lucky for him that our love-hate
relationship isn't a deal breaker.

I'll play, Dad.

Start the game.

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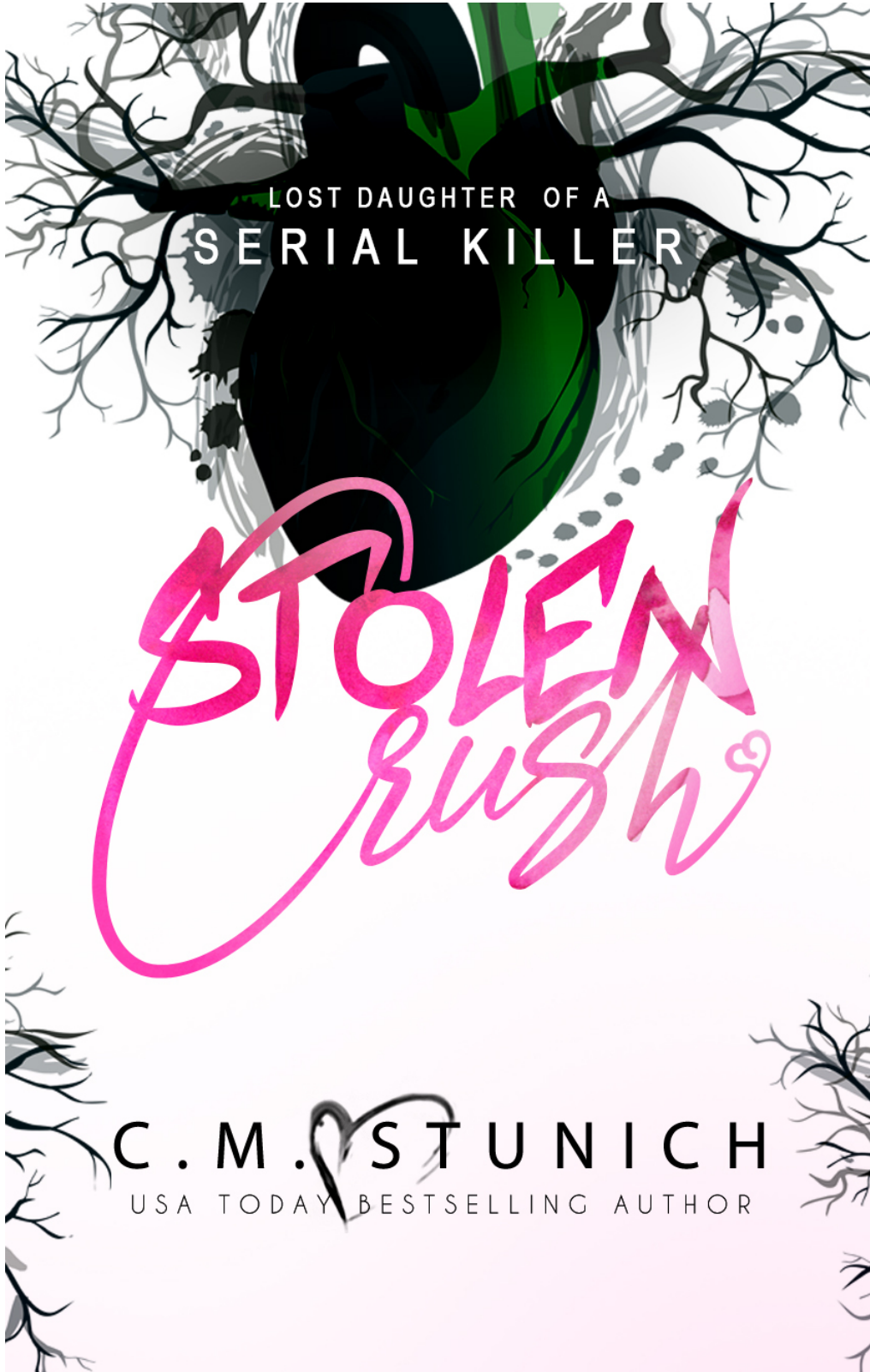
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Stolen Crush

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this book is dedicated to the following kick-ass humans:

(in no particular order)

Charlotte, if you're going through hell, keep going

Jordan, for the phrase 'question mark' (did I just say 'question mark' aloud?!)

*Sara, the strongest and most honest human alive
as well as Alyssa, Abby (the pupper), Jane, and Bailey.*

thank you.

also, goodbye RMF.

break the cycle, please.

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There's always a sense of dread in me when I think about the box.

I try not to think of the box very often.

“Don't do it,” Chasm warns, his shadow falling long across me and the old wooden box, the one that smells curiously like old pennies. That was the same day I realized that I was into more than one boy, that my crushes were multiplying as quickly as the secrets coming down on me like rain. Sometimes, often enough, that memory is obscured when I recall the contents of the box. “Dakota.”

I should've listened to Chasm, the boy whose name wasn't really his name at all. The boy calling me by a name that wasn't really mine at all. My second crush, just weeks before I realized who my third was. Murders and crushes. I think that's how I'll always remember high school.

Gamer Girl versus Serial Killer.

There's a creak as I lift the lid up, a smell that's almost a taste, like metal, like copper. Like blood. At the bottom of the box, there she is. The Vanguard's maid. It might've been cliché if it weren't so sad.

“Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit,” Chasm murmurs, just before throwing up into the bushes. I almost envy him for his ability to react in that moment, to let his emotions overwhelm him. He acts like an asshole, but really, he's a sweetheart. Parrish is the asshole. *Parrish*. The boy who's missing. The boy who

became family then lover then stolen, in what felt like an instant.

The lid slams shut, just barely missing my gloved fingers.

“I told you not to open it! Are you goddamn insane?!”

Why does each breath after that have to taste like blood? What does my father want? What need is he fulfilling by ensuring that I’ll corrupt myself with every step, that I’ll sink lower and lower, that I’ll do the unthinkable? *Wow, Dakota, are you seriously considering going through with this crap?*

I’d never hated myself more than I did in that one moment.

“Help me move this,” I deadpan, even as Chasm is pacing and cursing at me in Korean.

“What the hell is wrong with you? I’m not fucking touching that thing.” He points to the wooden box with his own gloved hand. “You really want to drop a dead body on someone’s doorstep? You think that’s a good idea?”

There’s only a breath of hesitation between his question and my answer.

“Yes,” I tell him, and I mean it. “Yes, I do.”

Love.

I am so in love. I also hate Parrish. Somehow, both of those things are true simultaneously.

And that’s the long and short of it, right? Love ... is a double-edged sword.

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CHAPTER 1

Three months earlier ...

Today is undoubtedly the worst day of my life.

I thought the day I found out that I'd been kidnapped as a child would qualify for the top spot. Instead, it's today, the first day at my new house in Washington state, about as far away from my home in Catskills, New York as geographically possible.

The black Mercedes we're riding in pulls up to a gate outside of a towering three-story mansion. It looks like a white cube with too many eyes, its numerous windows overlooking Lake Washington. With its flat roof and starkly modern aesthetic, it's the exact opposite of the 1830s farmhouse that I grew up in.

It's also surrounded by reporters.

I shrink down in the back seat, taking comfort in the tinted windows and doing my best to avoid the flash of cameras, the waving of cell phones, and the raucous chatter that's haunted me for the better part of the last six weeks. Six weeks of pure, unadulterated hell.

The gate slides open and the car rolls forward, leaving the flock of reporters and influencers behind a wall of stark metal pickets.

"Well, we're here," Tess Vanguard says, pulling into the four-car garage as I struggle to take in a shuddering breath. I suppose I should call her *Mom*, right? Considering she gave birth to me. But then again, I was stolen from a daycare center when I was two years old, and I don't remember anything

about her except the smell of her perfume. The moment she walked into my grandparents' house, and I took a deep breath, I felt it in my bones: *she's telling the truth*.

When I was two, I was kidnapped, abducted, taken away from her.

I remember none of it.

All I know is that one day, my life in New York was perfect and easy and comfortable, and the next ...

"I want you to think of this place as home," Tess says, looking up at the rearview mirror and doing her best to smile at me. Her face says she's exhausted, but then, so am I. And she's the one that wanted this, for me to come and live with her, when I was perfectly happy where I was. She also pursed her lips and sighed when I refused to sit in the front seat, choosing to curl up in the back instead and watch the airport fade into the distance.

My last connection to home.

Tess can call the hulking multimillion-dollar mansion whatever she wants, but home will always be twenty-two-hundred square feet of wide plank floors, funny little built-ins, and a kitchen that always smelled like Grandpa's cooking.

This is not home, and it never will be.

I'm trying not to be a bitter pill though, so I force a smile as I open the door and step out onto the shiny epoxied floors. My stomach lurches with nerves as I haul my backpack up my shoulder and wish with all my heart that I was at home helping my best friends Sally and Nevaeh pick out their outfits for Ryan's party on Friday. Ryan was the boy I had a crush on before I was dragged into this mess. Likely, I'll never see him again.

"Right this way, sweetie," Tess tells me, heading for a side door and opening it for me. She stands aside, waiting for me to step onto the white marble floors in my hand-me-down sneakers. They used to belong to my older sister, Maxine. Well, the girl I *thought* was my older sister anyway. Learning that I was kidnapped as a child by some crazy woman and

given to her parents to raise meant that I wasn't actually Maxine's little sister. That's the part of this whole thing that hurts the most.

I move into the house and stop short in the cavernous entryway. Everything in this house is white. I mean, truly. It's white-on-white-on-white. Sterile. Empty. And almost everything is *square* and *sharp*. My stomach lodges in my throat as I look up at the only organic shape in the room: the curving staircase with its metal bars, like a jail cell. That's what it feels like in here: a gilded cage.

"Who the fuck are you?" a voice asks, drawing my attention away from the staircase and over to the doorway across from me. It seems to lead into a kitchen/living room area of some sort, but it's impossible to take note of any of that because there's a shirtless guy standing in front of me, covered in tattoos, and holding a half-gallon of milk at his side. The carton has a picture of a teenager on the side with the words *MISSING CHILD* printed above her head. That's what I am. Me. A 'missing child'. "And what are you doing in my house?"

"Parrish," Tess warns, her tone maternal and familiar but harsh at the same time. "Knock it off. This is your sister ... *Dakota*." She chokes on that last word a bit, but I guess I can't blame her. It's the name my kidnapper gave me, not the one she did.

Parrish—apparently this is the hot shirtless guy's name—has an expression on his face that tells me he couldn't give two craps less what Tess has just said. He knows exactly who I am and why I'm here. His words are meant to inflict pain: *I know who you are, and I don't care; I don't want you here.*

I just stare back at him.

His eyes are almond-shaped, the color of hazelnuts with a splash of honey, and his mouth is full and lush, if not a little sharp at the edges, like he practices speaking cruel things on a regular basis. His hair is thick and wavy, a feast of dark chocolate, with a few naturally sun-bleached bits that tangle

around his forehead. He looks mussy and tired and pissed all the way off.

As I watch, he lifts the milk carton to his lips and chugs it while Tess sighs.

“We do own glasses, Parrish,” she says, her heels clacking across the floor as she moves past me toward the stairs. “Please pour the rest of that down the sink, and next time you get milk, use a cup like a civilized person.”

Parrish smiles prettily, but that edge is still there, making the expression more like a smirk. Also, he isn’t looking at Tess; he’s looking at me. Actually, *assessing* might be a better word.

Reflexively, I find myself putting my hand over my stomach. There’s an ember in there, something hot and crafted of refined, undiluted rage. *Oh my god, I hate this fucking guy.* Two seconds in and I’m staring at someone that makes my skin hot, my muscles tight, and who even manages to draw a few beads of sweat from my forehead. That’s how intense and immediate my reaction to my new ‘brother’ is.

This dude is a complete and utter tool, a tattooed Chad, a narrow-eyed, sulky, pouty, too-rich-for-his-own-good diva bastard. Great. Just fucking great. An Instagram model come to life with the personality of a pissed-off sloth. Slouchy, annoying, entitled.

I grit my teeth and force myself to exhale. Remaining calm is paramount; it’s essential. *You can make it through this, Dakota. You’ve got this.* And then, of course, Parrish speaks and has the audacity to *wink* at me which just enrages me even further. I’ve never had this reaction to another human being. *Never.* He’s got sketchy vibes for sure.

“There’s nothing about me that’s civilized, Mother,” Parrish drawls, sounding bored as he looks me over from head to toe, sizing me up with a single glance. As soon as he’s made his pass, he’s done, and I can see a hardening in his eyes: he’s dismissed me.

The thought is fucking infuriating.

But I promised my grandma that I would try. I promised Maxine. I promised *myself*.

“Nice to meet you, Parrish, I’m Dakota,” I grate out as pleasantly as I can, stepping forward and offering a hand. His are covered in tattoos, literally drenched with ink. There are matching sunbursts on the backs of either hand, letters decorating his knuckles. Both arms are covered, too, and much of his chest. I know he’s a bit older than me—seventeen as opposed to sixteen—but I can’t imagine how he got so much ink so fast.

He stares at my hand for a moment and then takes another swig of milk. I notice he doesn’t get a single drop of white stuck to his lips. My hatred for him doubles. Triples. Quadruples with each subsequent swallow.

“Chasm’s coming over in a few,” he tells Tess, and she bristles with irritation.

“Parrish, shake your sister’s hand,” she snaps, her voice stretched thin with fatigue from the long flight. We flew business class—of *course* we did—but she’s still tired, and so am I. Drained. Empty. Emotionally destroyed. “And tell Chasm he can spend a few nights at his own place. We have family stuff going on here.”

With another chug of milk, Parrish turns and shuffles back into the living room, barefoot and wearing plaid pajama pants and nothing else. Against my will, my eyes glide over the smooth muscles in his upper back, traveling down the curve of his spine and finding a taut, trim waist. A drip of lust mixes with my newfound fury and turns it into something ... weird. Like my emotions weren’t already in a tangle from finding out that I’m a goddamn kidnap victim. As if he can sense me looking at him, Parrish throws a lazy, arrogant glance over his shoulder.

“As if, little sister. In your dreams.”

Parrish pads off, leaving me gaping, a violent, achy feeling shooting from my heart to my fingers and toes. *What the ... hell?* My hands clench into fists at my sides, nails digging

crescent marks into my palms. Did he really just say that? Really? Fucking really?!

I have to slow-blink away the shock of his casual insult before I can close my lips, turning back to look at Tess.

She's now halfway up the stairs and doesn't seem to have heard.

Loneliness spreads out from my chest, an icy balm to soothe away the fire of my frustration. It doesn't make me feel any better though. Instead, I hurt worse. There's nothing more devastating than the cavernous chill of being lonely.

"Like I was even looking," I murmur lamely, almost a whole minute too late, and far too quiet for Parrish to have heard anything at all. *Parrish*. When Tess and I first met—and she'd finally stopped kissing my forehead and crying—we sat at my grandparents' kitchen table, and she told me all about her other children.

Parrish isn't Tess' biological kid. Instead, he's the son of her husband, Doctor Paul Vanguard. She met Parrish when he was three, and I'd been gone for just a few months. She told me she threw herself into being his mother for want of missing me.

I'm not sure how to process that.

Apparently, I have four biological half-siblings living in this house, too, siblings that I share with Parrish.

Heaving a defeated sigh, I follow Tess up the stairs and find her waiting, wringing her hands in nervousness. The curved staircase deposits us in a bit of hallway floored with pale bamboo, a wall of windows facing toward the lake. On either side of us, the hallway continues. Tess gestures for me to follow her to the left.

"Your room is right across from Parrish's," she tells me as I struggle to rein in a groan. Fan-flipping-tastic, that's exactly the restful, private space I need: one with a doorway that's three feet from *his*. Tess glances over her shoulder to gauge my reaction, so I force a smile I don't feel. Her hair is bouncy and dark like mine (before I dyed it anyway), thick espresso-

colored curls pinned into a loose bun behind her head with several stray ringlets brushing against a pale freckled neck. My own hand strays to my neck, and I flush, hoping Tess won't guess the direction of my thoughts.

“Look at those toes, kiddo. Long and curved, just like me and your mother. Your great-grandmother used to call them *witch toes*.” My grandfather's voice sounds in my mind, and I choke a little on my feelings. I looked just like them, like my grandparents, like Maxine, like Saffron—the woman I thought was my mother, but was really just my ... kidnapper.

“Awesome,” I reply belatedly, wondering how I'm going to survive living across the hallway from that tattooed prick. Back home, I would've openly hated him while Sally and Nevaeh would've secretly lusted after him. Oh, who am I kidding, I probably would've lusted after him, too. I almost choke again. He's supposed to be my brother, right? Or ... stepbrother, I guess. Gross. I've never liked stepbrother romances, never. *Good thing we're as likely to see Yellowstone's super volcano erupt and end the world as we are to see a romance between me and that horrible boy.*

Tess opens the door to a room on the right which surprises me. That means I have the lake view and Parrish doesn't. Interesting.

I stop short in the doorway as Tess turns around, crossing one arm over her chest and clutching at her elbow with her hand. She's nervous, not something a famous true crime novelist is used to being I'll bet. She's written over twenty New York Times bestsellers. Her first novel—*Abducted Under a Noonday Sun*—launched her career.

It was semi-autobiographical.

It was about *me*.

The irony is that I'd read that book—more than once, actually—and never once made any sort of connection. Stupidly, I'd even written an English paper analyzing the content and the deeper meaning in the story without ever getting it through my thick skull that I was dissecting a story about myself.

“Well, what do you think?” Tess asks proudly, chest expanding as she takes in a deep breath and gestures around the room with a hand decorated in a diamond ring and tennis bracelet. The day we met, she gave me a matching bracelet.

It’s in my bag; I can’t bear to wear it.

I force yet another smile. If there were a counter for it, I think we’d be at about nine-hundred and ninety-nine forced smiles in the six weeks since I met Tess.

“It’s great,” I say, trying to keep my voice from cracking the way my heart is. I almost miss the hot, angry feeling that Parrish gave me. It was a shit-ton better than feeling the way I am right now, like a ghost, a shell, a shadow of my former self.

The room is ... nice. I mean, it’s got those light-colored bamboo floors, stark white walls, and modern light fixtures that look like abstract metal sculptures. There’s a bed in the center of the room, decorated with silver and faux fur pillows, and it faces out on a magnificent view of the water.

It’s just so cold and sterile in here. There’s no color, no art on the walls, no creaky floors. There isn’t a dent in the wall from that one time Maxine and I were wrestling. There isn’t a deep gouge on the baseboard molding from that day Grandpa and I bought an antique dresser and struggled to get it up the stairs and pushed into place in the corner.

“You can decorate it however you want,” Tess says eagerly, stepping forward. She’s so happy, I’m trying my best not to rain on her parade. I can only imagine what it must feel like to find the child that was stolen from you fourteen years prior. “We can hit the shops tomorrow, get you whatever you want.”

“That’s really nice of you,” I respond, our interaction stiff and forced. Tess’ eyes—the same raven-black as my own—crinkle at the edges as she struggles to smile back. We’re both trying here. It’s just ... not a situation any normal person would ever find themselves in. “If you don’t mind, I’m a little tired from the flight ...”

Polite code for *please get the fuck out so I can die in peace.*

“Oh, of course,” she says, shaking herself and falling right back into that famous novelist role she wears so well. When I first saw her, I thought she might very well be the coldest person I’d ever met. But then she started to cry, and I could tell that she was just a master of locking away her emotions. She’d have to be, right? Considering what she’s been through.

One day—fourteen years, three months, and sixteen days ago to be exact—Tess took her two-year old daughter Mia Patterson to a low-cost daycare center down the street from the diner she was waitressing at. According to her, she was holding a red plastic tray with four Cokes, three cheeseburgers, and a chicken salad on it when her phone went off in her apron. Somehow, she knew something was wrong. The first line of her book sums it up: *In my stomach, I could feel it, a primal fear as cold as the snow and ice that kiss the Cascades.*

Tess dropped the tray to the floor and started running in kitten heels and an apron. By the time she got to the parking lot of the daycare, panting and shaking and sweating, she saw the red and blue lights of a police cruiser. She never made it inside, falling instead to the pavement outside the cheery yellow walls of the building and screaming.

That’s the day Mia Patterson became Dakota Banks.

“You’ve got your own bathroom, too,” Tess gushes all of a sudden, like she can’t bear to leave just quite yet. She moves over to a shiny white door on sliders, like the barn doors at home in my grandparents’ house. Only, this one looks space-age. It’s shiny and perfect, and I don’t see any sort of handle. Tess seems able to slide it open with just a few fingers.

I step forward and peer into the room, finding it just as sterile and cold as the bedroom. At least there’s black marble on the floors instead of white, and the shower is big enough for four. A bathtub rests in the center of the room, with windows all along the wall. That’s the only thing I see that makes me feel any better. A bath in that giant tub, looking out at the water and the city lights across the lake, that should help a little.

But only a little.

I'd do anything to go home and soak in the old clawfoot tub in my grandparents' house.

"Paul will be home soon, with the rest of your siblings," Tess adds, and I can hear the slightest warble of nervousness in her smooth voice. "If you're too tired to meet them tonight, we can go out for breakfast ..."

"That'd be fantastic," I blurt, wrestling my rebellious lips into forced smile Number One-Thousand. If Parrish is any sort of indication as to the reception I'm going to get here, I'd much rather wait until morning. Tess' face falls a bit, but she, too, manages to maintain a smile.

"Sleep well, Mia," she breathes wistfully, and then we both freeze up completely, any pretense of normality flying out the window. "I'm sorry, I meant ... Dakota." Tess pauses awkwardly as I do my best to swallow past the lump in my throat.

"It's okay. We're both working our way through this," I respond with all the politeness my grandparents taught me but with absolutely zero sincerity. On the inside, I'm screaming. *Why couldn't you just leave me alone? Why couldn't you just leave me where I was happy?* Tess nods once, her smile faltering just a little, before heading for the bedroom door. She glances over her shoulder one more time before leaving, but whatever it was she intended to say dies on her lips.

"Goodnight ... Dakota."

Tess steps into the hallway, closing the door behind her. I don't hesitate more than a handful of seconds before moving over to it and locking the handle.

I toss my backpack on the floor and then flop down on the bed, putting my face in my hands. I don't cry. I've cried enough over the last several weeks. Instead, I gather myself together and pull my phone out of the pocket of my hoodie.

It's hard to fathom the facts: that my family—that is, the Banks family—is legally obligated to refrain from contact with me for *an entire year*. So I'll have time to adjust, Tess

says. Personally, I think that's the most awful and wicked thing anyone has ever done to me. I video-call my grandparents, but nobody answers. I can only imagine Tess' scary expensive lawyers and fancy legal documents are keeping them from picking up. Doesn't stop me from texting them though.

I miss you guys, and I want to come home. I send that off, and I don't care if that makes my grandfather cry again. I need them to know how much I want out of this place.

Next, I video-call my sister, Maxine.

She, on the other hand, isn't intimidated by anyone or anything.

"Dakota!" she calls out, appearing on my screen with a smile. We used to say we had matching smiles—the same small mouth and full bottom lip, a thin bowtie shaped upper lip. Guess it was all bullshit, huh? *God, you sound bitter. Don't do that to yourself, Dakota. There's no sweetness to be found if you keep chewing on the same old sour crap.* "Where are you right now?"

"My new bedroom," I say, my voice strained and forlorn. I lift the phone up and pan it around so Maxine can see what I'm working with here. Multimillion-dollar views and about as much love and warmth as a block of ice. I turn the phone back to my face. "Maxie, I can't do this."

Her face softens as she sits down on the edge of her own bed.

"It can't be all bad, right? Moving in with a famous author and a plastic surgeon? You could probably guilt-trip them into buying you a sportscar." Maxine puts a hand to her chest, the phone jiggling around as she clutches it in the other. "A Ferrari. A white one with a red leather interior—"

"Maxie," I scold, but I'm smiling anyway. I knew talking to Maxine would help. Besides, unlike my grandparents who are a forty-two-hour drive away from me, Maxine is going to the University of Oregon in the city of Eugene which is only four and a half hours south of here. We're actually closer now than

we were when I was living at home. Silver linings and all that. “You’re probably right, but I don’t want a Ferrari; I want to go home.”

“I know, Kota,” she says, her body deflating just a bit. “I don’t like any of this either, but you know what?”

“What?” I lie back on the bed, staring up at the screen and wishing my sister were here to wrap her arms around me the way she used to do when I was little. That’s my very first memory, of Maxine smiling at me and stroking my hair back while I sobbed. I don’t remember anything about my life with Tess before that, when I was named Mia Patterson. Not a damn thing. Not surprising, considering my age at the time.

And still, the scent of her perfume lingers. I choke a little on the thought.

“This doesn’t make us sisters any less, you know that, right?”

“Blood is thicker than water,” I spit out, and then cringe. There I go, being bitter again. But maybe I’m just not giving myself enough credit? This is a lot harder than I thought it would be.

“Wrong. That’s one of the most misused quotes in the entire world. The *real* quote is: *the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb*. What it really means is that the family you choose is stronger than the family you’re born to.” Maxine pauses for a moment as my eyes water, and I blink back the tears I promised I wouldn’t shed. “Hey, how about I come and visit you next weekend? I’d come sooner, but I have a paper due.”

“The lawyers ...” I start, and Maxine snorts, tossing her auburn curls. We always used to say she took after grandma while Mom and I took after grandpa with his espresso-colored hair. Irony, at its finest.

“Fuck lawyers, Kota. I’m not about to let some suit-wearing bigwigs tell me I can’t see my little sister. Besides ...” She pauses and gives me such a goofy grin that I just know I’m about to hear about a boy. Maxine is so predictable. I smile.

“This is about Maxx—the boy with two X’s in his name, right?” I ask with a roll of my eyes. Leave it to Maxine to find a boy with virtually the same name and fall in love with him. Maxx Wright is a fellow student at the U of O, some motocross superstar, and the exact opposite of any boy Maxine has ever gone out with. I have yet to meet him, but I hear good things.

“I’m going to bring him with me,” Maxine declares, grinning. “You can just call him X, like I do. That way we don’t have to worry about any confusion.” She leans back on her bed, so that our positions are mirrored. Four and a half hours away, but just alike, as always. “You’ll like him, Kota, I know you will.”

“I don’t doubt that,” I say, my thoughts straying to my new stepbrother, Parrish. “Speaking of boys, I just met one of my new brothers.”

“Oh?” Maxine asks, her voice tightening just a little. She’s jealous of my newfound siblings; since she was five, and I came home clinging to Mom’s neck—I mean *Saffron’s* neck—it’s just been us. Me and Maxine. “Well, did you like him?” I snort, and my sister raises her brown brows. “I take it that’s a no?”

“My stepbrother,” I correct with a sigh. “Tess’ husband’s son. He’s a year older than me and a total asshole.” I can feel my face contorting with irritation, remembering his expression as he glanced over his shoulder and caught me checking him out.

“As if, little sister. In your dreams.”

I want to throw something.

“Whoa. So ... he’s hot as fuck then?” she asks, and I choke out a caustic laugh.

“If you like rude, lazy assholes covered in tattoos and bulging with lean, stupid muscles,” I growl, and Maxine howls with laughter.

“Um, yes, please. Sign yourself up for that, Dakota. You need something to focus on, something to distract you from ...

well, everything. Lean, inked, and stupid is just about right.”

“He’s my brother, Maxine,” I say, but really, he’s not. First off, I just met him. Second, he’s not Tess’s bio-kid anyway. And that’s all that matters in this family, right? Biology. That’s why I’m here, isn’t it? Because I came out of Tess once upon a time. That’s the only thing connecting us anymore, just that thin strand of DNA.

I know it’s there, too, because Tess made me take three DNA tests to prove it.

“What’s his name? I wanna social media stalk him,” Maxine says, but I just roll my eyes.

“Parrish Vanguard,” I admit, and then we both pause for a minute as we minimize our video-chat windows into the corners of our phones and start stalking. She starts with Insta; I go for TikTok.

“Oh dear sweet baby Jesus,” Maxine groans as I click on a short video that Parrish posted all of ten minutes ago. “Get on his Insta, stat. This boy is fire, Dakota. You need this. You need a sexy, sordid stepbrother affair.”

I ignore her in favor of watching the TikTok video. It’s just Parrish sitting on a hideous rectangular sofa in that awful, white-washed living room.

“Just met my new stepsister, Dakota, today,” he says, shirtless and gorgeous, slouched against the cushions. One elbow rests on the arm of the couch, the other holds his phone up at an angle, emphasizing the long, lean lines of his body. *“As you know, I rate every student at the academy—even the poor, lost lamb that’s just stumbled into my family.”* Parrish pauses, giving a fiery smirk to the camera. *“Fuckability rating ...”* He pauses like he’s deep in thought and then shrugs. *“Three. Three and a half with the right outfit. She’s just too”—* Parrish gestures at his face with a single finger—*“melancholy in the face for my liking.”* He licks his lower lip and smirks. *“Pair that with the puke-green and emo-black hair, the thrift store sneakers, and the anime hoodie and we’ve got a Twitch-streamer wannabe on our hands.”*

I stop listening, closing TikTok as the blood drains from my face.

“Oh, Dakota,” Maxine starts, but I just wave off her concern like it’s nothing, like I don’t care. Instead, I’m quivering with frustration. *How dare he?! Seriously. Fuckability rating? Of all the stupid, misogynistic shit. I’m so furious that I forget for a moment that I’m also supposed to be sad. See? Told you I hated that guy from second one. He isn’t just a Chad: he’s a troll, too. “Don’t let him get to you. He’s probably, like, a mama’s boy or something. I bet he’s jealous of you.”*

“You’re too nice, Maxie, you know that?” I say instead, acting out a pretend yawn. I’m not just saying that: my sister really is too nice. If I give any indication that I’m about to start shit ... “I think I’m going to take a bath and go to bed.” I pause for a second, glancing past the phone screen and out the window toward the water. *That’s right. This isn’t my usual nighttime chat with Maxine; this is different. My whole life is different.* “Promise you’ll really come next weekend? I don’t think I’ll survive if you don’t.”

“Oh, I’ll be there, come hell or high water.” Maxine smiles softly at me, reaching up two fingers to touch the screen. I do the same and we sit there for a while, pretending like we’re in the same room together, like old times. Until I was nine years old, I refused to sleep in my own room, choosing instead to bunk with my older sister. “X is driving me up; he has a Jeep Gladiator.”

I laugh. My sister has always been obsessed with cars. Me, I couldn’t care less. But I’m glad she’s excited.

“Until next time, I love you fierce,” I tell her, and Maxine nods.

“Until next time. Love you fierce, baby sister.”

I hang up first, biting my lower lip for a moment. My natural inclination here is to sulk. But that fury inside of me, that burning ember in my belly? It’s just been fanned into raging flames.

With that heat as fuel, I get up and crack the door to my bedroom, glancing down the hall to see if Tess is around. Much as I dislike Parrish, I'd rather not run into my bio-mom right now. The way she looks at me makes my shoulders hurt, like I've just been yoked to a wagon full of boulders. Heavy, that's what her stares are. Desperate.

I slip out quietly and let the door snick shut behind me before braving the stairs. At each turn, I check for people. I am officially peopled out. Well, you know, except for the throwdown I'm about to have with Parrish.

I find the asshole lounging on the same couch where he filmed his TikTok video, scrolling his phone and listening to some god-awful Drake song. The milk carton is sitting on the table next to his bare feet. When he hears the soft shush of my footsteps on the floor, he gestures to the cushion beside him without looking up. That's how self-absorbed he is, that he doesn't even bother to see who it is that's just walked in.

"About time you got here; sit your ass down," he murmurs as I take his instruction and flop down on the cushion next to him. It takes a good thirty seconds for Parrish to look up and realize that I'm not whoever he thought I was. That Chasm guy he mentioned, maybe?

"Hello Parrish," I grind out through clenched teeth. The song switches to ... something. I'm not a fan of mainstream rap so I have no idea what's playing now. What I do know, however, is this: Parrish smells amazing. Like, amazing-amazing. My nostrils flare to take in the scent and I hope it makes me look really ticked off. Because I am. I don't care if the guy smells like clean linen and dewy clovers and bright citrus. He deserves a kick in the balls.

"You."

Just that one word.

Our eyes meet and my heartbeat picks up speed, adrenaline surging through me as I do my best not to compare the color of his irises to toasted coconut.

“What the fuck is this?” I ask, turning my phone around so that he can see the offending video. “Is this supposed to be funny?”

Instead of getting defensive or even angry—I guess both of those emotions just cost too much energy for the lackadaisical lord beside me—Parrish smiles. It’s a terrible smile. It’s a smile that you could only paint with oil, that’s how slick it is. He looks *pleased* with himself, and if I thought I was mad before, it’s nothing to how I feel now.

“You’re stalking me already?” he asks with a confident laugh. Those stupid stomach muscles of his—remember, they’re *extremely* stupid muscles—clench as he chuckles. Parrish sets his phone down and then licks his lower lip, swiping a thumb across the shiny surface as he takes me in. “Let me reiterate this for you: *no*.”

“No, what?” I blurt out, shooting to my feet. Violence isn’t really my go-to response in uncomfortable situations—I do my best to be nice most of the time—but I feel positively murderous in that moment. The dark tones of the song Parrish is listening to actually suit my mood. “No, you’re not going to take the video down?”

Parrish surprises me by standing up, too, towering over me like he thinks I care that he’s taller. One swift kick to his junk could easily level out the height difference between us.

“No, I’m not interested in you.” He says the words slowly, as if he’s worried I won’t understand. But oh. Oh. *Oh*. Screw this guy. I’ve dealt with worse online; most girls have.

A laugh escapes me, something dry and mocking and foreign. Who is this person that’s standing here smirking with my face? Anybody that’s met me for even three seconds knows I despise conflict yet here I am inviting it into my life when I should’ve just blocked this douche and given him the silent treatment.

“Interested in you? Are you insane? We just met ten minutes ago, and you’ve managed to show me that you’re a clout chasing misogynist with bad tattoos and an ugly face.”

Oops.

I clamp a hand over my mouth to stop the verbal diarrhea. Sure, I dislike the guy, but does he really deserve all that? Despite the harsh words I've just thrown in his face, Parrish doesn't stop smiling. There's a slight tensing of his lips, but it's so minor that I could've easily imagined it. Nah, he doesn't seem fazed whatsoever.

He reaches up to cup the side of my face.

"Try hard not to fall in love with me," he drawls, his voice a menacing purr that raises goose bumps on every inch of my skin. Gah! I want to slap this asshole in his too-pretty face. Instead, I smack his hand away and give him a dismissive once-over the way he did me.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about that if I were you. I don't like guys with mommy complexes."

This time, I get the sort of reaction that I wanted. A dark shadow passes over Parrish's face, knocking that sultry smirk of his into a deep-seated frown.

"This," he hisses, pointing at my phone to indicate the offending video and then snapping his fingers, "is just the beginning. I've hated you since I was three years old, *Mia*." My breath releases in a rush at hearing my birthname, a moniker that I wasn't aware of until six weeks ago. If I didn't even know that I *was* Mia Patterson, how could Parrish possibly hate me so much? It makes zero sense. "I'm going to bury you."

We're so close now that we could kiss. That is, if we both wouldn't rather murder each other.

"I love a good challenge," I start, pushing over the milk carton with my foot. Milk floods the coffee table and spills across Parrish's phone. His eyes narrow to slits as he looks from the phone to my face. He makes absolutely zero move to pick it up or dry it off. There's basically no chance in hell that his phone isn't waterproof, but milk is sticky when it dries, and it smells if you don't get it out of every nook and cranny.

Hope he enjoys the exercise in humility. “Too bad I don’t see any challengers. Fuck off, rich boy.”

I shoulder past my new stepbrother and saunter out of that room like I’m not shaking and sputtering and burning. My skin feels like it’s on fire, and the nerve-endings in my fingertips are going batshit. I’ve never hated someone the way I hate Parrish Vanguard, not even close. I’ll even go so far as to say I’ve never actually hated anyone before. Disliked, sure, but hate?

Stepping into my room, I slam the door closed and press my back against it, closing my eyes and struggling to draw in several calming breaths. A few minutes later, I hear footsteps in the hallway. They pause briefly outside before I hear another door slam.

Parrish.

I make a preemptive strike by grabbing my phone and connecting the Bluetooth to the speakers on the sound bar that’s mounted below the bedroom’s TV. Cranking the volume, I start up “*STUPID*” by Ashnikko. The lyrics—and the video where she kills stupid boys—are pretty relatable to how I feel in that moment.

“Enjoy listening to that, you dick,” I murmur, frowning as I hear another song start up in Parrish’s room, drowning out my own.

With a groan, I flop onto my bed and turn my head into the silver pillows. They have too much glitter and sparkly shit on them to be comfy. I end up throwing all of the decorative ones onto the squeaky-clean floor and digging my old, thin folded pillow out of my backpack. When I press it to my face, it smells like home, and I have to force myself to hold my breath to keep the tears back.

“Give it three months,” Grandma Carmen told me, stroking my hair back and then cupping my face between her hands. “Just three months. If it doesn’t work out, we’ll find a way around this. I promise.”

Give it two months? I met Parrish all of two seconds ago, and I'm already over this place.

I force myself up, grab my pj's, and pause to open the nightstand drawer next to my bed, intending on putting my phone inside. As I expected, there's a phone charger built right into the piece of furniture. It's like that with all the high-end stuff. Not that we had any at home, but my best friend Nevaeh's family has a penthouse in NYC with charging pads on like, every piece of furniture.

There's also a small red velvet jewelry box with a note underneath it.

I frown as I set my phone on the charge pad, lifting the handwritten note up. *Why didn't Tess mention this?* I wonder as I read the slanted handwriting.

I've been searching for you for a long time, my sweet princess.

In this box, you'll find my heart. Wear it always, or you'll break it.

I'm not sure either of us would survive that.

I frown, setting the note aside and grabbing the box instead. Inside, I find a small metal heart pin. It's solid metal, a shiny crimson that catches the light when I tilt it back and forth. Huh. Seems a little melodramatic, but then Tess *is* a writer. I hear authors are batshit insane on a good day.

Without another thought, I put the pin back and set the box aside, grabbing the note and crumpling it up. I chuck it in the trash just inside the bathroom door, strip down, and try to lose myself in warm water and steam.

The only peace I find that night is inside my dreams.

OceanofPDF.com

The graphic features the word 'CHAPTER' in a black, hand-drawn, blocky font on the left. To its right is a large, stylized number '2' in a vibrant pink color. The background is a dark, textured green with black, branch-like lines and a faint, sketchy profile of a person's face on the right side. The overall style is reminiscent of a manga or anime title page.

CHAPTER 2

Tess and her husband, Paul, have agreed to give me a week and a half off of school to adjust to my new life. It feels like a century too little. The next morning—a school-free morning where I should rightfully get to sleep in, thank you very much—I awaken to a gentle knock on the door and the sound of a key in a lock.

Sitting up suddenly, I blink against the brilliant wash of sunshine and decide that the very first thing I’m going to ask Tess to buy me is a set of curtains. Turning over my shoulder, I watch as the door opens and a white girl in a *maid uniform* appears.

Uhh.

Very Japanese anime of the Vanguarders ...

“Excuse me,” she says with a tired smile. “But Mrs. Vanguard likes me to wake up the children on weekdays. If you want, I can come back later though.”

I just stare back at her, trying to hide my horror. They have maids here? But *of course* they do. God forbid the goddess of crime novels and Seattle’s favorite plastic surgeon clean up their own messes. Well, my grandma taught me better than that. Cleaning up after yourself is a basic human function for fuck’s sake.

“Uh, if I could, I’d like to ask that my room not be included on the cleaning schedule,” I say, fighting back the sleepy heaviness in my lids. Reaching over, I open the nightstand drawer, grab my phone, and see that it’s not quite seven in the morning. Jesus Christ. Back home, I don’t get up until eight,

leave for school at eight-thirty. My entire family sleeps in until noon on weekends.

“You’ll have to take that up with Mrs. Vanguard,” the maid says, trying and failing to smile at me. She looks stressed-out, and I realize that by trying to be helpful, I’ve just made her job harder.

“Right, right, sorry,” I say, forcing myself out of bed and pretending like I don’t notice her staring at my pink pj’s with the anime girls all over them. My friends and I like to nerd out a bit back home. Reading, Japanese anime, video games. Whatever.

I get the idea that none of that quirkiness will be appreciated here.

Grabbing my backpack, I slip into the bathroom to change into one of the few outfits I brought from home. Tess offered to buy me all new things when I got here. I agreed, but not for the reasons she might think. I didn’t want any of my stuff shipped from home because I intend on going back there at some point. Whatever this is, this ... stayover, it’s just a blip in time. It’s temporary.

With my favorite holey jeans, black *Eat the Rich* t-shirt, and mismatched Chucks on, I feel better equipped to face whatever’s going to come my way today. After a brief moment of hesitation, I put the metal heart pin on my shirt and hook the tennis bracelet around my wrist. I promised I would make an effort. I owe Tess that much, at least. I feel bad for what she went through, even if I had no part in it.

I take one, last look in the mirror, making sure my part is properly split down the middle. The left half of my hair is dyed lime green while the right side is jet black. Tess cringed a bit when she first asked me about it, insinuating that perhaps dying the nearly ass-length waves such extreme colors was a mistake. *God help me today*, I think with a bit of an eye twitch, ensuring that no black strands are on the green side and vice versa before I flick the light off and exit the bathroom, intending on finding Tess and cancelling the, uh, complimentary maid service.

“Oh good,” Tess says, appearing in the hallway as soon as I open my bedroom door. I notice Parrish’s door is open, too, the linens from his bed piled on the ground along with some dirty clothes. He’s nowhere to be seen (thankfully), but I do catch a small glimpse of matte black walls and wicked tattoo-inspired art pieces. *At least somebody in this family isn’t afraid of color—even if that someone is an outrageous dickhead.* I turn back to Tess, her eyes on the tennis bracelet at my wrist. Good choice then, to wear it. “I was about to come and wake you up. I’ve called everyone into school today; we’re going to spend it as a family.”

The way she says that last word, all wistful and dream-like, fills my stomach with dread. This is, like, her lifelong dream fulfilled, having me here with the new family she built in my absence. The sound of it makes me afraid that I’ll be stuck here until I turn eighteen.

“Sounds great,” I say instead, the words like ash on my tongue. I tuck my hands into the pockets of my jeans as Tess looks me over with studious interest, like I’m some foreign entity that needs to be studied. “What’s on the agenda?”

“Breakfast at the club,” she begins, perking up a bit and snapping her eyes from my holey jeans to my face. By club, I assume she means a country club of some sort, and I have to hide my disappointment. I don’t think the tee I’m wearing will go over well with a bunch of stuck-up, snooty assholes. “Shopping for your new room.” Tess reaches out to playfully tug the sleeve of my shirt. “Some new clothes, maybe?” She raises her brows, like this should be a tantalizing offer. Instead, I just feel like my heart is being wrenched from my chest and stepped on. “If we have time, we can stop by the tailor and get you measured for your uniform.”

“My uniform?” I ask, blinking in confusion as Tess heads down the hall toward the staircase, and I follow after her.

“For Whitehall,” she says easily, like I should know what that is. “Your new high school.”

Ah.

Whitehall Preparatory Academy.

The fancy new school I'm supposed to be starting next week. Already, I'm dreading the very idea of it. I've spent my entire life at public school. Hell, I truly and utterly believe in the idea of equal education for all. A fancy elitist academy that favors money over nurturing the best and brightest, no thank you. According to Tess, most parents have to apply for that school *just after their kid is born*. Can you imagine that? Your entire life determined by some stupid application and a fat check submitted by your parents at birth?

Am I being too judgy? Maybe.

The only reason I'm allowed to attend Whitehall at all is because my discovery lit up a media firestorm. Combine that with my mother's fame and money, her husband's fame and money, and the fact that two of my newfound siblings already attend the school, and my fate was sealed.

I'm going to be paraded around and put on brochures and held up like some sort of specimen in a jar.

I put a hand over my belly to calm my nerves as we hit the bottom of the staircase and Tess leads the way into the living room I confronted Parrish in last night. As soon as I step through the threshold, I find myself faced with an entire room full of people, sprawled out on couches and playing with their phones. Just outside a pair of French doors, I see my new stepdad on his phone, talking and gesturing like this is an important call.

My gaze is immediately drawn back to my new stepbrother.

Parrish is curled up on one of the sofas, hair messy but clearly styled to look a certain way, dressed in a gray hoodie with black lettering that reads *Whitehall Academy—Where the Best Shine Bright*. I don't know the guy from Adam, and honestly, he seems like a total waste of life, but I get the feeling he wears the sweatshirt ironically.

I do enjoy a bit of irony ...

No. No. *No*. I hate this dude. Hate him. He's a pig.

Those toasted almond eyes of his lift up to look at me, but there's nothing in them, not a flicker of recognition, sympathy,

empathy of any kind. Just ... boredom. He yawns, and the fury inside of me amps up, making me burn again. Sooner or later this shit is going to turn me to ash. *"Fuckability rating: three. Three and a half in the right outfit."*

"Mia," Tess starts, and then she grimaces, and I sway slightly, like my feet have just been kicked out from under me. "Sorry, Dakota, I'd like to introduce you to your brothers and sisters." Tess beams with pride as she holds out a hand to the oldest girl in the bunch, her hair an autumnal shade of blond, like gold on sun-drenched leaves. She lifts dark eyes up to regard me with no small amount of contempt. Honestly, the hatred in her eyes makes me take a physical step backward. "This is Kimber. She's fourteen and just started at the academy this year." Tess gives her daughter a look. "Kimber, say hello to your older sister."

"I don't have an older sister," she snaps, and Parrish laughs. The sound does strange things to my insides. Namely, it makes me consider murder as an option to dealing with my social problems. My eyes flick his way. At least Parrish just seems bored and disinterested this morning. Kimber is openly flaunting her distaste for everyone to see. *Sorry for being kidnapped, little sis, I think* as I turn back to her.

"Kimber Celeste," Tess snaps, the strength in her voice raising the fine hairs on my arms. "You will control your temper and your jealousy, or you will forfeit your phone for the rest of the year. Do you understand me?"

Kimber's mouth gapes open, nostrils flaring as she flicks her gaze to me.

"Hi."

Just one word, bitten out like a curse. She glances in Parrish's direction, and they share a look.

"This is Ben," Tess continues, gesturing to a boy on the other sofa. He gives me a shy smile and a little wave but makes no move to stand up. I'm starting to think this family is a bit ... WASP-y. Emotions are tamped down and hidden beneath fancy rugs in this house. "And these are the twins: Amelia and Henry." The two youngest kids actually do get up,

abandoning their phones on the coffee table. I most definitely didn't get a phone at age six, but I guess to each their own, right?

"I'm excited to have a new sister," Amelia says, grinning and moving up to me. "Can I give you a hug?" she asks, and, despite my reservations, a smile manages to bloom on my lips.

"Yeah, of course," I reply, leaning down to give her a tight squeeze. My grandparents, Maxine, and I always tried to give each other the strongest, most enduring hugs possible. A featherlight one just doesn't feel as good. Amelia pulls back as Henry clings to the cream-colored leg of Tess' pantsuit. Both twins have dark hair, just like I do, and tiny freckles on their necks. I see them when Amelia turns around to look at her dad.

He smiles at me as he comes in from the balcony, holding up his phone in explanation.

"Sorry, work stuff," Paul says, zoning in on me. I met him back in New York, and he seems nice enough, but he's also an extremely wealthy white guy who has no idea how good he has it. I heard him complaining about a new property tax the other day, about how he shouldn't have to pay that extra three hundred dollars a year since his kids don't even go to public school.

I make myself keep smiling. *Fake smile number one thousand and one.* From my left, I can feel Parrish's gaze swing to his dad. A scowl takes over his full, lush mouth, but I tell myself that I'm imagining how pretty he is, even when he's frowning like that.

"Can I please just go to school today?" Parrish asks, and his father gives him a warning look. "Chas and I have plans this afternoon." *Caz* he said. Must be short for Chasm, the guy he mentioned coming over last night. "It's not like Mia"—and here Parrish pauses, looking me dead in the face to tell me that mistake was intentional—"oops, sorry Dakota. It's just, we've all been hearing about you for years now as Mia. Mia this, Mia that. Say a prayer for Mia, light a candle for Mia."

“Parrish,” Tess begins, stepping forward, her heels loud on the marble floors, but her inglorious stepson isn’t done with his rant. Instead, he gets up, too, moving so close to me that I can smell him again. I hate that he smells like laundry detergent and clovers with just a hint of citrus, something lemony and fresh.

He spins his milk-free phone around in his tattooed hand as he leans in toward me.

“No, you can’t go outside and ride your bike because Mia. And you can’t spend the night at a friend’s house because Mia. And you can’t live your fucking life because some girl you don’t even know got kidnapped from daycare a million years ago.”

“Parrish, that’s enough!” Tess shouts, her voice harsh and cold and deadly serious.

Without even meaning to, my hand comes up and I crack Parrish across the face. My palm, where it touches him, burns like the sunburst tattoos on the backs of his hands. As soon as he lifts his own hand to his cheek and smirks at me, I know I’ve fallen right into whatever game it is that he’s playing.

“Mia—Dakota,” Tess corrects, stepping between us. She puts her hand on my shoulder, like she thinks I might actually go for Parrish or something. “Parrish was way out of line, no doubt, and I don’t know how you were raised, but we do *not* resort to physical violence in this house.”

My eyes flick to hers, and I can’t help it, even though I hate these people and I don’t care what they think, and I want to go home ... her words hurt. Actually, they cut me like a knife, making my already fragile heart bleed.

“Parrish, get your uniform,” Tess says after a moment, letting out a long sigh as she exchanges a look with Paul. “We’ll drop you off at the academy on the way to breakfast.”

“Are you kidding me?” I whisper, trying not to lose my temper. Maxine calls me a Red Hot—sweet and spicy in a single bite. I really do attempt to be nice and give people the benefit of the doubt, but when I blow up, I fucking lose it.

That's what he wants, I think as Parrish starts to turn away toward the front entry and the curving staircase, triumph clear in his brown gaze. He thinks he's won, and if I don't find a way to flip this situation, he'll be right about that. Choking down my pride, I phrase my next sentence carefully. "Tess—" *Not good enough*. "Mom," I start, trying out the word and seeing her eyes widen in surprise. Now that gives Parrish pause, and he flicks his attention back to me with another scowl building on his pretty lips. "You said we were going to breakfast as a family. This is my first official day here, and I ..." My courage runs out, and the words just stop, but I think I've done enough.

"Oh, you're right," Tess says, scrubbing her hands over her face as Henry continues to cling to her leg, Kimber gapes at me, and Paul moves across the room to put his arm around his wife's shoulders. "I'm so used to spoiling you, Parrish, but things are different now. You and Chasm can meet up some other time, and I've already asked your teachers to email home any missing schoolwork."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Parrish snaps, turning back around with fury blazing in his eyes. "This girl, this *stranger*, shows up here and all of a sudden, we're supposed to rewrite our entire lives to fit hers?" The look he gives me cuts bone-deep. "By the way," he leans in to whisper against my ear before I get a chance to pull back. "Looking at you in the daylight, I lied. You're a two, not a three."

My hands clench into fists as I resist the urge to shove him back against the wall. My ears are ringing so loudly that I can barely hear Paul when he barks out a reprimand to his son. Doesn't have much effect though; Parrish just shrugs his shoulders, turns, and saunters down the hall as he slips in a pair of earbuds.

I act like I have no idea what he just said and keep my lips pressed tightly together. It's pretty obvious at this point that nobody in this family is on my side. Back home—at my *real* home—everybody was. And I was on theirs.

Despite being a colossal fucking asshole, Parrish was right about one thing: we *are* strangers, and I have a feeling we'll

never be anything more than that.

I don't expect the limousine. I mean, I *really* don't expect it. Yes, I knew Tess and Paul were wealthy, but like, I thought they were upper middle-class wealthy, not like celebrity wealthy or tech mogul wealthy. Or maybe the white stretch limo is just a rental, I don't know.

Either way, back home, when we need to seat eight people in a car, we drive my grandmother's navy-blue minivan with the green side door. Someone backed into it once at the mall, and so my grandma used her insurance check to have the door replaced, but didn't bother with a new paint job. She put the rest of the money into Maxine's college fund instead.

Somehow, I end up sitting next to Parrish, our legs pressed precariously close together as the car climbs the steep hill behind the house, leading away from the water and toward the small town of Medina. It's a Seattle suburb, on the opposite shore of Lake Washington, and home to gazillionaires like Bezos and Gates.

It's pretty much one of the last places on earth I want to be right now, especially wearing a t-shirt that literally says *Eat the Rich* on it. I pick at the shirt with my fingertips as I glance in Parrish's direction. He's wearing a hoodie, so I guess I'm okay on the dress code situation. But still ... telling absurdly wealthy people that I think their wealth is scraped off the backs of the poor is not a game I want to play today.

"Did you see the reporters?" Amelia asks, turning around to peer out the rear window of the car. "There were hundreds of them!"

I cringe a little, but she isn't wrong. Once again, there was a horde of reporters just outside the property gates, cameras rolling, flashes exploding against the blacked-out windows. It's why I scrambled into the back of the car so quickly and ended up sitting next to Parrish. He barely looks at me, staring down at his phone and typing out angry messages that I can't read because he angles the screen away from me.

Instead, I lean back and stare down at my own phone, pretending like I'm just as engrossed in it as everyone else. Tess stares at me while pretending she's doing anything but gazing at me in desperation and wonder, but everyone else in that car, they're absorbed in phone la-la land the same as Parrish.

I find it a little weird, a little cold and impersonal, but I decide to use it to my advantage.

Tell us what's going on! We miss you!

I smile at Sally's text, and then frown again as I scroll through the dozens of pictures that Nevaeh's posted today. She has a terrible habit of chronicling every single thing she consumes—granola bars, cans of soda, yesterday's pizza leftovers. Mixed into all of that, there's a selfie of her and Ryan snuggled up in the hallway together. Apparently, he asked her to be his date to the party and she agreed which sort of pisses me off because she knew I had a crush on him. *She also knows you're never coming back, so it doesn't matter for shit.*

I turn my phone off and stare out the window.

If I were ever curious what the first level of Dante's hell might look like, well, I've found it.

"So, Dakota," Paul says, drawing my attention away from depressing thoughts and over to his chiseled face. He's clearly had work done, but probably from another surgeon of his caliber. I'll admit, he has a strong chin and high cheekbones, masculine without looking Neanderthal. My eyes flick briefly back in Parrish's direction as I trace the family resemblance in his face.

He notices me looking and then smirks, tapping something out on his phone that I'm very clearly meant to see.

Get lost, Dakota. I don't do incest.

Bristling, I turn back to Paul. He's holding Tess' hand, their fingers curled together in a way that makes me think they really do love each other. That's good, I guess, considering their home is as warm as an ice cavern, and their kids ... Ben

and Amelia seem okay. Henry is just super shy. But Kimber? She's tucked into the corner beside Tess, her own earbuds blasting something so god-awful that it makes Parrish's music choices from last night seem appealing.

"Are you excited for the interview?" Paul asks, finishing his question as my mind ping pongs around the limo and the million new things I'm supposed to be taking in and observing. I blink at him in confusion as Tess throws a silent, angry couple-look his way, clearly communicating that he wasn't supposed to be mentioning any such thing.

"Interview?" I ask, and Tess gives me an apologetic sort of look in response as Henry clings to her like he's three years old instead of six-going-on-seven. She's his mother in a way she'll never be mine—even if I wanted her to be, which I don't. There's a gap between us, an emotional chasm that I see she's desperate to cross, even if she has to build a new bridge, plank by plank. Personally, I'd rather just cut my losses and fly back to New York.

"Well, honey, as you know, we've been asked to appear on multiple talk shows—"

"Which I told you I wasn't interested in," I respond, feeling panicky. I briefly recognize that Parrish has popped out a single earbud in order to listen in on the conversation. "You said I didn't have to do any of them."

The last thing I want is to talk about how it happened, how I found out that I was a 'missing child', a kidnapped child, a child who didn't belong where she felt at home, and a child who doesn't belong where she's legally bound to stay.

My mind flashes back to that awful, awful night, the one that changed the entire course of my existence.

It was a Tuesday, and I remember that it was raining like fucking crazy. Sally and Nevaeh were over, and we were all sitting on the couch, peeling off wet soaks and complaining about the weather. Grandma Carmen made us popcorn on the woodstove, and then she and my grandfather disappeared upstairs into their room.

Nevaeh insisted—*insisted*—we binge watch this new show about unsolved crimes. I wanted to start a new K-drama, and Sally was insisting on a feel-good rom-com. Somehow, Nevaeh got her way (like she always does) and we ended up huddled together, sharing half of a joint that she stole from her brother’s dresser drawer and doing our best to blow smoke out the window.

When episode five came on, talking about Tess Vanguard and her best-selling true crime and thriller novels, I was excited. Before all of this shit happened, my biological mother was my favorite author. But then we started watching, and the pictures of little Mia Patterson began appearing on the screen.

That’s when I started to feel funny, like someone had just scrambled my insides with a whisk, like I was having the worst period cramps known to womankind. Then Grandma Carmen came down to get a glass of water, and I remember turning over my shoulder to ask her something. Whatever it was, I have no idea. The second I saw the look on her face, I knew something was terribly, terribly wrong.

“Can we pull over, please?” I ask, realizing that Tess has been talking to me for some time, and I have literally no idea what she’s saying.

“Pull over?” Paul echoes, exchanging a look with Tess.

“I might throw up,” I whisper, and Kimber makes a sound of disgust from across the limo. Apparently, she, too, has removed an earbud in order to eavesdrop. “I can’t breathe.”

“Alright, alright, stay calm,” Paul says, getting that *don’t worry, I’m a doctor* tone in his voice. You know the one, where a licensed physician is in the room and they just suddenly know everything there is to know about anything related to the human body, mind, or soul. “Take this.” He passes me an empty ice bucket—I’m guessing it’s used to hold champagne when the limo’s being used for something less depressing than a missing child family breakfast—and encourages me to lean over and put it between my knees. “Just keep your face near the bucket and try to breathe.”

Parrish says nothing, staring down at me like this whole scenario is more an annoyance than anything else. Then he goes back to texting on his phone, and I can't help it, I throw up.

“Oh my god, gross!” Kimber shouts as I dry heave into the damn thing. I haven't eaten in over twenty-four hours, so not much comes up, but it still doesn't make for a great first impression on my new family. My shiny, beautiful new family with their mansion in one of the richest zip codes in the United States, their horrible sterile box of a house, and their limo filled with hateful people.

My eyes squeeze shut, and I struggle to pull my thoughts together.

“Grandma?” I asked, turning fully around and putting my elbows on the back of the sofa. “Are you okay?”

She stood there for several seconds, just staring at the screen, her eyes telling me she was seeing something that she'd give anything to unsee. Anything. Her soul, her heart. Just to make it go away.

“Go get your grandfather,” she told me, moving around the couch to grab the remote. Her hands shook so badly that it took her three tries to press pause. When she glanced back and realized I hadn't moved, she snapped at me in a way I've never seen before. “Go, Dakota, now!”

I scrambled up from the sofa as Sally and Nevaeh exchanged looks, and raced up the stairs. In my mind, I begged the universe to make everything be okay. I'd thought for a second there that my grandma was having a heart attack or a stroke or something.

Instead, it was a surprise the likes of which none of us would soon forget.

When I open my eyes, I find every member of the Vanguard family staring at me like I've sprouted horns. Well, all of them except for Parrish. He's got his earbuds in again, and is typing on his phone like this is a normal Tuesday, like my roots

weren't just ripped from the soft, fertile earth and left to die in the sun.

"Let's ... not talk about the interview just now," Tess suggests, grabbing a cold bottle of water from the mini fridge and offering it up to me along with a tin of Altoids. I take the items, trying to see them as positives—she's just trying to help—versus the negatives that I really believe they are—*don't make a scene, here take these mints so no one will know your weakness*.

Sipping the water and popping the mints helps, and I manage to make it to the club without further incident.

There are no reporters there as the building sits on a huge piece of private property, but there might as well be. Every person and their grandmother wants to talk to us, to touch my arm or my hand like they can somehow glean my personality from an unwanted caress. More than one of them laughs at my t-shirt, and an older man with salt and pepper hair calls it *cute*.

I've never hated my life more than I do in that exact moment.

After breakfast, when I'm sure things can't *possibly* get any worse, Tess puts her arm around me and smiles.

"Did you enjoy the club?" she asks, and I nod, because what else can I do? To be honest, I hardly remember what it even looked like I was so disoriented. "Good. We come here a lot; it's a great place to meet people." She pauses for a moment in thought and then smiles again. "Although there is a dress code. Today, you were the guest of honor, but next time, you'll want to really look the part."

I say nothing.

What could I *possibly* say to that?

My eyes flick to Parrish and the ember in my belly sparks with heat as we glare at each other.

"Parrish was wearing a hoodie," I manage to choke out, just before I move to climb back into the limo after him.

“Oh, well, official Whitehall academy gear is always welcome.” Tess beams as she gestures for me to get into the car. Even though it means sitting next to my new stepbrother again, I oblige.

“Hope you’re ready,” Parrish tells me when it’s just me and him in the back of the limo. He doesn’t bother to look my way or even acknowledge the fact that my hands are shaking, just keeps scrolling on his damn phone with an inked thumb. “Because it only gets worse from here on out.”

And I hate that he could not have been anymore right about that.

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The graphic features the word 'CHAPTER' in a black, hand-drawn, blocky font on the left. To its right is a large, dark green heart with a pink number '3' inside it. The background is a light pink gradient with faint, dark, sketchy lines resembling a face or a map.

The next day, everyone goes back to work and school like I don't exist. Even Tess who's decided to work from home has to sit down and answer some emails from her publisher. Meanwhile, I'm left to wander the cavernous halls of the ice palace by myself, my phone clutched in my hand, desperate for any connection to home.

But my grandparents still won't respond to my messages. Maxine is busy with a research paper. Sally and Nevaeh are in class. And I'm just ... floating. Social media is a nightmare for me right now because everyone knows what happened, and it's all they want to talk about. So I just wander from room to room for a while, discovering that Kimber leaves her bedroom door locked which is just bizarre.

Parrish's, on the other hand, is wide open.

I slip inside, but just for a moment, just to look around. I'm aware that I'm being a bit of a creeper here, snooping through other people's rooms, but also ... Parrish gave me a 'fuckability rating' so screw him.

Anyway, there's a king-size bed, freshly made and decked out in all black linens. A few of the decorative pillows have designs on them that look like old-fashioned Sailor Jerry tattoos, and there's even a desk with a sketchbook, colored pencils, and an iPad. The iPad is locked, but the sketchbook is filled with beautiful drawings, some of them in color and some of them in black and white.

Holy shit, did he draw these? I wonder, studying one with an anatomical heart pierced through with an arrow. The detail work on each piece is insane, and the style sort of reminds me

of the tattoos I saw on Parrish's wrists and hands. On the edge of the desk, there's a portable tattoo kit, a box of disposable black gloves, and a shit-ton of ink. There's even a fake hand which is creepy as fuck.

I reach out and poke it with a single finger, leaning down to admire the design inked into the silicone flesh.

"Either you're a tattoo artist or a serial killer," I murmur under my breath with a hushed laugh. "Probably both." At least the setup explains how Parrish has so many tattoos at such a young age: he clearly did them himself. And for that, I have to give him at least a bit of grudging admiration.

Closing the book, I glance desperately at his nightstand drawer, wanting to snoop but deciding it's better not to. Not only is there the privacy factor to consider—because, despite his rudeness, he does deserve *some* privacy—but I'm also pretty sure that I'll puke if I open the drawer and find lube and crispy socks or something.

Eventually, I find my way downstairs to the pool.

"Seriously?" I murmur, stepping into a long, narrow room with an infinity pool. It's warm in here, and the windows across from me are all steamed-up, hiding the view of the lake. I'm on the ground level of the house now, the back half of it buried into the hill behind it. "An entire pool and ..." I open a wooden door and peek inside, finding a sauna with two benches and heated rocks with a bucket of water nearby. "A sauna. I'm really living a different life now, aren't I?"

Since I've got nothing better to do for the time being, I head upstairs, the sound of Tess' keyboard clacking echoing down the hall after me. For a moment, I pause in the hallway, one of my hands resting against the iron bars that act as a banister. Instead of the usual waist height though, these ones go all the way up to the ceiling. Like I said, it feels a bit like a jail cell.

I glance over my shoulder, wondering if Tess is writing about me. It's weird as hell, to find out that your favorite author is actually your biological mother. Especially when you grew up thinking you already had one of those. Now, a dad I've never had. Other than my grandfather, I mean.

Saffron—the woman who, apparently, kidnapped me that day fourteen years ago—told my grandparents that I was the result of a random one-night stand, that she knew nothing about the guy she'd hooked up with, and that he was several states away and long gone. Later, on the rare occasion that Maxine and I ever saw her, she'd get angry and storm out if either of us ever asked questions about our fathers.

And then that stupid crime show happened, and my grandparents called the hotline number at the end of it. Tess showed up, and when my grandfather asked about my dad, she got totally cagey and said she didn't remember him at all, that he was some old boyfriend. Her face, however, made it pretty clear that she was lying.

So now, not only did I have to leave everything about my life behind, but I have to live with someone who lies to me about the *one* question I might have ever really cared to know. That, and she favors her asshole stepson.

That much, is obvious.

With a sigh, I turn back around and head into my room, slipping into the new bathing suit Tess insisted I let her buy me yesterday. After our shitty breakfast at the club, she dragged us all to an upscale shopping center. The second Parrish was out of the car, he was gone, disappearing into a coffee shop down the way. Ben, Amelia, and Henry were dragged off by Paul, and I was left alone with Tess and Kimber.

I shiver and try not to think too hard about the afternoon. Kimber was a snotty brat, Tess managed to be both desperate and cold at the same time, and I spent the entire day wondering when it was going to be over.

Not a great start to my new life.

Wrapping a towel around my waist, I head back down to the pool, drop the towel on a lounge chair, and then jump in with a monstrous splash. I do a few quick laps—okay, fine, I doggy paddle since I don't know shit about like, actual swimming strokes—and then hop up on the side to relax, letting my legs dangle in the warm water.

I'm not in there five minutes before I feel someone's hand at my back, pushing me in.

With a muffled scream, I fall into the pool. My feet hit the bottom six feet down before I'm bouncing back up and sputtering.

"What the fuck?" I shout, my voice echoing off the wall of windows as I swipe my hand over my face and find a boy crouching at the edge of the pool, staring at me. He's laughing, too, which I most definitely do not appreciate.

Um.

He's also one of the most beautiful people I've ever seen in my life. His mouth is a hot slash across the bottom of his face, the corner of his lip twisted up in a slight smirk. Amber eyes narrow on me, but that mouth, it never stops smiling. The way he's crouched like that, like his body's made of shadows or something, makes me wonder if he's even human. *You are not in a cheesy teen novel, Dakota. He is not a vampire—even if he looks like one.*

His hair is an ebon black with a bright yellow streak in the front, like a bolt of lightning. Clearly, that's got to be the work of a master stylist. Bet this boy is just as rich as the asshole stepbrother who lives across the hall from me. He's also just as ripped, and just as covered in tattoos. This one, though, has a piercing through either side of his lower lip and small black plugs in his ears.

"I'm going to take a wild guess and assume you're Parrish's friend, Chasm?" I quip, raising a brow and refusing to let him know how pissed off I am. Or how scared I was for a brief instant. Right before I left New York, I was changing into my pajamas when I heard a sound coming from the roof. I parted the curtains to find a reporter crouching there with a camera.

So goddamn creepy.

"Ah," he says, rising to his feet with that awful, awful smile playing around his lips. It's awful because it's cocky as fuck. Also, it seems sort of ... genuine at the same time? If he hadn't pushed me into the pool, I might not have instantly

disliked him and that bothers me. Any friend of Parrish's is likely not going to be a friend of mine. "Now why would you think that, Mia?"

I grit my teeth. *These assholes. I take it back; there's nothing to like about this guy at all.*

"It's Dakota," I correct for what, I'm sure, is nowhere near the final time. "What right do you think you have, pushing a stranger into a pool like that? What if I didn't know how to swim?"

"But you do, don't you?" he asks, looking down at me as I move through the water toward the ladder. His eyes rake my body as I grab the metal bars and climb out, suddenly self-conscious of the bright yellow bikini Tess talked me into yesterday. Oddly enough, it matches the streak in his hair. Personally, I'd have been happier with black. Or lime green. Or something with skulls on it. "I saw you swimming; you just didn't notice me."

"You're admitting to being a creeper then? Do you regularly spy on hapless swimmers?"

Chasm seems unfazed by my question and shrugs his shoulders loosely, like he doesn't have a care in the world. He's a good actor then; there isn't a single person on this planet without problems of some sort.

"Only if they happen to be my best friend's shiny new sister. You're like a curio around here: we've been hearing stories about you for years." I just keep staring at him, dripping water across the floor while he continues smiling away at me. After a moment, he retrieves my towel and hands it over. I'm about to thank him when he adds, "Parrish was dead wrong about you."

His eyes blaze as he looks me over, his smile turning into an overly appreciative smirk.

Slowly, Chasm slides his hands into the pockets of his slacks and cocks his head to one side. As he looks me over, I return the favor. He's wearing a solid black blazer that's currently unbuttoned, leaving a black dress shirt visible

underneath. The shirt itself is also unbuttoned, revealing a smooth chest dripping with ink that I pretend not to like (but holy crap, it's hot). There's a hint of a tie hanging out of one pocket, a tartan plaid made up of gray, black, and lime green stripes that are oddly reminiscent of my hair color. The embroidered badge beside the blazer's lapel clearly states *Whitehall Preparatory Academy*.

I ignore my own visceral reaction to his body, wrap the towel around my waist, and then cross my arms over my chest. I'm trying to come up with some sort of quip, something easy but deeply insulting—like Parrish's murmured *as if, little sister*—but Chasm speaks up before I get a chance.

“You are most definitely not a three. I'd say a four, at least. Maybe a five, with the right hair and makeup.”

My mouth pinches into a thin line, but when I move to push Chasm into the pool in retaliation, he grabs my wrists in either of his hands and spins me around, so that my back is to the wall. I become hyperaware of each of his fingertips as they press into my bare skin.

“Please don't,” he breathes, letting that cocky smile take over his entire face. “Speaking of swimming, I really can't.” He pauses again and looks up and to the left, like he's thinking hard about something. Frankly, the comfortable, easy cadence of his voice is annoying the fuck out of me. “You've already made Tess cry and insulted my best friend. The last thing you need on your record is a drowning.”

Chasm releases me, and my body goes cold as he steps away, the spots where he held my wrists tingling strangely. That does it for me, unleashing my irritation in a choleric jibe that whips off the end of my tongue.

“Here's the thing: you *do* have the right hair and makeup”—here I pause to trace the edge of my eye to indicate the small amount of black liner he's wearing—“but you're still a big, fat zero on my rating scale. I only insulted Parrish because he started it. As far as Tess crying ... I haven't seen it.”

The guy hasn't answered my question about his identity, but he can only really be Chasm McKenna, Parrish's bestie and a

close friend of the family. Also, I hate him almost as much as I hate Parrish and we met three seconds ago.

This should go well.

He resumes that easy, comfortable slouch as he meets my eyes with his jewel-toned ones. I'll admit: he's got a powerful stare. I feel suddenly uncomfortable, like I should shift on my feet and try to sidle away. Instead, I stand my ground and stare right back.

"You've got bite, but is it enough?" Chasm shrugs his shoulders like he couldn't care less either way. Since I have no idea what he's talking about, I don't care either. I just want him to go away. "Welcome to Whitehall," he whispers finally, following up the words with another smile that's just oozing impertinence.

I say nothing, watching as he turns and heads for the door, and then I pad over to the sauna, open it up, and grab the bucket from inside.

Chasm's already out the door and in the hallway when I step up behind him, but as soon as he hears me, he turns, and I throw the entire bucket of warm water in his face.

He says nothing, just stares at me with his dark hair bleeding into his face, his soggy dress shirt clinging to the firm planes of his chest. I can't decide if he's angry with me ... or pleasantly surprised?

And then, of course, he has the audacity to fucking *smile* at me.

This dickface ...

"Thank you. I'm sure I'll enjoy Whitehall while I'm here." I drop the bucket on the marble floor, breeze past him, and head up the stairs to change.

Even if the bathroom here feels like some sort of bleached and sterile space pod, the shower is nice. It's roomy, and it has a

built-in bench seat. Plus, there are over a dozen sprayers and showerheads, and a surround sound system.

I start one of my playlists, taking my time with washing and conditioning my hair as I mouth the lyrics to “*DROWN*” by AViVA. In that marble box with its glass doors, I feel protected, insulated from reality. It’s like I’m on vacation or something, steeped in luxury that doesn’t belong to me, that I’m just renting for the time being.

I’m not a Banks anymore; I’m a Patterson. I’m not Dakota; I’m Mia.

The thought makes my head spin. It’s been six weeks since I found out. Just six. fucking. weeks. And yet, it hasn’t gotten any easier. I’m not sure it will *ever* be easy. Then to have to deal with someone as nasty as Kimber? As Parrish?

Add in his horrible friend, Chasm, and I just know I’m going to hate it here.

Even if I try. Even if I keep smiling. Even if I plaster a positive *can do!* attitude over the top of my melancholy.

With a sigh, I climb out of the shower, wrap my hair in a towel, and slip into the new robe that Tess bought for me. It was hanging in the closet, along with a few other staples. Subtle hints of a dress code my new mother wants me to aspire to.

I’m looking down at the floor, my chin toward my chest, as I fiddle with the towel on my hair. At the sound of a snort, I look up and find that Chasm guy on my bed. I stop short.

“What the hell?” I choke out, noticing Parrish standing near the window, his tattooed fingers pressed into the glass. He glances back at me, his face drawn down into a moue of boredom. He taps his fingers against the window a few times as I flick my gaze from him to Chasm. “What are you doing in my room?” My voice sounds a little edgy, like it’s lined in glass, but my nerves are seriously worn thin here. If I can’t have my privacy, then I have nothing left. Nothing at all.

“You snooped in my room; I decided I wanted to snoop in yours. Fair’s fair,” Parrish says, turning around and leaning his

back against the window. “Besides, Chasm’s mad. You stole his room.”

“Wait, what?” I sputter, trying to figure out how he knew I was in there.

“This room,” Chasm says with a long sigh, looking around with a sense of faux melancholy on his face. “It used to be mine, when I stayed over.” He glances over his shoulder, flashing that white-hot smile at me. Sally and Nevaeh would go nuts over him. Nevaeh, especially. I remember briefly that she hooked up with my crush, Ryan, and my heart contracts painfully. Not because of Ryan, but because a friend’s betrayal always stings the worst of all. “This bed, it used to be my bed.” He laughs and looks over at Parrish in a conspiratorial sort of way. “You don’t want to know the things I did in here; you’d never be able to sleep on this mattress again.”

My face heats up at the implications, and I realize that I’m completely naked beneath this robe, in a room with two strange guys, covered in tattoos, and dripping disdain and bullshit.

“Please. I’m supposed to freak out because you touched yourself a few times in the bed? Get over it. I’ve stayed in plenty of hotel rooms, and the sheets are clean.”

Chasm laughs at me; Parrish says and does nothing, watching us with such a mild interest that he could very well be watching paint dry.

“I didn’t just mean that I touched myself, Little Sister. I’m talking about the girls that I’ve brought in here. How many Parrish? I’ve lost count.”

“The entire female population of the Whitehall junior and senior classes, you mean?” Parrish responds coolly, and Chasm snorts.

“Come on, man. You know I’m a bit choosier than that.” Chasm pats the bed. “See, that’s why I’m saying she’s at least a four. Probably more like a five. You know I have standards.” He looks me over again and flashes his teeth in what I think is

supposed to be a disarming smile. All it serves is to supremely annoy me. Misogyny isn't cute on anyone.

"Low ones," Parrish retorts as my mind searches for an appropriate clap back. *Don't let them get to you, Dakota. You've been through the worst there is. What is this? Just bullshit.* "But sure, call her a four if it makes it easier for you to hit on her. We both know you're going to do it anyway."

"Look, I'm sorry you're a shitty artist, and I saw your hideous sketchbooks. What do you want me to do about it? Apologize for cringing when I saw your work?" I watch Parrish as the words leave my mouth. He tries to pretend that he doesn't care what I've said, but I see it, a slight tightening around his mouth. Just like that first night. *He's sensitive about his artwork.* Good to know. "You're upset I stole your mom. I'm upset you let your diseased douche of a friend sit on my bed. Just get out and let's call a truce."

The look on Parrish's face tells me that I've crossed some sort of line. He's subtle about it, but the darkness that crowds his handsome features reminds me of a storm that has yet to break.

"You," he starts, and then he's smiling at me in such a way that Chasm actually grimaces. I have a feeling that underneath all of that polished perfection and carefully practiced pique is a level of vindictiveness that I hadn't suspected until just now. Parrish moves away from the window, dressed in the green, gray, and black of the Whitehall Academy uniform. The way the blazer hugs his muscular shoulders is criminal, and I find myself shifting uncomfortably on my feet as he stalks slowly across the room to lord over me.

I'm not afraid of him, even now, even with his toasted almond eyes narrowed to slits, his chocolate-colored lashes casting shadows on his pale cheeks.

"Me, what?" I snap back, edgy and on guard, prepared for him to lob something equally awful my way. *You shouldn't have said that, about his art,* I tell myself, but it's too late. I've already said it; I can't exactly take it back now. Besides, didn't

he say he was going to—and I quote—*bury me*? Who does that? He fired the first shots; this isn't even my war.

“You'll never be a part of this family,” he tells me, and even as I tell myself that I don't care, that he's welcome to say and do his worst because it doesn't matter, we both know it does. It's the way he says it, too, that stabs me straight through the heart, tears that fragile tissue paper of my soul and makes everything hurt.

He says it, not like an insult, but like the truth we both know it to be.

“Doesn't matter though,” Parrish continues, reaching up with a single finger to twirl a wet strand of my hair until I slap him away. “Because even if you don't fit in, Tess will never let you go.” The smirk that takes over his face infuriates me to no end. Just as I've zoned in on his insecurities, he's doing the same to me. “*Never*,” he emphasizes, the two syllables of that word as sharp as glass. “Trust me: I know her. Having you here is all Tess has ever wanted, but you know what else?” Chasm stands up from the bed, like he knows this is about to get ugly. “You're a sickening disappointment.”

“Parrish, let's get out of here,” Chasm says, tucking his hands into the pockets of his slacks. His face is twisted in wry amusement, but I can tell his interest in the entire situation is fast waning. He slides his phone from his pocket, glances at the screen for a moment, and then frowns before looking back up. “We have better things to do than hang with your long-lost sister.”

My eyes flick to him and then switch back to Parrish's brown ones, dark with anger and pierced through with a thorn of familiar hurt. Having me here *hurts* him.

I know it; I could see it from the very first moment I stepped into this ice cavern they call a house.

“This girl is not my sister,” Parrish repeats, a phrase I'm sure he'll have to utter as many times as I protest the name Mia.

“You’re right,” I start as he turns away from me. Even before I say the words, I know that I’m going to regret them. “I’m not your sister because Tess isn’t your mother: she’s mine. You don’t seem to have one yourself. Didn’t she run off when you were a kid? I can see why. Clearly, you drove her away.”

Parrish hits the wall beside my door so hard that his hand must hurt, but he doesn’t stop walking, storming out of the room and down the hall as Chasm passes a stricken look my way.

“Jesus, Little Sister. That was fucked-up. Were you raised in a barn or something?”

Chasm takes off after his friend, leaving me alone and trembling and wondering how I could’ve said something so awful.

I’d say that Parrish Vanguard brings it out of me, but that isn’t fair. I’m hurting on the inside, so I’m lashing out. He’s doing the same, but how do we reconcile that?

The answer is something I’m afraid of: we don’t, we can’t.

“Crap,” I groan, sliding my hand over my face and sinking down to sit on the edge of the bed in my robe. Is hating someone supposed to hurt this much? When I’m around Parrish, I burn. When I’m not, I feel like a pile of cold, wet ash.

I fall back on my bed, one arm slung across my eyes; I don’t leave that spot for hours.

The graphic features the word "CHAPTER" in a black, hand-drawn, blocky font on the left. To its right is a large, stylized heart. The heart is primarily dark green with a black outline and a pink number "4" in the center. The background behind the heart consists of dark, bare tree branches and a light, misty or smoky atmosphere. The entire graphic is set against a light pink background.

CHAPTER 4

After a quick video chat with Maxine, I curl up early and fall asleep, plagued by awful dreams where I relive the hideous words I said to Parrish.

That wasn't like me. I'm not like this normally, I swear. I tell myself that was Mia Patterson I was channeling when I need to remember with every fiber of my being that I'm not her. I'm Dakota Banks, and I was raised better than this.

In the morning, I wake up to an early alarm and head downstairs, fully dressed and slipping past Parrish's door where the maid is currently cleaning.

"I'm sorry about the other day," I tell her, and she glances over at me in surprise, brown eyes crinkled at the edges with confusion. It takes me a second to realize that this is a different girl than the one I met on Wednesday. Oops.

The new maid isn't very old, likely around the same age as me. The way she's staring, I'm starting to get the idea that she doesn't often speak to the residents of the homes she cleans. I decide to try a different tactic. "You must be new?" I hazard and she shakes her head briskly.

"JJ usually works Monday through Friday and I do weekends." The girl shrugs. "She didn't show up today, so I'm filling in."

An awkward moment of silence follows before I decide to, you know, add yet another drop of cringe to the moment. Giving a little bow—I watch too much anime and *way* too many K-dramas—I decide to add, "and thank you, in advance,

for everything you do.” The girl stands up from where she’s leaned over, smoothing the black blanket on Parrish’s bed.

“No need to thank me,” she says crisply, like she’s worried I’m dragging her into some sort of trap. “This is my job; I’m paid to do it.”

I pause there, one hand resting on the doorjamb, as the girl’s eyes find my t-shirt and lift up in surprise.

“Paul,” she starts and then sighs, like she’s made a mistake she didn’t intend to make. “Dr. Vanguard, he isn’t going to like that t-shirt.”

I glance down at the design—it says *Pro-Cats, Pro-Magic, Pro-Witch*. Back home, we didn’t always see eye to eye on everything, but the Banks family never lashes out or overreacts. We talk through our differences and try to understand each other; I can’t imagine living a life any different from that.

“Thanks for the tip,” I tell her, trying to force a smile. “Do you mind if I ask for your name?”

“Delphine,” she tells me, but with an obvious reluctance, like she isn’t sure that anyone who lives in this igloo can be trusted. That’s probably true, to be fair.

“Dakota,” I say, pointing at myself. The momentary flicker of surprise on her face tells me that she was introduced to me under a different name: *Mia Patterson*.

“Have a wonderful day ... Dakota,” Delphine says, and then she disappears into Parrish’s bathroom without another word. Huh.

My mood slightly soured, I turn and head for the stairs, taking the curved metal steps quickly before I lose my nerve.

I woke with a very specific purpose in mind today: to apologize to Parrish. It’s going to hurt sure, but I’m fairly certain that’s why apologies are so important. They hurt because when you give them, truly and genuinely give them, it’s like ripping out a thorn embedded deep inside your heart. It bleeds, at first, but later it feels so much better. There’s a sense of relief that follows.

Even if I dislike—*hate*—the guy, it doesn't mean he deserves to be ripped apart verbally. I'm not sure what came over me that first night, but I won't let this riff between us turn into an all-out brawl.

I don't expect to find Chasm in the kitchen, but maybe I should have, considering how often I've heard his name mentioned in the last two days. "*Tell Chasm he can spend a few nights at his own place.*" That's what Tess said right after I got here, as if she was so used to Chasm spending the night that it'd become habit.

"Good morning," I say cheerily, breezing into the main living area and discovering with a surge of dread that Chasm isn't the only person digging into a basket of pastries on the counter. Parrish is here, of course, which is what I wanted, but it's Kimber's presence that makes me feel like I'm struggling with wobbly sea legs on the bow of a storm-tossed ship.

She lifts her eyes up to mine, the color so similar to my own that I choke back another stab of pain.

They're a reminder, those eyes, that Kimber and I share something that Maxine and I don't. Blood, DNA, things that don't matter half as much as the legality that keeps me chained here.

Parrish was right: I don't fit in here, and I never will.

He barely glances my way when I come into the room, his eyes half-lidded and lush with feigned boredom. Somehow, I see beyond that, to the seething anger that simmers beneath.

"Good morning, Little Sister," Chasm says, giving a breathless laugh that makes Kimber's cheeks pink. She sees me notice her reaction and turns feral, blocking my sudden discovery with a barrage of hate.

"What are you even wearing? Did you find time to go dumpster diving last night?" Kimber stands up from the sofa, dressed in her Whitehall uniform, the one that I have to be measured for this afternoon since we ran out of time yesterday. "I mean, after you snooped through my brother's room and then verbally assaulted him?"

Chasm laughs again, the sound wicked and thick with careful calculation. The way Parrish glances at him, sharp and cutting, tells me that he wasn't the one who told Kimber about yesterday.

"Actually, that's what I came down here to talk about," I hazard, watching Parrish's stoic expression to see what his reaction might be. "I wanted to apologize—"

"Save it," Parrish tells me, shoving the basket of pastries across the counter. Chasm looks between the two of us with an iniquitous gleam in his amber eyes. They're the color of the autumn sunshine on the trees back home, that soft, clinging light that bathes the trunks of the oldest trees in late afternoon. His personality is the exact opposite of that, apparently. "Because I won't be returning the favor." Parrish finally looks at me dead-on, and my entire world shifts. All of that carefully crafted calm, that strong resolve, that genuine feeling of regret, it feels like it's being ripped away under the challenging heat of his stare.

I feel myself bristling, shifting on my feet and preparing myself for a full-on assault.

He doesn't even give me the satisfaction of trying to one-up him with some casually thrown commentary. Instead, he collects his croissant, slips it in the front pocket of his Whitehall Prep hoodie (weird, but okay), and then sweeps past me, knocking me out of the way with his elbow.

I turn to ... I don't know, follow after or something, but then Tess appears at the bottom of the stairs, pausing to place a gentle hand on the top of Parrish's head, like he's seven instead of seventeen.

"Morning, son," she says, her eyes warm with love. He pauses to let her kiss his forehead, but otherwise gives no indication as to whether he enjoys the attention or not. "Morning, Mi—" Tess stops herself, her eyes darkening slightly as she focuses on me. A pang of longing hits me in the chest, memories of Grandma Carmen's big Irish breakfasts, the ones that *her* grandma taught her how to make. She looked

at me and Maxine the way Tess looks at Parrish, with unfailing dedication and endless love.

I try to remember if she still looked at me that way after she knew, or if her eyes were just too clouded with sadness to see anything but the storm of regrettable melancholy.

“Dakota,” Tess says finally, and I can’t help but notice Parrish glancing over his shoulder to smirk at me before he slips out the front door.

“You’re a sickening disappointment.”

He wasn’t wrong about that: I can see it written all over Tess’ face. I am not what the millionaire crime novelist was expecting.

The feeling inside of me is compounded by the fact that Tess was—and probably still is—my favorite author. So, my idol and my mother both are disturbed by me.

“Good morning.” The words sound hollow, like an echo of the greeting I’d call out as I hurried down the worn, wooden steps and skidded around the railing back home, a mere three thousand miles away from here.

Tess smiles at me, but the expression doesn’t quite reach her eyes, eyes that are the same endless pitch as my own, as Kimber’s. My stomach hollows out, and I turn back toward the kitchen, ignoring the way anxiety makes my gut twist as Tess moves into the room behind me.

I hesitate near the kitchen island, my eye falling to the basket filled to the brim with croissants, scones, shortbread cookies, tea cakes, and brownies. I’m surprised for a brief moment that this is an acceptable breakfast in a house such as this, but I’m too hungry to resist.

I reach out to take an all-too tempting scone dotted with bits of cranberries and orange zest when Tess makes a small sound as she comes up beside me.

With the scone in hand, I glance her direction and find myself surprised to see her staring at me with an uncertain expression.

“I’m sorry, Dakota,” she starts, the sound of my real name scraping off the end of her tongue like it hurts her to even force it out. “But that basket is for Paul’s business partner; it’s his one-year anniversary of joining the practice.” She hesitates as Chasm snickers and skirts out of the room to join Parrish.

Meanwhile, I’m left standing there, holding a scone that feels like it weighs a million pounds and wishing the floor would just open up and swallow me whole.

Guess she didn’t see Chasm and Parrish chowing down, now did she?

I feel suddenly so awkward that I’m afraid I might throw up again. Here I am, stuck in this house with these people, and I’m supposed to act like it’s my home and when I do ...

I put the scone back and Tess cringes again, only to make me realize that I’ve just sort of contaminated the whole basket by tossing it in.

“Mia, wait,” Tess calls out as I spin on my heel and take off for the side door that leads into the garage. I slip inside, ignoring the crush of reporters that I can see through the open garage door, and then slide into the backseat of an idling sportscar.

“Whoa, Little Sister,” Chasm whistles, turning to look at me over his shoulder. My face is burning, and I know I look ridiculous, barefoot and mussed and flushed all over. *Can’t wait to see these photos popping up all over the internet.* “What are you doing in here?”

I glance to the right just as the door opens again and Tess appears, flustered and red-faced.

“I can’t be here anymore,” I choke out as Parrish proceeds to ignore me, pulling his stolen croissant out and biting into it. He gives me a bored, apathetic sort of look in the rearview mirror. “Please.” I hate the way my voice sounds, high and reedy and pleading. Tess turns back around and heads inside, like she thinks I must’ve escaped the house in some other way. As in, the thought of me sitting in a sportscar with her do-no-wrong son is an impossibility. “Just drive.”

“Suit yourself,” Parrish says, and then he shifts gears and reverses out of the open garage door in just such a way that my body slams back against the seat and then flies forward when he hits the gas to head toward the front gate.

It slides open automatically, and we just barely clear the edge of it as it continues opening along a track. Reporters duck out of the way, snapping pictures of the car as we go.

Chasm and Parrish share a look and then Chas leans forward to turn up the volume on some CORPSE song that I vaguely recognize.

Leaning my head back against the seat, I try to be grateful that they’re ignoring instead of taunting me.

My eyes close as I struggle not to go back to that moment, to Tess’ reddened face. Why are embarrassing moments so sticky? They cling like cobwebs to the corners of your mind, latching onto any stray thought until they’re at the forefront and you’re forced to live them over and over and over again.

With a groan, I swipe both hands down my face and then lean in between the two front seats to turn the music down.

“You might’ve told me those pastries were for your dad’s work,” I growl out, turning to look at Parrish as Chasm chuckles on my other side.

As if in response to my question, Parrish slams on the brakes and sends me flying into the back of my seat with a grunt.

“Maybe you should’ve asked?” he counters, hitting the gas again and taking off with a squeal of tires. I struggle to get my seatbelt on, cursing my new stepbrother all the while and hating his stupidly gorgeous best friend with the crazy hair and the whiplash smile.

Nevaeh and Sally would be in boy heaven. Feels like I’m in boy hell at the moment.

“Is Tess always so ...” I struggle to find the right word as Chasm turns the volume back up on the music, but not quite as high as it was before.

“Uptight?” he queries, and then gives another barking laugh as Parrish shoots him an evil look. “Yeah, pretty much. Why? Let me guess: it was all puppies and kitty cats back home?”

His voice straddles the edge between playful teasing and mocking derisiveness, leaving me unsure how to respond.

I regret saying what I did to Parrish last night, but at the same time, I’m not about to let these two bully me.

“If you mean, did my grandparents love me unconditionally and show it through words and actions? Then yeah, it was puppies and kitty cats. Seeing as you’re always at Parrish’s place”—not about to call that sterile asylum home—“I’m guessing your homelife most certainly isn’t.”

Chasm flinches at about the same moment that I do. Shit. And there I go again, saying awful, awful things that I don’t really mean and feeling guilty about it.

“Little Sister is a real bitch, isn’t she?” Chasm asks, and then he cranks the stereo up to ear shattering levels, leaving me to sit hunched in the back seat with my palms pressed over my ears as I grit my teeth.

I started off wanting to make friends; I usually try the nice route first. But these guys are not making it easy.

About thirty minutes later, just as I’m starting to become convinced that my eardrums are about to explode, we pull up to a massive, filigreed gate with the words *Whitehall Preparatory Academy* arched over the top.

Shit.

“We’re at the school?” I choke out, staring down at my bare feet and then looking back up and out the front window as Parrish follows a narrow road that winds around the back of the school. There’s a parking garage, half-buried in the hillside. This is where we park, and then the boys are up and out of their seats, taking their book bags with them.

“What am I supposed to do with no shoes and no phone?” I call out, leaning my head out the door as Parrish and Chasm start up a winding ramp that leads to the top floor of the garage.

Parrish glances briefly back at me, a cruel edge to his lips that makes fury burn bright and hot inside me.

“I have no idea. I’m just a shitty, wannabe artist and Chasm here is just an unloved scamp, am I right?” He turns away and the two of them share a cruel laugh while I scramble around inside the car, looking for any spare shoes. He’s a teenage guy, right? Like, he must have some spare gym shoes or something in here.

Only ... there’s nothing, and I forgot to bring my phone. Faced with the idea of sitting in Parrish’s car for eight hours alone or wandering the fancy-pants academy sans shoes, I choose the latter.

I’ve always been a bit of a risk taker.

Hopping out, I start across the pavement, side-eying the rows of luxury cars on both sides of me.

I’ve never found excess admirable, to be honest. So when I come across an old beater covered in stickers, a smile takes over me and I find myself pausing to see what the driver looks like.

A beautiful black girl climbs out, a piece of toast stuck between her lips, items tumbling out of her purse as she struggles to heft a box and a book bag out of the car at the same time.

Recognizing a fellow clumsy chick in need, I jog over in bare feet and just barely manage to catch the box before it falls to the ground.

“Thanks,” the girl breathes before she turns around and spots me, dressed in casual clothes and standing barefoot on the cool pavement. “Oh.” Her breath releases in a rush as she looks me over. “You’re the missing girl, huh? Parrish Vanguard’s sister?”

I cringe a bit at that. I’d been sort of hoping that I could sneak into the student populace unnoticed. But, apparently, my reputation precedes me.

“That’s me,” I reply, forcing a smile that I don’t feel on the inside. *Fake it till you make it.* I’m really trying here, I am. But

maybe I need to try harder. I owe that to my grandparents; I promised them. So I don't correct the girl about being Parrish's sister. "My err, new stepbrother sort of left me high and dry here."

"You seem to be in need of some shoes," the girl replies cheerily, perking up. "Danyella." She extends her hand as I shift the box into the crook of my elbow and offer my own up. Her palm is warm and smooth, her grip firm and self-assured. I spy a potential friend right off the bat. "Here."

Danyella opens the back door of her car and garbage spills out on the pavement as I chuckle.

"Sorry, sorry, I've been meaning to clean this thing out ..." She shoves aside stacks of papers, bags of glitter spilling gold across her hands, as bits and pieces of brightly colored fabric scraps tumble to the pavement. "I've just been so busy with the production."

"The production?" I ask, hope filling me. I was always involved with art clubs and shit at my old school. I wasn't sure if they even had any here. I mean, I know it's a pompous rich-people academy and all that, but I wasn't sure spoiled assholes like Parrish or Chasm would be cool with long nights painting scenery or sewing costumes; I figured they might hire stuff like that out.

"We're doing *Wicked* this year, *Hamilton* next." Danyella makes a sound of triumph and then stands back up. Next thing I know, she's taking the box from me and setting it on the roof of her car. She throws a black blazer around my shoulders and stands back with a satisfied smile.

"There. That'll help make you a bit less noticeable."

I realize suddenly as I blush and mutter my thanks that I haven't actually introduced myself.

"I'm Dakota Banks," I blurt and Danyella laughs. Her braided hair is studded with bows, most of which seem to be themed. I recognize a pale blue *Dear Evan Hansen* one right away. And there, on the opposite side, one with the *SIX* logo in the center. Clearly, this girl is a fan of musical theater.

Thank the heavens.

“I know who you are,” she reminds me, but not unkindly. “The long-lost daughter of renowned true crime novelist, Tess Vanguard.” Danyella flashes a white-toothed grin. “*In my arms she once rested; in the darkness I weep and hold only her ghost.*”

I flinch like I’ve been slapped, and Danyella grimaces. She’s only quoting one of the more popular lines from Tess’ most famous book—the one that’s about me—which was a *New York Times* bestseller for fifty weeks straight. It sold over four million copies in its first year of publication alone and almost twenty million copies in the decade that followed.

“Sorry,” Danyella begins at the same time that I wave my hand dismissively. I’m already wondering if it isn’t too forward to ask her if I might use her phone for a second.

Not sure, exactly, who I’m going to call since I don’t know Tess’ number, but maybe I could get a cab or an Uber or something to take me back to the house?

Only ... I guess I don’t know the address of that either.

Crap.

“It’s okay,” I say, even though it’s not. I used to love *Abducted Under a Noonday Sun*. It was the first book I ever read of Tess’, and a frequent reread for me. Now, I can barely stand looking at the cover. Somehow, finding out that I’m the true story that it’s based on makes it unbearable.

“No, it’s not,” she says, opening her trunk and revealing nearly two dozen boxes of what seem to be brand-new shoes. She gives me a look over her shoulder and then shrugs. “I’m sure you’ve had to put up with people in your business for weeks now; I don’t need to add to your discomfort.” She digs around for a moment, checking the sizes on the boxes, and then looks back at me again. “What are you, a size seven? Seven and a half?”

I lift a brow and nod as Danyella chuckles.

“Seven. Damn, you’re good,” I tell her as she lifts a lid on one of the boxes and the edge of her lip quirks up in

amusement.

“My parents own a bunch of online shoe retailers,” she tells me, handing over the box. “That, and a snooty flagship store in Seattle; they make me work there on the weekends for minimum wage.” Danyella rolls her eyes as I sit down on the pavement, opening the lid on the shoes and choking out a laugh as I lift up a red patent leather pump. “They say it teaches character or ... something.” She lifts her chin in my direction when she notices my expression of terror. “Only pair in your size, I’m afraid.”

“These must be expensive,” I hazard, sucking my lower lip under my teeth as I debate putting my dirty feet into the luxury heels. “I don’t know when I’ll be able to pay you back ...” It occurs to me then that I could probably ask Tess for the money, and that she’d probably give it to me. Then again, she just about went full dragon on me this morning for daring to eat a scone that didn’t belong to me, so who knows?

“No need. I’m supposed to drop all of these off at the women’s shelter after school anyway. We donate shoes with imperfections.” She points to a dark scuff on the side of one heel and then shrugs. “They distribute the most practical shoes to women seeking assistance, and the rest get sold in their thrift store.”

I actually feel more—rather than less—guilty for taking the shoes, but since I’m not keen on walking around barefoot, I put them on as Danyella gathers the shoebox and tosses the garbage into the trunk of her car. She offers her hand to help me up and I take it, wobbling for a minute before I find my feet.

“So, where are we taking this?” I ask as I grab the original box from the car’s roof and tuck it under my arm again. I’ve only ever worn heels a handful of times. I’m going to have to really work to not break an ankle.

Danyella grins, gathers her book bag, and slams the back door of her old Geo so hard that it shudders like it’s in the throes of a death rattle. The door gets caught and she braces

herself against the pavement so that she can try and jamb it closed with her left hip.

“To the theater,” she tells me with a sharp nod, giving her car a death glare as we start off in the direction that Parrish and Chasm went.

“You know, you’re the only person here with a car that doesn’t cost more than a house,” I start and Danyella laughs. “That’s how I knew we could be friends.”

She gives me that award winning smile of hers again, tugging on her blazer in a futile attempt to straighten out the wrinkles.

“My parents believe in rewarding hard work, not birthright.” She shrugs and shakes her head. “I’m working to save up for an Altima.” I raise a brow and she gives me a wink in response. “I know, right? Not very glamorous. My mom drives a Maserati, but she doesn’t want me to turn out like ...” We pause near the upper exit of the parking garage, looking out at the sea of students laughing and lounging on the half-wall of the third story courtyard outside the towering walls of the academy.

Danyella doesn’t need to finish her sentence; we both know what she means.

So, Danyella is just as rich as the rest of the students here. I should’ve guessed as much.

“Welcome to hell,” she announces before starting off down the white stone walk toward the side doors. A quick glance over the short wall on my left shows a plummeting drop to the emerald green lawn below. I shiver and stand back up, only to realize that everyone’s gone quiet.

They’re all staring at me.

I stop walking, suddenly aware of all the eyes on me.

Crap, crap, and triple crap.

“Eyes to yourselves,” Danyella snaps, reaching down to grab my hand so she can drag me along behind her. “Nothing to see here.”

“You don’t get to put dibs on the new girl,” someone says. I glance over and find a honey-haired white girl with eyes the color of the earth. “Although, after looking at her, I think she may be just up your alley.”

It takes me a second to ascertain whether that was meant to be an insult or not. But then the girl smiles and holds out a hand for me to shake.

“Lumen,” she says as I take her hand and several of the other students shuffle closer. “You must be Mia.”

I swallow back the sharp stab of pain that name dredges up in me.

“Dakota, actually,” I say, waving my right hand around dismissively as I prop the box on my hip. I can’t help thinking about Parrish’s stupid TikTok where he called me a three. I hate that I’m meeting these people and instead of starting with a fresh slate, I’m wondering if they’ve seen it. Or worse, if they agree. Worst of all, I shouldn’t care and yet ... I do. “Mia’s just my birth name,” I add, and much to my surprise, Lumen nods.

“Your brother is on a mission to destroy you. Just thought you should know.” She shrugs her shoulders as Danyella grabs my hand again and pulls me toward the door. “But don’t worry: I’ll do my best to keep him in line.”

Danyella finally succeeds in moving me toward the door as my cheeks heat and yet another crowd of students turns to gawk my way.

“Is Lumen nice?” I ask, because for some reason, I trust Danyella’s opinion on the matter. We’re birds of a feather, that much I can tell already.

“She’s alright,” she admits, but almost grudgingly. “She’s also been slobbering after Parrish for years. I wouldn’t call her a mean girl or anything, but I also wouldn’t confess my deepest secrets to her, you know?”

There’s something in Danyella’s voice that speaks to experience and pain. Seeing as I just met the girl ten minutes

ago, it isn't my place to ask, but I file away her statement for later.

Glancing down at the box, I realize suddenly that it holds a bunch of props. I recognize Elphaba's glasses and knitted blue hat from *Wicked*, along with a wand that must belong to Glinda. A smile twitches at the edge of my lips, just before Danyella comes to an abrupt stop and I glance up to see an administrator gliding our way with purpose.

Uh-oh.

"The cavalry has arrived," Danyella murmurs, taking the box from me. She manages to hook her book bag over one shoulder, propping the box under her right arm. "Find me on online later and we'll figure out a spot to meet up on your first day. For now, I've got to jet. The bows aren't really in the dress code." She points at her hair and then disappears inside a set of double doors on our left.

I catch the briefest glimpse of the theater, all stained-glass windows and long, crimson curtains, and my mouth waters. Real architecture, character, and history. It's basically the opposite of the Vanguard's house.

"Can I help you?" the woman asks as she pauses in front of me, taking in my borrowed blazer with the sequins on the lapels. The next thing she notices are my shoes, the red heels that I borrowed from Danyella. "I see you've met the president of our drama club," the woman adds dryly with a long-suffering sigh. "You must be Mia Patterson."

I grit my teeth, breathe out through my nose, breathe in again to calm myself.

"I go by Dakota Banks," I offer, plastering on a smile to soften the gentle rebuke.

"We weren't expecting you until the Monday after next," the woman adds, looking me over again, like she isn't quite sure what to make of me. She has a slight accent, but I can't discern what it is.

"I'm here for the tour," I say, knowing full well that I'm scheduled to meet with the headmistress on the twenty-eighth.

I can't very well admit the reality of my situation, now can I? *Yeah, sorry, I accidentally ended up in the back of my stepbrother's car, shoeless and on the verge of tears because I have nowhere else to go, and my birth mother who I just met chastised me for eating pastries belonging to my shiny new stepdad just after insisting that I make myself at home and then doing absolutely nothing to make me feel that way.*

I keep smiling, even though the expression hurts my face. *Forced smile number one-thousand and two.*

"Well, I suppose this works as well as any other morning," the woman muses, smiling back at me. Her raven dark hair is twisted into a bun at the back of her head, and her lipstick is the color of blood. I like her right away. "Yuki Miyamoto," she says with a small exhale. "I'm the headmistress' assistant. Do you happen to have your phone on you? We could get you logged into the student portal and have a look at your class schedule."

Yuki starts walking, and I struggle to catch up in the heels. I've worn high heels exactly four times in my entire life: once to my great aunt's funeral, once on Halloween, and to two of my grandmother's boring doctor conferences. I wouldn't exactly call myself an expert.

"I actually ... don't." I give Yuki a look and see her struggling to hold back a smile.

"I thought you kids kept your phones glued to your palms," she muses and then briefly shrugs her shoulders. "No matter. Let's pop down to the office, shall we?"

She guides me down the cavernous hallway as I lift my gaze to the vaulted ceilings and the leaded glass three stories above our heads. Early morning sunshine filters in, making the stone floors shine prettily.

We pause outside a small elevator, and I watch in surprise as Yuki—er, Ms. Miyamoto—pulls out a keycard and swipes it before pressing the call button.

We head down to the basement level and step into an office with stone walls that look so oddly medieval against the desks

and bookcases arranged neatly near the front of the room that I stop right where I am.

Ms. Miyamoto asks me a few questions—name, birthday, the usual—and then frowns when she can't find me in the system.

“You might be listed under Mia Patterson,” she adds apologetically, and my heart drops. Even then, she can't find me in the computer.

That's when it occurs to me: my birthday is probably wrong, too.

“I ...” I start, but the words won't come out. I can't seem to make myself admit that I have no idea what my real birthday is. For my entire life, it was October twenty-fourth, just a week before Halloween and usually involving costumes and skeleton decorations and candy. Well, except for last year. Last year, we partied at the cemetery. My grandparents were not pleased.

“No matter,” Ms. Miyamoto says, and after a moment, she finds me in the system anyway and prints out a paper schedule. Just looking at it makes me sick. The school day here is arranged so differently that I may as well be in a different country; the culture shock is real.

Without another word about the birthday and name mix up, Ms. Miyamoto starts the tour by taking me up in the elevator to the first floor.

We've barely begun when I hear someone yelling from down the hall.

“Mia!”

The voice is frantic, almost shattered. Just the sound of it makes my head and heart ache. I don't need to turn around to know that it's Tess.

Shit.

If I'd thought the students were staring at me before, they were really just glancing my way. Now, they're all outright gaping.

“Mia!” Tess almost stumbles in her haste to get to me, throwing her arms around me as a relieved sob overtakes her. She grabs my face, mascara bleeding down her cheeks. I notice her husband, Paul, striding down the hall toward us. “Oh my god, I’m so relieved,” Tess breathes, breaking away from me to brace a hand on the wall.

My cheeks flush with heat and my skin prickles with goose bumps. I can’t bear to look at any of the other students, so I flick my attention over to Ms. Miyamoto instead.

The bell rings as she turns her attention to the gathering crowd.

“Alright, that’s enough of that. Off to class,” she commands, her voice sharp and authoritative. “She repeats herself in another language, and it only takes me a second to recognize that she’s speaking Japanese.

My excitement at that—Ms. Miyamoto teaches the only foreign language class offered on-campus which I just so happen to be enrolled in—fades as soon as I catch sight of Parrish and Chasm at the edge of the crowd.

“Is everything okay, Mrs. Vanguard?” Ms. Miyamoto asks, turning her attention back to Tess.

She’s breathing heavily as Paul rubs her back in small circles, his lips thin and tight. Tess, on the other hand, looks like she’s on the verge of a full-blown panic attack.

“I ...” Tess begins, turning her familiar brown eyes over to mine. The fear shadowing them almost staggers me, and I take a small step back. My own fear takes root in my belly, crawling up my throat in the form of acid reflux as I start to realize something so terrifying, I can barely put a name to it. “Mia disappeared from the house, and she wasn’t answering her phone ...” Tess trails off and, as if she’s realized what a spectacle she’s making, stands up straight and lifts her chin proudly. “I apologize for my behavior, Ms. Miyamoto.” I watch as her face shifts from fear and melancholy to anger. “It’s just ... the last time my daughter went missing, I didn’t see her for fourteen years.”

Yuki's face softens slightly as my heart thunders and blood roars in my ears. I glance over to find that the hall has emptied of everyone but Parrish. Even Chasm is gone.

Our eyes meet and he briefly smirks at me before moving up to put a hand on Tess' shoulder.

"Don't cry, Mom," he says, the cruelty and derisive apathy stripped from his voice for a brief moment.

The look she throws him makes him take a step back.

"You told me you had no idea where your sister was," Tess begins as Paul steps up beside her like an honor guard. "You lied to me, Parrish."

The color drains from his face as he flicks an evil glare my direction.

"She hid in the backseat of my car. How the hell was I supposed to know where she was?" he lies while I stand there gawping at him.

"Are you kidding me?!" I choke out as Tess turns back to me and her eyes waver between relief and righteous anger.

That's when it finally hits me, that thing I didn't want to put a name to.

Parrish ... was right.

When he told me that Tess was never going to let me go, he wasn't just baiting me into an argument or trying to piss me off. No, instead he was delivering a simple truth.

I see it now, reflected in her gaze, in the stiff stance of her shoulders and the tremble of her hands, the fear that she carefully tucks away behind an exasperated expression.

Tess will never, ever let me go. Until I turn eighteen, I'm stuck here. Stuck in Washington state in this horrible suburb full of entitled, rich assholes. Stuck in that nauseating glass and cement box they call a home.

Stuck with a lying snake like Parrish Vanguard as a stepbrother.

“You knew perfectly well that I was in your car,” I growl back at him, surprised by the menace in my own voice. I’ve never been one to start feuds with others. In general, I get along with everybody. There’s usually some thread, no matter how small, that you can find with another human in order to create a connection.

But not here.

Not with *him*.

“Prove it,” Parrish retorts as Tess holds up both hands, palms out.

“That is enough, you two,” she snaps as Paul gives his son a sharp look. “You’re both grounded for the next two weeks.”

My mouth drops open as Parrish grits his teeth, turning a monstrous look on me, like this is somehow my fault that he lied and got Tess upset. If he’d just told her the truth, that I was at the school the whole time, this wouldn’t be happening.

I wouldn’t have had the worst start to my first day on campus, and Tess wouldn’t be slowly recovering from what looks like a PTSD reaction to finding me missing.

You have some responsibility in this, Dakota, I tell myself, but it doesn’t matter. Not right now. Not when I’m so mad at Parrish that I could spit. Not when I’m now dreading my first day of school at Whitehall more than ever.

“And you can hand over your car keys,” Paul continues as Parrish turns a stricken look in his father’s direction. “I’ll drive it home, and you can earn it back over the next two weeks by doing some work at my office.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Parrish snaps, and I raise both brows. Uh-oh. He throws a hand out toward me accusingly. “This girl—this *stranger* shows up—and suddenly my life is a living hell?”

“This stranger is my daughter,” Tess says, and any small spike of pleasure I feel at hearing her defend me is obliterated by the look of agony on Parrish’s face. “Like it or not, you two are family now.”

“We are *not* family,” Parrish growls back, his gold-flecked eyes turning my way again. He’s hurt. By what or who, I’m not sure, but the look of devastation on his face is staggering. “Never will be. Send her back to New York. She wants to go back anyway. She’ll never be happy here. She showed up wanting to hate us all.”

He turns on his heel and storms off, leaving the four of us in the empty hallway. The classroom door slams behind him, echoing ominously in the sudden silence.

Frankly, if I spoke to my grandparents back home the way Parrish speaks to Tess and Paul, I’d have received far worse punishment than two weeks grounding and a brief hiatus from my car.

I almost smile thinking of the punishments that Grandma and Grandpa would cook up: scrubbing the chicken coop, taking my phone away, stealing the power cord from my TV and PlayStation. Oh, they’d have made me wear grandma’s old brown shoes to school for two weeks. I’d be tasked with dinner prep for the whole family every day for a month.

In the end, I can’t make myself smile because I’m too sad, too lonely to do anything but stand there.

“I apologize again for my dramatics, Ms. Miyamoto.” Tess glances my way and tries to force a smile. “We could tour the school together while we’re here?” she queries as Paul checks his Apple Watch and fists Parrish’s keys against his palm.

“I’ll be off now. I’m already missing my first patient of the day.” He gives Tess a kiss on the cheek and offers me a tight smile on the way out. I notice that his gaze lingers a bit on my shirt, and I briefly remember Delphine’s warning from this morning. Heh.

“I think I’d rather go ...” I almost say home, but I don’t have a home anymore, now do I? I have a fancy multimillion-dollar house that I live in. Across the country, a home waits in New York state that will never be mine again.

My stomach roils and I fight back a rush of tears.

“Understandable,” Ms. Miyamoto says, giving me an empathetic smile. “We’ll see you on the twenty-eighth then.” She hands me my schedule and then heads back down the hallway.

Standing there alone with Tess, it’s my own personal version of hell.

“I’m sorry if I embarrassed you,” Tess says finally. “But you can’t just run off like that. I don’t know how those people raised you but—”

The look I turn on her is nothing short of murderous. She notices and redirects the conversation.

“I’m not totally unreasonable,” she tries as I turn and head in the direction she came from, assuming there’s some sort of exit this way. “All you had to do was tell me where you were going.”

“Parrish had his phone,” I reply tiredly, “but he chose to lie to you and leave me shoeless and alone in the parking garage.” Tess’ eyes drop to the red heels on my feet and both of her perfect eyebrows go up in question. I decide some things are best left a mystery and neglect to fill in the blanks.

She doesn’t respond, and we make the drive back to the house in silence. The only backdrop to our combined suffering is an audiobook that I realize is Tess’ newest release, the one I didn’t read because it came out two days after I met her for the first time.

There’s just something about knowing how she is in person that makes me not want to read her books anymore. It’s probably like that with most authors, huh?

I do my best to shut out the narrator’s voice, closing my eyes as we approach the gates to the house and the still sizable crowd of reporters.

As soon as the garage door closes behind us, I’m out of the car and into the house, heading straight up to my room and slamming the door behind me.

It isn’t long before my pillow is wet with tears and I’m feeling so sorry for myself that I get nauseous.

My phone is right where I left it on the nightstand, so I grab it and ignore the disturbing number of notifications waiting for me. Every influencer worth their salt wants me on their YouTube channel or their Instagram feed, wants me to appear on TikTok for them or do an interview.

I ignore all of it and dial up Maxine. She declines the video chat and texts me instead.

In class right now with the she-devil professor. Call you later!

And then I'm left to drift, lying there on my back and staring at the ceiling. When Tess knocks later, I pretend to be asleep.

Saturday, and my coffee meeting with Maxine cannot come quickly enough.

OceanofPDF.com

The graphic features the word "CHAPTER" in a black, hand-drawn, blocky font on the left. To its right is a large, stylized number "5" in a vibrant pink color. The background is a dark, textured green with black, branch-like patterns. On the right side, there is a faint, sketchy drawing of a person's face in profile, looking towards the left. The overall style is artistic and somewhat macabre.

CHAPTER 5

Parrish clearly blames me for his grounding and the loss of his car. Fortunately, all that means is that he avoids me and refuses to have even the most basic of conversations.

“Pass the orange juice,” is met with a glare and the juice is only passed when either Paul or Tess is present and watching. Kimber joins in the fun, going so far as to purposely bump into me in the hall as if I’m a ghost. She doesn’t apologize, and I don’t ask her to. Frankly, she could drop dead for all I care.

The younger kids—Ben, Amelia, and Henry—aren’t so bad though. And they don’t deserve to be punished or ostracized for anything that’s happened, so I spend the next week playing with them, helping with their homework, or reading to them at night.

Actually, the only—and I mean *only*—good thing about this nightmare is getting three new siblings that don’t hate my guts.

Oh, and grounding at the Vanguard household doesn’t appear to extend to Chasm. He comes over every day after school and stays through dinner. The following Friday, he doesn’t leave, and I’m forced to listen to him and Parrish laughing their asses off every time I enter or leave the living room and kitchen area.

Early Saturday, I wake up and get dressed, heading to Tess’ office where she’s working on a typewriter.

A typewriter.

No offense or anything but only pretentious assholes use typewriters. I just stare at her back, dreading this moment, dreading what I’ll be forced to do if she tells me no.

I knock on the doorjamb and lean my shoulder against it. Tess holds up a single finger and then taps out a few more words before turning around with a smile.

She beams as she looks me over, like I'm the be-all, end-all to her happiness.

That's a lot of pressure to put on somebody you barely know.

"Decide to take me up on my offer to go furniture shopping?" she asks, a tremor of excitement in her voice that she tries to hide. Uh-oh. If that's her expectation for this meeting, she's going to be sorely disappointed.

You aren't giving this a real shot, Dakota, I tell myself, but it hurts too much to try. And I'm so emotionally drained, I can barely breathe through the tears sometimes. I never expected to feel this lonely, to feel this disconnected from Sally and Nevaeh, to miss home so bad that I get dizzy thinking about it. Shit, I knew it would be hard, but not this hard.

"Actually, I was wondering if we couldn't give my grandparents the money to send the rest of my things over?"

There's a long pause where Tess waffles between being pleased that I'm looking to make a more permanent stand here—not by choice—and irritated that I've called the Banks family my grandparents.

"Yes, of course, honey. I'll shoot them an email tonight and send the money in the morning."

A slight smile plays over my lips, but not because of Tess. Because my grandparents are highly unlikely to check their emails anytime soon.

"I could call them?" I suggest, hope burgeoning in my chest. If I called from Tess' phone, they might answer.

"Honey," Tess begins, letting her voice trail off. She looks so ... Seattle, dressed in an expensive dress shirt paired with Birkenstocks. Her makeup is flawless, the lake stretched out and shimmering outside her office window. There's this 'outdoor chic' look that everyone in the Pacific Northwest seems to be obsessed with. Like, they wear hiking boots or

expensive Fjallraven outdoor gear whether they're going on a hike or not. Just to be fair, they do seem disturbingly obsessed with hikes, coffee shops, and telling everyone who wants to listen how much they hate people from California.

“Then you'll have to call them. My grandparents are old school; they check their emails once a week and they ignore texts.” I focus on my breathing, struggling to keep the anger and resentment from my voice. Instead of letting me talk to my family to ease the transition, Tess has forbidden me from them. Does she even recognize how cruel that is?

“I can do that,” Tess agrees reluctantly, looking me over. “You look nice today.”

My stomach clenches tight as I consider how to approach this moment. I can't tell Tess about Maxine or she'll definitely prevent me from going. But I also can't run out on her again. The look on her face ... I can't trigger a grieving mother's PTSD, not even if she's among my least favorite people in the world right now.

My heart sinks. I'd hoped Tess' compassion—and obvious guilt—would win out over her jealousy, and that I might be able to convince her to let me see Maxine. But after that reaction to my suggestion about a phone call to my grandparents?

It's clearly not happening.

“Thanks,” I breathe, and then I turn and head down the hall before the tears can start falling.

“Somebody die, Little Sister?” Chasm asks, leaning against the wall in the hallway with no shirt on. His arms are crossed over his chest, his smile tinted with mischief.

He's undeniably pretty to look at, but his inked arms and edgy haircut aren't enough to make up for that rotten personality of his. He may as well be The Prince of Sloths' personal knight in shining armor, always coming to Parrish's rescue. Also, he says things to me in Korean that I don't understand but that—because I am a K-drama freak after all—

get the gist of. None of the things he says to me are polite, that much I know whether I speak the language or not.

The only thing Kimber wants to talk about besides TikTok trends is Chasm. Apparently, he's half Korean, lived in Seoul with his grandmother for the first nine years of his life, and then was shipped over to the US to live with his dad. The way Kimber puts it, his father is basically a sociopath or something. Guess that's why Chasm's always hanging out here.

You'd think—you'd *think*—that our shared past—that is, living with one family in one place and then losing it all to live somewhere else with someone else—would give us some sort of connection. Instead, all this guy has given me is a cocky shell instead of a personality. He behaves like a bodyguard, like he's Parrish's only protection against the world. I know absolutely nothing about him other than straight facts and wistful sighs delivered by Kimber. Since it's the only thing she'll speak to me about without scowling or insulting me, I listen.

I stop walking, watching as Chasm moves into Parrish's bedroom and cracks the window, climbs onto the roof, and starts to smoke a cigarette.

The sound of the shower going in the attached bathroom answers the question of where Parrish might be. I decide to take Chasm's query as an invitation and climb out onto the roof beside him.

He looks surprised but offers up the pack of cigarettes anyway. I wave them away.

"I don't smoke," I tell him with a shrug, and he cocks a dark brow.

"Oh, I'll bet you don't," he says with a sharp laugh. Goose bumps pebble across my skin at the sound. Guys that laugh like that ... I'd be better off with the cigarettes in regard to my health. "Bet you put on cheesy song and dance routines to warn your classmates against the dangers of nicotine."

He snorts and glances up at the ascending parade of luxury homes that dot the hill. I still can't for the life of me understand why Parrish wouldn't want the room across the hall, with a view of the water. Maybe he can't swim? Or has a crippling fear of sharks?

The thought makes me smile, makes him seem more human somehow.

Clearly that means it's bullshit; he isn't human. He's a fucking demon dredged up from the pits of my own personal hell.

"I don't judge people for smoking," I tell Chasm, glancing over to find his brilliant amber eyes staring back at me. They're so bright they look gold in the early morning light. "Actually, I think many of today's anti-smoking laws are a violation of our constitutional rights."

Chasm frowns, like I've surprised him—and not in a good way—and turns back to the houses above us.

"I'm supposed to have coffee with my sister today," I say, unsure why I'm even bothering. Chasm and Parrish have made no moves to welcome me here. Then again, I highly doubt Chasm's about to go running off to tattle to Tess. I may as well spill my guts. It isn't like I've got anyone else to talk to here. "My real sister," I add before he gets a chance to ask. "Pretty sure Kimber would rather throw boiling water in my face than gossip over a latte."

"But you're grounded," Chasm fills in, smiling to himself as he studies the series of retaining walls that make up the backyard. Back home, we had apple and plum trees, a row of raspberry bushes and a garden surrounded by deer fencing. The woods were a natural fence, offering privacy but letting in dappled sunshine. I miss it so much that my heart seizes in my chest.

"That, and part of the plea deal that Tess offered my grandparents in exchange for their daughter's guilty-time-served verdict was that we have no contact for a year."

I choke on the words and look away so that Chasm won't see the deep melancholy etched into my face. He doesn't need anymore ammo. *Parrish* most definitely doesn't need anymore ammo. He seems to know exactly how to hit me where it hurts already.

"I'll drive you," Chasm offers, still smoking his cigarette and leaning back on one hand, legs stretched out in front of him. The tops of his bare feet are inked, too. It's very clearly Parrish's work. I can see it in every perfect stroke of black, every white highlight.

Despite what I said to his face, I actually do admire his work. But, like with Tess' books, it's a bit hard to appreciate the art when the artist is an asshole.

"You'd drive me?" I scoff, giving Chasm a onceover. "Why?" I can barely keep the skepticism from my voice. Nothing in life is free. And if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. I do enjoy a good idiom.

I narrow my eyes as Chasm laughs and stabs his cigarette against the roof shingles to put it out.

"Chalk it up to natural curiosity," he says, leaning far too close and smelling like tobacco and mint gum. I lean back because his face—and naked chest—are far too close for comfort. "Oh, and don't tell Parrish or I'll lie like hell about it," he adds as he pulls back and climbs in the window. He offers out a hand and I take it, letting him pull me back inside. "Meet me downstairs in twenty."

Chasm moves over to Parrish's bedroom door, waiting for me to leave before he slams it shut.

I'm perplexed as hell, but too desperate to see Maxine to argue about it. This could be my only chance to see my sister for a while. Weirdly enough, my hand tingles in all the places he touched it. With a huff, I rub at the offending flesh and frown before turning away.

There's a TV in my room, one that was there when I moved in. It's mounted to the wall above the utilitarian dresser that has so much chrome, it looks like it belongs in a spaceship. I

turn it on and crank the volume, leaving *Uncanny Counter* to blast into the room. Tess is unlikely to bother me for the duration of her workday. Once she's sat down to write, she only emerges for lunch and is usually so far inside her own head that she mumbles plot points as she putters around the kitchen. I might find it endearing if I weren't so angry with her.

While I'm waiting for Chasm, I pace the foyer, wondering if I'm being an idiot, if I'm about to fall into some sort of trap. What if he tells Tess my plans? What if this whole thing is a setup? Unfortunately, I'm too desperate and too shit outta luck to do much else.

Maxine is worth the risk.

I lift my head up at the sound of footsteps on the stairs, a readymade lie resting on my tongue in case it's Tess. Instead, it's Chas, dressed up and looking pretty in black pants, a too-tight t-shirt, and sneakers that may very well be those Lil Nas X ones that caused a lawsuit.

The way my heart beats when I see him annoys me; the way my palms sweat when his lightning bolt colored hair falls across his forehead infuriates me.

Chasm doesn't say a word, just grabs my sweaty hand and yanks me into the garage before anyone sees us. Once again, my hand tingles and I shove it into the pocket of my black and white striped overalls to silence my rebellious skin. Too many teenage hormones, that must be it. When it comes to love interests, I'm choosy but I'm not a nun.

Chasm heads over to a sleek black sportscar on the far end of the four-car garage that I'd assumed belonged to Tess or Paul.

"Whose car is this?" I ask warily, unwilling to borrow someone else's vehicle for our getaway. If Tess discovers me missing again, she'll be upset of course. But tack on a stolen car? No thank you.

Chasm snorts.

“It’s mine,” he says, sliding into the driver’s seat and starting the vehicle as I scramble to catch up. I won’t be left behind, not today. The thought of seeing Maxine is the only thing keeping me sane right now.

I slide in just as Chasm presses a button on his visor and the garage door starts to open behind us.

It occurs to me as Chasm starts to back out that I won’t necessarily have a ride home.

“Are you coming back then?” I ask as he starts up a song and turns the volume up too loud. *Warriors* by Imagine Dragons blasts out as I choke back a small knot of worry. After Tess’ reaction last time, I’m not so sure this is a good idea. That, and we have to drive right through the mess of reporters yet again.

“When the fuck will they give up?” Chasm murmurs, blasting out the gate and speeding right past them.

Once we’re clear, I let out a sigh and Chasm turns the volume down a blissful few notches.

“If you’re expecting a ride back, I hate to disappoint you, but I’ve got other shit to do before the party tonight.” Chasm’s pretty jaw clenches as he flicks his gaze over to mine. A bit of that mischievous glint I saw earlier is back, sparkling like fool’s gold in his amber eyes.

Ah, he wasn’t planning on telling me that, that he wouldn’t be able to give me a ride back. Too bad for him I don’t care. Maxine can drive me back and drop me outside the gate. Even if I have to fight through reporters to get back in, I’ll do it. Tess gave me a list of codes and passwords for the house and Wi-Fi that I’ve got saved on my phone. Surely the gate code is in there.

As far as the party goes, I know all about it thanks to Danyella. I found her on social media, so we’ve been chatting for the past week. If I weren’t grounded, I might even go, even if high school parties aren’t really my scene.

“I’ll be fine on my own,” I say, leaning back in the leather seat as Chasm takes turns far too quickly, making me sweat a

bit. Jesus.

“Look at you,” he whistles, hands tightening around the wheel as the right corner of his mouth quirks up. “What a rebel.”

“What do you have against me anyway?” I ask, and he shrugs loosely. It’s impossible to miss how nicely his white t-shirt clings to his lean body or how the sleeves are bunched just enough to allude to a recent change in muscle mass. The shirt is too small for sure.

I look back at the road.

“You’ve got that snooty East Coast snob thing going on,” he says, and my mouth drops open.

“Me?” I choke out as we weave through street after street of mansions, a sigh escaping me when I spot my first normal middle-class house. Real people, thank god. “I am not snooty. I’m not the one driving a two-hundred-thousand-dollar car and attending a high school that requires parents to send in applications for their fucking *infants*.”

The heat in my voice surprises me. It seems to surprise Chasm, too. For a moment, he says nothing at all.

“Actually, you do attend that school,” he says, almost thoughtfully. “A school that doesn’t allow anyone in if they have the audacity to slip up in middle school—even *if* their parents got that application in a decade and a half ago.”

I open my mouth to speak, but he cuts me off and I frown.

“But look at you, the celebrity with the mother that cares so much that she never stopped looking, the one that wrote a book about you, the one that fought tooth and nail to bring you home, and all you can do is hate her.”

“You must understand at least a little how I feel,” I snap back, feeling my skin get hot and tight. “Don’t you miss your grandma? How about Korea? I moved across the country; you moved across the world. Was there no culture shock?”

“I’m not the one whining and bitching about my rise from pauper to princess,” he says, waving a dismissive hand my

way. “Don’t compare us. Trust me, Little Sister: we are *nothing* alike.”

“You’re right,” I say, letting my hands fall to my thighs with a slap. “We aren’t. I have a personality, interests, dreams. All you talk about are girls and how many notches you’ve got on your belt.”

Chasm squeezes the steering wheel even tighter, knuckles going white, and I know that I’ve struck a nerve, just as I intended. Immediately, I regret it. See, that’s the thing with me: I can’t decide who it is that I am anymore. The Dakota Banks I know would never try to pick at someone’s scab just to get a reaction out of them, yet I can’t seem to stop myself from doing it now.

“Sorry that you can’t be one of them?” he quips back at me, recovering quickly. “Now that I’ve seen the real you, I think Parrish was right. Three, three and a half with heavy makeup and an expert hairstylist.”

“Screw you,” I breathe, but it’s all I can manage to get out. He turns the volume back up on the music, mumbling something under his breath in Korean. I think he just said ‘suit yourself’ or ‘do whatever you want’. Either way, it was a clear dismissal.

I can’t get out of that car fast enough when we pull up to the curb. I’m about to slam the door when I realize that, despite Chasm’s lack of empathy toward me, I still owe him a thank you.

“Thanks for the ride,” I tell him, trying on a smile that actually seems to stick. But not because of him. All I can think is that I’m about to see my sister—my *real* sister—and that I can use her phone to call my grandparents. Maybe if I tell them how much I hate it here they can ... well, I don’t know, but just hearing their voices would mean a lot to me right now. “I really appreciate it.”

“Sure thing,” Chasm says, lighting up a cigarette and then grinning as he spots someone out the windshield. I turn just in time to see Lumen striding our way, dressed like she’s on her

way to a date. A very odd, very misplaced bolt of jealousy stabs me right through the gut.

The hell is that about? Chasm can marry Lumen and carry her off into the sunset for all I care. I mean, I'd feel sorry for Lumen, but that's about the extent of it.

She pauses beside me and smiles, and the expression doesn't seem entirely disingenuous.

"Where are you off to?" she asks, giving my outfit a once-over. I suppose I'm also dressed like I'm off on a hot date. With Chasm? I glance back at him, and the thought isn't entirely repellent which bothers me.

He's too rude, too much of a bully. Maybe if he were nicer, and he didn't throw himself between me and Parrish like some sort of martyr ...

"Coffee with my sister," I say, and then add, "my real sister." In case the idea was up for debate. Kimber is anything but a sister to me.

"Party tonight at Antonio's," Lumen suggests, flashing me a mischievous smile. "Parrish said he might sneak out and come. Looks like you already beat him to that."

She laughs and then climbs into Chasm's car like he was there to pick her up all along. For all I know, he was.

A frown creases my lips as Lumen closes the door and then pauses, rolling the window down just long enough to grab my phone from my hands.

"Here's my number. Text me if you decide to come." She hands me my phone back and then laughs as Chas hits the accelerator and takes off.

I watch them go, weaving into the decent crawl of traffic on the small street outside of the café. After a moment, I turn and head inside, fully aware that I'm a half an hour too early.

I decide to order the drinks ahead of time since the place is so busy, grabbing a spot in one of the two lines.

A boy in the line to my right glances over and our eyes meet.

His are a startling green, vibrant and saturated and engaging. Mostly, they brim with a steady confidence that seems to supersede even the jewel-tone brilliance of the color. My lips part of their own accord, and it takes several slow, shudder-y breaths for me to realize that I'm gawping like an idiot.

"Hi." He says it first which is good because when it comes to talking to potential love interests, eh. Not one of my strong suits. Apparently, I'm an expert at insulting people though. Parrish and Chasm have taught me that.

"Hi," I reply, feeling a bit stupid as I tuck a tendril of lime green hair behind one ear. I'm used to plugging myself into games, leaving the real world behind in favor of online interactions. But this could be good, right? It could be really good. *This dude is hot as hell, way hotter than Parrish or Chasm. Well, at least as hot, and with a much better personality.* I try to take it as a positive sign, some call from the universe that life in Washington doesn't have to be completely shitty for me.

"How are their chai lattes here?" he asks me, and I can't decide if it's because he just thinks I'm a chai latte sort of girl or because that's the drink that he's into.

"Dunno," I reply laconically, criticizing myself in my own head for not being as well-spoken as I'd planned. *Get it together, Kota!* This guy, whoever he is, is the complete opposite of Parrish. Instead of feeling a sudden and inexplicable hatred, I immediately feel a connection to the stranger standing opposite me. "I just moved here a week and a half ago—against my own will, I might add."

The guy chuckles and we both move forward simultaneously in our respective lines.

"I'm here on a day trip," he says absently, studying the menu and then shrugging. "I'm ordering drinks for the group." He flashes me a grin, and I flash one right back, pointing at myself and drawing his attention to my Ashnikko t-shirt beneath my overalls. The grin shifts into an understanding smile.

“Same,” I reply, checking my phone briefly to see if Maxine’s responded to my text asking what her new boyfriend likes to drink.

Hates coffee. Get him a watermelon Italian soda. I’ll pay you back.

I find my gaze shifting over to the guy again. He’s watching me, and something about the way he’s staring makes my stomach flip-flop dangerously. *Such a better crush than Parrish*, I think to myself only to begin vehemently denying that I have a crush on my stepbrother at all. Gross. Wouldn’t that be romantic cliché cray? He’s a jerk with a jerk for a best friend and a stepmom that just so happens to be my birth mother.

I banish the thought where it belongs, to the murky waste bin of my brain. Won’t think about that ever again. Abuse isn’t love, and I’m not some hapless teen in a novel who can’t tell the difference. Besides, I really do hate the guy. Who wouldn’t, in my situation?

“What sort of day trip?” I query, just as the guy starts to turn away from me and back toward the menu on the wall above the baristas’ heads. He doesn’t look back at me, but his full lips do shift into a smile.

“Visiting a friend,” he says absently, and then frowns. “Well, I came here for a different reason, but ...” He pauses to look over his shoulder, surveying the café as if he’s searching for someone in particular. “There’s a party tonight. Two of my best friends are going, and even though I graduated last year, I might pop in to check on them.”

I wonder briefly if it’s the same party that Lumen and Danyella mentioned, the one that Chasm’s going to, and that Parrish is supposedly sneaking out for.

That dick.

He was going to bail and leave me at home to pick up the pieces. I’d hate him more for it if I weren’t the one who’d already bailed out on our grounding.

“You’re in college?” I ask. It seems pretty obvious. I mean, where else would he have graduated from but high school? Still, I can’t seem to think up another question to ask. My palms are sweaty, and I’m starting to wonder if the hand of fate—which I normally don’t even believe in—isn’t involved somehow.

I’m not usually attracted to people I just met, and this guy is ... well, there’s something different about him.

“Yeah, the U of O,” he says absently, and my brows go up. The line moves forward yet again. I smile. I’m about to mention Maxine and then maybe, just maybe, ask this guy for his number when he turns to me with an apologetic sort of expression on his face.

“I’m really sorry,” he says, and I end up blinking in surprise. “You seem ... well, I liked you right away.” He points and grins at my shirt. “Your style, your hair, your, well, everything. But I’ve got a girlfriend, and she’s pretty awesome so ...” He trails off and my stomach drops to the floor. A blush creeps over my cheeks as he offers one last smile in apology and approaches the registers.

“Can I get a chai latte, a double chocolate mocha, and—”

“A watermelon Italian soda?” I finish with a sharp stab of disappointment.

Well, crap.

I’ve just now figured out who this is.

First ‘love at first sight’ type crush I’ve ever had, and he’s taken. Not just taken, but like, blacked out of being a love interest for the rest of eternity.

The guy turns to glance at me with a raised brow, and I force another smile out, even though it hurts. What number is this now? Forced smile six billion and two? I’ve lost count at this point.

“You’re Maxx Wright, yes?” I ask and understanding dawns on him. “Dakota Banks.” I point at myself as Maxx struggles to maintain his own smile, sliding his debit card into the reader to pay for our drinks.

“Maxine’s sister,” he says, sounding almost ... relieved?
“No wonder I liked you straight off.”

My mouth twitches. I’m not sure if his statement is supposed to be dismissive, but it sort of feels that way in the moment. I decide to brush it off in the name of progress; silver lining is that he’s not a cheater at least. It was risky coming out here today, and I’m not going to screw up the first meeting with my sister in months over some boy.

“Yeah, must be,” I agree, albeit a bit lamely. Maxx—I still can’t quite get over the guy having the same name as my sister—gives me a smile right back, one that I suspect is just as forced as my own. He tucks his card away and we move past the crowd to find an empty table in the corner to wait for our drinks. “Max,” I start, referring to my sister, and then pause as the boy’s gorgeous emerald eyes slide over to mine. “Right.” I exhale and sit up straight, pushing green and black hair away from my face. “I call Maxine, Max sometimes. And well, your name *is* Maxx. So what should I call you? What do you and Maxine call each other?”

I’m genuinely curious. My mind briefly flashes to ... other things, and I wonder if it gets awkward, calling out each other’s names in the dark. My cheeks flare hot, and I shove the thought away. The last thing I want to think about is my sister getting it on with some hot guy that I actually considered asking out.

Maxx—with the two Xs—smiles back at me, his knuckles grazed and raw with what looks like a fresh injury. He’s got some athletic tape wrapped around his wrist, too, making me think he must’ve taken a pretty nasty fall in the last few days.

“You can call me X,” he says, his forced smile fading into something a bit more natural as he moves to explain. But I’m already two steps ahead; I get it. “It’s because—”

“You have two Xs in your name. Yep.” I tap the side of my head, my own smile relaxing a bit. Who cares if the guy is gorgeous? I’ve got more important things to worry about. Such as getting back to New York where I belong. Or not getting caught by my overprotective bio mom. If she finds out

that I've sneaked out, and then Parrish decides to sneak out ... We're both going to be heading into a world of hurt when we go back to the house. I cannot for the life of me begin to call it home. For now—forever—Tess' multimillion dollar mansion is simply 'the house'. "I'm quick on the uptake."

Maxx—err, X—raises his brows and then lets out a low, sultry chuckle, rife with self-confidence but free of condescension. It's a beautiful sound, and I feel my own breath let out in a huff. *No, Dakota. Bad Dakota. Sister's boyfriend. Don't act like a freaking creeper.*

"I guessed that right away," he says, cocking his head slightly to one side and teasing rough fingertips across the surface of the table. With his sun-kissed skin and the bruise on the left side of his jaw, the battered knuckles, the athletic tape, it's quite clear that although X and I were attracted to each other initially, our interests are way off. I wouldn't, um, exactly describe myself as an outdoorsy person. More of a 'gamer girl who reads too many books and watches too much anime and also hisses at the sun' sort of a person. "The way your eyes take in a room, it's obvious that your brain is going a million miles a minute. It's why I struck up a conversation when I shouldn't have." Maxx pauses briefly as his name is called, and we both stand up to grab the drinks. "I've got it," he volunteers, unfolding his athletic form from the vintage armchair and moving away before I can truly process what it is that he's just said.

He started talking to me because I looked smart. Because he *liked* how smart I seemed.

Dear universe, please help me through this.

Fortunately, before I get a chance to dive any further into my own head, the doors to the coffee shop open and there she is, my favorite person in the entire world.

"Max!" I shout, probably a little louder than I should. A few sets of eyes swing my way before the coffee shop's occupants go back to their phones or laptops or lattes. I'm out of my seat and in her arms before I know it, crushed into a sweet-

smelling hug that feels like it contains every ounce of warmth in the world.

“Baby sister,” she breathes, crushing my head beneath her chin. At five-eight, I’m about as average a height as there is, but still, my sister towers over me at six-one. We always used to laugh about it because both my grandparents are my height, as is Saffron. Maxine is the only person in the Banks family to exceed six feet. Since we know absolutely nothing about her biological father, we always assumed she got it from his side. And since we know nothing about mine, we always assumed any oddities between me and my family were the result of patriarchal DNA.

Only ... Maxine is related to the Banks, whereas I am most definitely not.

After the surprise discovery of my lineage, we were both DNA tested, just to see if Saffron might’ve been lying about both of her supposed daughters. But no. Maxine is a true Banks. It’s just me that’s the odd one out.

“I’ve missed you so much,” I murmur, doing my best not to cry. I don’t want to show the world how much I’m hurting. It’s easier if I don’t, if I pretend like I can handle this situation as if it’s any other, just a problem to be solved.

Even before the incident with the Netflix show, and the lawyers, and the FBI, Maxine had been away at college since August. I hadn’t seen her since my birthday, so this is a reunion that’s been a long time coming.

“Not as much as I missed you, I promise,” she assures me, scooting me back so that she can look me over. She frowns at me and lifts up a strand of green hair, teasing it around her pointer finger. As usual, her nails are short but pretty, decorated with red tulips that she likely painted on herself using a brush the size of a toothpick. “I can’t believe that woman hasn’t made you dye your hair yet.” She continues to frown, the harsh emphasis of the words *that woman* hanging in the air like smoke. Maxine flat-out refuses to call Tess anything but that.

X reappears beside us with a drink carrier, setting it on the table behind me. As soon as my sister's eyes move from me to him, her entire face lights up. It's then that I see it, how much she's in love with him. My chest tightens considerably, and my breath releases in a sharp exhale.

I have never—and I mean *never*—seen my older sister look at a boy the way she's looking at Maxx Wright, like her heart has been wrapped in brown paper and twine, ready to deliver to his door, never to be returned. He isn't looking at her just now, taking the drinks from the carrier so that he can return it to the counter. To look at Maxine now, you'd think he were a knight in shining armor, delivering a fatal blow to the dragon. A hero. A savior. A soul mate.

Goose bumps break out across my arms as I turn around, meaning to take the carrier from X's hands so I can carry it back to the counter myself. Our fingers brush, and a zing shoots through me that only serves to make me more confused. That, and sick to my stomach.

You can't control your thoughts, but you can control your actions, Dakota.

It's the same mantra I've been feeding myself since I found out about Tess. The same mantra that I've been repeating every waking hour for weeks.

Our eyes meet, and I wonder if I've just suddenly developed a fever or if the heater in the café is cranked up too high or if perhaps I'm just losing my damn mind here.

"I've got it," I say, scurrying away with the plastic tray and staring into the cup holders, at the stray droplets of condensation. X noticed my reaction, but I'm hoping like hell that Maxine didn't. As I set the tray on the counter and glance back, I find the two of them smiling at one another. Much to my strange relief, they don't hug or kiss in front of me.

"So," Maxine says, settling into a leather chesterfield armchair beside X while I take the seat across from her. The coffee shop that we're in is an eclectic mix of antiques and floral wallpaper set with stained concrete floors and decidedly modern light fixtures and art pieces. It's very Pacific

Northwest, or so the online reviews said. “How are you settling in?” Maxine pauses and reaches up to adjust her dark hair, its natural shade so similar to my own that I doubt anyone ever looked at us and thought we were anything but blood related.

How cruel was fate, to do that to me? Why couldn't I have been born looking different, maybe with a constant sense of not belonging? Then it might not have been such a shock. The thing is, I've always felt loved and wanted with the Banks, always like an integral part of the family. Even now, nothing has changed except for my geographical location.

I stare down at the lid on my coffee, tracing the word *biodegradable* on the top.

“Please tell me you still hate it here?” Maxine asks, and X gives her a sharp look. “What?” She glances back at him, one brow raised. “I know I'm being selfish, but Dakota is my little sister. I'm not surrendering her to some guy who makes rude as fuck TikToks.”

X cringes slightly, his jaw tightening as he glances off to one side. I can smell him from where I'm sitting, and I don't mean that in a bad way. He smells like freshly mowed grass and some sort of sporty aftershave that reminds me of citrusy drinks sipped beside a cool blue pool in summer. Ugh.

And ... wow. Wow. Why the fuck do I keep smelling guys? Who does that?! I almost facepalm right then and there, but that would require admitting that I'm a pervert who sniffs people and who gets zings and shocks and tingles when they touch attractive peers. Seriously. First, Parrish. Then Chasm. Now this Maxx guy? Blergh.

“Yeah,” X starts, almost like he's hesitant to say anything at all. “Parrish can be a total dick sometimes.”

My brows go up in surprise as I lean forward, interest piqued.

“Wait, you know Parrish?” I ask, because there's just no way. That's too big of a coincidence.

Maxx of the double Xs offers me up an apologetic smile, as if he has some reason to feel responsible for the actions of a stranger. With a small sigh, he stirs his drink, watching the bubbles catch on the straw before lifting his green eyes up to mine.

Another zing shoots through me that I vehemently ignore.

“We went to school together for most of our lives,” he says, softening the revelation with another award-winning smile. I do my best to shield myself against his natural charisma, lifting my coffee to my lips to distract myself. Maxine, at least, doesn’t seem to notice anything amiss. Good. Because I’d sooner throw myself off a cliff into the sea before hitting on my sister’s boyfriend. You have to earn her trust but once you have it, it’s implicit. “Me and Parrish and Chasm.”

“Chasm,” I repeat, frowning as I think about our strange interaction this morning. *Chalk it up to natural curiosity*, he said. I don’t buy that for a second. Not for the first time, I wonder if I’ve just walked into a trap of some sort. Maybe he *is* planning on holding this over my head? Or maybe he’s thinking of ratting me out to Tess, just to see me suffer? Either way, I wouldn’t be surprised.

“You still consider them your best friends, don’t you?” Maxine clarifies, and X offers up another casual shrug. “He video chats them at least once a week.” She pauses to roll her eyes and then lets out a long-suffering sigh. “That, and they game at least six days a week.”

They game.

The idea of Parrish, Chasm, and X gaming together makes me fidgety, but I can’t exactly put my finger on why that is. *Sip coffee, act normal, don’t let them know what a gamer fangirl you are.*

“If Parrish is giving you a hard time, I could talk to him,” X offers, but I know immediately that whatever he might say isn’t going to help. I redirect my attention back to my drink. “He’s struggling with this, too, I think.”

I turn my attention back up to X, trying not to feel offended by his statement.

“You’re ... defending him?” I query back, my voice thick with surprise. X sits up straight in his seat and leans back, running his tongue across his lower lip as Maxine gives him a look that very clearly demands he explain himself. “I’ve tried to be nice to him from moment one. He posted a TikTok rating my looks—poorly, I might add. It would’ve been an offensive move either way.” I turn my attention to the street outside, to the passersby wearing t-shirts in the rain, like they don’t care that they’re getting wet. Hardly anyone is using an umbrella. Yet another PNW quirk. According to local lore, you can spot a foreigner miles off by the fact that they wear coats in the cold or use umbrellas. And by foreigner, I mean Californian. “Parrish chose to hate me before he even met me.”

“He’s resentful toward you, I think,” X tries to explain, but Maxine’s harsh laugh knocks the conversation off-course for a minute.

“Resentful? My little sister’s been kidnapped twice at this point. Once, when she was two and again, just a few weeks ago. She’s lost everything. What has Parrish lost? Nothing but a little bit of attention. In exchange, he gained the most amazing sister in the world.” Maxine turns to me, very clearly in love with Maxx Wright but also very clearly on my side. Always. Forever. I smile back at her, reaching out so that she can give my hand a squeeze.

“Has Parrish said anything to you?” I ask, looking over at X. I don’t want to exist in a world where my own beliefs and ideas are parroted back at me, deafening me to the thoughts and feelings of others. Empathy is the savior of society. If Parrish feels like I’ve done something to him, or if he’s suffering, then I want to know about it.

Maxine frowns, but waits for X to answer.

“He isn’t exactly the sort of person who shares his feelings freely,” X offers dryly, checking his phone. “But he and Chas are supposed to be at the party tonight. It’s no problem if you want me to talk to them.”

“Please don’t,” I blurt, feeling my anxiety creep up on me like a shroud. I have the distinct feeling that being told off by their elder bestie will only make Chasm and Parrish like me less than they do, a feat that doesn’t seem entirely possible, but which can only make this living hell I’m tiptoeing through worse. Instead, I turn to my sister.

“I don’t care about Parrish or Chasm or anybody else here,” I tell her, and I almost mean it. “I want to talk to Grandma and Grandpa.”

Maxine’s face gets tight then, and I can see right through her brave big sister act to the fear and pain underneath. Something is going on that she isn’t telling me, something that I’m most definitely not going to like.

“Maxie ...” I warn when it looks like she might hesitate. “What’s going on?”

“Kota,” she starts, her voice softening as she scoots her coffee away and shifts her seat to be closer to me. Her brow is furrowed with pain, lids drooped, mouth downturned in a rare frown. Maxine is one of those people who finds happiness in everything, who manages to salvage the worst situations imaginable. But, maybe, not this one. “They’re heartbroken.” My own throat closes up at her words, even though I already knew that part of the story. Not only could I see it my grandparents’ faces when they were loading up Tess’ rental car with my bags, but I feel it in my own heart, that same sick, sad longing for the life we were supposed to have. “And they’re not handling it well. Grandpa went to the hospital last week —”

A small sound escapes me as panic takes over, the buzz of it deafening me to the chatter in the coffee shop. All the while, X sits quietly, watching us both with an expression that says he very clearly feels like the third wheel here.

“The hospital?” I repeat as Maxine takes in a deep breath and then lets it out, nice and slow.

“I shouldn’t have phrased it like that,” she begins, scooting her chair close enough to mine that the arms bump together with a wooden clack. “He fell carrying a bag of potting soil up

the steps to the deck and broke his leg.” My hand goes to my chest, fingers curling in the fabric of my shirt.

“I want to talk to them,” I tell Maxine, knowing that I’m not leaving this coffee shop without at least attempting a phone call. If they won’t pick up—and they might not because they’re not just protecting themselves, but Saffron as well—that’s one thing. But I have to try. I have to at least fucking try.

Maxine looks unsure for a moment, glancing toward X in a quiet, couple-y sort of way, like they might’ve already talked this over at some point together. He gives her a sympathetic half-smile in response, vaguely nodding his head, like he’s telling her that whatever she chooses to do, it’ll be the right thing.

My face sours up, like I’ve bitten into a lemon. That sick sense of free-falling takes over me again, and I feel suddenly like I don’t belong here either, in the one place I always thought I would: with my sister.

“Okay,” she says finally, and I exhale again, letting out a gust of that nervous energy. Maxine pulls her phone from the pocket of her bag, a plain canvas thing designed more for backpacking in the woods than for hanging out in a coffee shop in Seattle. My sister is an outdoorsy girl in her heart, so much happier playing in the dirt than curling up inside with a PlayStation, a Kindle, and an iPad. She dials up our grandparents, holding her phone in just such a way that I won’t be visible should they answer.

“Maxie,” Grandma Carmen says, smiling as she answers, the screen showing the extent of the greenhouse garden behind her, the one that we planted together shortly before I left. There are sprouts there, marking the passage of time, and I hate that. I hate that the world is moving on like nothing at all has happened, spinning and twirling and ticking. “Where are you, baby?”

“In a coffee shop,” Maxie says brightly, a bead of sweat appearing on her temple. I glance over at X and find him leaning back in his seat, his red windbreaker unzipped, a t-

shirt underneath with the words *Wright Family Racing* scrawled across the front of it. “In Seattle.”

There’s a bit of a pause as our grandmother’s face—a face so similarly shaped to my own—twists up in confusion. The University of Oregon is in Eugene, nearly five hours from Seattle proper. She’ll be wondering why Maxie is here and ...

“Guess who’ve I’ve got with me?” my sister adds cheerily, tilting her phone just enough that I appear in the window in the bottom corner beside Maxine.

“Grandma,” I breathe, and then tears prick at the edges of my eyes. A small gasp escapes her before she clamps a hand over her mouth, her own expression a strange mix between relief and agony. Does she even *want* to see me? Or am I only thinking of myself? It’s a bit too late now to second guess the decision, so I force yet another smile, one that I hope hides all of my pain and heartbreak and uncertainty.

“Dakota,” she whispers back, dropping her hand to her side, her dark eyes shining with unshed tears. “How are you doing, honey? We’ve missed you so much.”

“I hate it here.” The words fall from my lips before I can stop them, dredging up this surge of emotion that I thought I had under better control. But no. No, nothing in my life feels like it’s in my control right now because ... it isn’t. I’m sixteen therefore, according to the law, I am not a person. I’m just a possession to be shuffled from place to place, something to be won with court cases and DNA tests. “I want to come home.”

Those tears my grandmother was fighting so hard to push back start up again, draining down her face in two salty rivulets. This isn’t fair of me, not at all. If she could do anything to bring me home, she would. I know that. There’s nothing Carmen Banks can do to fix this and yet, here I am, telling her how much I hate it, how much I want to leave. I should lie. I should tell her that I like it here, that I’ve got a large room with a lake view, that ...

“Tess wants me to ship your things,” Carmen says, her voice breaking a bit. “All your furniture, your clothes ... everything.” Yes, that’s right. Because I asked her to. Because

I was trying to soften her up, to make things easier on my end yet again. I didn't think about how my grandparents would feel, emptying my room, watching as movers wrapped my furniture in pads and dragged the pieces down the old stairs. "Would that make you feel better, being surrounded by things from home?"

I open my mouth to tell her everything: how I despise Kimber, how awful Parrish is, how desperate and clingy and suffocating I find Tess' attention. But then I look into her face, really look at it, and I know that I have to put my grandmother's feelings before my own.

To buy myself an extra moment, I pick up my coffee and take a small sip, swallowing all of my pain and anger and resentment along with the mouthful of mocha. I plaster on another fake smile. I wonder how many of them I have in me? Is there a limitlessness to the amount of time we as humans can fake our own emotions? Or do they just all come tumbling out at some point, cascading like a rockslide around our hearts until it's quiet and dark and buried?

"I think it would help immensely," I admit, feeling a sharp sting of panic at the idea of my room back home being empty and barren, wiped clean, erased like I was never there. Even Maxine's room still looks like hers, minus some clothing, a lamp, and a few spare pieces of décor. When she comes home on holidays, she stays in her own bed, puts her clothes in her own dresser, paints her nails at the same antique dressing table she's had in her room since my earliest memories.

I try to tell myself that, if by some miracle, some supernatural intervention by the universe, Tess allows me to go home, she's wealthy enough to pay for it all to be shipped back. It isn't permanent. That's what I take comfort in: that *nothing* in this world is permanent. Everything changes—even this. Worst case scenario, the day that I turn eighteen, I'm getting the fuck out of here.

"My room looks out at the lake," I offer, my own watery smile no more real than my grandmother's. But we each pretend, because that's all we can do at this point, play the

roles that were assigned to us. “I’ll send Maxine some pics and she can forward them to you.”

We both pause, Tess’ rule of zero contact for a year hanging heavy around both of our hearts.

“She won’t find out about this,” I explain hastily, glancing over at Maxine. She isn’t bothering to hide her tears. Her face, despite being wet with salt, is much more real than mine or my grandmother’s. That’s one of the things I’ve always liked about her, one of the same things that always gets her into trouble: my sister doesn’t hide her emotions, not for any reason. There are positives and negatives to that, to be sure. “Tess, I mean. We’re calling from Maxine’s phone, and I snuck out of the house ...”

“Dakota Banks,” my grandmother breathes, aghast at the very idea. I’d have never done anything like this back home. There wouldn’t have been any reason to. At the very least, even if I’m being scolded, I’m being called by my own name. “Tess is a woman with a lot of trauma in her background. Imagine if she finds you missing? What will her reaction be?” Guilt sweeps over me like a tidal wave, drowning me in cold and foam and salt. I *know* what her reaction will be because I’ve already seen it. “Honey,” she starts, and I get the idea that she’s shoring herself up to say something she’d rather not. “You know that your grandfather and I miss you more than anything. That we’d do anything to get you back.”

“I know that,” I whisper, dropping my head slightly. I stare at the rough surface of the wooden table beside my coffee cup. They really would do anything. I know because I saw them try, saw them fight against an impossible storm. Tess’ money, those awful DNA tests, the publicity, the threats to Saffron ... Trafficking a kidnapped child across state lines comes with hefty prison sentences. Instead, she was offered a guilty-time-served verdict for the time she spent in jail during the negotiations. I want to believe that Tess did that because she was trying not to hurt me, but really, I think it was just a bargaining chip to use against my grandparents.

“I wish your grandfather was here to see you,” she tells me with a slight frown. “But he’s having surgery on his leg today.

Did you tell her about that, Maxine? How the old fool broke his ankle trying to move a bunch of dirt?” She huffs out an exasperated sound, but it does nothing to hide the anguish lurking just beneath the surface. We’re both fairly shitty actors, it seems. Must run in the family.

As soon as that thought hits me, I feel my fake smile begin to crack at the edges.

“What time will he be out of surgery?” Maxine asks, and my grandmother answers, as if this is a normal conversation between family members, as if nothing at all is going on. Maybe ... maybe we can just pretend that I’m away at college like Maxine? “Make sure to call me as soon as you hear anything, and I’ll pass the news on to Dakota.”

My grandmother hesitates for a minute, glancing off to one side. She’s only fifty-nine—Grandma had Saffron at twenty-one, and Saffron had Maxine at nineteen—but her face looks so old and tired right now, in a way that it didn’t before. Heavy, that’s what it looks like. Like her emotions are too heavy to wear on her face.

“I don’t want to advocate you sneaking out of the house, but ... if you get any opportunities like this again—to call us, I mean—without Tess knowing, then ... Well, I’m just saying that I won’t hesitate to answer.”

I choke on whatever it is that I was about to say, knowing that I can’t stay here long, that I have to get back before Tess notices that I’m missing. If I don’t, then I’ll ruin any chance I might have for sneaking out in the future.

“Miss you and love you fierce,” is all that I manage to get out.

“Miss you and love you fierce,” my grandmother replies, kissing the screen with her bright red lipstick, the color she always wears, that makes me think of home. The call ends, and Maxine very carefully sets her phone on the table.

“Do you think you could give me a ride home?” I blurt out, because I want to be alone to ... I don’t know, feel? Why does it seem so much harder to just feel things in front of other

people? “The ride that got me here, well, he’s long-gone.” The words come out dry and caustic, and Maxine frowns. Before she can answer, however, X speaks up.

“I’ll take you,” he offers, giving Maxine a long look. “That way, Tess won’t see you with Maxie. And anyway, I was hoping to stop by and visit Parrish before the party. If you duck down when we pass through the gate, I bet you can get in and act like you never left before Tess even notices.”

It’s a good idea, actually, so I nod and pick up my coffee as my sister looks on helplessly.

“Stay,” she says, putting her hand over mine. “Just for a little while. I’ll tell you all the bullshit gossip from campus, and you can complain about your sexy stepbrother—”

“Sexy?” X interjects, raising two dark brows.

We both ignore him.

“Please,” Maxine pleads, pouting out her lower lip in that way she knows that I can’t resist.

“His sexiness doesn’t make up for his awful personality,” I grumble, dragging my coffee closer and pushing down the overwhelming urge to cry. What good will that do me? Sure, I’m a bit of an introvert, and I far prefer the great indoors to the great outdoors, but I’ve never been a sulker or a crier—not that there’s anything wrong with that. It just isn’t who I am. “Fine, I can stay, but not for too long. Otherwise, we won’t be able to do this next weekend.” I flash Maxine a pleading look of my own and she laughs.

“I’ll have to pick up some extra shifts at the Dari Mart to cover the gas money, but you know what? I’d do anything for my baby sister.” She throws an arm around my neck and drags me close so she can kiss all over my face. I pretend to bat her away, but only pretend, because in reality, I like the attention.

“I’ll cover the gas money,” X offers, and my sister lets out this disgustingly contented sigh that has me sticking out my tongue. *Gods, she really did find a good one, huh?*

“You see why I like him?” she asks, beaming down at me. I glance his way and feel that strange fluttery feeling in my

belly again, like butterflies are taking off in a place where they should most definitely not be.

“I see,” I tell her, crushing the silly winged insects of my emotions before they cause any trouble. Like I said, you can control your actions even if your thoughts and feelings are all over the place. It’s a perk of being human. “Thank you, Maxx.” I sigh and shake my head. “I mean X. It’s still weird that you guys have the same name.”

“Technically I’m Maxine, and he’s Maxim,” she clarifies, and I struggle to hold back a snort as X’s face gets this sly look to it, his eyes narrowing slightly as he studies me.

“Go ahead and say it,” he tells me, lifting his drink in salute. The shape of his mouth is criminal, a treat crafted of confidence, self-deprecation, and good humor. Crap. How shit-tastic. X’s mouth is most *definitely* a treat I shouldn’t be eating—even with my eyes. It’s too cringe, checking out your sister’s boyfriend. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“You mean ... that your name is the name of a men’s magazine?” I choke out, struggling to control a laugh. Maxine grins big beside me and leans back in her chair, her smile and her casual attitude doing much to put me at ease.

“It’s also a name of Latin origin that means ‘the greatest,’” Maxx tells me with this naturally cocky smile that probably wins him many a favor with his classmates. He really is handsome, and in a different way than Parrish. Parrish has that hot-cold, aloof, rich-boy artist thing going on. Maxx ‘X’ Wright has a down-to-earth confidence that Maxine could really use in her life.

“Bet you spend a lot of time practicing that retort in the mirror, huh?” I ask, noticing that his lips curl up at the edges in response. “Doesn’t change the fact that you’ve got a porn star name. Don’t apologize, just roll with it.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” X tells me, his smile growing even wider. “I never do. My parents picked my name off a ‘Top Ten Hot Guy Names’ list that they found online, kid you not. Guess it was a self-fulfilling prophecy, huh?”

“Wow, cocky much?” I retort, turning my attention to Maxine. “You have your hands full with this one, Maxie.”

She glances back at her boyfriend, and her face softens in that disgusting way that people in love do. Gross. While many people dream of looking like that one day, nobody else likes to look at them while they’re doing it. I barely stifle a snort, and Maxine elbows me in the side.

By the time I hug my sister goodbye and climb into a shiny new Jeep Gladiator with X, I’m feeling much better. Almost normal. But the closer we get to the house, and the gate with all the reporters? Those crappy feelings come rushing right back.

“This sucks ass,” I murmur, doing my best to bury my face in my hands. “If I ever wanted to be famous—and I don’t—I wouldn’t want to be famous for being stolen. Who wants that?” I glance over at X and find him chewing his lower lip in thought. It’s full and shiny, but with the slightest indent, like this is a common habit of his.

I force myself to turn back to the road. *Focus on the lines, Kota. You can do this.*

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” he asks me, seemingly at random. A quick glance over at me, a charming smile, and I’ve just forgotten my own name. I’m not usually this boy-crazy, swear on the future existence of Wi-Fi that I’m telling the truth. Maybe there’s something in the water here? Between Chasm, Maxx, and ... well, I guess Parrish *is* physically attractive even if his personality is atrocious. I wish fervently that I could look past his tousled chocolate waves and gold-flecked eyes to the black and twisted soul that lies beneath.

GAH! Stop fixating, Kota! Why are you so obsessed with that douche? Who cares about him anyway?

“I toyed with the idea of starting an OnlyFans account,” I begin, waiting patiently for Maxx to laugh and then pause, and then silence. Silence ...

“Seriously?” he asks after a moment, but not in a judgmental way, more like he expected a punchline to come after a joke. “I mean, I hear you can make big money ...”

“You have an OnlyFans account?” I ask, pretending to be shocked. I once tried this joke on my grandma, but she doesn’t know that OnlyFans is an, erm, paywall porno site, so she didn’t get it. Also, it commoditizes women’s bodies, so I’m not into it. “You okay if I look you up?”

“You want to see me naked?” X asks, his voice pitched just a tad lower than it should. “I have to warn you: once you do, your expectations will be unfairly raised.”

“My expectations for what?” I counter back, just before we make the final turn onto the street that leads to Tess’ place, and my mood drops out from under me like an elevator intent on crashing into the bottom floor. “Shit.”

“Duck down and cover your head.” Max pauses just before the left turn that will take us toward the front gate, slipping off his jacket and passing it over to me. “Here.”

I take the red windbreaker from him, rubbing my thumb against the fabric as that fresh grass and aftershave smell washes over me again. *I should ask him what fragrance he uses because damn, that’s nice.* Quickly as I can, I take my seatbelt off and slide to the floor, following his instructions until we’re safely inside the gate.

Maxx pulls into the garage without a second thought, hitting a button on his own sun visor that closes it behind us.

Huh.

When he said that he and Parrish and Chas were friends, I guess I didn’t realize that he was as close to the family as Chasm is now. If he’s got their damn garage programmed into his car, then he must’ve been, right? Must *still* be.

I hop out of the car and toss his jacket back on the seat like it’s hot, scrambling away just in time to see the side door open. Parrish is there, barefoot and shirtless—his preferred style of loungewear despite his mother’s, err, Tess’ complaints. As

soon as he sees me standing there, his eyes narrow and I can see by the look on his face that he knows.

“How on earth did you manage to wrangle this?” he hisses at me, just before Tess appears behind him, beaming from ear to ear. She gives me an odd look, like she can’t quite understand why I’ve rushed down to greet someone that I’m not supposed to know, but then brushes it aside in order to give Maxx a big smile.

I notice she doesn’t hug him. Nobody in this family seems particularly interested in showing affection of any kind. They’re the WASPiest people I’ve ever met in my life, and I’m from the East Coast. There are super WASPs up there, no doubt.

“We’ve missed you, Maxx,” she says, pushing open the door to the house to invite him in. She flicks a look at Parrish that he returns with a steely, brown-eyed stare. “I didn’t know you were coming by today?” Tess turns it into a question, but I can tell by the way she stares at her stepson that he’s going to get it later.

“Neither did I,” Parrish adds dryly, giving me another look. “But he’s hardly ever in town. You’re not going to kick him out, are you?”

“Parrish Vanguard,” Tess snaps, and I fight my hardest to push back a sadistic grin. At the very least, if Tess is going to be a hard-ass, I enjoy seeing Parrish get his. I wasn’t sure he was ever punished for anything. “Parrish and Mia are grounded,” she explains to X, almost apologetically. Not a person in that garage misses the way I cringe when she says it.

Mia.

As Shakespeare once said, *What’s in a name? That which we call a rose / By Any Other Name would smell as sweet.* I shouldn’t take it to heart. It truly is just a word, but it means so much more. It *stands* for so much more.

“I won’t stay long,” Maxx promises, tucking his battered hands into the pockets of his jeans. Even the way he does that, such a casual, normal move, makes my heart jump. I frown

and Parrish notices. His eyes take me in from head to toe, absorbing the careful waves of my hair, the makeup on my face, the black leather sandals.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Tess says, putting on a smile. “Come on in.”

She pulls Maxx ahead with her to chat, but I don’t miss the way his gaze lingers on me, almost apologetically, like he wants to correct the Mia thing for me. But that would blow our cover, and I can’t have that. The last thing I need is Tess knowing that Maxx is dating my sister. She’d probably ban him from the premises, and I’d feel even more trapped in this icebox.

“Did you seriously sneak out to go on a date?” Parrish asks me, and I notice that his left hand is bleeding. There’s a fresh tattoo there, one that I can’t quite make out beneath all the blood. He notices me staring and then frowns even harder, glancing down at the design before swiping the blood across his pajama pants.

“No, actually,” I retort, feeling that strange sense of competitive spitefulness take over me. Why the hell am I letting this dick dig at me like this? Parrish isn’t the first asshole I’ve ever been around. I usually try to take a page from my favorite Twitch streamer’s—*negaoryx* is her online handle—book and educate trolls, assholes, and misogynists the best I can. “My sister just so happens to be dating your bestie. He gave me a ride so that I could see her.”

I decide it’s best to keep the Chasm bit to myself. Somehow, it feels like I might lose something precious by giving that up. Silly, I know, but there it is.

Parrish stares at me for a long moment, wiping the blood on his pants again. That can’t be good for the tattoo, can it? My eyes drop down to his hand before lifting up again to his face. For the briefest of seconds, it looks like he might say something meaningful. Because I’m an eternal optimist, I get a strange hope inside my chest that he might be considering an apology for the other day.

Then he blinks, and his mouth twists into this sharp frown that would take a team of specially trained psychiatrists to diagnose. They'd all need advanced degrees in filthy rich boys just to figure him out.

"I guess you'll keep your mouth shut and help me escape this dungeon tonight, won't you?" he asks, but it's not just a question, is it? No, it's a threat.

My defense mechanisms slam into place, and that happy, floating feeling that Maxine left me with disappears in a puff of smoke. A fairy-tale is what that was. A fairy-tale where I'm still Dakota Banks instead of Mia Patterson with a stepbrother who hates me for reasons that are completely out of my control.

"I never asked to be kidnapped, you know?" I snap at him, feeling my hands curl into tight fists. The day of my kidnapping remains a mystery to me. I have no memory of it. How could I be expected to? "I was two freaking years old. I was stolen from daycare. It wasn't Tess' fault, and it most certainly wasn't mine either."

Parrish looks taken aback for the briefest of moments, but his eyes narrow even further, as if the hooding of his lids can protect him from the reality of the situation. He's decided to hate me because he's jealous. Because he doesn't like change. Because Tess was an overprotective parent for most of his life and he feels like he missed out on something. From what I can see, maybe he didn't miss out on enough?

"You're so *spoiled*," I breathe, feeling my own eyes narrow. I should probably stop right there, but I can't help myself. My tongue feels like a wild thing, a caged animal trapped inside the confines of a perpetually smiling mouth. That's one thing I can say about Parrish Vanguard: he frees me from the shackles of my niceness, from my attempts to be pleasant, from thinking of other people so much that I sometimes forget to think about myself. Around him, I can just be selfish and cruel, unfiltered and angry. "How can you be so mad and so unhappy when you're so goddamn spoiled?!"

“Oh, you just wait,” he hisses, a cruel smile taking over his lips. They’re very pretty lips, too, as if somehow the universe deigned to grant him this cruel and unusual means to lure in prey. “Until you see what you’ve gotten as a birthday present. Then we’ll see who the spoiled one truly is.”

He sweeps past me, our bare arms brushing.

A wild spark flares between us, enough so that Parrish actually stops and looks back at me. But instead of confusion or curiosity showing on his face, he looks almost ... scared? That emotion fades in the blink of an eye and then he’s back to being pissed off again. His perpetual default.

He turns away, even as I open my mouth to speak. Whatever I was going to say is lost, and I swallow back the emotion like I always do.

Back inside the house, I find Kimber chatting happily in Maxx’s direction as Tess looks down at her phone with a slight crease in her brow. She pauses to glance up at me, this softening of her features reminding me of my sister when she was looking at Maxx. It might not be romantic love, but it’s love all the same. Tess is looking at me like she needs me, and I don’t know how to process that. I might’ve developed inside her belly, she might’ve changed my diapers and breastfed me and cared for me for two years, but ... I don’t remember her at all. Except for the smell of her perfume, that is.

I look away, toward the pretentious white marble floor.

“We’re ordering dinner in, Mi—” Tess pauses again, and I glance up to see both Parrish and Maxx staring at her. “Dakota,” she corrects, like the word is foreign and sticky in her mouth.

You can do this, Dakota, I tell myself, thinking of my grandmother’s anguished face, of my grandfather’s broken ankle, of my sister hugging me so tightly that I forgot how to breathe.

“Come look at the menu and pick something out.”

“Usually, you just click our saved order,” Kimber says, her voice more caustic and biting than Parrish’s even. Honestly, if

I were forced to choose between them for an arena battle, I'd pick Parrish as my opponent. Kimber is harboring so much resentment for me, it makes Parrish's feel like a drop in the ocean. "We order from there all the time; we have a saved family order." She sounds furious about it.

"Well, we have a new family member to add to our order," Tess says, her voice halfway between understanding and angry. "Besides, Maxx is here—"

"Maxx's order is saved in your phone, too," Kimber interjects, turning her matching raven eyes over to me. "You're the only person here who doesn't belong."

"Kimber Celeste!" Tess snaps, finally losing that tentative control on her cool. "I have a deadline this week, your father has five surgeries scheduled, and your sister is trying to adjust to her new life. Have some compassion." She hands me her phone as I feel a small surge of triumph beneath my ribs. *You go, Tess!* But the outburst fades as quick as it came when Kimber's eyes tear up and she turns on her heel to race down the hall toward the stairs. With a sigh, Tess follows after her. "You can go ahead and place the order once you've chosen," she tells me, reaching up to cup the side of my face and then pausing at the last second, like she's thought better of it.

Tess disappears after her daughter—her *real* daughter—and I'm left to float there in the middle of the cavernous living room like a boat with no sails. The sadness comes roaring back with a vengeance, and my arms pebble with goose bumps.

"Hey," Maxx says softly, drawing my attention back over to him. His shoulders are a bit broader than Parrish's, like he doesn't work out just for his physique, but like it's a part of who he is. Maxine did describe him as some sort of up-and-coming motocross star, so I suppose that makes sense. "Are you okay?"

"Why wouldn't she be?" Parrish scoffs dismissively, wincing as he turns the sink on and begins to wash his tattoo with some orange Dial soap. He watches me, rather than his

tattoo. I ignore him as best I can. I try, I really do, but I've only got so much in me.

Without really looking at the menu on Tess' phone, I click the most appealing thing I see—it just so happens we're ordering Mexican food, and I've chosen street tacos—and submit the order.

“Because her entire life has been upended,” X says, his voice patient but verging on frustration. He gives his friend a look that Parrish doesn't notice because he's still staring at me. “Your mom can't even call her by the right name.”

“Mia *is* her name,” Parrish snaps back, finally deigning to glance Maxx's way. “It's printed right there on her birth certificate, the one that's fucking framed and hung on the wall in the entryway.” He turns back to me, his expression less cruel but somehow harder to look at. Resolute, is what it is. He delivers the next words to me, not like an insult, but like a fact that I damn well better get used to. “Tess is your mother—your *real* mother. She picked the name Mia. She raised you until you were taken from her, and then she ran herself into the ground looking for you. Fight it all you want, but you're Mia Patterson. Dakota is just the name given to you by some filthy fucking drug addict. You know why she picked you, right? They told you that part?”

“Parrish, stop,” Maxx growls out at him, taking a step in his direction. “She's been through enough.”

“No,” I interject, my voice almost too loud for the sterile space. It echoes just a bit. That's how empty and cold and weird this house is. Back home, there was no such thing as an echo. Not with the antique furniture strewn about, the old but faithful rugs, the oil paintings on the walls. There was too much love, too many people, for that house to echo. “I want to hear this. Apparently, Parrish knows something that I don't.”

He doesn't smile at me this time. I don't think I could handle it if he did. Instead, he continues on in that non-sense, matter-of-fact voice of his, like he needs to deliver this information to me so that I can understand. So that I can

conform. So that I can fit in here and stop fucking up his perfect life.

“Saffron Banks, the meth addicted junkie who snatched you from the daycare?” He phrases this like a question. I don’t know why. I knew all about Saffron. My grandparents never tried to hide the fact that their daughter was a sad, broken person searching for something they couldn’t understand. “Her own baby died just a few weeks before she kidnapped you. She picked you because you looked like her dead kid. That’s it. Chance and circumstance. There’s nothing more to it. You are *not* a member of the Banks family, just a coincidence. Dakota Banks is dead and buried. *You* are Mia Patterson.”

Parrish pauses as Tess’ footsteps sound on the staircase. Despite his faults, I know that he—with the exception of the school incident last week—goes out of his way not to hurt Tess.

I’m staggered. Fucking staggered by his words.

My mind spins with this new information. Why didn’t anyone tell me that about Saffron? Why keep it hidden? Then again, it doesn’t change anything, does it? It doesn’t really matter *why* she kidnapped me, only that she did.

Except ... somehow knowing there was a real Dakota Banks, a girl who was a member of that family in her blood, who was Maxine’s real little sister, that’s a hard pill to swallow. How can I be Dakota Banks if my identity belongs to someone else?

Shit, shit, shit. I’m spiraling. I feel my energy leaking out through my feet, my spirit being sucked into the dark underworld of depression.

“Shall we set the table?” Tess asks, sweeping into the room and smiling at me.

I just don’t have the energy in me to smile back.

Not this time.

Guess there really is a limit to how many forced smiles a person gets before they break.

Crack, Dakota Banks. Crack, crack, crack.

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A graphic for Chapter 6. The word "CHAPTER" is written in a black, hand-drawn, blocky font on the left. To its right is a large, dark green heart with a pink outline. The heart is set against a background of black, bare tree branches. On the right side of the heart, the number "6" is written in a pink, cursive font. The entire graphic is set against a light pink background.

CHAPTER 6

I trace the metal heart brooch with my fingertip. I've decided to pin it to the strap of my book bag. According to the rulebook for Whitehall Prep, I'm allowed exactly three pins, patches, or other decorative items on my bag at any given time. Guess this will be one of them. It should make Tess happy, at the very least. I've decided to put it next to a button that reads *Dump Your Pornsick Boyfriend* and a metal book-shaped pin with a 24K gold backing that Maxine got me for Christmas last year.

I've got one day left until I start school and to be quite honest, I'm counting down the seconds. Anything to get out of this house. The only bright spot at dinner earlier was Maxx. He was the only person who easily and willingly called me Dakota without it sounding like a curse. I ate my street tacos across from Parrish—whose order I'd apparently copied without even meaning to—with a fork and a knife.

A fork and a knife.

For street tacos.

There's a soft knock on my door, and I resist the urge to sigh, setting aside the book bag before moving over to answer it.

It's Maxx.

"I'm heading out," he says, right hand tucked into his pocket. He looks so casual and comfortable in his own skin, like he doesn't owe an apology to anyone for existing. That's what I like most about him. He seems to be able to placate every corner of the room without sacrificing himself in the

process. That's what I need to learn to do—keep other's needs in mind but also take care of myself.

“To the party, I'm guessing?” I ask as Parrish's door opens, and he steps out looking more beautiful than I've ever seen him. He's got on what just has to be an ultra-pricey jacket, some khaki-colored preppy thing that screams rich-boy-walking, along with a black t-shirt, a silver pendant of—is that *Baphomet*?!—and loose-fitting jeans.

He levels a look on me that is very clearly a challenge.

Both my body *and* my rage respond in equal measures.

How the hell do I find him so attractive when it's clear that his mission in life is to piss me off? And why do I care? Why can't I just say 'hot but rude, no thanks' and move the fuck on. Instead, I stand there and I stare at him as his eyes go hooded, his mouth quirks up at the corner, and my scalp tingles with the promise of an incoming insult.

Parrish pushes the sleeves of his jacket up to reveal his sea of colorful tattoos.

“Gamer Girl, you're staring at me again,” he says, leaving me to choke and sputter in my Pokémon sweats, my oversized anime hoodie, and my lime green headset. My heart thunders, and my throat feels tight and scratchy all of a sudden. Between the two of them, Maxx and Parrish could start their own world-crushing influencer brand. Tack Chasm into the deal, and they could rule every social media platform known to man. “I already warned you: don't fall in love with me.”

Maxx lets out a tired sigh, but I'm unfazed. That ember in my belly burns and burns and burns, drawing the dark smoke of my anger out.

“If I'm staring, it's only because I can't believe anyone under the age of sixty wears khaki. Maybe it's just a 'young republican, country club' sort of a thing.”

Parrish smirks at me and steps closer, leaning his forearm on the wall above my head so he can stare down at me with that stupid Insta-worthy face of his. I beg the universe to send a

horde of pimples his way, anything to mar that perfect skin and steal the cocksureness from his face.

“And what about your outfit, Gamer Girl?” he taunts, when he damn well knows my real name. “Did you get lost on your way to a subreddit about first person shooters?”

“Let me kick your ass on one, and we’ll see,” I retort, looking past Parrish to Maxx. He’s watching the interaction between the two of us with an expression that I can’t quite puzzle out. He *looks* irritated, but when he speaks, he doesn’t sound like it.

“Gamer Girl?” he queries, because unlike Parrish, he hasn’t heard me up in my room gaming on my computer until four in the morning. Sometimes, I leave the door cracked, just to see how many times my new stepbrother gets up for snacks. I counted a dozen just last night. Also, I noticed that he sometimes glances in my room to see what I’m doing. I pretend like I’m not aware of any of that.

“If the label fits.” I shrug my shoulders as Parrish lets out a harsh, derisive sort of laugh.

“Oh, it fits,” he says, looking me over yet again, like there’s something wrong with a girl who enjoys video games.

I was thinking of working on my Twitch channel tonight, but I’m not sure if I can handle trolls and misogynists and pervs right now. I considered starting a brand-new channel to try to disguise my identity, but nothing stays secret on the internet for long. By the end of the week, it’ll be just like my original channel: filled with people asking about the kidnapping, about Saffron, about Tess the crime novelist, about my *Princess Diaries*-esque rise in class.

My stomach roils and I slip the headset down to rest against the back of my neck.

Maxx’s mouth twitches with a genuine smile as Parrish frowns even harder, like something about me is just bugging the ever-living crap out of him.

“Do you want to go with us?” Maxx asks, glancing over his shoulder in the direction of Tess’ office. Her door is closed,

and I can hear the Killers' song *Mr. Brightside* playing on repeat. We have that in common, playing songs on a loop. I've listened to RADWIMPS' *Sparkle* about thirty times today. "If you turn your lights off and lock the door, Tess will usually leave you alone."

Parrish gives Maxx a scathing sort of look, like he can't believe his friend is passing on such valuable tips to an intruder.

I think for a moment; my natural inclination, of course, is to stay here. Like I said, I'm a great indoors person. And an introvert. But ... this house, it isn't home. I'm not entirely sure a party would feel anymore alienating or uncomfortable than this sterile room with its pretty lake view. I did, at least, take it upon myself to shove the bed into one corner. No offense but people who put their beds dead center in the middle of the room are weird AF. I'd rather do the teenager/single person thing and shove it into a corner with only a single nightstand. It's preferable than free floating in such a large space; I need to feel grounded.

Parrish looks past me and notices before glancing back in the direction of Tess' office door.

"We need to get going. Make up your damn mind."

"I'll go," I say, addressing X rather than Parrish. "Let me slip my shoes on."

"Don't you need to change?" Parrish asks, his voice this lofty, annoying condescension that makes me want to scream. I look back at him in his stupid khaki-colored jacket and his designer slip-on sneakers.

"Don't *you*?" I retort, because I long ago decided that any friends who can't accept me because of the clothes I wear are not friends that I'd want in the first place. I slip on a mismatched pair of Converse—one green, one black to match my hair, much to Parrish's chagrin—and off we go.

I leave my lights off, locking my door before I close it. It's got one of those little knobs with a hole in it that you can pick from the outside. Once again, I feel a pang of guilt at sneaking

out on Tess, and her distraught face flashes in my memory again, but I push it aside. I feel trapped here, suffocated. And there's always a chance I might see Danyella or Lumen at the party. It'd be nice to have friends here considering my own friends from back home have hardly bothered responding to my texts.

Parrish's father is in his own office downstairs, while the youngest kids are already asleep. Kimber emerges from the living room as we pause in the entryway, her eyes lifting from her phone to stare at us. As soon as she sees me, her entire demeanor changes.

"You'll take *her* to the party, but not me?" she hisses, giving Parrish a dirty look. "Are you insane? I should go ask Mom what she thinks about that."

"If you rat me out, I will drown you in the pool," Parrish snaps right back, doing that eye-narrowing thing he likes so much. It's nice to see it directed at someone who isn't me. "You're fucking fourteen. Nobody wants a fourteen-year-old at a party. Go upstairs and play with your dolls."

"Eat shit, Parrish," Kimber whispers back at him, her eyes flashing over to me. She almost immediately turns her attention back to her brother, picking up a handful of gold-foil candies from a decorative bowl nearby and chucking them our way. They scatter to the floor, but Parrish ignores them. Of course, he does: because Delphine will likely be the person who has to pick them up.

I pause briefly to bend down and gather the candies up, dumping them back in the bowl while Parrish and Kimber stare at me like I've lost my mind and X gives me that mysterious but charming smile of his.

"Come on, Kota," he says, clearly borrowing my nickname from my sister's vocabulary. "You can ride shotgun. Parrish, you get the back," he says, jerking his thumb toward the backseat after kicking the door to the garage open. He gives his friend a meaningful look as I scramble into the front seat of the Jeep Gladiator, gloating and smirking and watching Parrish's glare follow along for the ride. "Come on, don't piss

me off tonight. I'm your only chance to get out of here without having to walk."

"Yeah, whatever," Parrish murmurs back, but he takes the backseat without further complaint.

With a grin, I close the door behind me, the expression fading away as the garage door begins to open behind us and I tense for the crush of reporters. Only ... there's nobody there. I let out a sigh of relief. People move on quick, right? I mean, my kidnapping should be old news already.

"You really don't like the attention, do you?" X asks, turning the truck around and then heading down the driveway as the gate slides open into blissful darkness. No flashing cameras, no recording phones, no shouting people. I let out a sigh of relief.

"Not at all. Who wants to be famous for being kidnapped?" I ask, leaning back in the quiet shadows of the cab. It's almost like Parrish isn't there at all. Except ... I can almost *feel* him behind me, pretending to be engrossed in his phone when he's actually listening to every word. Probably filing them away to use against me later, no doubt.

"Fair point," X agrees, glancing my way again. He quickly turns his attention back to the road, but not before my mind flickers with his words from the coffee shop. "*I've got a girlfriend, and she's pretty awesome so ...*" Ugh. I ignore that, burying it deep down where it belongs, locked away tight. My sister is the single most important person in the world to me, and I won't compromise that relationship for anything.

Instead, I turn around so I can look at Parrish.

"Why did you tell me that stuff about Saffron?" I ask, my heart aching for the woman I grew up believing to be my mother. She lost her baby? How? When? Was the child a similar age to me? I never really liked Saffron—Maxine never liked her either for that matter and she really is her kid—but I also felt empathy toward her. She just seemed so fucking sad every time we saw her.

“Because keeping the truth from you is only making things worse,” Parrish snaps back, like I’ve supremely annoyed the shit out of him. He turns away from me toward the window, shutting off his phone and slipping it into his pocket.

“Just ignore him,” Maxx offers, his words dragging a scoff from Parrish’s perfect lips. “The fact that you were kidnapped as a baby shouldn’t affect your OnlyFans subscriber count.”

A laugh escapes me, one that’s just a little too loud, a little too raucous. I clap a hand over my mouth as Maxx flashes me a white-toothed smile. It’s big and gorgeous and most *definitely* still not a treat my cringe-worthy ass needs to be nibbling on.

“OnlyFans?” Parrish echoes, his voice strained and honestly, a bit like a tightrope walker onstage and wobbling. I glance over my shoulder, give him a tight smile and a lift of my brows, and then turn back to the front windshield.

It seems too dangerous to talk to him now, too dangerous to speak to X.

I pretend not to be interested in either of them as X chooses a playlist on his phone and The Script begins to play. *The Last Time* is his song of choice. Interesting. And not quite what I expected.

By the time we arrive at the party, I’m more than ready to get some space from the two boys.

“I’ll drive you guys back in about two hours,” X says, giving Parrish a look when he scowls. “I know it’s not much time, but I have to be up crazy early.”

“Whatever,” Parrish says, putting his freshly-tatted left hand on the shoulder of Maxx’s seat as he leans forward. “Old man,” he hisses with a laugh, and then he’s sliding out the back door, dispersing into the crowd, and leaving me and Maxx alone.

It is awkward as fuck in there, I’ll tell you that right now.

My gaze moves past the limned outline of Maxx’s profile and toward the house. It’s a five-story monstrosity made out of

glass and cement, much like our house but a little flashier, like the person who owns it really has something to prove.

“Bourgeois,” I murmur under my breath and Maxx chuckles again, turning off the engine and then leaning back in his seat, his body bathed in shadows and outlined with the golden glow from the patio lights. We’re parked near an open gate that leads into the backyard, the grass littered with luxury cars. Comparatively, Maxx’s Jeep Gladiator looks like a cheap hunk of junk. Still fancy to me though.

“You have no idea,” he murmurs, leaning forward and crossing his arms on the top of the steering wheel before resting his chin atop them. The song switches over to another track from The Script. I chew on my lower lip which is most definitely *not* a normal fidget of mine and realize that I’m subconsciously imitating Maxx. God. Damn it. I stop the action immediately and squeeze my hands together in my lap, knowing that I should rightfully bail out this door and never climb in another vehicle with Maxx Wright ever again. “Be careful with them: they start off nice but the deeper you get in Whitehall, the worse things you see.”

Maxx glances my way, and even though I know it’s impossible in the darkness, it feels like I can see the emerald glimmer of his irises. *Okay, that’s it. Get the fuck out of the car.* I reach for the door handle, but nothing happens. My fingers betray me, resting atop the handle but refusing to press down on it.

“They’re all stereotypical rich assholes, aren’t they?” I ask and Maxx chuckles at me, the sound somehow even *more* effective than it was during the daylight.

“Maybe not stereotypical,” he muses, like he’s chewing over some old stories, “but rich assholes? Oh yeah. Don’t let them intimidate you.” X sits up and reaches for his own door. His hands, however, do not betray him. *I hate you*, I think at my hands as Maxx climbs out and glances toward the house, letting out a tired sigh. “Am I gonna be ‘that guy’ tonight?” he muses aloud, looking back toward me with another smile. “Like, an old guy creeping around a high school party?”

I lift both brows and then finally convince my frozen fingers to move, opening the door and climbing out. Maxx comes around the hood to meet me.

“Should I take your silence as a yes?” he asks, but if I were to answer truthfully, I’d probably get myself in trouble.

“Oh yeah, you’re definitely the old creeper,” I say, giving him this ... this terrible punch in the shoulder like we’re bros or something? Gross. I sweep past before X gets a good look at my face and knows just how *insane* I’m acting. I’m sure I’ve got pink cheeks and a crimson chest. That’s where I always blush most, on my boobs.

I shuffle into the backyard in my Pokémon pants and hoodie, staring at the sea of girls in designer body-con dresses and thousand-dollar heels and know instantly that I’ve made a mistake.

Oh yeah, that’s right, we’re not in freaking high school; we’re in Hollywood high school. Everyone here is a goddamn model.

“Great,” I murmur under my breath, dragging a hand over my face.

“What’s the matter, Little Sister?” Chasm purrs, sliding up beside me like the pervy shadow he is. “Realize you missed the rules of the dress code?” He looks me over and then shakes his head, making an exaggerated tsk-tsk sound that has me rolling my eyes in a particularly dramatic fashion. “Nice Pikachu pants, by the way. Are you fucking twelve?”

“You look like a HotTopic ad from 2002 vomited all over you,” I spit back, probably reconfirming the idea that he has of me being twelve. *Nice one, Dakota. Really, spectacular. You could be a professional linguist. Hell, you could be a fancy writer like your bio-mom at this point.*

In all reality, Chasm looks ... well, shit. Chasm looks really good. Like really, really, horrifyingly good. Tight black pants, bright white sneakers, and a black and white striped dress shirt that’s only got a single button through the wrong hole, leaving it elegantly skewed. It leaves absolutely nothing to the

imagination, drawing attention to his flat chest and myriad ink. Fuck, he's hot, and I have to admit, the small amount of eyeliner he's wearing is doing things for me that I never thought possible.

"I thought the eBoy look wasn't supposed to leave the bedroom?" I query back, like I actually care. I'm just ... surprised? Most of the time, when I see Chasm, he's wearing his school uniform or well, almost nothing at all. Shirtless and barefoot, just like Parrish. Now that I've gotten a second glimpse of his style, I actually like him more. Which isn't a lot at all anyway.

"Aww, cute," Chasm says, smiling sharply at me. He gestures in the direction of a large firepit with his beer and then tilts his head the same way. "Want to get plastered and hang out? You can tell me *all* about how much you hate it here."

I shrug my shoulders and tuck my hands into the front pocket of my hoodie, clutching my phone for comfort. I am so far outside my element here. I mean miles. I mean *leagues*. Light years. Legions.

"Why the fuck not?" I strut across the grass like I own the place while people stop dancing or talking to turn and look at me. Some of them look actively perplexed, like they can't figure out if I'm the most mockable human being they've ever seen or the most interesting.

Please give me the latter, I beg you! I call out, looking up into the stars for comfort. *I've got this. I've fucking got this.*

I squat down beside the cooler and extract a bottle of ... I look at the label. Jägermeister?

"You drink hard alcohol?" Chasm asks, pausing beside me and tilting his head to one side. He even manages to lift a single eyebrow in mocking query. *Ah there it is, NOW you sound intelligent—in your own head. Congrats on that, by the way.* "Excuse me for saying this: but it looks like you couldn't handle the dregs of a wine cooler."

I unscrew the bottle's top and then lift it to my lips for a swig.

The taste of black licorice hits the back of my throat, nearly making me gag, and that's *before* the acrid burn of the booze really starts to singe my throat. Still, I'm not about to be mocked by a guy with a lightning bolt dyed into his hair. No freaking way.

I almost choke—but then *almost* is the key word. I manage to swallow the alcohol, dropping the bottle from my lips and giving Chasm what I hope is a *don't fuck with me* sort of look. However it comes across, he throws his head back and laughs at me, the sound cold and cruel.

He's sharp, this one. Razor-fucking-sharp. I wouldn't bother with Chasm at all if he weren't Parrish's near-constant companion. Seems to fancy himself the dark knight to Parrish's indolent prince routine.

"You look like you want to puke, to be honest," he drawls, turning his head just slightly to look at me. He doesn't seem unappreciative of the fact that I just chugged, like, five shots of hard liquor in one gulp though.

"Where did Parrish run off to?" I ask without even meaning to. Chasm gives me a look.

"You have a thing for your brother, Little Sister? That's seriously messed up." He stands up straight, finishes his beer, and then chucks it into the grass. I narrow my eyes in irritation but Chasm either doesn't notice or pretends not to, reaching out to take the Jäger bottle from my hand. "He's probably off banging Lumen in an upstairs *suite*." He snaps the last word off the end of his tongue, like he's mildly annoyed about something and then takes a swig.

Talk about broody.

Chasm McKenna is the very definition.

My stomach churns as I glance away from his stormy expression, this sudden, irritational surge of irritation flowing through me. *Upstairs banging Lumen?* I think, clenching my jaw. *Seriously?*

“You know, blatant misogyny hasn’t been sexy for two generations. Get it together, McKenna.” I steal the bottle back from him and down another two shots worth. Or, at least I think it was two shots worth. I’m actually not super-duper familiar with what, exactly, a shot constitutes. I am not a fun or interesting sixteen-year-old. Frankly, I would accept an AARP card tomorrow.

“How is that misogynistic?” Chas asks, throwing his arm around some random brunette as she snuggles her bikini-clad body against his side and giggles. My mouth twitches in annoyance, but not at her—at Chas. He had Lumen in his car earlier today, spent all of this morning blabbing about a completely different girl, and now ... who even is this? “I’m not a misogynist at all. In fact,” he looks back at me and smiles, “I’m a feminist. I helped organize last year’s International Women’s Day parade.”

And with that, Chas steals the bottle back from me and takes off just long enough for me to realize that the girl was in a bikini so ... pool? I follow the flickering light of the firepit to a row of hedges. Moving forward, I come around the side of them to see that not only am I not dressed right for the dancing-grinding-drinking portion of the party, I’ve also come sans-swimsuit.

“Hey!” Danyella calls out, dressed in a white bikini and waving around a bright-blue drink with an umbrella and a straw that most *definitely* did not just come from a cooler. I glance past her, across the lit surface of the pool, and over to where a bartender is mixing drinks.

A bartender.

At a high school party.

Right.

Okay.

I can so do this.

I turn back to Danyella and smile.

“Hey.” I give a weak wave and take a step forward, realizing already that my head is beginning to spin. Uh-oh. Not good.

Not good at all.

“I didn’t think you were coming,” Danyella replies, offering up her drink. My vision swims a bit as I look at it, but I manage to drag my gaze to her face. Somehow, someway. But I can definitely feel the uh, ‘only ever had alcohol three times in my life’ syndrome coming on. “I mean, I was hoping you would.”

“I figured it was better to be here than at Tess’ house,” I reply, when it occurs to me that—despite our similar love for creative endeavors—we are not friends at all yet. Just strangers. And already I’m dumping my shit on her. I wouldn’t be surprised if Danyella ran for the hills. Didn’t Maxx just tell me they were all rich assholes?

“Are you okay?” she asks me, sounding genuinely concerned as she sets her blue drink aside.

The last thing I want to be tonight is a burden, so I force my mouth into a smile. Oh, there it is. Guess I’m not entirely out of them. Each one just costs me a little bit more than the last.

“Actually, I’m good,” I say, letting my hands bury themselves in the sleeves of my hoodie as I cross my arms and take a step back. I give a slight bend of my knees, like I’m bowing out or squatting or something. “I’m just gonna look around. This is an ...” I laugh. “An interesting house, for sure.”

Danyella picks her drink back up and shrugs.

“Well, if you get bored around the rich yuppies in there, come and find me. I’ll be here, suffering. Tremendously.” She shifts her gaze over to the writhing horde of teens in the pool. Was I somehow concerned about not having a bathing suit? Jesus, Chasm was right: I’m still twelve and pool parties are *fun*. Looking down at the pool water, I wonder how contaminated with lusty, sweaty teenage hormones it must be to change color.

“Deal.”

I spin on my heel and start powerwalking for the house.

I’m going to vomit.

No doubt about that.

On my way inside, I run into Parrish. With Lumen. They don't look like they've just had sex though, more like they just ... broke up? Or maybe were never together in the first place.

"Are you okay?" I ask Lumen, because she looks like she's about to cry. Her mascara has run down her face in two charcoal streaks and her left falsie looks like it's about to peel off.

Parrish snaps his attention over to me and our eyes meet.

He looks temporarily relieved—until Lumen throws herself into my arms, hooking them around my neck and sobbing into my shirt.

"No, I'm most definitely *not!*" she sniffles as she burrows into me, and Parrish's flash of relief turns into an angry scowl.

"Twenty minutes into the party and you're stealing my fangirl, too?" he growls in my ear, low enough that likely I'm the only person who can hear him. With her racking sobs, I doubt Lumen can hear a thing besides herself. "I hate you, Dakota Banks."

He tears himself away from me as I grit my teeth and prepare myself to shout after him. What I'm going to say, I'm not sure because Lumen starts choking like she's about to throw up and I end up dragging her into the nearest bathroom. There's no line. Like, not even a single person waiting. Apparently, this place has enough toilets to satisfy the entire population of Whitehall Prep.

"I hate him," Lumen moans, blonde hair hanging in glossy waves over one shoulder. Despite the fact that she just threw up—and also that her left falsie is like, floating in the toilet bowl—she still looks like she could walk onto a photoshoot at any moment.

"My sentiments exactly," I murmur under my breath as Lumen forces herself to stand up. When I reach out to grab her shoulder and help her, she gives me a watery smile.

"It must be hell having to live with him," she murmurs, moving over to the sink and leaning in close to the mirror. She

notices right away that her lashes are missing and rolls her eyes as she peels the remaining one off and then proceeds to wash her mouth out with cool water.

“At least he has a small dick,” I reply with a smile and a shrug, my hands buried in my front hoodie pocket. Taking care of Lumen has helped a bit with my initial nausea, but I’m not exactly ... sober? At my response though, Lumen turns so slowly to look at me that I wonder if I’m in a horror movie and there’s somebody with a knife that’s just revealed themselves behind the shower curtain. *Eat your heart out, Norman Bates, and just stab me already.*

“You’ve seen his dick?” is her response. It takes me a good thirty seconds to parcel that one out.

“Huh?” I ask just as Lumen takes my silence for acquiescence.

“His majesty claims there isn’t a single girl at Whitehall that’s good enough for him,” she says, seemingly unperturbed by the idea of someone else getting it on with her ... boyfriend? I have no idea if Lumen and Parrish are actually a thing, but Chasm seemed to think they were. Danyella, too. Parrish said ‘fangirl’, didn’t he? That’s pretty dismissive and rude actually ... “Guess you’re the one he’s been waiting for.”

“Oh?” I ask, still wondering if I’m misinterpreting the entire conversation.

“He moved in quick, didn’t he?” Lumen replies with a scoff and a shake of her head, digging around in her purse for a piece of gum and popping it between her lips. “Screw him, but good on you.”

“Good on me for ... what, exactly?” I ask, but then Lumen is snatching my arm and dragging me out of the bathroom.

“Lumen and the new girl making out in the bathroom just now!” someone calls out, and I gape as Lumen leans over to press a minty kiss to my cheek.

“Don’t let anybody tell you that I didn’t steal Parrish’s girl out from under him,” Lumen calls out, and then she’s strutting off like the queen of the school. The attitude of the crowd

shifts dramatically, and then everyone is smiling and laughing and offering me drinks.

“What the hell did you do?” Chasm asks, appearing by my side an hour later. Doubtless he’s been drinking all night, but he doesn’t look it. His gaze is sharp, his mouth a thin razor across the bottom of his handsome face. “You’re a bi-icon now, Little Sister.”

“Yeah, not sure how that happened,” I start, sitting in an armchair near the huge fireplace, a sea of untouched drinks beside me. I’ve been secretly taking sips from a water bottle buried under my hoodie and eschewing the alcohol, and I feel about a million times better now. “Apparently I’m dating both Lumen *and* Parrish right now.”

Chasm takes a seat on the arm of the chair, watching the crowd with a smirk playing about his lips.

“You should’ve seen his face when the news reached us.” Chas glances my way and lifts both brows in my direction. “He’s going to kill you, you know that? Like, verbally destroy you in front of everyone.”

“Let’s see him try,” I challenge, just enough of the alcohol in my veins to keep my confidence up. Chasm laughs and shakes his head, leaning back on the chair arm as Parrish slips through the crowd to find me. His rich-boy saunter is pronounced as he makes his way across the room to pause in front of me.

He adjusts the sleeves of his jacket as I look up at him.

“You’re the only person in Whitehall who’s seen my dick,” he says, almost like it’s a real fact. “Congratulations. Now the entire school knows that.”

“Sucks, huh?” I ask, pretending to cringe. “Now that they all know about ... the size.” I shift in the seat as the edges of Parrish’s mouth curves down in a violent frown. “Or lack thereof, really.”

He looks me over like I mean too much and nothing all at once. I don’t get it, what our issue is.

“If you think I’m going to sputter around and deny this, you’ll be sorry.” Parrish’s frown turns into a smile, one as cruel and wicked and obscene as everything else about him. He’s a villain in a very pretty story, that’s what he is. And once he’s set you as a target, that’s it. I can feel it now: he’s bringing me down. At least ... he’s going to try. And he can try his fucking best. “I’m going to embrace it. Actually, I’m going to start spreading rumors of my own. Just remember that you brought this on yourself.”

He leans down beside me and presses his lips against the side of my jaw, his kiss iniquitous and violent and searing as anything I’ve ever felt. Heat flares through my veins and I shoot to my feet, but all that really does is put us closer together.

Parrish gathers my head in his hands and then his mouth is on mine, his tongue stealing between my lips as they seem to part of their own accord. *Oh my gods, what the fuck am I doing?!* I wonder as my arms go around his neck and I end up on my tiptoes in an attempt to deepen the kiss. Parrish seems mildly surprised, but then his arms are around my waist, squeezing hard enough that it almost hurts.

When he pulls back from me, his lips move near my ear.

“That’s what I thought, Gamer Girl,” he says, releasing me like I’m venomous and stepping back with a confident smile warping his lips. Lips that are just this side of glossy from kissing. From kissing *me*, specifically.

Oh shit.

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit.

Did I ... was that ... oh hell, that was my first kiss?! With Parrish of all people? What the actual fucking fuck is wrong with me? I clamp a hand over my mouth as my cheeks flame and that ember in my belly turns into a raging fire, crawling through my veins and burning me up from the inside.

He can sense it, too, the way he’s looking at me, all smug and shit. He warned me not to fall in love with him and I hate him and I would never and yet I kissed him and now I’m

standing here looking like a total moron and everyone is staring and multiple people have their phones out andohmygodthisisgoingonthegoddamninternet.

“Clearly that was your first kiss,” Parrish remarks absently, frowning down at me in that way of his, that way that makes me wish I knew how to acquire ricin poison to slip into his morning coffee. Every goddamn day he makes a cup with Tess’ five-thousand-dollar espresso machine and sits there sipping it in his Whitehall uniform, and it just *pisses me the fuck off*. I hate the way he drinks coffee, slowly and contemplatively, like there’s actually something going on inside his stupid, ugly head. “But I’ll keep that to myself or else the rumors I’ve spread won’t make much sense.”

He has the audacity to smile at me. I feel like a fucking tea kettle boiling over and steaming.

“Shows what you know because it obviously was *not*,” I snap back, but he just keeps smiling in that infuriating way of his.

“Then I guess you’re just a shitty kisser. Less spit, less tongue flapping, less desperation, Gamer Girl. If you’re nice to me, maybe I’ll let you practice a little.”

“Stick your dick in a meat grinder,” is all that I can manage to get out. I’m losing this battle, no doubt, but I think by befriending Lumen and impressing the students at the party I might be able to win the war.

“Dick can’t be all that small if you’re gonna kiss him like that,” Chas says finally, lifting up his drink in salute and then downing it as several of the people nearest him laugh. Someone lays out a line of what I think might actually be *cocaine* on a table nearby, and I feel my face pale.

Maybe I’ve just stepped into something I’m not quite ready for?

What was it that Parrish said to me: *Hope you’re ready. Because it only gets worse from here on out.*

I’m starting to wonder if he was right about that.

By the time I find Maxx and the Jeep Gladiator, it's twenty minutes past the time we said we'd meet. For his part, X doesn't seem particularly bothered, offering up a tight smile when I climb into the front seat beside him.

"It seems like you've made quite a name for yourself," he tells me with a raise of his brows. "Good work, Kota. You've nailed the Whitehall Prep test."

"There's a test?" I ask, but I know what he means. The test of whether I belong here or not. Apparently, I meet their required level of drama, lucky me.

Parrish climbs into the backseat about five seconds later which is both good and bad because I want to get the hell out of here but also, I want to be nowhere *near* the guy. He's a disease that I can't stop obsessing about, and now have inextricably tied my reputation at Whitehall to.

I should've stayed home and headshotted some aliens. Or had a heart-to-heart with Tess which, other than this party, sounds like the worst possible thing in the world right now.

"That was an interesting night," Parrish remarks, like he didn't stick his tongue down my throat thirty minutes earlier. "Let's get out of here before things get dull."

"God, I hate you," I murmur, closing my eyes in frustration as he laughs behind me.

Neither of us is laughing by the time we get back to the house to find that most of the lights are off.

"Stop here," Parrish tells Maxx, causing his friend to roll his eyes and sigh.

"This isn't my first time doing this, you know?" X reminds Parrish as he pauses at the street corner and both Parrish and I hop out. I turn to thank Maxx for the ride when I realize that Parrish has just taken off without me.

"Thanks, I'll talk to you soon," I tell him, starting to shut the door. Then I pause and frown. Maybe I'll talk to him soon?

Maybe not at all? It might be better if I didn't. I glance over my shoulder and notice that Parrish has already unlocked the gate and is strolling through it.

"No problem, anytime," Maxx replies, but he's hardly paying any attention to me. Instead, he's watching Parrish walk away with a strange expression. He quickly returns his green eyes to mine and smiles again. "See you next time Maxine is in Seattle."

Our goodbye gets suddenly awkward, so I slam the door shut, take a huge breath and close my eyes while Maxx drives away. As soon as his taillights are around the corner and up the hill, I turn and head for the gate.

Realizing that it's about to close, I start to jog and then sprint, but I don't make it in time, and the gate slides shut.

"Hey Parrish," I call out, before he's too far ahead. I can't exactly shout to be heard without waking Tess or Paul up. Or hell, Kimber. She'd probably break sibling code right off and run to her mother with the news that I'd snuck out.

Parrish's walk slows slightly but doesn't stop.

"Can you please come back and open the gate?" I ask, but he doesn't turn around. In fact, he doesn't even stop walking. I gape after him as he slips around to a side door and lets himself into the garage and then, subsequently, into the house. I can see his shadow against a dim kitchen fan light as he passes by.

With a sigh, I pull my phone from my pocket to look up the gate code ... and find out that it's dead.

"No, no, no," I murmur, frantically squeezing the power button. "This is not fucking happening to me."

But the phone stays dead, and the front gate stays closed, and I find myself shivering with my arms crossed over my chest. I walk the edge of the property, but there's no other way to get in, and there's no way in hell that I can climb it. It's an eight-foot-tall metal fence with absolutely zero in the way of ornamentation.

Fantastic.

It takes two rounds of pacing outside the fence for me to give in to the inevitable: I am stuck out here for the rest of the night. Tess is going to find out that I left the property. Sure, I could lie about the party but what's my excuse?

After a while, I end up sitting with my knees pulled up to my chest outside the gate, waiting for morning. If I'm lucky, maybe Parrish will let me in before breakfast? That still gives me several hours of sitting out here in the cold, but at the very least, I'll avoid Tess' wrath.

My mind goes immediately back to that awful kiss. I mean, it wasn't awful in the moment—actually, it was kind of nice—but then I remember the smug look on my stepbrother's face and I want to scream. How could I have kissed him like that? Wrapped my arms around his neck, lifted up on my toes, leaned in.

My cheeks flush but at least there's nobody out here to see it.

How dare he lock me out like this, I think instead, realizing as I sit here that he isn't coming back. No, he's planning to leave me out all night. In the cold. In a neighborhood that I don't know. He did say he was going to bury me, so I suppose I should've expected this.

I need to push back, swing harder, fight dirtier.

I'm already fantasizing about ways to ruin his life when, much to my surprise, I hear the gate start to slide open. I don't have a phone or a watch, but I'm guessing it's only been a couple of minutes. The asshole was just trying to make me sweat.

Shoving up to my feet, I notice a shadow standing on the other side of the fence.

It's Parrish.

"I've been watching you the whole time," he says, which should be creepy but comes across in a different way somehow. Observant, really, like he expected less out of me, and I surprised him.

I move toward the gate, and he waits until I'm on the other side before pressing the button to slide it closed. As I follow him up the curving driveway toward the front door, I hear something over my shoulder and turn to look.

It sounded like there were footsteps there in the dark, but now that I'm looking, the moon is full and the darkness has been driven back to the shadows of foliage and the looming rectangles of houses. There's nothing there, and the sound is gone.

I'm sure I imagined it.

When I squat down in front of my bedroom door, Parrish does the same. He's picking his lock, same as I am.

"Do you need a spare bobby pin perchance?" I whisper back, trying not to notice the nearness of his body. I should rightfully want to kill him for locking me out, but then, he did come back so I suppose that helps. He pauses briefly, his voice softer and quieter than I've ever heard it. And not just because we're both whispering to avoid detection. More than that. Something else.

"No, thank you. This isn't the first time I've done this."

That's when I realize it.

The reason we're having such problems, me and my new stepbrother.

I bite my lower lip and try to shove that knowledge back in the dark box of my mind where it belongs, right into the same place I'm keeping my natural attraction to my sister's boyfriend, and the pain I feel every day I wake up here and not back home with the Banks.

The thing about doing that, about stuffing emotions away where you can't see them, is that they fester and rot and morph into something so much worse. Monsters, that's what they become. Fucking monsters.

I pause and exhale, knowing that I'm starting to run out of space in that box.

"Parrish," I start, reaching up to put the bobby pin in the lock. But my door is no longer locked or ... it never was? It swings open slightly, revealing the dark bedroom beyond it.

Huh.

"Yeah?" he asks, his voice strangely receptive. He's probably still drunk. But still, it's too good an opportunity to pass up. I decide that I must not have closed the door all the way and push the worry aside.

"Do we have a thing, maybe?" I ask, because I can't forget the way he looked at me at the party, like something he shouldn't want but did anyway. Of course, I could've just imagined it. It's also possible that he was simply looking at Lumen. "Is that one of the reasons we hate each other so much?"

He says nothing, but I can hear his clothes rustling as he stands up behind me. I stand up, too, and turn. Almost too quickly, my green and black hair flying out and smacking him across the face. Oddly enough, he doesn't seem to mind. Instead, his brown eyes are locked on me with an unnerving amount of focus and attention.

My breath quickens, my heart pounds, strange things happen in my lower belly.

I shift uneasily on my feet.

He doesn't have to answer me: I can feel it.

The same sort of natural attraction I felt toward Maxx, I feel it toward Parrish. I feel it, and he feels it, and we're as impossible as me and Maxx. More so, really. Because I know that, more than anything, Parrish loves Tess. She's as much his real mother as she isn't mine. And yet, she considers us both her children.

Also, I hate him. There's that, too. Natural chemistry doesn't make up for the fact that Parrish is an insufferable tool who's chosen to make my life hell for no other reason than that he feels like it.

“There is nothing between us,” he says, but the way he’s looking at me says he’s a skilled and consummate liar. His eyes rake my body, from my mussy hair to my mismatched shoes, and he sucks in a sharp intake of breath. “I told you, Gamer Girl: I don’t do incest.”

“That kiss might prove otherwise,” I retort, but he pretends not to hear me.

Parrish turns on his heel and disappears into his room. At first, it feels like he might very well slam his door and give us both away. But at the last minute, he slows it and then very carefully pushes it shut. I hear the lock click into place, standing alone in the hallway and panting like I’ve just run a marathon.

My hand comes up to my chest as I struggle to catch my breath.

Is my type just ‘emotionally unavailable and impossible’? No. That isn’t me. I’m not into guys who behave like jerks. I don’t ... I’m not finding myself attracted to Parrish just because he’s hot, or because he’s a bastard. No, it’s in spite of those things. It’s the way he watches out for Tess, how he cares so much that it’s hurting him.

I recognize that because I do it, too, put other people first at the expense of myself.

As Maxx Wright is the opposite of me, an ideal of confidence and self-care that I ascribe to be, Parrish is just the same as I am.

The question is: do opposites really attract? Or can we fall for ourselves in somebody else?

With a huff, I turn on my heel and shove open my bedroom door, neglecting to turn on the light as I flop onto my bed in the corner. Outside the wall of windows, Lake Washington sparkles under the moonlight, white crested waves beating a steady and comfortable rhythm against the curvature of the shore.

Standing up, I pad over to the windows and find that none of them open. None of them. Not a one. Here we are with this

beautiful view—this privileged view—of the water and yet I can't crack a window?

Suddenly desperate for the steady heartbeat of mother earth, I turn and head into the bathroom, finding that at the very least the window above the bathtub opens. I push it as wide as I can, manipulating the screen until I can pull it into the bathroom and toss it aside. Crossing my arms on the windowsill, I lean out and close my eyes, letting moonlight and the distant taste of sea salt from the Puget Sound wash over my face.

Even with Parrish's brush off, I feel better somehow, like I at least understand where he's coming from.

I'm going to be okay, I tell myself, because in that moment, with the sound of the water, and the wild thumping of my heart, it truly feels like I will be.

That is, until I wake up the following morning.

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CHAPTER 7

I come to at the sound of knocking on my door, a small groan slipping from between my lips as I turn over and find my freshly charged phone. It's not quite ten in the morning, but it's also Sunday. Do the people in this house never sleep in? I'm tired from the party, but there's also no way to admit to that without admitting to sneaking out.

With yet another grumble of disapproval, I stand up and pad over to my bedroom door, opening it to find Tess waiting with a handful of balloons. They say *Happy Birthday* on them. I blink a few times in surprise and then try to force a smile.

"Whose birthday is it?" I ask, wondering if it's Ben's or perhaps the twins'. Hopefully it isn't Kimber's. Tess laughs, like I've just told the most wonderful joke. Apparently, I'm the butt of one. Or ... I'm about to be.

"I don't know how you usually celebrate," she starts as I look past her shoulder and notice Parrish relaxing in the doorway to his bedroom, leaning shirtless against the doorjamb with his arms crossed over his chest. He's watching me carefully, frowning as usual. It feels like things should be different between us this morning, considering we were partners in crime last night, but apparently I'm the only person who feels that way.

I'm also the only person in that house who doesn't know that it's my birthday.

"Oh, you just wait until you see what you've gotten as a birthday present." Parrish said that to me the other day, but I didn't ... I thought he'd meant for next year or ... something. *Shit.*

Dakota Banks' birthday is October twenty-fourth, exactly one week before Halloween, sixteen years ago.

Mia Patterson's birthday, apparently, is February twenty-seventh.

I wasn't sixteen until ... now. I've been fifteen for four months longer than I expected.

A chasm opens up beneath my feet, and I feel suddenly like I'm falling. Somehow, I manage to stay on my feet, but I don't feel good. No, my head is spinning, and my belly swims with nausea.

Tess hands the balloons out, but I can't seem to force my hand to move to take them. After several long, agonizing seconds, I do. Mechanically. My face feels frozen into this caricature of a human being.

"Come downstairs," she says excitedly, and I realize that she's been waiting for this moment for fourteen years. Fourteen years of missing Mia, of missing her birthdays, of finding February twenty-seventh roll around again and again as hope dwindled. I've often wondered what sort of thoughts went through Tess' head during that decade and a half. It's an important part of empathy, after all, trying to understand what others are going through.

She probably thought much worse than what happened to me actually happened.

Sexual assault. Human trafficking. Death.

My smile feels like broken glass, but I keep it in place anyway. The cost really is rising exponentially, each time I have to fake it. Eventually, the dam of my emotions is going to break and I'll be flooded and drowned with them, choking on my own pain.

I know Tess isn't meaning to be sinister. Hell, it probably hasn't even occurred to her that I might celebrate my birthday on a different day. *On a dead kid's birthday?* I wonder, thinking about what Parrish told me about Saffron and her lost baby.

Whatever compassion and empathy I feel toward her, I have to redirect toward Tess.

I am Tess' lost baby.

"We had breakfast delivered," she says as my eyes stray past her eager expression to Parrish's. He may as well be carved of stone for all that he's giving me this morning. His hair is mussed up, but not the careful mussing of a teenage boy who's in love with his mirror. No, he's very clearly just gotten up as well.

Our eyes meet. *We kissed last night.* The whole school thinks we're dating. Well, the whole school thinks I'm dating both Parrish *and* Lumen. At the same time. The first day at Whitehall should be fun.

"Sounds great. I'll be down in a minute," I tell her as she pauses, her gaze flicking to one side before coming to land back on me again. She doesn't look like a super wealthy bestseller right now. Instead, it's quite obvious she had me young. Tess Vanguard née Patterson barely looks old enough to be my mother. Instead, she looks decades younger than her thirty-four years.

But just like Parrish, that instance of vulnerability fades in the span of a single blink and Tess is smiling confidently again, like she's got a secret she just can't wait to share.

"Here," she hands me a card, and then pauses, curling her hand around mine in a rare gesture of affection. Other than the initial hug and kisses she gave me when we met for the first time, this is the most we've ever touched. I look down at our hands, remembering two birthdays ago when Saffron cupped the side of my face, tears brimming in her eyes, and put our foreheads together. I felt so loved then. Even though she wasn't around much, when she was, she didn't hesitate to show affection. Was it all a lie then? Was I just a stand-in for a baby she missed too much to face reality? "Don't open it yet. Tonight."

Tess withdraws her hand and then glances over at her stepson with a long-suffering sigh.

“You do own clothes, do you not?” she asks him, but he ignores her, waiting until her head disappears from sight down the staircase. His attention shifts to me. I haven’t moved yet. Instead, I’m standing there clutching those goddamn balloons in my hand, the card burning my opposite palm as I squeeze it tightly enough to wrinkle the pink envelope. The question is: will the card be addressed to Dakota? Or to Mia? And who, exactly, is it that I am?

“When’s your real birthday?” Parrish asks, surprising me. I stare at him, rooted to the spot by withered vines of emotion. I don’t want to feel so ... god, so fucking *sad*. *Check your privilege, Dakota*, I tell myself, and I try. I do. This is a very nice house in a very nice neighborhood, and Chasm was right: Tess loves me in a way that I barely understand. So why do I feel so listless and empty?

“October twenty-fourth,” I breathe, trying to fight back the tears. Parrish won’t understand. Or, even if he does, he won’t care. I’m not sure I can take his cruelty right now. As if he can sense this somehow, he says nothing, turning and heading back into his room.

He closes the door behind him as I retreat into my own room, heeling the door shut and then leaning my head back against it. Closing my eyes, I focus on taking deep breaths before setting the cluster of bells and plastic shapes that weigh down the balloons on my nightstand. Wrenching the drawer open, I start to toss the envelope inside when I notice a small box that wasn’t there before.

Huh.

Is that why my door was unlocked last night? Did Tess come in here and leave something for me? If so, she didn’t mention the fact that I was missing from my room or ask where I’d been.

There’s a bow on the box, and a small card tumbles out when I slide the lid off.

My beautiful daughter. Patience is key to everything. Happy birthday.

Inside the box is a key. A big, fat skeleton key that smells a bit like blood. *It must be made of iron*, I think as I heft the item in my palm and frown. What is up with Tess and her secret gifts? First, the metal heart pin. Then the card that she doesn't want me to open in front of anyone—least of all her, apparently. And now this?

With a small sigh, I tuck the key back in the box and return it to the nightstand drawer. Whatever gift this goes to, I'm clearly meant to wait for it.

Throwing on a white midriff sweater and some old Hot Topic pants that Maxine passed down to me after she left her so called 'eGirl phase', I open my door at the same moment that Parrish does. He looks me over with a quick flick of his brown eyes, attention resting on the double pair of navel piercings in my bellybutton. I've got silver rings in both the top and bottom, dressed with opals. Because, you know, opal is the birthstone for *October*.

"Nice metal," he says, lifting his gaze back up to my face. "Got anything else?"

His question takes me back a bit, almost as much as the rare praise that preceded it.

"You mean, like in my nipples or something?" I choke out with a laugh, but Parrish doesn't laugh with me. Instead, he maintains that heavy stare of his. And holy hell, does it feel like it weighs a million pounds.

"Or anywhere else," he adds, but it's not a question. My cheeks heat as he holds out a hand and very dryly adds, "after you, un-birthday girl."

The reference to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* catches me even *more* off-guard than his supposed reference to pierced genitals or whatever. I accept his invitation into the hallway which is easily wide enough for us to walk abreast. So we do.

Please have been too drunk last night to remember that we're supposedly dating and that we kissed and—well, everything else. I pick some god at random—Anubis, just because—and pray to him that Parrish really doesn't recall a

damn thing. Gross. Why did I even do that? Who kisses their own stepbrother? Only in pervy romance novels. Not that I'm judging. I happen to like pervy romance novels (just not stepbrother ones). I also don't think Tess would appreciate it if Parrish and I ...

He lets me go down the stairs ahead of him, pulling out his phone as usual and zoning into it. I'm not surprised to see Chasm waiting just outside the entrance to the living room. He smirks at me, but I don't have the energy to smirk back.

"You were dynamite at the party last night, Little Sister," he tells me, and I sigh, knocking my shoulder into his as I pass by. He lets out a little whistle, but doesn't pursue me, hanging back to chat with Parrish while I head through the living room toward the dining area with a solid lump of dread in my stomach.

Breakfast is, as promised, delivered. Catered, more like. There's a bountiful spread atop the table, one that Ben and the twins have already dug into. Kimber is sipping a coffee and zoning into her phone with one earbud while Paul carries on a low conversation on his own phone.

Happy birthday to me.

My heart begins to pound as I think about my most recent birthday back home. Grandpa made biscuits and gravy with bacon grease, the way he always does. Grandma picked fresh lavender from her greenhouse herb garden and made lavender-lemonade from scratch. We sat at the old, worn wood table in the dining room while my grandparents regaled me with all the crazy stories they have from the time they owned their own pizza parlor.

My big gift this year was Maxine's surprise arrival, bursting through the front door with a new hoodie and a phone case wrapped in newspaper, a hug, and a smile.

Only Tess looks my way when I come in.

"Take a seat," she says, patting the empty chair between her and Ben. I happily accept; my younger siblings are the only parts of my new life that I like thus far. My smile remains

pasted in place as I stare at the catered scrambled eggs and gourmet sausages, the pancakes under a glass lid. Culture shock hits once again, but I blink my way through it, relieved when Chasm and Parrish take their seats across from me.

Kimber turns neon red as Chas slides into the seat beside hers, tossing her hair and giving him an award-winning smile that he ignores. Best friend's baby sister isn't usually a romantic role that works out in anything but a rom-com.

"How old are you today?" Chas asks casually, parking his elbow on the table and resting his chin in his hand. His admittedly pretty hair falls across his forehead, the lightning bolt of yellow color in it catching my attention. I need to find out who does his hair. I've always done my own, but if Tess is willing to give me money to splurge on anything, it'd be that. I'd love to get some cool, crazy design put into my own hair.

"Sixteen," I reply dryly, hating him because he knows damn well how old I'm supposed to be. *What a dick move.* "You turned twelve on your last birthday, right?" I blurt out before I can stop myself. "Because you sure act your age."

Chasm laughs at me, Parrish remains as stoic and uninterested as usual, while Kimber glares daggers at me from across the table. Paul actually cringes and covers his phone with his hand, mouthing *be right back* to Tess before disappearing out to the balcony and closing the glass doors behind him.

"Mi—" Tess starts to scold me, changing tactics at the last second. She exhales sharply, and I want to scream. How hard is it to just call me by the name that I grew up with? "Dakota."

My fingers twitch under the table, digging into my upper thighs and scraping at the zippered pockets. Paul comes back in a moment later and takes his spot at the head of the table. It bothers me a little bit, that he always sits there. I smell patriarchy. Shit, I *spot* patriarchy as his eyes flick over to my half-shirt with the characters from *Food Wars* on it and his mouth twitches with disapproval.

"Do you believe that clothing can dictate the way others perceive you?" he asks rhetorically, and the stink of judgment

becomes almost unbearable. I brace myself for ridicule, snatching up a spoon and slopping scrambled eggs onto it. They're sort of ... different than I'm used to, runnier.

"This restaurant," Tess interjects, trying to distract her husband, "*P'tit Dej*", makes their scrambled eggs with fresh cream."

"Back home, we take eggs from the coop and scramble them with salt and pepper," I say, once again before I can stop myself. Chasm snorts, Parrish stops buttering his toast to look up at me, and Kimber makes a huffing sound that has me half-ready to take one of the fine China teacups off the table so I can chuck it at her.

"That must be nice," Tess says primly, her mouth pinching into a thin line. "To have fresh eggs every day." I notice her attention is still on Paul. With a huff that reminds me of Kimber, and a grumble under his breath, Paul returns his focus to his phone.

"It was nice," I say, knowing that Chas and Parrish are still watching me. Chasm has his phone out, but he isn't looking at it. "Actually, we had eggs when we celebrated my birthday on October twenty-fourth."

There's a long, heavy pause that follows, and I feel suddenly like the most ungrateful brat there is. I'm not *allowed* to be upset when there are two families fighting over me, two families that both want and love me. I'm just ... not.

The thing is, the heart doesn't always see reason; emotions don't have to make sense.

"You celebrated your birthday on October twenty-fourth?" Tess asks, her voice strained and tense. She's got a full face of makeup on now, hair coiffed, a short-sleeved suit jacket over a red blouse. Very professional, very pretty. I preferred the way she looked when she first knocked on my door.

"Since before I can remember," is how I respond, knowing that I've bungled this whole morning.

Silence follows, broken only by the twins as they start to bicker over the last piece of bacon. I'd give anything to spend

the day with just them and Ben.

“Did you know that your real birthday was today?” Tess asks, and my savior comes, strangely enough, in the form of Parrish. Although I’m not entirely sure he knows he’s taking the heat off of me.

“Does it matter?” he asks, setting his toast on his plate without even taking a bite. Tess glances over at him and he shrugs. Even Chasm is glancing his way now, like he isn’t sure where his best friend is going with this. “You should just give her the gift now, so we can all move on with our day.”

Rather than chastise him, Tess glances over at me, at the uneaten portion of eggs on my plate. Her cheeks are as red as mine were when Parrish kissed me last night. She’s embarrassed. Maybe she should be, I don’t know, but I feel suddenly bad about it.

“It didn’t occur to me that ...” she starts, and then pauses, looking over at me like she’s never seen me before, like she has no idea who I am. And she doesn’t, really, does she? She won’t unless she makes more of an effort to get to know me instead of just treating me like the daughter she lost all those years ago.

“I wouldn’t mind having two birthdays,” I offer up, trying to smooth my way through a conversation that I derailed in the first place.

Tess smiles but doesn’t answer, and we suffer through a mostly silent meal.

Afterward, Tess and Paul lead the way to the garage, pausing just in front of the door to offer me up another key. This time, however, it isn’t an iron skeleton key that smells vaguely of blood. No, this is a shiny black key fob with chrome accents. The BMW logo takes up the center of the device.

I look up to find Tess doing her best to suppress a grin. It’s a bit faded at the edges, but it’s there.

“Happy birthday,” she tells me, and then she pushes open the door to the garage, revealing a white convertible with a

giant bow on the hood.

She's gotten you a sportscar for your birthday, I realize, my hands beginning to shake.

"You're still grounded for the rest of the week, so Paul or I will be taking you and Parrish to school, but after that ..." Tess trails off, waiting for my reaction. She and Paul exchange a brief look over my head.

Be happy, Dakota. Be happy.

"It's beautiful, thank you so much," I tell them, trying to shake off this strange sense of foreboding. Like, if I accept this car, it'll bind me to this place and I'll never be allowed to leave. It's like a fairy offering, some fancy delicacy held out by a suave but unsavory forest spirit. If I take a bite, that's it: I'll be trapped for eternity.

"Also," Paul begins, and I glance his direction to find him smiling at me. He looks like a Ken Doll, to be quite frank, a personality-free piece of plastic. "We've decided that you can choose one surgery to have during summer break."

The key fob nearly falls from my hand as I stare at him, and Kimber makes a noise of protest from the direction of the living room.

"So freaking unfair," she grumbles as I struggle to grasp what my new stepfather has just said.

"I'll be performing the surgery myself," he continues proudly, as if this is the greatest honor that could ever be bestowed upon another human being. All I want suddenly is to run far, far away, until I fall into the sea and its salty arms sweep me away. "If you want to save it until after graduation, you can do that as well. We made the same deal with Kimber, one surgery before junior year or ..."

His voice fades away as I begin to sway. Things only get worse from there as his next words filter back through my consciousness.

"With all this media attention, you could really run with having any sort of career you wanted. Add in the right procedures, and the world really is your oyster. At your age,

I'd recommend a rhinoplasty, as the nose is nearly finished growing—”

My brain obscures the rest of Paul's words as the BMW key weighs on my hand like a dumbbell. I feel so heavy all of a sudden. Heavy and disoriented. Frankly, I'd rather be back at the party, kissing Parrish in front of all my new classmates.

“I remembered you saying you didn't like your nose,” Tess tells me, touching a finger to her own. “I was bullied for my nose in high school, too, and I just thought—” She stops talking, as if she's just realized what the look on my face might mean.

“The car is fantastic,” I say. I mean, my words say that, but my voice is this distant, quiet thing that I barely recognize. “I don't know how to drive though.”

“Oh, I'd be happy to sign you up for some driving lessons,” Tess says with another brilliant smile. “Wouldn't that be fun? You could get your license and drive yourself to school?”

Drive myself back to New York state more like, I think, remembering the deal I made with Grandma Carmen. If I came home with straight As first semester of sophomore year, she'd teach me how to drive and let me have Saffron's old Kia Rio. I'd already plastered the bumper with too many stickers to count and hung a bunch of shit from the rearview mirror. I was ready. I got the grades.

Then I got spirited away.

“Sounds great, thank you,” I tell her, still struggling to control my disappointment. “I think I ate too much. Is it okay if I go upstairs and lie down?”

Without waiting for an answer, I turn and head for the stairs. Parrish is lounging against the wall near the entrance to the living room. For the briefest of seconds, our eyes meet, but I'm too numb to process the expression on his face.

Instead, I turn away and make my exit before either Paul or Tess can stop me.

The BMW's key fob is clutched so tightly in my hand that it leaves a mark that doesn't go away for hours. The one on my

heart, well, that one lasts much, much longer.

Eventually, I get the courage to open the nightstand drawer, the bright pink envelope—and the box with the skeleton key—staring back at me. Without bothering to open the card, I take both items to the trash can in my bathroom, chuck them in, and close the lid.

I don't think twice about it.

Later, when I open the door to the hallway, I see Parrish's door is open and he's seated in a gaming chair near his wall-mounted TV. I watch him for a moment, recognizing the game he's playing as one of the last ones I live-streamed before shutting down my Twitch channel.

With a tentative knock on the doorjamb, I wait until he lifts a hand to wave me in without even looking. Kim Dracula's *Paparazzi* is playing on his open laptop. Taking a seat in the chair beside him, I notice Parrish glance my way with surprise. He didn't expect the knock to come from me.

I grab the abandoned controller from the arm of the chair, likely left there by Chasm before he headed home—we are *technically* still grounded, so school night sleepovers are a no-no, even for him.

“Mind if I join you?” I ask as Parrish pushes his headset off and gives me a long, studying sort of look. After a moment, he shrugs his shoulders like it doesn't matter to him either way.

“Suit yourself,” he says, and I find myself grinning for the first time today. I very quickly head back into my room to grab my own headset, and then connect to the private Discord server he's on. I immediately recognize both Chasm's and Maxx's voices on the other end.

“Are you guys ready to get your asses kicked?” I ask, and there's a pregnant pause before Maxx's confident laughter buzzes through the headset.

“Is that you, Little Sister?” Chasm asks as I look up and realize for the first time that Parrish has not one but *two* OLED TVs mounted to his wall. The controller I’m holding goes to a separate PS5 from the one Parrish is using. I quickly sign into my own PlayStation account and glance over at my stepbrother ... and fake boyfriend? Eww. What the hell have I done?

Set up a lovely little romance novel plot, that’s what.

I wrinkle my nose and shake my head to clear the memory of Parrish’s hot mouth slanting across mine, the brilliant sweep of his tongue, the possessive heat of his hands. *Good god, Dakota, get it together!*

“It’s me,” I confirm as Parrish looks me over with that strange, detached aloofness he so specializes in. It’s all bullshit, of course. I’ve seen it crack into pieces more than once since I got here. I tuck my legs up in the oversized gaming chair, gathering my messy hair into a loose bun at the back of my head. I hand over the controller. “Send friend requests to yourself and your friends.”

“Maxine says hi,” X tells me, and I hear my sister cheering for me in the background. She despises playing videogames, but she’s always happy to watch a loved one play and provide moral support. “Glad you’re here,” he adds as Chasm cackles gleefully.

“Okay, I cannot fucking wait to wipe the floor with you.”

“You can try,” I warn him as Parrish hands the controller back, and the boys accept my requests.

It might only be digital friendship, as meaningless as a teardrop in a rainstorm, but it makes me feel better anyway.

Parrish creates a match and invites the rest of us in.

He puts himself and his friends on one team and leaves me with a bunch of randos on the other.

Doesn’t matter.

Within five minutes, I find Chas and blow his head off.

“Holy fucking shit, Little Sister!” he calls out as I laugh and notice Parrish peeking at my screen to get a read on my location. Knowing what he’s planning, I make my own preparations, setting up a trap for him that goes off the instant his character enters the room.

“And it’s over!” I cry out as Parrish curses and throws his remote on the floor.

Fifteen minutes in, and it’s down to me and Maxx.

“I’ll admit,” I say, crossing my legs as I mash buttons absentmindedly—still kicking ass, I might add. “Out of the three of you, I didn’t expect Maxx to be the toughest one to kill.” With my left hand, I reach out and snatch a piece from Parrish’s package of red licorice, letting it hang from my mouth as I continue searching the battlefield for Maxx’s green-skinned alien avatar. “Aren’t you big into sports?”

“My family is big into sports,” he replies easily, which isn’t exactly an answer to my question. “My sister just got a six-figure deal with some sports drink company. Her entire bike got repainted with their colors and logo.”

I keep my character hidden in the attic of an old house, peeping out the windows as I wait for Maxx to search me out. I’ve rigged the trapdoor into the room with a grenade, but that was my last one. If he wants to climb up the side of the house and into one of the four windows, I could be in trouble.

“Maxine told me you were into games,” he continues as I check my ammo and realize that I’m dangerously low on bullets. “She also said you had a pretty popular Twitch channel?”

“I ghosted it,” I reply, crouching in the corner of the room with my last remaining bullet waiting in the odd-shaped purple gun that makes up my favorite weapon in the game. “Too much attention for the kidnapping thing.”

I munch down the rest of the licorice strand and reach for another as Parrish taps his fingers on the arm of his gaming chair and watches me like one might observe a new and unfamiliar species they encountered in the woods.

“Are you sure you’re related to Tess?” he asks dryly as Chasm snickers on his end of the mic. “Or is this just a nature versus nurture thing? You’re nothing like her.” The way he delivers that news, I could take it as both a criticism and a compliment; I’m also certain that wasn’t an accident. Parrish’s words are nearly always a double-edged sword.

“How so?” I reply innocently, watching the time in the corner tick down. If this match ends without me taking out X’s avatar, then it’ll be a tie and mar my near-perfect record. I wet my lips and stand my character up as Parrish watches, lounging back in his chair like a boneless prince. Or a rich, well-bred, cranky sloth. A mean sloth. A carnivorous sloth.

“She intends on using this kidnapping thing to milk every extra book sale, talk show opportunity, and dinner invite she can. You’d much rather dig yourself a hole and hide in it.”

I grit my teeth as I pop open one of the windows on the game and hop through it, eyes scanning the screen for X.

“Are you mad at Tess for turning a tragedy on its head and using it to further an already impressive career? Or mad at me because I value my privacy and protected space?” I swing around a corner of the crumbling house to find X waiting for me. *That fucker!* He read me well: he knew I’d come out in order to keep the match from becoming a tie. “Because both things are valid.”

“Little Sister might be a brat, but she knows how to debate,” Chasm muses as I find myself in a crouch, in a near stalemate against Maxx’s character as he hides on the other side of a burned-out van. In this game, I’m a human; he’s an alien intent on stealing my skin so he can wear it as a suit and invade our planet undetected.

I’m about to kick his ass.

“Tell us,” Chas continues, “what are your plans here? Do you want to rule Whitehall? Hide in the shadows? You say one thing and then do another. If you’d wanted clout, you could’ve just made out with me at the party instead. Now everyone’s going to be watching you.”

A hysterical laugh escapes me as I toss my gun to the right and then swing my character around the left side of the debris pile I'm hiding behind. As expected, X shoots at the weapon with lightning-quick reflexes, and I end up lurching around the back of the van to where his character's hiding.

He has his back to me, so I leap on him and execute a bare-handed attack that involves pulling his antennae off. It's his character's weakness, and he's instantly incapacitated. I steal his gun and end him, taking the match and a fuck-ton of 'clout' along with it.

"You think making out with you is a privilege?" I ask with another laugh, one that Maxx joins in with. "Now that's *hilarious*. Aren't you just Parrish's shadow?"

"Ouch," X murmurs, but not unappreciatively. I can practically hear Chasm scowling on the other end of the line.

"Should've known you had a stepbrother fantasy when you practically lunged at his face and took his tongue down your throat. Nice playing, Little Sister." Chasm disconnects from the game and the chat at the same moment as I glance over to find that Parrish is still watching me. Observing, more like.

"Guess I hit a nerve," I say with a shrug, taking the points I just earned from that match to buy my avatar a new skin. Parrish and I end up reaching for a piece of licorice at the same moment, our fingers bumping together as flames shoot through me. It's a perfect analogy really, but even though the sensation is warm, pleasant even, there's always the possibility of catching fire.

We look at each other as I do my best to *not* think about that kiss at the party; there's a hell of a lot to unpack there. Neither of us is ready to do the heavy lifting of that baggage, I assure you.

"You found Chasm's weak spot," X agrees, the cool confidence in his voice a balm to that unruly fire. I fold the entire piece of red licorice into my mouth as I mull that over. It's pretty obvious that while Chasm likes and emulates Parrish, he's a completely different person. Not entirely sure

that *he's* figured it out yet though. "It's better not to engage with him. He can be a spiteful asshole."

"Whose side are you on anyway?" Parrish asks coolly, chewing on the end of a piece of licorice. "Your obsession with my new sister is becoming annoying."

"I promised my girlfriend I'd look out for her, you dick," X replies easily, and I feel a strange tightening in my chest. Ah, right, I'm an extension of Maxine, not true friend material in and of myself. The thought's a sobering one, and I exit out of the game, logging out of my PlayStation account to keep Parrish from messing with my shit. "You kicked ass tonight, Kota. Play again tomorrow?"

"She can play as long as it's from the privacy of her own bedroom," Parrish remarks, giving me a once-over. Maxx sighs tiredly.

"Whatever Parrish. Goodnight, Dakota."

Maxx disappears, leaving me and Parrish alone in his darkened bedroom.

Both TVs are off now, killing the only source of light. With such a cloudy sky outside the open window, it's all shadow in here. Paired with the black walls, it's almost ominous. Oh, and the whole place *smells* like Parrish—and not in a bad way. Clean laundry, clovers, and lemons. That's what it smells like in here. There's something about that scent too that gets under my skin, making my fingers twitch in my lap. I like it far too much to admit, even to myself.

Parrish turns the TV back on, selecting some random show on Netflix. The flickering of the screen highlights the aristocratic planes of his face.

"That was fun," he tells me, almost grudgingly, looking me over again in a way that's hard to interpret. Just as I thought the night of the party, it feels like there's something there, like maybe he actually likes what he sees? I stare right back at him in challenge, daring him to keep looking under my scrutinizing gaze. "Now, get the fuck out of my room."

With a slight frown, I chuck the remote his way and stand up, shoving my headset back to rest against my neck. On my way past, Parrish reaches out and places two fingers against the side of my left thigh, just below the high-cut leg of my shorts. There's an image of Bowser on the ass of them. Maxine always called them my adorkable booty shorts.

Where his fingers touch me, I burn in the worst way. I ache. And I don't understand it at all.

"A canvas," he says, but more to himself than to me. His eyes trail back up my body in an unmistakable way, his body language giving away things that he won't allow his words to say. "I could put some pretty ink here." Parrish pauses briefly, looking away and dropping his hand to his lap. Why does he always have to be shirtless and pretty the way he is? And I don't just mean his lean body or his tattoos or even the carved-by-gods shape of his face. It's the way he holds himself back, like there's so much more to him that he wants to show the world, but is afraid to. That's what I like best, what I find most attractive. *Shit, no. No. Not attractive. Hate. I hate him.* "And not because you need to be any prettier," he adds, looking at me again. "I'm sorry about what my dad said. What Tess said. Your nose looks good to me."

He stands up suddenly, too close to me really. Our bare toes are practically intertwined.

"I never hated my nose," I tell him as he watches me in the quiet darkness of his room. The screen behind me flickers, bathing the room in strange, ethereal light. "I don't want any plastic surgery, but ... I'd take some ink. Practice on me sometime."

"Maybe I'll let you practice a little." That's what he said to me at the party. And I just mimicked it and turned this moment into a double entendre when it didn't need to be, goddamn it.

Parrish sucks in a hissing breath before tearing away from me and moving over to his bedroom door. He opens it wide and then holds out a hand, clearly telling me in the nicest way possible to get the hell out.

“I thought you hated my work? That I was a shitty artist with a mommy complex?”

“Maybe I lied about one of those things,” I quip as I pass by and he grits his teeth.

“No butterflies or turtles or birds turning into feathers,” he says, and then he slams the door hard behind me, and I jump, wondering what it is that I’ve just agreed to.

OceanofPDF.com



Monday morning.

I wake up to the sound of Delphine’s slight knock against my door, shuffling over in my pajamas to open it. The girl is waiting there in her admittedly ridiculous uniform. She looks like she belongs at a maid café in Tokyo or something. At least the outfit isn’t sexualized. On the contrary, it’s a bit ... I don’t know, dowdy?

“Good morning, Delphine,” I murmur, rubbing at my blurry eyes and wishing that I’d never gone to that party, and that I’d never kissed Parrish, and that everyone didn’t think I was dating two of Whitehall prep’s superstars.

“Good morning,” the girl replies, her mousy brown hair gathered in fat curls around her face, almost like she’s trying to hide behind them. Add in the thick-rimmed glasses and the way she’s always staring at the floor and you’d almost believe it. If it weren’t for the sharpness in her stare and the almost imperceptible quirk of her mouth, it might even be true. But it’s quite clear that Delphine isn’t all that she seems. “Looking forward to your first day of school?” she asks, surprising me.

I raise my brows and step aside, cringing a little as she drags back my blankets at the same moment I register a bit of warmth between my thighs.

“Shit,” I murmur as the bloodstain on my sheets is revealed. “Sorry, Delphine, you don’t have to clean that.” I move forward to take over the cleaning duties when Delphine holds up a hand, shaking her head slightly.

“This is my job and trust me: I’ve cleaned up worse,” she admits as I cringe and wish that I still lived in a normal house with normal people who cleaned up their own messes. Just as I’m about to argue with Delphine, I feel liquid on my inner thighs and look down just in time to see a bit of blood trail down past my Bowser shorts.

As always, my timing is impeccable, and Parrish opens his door at just the right moment to see me standing there, blood dripping on the floor near my feet. He’s in the process of adjusting his tie, shrugging into the solid black Whitehall blazer at the same moment. But as soon as he sees me, he stops dead in his tracks.

We stare at each other as his eyes widen, and my cheeks—and yeah, my boobs—turn pink and red respectively.

“You’re bleeding,” Parrish says, like he’s dumbstruck. He actually stops walking to stare.

I just stare back at him, realizing that this is kind of an intimate moment to be sharing with my newfound stepbrother on the first day of school. What a *fantastic* start to what’s bound to be an eventful day—thanks to my, uh, performance at the party.

“Girls bleed, Parrish!” I yell back at him, slamming the door in his surprised face and then turning to look at Delphine. She’s pretending not to smile as I grab the edge of the sheet and yank it off, dragging it along with me into the bathroom.

“*Girls bleed, Parrish,*” I mimic, rolling my eyes at myself as I strip down and shower. How articulate I am. Instead of some witty, kick-ass, don’t-give-a-shit comment, I had to blurt what had to be a pretty obvious fact, considering I was standing there having my period in front of my new stepbrother.

I pretend like all will be forgotten by the time I get downstairs.

Instead, it’s worse than I thought.

“Hey,” Tess says softly, resting her hand gently against my upper arm. “You look adorable in that uniform.”

I glance down at the black blazer, pleated skirt, and tie that matches my damn hair, and frown. I'm a big fan of self-expression. Kind of hard to self-express in a uniform that looks like an infantilized version of a corporate suit.

"What does *Dump Your Pornsick Boyfriend* mean?" she asks me, glancing down at the button on my book bag. Ehh, I just don't have the energy for a feminist discussion this early in the morning.

"Pretty self-explanatory," I answer glibly, and Tess' left eye twitches. But as I try to pull away and head toward the kitchen, she strengthens her grip on my arm slightly.

"I heard from Parrish that you ..." she begins, and I feel my jaw clench tight. *That motherfucker*. "Started your period today. Was this your first time?"

I give her a look like she's insane.

"I got my first period when I was twelve," I say and Tess blinks at me in surprise. Her grip on my arm loosens suddenly, and I can quite clearly see that she's embarrassed. "I've got plenty of pads, tampons, menstrual cups, and, uh, period underwear," I start and then shrug, hoisting my book bag up my shoulder. "But if I need anything else, I'll come to you first." I give a loose swing of my arm in like, some strange attempt to be funny, but Tess just gives me this terrible, deprecating smile.

"Okay, honey," she says, face tight as she turns back toward the kitchen, and I'm left standing there cursing under my breath.

Back home, I'd be dragging myself out of bed in about a half hour, slogging down the stairs and slumping at the table for breakfast. Grandpa insisted on cooking for me and Maxine nearly every day. He said school was too important to go hungry. I was so close to the high school that I could walk, picking up Nevaeh and Sally on the way.

This ... is nothing at all like that.

There's quiet chaos in the Vanguard kitchen area.

By that I mean, all of the children are present and accounted for, but even though the air is tense and there's a flurry of activity, it's dead-silent. Well, nearly dead-silent. Currently, Parrish is in progress with a hissed argument against his father about the loss of his car privileges.

"It doesn't make any sense for you to drive me an hour out of the way," Parrish is saying, his eyes flicking my way as soon as I come into the room. I stare at the spread of food on the kitchen island, but I don't dare touch any of it. How the hell am I supposed to know if this, too, belongs to one of Paul's business partners or Tess' agents or something?

My bio mom saunters past me, heading straight for the twins at the eat-in kitchen table and making a huffing sound when she sees they've both eschewed breakfast in favor of Roblox on their iPads. I think about the envelope she gave me, and the fact that Delphine is probably in the process of dumping it into a garbage bag to take outside. Tess hasn't asked about it, and I haven't offered anything up on my end.

Today isn't the day to worry about that.

"You're being punished, Parrish," Paul says, like that's the final word on that. He's clearly over the conversation already. "You and your"—Paul nods his head in my direction—"new sister." My new stepfather does his best to smile at me, but I'm clearly not his favorite person in the world and it falls flat. Or else maybe he's just always like this? It's hard to say.

Parrish scowls at me, and I flip him off. That kiss at the party seems leagues away from this morning, a distant dream—or nightmare, maybe. *Really though? Really? You want to lie to yourself like that Dakota?*

Tess notices our exchange, but she's too busy dealing with the twins to chastise me.

"Here," Parrish snaps, shoving a plate of toast in my direction. "This time, you're allowed to eat the food."

He storms out of the kitchen, his shoulder brushing against mine with an electric charge as he heads down the hall toward the front door and then slams it behind him.

“We better go,” Paul says, checking his smart watch and then sighing dramatically. “I have surgery in two hours.”

He takes off after his son while I grab a dry piece of toast and resign myself to god only knows how many mornings like this one.

The ride to Whitehall is tense, the interior of the car filled with Paul’s constant phone calls. It’s never-ending with him. I hear him complain about his kids being on their phones all the time, but I have yet to see him without it. At the very least, Kimber follows in her father’s footsteps and can barely tear her eyes away from her phone screen—even when she gets out of the car and takes off like a bat outta hell.

Paul ends up dropping the three of us on a white gravel loop in front of the school. There’s basically nobody else there, and Parrish glowers like he’s been kicked and spit on. I get the feeling that it isn’t particularly good for either of our reputations to get dropped off out front like we’re still in elementary school.

“Why did you tell Tess about my period?” I ask as I struggle to keep up with Parrish’s long-legged strides. He takes off for the front doors of the academy like he owns it. Socially, at least, he very well might. There’s no way he’s the wealthiest person on campus, so all I can surmise is that his looks and his attitude play a big part in his social standing.

“Why don’t you decide how you’re going to handle dating both me and Lumen while the whole school watches?” he purrs back at me, leaning in far too close before turning away again and shoving through the front doors. I’m cursing him out as I struggle to keep up, but he doesn’t seem to give a shit.

“For real, why tell her about my period?” I repeat as Parrish turns suddenly and steps forward. Instinctively, I move to take a step back and slam into a row of lockers. The smile that takes over his lips is very clearly a weapon, one meant to draw blood. Looking at him, I can feel it, a wound opening up inside my chest.

“Maybe I was worried about you?” he breathes, leaning down close enough that we could kiss again. You know, if we

were so inclined. “You seem so goddamn helpless; it was my job to step in.”

“Oh Parrish, pretty please, mansplain periods to me, so I can better understand them?” I quip back, batting my lashes. Swear to god, I have never reacted this way to another person in all my life. I’ve never been around someone who makes my blood boil and my hackles raise, my skin pebble in goose bumps, my heart race and my palms sweat.

“Look to your left first and if you’re lucky, I will,” he tells me, all saccharine sweet and smiling. Unfortunately, even though he’s clearly in ultra-dick mode, the gentle waviness of his hair makes it difficult to breathe. I look left.

Virtually everyone is staring at me. Us.

“Reap what you sow, Gamer Girl,” he tells me, pushing back from the locker as Chasm moves over to us.

“You’re really going along with this dating thing, huh?” he asks, just loud enough that only Parrish and I can hear. Parrish ignores us both, stalking down the hall like he just doesn’t give a shit.

Chas sneers at his friend’s back before turning to look at me.

“This isn’t going to turn out the way you want it to,” he tells me, and I raise both brows in question.

“Which part?” I ask as he scans me with those pretty amber eyes of his, shoving his lightning-bolt dyed hair off of his forehead.

“You and Parrish becoming a thing. Call it quits before he eviscerates you,” he warns me, but I just smile as I notice Lumen making her way through the crowd toward me. I’m starting to get the idea that Parrish is the king of the school; Lumen is the queen. I don’t need both of them to survive here—just one.

“Some people might say you were jealous,” I shoot back as Chasm lets out a grating laugh and reaches over to ruffle my green and black hair. I bat his hand away, but he remains unfazed.

“Keep dreaming, Little Sister,” he tells me, turning and sauntering off in the direction Parrish went. He makes sure to flip Lumen off as they pass each other, but she ignores him.

“Do you like the buzz I’ve generated for you?” she asks, reaching out and sweeping a tendril of hair back from my forehead. The move surprises me, but I don’t stop her. Everyone’s staring at us now, expecting some sort of a show. I’m not sure if giving them one—especially one that isn’t true—is the right thing to do, but my back feels bowed under the social pressure.

Ugh.

If invisibility were an option here, I’d probably take it. Back home, it was mostly just me, Sally, and Nevaeh. We went to the occasional party or sporting event or whatever, but there was none of this salivary expectation like I’m feeling now.

The students at Whitehall Prep do indeed enjoy a good show.

“So I looked you up last night,” Lumen continues, her blond ponytail curled in gentle waves and bouncing as she moves. Her makeup is flawless, her blazer ironed, the pleats in her skirt arranged just so. She barely looks human, but at least she’s smiling at me. I imagine that if she wanted to, she really could make my time here at Whitehall an even worse hell than it already is.

“Looked me up?” I repeat, still glaring at Chasm and Parrish’s retreating backs as they make their way down the wide hall. The walls are covered with this intricate wood paneling, and the floors are old but well-kempt, the stone covered in a thick layer of sealant or varnish or whatever. You can tell the building’s been here since the late eighteenth-hundreds just by looking at it.

“You’re a superstar,” Lumen continues, giving me her elbow so we can loop arms. She’s a good three inches taller than me, but she seems like she’s a foot taller based on her presence alone. I hate to think it, but I’m sure Tess would be a hell of a lot happier with a daughter like Lumen instead of one like me. “The internet is in love with the story of your kidnapping.”

“It’s my defining feature, apparently,” I add with a dry humor that I don’t particularly feel inside. I *used* to have an online presence based on my gaming merit. Not anymore.

“It gives you this enigma vibe,” Lumen says, looking me over appreciatively as she guides me down the hall like an escort. “Run with it. You could have a lot of fun here at Whitehall,” she continues, glancing down at me with pale brown eyes. For a minute there, I’m pretty sure she’s checking me out, but then she blinks and the moment’s gone.

It only takes about five minutes of walking by her side to see that she most definitely is the queen bee on campus. Parrish is the lazy prince, and Chasm is his overprotective knight. Everyone else is just background noise.

“What’s your schedule like?” Lumen asks as I slip my phone from my pocket and hand it over to her. She scans my itinerary for a moment and then nods. “Your first class is across the hall from mine. Follow me and I’ll show you how to get there; this campus is a fucking labyrinth.”

Frankly, I think my schedule looks like something out of a nightmare.

Period One: Introduction to Probability and Statistics

Period Two: Academic Composition

Break

Period Three: Technical Writing

Period Four: Computer Science I

Lunch

Period Five: Beginning Japanese

Period Six: Software Tools: App Development

I wasn’t given my choice of classes, so I can only assume this is Tess’ doing. A warm anger spreads through me as my fingers clench tight around my phone.

“Are you going for a degree in computer science or programming or something?” Lumen asks me, glancing over at me. I give her a look that clearly communicates my distaste

with the new schedule, and she laughs. “Right. My mom wants me to be a software developer; I feel your pain.”

“What would you rather be?” I ask, posing the same question to myself. I’m not sure I have the answer right now, but I know that *computer science* isn’t it.

Lumen looks up at the ceiling wistfully for a moment and then shrugs.

“An influencer, I guess?” she posits, and I hold back a sigh. Of course. Influencer, YouTube star, Instagram model, TikTok sensation, Twitch streamer. Pretty much everyone I know is desperate to find a lucrative career in one of those fields. They may as well buy a lottery ticket and hold their breath. “You?”

I shrug because I don’t even have a basic answer to give.

I *thought* I knew who I was, but after discovering the Banks weren’t my biological family, and that Tess Vanguard of all people was my bio mom, I have no idea.

“Enjoy your class and find me at lunch,” Lumen says with a wink, opening the door to my first class for me and holding out a hand to usher me in. There isn’t a single person in the hall or the classroom that misses that move, notes it, maybe even snaps a pic of it.

With a deep breath, I slip my phone back into the pocket on my blazer and dive in.



CHAPTER 9

First day of school at Whitehall Preparatory Academy, *a school for innovators, engineers, and world leaders*. That's it. That's their slogan. There are no art classes, no music classes, and only one foreign language class because *we don't really need them, the software is there to make inter-language communication an easy feat*.

The only—and I mean *only*—creative endeavor left at the school is the theater program, headed and funded by Danyella and her family.

“We were able to get committee approval by reminding the board that as technology improves, people seek more real-life ways to connect. Live performances are not dead. Live performances were dead in the early 2000s and during that covid pandemic thing. Live performances are *now*. They're human.”

“I'm sort of a ... closet theater lover,” I admit, sitting on the edge of the stage and bumping my heels against it while Danyella works on a paper on her laptop. She's wearing a pair of rectangular glasses with a hot pink frame that are so damn cute, I want to borrow them and pop out the lenses for a day.

“You're the school's poly, bi-icon and you're in the closet?” she asks, smiling, but keeping her attention on her screen. It's lunchtime now, but I don't have the energy to brave the cafeteria just now. Everyone wants to talk to me, and it's exhausting. At CHS, lunches were spent under the old tree out front of the school. But here? We're not allowed to leave the building during the day. The gilded cage feeling creeps over

me again as I scroll through the disturbingly silent group text with my girls.

There are three messages from me and no reply from either of them.

Loneliness sweeps over me like a cloak, but I shake it off. I've got Danyella right in front of me, and Lumen's standing invite for lunch. Plus, even if they dislike me, at least Parrish and Chasm are willing to game with me. And then, of course, there's Maxx ...

"What's your paper about?" I blurt, adjusting the black blazer and the plaid tie that gets tucked underneath it. I hop down off the edge of the stage and make my way over to where Danyella's sitting in her academy-issued slacks. Apparently at Whitehall, they don't give a shit whether boys wear pants and girls wear skirts; it's allowed either way. Good for them. Sex-role stereotypes are annoying as fuck.

"Sexual dimorphism in mammals," she says, chewing on the edge of her phone case in thought as she leans back in her seat. "Like, how male peacocks have fancy feathered tails while the females have small brown and white tails. Humans are sexually dimorphic as well."

"Sounds fascinating," I say (even though it's a bit boring), sitting beside her and looking up at the stained-glass mural on the ceiling above our heads. Ten minutes into my second class and I knew that I was in trouble; I had no idea what the teacher was talking about. To be fair *Academic Composition* here is equivalent to ... basically nothing back home. I'm in a different league, and if I'm not careful, I'll drown here. At my old school, all we had was plain old *English*. "Is that why boys are so much moodier than girls?"

Danyella flips her braids over one shoulder and then turns to give me a look.

"Actually, human males have hormonal cycles, just like girls do. Because of their higher levels of testosterone, they really can be moodier. Do you have a particular moody boy in mind?" She grins big at me, and I feel my boobs turning crimson again with a heated blush.

“You know Parrish and I aren’t really dating, right?” I ask and Danyella shrugs, closing her laptop and studying me with shrewd brown eyes.

“I figured as much. You and Lumen?”

I shake my head.

“But they both decided to go along with it for whatever reason.”

“I’d be careful if I were you,” Danyella begins, musing on the subject for a moment. “They could be using you in their war against each other. They’ve been playing this ‘will they, won’t they game’ for years.” My heart drops and my stomach roils with nausea. Is that what this is? Both Parrish and Lumen are using me in some sort of social chess match against one another? “Are you interested in either of them?”

“I’m not interested in anyone,” I lie, but I’m not exactly sure if I’m lying to Danyella or myself. Or both of us. Yeah, probably both of us. I spin in my seat to look at her, reaching out to take her hands in mine. She cocks a brow, but doesn’t pull away. “Is it creepy to be interested in your stepbrother?” I ask her, and she grins.

“Are you fetishizing his role as your stepbrother?” she asks me, and I balk. “Well then, why would it matter? If you like him, you like him.”

“I might also ... hate him? Question mark?” Yep. I actually say *question mark* aloud. Like a twelve-year-old. Chasm had me nailed right through the heart. Maybe I’m a tad naïve for the craziness of Whitehall Prep. Danyella just keeps smiling at me, like she’s waiting for me to figure it out on my own. “Is this a lot for our first official day as friends?” I ask and she throws her head back with a wild laugh.

“Oh, I knew I liked you straight-off,” she says, standing up just as the bell rings, signaling the end of the lunch period. “Listen: come over to my place on Friday. We can stay up all night and discuss how the medial preoptic area of the brain processes sexual behavior and attraction.”

“The medial what?” I ask, standing up and scrambling to dig my phone out of my bag so I can check my schedule. Danyella just laughs at me and holds the door open to the hall.

“We’ll ... go over all that,” she continues, gesturing me into the hallway.

And who do I run into?

Parrish himself.

Rather than avoiding me—like he’s been doing all day between classes—he comes right up to me.

“You’ve thrown in with the theater geeks?” he asks, the edge of his mouth curving up in distaste. “You worked so hard to improve your social standing in the school; why throw it all away now?” He rolls his eyes at me as Danyella comes up to stand at my side, crossing her arms over her chest.

“I didn’t think it was possible, but you’ve actually become even *more* of an asshole as of late,” she remarks as I narrow my eyes at my much-taller stepbrother. He looks stupid good in his uniform, like absurdly good. It’s sickening, the way the blazer clings to his strong shoulders and sturdy frame. His tattoos peek tantalizingly from the end of his sleeves, and I realize that I’m staring at his hands like they hold the key to ... something.

“Don’t worry about him: he has serious unresolved mommy issues,” I blurt before I can stop myself. We made some sort of connection last night, didn’t we? So why are we doing this now, in front of everyone? And believe me: people are staring.

“Better that than spending all my time dreaming about a family that I don’t belong to or begging to be called by the name of somebody’s dead baby.”

He shoves past me, and I spin, clenching my hands into fists by my sides.

“You know I’ve *never* cared that you have a micropenis!” I scream after him. “It’s not your tiny dick that I have a problem with: it’s your personality.”

Parrish stiffens up, but when he lazily throws one of this pouty rich boy looks over his shoulder, I almost die. *Don't let your shitty teenage hormones get to you, Dakota*, I tell myself, but I can't seem to help it. There's just something about Parrish that breaks down all of my boundaries.

"We both know I don't need my dick to make you feel good," he says, making a crude gesture with his fingers and flicking his tongue out. I end up quite literally throwing a book at him—a paperback that I snatched from Whitehall's admittedly impressive library—and then balking as he picks it up and actually bothers to look at the title.

One should only read a novel titled *Stepbrother Inked* on their phone or Kindle if they don't want said real-life stepbrother to see it. Maybe, also, one should not throw said book at said stepbrother.

The words *hot mess* come to mind when I consider going off on an internal diatribe against myself.

"Jesus Christ," he murmurs under his breath, taking my book along with him as he sweeps down the hall. I grit my teeth, but there's no point in going after him and drawing attention to the novel of my choice. To be fair, I wasn't lying when I told Danyella that I'm not fetishizing his role as my stepbrother. I was just ... curious.

"Wow. Please spend the night at my place on Friday. We have a lot to unpack." Danyella pats me on the arm and then leaves me to my next class: *Beginning Japanese*.

I'm surrounded by freshman which isn't surprising, but which is also remarkably embarrassing, especially considering my only knowledge of the language comes from manga, anime, and video games. I can pretty easily say, *I'm embarrassed*, *I'm home*, and *goddamn it* in Japanese, but not much else.

Fortunately, my teacher—which just so happens to be Ms. Miyamoto—is kind enough to pretend like I'm not a total failure as she offers me extra guidance through my first lesson. I keep myself going with the mantra of *one more hour to go, just one more hour*.

Mr. Volli (took me three tries to pronounce—it's *voh-lee*), the instructor of my next class, *Software Tools: App Development*, seems nice enough. He lets me sit in a spot in the back and use my phone to look up any terms I don't understand (meaning: all of them). Interestingly, my first day at the school is his as well; he's taking over for the previous instructor who got into some sort of hiking accident (told you these Pac Northwesterners were obsessed with hiking). When Mr. Volli talks about coding, I decide that he has a pleasant, comforting voice, even if I don't understand a damn word that he's saying.

I am so behind.

So fucking behind.

There is no way in hell that I'm going to pass my classes here, not without help of some kind.

After class, Lumen finds me again and introduces me to a group of her friends. It's highly likely that I won't remember any of their names: there are a lot of them. They do, however, take my phone and pass it around, ensuring that everyone has plugged their number into my contacts.

Parrish overhears on his way past and gives me a look that seems impossible to interpret.

"Desperate, much?" he murmurs as I scowl at him. It's like, every time we share a moment that seems to mean something, he goes out of his way to make sure that it doesn't.

"Don't be jealous just because I like girls better," I tell him which isn't necessarily true, but which gets me the reaction that I wanted. Parrish frowns hard and knocks me with his shoulder as he passes, eliciting whispers and gossip from the surrounding students.

"He likes to be the center of attention, just ignore him," Lumen tells me with a shrug, but her eyes follow Parrish's back as he heads down the hall anyway. With a sigh, she smooths her palms down the front of her uniform, smoothing out imaginary wrinkles. She pulls the look off so well, in a way that I'm envious of, like the uniform was made

specifically to complement her style. Personally, I'm suffering from imposter syndrome like nobody's business.

I don't understand the curriculum, and I'm not used to such a bloodthirsty and gossip hungry populace.

Already, I feel overwhelmed.

"So, are you coming?" Lumen asks, and I blink a few times as I try to reorient myself.

"Coming?" I repeat as Parrish pauses nearby and opens a locker, removing a bag of gym clothes and a gaming laptop that makes my own look like an ancient relic. "Coming where?"

Lumen just laughs at me.

"Danyella's on Friday?" she repeats, raising two blond brows in question. "She said she invited you."

Oh.

I didn't realize it was like, a sleepover or something?

"We go way back," she continues, like on top of everything else, she can read my mind. I wouldn't doubt it. On top of being gorgeous, she's apparently battling it out with Danyella for one of the top academic spots in the school. I should ask one of them to tutor me.

"We're still grounded, remember?" Parrish calls out from down the hall. I let my gaze fall past Lumen to land on him. He's posed like a model, one shoulder leaning against the now-closed locker, legs crossed at the ankles. He looks like a cat: bored, apathetic, but with this slight edge of annoyance that you could blink and miss. It's all in the little tells: the way he slits his eyes, the way his hand plays with his tie, the slight tapping of his foot against the floor. "I thought we were going to spend our isolation ... *together.*"

The word drips with innuendo, yet another tidbit for passing students to glom onto.

Lumen gives Parrish a dark look and then turns to me with a smile.

“Just say yes and we’ll make it work,” she adds loudly for dramatic effect. Her gaze drops back to mine, and she smiles before waving goodbye and taking off down the hall with her friends in tow.

“Thanks for trying to ruin that for me,” I tell Parrish, glancing back at him. He ignores me, turning and leading the way down the hall. It’s easy to catch up to him; Parrish strolls everywhere he goes, like he has all the time in the world. *Fucking sloth.*

“Ruin what? Your relationship with your new girlfriend?” he asks, gaze straight ahead, hands tucked into his pockets. “Since I turned her down at the party, I’m sure she’ll be all over you, don’t worry.”

“What happened between the two of you?” I ask, even though I know I probably shouldn’t. Parrish gives me a weird look, like I’m overreaching like crazy, but I don’t take the question back. We have to live together. Shit, we have to live across the fucking hall from one another. We may as well be pals.

“And that matters to you, why?” he drawls, pushing open the front doors of the school to reveal Kimber and a handful of other students. Nobody looks particularly happy to be out here while all the other students pile into fancy sportscars and take off on their own.

Doesn’t matter much to me. I’m not ready to drive the new car that Tess bought me, so I figure Parrish will be responsible for taking me to school once our grounding is over. Yippee.

As soon as she sees me, Kimber pops her second earbud in, ensuring that I have no viable way of communicating with her. She jacks her music up so loudly that I can hear DJ Khaled playing. Gross. Sorry, but I could never get past his bullshit commentary about how women need to go down on their men, but that it’s disgusting for a man to return the favor. What a fucking misogynistic loser.

Let’s just say, my new sister’s taste in music is abysmal.

Parrish leans back against the wall, propping one foot against the stone while he pretends to be interested in his phone. Rising up on my tiptoes, I bite my lower lip and try to steal a glance at the screen. It's dark. Honestly, I'm not sure his phone is even *on*.

Those gold-flecked brown eyes of his swing my way immediately and he scowls, shoving his phone in his pocket and turning his attention to the manicured grounds on our left. What little of the campus I've seen is beautiful; it'd be nice to spend an afternoon exploring it.

"The hedge maze is cool," I say absently, turning back to the gravel driveway in front of us as a *limo* pulls up and a student climbs inside. One of my brows goes up and I let out a low whistle. Good god. I've always found excess wealth ... like, disgusting, I guess is how I'd phrase it. Now that I'm embroiled in it, I'm not entirely sure my views haven't been exacerbated.

"You think so?" Parrish replies, surprising me, and a smile begins to bloom on my lips. *We're making progress here. Who knows? Give us six weeks and we might actually be civil toward one another. Maybe we'll even be—le gasp—friends?!* "Students go there to fuck."

Or ... never mind then.

Yep, still hate him.

With a huff, the smile slides off my face and I turn back to the driveway with a frown in place. My book bag is slung over my shoulder, my fingers absently teasing the metal heart pin that Tess gave me.

Tess.

She's supposed to pick us up today. I assume she'll be grilling me about my first day at Whitehall. Granted, I don't hate it as much as I thought I would, but I still miss home. Almost desperately so. High school is supposed to be at least a little bit fun, right? I'm exhausted from my first day here; the academics are so far above my head that I feel like I'm

drowning. *Sex in the hedges*, I think, biting my lower lip again as my eyes slide in that direction.

As soon as I see that Parrish is watching me, I tear my attention away and stare out at the horizon, waiting for Tess' Mercedes to appear in the direction of the gate. Instead, a few minutes later, it's Chasm's sportscar that pulls up.

Kimber lets out a small sound that I'm almost positive I wasn't meant to hear, practically falling over herself to get in.

"Tess isn't coming," Parrish tells me, holding up his phone to reveal a text message. *Sorry, meeting with my editor ran long, can't make it. I asked Chasm to bring you home. Tell the girls.* And that's that. A strange surge of disappointment runs through me, but I do my best to ignore it. It's not like I *wanted* to be grilled by my bio mom, right? Actually, I'm relieved.

"Can I ride shotgun?" Kimber is asking flirtatiously as Chasm slides a lazy glance in her direction and smirks.

"Are you fucking kidding me? No. Get your ass in the backseat and stop hitting on my best friend. Don't you have any shame?" Parrish snaps, shoving Kimber into the back as she mutters insults and curses under her breath.

"Why don't you let Chasm answer for himself?" Kimber bites out as I slide in beside her and she scowls at me, her expression almost disturbingly similar to her brother's. Her brother. My sister. Parrish and I might not be related, but we share four blood-related siblings. Is it weird for me to pretend to date him?

I decide the only weird part about it is how goddamn rude and dismissive he is. I don't glorify bad behavior from boys, so what is it? Why? Why am I doing this to myself?!

"I don't date freshman," Chasm replies, some Podcast about modern day serial killers playing on his car's stereo, which isn't even remotely something I expected from him. "Sorry, Kim."

"Whoever said I wanted to date you?!" she gasps, like the thought's so abhorrent to her that she'd rather die than admit her crush aloud. "That's disgusting."

With a sigh, I lean my elbow against the window and park my chin in my hand.

“Fucking hell, Kimber,” Parrish scoffs, looking back at her with disdain marring his pretty features. “You’re almost as bad as Dakota.”

I kick the back of his seat hard enough that he grunts, and Chasm gives this annoyingly self-satisfied chuckle.

“I’m under strict orders to take you kids home,” he says, heading for the Whitehall gate at a speed that’s at least twice that of the legal limit. I check and double check my seat belt, just in case.

“How are you able to hang around the house so much if Parrish is grounded?” I ask as Chasm lifts his pretty amber eyes to the rearview mirror so that he can smile at me.

“Just consider me part of the family,” he says, locking eyes with me in the rearview mirror. We hold each other’s gazes for a disturbing amount of time before he turns back to the road. “Did you hear that Gavin is fucking some actor twice his age? He was sharing dick pics with anyone that would look.”

Mindless gossip. I don’t even know who ‘Gavin’ is.

For the love of god, I think as I suppress a roll of my eyes and lean back against the seat, trying to listen to the Podcast instead of the day’s gossip. The hosts are discussing the latest rash of disappearances and murders in Seattle, most of them involving teens around my age. It’s too depressing to listen to, so I stuff my own earbuds in and close my eyes for the rest of the drive back to the ice cavern.

I slump onto my bed and cover my face with my hands.

What a long-ass day.

“Knock knock,” Chasm drawls, slouching in my doorway and smoking a cigarette. I swear I locked the door, but he probably just picked the lock. I sit up, so that I can glare at him.

“What do you want?” I ask him, but he just laughs and continues to smoke. I’m assuming that Tess isn’t home then or else he wouldn’t be quite so blatant about it.

“I wanted to check on you, after such a wild first day and all,” he says, sauntering into my room and looking around with a wistful nostalgia on his face that’s clearly crafted of bullshit and arrogance. He’s just come in here to annoy me, clearly.

I lean back, planting my hand on the bed only to realize that I’ve just put it in something ... wet? With a frown, I lift my palm up and notice the blood. *What the hell?*

“You’re the talk of the school, you know that, Little Sister?” Chas asks, seemingly oblivious to my predicament. I blink a few times as I stare at the red on my palm and then surreptitiously flip the comforter back, revealing a small red stain underneath. Huh. I remember stripping my sheets this morning. At least ... I thought I did?

I must be losing my mind.

“Am I? I hadn’t noticed.” Only, I had. And I’m not sure whether it was a smart move on my part—or a huge mistake, playing this game with Lumen and Parrish. I move into the bathroom and wash my hands, heading back into the room and systematically stripping the bed while Chas watches, still smoking his cigarette.

He pauses at the sound of footsteps in the hall and we both turn to see Parrish in the doorway. He narrows his eyes on his friend.

“Why are you in her room?” he asks, this biting edge to his voice that gives me pause.

“What do you care?” Chasm retorts, tilting his head slightly to one side as Parrish flicks his attention my way, noticing the bloodied sheets and comforter. He frowns slightly, like he, too, remembers the exchange this morning. I kick the pile of blankets into the corner until I can get rid of both boys.

I’m not ashamed of my period—no girl should be—I just want them both to go away.

Parrish doesn't respond with words. Instead, he slits his eyes in that way of his, the one that seems to say *I expect everyone around me to know what this means, to know what I want*. I roll my eyes at him and grab onto Chasm's arm, intending on dragging him to the doorway. What actually happens is that as soon as my hand makes contact with him, there's a fluttering in my stomach that causes my fingers to clench tight, wrinkling the fabric of his Whitehall Academy dress shirt.

Chasm pauses and looks down, a frown tracing his mouth that seems impossible to interpret. Is he upset that I'm touching him? Is he upset that he likes me touching him? It could be either/or in this case. I pretend like I'm not feeling anything at all and attempt to drag him toward the door anyway.

"I was just congratulating Little Sister here on her first day at school. Impressive, for someone who comes from nothing."

"If you came here to insult me, it won't work." I yank on his arm, and he takes a small step forward, either by choice or because I'm just strong as hell, I'm not sure.

"Won't it, though?" he asks, and then he leans down and whispers something in Korean in my ear. The temptation to kick him in the nuts is strong. "Don't think I haven't heard you watching your shitty K-dramas in here. Shall I play the hero and save you from Parrish's wicked claws?"

"Get out of my room," I grind out, doing my best to drag him out the door. I need time to prepare myself for Tess. There's just no way I'm lucky enough to escape a first day of school grilling. Chas just laughs again as I finally succeed in shoving him into the hallway. As I go to slam the door on the two of them, I notice the way Parrish and Chasm are looking at each other, like there are a million unsaid things they're playing at right now.

I shove the door closed and flick the lock with a groan, turning around and putting my back to it. My eyes stray briefly to the bloodied sheets in the corner, but I don't think twice about it. I haven't had an easy month; there's no lack of reasons that I might've been confused this morning.

Tess never comes by to ask how my day went; she doesn't even bother to text me.

So much for building a mother-daughter relationship.

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CHAPTER 10

There's a breeze teasing chilly fingers across my skin, and my bed feels wet. At first, I just assume that I've overfilled my menstrual cup again. But as I crack my eyes open, something strange happens. I find myself lying on my side in the *woods*.

“What the fuck?” I blurt, sitting up suddenly and feeling an icy chill take over me. My first thought is that this is a dream because, like, what the actual hell? The night is pitch-black and freezing-cold, so cold that my skin is pebbled with goose bumps and my teeth are already chattering.

As I scan my surroundings, I try to figure out if this is a dream or ... not. A quick pinch on my arm hurts like hell, and when I close my eyes and try to will myself awake, nothing happens. Opening them again, I force myself to my feet, staggering slightly and cursing as pine needles and small rocks dig into my bare feet.

My first reaction is to assume that the boys dragged me out here. How they managed to move me from my bed into the woods without waking me is a mystery for another day. But really, what else could this be but a prank?

“Alright, you got me,” I mumble, brushing leaves and pine needles from my ass. “Really funny, I'm highly amused.” I stand up straight, the wind digging cool fingers into my hair and tousling it around my face. The night is as black as they come, an ebony jewel stretched across the sky and dotted with the faintest twinkling diamonds, as if the stars are smiling at me.

Only, if they are, it feels like an endless sea of mocking smiles. Something doesn't feel right out here. The hair on the back of my neck stands straight up as I wrap my arms around myself and squeeze tight. Just like that night after the party when I thought I heard someone creeping around outside the gate, I get that same feeling now.

"Probably just reporters," I murmur aloud, just to keep the night from seeming too cold, too empty. I'm not panicked, but maybe I should be? I fell asleep in my bed and woke up outside. Even *if* the boys concocted this scheme, I should probably still freak out, right? How messed up would that be? "You can come out now; I'm ready to go home."

I make my voice as firm as possible, a feat not easily accomplished with chattering teeth and absolutely zero sense of direction. I could get lost inside a cardboard box. My grandmother always said it was because I was a dreamer, just like her, just like her mother. Except none of that is true, is it? I guess if I am a dreamer, it must've come from Tess or from the mystery father she won't tell me a damn thing about.

"Guys, fucking seriously? I'm not with this shit. I won't tell Tess, but I want to go home *now*."

When nothing happens, I roll my eyes and start walking. Frankly, every direction looks the same to me, but I figure if I walk far enough, Chasm and Parrish will appear and call out to me. They're brats, no doubt about that, but they aren't total monsters.

Ten minutes later, I still see nothing but trees and shadows, and I hear nothing but for the gentle rustle of pine needles and leaves above my head. Every once in a while, there's the sound of something scurrying through the underbrush, but this is Seattle, right? Not the middle of a South American rainforest. Mice, squirrels, opossums, and raccoons are pretty much the only animals out here. I keep walking, focusing straight ahead, looking for something—*anything*—in all of that silky blackness to help me find my way. Looking up, I can see the canopy and a sprinkling of stars and not much else. Where it is that I am, I have no idea. Clearly this isn't Medina proper; there's not enough nature left there for me to get lost.

But twenty minutes later? That's when I start to feel the first surge of panic. I don't have my phone, I don't know where I am, and it's the middle of the freaking night in a wooded area near a big city. Every footfall, every snapping branch becomes a man stalking me.

That's my worst fear: being kidnapped, being raped, being murdered. And on top of that, there's a fucking serial killer offing teenagers in the Seattle area. It's a very real terror that's digging its icy claws into my skin, my heart, my head.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I come to the edge of the woods and emerge into a well-manicured park. There's even a jungle gym, some swing sets, and a small skate park attached. That's where my relief ends. How much better is it to be in a dark and lonely park in the middle of the night than in the woods? Animals aren't the danger here: people are.

My eyes dart around the shadowy playground, my senses on hyper alert.

That's when I hear it, that sound that I've been dreading but also that I've been waiting for.

The sound of footsteps.

A windchime sounds nearby, and I start to run. If there's a windchime, there's probably a house, right? Because people don't often put windchimes in public parks. My breath comes in panicked gasps, but I don't let the fear control me. What good would that do but get me killed? I put all of my energy into running, sprinting for the edge of the park and the row of houses I can see just beyond the quiet suburban street that runs alongside it.

I've never been much of a runner, but adrenaline gives me that extra edge to keep going, to move faster, to ignore the bleeding of my feet as I stumble into the road at the same moment my attacker catches up to me.

A gloved hand covers my mouth, stifling a scream, while a muscular arm wraps my waist. I'm kicking and fighting, clawing at the black fabric of the man's jacket. His breathing is even and calm, and there's the vaguest hint of some spicy

aftershave lingering in the air around him, almost like he tried to scrub it off and failed.

Rather than go for his hand, I jab a thumb back in the spot where I figure his eye must be. I'm rewarded with an awful squishy feeling that turns my stomach. It does the trick though, and the man loosens his grip just enough that I'm able to throw myself forward.

I end up on the ground, scrambling to my feet as I hear slow, easy footsteps behind me. He isn't running, just strolling after me. That's the part that freaks me out the most, how calm this person is. It's a calculated sort of stalking, a following, a predation. Part of me wants to scream, but I need the breath to run, and I'm choking on it.

My bare feet slap the ground hard, a sound that, when mixed with the harshness of my breathing, creates an elegy that foretells a very unfortunate ending. If the guy isn't chasing me then ...

Another man appears from behind a parked car in a strange mimicry of my attack on Maxx, buried inside the safety of a video game. But this ... is not a game. And it's not a dream.

What the fuck is going on?!

I skid on the pavement, stumbling as I do my best to avoid the second attacker, some rando dressed in black with a balaclava on his face. That's never good. Never good at all. I'm up and running again before he grabs me, darting into the yard of the house with all the windchimes.

They're swaying now, catching the breeze and adding melancholy notes to my dirge.

Just three feet from the front steps, I'm wrenched violently backward. I end up on my back, struggling to catch my breath as my hands search the ground for a weapon. Luck must be on my side because I find one right away, fingers clamping around the wooden handle of a small planting hoe. It's half-buried in the grass, but it comes out easily enough when I tug on it.

Without thinking, I sit up and swing my right arm back, wincing as it makes contact.

My attacker lets out a grunt as I wrench the weapon forward, splattering blood across the walkway. But then he's on me, using his bodyweight to push me into the cement.

I'm wrestled to the ground, the asshole kneeling on my back, and every instinct I have inside of me turns to fire. Never leave the first location: that's self-defense rule number one. Except ... all the fire in the world can't push a two hundred plus pound man off my back. All the fire in the world can't stop the sharp prick of a needle going into my neck. A small snarl escapes me just before everything goes black.

"Rest now," the voice whispers, pressing an awful kiss to my cheek.

That's the last thing I remember.

I come to with a gasp, my heart racing, sweat soaking my sheets. A quick glance around the room shows me that I'm back at Tess' place, the view of Lake Washington taking up the far wall and reminding me that I forgot to close the curtains.

For several minutes, I just sit there, clutching my pajamas in one fist and struggling to control my breathing.

When I throw my blankets back, I expect to find dirty and bloodied feet. Only one of those things seems to be true. There are marks on the bottoms of my feet, small scrapes and cuts that clearly came from somewhere. That, and my back is sore as hell. On the other hand, I'm wearing the same pajamas that I went to bed in and there isn't a speck of dirt or blood on them, not from my fall to the pavement, not from lying on my back on the damp forest floor.

Nothing.

"What the hell?" I murmur as my door swings open softly and a pale face appears in the blackness.

It's Parrish.

"Where have you been?" he asks, sounding mildly annoyed. "Tess came looking for you, and I told her you were in the sauna."

"The sauna?" I repeat, because I'm having trouble making sense of what just happened. There's no way in hell that was a dream; I'm not stupid enough to believe it was. "I was most definitely not in the sauna," I murmur, reaching up with both hands to rub at my face. Parrish leans his long body against the doorjamb, watching me with a quiet expression. If he's responsible for what just happened to me, if he was in on the ... prank or whatever it is, then he's a beautiful liar because when I drop my hands to my lap and look at him, I don't see any hint of subterfuge or cruel amusement. "I think I was in the woods?" There's a question mark at the end of that sentence that Parrish raises an eyebrow at.

"You *think* you were in the woods?" he asks, blinking at me. He moves further into my room, and I feel that hot tightness in my chest again. There's something about him that really gets to me, some deep core of emotion and self-sacrifice that I understand. We're really two peas in a pod, me and my new stepbrother.

"Are there are any parks near here?" I ask, looking up at him and feeling along the side of my neck where I felt the needle enter my skin. Frankly, I should probably grab my phone and call the cops. Or at the very least, go wake Tess and Paul and tell them what happened. But how the fuck do I explain this without the both of them thinking that I've gone nuts? I'm the one that experienced it, and even still, I'm struggling to make sense of the whole thing. "Like, a playground/skatepark surrounded by woods perchance?"

"Are you smoking some really good weed or something?" Parrish asks, glancing away as I yank down the neckline of my pj top, searching for bumps with my fingers.

"Can you check my neck?" I ask him, and he whips his head back like I've gone completely insane.

“Check your neck for what?” he repeats, puzzlement clear in his voice. I reach over and turn the bedside lamp on—some metal space-agey looking thing that I can’t wait to get rid of. Moving into the bathroom, I turn that light on, too, and start looking for marks. Parrish follows me to the bathroom door, shirtless and barefoot as always, and then gives a dramatic sigh before finally stepping up behind me.

My breath escapes in a rush as he uses long, inked fingers to sweep my green and black hair away from my neck. In the mirror, I watch as his reflection stands tall over mine, the bare muscles in his chest and shoulders tense, but his touch gentle and warm.

I could get used to being touched like that, I think, exhaling sharply as he runs his fingertips against the side of my neck, leaving lines of aching fire in his wake. My eyes close of their own accord, and I find myself breathing deep and heavy, leaning back into him without meaning to.

“Shit,” he murmurs, scoffing as he teases me with his fingertips, stroking one along the throbbing beat of my pulse. “What the fuck am I looking for? Vampire bites?” He pauses briefly and then presses down slightly, making me cringe. “Is that painful?”

I open my eyes to find him watching me in the mirror’s reflection.

“Does it look like a needle mark?” I ask, and Parrish blinks back at me in surprise.

“A needle mark?” he repeats, like I really have lost my mind. “It looks like a fucking bug bite.”

He rests his hand against the side of my neck, and I find myself pressing harder back into him, enjoying the hot heat of his body. When his eyes drop to my neck and his hand falls by his side, I go tense, waiting, wanting, unsure what exactly it is that I’m wanting or why I care more about this all of a sudden than I do about the fact that I just escaped a pair of crazy men in a park.

That wasn't real, I tell myself because to think otherwise is unfathomable. Some random dudes kidnapped me and took me to the woods, chased me for fun, knocked me out, and brought me back home relatively unharmed? It makes zero sense.

Parrish leans down and breathes against the side of my exposed throat, almost like he's waiting for something. Permission, probably. Consent. *Fuuuuck, there's nothing sexier than that.*

"Show me where it is."

The words sound innocuous enough, but there's a hidden meaning to it, a euphemism that we can both sense. Parrish curses again, some meaningless words that I feel in the softness of his breath rather than hear. He leans down and swipes his knuckles against the back of my neck, pushing my hair aside and dropping his mouth to the sore spot.

A sound escapes me, something foreign and new but exciting. I lean back even harder, pressing my body to his, and end up rubbing myself against the bulge in his pajama pants. With a sharp hiss, Parrish steps away from me, swiping his hand over his face. His skin is red with a hot flush, and even though my body feels weird and rebellious, I have to laugh. He blushes as badly as I do.

"There's nothing on your neck but a goddamn mosquito bite," he murmurs, flicking the light switch and plunging us into darkness. There's no moon tonight either, just the distant twinkling of city lights to guide me as I follow Parrish back to the bedroom door.

"I woke up in the woods, Parrish," I tell him, because even if it wasn't real, it *felt* real. It could've been a prank, right? It could've happened, as far-fetched as that seems. "Is Chasm here?"

Parrish rests his hand on the doorjamb, and it takes me a moment to realize how heavily he's breathing. How heavily I'm breathing. Without thinking, I reach out and run my fingers down the smooth length of his spine.

“Stop touching me,” he growls, spinning around abruptly. “And stop asking about Chasm. He isn’t interested in you.”

“Interested in me?” I echo, like the thought never occurred to me. It had, briefly, but I brushed it off. I must be going through some hormonal phase because I’m finding myself simultaneously attracted to multiple people—two of which are completely off-limits. Maxx is with my sister; Parrish is my stepbrother. But Chasm? I don’t need or want a boyfriend right now, and if I did, it isn’t like they’re hard to get. Any girl can tell you how unbelievably easy it is to get a guy if you want one. It’s harder to get rid of them, more often than not. “That’s not why I’m asking, Parrish.”

“You were dreaming,” he tells me, trying to close my bedroom door behind him. I stop it with a palm out, pushing my way into the hallway and then following him into his own room. He scowls but doesn’t do much else to stop me.

Hearing Parrish mock my fears like they’re nothing irritates the crap out of me. His patronizing tone just seals the deal: there’s nothing about this that feels like a normal dream. Even if I want it to be, even if I wish it were.

As soon as I set foot in his room and he reaches above my head to slam the door shut with his palm, I realize how strangely intimate this moment is. The house is dark and quiet; everyone else is asleep. It’s just me and Parrish, twisted up in a dream that should probably, by all rights, be a nightmare. No matter how hard I try, I can’t seem to shake the bite of the needle in my neck, or the cold chill of the wind as it rustled my hair against my nape.

“If I were dreaming, then where did the mark come from?” I continue as Parrish sighs and pulls away from me. I don’t miss how hard his nipples are, how big the bulge in his pants is, even as he tries to turn and hide himself. One of those reactions could be blamed on the coolness of the night air, but the other? No, that’s all about heat.

“It’s probably a fucking bug bite, I told you,” he breathes with another rush of air, reaching up to rub both hands down his face. He moves over to the window and shoves it open

with more force than necessary. It occurs to me then that I'm standing in a stranger's room, dressed in pj's and accusations of a strange nightly run through the woods. When did I start feeling like I actually knew Parrish? In reality, we're no closer than me and Danyella, or me and Lumen. Shit, I've had saner conversations with Delphine.

"What about my feet?" I continue, my questions just as much for myself as they are for Parrish. Without asking, I sit down on the edge of his bed and cross my right leg over my knee, examining the sole of my foot in the dim glow of his TV. There's nothing on, just the home screen for HBO Max, but it's enough light to see by. "They're all cut-up and bruised."

There's a sudden rush of footsteps and then Parrish is just there, flicking on his bedroom light and making me squint. Without preamble, he reaches down and grabs my foot, examining it with a frown and a heavy dose of skepticism. The bruises, cuts, and scrapes are unmistakable in the harsh glow of the overhead light.

"Have you ever sleepwalked before?" he asks me, looking up suddenly and catching me with those pretty eyes of his. His lashes are long and dark, like they've been dipped in chocolate, and his gaze is intense enough that my breath catches and stills until my head swims and I'm forced to suck in a sharp inhale.

"Never."

"Well, new and stressful events can trigger episodes." He releases my foot and looks up at me, kneeling on the floor like a slothful prince. "And think about it: your life has been nothing *but* stress for weeks."

We stare at each other for a long moment, the air thickening and perfuming between us. There's that scent again, that fresh-laundry-hung-on-a-line scent, and while Parrish smells pleasant enough, I'm reminded of my attacker again, of that strange detail of his aftershave. Could I really have dreamed that? Could I really have sleepwalked and not realized? If so, how did I hurt my feet? What did I step on?

“And whose fault is that?” I retort sharply. Not entirely fair considering Parrish is only one microcosm of stress in the scope of things. Still ...

He frowns at me again, rising to his feet and heading back over to the bedroom door.

“Out,” he tells me, flicking off the light and then pointing into the hallway like the gesture will somehow get me to move more quickly. “If you don’t think you were sleepwalking, if you really and truly believe you were kidnapped for all of five seconds and then magicked back into bed through a gate with security cameras and a front door with five locks, then go find Tess. Wake her up. Tell her, let her check the footage. Otherwise, just assume you stepped on some of the twins’ toys and leave it at that.” When I make no move to stand up, Parrish storms over to me and then stops suddenly with his arm extended, like he was thinking of grabbing me and thought better of it.

“You’re really okay with the entire school believing we’re dating?” I ask, and he closes his eyes like he’s in pain. That, or just incredibly frustrated with me. Everything he’s said makes sense. Why the hell would someone kidnap me only to bring me back? And why are my pajamas clean? Like some rando murderer would buy an identical pair of pj’s just to fuck with me?

So I decide to let it go.

Big mistake. Huge. If I hadn’t, if I’d trusted my own instincts, would things have turned out differently? Hindsight. Mm. Fucking twenty-twenty, am I right?

“We are not getting together,” Parrish says instead, gesturing between me and him. He takes a step back and exhales, letting his head fall back and his eyes close. “Stop harping on it.”

“See, here’s the thing,” I tell him, standing up and then putting my palm flat on his tattooed chest, right over the green-blue scales of a dragon. “*You* are the one who keeps bringing that up, who keeps vehemently denying it. Why is that? Why are you so obsessed with the idea of me being into

you? Wishful thinking is all I can come up with.” I take my hand away just as Parrish’s eyes open and he slowly—oh so very slowly—lifts his head back up to look at me.

“What kind of pervert do you take me for?” he whispers, almost like the question is more for himself than it is for me. “You’re supposed to be ... like a sister or something.” He scrubs his face again and then points at the door. “Respect my boundaries and get *the fuck out of my room.*”

“Like a sister, but I’m not your sister. You’re not my brother,” I tell him, but he’s got me with the boundary thing. People deserve safe spaces and the right to say no to those trying to breach them. So I leave and he slams the door behind me.

My palms are sweaty, my heart is racing, and I can’t seem to grasp the fact that I have a stupid teenage crush on Parrish. For a second there, my mind goes blank trying to remember the name of the guy I was crushing on back home. *Ryan*. Right, right, it was Ryan. Ryan ... something.

“Gah!” I rub at my face for a moment. Maybe if that crush faded so easily, this one will, too?

I retreat into my room, close the door behind me, and lock it.

Before I climb back into bed though, I set my phone up on a mini-tripod atop my dresser. If I do sleepwalk—or if someone comes in—I’ll know.

For now, there’s no point in stressing Tess out anymore than she already is. Her control over me is absolute at this point, and I don’t need to fan that fire without good reason.

A graphic for Chapter 11. The word "CHAPTER" is written in a black, hand-drawn, blocky font on the left. To its right, the number "11" is written in a bright pink, hand-drawn font. The background features a dark green, textured heart shape, a black silhouette of a tree with bare branches, and a faint, sketchy profile of a person's face on the right side.

CHAPTER 11

My first week at Whitehall isn't as bad as I thought it would be. Frankly, the worst part of the day is the ride to school, stuffed in the backseat with either Kimber or Parrish, or in the front with Paul—the hypocrite who gripes at us for being on our phones too much and yet has his glued to his goddamn ear.

“I'm tired of that DingDong app. It's owned by the Chinese government, and it's nothing but a data farm,” Paul continues as Parrish turns a muted scowl in his father's direction. It's now Friday and by this point, I'm more than used to their daily bickering. “Turn it off and enjoy the scenery around you.”

“You mean the way you do?” Parrish quips, apparently deciding against mentioning the misnomer of DingDong in place of TikTok. Close enough, I guess. And I mean, Paul is right about the rest of it.

“Don't get smart me with me, son,” Paul reprimands, answering another phone call with the hands-free button on his steering wheel. That must be nice, to have one of those. Grandpa's truck most definitely didn't have Bluetooth. It didn't even have AC or automatic windows. I mean, it was a freaking classic. *God, I miss that truck*, I think as I turn to look over at Kimber while Paul mouths, “*this is work, I have to take it.*” And then proceeds with his phone call uninterrupted.

“What the hell are you staring at?” Kimber whispers to me, her blond waves swept into a low pony and tied with a scrunchie. It's her only form of self-expression; everything else about her uniform is perfect and polished. That is, until she gets to school and rolls the waistband over three times until her ass hangs out then leaves it that way until she gets

told by the administration that it's unhygienic to sit bare panties on the chair seats. At least they don't slut-shame. I've decided I'm more comfortable in slacks, and Kimber already hates me for it. "Are you a dyke or something?" she asks as she stares at the offending pants, which is a question that just makes me laugh.

"Because I like pants? Girls can wear pants, Kimber. This isn't the nineteen-fifties. I can wear or do whatever I want; it isn't an indication of my sex *or* my sexual attraction."

"You're so uppity," she breathes, like my being assertive is a problem. "And don't you think it's creepy that you've carved out a niche for yourself at the school for dating your own brother?"

Parrish whips around in his seat, his eyes flicking over to Paul to make sure he hasn't heard before he redirects his anger in Kimber's direction.

"Keep your goddamn mouth shut," he growls out, his voice low and menacing. "You're acting like a fucking child again."

"And you're a pervert," she whispers back just before Parrish reaches out and snatches her phone from her hand like a ninja. Without skipping a beat, he rolls his window down and chucks it outside. My mouth gapes open as I spin in my seat just in time to see it shatter on the road and then ... it's gone.

Paul is too busy with his phone call and doesn't notice.

Slowly, oh so slowly, I turn back around to stare at Kimber. I'm afraid to move too quickly lest I draw her attention. It's like, if you come across a venomous snake poised to strike, don't make any sudden movements.

"You ..." she starts, her face going chalk white. But she doesn't raise her voice. And she most definitely doesn't alert Paul. "How could you?" Kimber's glossy lower lip trembles as Parrish turns back around in his seat, rolling his window up and then zoning into his phone like he didn't just throw someone else's thousand-dollar smartphone onto the highway.

Uh-oh.

It occurs to me then that maybe I haven't seen all that Parrish Vanguard is capable of?

Kimber turns away from me, burying her face in her hands, shoulders shaking slightly as she cries silently in the back seat and her father fails to notice. Even after he pulls into the white gravel turn-around and we climb out, he doesn't catch on to the fact that his daughter is devastated and his son is an asshole.

Paul takes off and Parrish saunters ahead while I stand there beside Kimber, unsure if I should try to, like, comfort her or something? She's been nothing but a total psycho to me, but I can't help but feel sorry for her.

"Why did you let him get away with that?" I ask, that familiar rage swirling around inside of me. Parrish is really and truly one of the rudest, snobbiest assholes I've ever had the displeasure of meeting. I mean, he has his moments, but holy shit, what was that just now? Once I'm done dealing with Kimber, I'm going to find him and kick his ass.

Snotty and red-faced, Kimber lifts her head up to look at me. As per usual, she scowls before bothering to respond, just to remind me where I stand. Typical.

"Are you kidding me?" she snaps, like I'm beyond stupid for not immediately understanding why she'd allow her brother to destroy her phone and say nothing about it. She flings a hand back to indicate the towering walls of the academy. "Are you so dense you haven't noticed that our brother controls Whitehall?"

Our brother.

Part of me is thrilled that Kimber's referring to Parrish as 'ours'. That must mean some little part of her has to come to accept me, right? On the other hand, he isn't my brother. I don't want anyone to think of him that way, least of all me.

"I don't think any one student can control an entire population of—" I start, but Kimber's just sneering at me and sniffing, pulling out a compact from her bag to check her makeup. It's ruined. As soon as she realizes that, her face falls

and her eyes dart around the empty courtyard to see if anyone else has noticed.

“You got lucky at that party, getting Lumen to back you up.” Kimber snaps her compact closed, her eyes red-rimmed as she glares at me. “That, and you pushed him into a corner. Everyone thinks you two hooked up, so you can’t be a total waste of life or you’ll ruin his reputation. But don’t worry: he’ll show his true colors sooner or later.”

Kimber takes off, cracking one of the exterior doors to peer inside. Whatever she sees sends her running off around the side of the building rather than into it. I watch her go with a long sigh and then head for the doors myself.

Just one last day of classes and then I’m going home with Danyella after school.

Setting this sleepover up was not the easiest thing in the world. I can see now what Parrish was talking about when he said that I ruined his life. Tess actually *drove over* to Danyella’s parents’ house to meet with them before agreeing to this. If she hadn’t met them on several prior occasions—apparently they attend the same country club as the Vanguard—then I wouldn’t have been allowed to go at all.

I’m also supposed to call as soon as I leave the school, once I arrive at Danyella’s, and then again before bed. The rules are stifling, especially when coupled with Tess’ general aloofness this week. She’s barely spoken to me other than a quick smile here and there, a few random questions about school sprinkled over dinner conversation. Paul says she’s on a deadline with her new book, but I can’t help but feel hurt by it.

This is my first week of school in a new state, my third week living a completely new life.

To me, it’s all just more proof that she cares more about me as an extension of herself rather than a person.

As soon as I get inside the school, I see Parrish and Lumen facing off in the hallway.

Utterly fantastic.

“Well, are you in?” he’s asking, his voice pitched in just such a way that it’s quite clear the rest of the students in the hall are meant to hear. There’s a cluster of girls behind Lumen, a group of boys behind Parrish. Chasm is leaning against the lockers, head back, eyes closed. He looks bored out of his mind.

“I have no fucking clue what you’re talking about,” Lumen replies just as smoothly. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were staging this whole thing to get some attention from me.”

“I’m asking you if you’re down,” he replies as I pause in the middle of the hallway and all eyes turn my way. “You. Me.” Parrish whips out a hand in my direction, pointing an accusatory finger my way. “Dakota.” He smiles and it’s whip-sharp, devastating, completely and utterly unnerving. “If my girl wants to have a threesome, it’s my job to make that happen for her.”

This motherfucker, I think as I narrow my eyes on him and march down the hall with my book bag slung over one shoulder.

“Little Sister looks pissed,” Chas remarks with a lazy smile of his own. I ignore him, pausing beside Lumen and Parrish as the latter glances over at me with that deceptive smile of his still in place. It’s complete bullshit, that look. I live across the hall from the guy, and I’ve never seen him look like that, not even when he thinks he’s all alone in the kitchen, elbows leaned on the counter, head hanging down. Parrish Vanguard never smiles, not for real anyway.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I ask him, glancing over at Lumen. She looks annoyed but not entirely displeased with the attention.

“You wanted a threesome: I’m asking for one.” Parrish gestures in Lumen’s direction and I sigh.

“If this is what you meant by ‘I’m going to bury you’ then your game is seriously lacking. I don’t care if everyone here knows I want a threesome.”

I stare Parrish down, but his expression never changes. Either I'm playing into his hand the way he wanted me to or he's just that good of an actor.

"Well then, what say you, Lumen?" He turns back to the girl in question and cocks a pretty brow. Last night, I heard him in his room, tattoo machine buzzing, low voices in the background from that stupid murder Podcast that he and Chasm like so much. I tried to get a glimpse of where his newest ink might be this morning, but by the time Delphine woke me up for school, he was already dressed in his uniform.

"Don't pressure her," I say, resting a hand on Parrish's upper arm. He glances down at me like I matter, like I really am his girlfriend and he's so into me that he can barely breathe. My own breath escapes in a rush and I feel a bit unsteady on my feet. I'm smart enough to realize that it's all an illusion though, just a game to be played so that my time at this school doesn't suck royal ass. "You're a really sweet guy, so kind and gentle, always crying and expressing yourself." I reach up and stroke some of Parrish's pretty hair away from his forehead. There's the slightest narrowing of his eyes, but he doesn't make any move to stop me. How can he, with everyone watching? "But the micropenis thing really is starting to get to me. I just thought that if it were me, you, *and* Lumen that I might be able to get off ..."

The tightening in Parrish's jaw becomes a ticking muscle, a sign of anger that he can't control. Even the prince has flaws.

"I didn't think you'd want to discuss this in front of everyone though," I whisper back, a very real blush suffusing my cheeks and chest. "Sorry, Lumen. He can be a bit headstrong at times."

Lumen crosses her arms over her chest, looking Parrish over with a sharp smirk that tells me I've chosen the right path here. Hanging out with the queen bee of the school nullifies the stingers in the rest of the hive.

"You don't have to lie about my dick just to save my feelings," Parrish whispers, but it's a stage-whisper. We are still very much in the middle of a performance here. "I don't

care if Lumen knows.” He turns back to the girl in question as I brace myself for whatever it is that might be coming next. “I can’t get hard for her,” he says, almost as if he’s admitting something scandalous. My hand tightens on my book bag, the metal heart pin that Tess gave me digging into my skin. “We get along great otherwise; she’s a phenomenal gamer. And she has *incredible* taste in music”—the sarcasm is so thick it’s practically dripping—“but it’s just, when the time comes, she just doesn’t do it for me.” He shrugs his shoulders loosely as Chasm looks on, tapping his fingers against the locker he’s leaning against.

Rather than watching Parrish however, he seems to be watching me. If I didn’t know any better, I’d almost say that he looks ... sorry? Like his friend’s behavior isn’t exactly his favorite thing in the world.

A small shiver traces over my skin, one that I ignore in favor of holding my ground against his bestie. *This stupid, piggish, annoying sloth prince!* I want to kick him in the nuts, but if I get expelled from this fancy school for violence, Tess will probably hire a private tutor and I’ll be trapped in the ice cavern for the next two years.

“Your erectile dysfunction is nothing to be ashamed of. A lot of guys have issues getting hard—even ones diagnosed with micropenises.” I stroke Parrish’s arm and lean my head against his shoulder. He immediately stiffens up, but I don’t think either of us misses how good that feels. He’s warm, and his body is lean and hard, and holy crap, he smells amazing. Also, pretty sure he neither has issues getting hard nor has been diagnosed with a micropenis (which is a real medical condition that I probably shouldn’t be using to tease him with).

The thing is, when Parrish comes at me, I forget to control my emotions. Something about him just triggers me into doing and saying things that I wouldn’t normally do or say.

“Honestly, Parrish,” Lumen begins with a sigh, tossing her curled honey hair over one shoulder. “I’m over you. We might be dating the same girl, but even her wishes aren’t enough to get me into your bed.” She flashes him a sharp smile and then lifts a brow in my direction where I’m still cuddled up to my

stepbrother like he's actually anything other than a thorn in my side.

"Shall we?" she asks, but Parrish isn't done. He very carefully withdraws his arm from mine, and though I'm loathe to admit it: I miss the contact. *This asshole!* What the hell has he done to me, other than scramble my brains around in my skull until it seems impossible to think clearly when he's around?

"I'm sorry, Dakota," Parrish says, shaking his head and then running his fingers through his hair like he's actually in some sort of emotional distress. "But I don't think I can do this anymore. It's not that I have trouble getting it up: it's just that I have trouble getting it up around *you*." He stares down at me with those pretty gold-flecked eyes of his, and that ember in my belly heats up, burns, incinerates. *I'm going to kill him. Really and truly. No hyperbole necessary.* "It's over."

He turns away from me and stalks down the hallway, taking his cluster of friends with him. That is, all of them except for Chasm. He has his arms crossed over his chest, but his face, that's impossible to read.

"Told you making out with me at the party would've been a better idea." He stands up from the locker and gives me this voracious little smile that makes the girls—and a few gay boys—titter and giggle. Gross. I glare at him.

"Trying to shame me in front of the whole school? How cute. Why don't you put a leash on your bestie instead of letting it be the other way around?"

Chasm frowns hard, and I can feel it: a shift in energy.

Crap.

I've done it again, said something that I almost immediately regret. For the most part, my beef is with Parrish, not Chasm.

"And here I was thinking that I'd offer to tutor you, Little Sister. Guess you can figure that one out on your own." He turns and heads down the hall after Parrish as I bite my lip. Shit. Tutor me? How does he even know I need to be tutored? Then I remember that Parrish and Chasm are rude assholes

who go through my stuff whenever my back is turned. On Wednesday, I looked up from making a sandwich to see the two of them casually thumbing through my academy-issued iPad.

Pricks.

“Too bad,” Lumen says, casting a glance in Chasm’s direction. “Kwang-seon is on his way to being valedictorian.” She pauses for a moment, tapping at her glossy lower lip with a single finger. “Or at least salutatorian, if I have my way about it.”

Turning to look at her, I cock a brow and try to figure out which part of that statement is most interesting: that Chasm is one of the top students at Whitehall ... or that Lumen just referred to him as ... what was it? It almost sounded like it started with a ‘G’ and a ‘K’ at the same time.

“His name is Kwang-seon?” I ask, blinking a few times in surprise. Lumen gives me what amounts to a sultry smile before lifting a perfect brow in my direction.

“Apparently when they first met, Parrish was missing a tooth and all he could say was ‘chasm’. It just sort of stuck. Cute, right? Also, his dad hates the nickname, and he hates his dad, so ...” Lumen takes my arm the way she’s been doing virtually every morning this week and leads me down the hall toward my first class. Without her help, I’d likely still be getting lost on the way there. “Guess it’s just you and me now?” She gives me a smile that I’m not entirely sure how to interpret, and then leans over and presses a floral-scented kiss to my cheek. “Don’t worry. He can’t sink you if you’re attached to me.”

And there it is, the honest truth.

What did Danyella tell me when I first arrived here? Welcome to hell? It hasn’t been so bad thus far, but I get the idea that I’ve somehow fallen into a lucky niche. Chance and circumstance are on my side. Maxx told me not to trust anyone at this school, and he should know better than anyone. He survived four years here as a scholarship student. Class warfare is real, unfortunately.

“Will he try?” I ask, because even though it feels like I know Parrish, we’re strangers. Worse than strangers, really, because we can’t escape one another, no matter how much we hate each other, no matter how much we fight.

Lumen gives me a look that sums it up without words: *oh yes*.

“Enjoy being my girlfriend for a while,” she says, her gang of supermodel-esque girls flowing down the hall behind us. “And I’ll see you at Danyella’s after school.”

Without warning, Lumen turns and threads her arms around my neck, pressing a kiss to my mouth that surprises the shit out of me.

It’s all I can think about for the rest of the day.

By the end of the school day, I’ve decided three very important things.

One: Mr. Volli’s class is by far my favorite. Granted, I don’t understand a thing he’s talking about, but he’s nice, and he doesn’t look at me like a steaming pile of cat turds the way my other teachers (minus Ms. Miyamoto) do.

Two: if I don’t find someone—Chasm or otherwise—to tutor me then I am really and truly fucked here. I will fail every class, and I won’t get into NYU, and I’ll be stuck living off of Tess’ good graces for the rest of my life. *Note to self: maybe I should use my newfound clout to revive my Twitch channel.*

Three: someone has posted a quickie shot of Lumen and me online and everyone knows about it.

Including Parrish. Who seems ... pissed off?

“You and Lumen are really a thing now?” he asks me dryly, waiting outside my last class of the day, just to make sure he can dig in with a few extra barbs before I leave with Danyella. I pause, hefting my book bag up on my shoulder and giving him a look.

“What do you care if we are or we aren’t?” I quip back, trying to maneuver around him to head for the theater. Parrish blocks me off by slamming his palm into the lockers and I sigh. “Seriously? You’re the one who went on the attack this morning, tried to make a scene to humiliate me and lost. Get over it.”

“Lost?” he asks with a caustic laugh. “You got dumped in front of the entire school. Explain to me how that’s a win for you.”

“The whole school thinks *you* have a two inch long, perma-soft dick. Explain to *me* how that’s a win.” I go to duck under his arm, but then he slams the palm of his other hand into the locker, effectively caging me in place. “Nobody’s going to want to date you now.”

“Good.” He stares down at me with a level of haughty arrogance that I’m only used to seeing on the faces of K-drama stars. “Maybe I can enjoy the rest of my high school career without girls glomming onto me at every available opportunity?”

A laugh escapes me, one that I barely recognize. I’m not sure I even know who I am when I’m around Parrish—for good or bad. Probably for bad. For worse, really.

“You act like you’re god’s gift to straight and bi girls everywhere. If that were true, then why was Lumen crying at the party, hmm?” When I try to duck down this time, Parrish leans in close to me, bending his elbows and pressing my body to the lockers with the weight of his own.

People are staring. I mean, do you blame them? First, I’m a polyamorous, bisexual icon. Then we’re talking about threesomes. Then I’m getting dumped. Kissed by Lumen. Harassed by Parrish. He’s smiling at me now and, like I said, he never smiles. Not when he’s tattooing, not when he’s drawing, not when he’s playing video games. Unlike normal people, Parrish Vanguard only smiles when he’s about to do something cruel and awful.

“Lumen was crying because I turned her down,” Parrish says with a loose shrug of his shoulders. Still smiling though.

Still fucking smiling. He leans in close to me, and I hate the way my body goes haywire when it's around his. We have metric fucktons of natural chemistry, that's for sure. And I hate it. And I hate him. And I hate the way he smiles. And I hate the way he kissed my neck on Monday night, and I hate the way that I can't seem to forget about the warmth of his lips against my skin. "How does that make you feel, knowing your new girlfriend was begging for it just one week ago?"

"Well, based on the way she kissed me today, she isn't begging for it now, is she?" I smile right back at him, flames racing across my skin, fingertips tingling. He just pisses me off so damn bad, I can't explain it. Everything about him bothers me, like how he gets out of the shower and leaves his bedroom door open on purpose, just so that I have to stare at his bare torso. "What do you even want from me right now?" I continue, because it hasn't escaped my notice that not only did Parrish track me down, but also that he seems weirdly preoccupied with the idea that Lumen and I might actually be into one another.

"I want to know what game you're playing at," he breathes, and the intensity in his eyes scares the shit out of me. He isn't smiling anymore. Instead, he's staring at me like he could break me apart with his gaze alone, find every little hidden piece of me and memorize its shape. "You ruined my entire life, you know that? I had to wait until I was sixteen to spend the night at a friend's place. Seventeen before I was allowed to drive to school by myself. I'm *still* not allowed to drive my car anywhere else."

"Again, not my fault," I repeat, trying to ignore the way our uniforms are brushing up against one another, the fabric rustling in just such a way that it seems overly loud, like I can imagine each fiber tangling together and drawing us closer. "I was *two*, Parrish. Two. Tell me how much you can remember from age two. Now, leave me the fuck alone, I have plans tonight."

"All I have to do is send that pic of you and Lumen kissing to Tess, and you won't be going anywhere," he replies, cool as a cucumber even while he has the audacity to threaten me.

“Then maybe you’d understand how it feels to be suffocated because of someone else’s mistake.”

“You mean Saffron’s mistake?” I query back, using the righteous anger in me to crush down those pesky hormones. “You’re right. I’m sorry that you suffered because of a mentally ill and extremely sad woman. But don’t take it out on me: it’s petty and pathetic and it doesn’t suit you.” This time, when I go to elbow him out of my way, he leans in even closer.

“You already ruined my life once, and here you are, out to do it all over again. Whatever this crap is that you’re pulling with Lumen, call it off. Break up in front of the school. Do it online, I don’t care. Just end it.”

We stare at each other for so long that I can’t help but wonder what everyone else is thinking. From anyone else’s perspective, this probably looks like a romantic moment. Our faces are that freaking close.

“Newsflash: you don’t get to tell me what to do. You might have Kimber so afraid that she won’t speak up when you trash her phone—which was really fucked up by the way—but not me. I don’t want my time at Whitehall to suck, but I’m not bowing down to some pouty rich boy who thinks he owns the school and everyone in it.”

Parrish grits his teeth, but whatever it is that he was planning on saying goes out the window when Danyella appears on my left side. She looks decidedly ticked off.

“Are you quite finished, Mr. Vanguard?” she asks, pulling her hot pink glasses down her nose to look at him. “Because as far as I’m concerned, your behavior is troubling and inappropriate. Did Dakota consent to having you push her into a bank of lockers?”

He says nothing, standing back up and staring down at me with an intensity that’s hard to describe. It’s similar to the way he looked at me during the party, like I’m nothing and everything at the same time. An impossible dichotomy, that’s what his gaze is. I can’t even begin to pick it apart.

Danyella grabs my arm and drags me away, casting an angry glare over her shoulder as she steers me toward the entrance to the parking garage.

“You shouldn’t let him get away with things like that,” she chastises as I let out a huff and slide my phone from my pocket. God forbid I forget to call Tess. According to Kimber, if you miss *one* required check-in text or call, Tess will show up with Paul in tow and drag you back home for a lecture. “He’s a bully, Dakota.”

“He sure does act like one sometimes,” I say with a sigh. Parrish’s motivations make zero sense to me. *Why does he care if I kissed Lumen? Well, if Lumen kissed me. What’s it to him? Also ... does that count as my second kiss? There was no tongue, but it was on the mouth. That counts, doesn’t it?* “Mostly, I think he’s an insecure asshole who needs a spanking.”

The look Danyella throws me is equal parts horror and fascination.

“Not from me!” I blurt out, and I hope I look as aghast at the idea as I sound. “You think I’d actually touch that jerk’s ass?”

“Flushed cheeks and parted lips are a physical indicator of attraction. You were certainly looking at him like you wanted to touch his ass,” Danyella says with a shrug, flipping her book bag open and rummaging around for her keys. “Also, there seemed to be a bit of a rash on your chest that wasn’t there earlier.”

I narrow my eyes on her the way Parrish does, and then I want to kick myself for imitating him or even *thinking* about him at all.

“I was angry,” I tell her, and she gives me a look, once again over the rim of her glasses which must be some sort of indicator that she’s annoyed. “He infuriates me like nobody I’ve ever met. I can’t explain it, but from the first second I laid eyes on him, I hated him.”

Danyella continues to stare at me for a moment before letting out a regretful sigh and dumping her bag onto the

pavement. She's like Mary Poppins or something with all the weird shit she keeps in there: scissors, glue, bags of sequins, signed playbills from past theater performances, a curling iron, a single pink ballet slipper.

"So you're glad it happened then?" she clarifies as she digs through the items and then eventually finds her car keys shoved into the toe of the slipper.

"Glad what happened?" I ask, still far too distracted for my own good.

Danyella shovels the junk back into her bag and stands up, pointing at me with her keys.

"The breakup," she says, and it takes me several seconds to even remotely remember what she's talking about. Oh. That. People have giving me sympathetic looks all day, but I don't really know anyone here yet with the exceptions of Danyella, Lumen, Chasm, and Parrish.

"We were never really dating, so we can't really break up either," I tell her after a quick look around to make sure nobody else is in hearing distance. "He just wanted to put on a show to humiliate me."

"He resents you," Danyella agrees, and three tries later, she's able to unstick the door on her side of the car. Mine was never really closed to begin with since the fabric of an old costume was stuck in the hinges. I carefully tug it free and deposit it into the back seat.

"I guess," I reply, wondering where we're going with this. I'm excited to have made a friend so quickly, but I'm still wary. Chasm warned me about Whitehall; Maxx did; Danyella herself did. I can't be expected to trust too easily, right? "He blames Tess' overprotective nature on me, as if I chose to be kidnapped. I'm pretty sure he's jealous, too. Like, he wants to be Tess' bio kid the way I am."

"I think the two of you resent each other," Danyella says, backing out of her space in the parking garage and maneuvering around all of the luxury cars driven by idiots

who seem to be backing out without looking and also while going about ninety miles an hour.

“Whatever resentment I feel toward Parrish, he brought on himself,” I say, shooting off a quick text to Tess and then another to Maxine. Tonight would be a good night to talk, seeing as neither Lumen nor Danyella care whether I speak to my ‘kidnappers’ or not. Maxie keeps saying she’s going to take me hiking, but we haven’t been able to work out a day where she’s free *and* one where I can escape Tess. I haven’t talked to my grandparents since the coffee shop either, and it’s starting to chip away at me on the inside.

They’re all alone now, in that big house, and it kills me. It fucking kills me. I suck in a deep breath to banish the feelings and try to focus on my new friendship instead.

“Regardless, it still takes two to tango,” Danyella replies, carefully checking both ways before exiting the parking garage. That two second delay causes the other cars piled up behind us to honk, and people start yelling out their windows for her to hurry up. I feel my eye twitch. *Entitled brats.*

I turn in my seat to give her a look.

“Whose side are you on anyway?” I ask as we pull onto the road heading toward the gate. On either side of us, huge willow trees sway in a gentle breeze and early spring sunshine turns the grassy grounds a brilliant emerald. I could almost be happy here if I hadn’t been ripped violently from the only home I’ve ever known and stuck in an ice castle with an aloof writer and a brooding stepbrother.

“I try not to take sides in any situation,” she responds, pausing once again at the exit as other students honk behind us. From what I hear, there’s another party happening tonight that I’m beyond relieved to *not* be attending. “If I only told you what you wanted to hear, how would that help?”

“You are far too even-tempered and level-headed for your own good,” I respond, absently opening my group text with Sally and Nevaeh. They’re going out to the lake with some of the boys from the high school, and I can’t help but feel a pang of FOMO. At the very least, they’ve both texted me back

today which is a massive improvement over the past several weeks.

“I hear that a lot actually.” Danyella grins as several cars zoom around us and leave us in the dust. That’s when I realize why everyone’s so ticked off with Danyella, and it’s not because she observes basic, common sense safety measures. She also drives like a grandma. We’re doing thirty in a forty-five zone right now. She notices me peeking at the speedometer and gives me a look. “What? Did you know that your odds of dying in a motor vehicle accident are one in a hundred? That’s two-thousand-five-hundred times more likely than being murdered by a serial killer.” There’s a long pause here as Danyella refocuses on the road. “Also, the car can’t go any faster than thirty miles an hour anyway.”

“Your parents must really hate you,” I respond with a teasing smile, thinking of Saffron’s old car, the one that I plastered with bumper stickers. Then I think about the shiny new sportscar sitting in Tess’ four-car garage and my smile fades a bit at the edges. My affection isn’t easily bought, apparently. I’m not sure if that makes me a spoiled brat, a pessimistic asshole, or something else entirely. “Also, this car must build a shit-ton of character.”

“Oh, I’m straight blessed,” she breathes with a laugh, snorting as I reach down to fiddle with the radio. It’s stuck on a worship station and I’m *this* close to bleeding from the ears. But as I fiddle with the dial, I realize that ‘stuck’ really is the operative word here. I can’t change the music. “If you imagine the words ‘boy’ or ‘girl’ in place of ‘Jesus’ or ‘God’, then really, it just sounds like you’re listening to love songs.”

“You get more interesting by the minute, you know that?” I relax back into the seat as we putter down the winding forest road toward Medina. The only negative about Danyella’s house is that it isn’t all that far from Tess’. Really, it’s within walking distance.

“Well, my sister is being groomed to take over the company from my parents, and my brother is the black sheep of the family, so I do my best to fall somewhere in the middle of all that.”

“What did your brother do to become the black sheep?” I ask, imagining all sorts of strange and twisted stories. Nobody ever said I was lacking in imagination.

“He detoured a bit from the whole ‘CEO/startup/big tech route’ that my parents wanted.” Danyella shrugs and then flashes a grin. “He became a foot doctor.”

And that right there, that’s a punchline to an exceptionally good joke.

I knew I liked this chick.

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A graphic for Chapter 12. The word "CHAPTER" is written in a black, hand-drawn, blocky font on the left. To its right is a large, dark green heart with a pink outline. The number "12" is written in a pink, hand-drawn font across the heart. The background features a stylized, dark, leafless tree with intricate branches and a faint, sketchy profile of a person's face on the right side.

CHAPTER 12

It takes us about thirty minutes longer to get back into Medina proper with Danyella behind the wheel as opposed to say, Chasm the speed demon or Doctor ‘I drive a Range Rover with my *own name* on a vanity license plate’ Paul. Seriously. It says “DCTR P” on it. Who does that? As a rule, I don’t trust people with vanity license plates.

As we pull into Danyella’s driveway, I’m struck by the absolute absurdity of this neighborhood. Her house is nice, granted, but it looks similar to the fancy McMansion that Nevaeh’s family lived in back home. The only real difference here is price: Nevaeh’s family paid about half a million for their home while Danyella’s family paid about five million. I know, because I looked it up on Zillow.

“And here we are,” she says, using sheer brute force to shove the driver’s side door of her car open. It groans in protest as we both climb out and she shuts the garage door behind us, giving me a tight-lipped smile. “The neighbors signed a petition that says I can’t park my car in the driveway because it devalues the other houses in the neighborhood.”

I just stare at her for a moment, giving a nice, slow, sarcastic blink.

“God, I hate rich people,” I murmur as she laughs and uses a keypad next to the door to let us in.

I’ve already spotted Lumen’s BMW outside, so I’m not surprised when we walk into the kitchen to find her bent over the counter, scrolling on her phone.

“I told you to ride with me,” she says playfully, standing up and turning around to lean her butt against the center island. “Danyella drives like a ninety-year-old woman.”

“You know I’m capped out at thirty miles an hour,” Danyella responds mechanically, like she’s regurgitated this line about a thousand times already. “Don’t be jealous that my parents are instilling the ideals of hard work and self-sacrifice into me.”

Lumen scoffs and tosses her blond hair, her skirt riding dangerously high up her thighs as she lounges in the Schaeffers’ kitchen as if she’s as comfortable here as Chasm is at the Vanguard’s. I’m still not entirely sure what Danyella and Lumen’s relationship is really like. From what I’ve heard, they’ve known each other since kindergarten, but they don’t exactly hang out on the grounds of Whitehall.

“Rumor has it that Parrish assaulted you in the hall on your way out,” Lumen continues as Danyella opens the fridge and offers me a drink. It looks like a supermarket drink aisle threw up in there. Must be a rich people thing, to have a half-dozen of every flavor and brand and type of beverage ever created. I choose a bottle of red Gatorade while she hands Lumen a Fiji water without even asking.

“He tried,” I say with a long-suffering sigh. “He seems pissed about the ...” I can’t even say it without blushing. My boobs are already beet red beneath my uniform, I’m sure.

“The kiss?” Lumen guesses, and then she laughs. The sound is like tinkling bells or the beating of fairy wings or something. She’s almost too perfect to be real. The smile she gives me is mysterious, almost coquettish. “Don’t tell me that was your first?”

That beet red color my body seems so fond of entertaining spreads across my breasts, cheeks, and forehead. Luckily, Lumen and Danyella can’t see the worst of it.

“No, it most definitely wasn’t,” I respond slowly, thinking about Parrish. Again. My mind seems to circle back to thoughts of him in an unhealthy way. I should be working to build friendships, not daydreaming about a lazy, entitled

asshole. I clear my throat, but Lumen's laughing anyway. Danyella gives us both a weird look.

"This is why I think dating is better left for *after* college," she says, rolling her eyes to the ceiling with a sigh. Her words from that first day come filtering back to me, the ones she said about Lumen. "*I wouldn't call her a mean girl or anything, but I also wouldn't confess my deepest secrets to her, you know?*"

I keep that in mind. Frankly, I'm surprised that they're friends at all. Danyella is introspective and intellectual while Lumen is outgoing and gregarious. Then again, Lumen is apparently neck-and-neck with Chasm for the top spot in the academy. For juniors anyway. Danyella, as far as I know, is the top-ranking sophomore. When the time comes that *my* grades are posted online for everyone to see (a practice that I don't agree with), I won't be looking. A ranking of dead last would not surprise me.

"After college?" Lumen asks, opening a cabinet and sourcing some liquor. She unscrews the top without even asking and starts making drinks, much to Danyella's irritation. But she doesn't stop her friend from doing it, so I figure she knows her parents well-enough to know that we'll get away with this. What would Tess think, if she knew? I imagine I wouldn't be allowed to come over here ever again.

I bite my lip—imitating Maxx yet again. Ugh. I force myself to stop.

"Yes, after college. Education is far more important than hormones and meaningless sex." Danyella leans back against the cabinets, this look of challenge on her face that makes me wonder if this isn't a common occurrence for the two of them, this verbal sparring.

Lumen snorts a laugh, splashing juice into the cups and then shoving one across the counter toward me. She takes the other for herself and offers nothing to Danyella.

"Are we going somewhere later?" I ask, and Danyella lifts a brow at me.

“Why would you think that?” she replies, glancing over at Lumen.

“Because I know you drink—I saw you at the party—but you’re not drinking now. So you’re driving. Where are we going?” My heart swells at the idea of escaping the school and that awful house. I was about to freeze to death inside of the walls of the fucking ice cavern. I curl my hands around the glass and drag it closer. *Bottoms up, I guess*, downing the entire drink in one go before launching Tetris on my phone and resuming my previous game. “What?” I ask, glancing up to see the both of them staring at me.

“You could be a detective,” Danyella finally says with a smile, just before Lumen grabs my arm and gapes at my phone screen.

“You’re playing this with a single finger, and you have a better score than I’ve ever gotten.” She gives me a look. “*And* you downed four shots in a single gulp. Are you human?”

That was four shots? Oops.

“Chasm and some of his friends are hanging out by the lake. We figured we’d join them. Mostly so I can work on my sketchbook.” Danyella flips open the clasp on her bookbag and pulls out an art book, tossing it onto the counter as Lumen gives her an exasperated look.

“You’re probably wondering why we’re even friends,” she starts as I finally top out on Tetris and set my phone on the counter. “I can assure you, we were introduced at too young of an age to quit each other, social and political differences aside.”

“And there are many,” Danyella assures me, giving Lumen a once-over. “I’m sure you’ll spot many of them before the evening’s over.” She pushes up from the wall and tucks her sketchbook under one arm. “We all know you’re going to change and do your makeup, so hurry it up. I’ve got set designs to work on.”

Lumen gives an exaggerated roll of her eyes and pours herself another drink.

“What’s the point of coming over if I don’t dress up? There’s absolutely zero chance of my dad seeing what I’ll wear.” She grabs her bag and flounces off in the direction of a staircase as Danyella sighs and rubs at her forehead.

“I’d apologize for her in advance, but you’ll see what I mean. She can’t help it, I think, considering her parents.” Danyella gives me a look, purses her lips, and then points at my phone. I have no idea what she’s talking about, but I’m almost afraid to ask.

Seattle is weird. Medina is weirder. Rich people are the weirdest.

“Call your mom before she panics; I’ve seen Tess’ freak-outs in the past, and I’d like to avoid ever going through that again.” Danyella sits down on a stool at the breakfast bar and slips off her shoes, exchanging them for a pair that she pulls out of her backpack. I’ve only seen pictures of the girl’s room so far, but it’s quite clear that she’s got a shoe fetish.

“You’ve seen Tess freak out?” I ask, thinking about the incident at the school. Was Danyella there? My brain was so scrambled that day that I can’t even remember.

But that’s not what Danyella’s referring to, apparently.

“At a birthday party when I was twelve,” Danyella admits, cringing a bit. “Parrish was supposed to call Tess to check in and he forget. She drove all the way over to the house to yell at him.”

Oh. Ouch. No wonder Parrish is so pissed at me. He blames *me* for Tess’ bullshit. It’s a fucked-up way to think, but I know it’s exactly how it feels.

“Then she got there and saw the sleepover was coed and Parrish was banned from them for ... ever, I think. Yeah, I don’t think I saw him at a party or anything until he started sneaking out.”

I just stare back at Danyella, but I don’t know how to respond to that. How stifling. It makes *me* feel stifled. Am I only here because Tess is trying really, *really* hard with me? Or because she’d rather not have me around? I have no idea.

“How did he get so popular?” I ask, knowing even as I ask the question that it’s cringey as fuck. Popular? What does that even mean? Everyone at Whitehall is obsessed with Parrish and his friends, Chasm included. Apparently, Chasm is ‘nice’, but how does that explain Parrish’s academy fame?

Danyella just stares at me and then sighs dramatically.

“You really aren’t from around here, are you?” she asks, but I have no idea how to answer that, so I say nothing. “Parrish is the richest student at Whitehall, that’s why. Everyone is sucking up to him, obviously. That, and all their parents want to get under Paul’s knife.”

“That’s ...” I just pause and shake my head. “Oh my god, rich people suck ...”

Danyella nods, like that’s a fact she’s well aware of, but then shrugs.

“You’re one of us now, with a famous author for a mother. Did she tell you about the multi-million-dollar contract she just signed to sell the film rights of *Abducted Under a Noonday Sun*?”

Now I’m not just staring at Danyella, I’m gaping. Tess ... sold the film rights ... for the book that’s *about* me? And she didn’t think to mention it?

I drag the bottle of liquor close and turn it so I can see the label. It looks to be a very, very old bottle of Scotch. It’s probably stupid expensive too. I lift it to my lips and chug some, gasping and sticking out my tongue at the sour taste.

“Tess didn’t tell you, did she?” Danyella asks, holding out her phone for me to take. There it is right there, an article about my bio mom. I would’ve seen it, had I not put myself on a self-imposed social media/news break. “I’m sure she had a good reason.”

It’s an empty sentiment, and we both know it, but I appreciate it anyway.

“Aren’t you getting changed?” Lumen asks, appearing in a red party dress with so many sparkles it could light up the Fourth of July. “Here, zip me up.”

She turns around and pulls her gently curled blond hair over her shoulder.

“I’ll wear my uniform,” I say, yanking her zipper into place and then taking another swig from the bottle. “Let’s go.”

Because if Chasm is at the hangout, then Parrish probably is, too.

And I’m not excited about that at all.

I can hear the music before we turn the corner and find ourselves at the edge of a lake. “*Up*” by Cardi B is blasting out the speakers of someone’s car. Danyella pulls up beside the row of vehicles and we climb out. There aren’t many people here, maybe ten in total, including us, but there’s one person I spot right away.

“If it isn’t Pokémon pants,” Chasm says, arms crossed over his chest as he leans against the hood of his car. “Wouldn’t be a proper hang without you.”

I close the back door on Danyella’s car, bumping it with my hip to keep it that way. It clicks open regardless, and I sigh.

“Where’s your first-in-command?” I quip, moving over to stand beside him in my Whitehall uniform. I might not be as dressed-up as Lumen, but it’s infinitely better than old pj pants and an anime hoodie.

“Simp for Parrish?” he questions, raking that amber gaze over me and clicking his tongue in distaste. “Sorry to disappoint you, Little Sister, but he isn’t here. Seems somebody pissed him off after school.” My cheeks blaze as Chasm turns away, narrowing his eyes at one of his friends as the guy chugs a bottle of liquor and tosses it into the lake. My lip curls in distaste, but before I can even say anything, Chasm calls him out. “Dude, what the fuck? I swim in that lake during the summer, you dick. Don’t throw garbage in there.”

He turns back to me as I tuck my hands in my blazer pockets and raise an eyebrow at Lumen. She’s already got a

drink in hand, body working to the song as Danyella takes a seat and pulls out her sketchbook. She's got colored pencils, and it looks like she's going to draw the lake. Interesting.

"So, Kwang-seon," I start, and Chasm gives me a look, his own brow raised in surprise. "I hear you're not as shitty a person as you seem. Everyone at Whitehall seems to think that you're—" I almost choke on the next word, forcing it out the same way that Tess says *Dakota*—"charming."

"Is that the word on the town?" he asks, staring me down in just such a way that I feel like fidgeting. *No, Dakota, no. Bad girl. Don't let him see you squirm.* I stare right back at him instead, and he laughs. "Everyone who attends Whitehall is part of a powerful or influential family. Someday, I might need a favor. Might as well make friends now so I can be rich later."

"That's ... sort of a depressing reason to be nice," I reply, eying him up and down. *See? He really is a dick. He's not actually some sort of angel the way Lumen painted him.* "I don't ever recall you trying to be nice to me. The first time we met, you shoved me into a swimming pool." Chasm just continues to stare at me, the corner of his lip quirking up.

"I'm always willing to make exceptions," he says finally, giving a loose shrug of his shoulders. "Why should I be nice to you anyway? You stole my room. Where am I supposed to take girls now?"

"How about home?" I quip back, but he just shakes his head like that isn't even an option. Why he never wants to go home is a mystery I have yet to solve, but it's also not something I'm willing to press. Who knows what his living situation is? Just because he's rich, that doesn't mean he has a good homelife.

I decide to take a seat on the hood beside him, hopping up on the car as he lets out a small whistle.

"Really? This is a car, not a bench. Move your ass, Little Sister."

"Why? You're leaning on it," I challenge, and surprisingly, he laughs at me, turning his attention back to the small group

of his friends gathered near the lake. “By the way, can I call you Kwang-seon?”

“No.”

I elbow him in the side, and he flashes a look my way.

“Why not? It’s a pretty name.”

“Regardless, you can still only call me Chasm.”

“Then you can start calling me ‘Dakota’ and forget all about the ‘Little Sister’ bit.” I start to slide off the hood, intending on leaving Chasm in the dust so I can join Lumen instead. He surprises me by putting a hand on my arm, dragging reluctant goose bumps from my suddenly heated skin.

“Call me Kwang-seon if you want, but don’t be surprised if I don’t answer. You want a beer or something?” I shrug in response to his question and Chasm saunters off, dressed in dark jeans and a red zip-up hoodie over a white t-shirt. He’s undeniably gorgeous, that much is a fact, even if he seems to be nice to everyone *but* me.

“So, what did you mean about offering to tutor me?” I ask when he comes back and hands a beer out to me. His fingers burn mine when we touch, but he doesn’t seem to notice, so I pretend that I don’t either.

“You blew your chance at that this morning,” he tells me, chugging his drink as I roll the bottle between my suddenly sweaty palms.

“I’m sorry I said that,” I reply, and he stops mid-drink to stare at me like I’ve grown horns. “I’m not usually like that. It’s just something about Parrish that infuriates me.” Chasm looks briefly pleased and then supremely irritated again, all in the span of a single breath. “You and I don’t have to butt heads all the time, you know?”

“Maybe if you’re *real* nice to me tonight, I’ll change my mind?” he purrs, giving me another look, one that’s dark and heavy with innuendo. I don’t pay it much notice; Chasm McKenna looks at a lot of girls like that. Even still, I can’t help the hot flush that takes over my face and boobs. Luckily, he can only see one of those things.

“McKenna is an interesting last name,” I posit instead, trying to change the subject before I give myself away. “Irish?”

“My dad is white as fuck,” he tells me, removing a small tube from his back pocket. He pops the top and a pre-rolled joint slides out. “Irish, sure, I guess. My mom was his superior at their company’s South Korean branch.” I scoot a bit closer to Chasm to listen and he frowns at me.

“What? I’m always game for a good love story.”

“Love story? Whoever said this was a love story? My mom got fired for dating my dad, wound up pregnant and living with my grandmother, and then died from preeclampsia. Does that sound like a love story to you?”

I just stare back at him, too surprised to formulate a response for a moment.

“Preeclampsia ... that’s related to pregnancy, right?” I ask, and Chasm nods.

“I was gonna ask you about your family history, but then I remembered you don’t know any of it.”

A frown pulls my lips down.

“Was that necessary?” I query back, my mind drifting to Tess and her sketchy behavior when I asked about my birth father. Chasm is being a dick right now, but he isn’t wrong about what he’s saying. I know precisely zero about one half of my lineage. As for the other half, I know only that Tess’ parents are both dead and that she doesn’t have any other family outside of the Vanguards. That’s about it. “If you don’t want to talk about your past or your mother, that’s okay, but don’t be a dick to me just because you’re hurting.”

This time, when I go to leave, Chasm grabs my wrist.

“Stay. I’ll chill out a little when I smoke this,” he tells me, and I settle back in, watching him a bit warily from the corner of my eye. He lights the joint, takes a drag and then offers it out to me, but I decline. “Oh, that’s right? You’re a good girl; you don’t smoke.”

“But I *can* bake pot brownies like a boss,” I reply smugly, and Chasm tosses over a skeptical look. “It’s true. The secret is in the butter.” Weirdly enough, it was Saffron who taught me to make the brownies for my grandmother’s arthritis. I redirect my attention back to the beer in my hands. It seems easier somehow than trying to maintain eye contact with Chasm. “I might not know a lot about my biological family, but I could tell you all about the Banks. I could tell you how my great-grandmother used to do my hair every morning before school, that she collected hotel soaps and shampoos and kept them in a big basket in her bathroom.” I look back up to see Chasm’s pretty face softening in my direction. *Oh my god, be still my fucking heart!* He’s so goddamn stunning, it isn’t fair. The universe must hate me. “Or I could tell you that my grandparents met in front of a waterfall during a hike, that they got married a week later, and that they’ve been married for forty years. History isn’t just about DNA; it’s about people, experiences, and memories.”

“You’re a wise one, Little Sister,” he admits, almost grudgingly. I watch his full mouth curve around the joint as he takes a drag and then lets the smoke billow from his nostrils.

“*Gamsahabnida,*” I reply with a little bow, hoping that it really means *thank you* in Korean the way I’m hoping it does. Chasm lets out a sharp laugh and then reaches over to ruffle up my hair, like a kid sister. The move is affectionate, but also sort of annoying, and it takes me a moment to pinpoint why. *I don’t want him to think of me like a little sister, even if he calls me one.* I’ve seen Chasm’s responses to Kimber panting after him; he isn’t receptive in the least. *Probably the only girl in the world he isn’t receptive to.*

“Not bad. Is that what you’ve been doing, holed up in your room all week? Watching too many K-dramas. No wonder you’re so far behind in all your classes.” I elbow him, but all he does is laugh, smoking his joint and watching the sun set behind the lake. “*Working Bitch*” by Ashnikko starts to play, and I let out a small sound of excitement, hopping off the car and handing Chasm my drink. “What the hell are you doing?” he asks as I wait for the right part of the song.

Pretty sure I spent about three weeks in my room learning this dance (before I moved to Washington, obviously).

Chasm's brows go up as I start to go through the moves, but he doesn't seem unimpressed.

"You're just full of surprises, aren't you?" he asks as I keep dancing. There are parts of the song that don't have any associated moves, but I fill the blank spaces with my own, ones that I made up when I learned the dance originally. When I'm done, I pluck the beer from his hand and chug it, panting and sweating just a bit.

When I drop the bottle to my side and look at Chasm, I swear that there's something different in the way he's looking at me.

"What?" I ask, but he just shrugs again, finishing the joint and dropping the butt to the ground. He crushes it with his foot and then, surprisingly, picks it up and slides it back in the tube. Both items are chucked in the trash just before he grabs my hand and drags me toward the edge of the lake.

"Have y'all met Dakota?" he asks, lifting up my hand as I wave with the beer bottle in the other. "She learns dances for TikTok."

I snort and yank my arm from his grip.

"No, I learn dances on the off-chance Ashnikko will see my video and want to go out with me."

"Ooooh," Chasm whistles back, but he's pretty much the only person listening. Everyone here already knows who I am, so they've checked out. "So you're not just playing bisexual, you really are?"

"Are you jealous?" I shoot back, although I feel like in retrospect I'm going to think that was a weird thing to say. Chasm stares at me like the same thought might've crossed his mind, but then he just snorts and mutters in Korean which drives me nuts. One, because I really, really, *really* want to know what he's saying. Two, because a guy that speaks more than one language is hot. *Down hormones, down! Bad Dakota.*

Bad. “No need to be. You weren’t on my radar regardless of sex.”

“Harsh,” he murmurs, but then things are sort of weird because we’re staring at each other. I try to distract myself by making my way over to Lumen. She’s stripped off her dress and is wading into the lake in a white bikini top and pink boy shorts. Gotta give her credit for that, it’s cold as fuck in March in the PNW. Freezing, actually.

“Join me!” she calls out, trying to wave me over, but there’s little to no chance that my ass is getting off the dock and into ice-cold water. I squat down beside her as she wades out and several of the boys gaze after her longingly. I’ve noticed several of them watching her with stark admiration, but then looking back at me with a hint of nervousness. They’re not sure if we’re actually going out or not. “Question,” Lumen asks after a minute, hopping up onto the dock next to me and shivering slightly. She’s one brave chick. “Are you into me?”

That surprises me, so much so that I actually sit down on the deck, slipping my hands into the pockets of my blazer. I can feel the smooth surface of my phone as it buzzes with an incoming text. I’m still considering Lumen’s question when I slide it out to see who it’s from.

Parrish.

Tess is starting to panic. Call her. There’s a slight gap and then one last word. *Now.*

I purse my lips as adrenaline floods me. That boy really knows how to tick me off. He knows that he’s being helpful, that I’ll have no choice but to call Tess, but that he can ‘command’ me to do it, then revel in watching me ‘obey’ him. *Fucker. Idiot. Dickhead.*

“Give me just a second? I have to call my ... Tess.” The word *mom* just doesn’t cut it with me and her. Lumen raises her brows at me.

“My daddy’s a right-wing combat veteran with control issues and he doesn’t make me call home this much.”

“Trauma,” I say with a small shrug, and then I hit dial on Tess’ number. She answers right away.

“M—” Neither of us misses the wrong letter forming on the edge of her lips. She cuts it off quickly and redirects herself. “Dakota, how’s it going? Are you still at the Schaeffers’?”

A sudden fear cuts through me as I imagine her waiting outside, wanting to see or talk to me.

“Yep,” I reply carefully, unsure if I should just stop talking or try to make up an imagined activity. But then ... even if I were really back at Danyella’s house, I wouldn’t tell Tess anything.

“Do you mind if I speak to her?” Tess replies, her tone putting me on edge. There’s a primness to it that makes me want to scream. She is really and truly in charge of me, but just because she controls me, that doesn’t mean I’ll want a relationship with her later.

With a sigh, I stand up and head over to where Danyella’s sitting on the grass, her shoes kicked off—I’ve noticed that she wears a different pair of shoes every day—and her ankles crossed. She glances up as I hand the phone over, fully aware that Tess can hear the music playing in the background. That doesn’t matter; we’re just as likely to be listening to music at Danyella’s place.

“This is Danyella Schaeffer speaking,” she says, all formal and shit. I find myself grinning as she nods her head and replies diligently. “Of course, Ms. Vanguard.” Another pause. “Okay, thank you.” She hands the phone back to me.

“Don’t forget to call me just before bed,” Tess reminds me as I roll my eyes to the sky.

“Sure.”

There’s a long pause there where I’m afraid she might say something horrible like *I love you* and I’ll be forced to sputter out a response. I give a hasty goodbye and hang up before she can get the chance. Danyella offers up a sympathetic look.

“At least she cares.” She pats the grass beside her, and I sit down. We were supposed to discuss the, uh, medial preoptic

brain thingy or ... something, but I'd rather not so I decide not to remind Danyella.

"Lumen asked me if I was really into her," I admit, and Danyella turns to look at me, pushing her glasses up her nose and waiting for me to continue. My phone buzzes again, and I feel my heart rate speed up as I lift it to check. It's from Parrish, again.

Whatever you said, you pissed her off. I'll let you know if she leaves to head over there.

I smile for a brief moment at the idea of Parrish looking out for me, and then frown hard after. Why would he let me know about Tess if he didn't think I was somewhere I wasn't supposed to be? I glance over my shoulder to see Chasm leaning against the trunk of a tree with his phone in his hand, head bent over the screen.

"Well?" Danyella queries politely.

"Just a minute. I need to check on something." With a sigh, I push up to my feet and move over to stand beside him. It only takes him a second to look up, and I reach out to pluck the phone from his hand.

Why would you even ask me that? is the most recent text from Parrish. The one before it, sent from Chasm's phone says *Do you like her?*

Her? Who's her?

"This isn't about me, is it?" I ask as Chasm snatches the phone back with a slight curl of his lips. He looks like Parrish when he does that, and it bothers me. "It is about me. I knew it."

"This isn't about you," he snaps back, shoving his hair back from his forehead and giving me a look. With his fingers playing in his hair, I take note of the tattoos that stop at his wrist. It's like, he only has them in places where they could be hidden easily. Coincidence? "I've got a crush that *you* don't need to know about."

"Oh?" I ask, planting my hands on my hips. I can strike a fierce ass pose with my half-black and half-lime green hair.

Gamer Girl Extraordinaire. “Why not? Because *she is me?*” I’m grinning as I ask, but not because I really think his crush is me. Not even.

“She’s pretty much the exact opposite of you,” Chas says, lifting both of his dark brows up and playing with one of his lip rings with his tongue. “Good grades, athletic build, outdoor interests. Not some Ashnikko simp with a crappy Twitch channel.”

“Mm-hmm,” I murmur, crossing my arms over my chest. “She’s all that, huh?”

“She dresses up for parties,” he adds as I laugh. There’s this weird tightness in my chest that some might mistake for jealousy, but I have no idea where that would come from so I brush it off and keep smiling. “I like blondes so, she checks that box for sure.”

He slides some gum from his pocket and pops a piece into his mouth, offering another up to me. I wave my hand to decline it, glancing over at Lumen. That would make sense, if he were crushing on her. Everyone else here is. That, and didn’t she climb into his car at the coffee shop like she’d been waiting for him? I remember, too, how bitter he seemed when I asked about Parrish at the party, and he told me that he was likely with Lumen.

A lightbulb goes off and I let out a whistle.

“What?” he asks, glancing over at me with those gorgeous amber eyes of his. Like, they’re brown, but they’re so light, as if someone placed a golden overlay atop his irises. When they catch the sun, ugh. Not fair how pretty he is.

“Lumen wants to know if I’m into her. I think she might ask me out for real.” I clasp my hands together behind my back and turn to look at Chasm. “Unless you can think of a reason that I shouldn’t?”

He stops chewing his gum for a moment and just stares at me. Our gazes lock and I start to feel sweat form on my lower back. What the hell is going on here? All I want to know is if

he's into Lumen or not, but he's looking at me like I've asked something completely different.

"A reason you shouldn't?" he repeats, and then something else in Korean. And then, "shit, fuck it."

Before I know it, his hands are on my shoulders and he's turning me around so that my back is to the trunk of the tree. As I turn my head to the side, all I can think is how his fingers look, leaving indents in the stiff fabric of my blazer. It feels suddenly hot out here, the sunlight long and sticky, leaving droplets of sweat to slide slow and agonizingly down my spine.

Chasm leans in toward me and my breath escapes in a rush. My hands automatically go to his t-shirt, fisting in the fabric and feeling the tight, lean muscles underneath. He very carefully reaches up and touches two fingers to the side of my face, turning my head back so that I'm looking right at him.

There's nothing stopping me from kissing him, right? Like, he's not my stepbrother. He isn't my sister's boyfriend. He's just ... a guy from Whitehall Academy.

Also, how did I go from having kissed nobody to having kissed ... well, it's about to be three people, isn't it?

My lids feel suddenly heavy though, and my limbs relax as Chasm's fingers grip my shoulder just a bit harder as his other hand slides across the curve of my waist. The fabric drags across my sticky skin, making me gasp. The sound hits Chasm's lips and he lets out a small groan, moving ever closer to my mouth. I can almost taste him it seems like. I can certainly smell him, like peppermint ice cream with dark chocolate chips. *Oh my god, I really do have a fetish for pretty scents.*

Our lips brush—and I mean just *barely* brush—like a kiss of the wind before it's gone, and Chasm is pulling back with a look of horror on his face. His lip curls like he's just remembered who I am—his best friend's hated stepsister—and not Lumen or whoever else his blonde, good-grade getting crush is.

“Fuck, what did I almost just do?” he murmurs as I shove him back and he stumbles, dragging his arm across his mouth like he’s lost his damn mind. He’s made out with—and probably screwed—dozens of girls and somehow, I’m the one that he just can’t stomach to touch?

“Why does everyone keep telling me how *nice* you are?” I blurt out, fisting my hands in my skirt as I struggle to pull in a deep breath. *Calm, Dakota, stay calm.* Only I’m wildly and irrationally annoyed. “You’re a useless manwhore who copies his best friend because he doesn’t know who he is on the inside.”

Chasm whistles at me again, but it’s most definitely not in appreciation this time. Somehow, I feel like I see the front of his pants tented before he turns away from me with a scowl of disgust. “Here we go again,” he throws over his shoulder, scanning the horizon like he’s looking for the nearest escape route. “Keep throwing insults, Little Sister. See how far that gets you with me: *fucking nowhere.*”

And then he’s storming across the grass, and I’m left holding in a scream.

That fucker! I think, gritting my teeth briefly before forcing out an exhale. Why am I doing this, letting him get to me? I let Parrish get to me, too, and look how well that’s going. I’ve got to stay strong here.

As I watch in disbelief, Chasm makes his way over to the drunkest girl he can find and starts hitting on her.

It sounds bad, but just wait. Just wait. I was mad, too.

My jaw drops with disgust, and I practically stumble over to where Lumen’s sitting, on a towel beside Danyella.

“Is he really doing that?” I whisper, realizing that I have yet to answer Lumen’s question. Am I into her? Based on my reactions as of late, I seem to be into everybody. Parrish. Chasm. Maxx. Ugh. I probably shouldn’t trust myself in the romance or sex department for a while; clearly my judgment is muddled.

“Doing what?” Lumen asks, her gaze following my outstretched hand. “Oh, Chas? He always hits on the drunkest girl at the party. Usually takes her home, too. I’d say nothing shady was going on because no one’s ever said anything, but he is one of the most popular guys at Whitehall ...”

“I’ve talked to him about it in the past.” Danyella tosses her braids over her shoulder and gives me a look. “And Lumen’s right: I’ve asked some of the girls but none of them have a bad word to say about him. Half the school seems to be in love with the guy.”

I frown hard, my stomach weak with the idea that Chasm could be taking advantage of drunk girls. He always brags about how many girls he’s done it with—in my bed, in particular. I frown harder.

“Yeah, okay, you are *not* into me,” Lumen says with a long sigh, glancing over at me in an assessing sort of way. “Too bad. You’re cute, too.”

“How do you know I’m not?” I retort back, and she laughs, her blond hair wet and hanging in clumps around her shoulders. She gathers it together and wrings it out while I watch. I cannot even believe she dunked herself in icy Washington water. That’s cray.

“Because you’re into Chasm,” she tells me, and I scoff.

“I’m into Parrish,” I blurt, and then immediately regret it as both girls turn to look at me. Wait. Did I just say that aloud? Did I *mean* that?

“Oh,” Lumen says, and then she frowns, too. “Well, I’m sorry then.” She gives me a pitying look that I’ll likely remember later. “That sucks.”

“Why?” I ask as Chasm starts to lead the girl up the hill, toward a house I hadn’t really paid much attention to now. Ah. Figures. One of the students here must live on this property. It looks like a park, but it could be part of some fancy-pants yard.

“Because being into Parrish is a lot worse than being into Chasm.”

I glance back at Lumen but Danyella's nodding like she agrees wholeheartedly.

"I'll be right back," I tell them both, and then I'm up and running in the direction that Chasm just went. *This piece of work!* I think, imagining him taking some drunk girl back to her room and ... doing something. I won't let myself delve into visions of what could be, intent just on stopping it. And yelling at him. And then being disappointed in myself for even considering kissing a guy like this.

There's a loose cluster of trees that guard the house from the lake, morphing into the thickness of woods behind it. I slow my run briefly, blinking in surprise at the sight. This place looks oddly familiar to me, like I might've been here before.

Like I might've been *chased* through here before.

"I knew it," I breathe, looking up at the canopy above my head. It's about sunset now, and I was last here in full dark, but I can feel it somehow. This is where I woke up that night. *I wasn't sleepwalking*, I think with a jolt of fear, moving along a stone path that leads toward what must be the back door of the house.

Chasm was involved that night. Parrish, too, probably. How could I have missed that?

My hand goes to my neck as I step up onto the back porch and notice that the door is already cracked. There's no point in knocking, right, if what I'm here to do is teach Chasm about proper consent with a kick to the balls?

Slowly, I push the door open, running over that night in my mind. The way the person chasing me smelled, the blood that splattered when I hit the second attacker, the prick of the needle in my neck. Isn't that a fucked-up prank for high schoolers? Even bullies like Parrish and Chasm?

But then I think about the fact that Chasm just picked up a drunk girl from the side of the lake and brought her ... here. Wherever here is.

I step into the house and pause, noticing a row of photos along the wall beside me. There's a small boy with jet-black

hair posed with a smile in front of an old woman with silver hair. She's sitting on a wood porch with one leg propped up, her elbow thrown across her knee. In front of the pair of them is a basket filled with vegetables.

With a squint, I lean in and take note of the boy's face, of the familiar shape of his mouth and eyes, the amber color of his irises. Oh. *Oh*. This is Chasm's house?

I pause, feeling suddenly more awkward than if it were the drunk girl's house, or some other random person that's still hanging out down by the lake. My left hand drops to my side as I notice the shoes kicked off near the back staircase. I kick my own off—I'll try to respect Chasm's dad, even if Chas is an idiot—and make my way up the stairs.

That's when I hear his voice, low and cool and calm. The sound of it gives me chills, but not in the way I was expecting. I'm *pleased* to hear it. And that bothers me. I move forward across the hardwood floors, ready to throw open the first door I see, when I hear something that surprises me.

"You can sleep here as long as you need and go home when you feel better," Chasm is saying, and I find myself leaning forward so I can peak through the crack in the door. The drunk girl is sitting on the edge of a bed, a blanket wrapped around her, and a glass of water and some pills on the nightstand.

"Thank you," she breathes, slurring her words slightly.

Chasm sighs and puts his hands in his pockets.

"You should always watch how much you drink at parties," he says, pushing the water glass closer to her. "Even at small hangouts like this. Boys can be monsters sometimes. Trust me: I am one and I know how they are."

"You're the best, Kwang-seon," she hiccups, and I frown again. *That asshole!* He lets other people—other girls, for that matter—call him by his real name? What a hypocrite. A pang of hurt rings in my belly, but I ignore it, watching as he urges the girl to drink the water and take what I'm assuming are painkillers. As soon as he's sure that she's had enough to

drink, he plugs in her phone to charge, and hands her a remote to the wall-mounted TV.

When the girl reaches out a hand to touch his arm, Chasm very gently pushes her away.

“You don’t think I’m pretty?” she pouts, like she’s on the verge of a drunken meltdown.

“You’re gorgeous, babe, but I’m not a predator; you’re plastered.” He goes to stand up and she grabs onto the bottom of his shirt, clinging to him with tears sliding down her face. How Chasm handles this situation will determine whether I kill him or not.

Metaphorically speaking. I’m no serial killer.

“You slept with like, three of my friends, but I’m not good enough? I’m not hot enough?”

“You mean three of your friends lied and told you they slept with me because they didn’t want to admit to puking all over my carpet and leaving me to clean it up. I told each and every one of them what I’m going to tell you: *I don’t fuck drunk chicks.*” He untangles the girl’s fingers from his shirt as she cries. “Jesus, you won’t even remember this in the morning.” He swipes a hand over his face like he’s suddenly exhausted. “Leave whenever you want, even if it’s tomorrow. I can give you a ride home.” He turns around and heads for the door so quickly that I’m caught off-guard. My attempts to scurry away are foiled by a potted plant that I end up knocking over, spilling dirt and small rocks all over the floor.

I cringe as I hear Chasm step into the hallway. I’m kneeling down by the plant, holding onto the edges of the pot and wishing I could disappear into the floor.

“What the fuck are you doing in my house?” he asks with a long-suffering sigh, moving over to help me right the plant. We squat side by side, scooping up dirt with our hands and putting it back into the pot. Sorry, plant.

“I wanted to see what you were doing with a drunk and vulnerable girl,” I say, lifting my chin and knowing that my

cause was worthwhile, even if I was wrong. More often than not, I'd probably be right to make the same assumption again.

Chasm goes very still beside me, and it becomes immediately obvious that I've offended him somehow. I turn back to look at him, remembering the drunk girl from the party that threw her arms around him, the one he disappeared with. Does he do this a lot, rescue drunk girls from parties?

"It's my business what I do with the girls I like," he snaps, and it occurs to me that the girl in that room—in what I think is probably *his* room—is blonde. Pretty sure I recognize her from some of Lumen's classes, all the fancy, advanced, AP ones that I wouldn't last a day in. So she's smart. She could be the crush he was talking about.

"Is that girl your crush?" I ask, and he sighs, shoving that lightning-bolt colored hair away from his forehead with a deep-set frown.

"She doesn't creep into my house uninvited and spy on me, so yeah, she could easily be my crush. I already told you: she's the opposite of you." Chasm stands up suddenly and yanks me along with him. "What did you hear?" he demands, like I've encountered some terrible state secret.

I yank my arm from his grip, trying not to think about the way he said *fuck it* just before he tried to kiss me.

"What are you planning on doing with her?" I demand as he grunts in annoyance and grabs my arm, attempting to drag me toward the stairs. I resist, digging my heels into the wood floor. With a sharp yank, I manage to free myself from his grip again and turn around, scrambling across the floor and bursting into his bedroom with a crash.

The girl in the bed sits up suddenly, her cheeks and forehead red.

We stare at each other as Chasm curses behind me.

"Are you okay?" I ask, because I can't not check. What kind of person would I be if I didn't? "Do you need me to call anyone? Or take you home?"

The girl blinks at me a few times before turning her attention to Chasm and then back to me again.

“I’m fine,” she replies, sounding confused but a hell of a lot more sober than she was a few minutes ago. Pretty sure I startled some sense into her. “Just had a bit too much to drink.”

“Little Sister ...” Chasm warns from over my shoulder, but I just stay where I am, taking another step into the room. It’s austere as hell, as personality free as my own room was when Tess first showed it to me. Is this really Chasm’s room? Because it doesn’t display a single thing about his personality.

“He didn’t try anything untoward?” I ask, and the girl shakes her head.

“He doesn’t want me, but I hear he’s pretty easy. You can have him.” She smirks at Chas, but then her face sours like she’s going to puke, and she’s scrambling out of the bed and disappearing into what appears to be an attached bathroom.

The door slams shut behind her, and I can suddenly feel the weight of being alone with Chasm like an iron collar around my neck.

“Get out of my room. Get out of my house. Or I swear to god, Little Sister ...”

I whirl around on him, my cheeks and tits flaming, my breathing heavy.

“I’m no more your little sister than I am Parrish’s,” I snap back, unsure where the anger is even coming from. “Sorry I found out your secret, but you get why I was concerned, right?”

“You think I’m a monster, I get it,” Chasm spits out, scowling at me again. According to school gossip, I’m the only person he scowls at like that. Everyone else, he’s nice to apparently. “Because I’m the type of guy who’d take advantage of a drunk girl.”

“That’s the persona you put on!” I shout back, unsure why it is I’m shouting at all. The air feels thick and hot between us, and it’s pissing me off. “You could’ve just told me you watch

over drunk girls.” *His knight-like persona is coming out again.* “Besides, it’s not like you’re some innocent virgin either. You’re always bragging about—”

With a yelp, Chasm grabs me and throws me over his shoulder. I’m tempted to bite him, but who knows what I’d catch? He carries me down the stairs like it’s nothing, deposits me onto the back porch, and then slams the door right in my face. I’m still gaping after him when he turns the porch light on and flicks the dead bolt.

And I didn’t even get to confront him about the kidnapping prank.

With a huff, I turn around and shove my fingers through my hair, shaking out the loose waves and closing my eyes tight to get ahold of myself. There’s just something about Parrish and Chasm that gets me frothing. A few deep breaths of the cool Pacific Northwest air, and I remember where I am and who I’m with.

Lumen and Danyella.

Yanking my phone from my pocket, I start to answer Danyella’s most recent text and then pause, lifting my head up and watching the branches of the trees rustling above my head. A prickle starts at the base of my spine and travels up, like the fingers of a skeleton stroking my skin.

It creeps me the fuck out, but I can’t explain why. It’s like that night, that night I thought I was sleepwalking but maybe wasn’t. Ugh.

“Shit,” I murmur, tucking some hair behind my ear and finishing up my text. *At Chasm’s house, omw back.*

I keep my phone clutched in my hand and hop off the porch step, adjusting the buttons on my blazer. Sometimes I hate the uniform—lack of self-expression and all that—and sometimes I like it because it feels like I’m in an anime or something. That’s what I focus on as I start the walk back down the hill. It isn’t far; I can already see the lake and the small shapes of my new friends in the distance.

About halfway down, I swear that I can hear someone creeping in the bushes beside me. I spin quickly, glaring into the growing shadows around me and frowning.

“Chasm, for real,” I snap, feeling that hot, itchy anger take over me again. The thing is, this time it’s underwritten with a cold fear. A person acting all sus in the bushes? Never a good thing. I wait there for a moment, hoping that I’m right, that it really is Chasm ... but knowing instinctually that it isn’t.

With a quick glance down at my phone, I realize that I’ve somehow missed a few texts from Parrish.

Don’t mess around with Chasm. You and Kimber are fucking thirsty. Back off.

My teeth clench again, and I almost briefly forget about the person moving in the bushes. A twig snaps, and my heart leaps into my throat, convincing me to start moving again. The wind teases my skirt up around my thighs, causing the plaid fabric to billow. That’s when my neck begins to throb, and I know I need to get the hell out of there.

Sprinting down the hill, I end up falling on my ass and sliding part of the way down, hitting the flat ground near the lake and collapsing to my knees. I’m panting as I glance over my shoulder, but I don’t see anyone lurking in the evening shadows.

“So fucking creepy,” I murmur, standing up and brushing the dirt off my knees. I feel silly for overreacting, but I would’ve felt even worse if I’d underreacted and something happened. *Who would be stalking you, Dakota? Who?* As a teenage girl, I’m more than well-aware of how predatory men can be, but this feels like something different. It rings a different set of alarm bells, and I don’t recognize the sound.

“Are you ready to head out?” Lumen asks as I look up and find her waiting in a towel beside a cluster of blackberry bushes.

“I’m ready,” I agree, but I can’t resist just one, last look over my shoulder as I walk away.

Still, there's nothing. Somehow, I feel like there is most definitely *something*.

Later that night, when I part Danyella's curtains and peer out, I swear I see a shadow watching us from the edge of the property. But when I run down the hall and flick on the outside light, there's nothing there.

I must be losing my goddamn mind.

Or ... somebody else already has.

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CHAPTER 13

When I get home on Saturday, I head straight for Parrish's room and throw open the door which, surprisingly, is unlocked. He lifts his head up from his sketchbook to stare at me through a slitted gaze.

“What the fuck do you want?” he drawls, as if he didn't go out of his way to embarrass me in front of the entire school. I'm starting to see that Kimber's assessment of the situation was accurate: if I hadn't somehow endeared myself to Lumen, I might very well be in trouble here.

“You were creeping around in the bushes outside of Chasm's place last night,” I snap, shoving the door closed behind me and putting my back against it. Parrish continues to do his prince of the angry sloth routine where he moves like he's wading through molasses, pushing himself into a sitting position and frowning at me like I've lost my damn mind. “And Danyella's, too.”

“Why the *fuck*,” he hisses, shoving some of that pretty tousled hair back from his face, “would I bother doing that? If I wanted to see you naked, all I'd have to do is wait for you to change with your door cracked which, I might add, you do on the regular. Trust me: I've seen enough, and I'm not impressed.”

Anger ripples through me, a boulder crashing into the serene surface of a lake. I had a good time last night, great actually. For the first time in weeks, I'm starting to see through the murky shadows of my situation. I don't have to like Tess; I don't even have to like Washington. But I can have friends, I

can enjoy the experience of having younger siblings. I won't let Parrish ruin that for me.

"Nice. Keep body-shaming me, asshole. It helps emphasize your natural level of maturity."

Parrish swings his long legs over the side of the bed and stands up, moving over to where I'm standing. My body betrays me, my breath stilling as that angry heat mixes with my natural attraction toward him.

"Ask yourself this: would I waste my Friday night hiding in the bushes on the off-chance that I might see you having a pillow fight with *Lumen* of all people? Danyella, the theater geek? Or is it you that I'm supposed to be interested in?"

I force myself to exhale as Parrish reaches around me, going for the handle of his bedroom door. I clamp my hand over his to stop him from turning it, and my stomach flip-flops dangerously.

"If it wasn't you, then who was it?" I demand. "Someone was out there; someone was watching us."

"How the fuck should I know? There are perverts everywhere," he says, trying to turn the doorknob again. I tighten my grip on his hand, and he turns those toasted almond eyes of his over to me. Our faces are stupid close, like way closer than any two normal people would ever stand. "You seem to think you have a stalker who kidnaps you in the middle of the night and returns you unharmed to your bed. Maybe it was him? Like I said, if you're that worried, go tell Tess *all* about it and see how much harder your life gets."

Parrish yanks his hand back and turns away, returning to his bed and his abandoned sketchbook. He lounges back into his pillows and starts to sketch again, like I'm not even here. That infuriates me. It's worse, I think, when he pretends I don't exist versus when he actively ridicules me. Why is that?

"Don't ignore me," I demand, moving over to his bed and then climbing onto it. He whips his gaze up to glare at me and scowls. We do that a lot in one another's presence, scowl like

that. “I know it was you. It had to be. With Chasm tagging along, probably.”

“Why are you so goddamn obsessed with Chasm?” he bites back, slamming the cover on his sketchbook closed before I can snag a peek at it. “If you like him so much, ask him out.”

“I don’t date manwhores,” I tell him, biting my lower lip and then lunging forward to grab the sketchbook. Parrish doesn’t expect it, so I manage to pull the move off, yanking the book away from him and then rolling off the bed and onto the floor. As I scramble away, I flip it open to see what he’s been working on.

There’s a dead body with a puddle of blood nearby.

“Whoa, need to see a psychologist much?” I ask just before Parrish snatches the sketchbook back from me. “You need to stop listening to those murder Podcasts; they’re not doing much for your psyche.”

“Get out of my room,” he breathes, just like he did the night I got kidnapped. “Now.”

“Make me.”

The words come out before I can stop them, and we’re left standing there toe to toe, the air thickening and heating with unspoken things, forbidden things, taboo things. *He kissed your neck*, I remind myself, thinking of that night again, but for entirely different reasons. *Why? If he hates you so much, then why?*

Parrish just stands there, and then he smiles at me in a way that I can’t explain.

That’s about ... two seconds before he leans down and presses his mouth against mine. Just like that. His tongue slips between my lips or maybe I part them for him, I’m not sure, but either way, as soon as he starts kissing me, I start kissing back.

That’s when things get really weird. Parrish’s right arm sweeps me up and he drags me closer, crushing our bodies together. The fingers of his left hand tangle in my hair as he tastes me, slow and languorous, like he has all the time in the

world. *Stupid, annoying, irritating, rude, piggish, selfish rich boy*, I think, but ohmyfuckinggod, he's delicious, too.

"Stop telling everyone at school I have a small dick," he whispers, pulling back slightly. He can't hide the way he's panting, the way his eyes are half-lidded and heavy. It's painfully obvious that he's attracted to me—even if he doesn't want to be. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were doing it just to keep the other girls away from me."

I'm shaking now, completely and utterly confused by this hot-cold shit. How am I supposed to interpret this?

"You said you were going to bury me, remember? What else can I do but fight back? We could call a truce, if you want."

Parrish studies me for a moment, his fingers lightly massaging the back of my head. It feels good, too good actually. I could stand like this for hours, my hands resting on the front of his t-shirt, that citrusy smell of his playing tricks on my senses.

"That could work," he muses, looking up at the ceiling for a moment. "But you have to correct the lie: we both know I have a huge dick." I give him a look and he laughs. "Well, I do. Just the other night you were feeling me up; don't tell me you didn't notice."

He's referring to that moment in the bathroom. While I wouldn't exactly call that 'feeling him up', I did get a bit of a handful ...

"If I find some way to correct the micropenis rumor, you'll lay off a little?" I ask, heart thundering, wondering what's going to change between us after this moment. I mean, we're having a thing right now, aren't we? The way Parrish is staring down at me, I can tell that this is a pivotal moment for us.

"Say it, and I'll leave you alone," he says, lifting up a hand and offering me his pinkie finger. "Pinkie promise."

I give him a skeptical look in response. *As if your heart isn't thundering like crazy right now, Kota*. Hah. If I can't even lie to myself, how am I supposed to stand here in front of Parrish and act like I'm unaffected by his presence?

“Say what?” I reply with a sigh, reaching up to curl my pinkie around his. We hook fingers and my pulse goes crazy, blood roaring in my head, dizziness sweeping over me and leaving me wavering.

“Tell me I have a huge dick,” he replies, and I cock a brow. “That’s it, all you have to say, and I’ll leave you alone.” I narrow my eyes at him. Like I said, I enjoy a good idiom. *If it seems too good to be true, then it probably is.*

My gaze shifts over to his desk, to where his phone is lying, propped up and resting in just such a way ... I tear my hand from his and scramble over to it, snatching it before he can stop me. Just as I thought: the fucker’s recording this.

“You royal piece of shit,” I grind out, ducking into the hallway just in time to slam into Tess.

Oh.

What fantastic timing.

“Royal piece of shit?” she queries, looking up and over my head at her stepson. “What’s going on over here?”

Quick as lightning, Parrish snatches the phone from my grip and does ... something with it. When Tess holds out her hand, he passes it over with a scowl, giving me a look that quite clearly says *keep your mouth shut*. Not like I was about to cop to making out with my stepbrother. What would Tess do if she were to find out? I have a really good feeling that I don’t want to find out.

After a moment of scrolling through Parrish’s phone, Tess hands it back and does her best to smile at me. Still, there’s something in her gaze that bothers me. It must bother Parrish, too, because his mood takes an even deeper nosedive into the abyss.

“Tell your daughter to stay the hell out of my room,” he hisses, as if he wasn’t just trying to film me saying he had a big dick. Likely he’d make a nice little cut of the footage and post it online. *I hate him. I should’ve kissed Chasm at the lake.*

I scowl but say nothing. Tess is saying enough for me, giving Parrish a stern look that’s leagues better than the one

she had on just a few minutes ago. *She senses something developing between us, doesn't she?* I feel suddenly itchy and disturbed by the idea, like I've been caught doing something wrong.

"Your sister," Tess inserts forcefully, and I swear, both Parrish and I cringe a little, "should not be in your room without your permission." And here it's my turn to get a stern look. "But don't refer to her like that, you know better."

"Refer to her as what? The stranger that she is?" Parrish questions, and then he slams the door closed and Tess gives a deep frown. She might be overbearing and controlling, but she also spoils her kids. It's a toxic combination.

I can see it as she turns to me, looking me over with that same, sad desperation. Despite that, Tess has yet to give me more than fifteen minutes of her time this entire week.

We stand there in the hallway, just staring at each other for a moment. I wish we weren't though, because the longer I stare at her, the more I see of myself in her face. That bothers me, immensely.

"I know he comes across a certain way ..." Tess begins, her familiar raven-black eyes shifting to one side, toward the window at the end of the hall that shows off a sliver of lake. "But he's really a sweet boy." She looks back at me, and I do my best to stifle a snort.

"I'm sure he is," I choke out, thinking of Parrish snatching Kimber's phone and chucking it out the window. *A real peach. A rotten one. Teeming with maggots.* "We're just ... clashing a bit." And by clashing a bit, I mean ... fighting and then kissing? Somehow, I really, really, really seem to like the fighting and kissing. In that order, too.

I could never tell Tess that. I'm sure of it. She isn't the type of parent to say *well, you two aren't related, and you just met, so it's okay if you want to ...* Do what? Date? When we live in the same house? When we're calling the same woman 'mother'? I want to scream.

Instead, I make myself smile. If I get hurt, and I smile, then I can remember who I am. When I react, I feel like I'm hearing a stranger use my mouth, like I'm Mia Patterson with a quippy comeback instead of calm, cool, chilled-out Dakota Banks.

Tess puts her hand on my shoulder, giving the barest of squeezes.

"You'll figure it out." She gives me a sly half-smile that I almost want to return. But then I remember that she offered me a nose job for my birthday, and the urge dies before it can take root. "I've somehow learned to live with Paul," she says, giving a slight tilt of her head. I should laugh, probably, but instead I just stand there.

The silence stretches strangely between us as Tess reaches up to adjust her glasses. I've literally never seen her wear them before, not this whole time I've lived here. *A whole three weeks. When I still have years to go before I can escape. This is going to drag, that's for sure.*

"Well, I've got a deadline," she posits, and then just stands there awkwardly for a minute. Out in public, Tess Vanguard puts on the persona of a deeply confident and impossibly successful person. In private like this, she sort of fits the stereotypical shy and hermit-like writer, the type who'd happily live in a cave in the middle of the woods and let an owl fly their manuscript into the publisher.

Looking at her, I decide that there's only one side of that persona I like. If having both facets is what it takes to be a writer then it is most *definitely* not a career choice I'd ever entertain.

"I should probably get started on my homework," I say, just before I hear footsteps coming up the stairs. A moment later, Chasm appears with an iPad tucked under his arm. He looks pissed at me, but he gives an award-winning smile when Tess glances his way.

"Parrish has locked himself in," she says, gesturing with her chin in the direction of her son's room.

“That’s okay,” Chasm says, shrugging his shoulders loosely. “I’m not here to see Parrish.”

The expression on Tess’ face is worth about a million words, but I’ll let her write them since that isn’t my thing. Freaked-out is how I’d describe it, actually. She looks between the two of us with surprise for a moment, but Chasm makes certain she doesn’t get the wrong idea.

“Dakota is behind in every class,” Chasm says, flipping his iPad around so that Tess can see it. There’s some sort of Japanese worksheet on *hiragana* and *katakana* that I vaguely recognize from seeing my first day in class. There was a quiz today, but Ms. Miyamoto excused me from it. “I’m here to tutor her.”

“Oh.” Tess blinks a few times in surprise, pushing messy hair back from her face. She doesn’t let anyone outside the family see her like this, without the power-suit and the expensive heels. Chasm is included in that elite group, apparently. Chasm and Maxx both, for that matter. “Your dad’s okay with that?”

There’s the slightest look of hesitation on Chasm’s face before he shrugs his shoulders again.

“As long as I’m on track to be valedictorian, he doesn’t care,” he drawls, giving a tight smile as Tess slides her phone from the pocket of her sweats and sighs.

“If you two want to use the living room, I’ll kick the kids out. But I’ve really got to get this damn book done. I’m running two chapters behind, and my editor isn’t happy.” She glances back up at us, but Chasm clearly knows how to handle her.

“We’ll leave the door open,” he promises, but he closes it as soon as she disappears into her office and we can both hear the clacking of her typewriter.

“Did you really come here to tutor me?” I ask as Chasm yanks an unopened box of my clothes over and sits down beside it. He points to the spot on the floor beside him.

“You, here,” he tells me, turning up the brightness on his screen and holding out an Apple pencil. “Take this and start copying characters. As you draw them, pronounce them.” I give him a skeptical look that he returns with a challenging one of his own. I can only imagine what Parrish is going to think when he finds out that his best friend stopped by to see ... me?

If he hadn't turned up his stupid music so loud, then maybe he'd have already realized that Chasm was here.

With some reluctance, I take a seat beside Chasm and pull his iPad into my lap.

“In exchange for this,” he starts, and I look up because I just knew it. There’s no such thing as a free lunch, is there? “Don’t tell anyone about what you saw at my house.” The way he looks at me, there’s a tenderness to his expression, like he’s afraid of being found out. As if being a nice guy and helping drunk girls out is something to be ashamed of.

Unless ... he’s protecting the girls and not himself?

Since Lumen knew the girl Chasm took to his room (she knows everyone), I texted from her phone to see how she was doing. *He was great, gave me my space, took me home in the morning. No wonder all the girls like him.* There’s something distinctly sexy when a guy *isn't* a creep or a perv. So why put on the display like he is, flashing his feathers like a peacock every day at school?

I just stare at him.

“You’re a virgin, I get it. I won’t tell anyone.” I look back down at the iPad, but the letters may as well be an alien language for all that I understand them. *Deep breath, Dakota. You watch plenty of anime, you got this.*

“Did I say I was a virgin?” Chasm grits out through his teeth, reaching over and curling my fingers tightly around the Apple pencil. My hand burns where he touches me, but I refuse to give him any indication that I’m in the process of catching on fire. “Just don’t tell anyone about Friday night. Write. I have other things to do today.”

“You’re a virgin,” I repeat, but I do as he says. He doesn’t respond to me, but whenever my attention starts to wander, Chasm flicks me in the nose and I throw the pencil at him. When he packs up to leave however, I look down at the worksheet and realize with a start that I’ve started to memorize most of the characters. Three hours have passed, and I barely noticed.

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” he tells me, standing up and collecting his things. As he turns to leave, I finally remember what it is that I meant to ask him about last night.

“Hey, did you ever ...” *God, this is going to sound weird.* “Did you ever prank me by dragging me out to the woods at night?” I look up to see the expression on his face and see him staring at me like I’ve lost my mind.

“God, you’re weird,” he replies with a roll of his eyes, stepping into the hall and closing my door behind him. I stare after him for a moment and then grab my phone, setting it up on the tripod and making sure that it’s facing directly toward my bed.

If there is someone creeping around in the dark, I’ll catch them eventually.



CHAPTER 14

I'd easily forgotten Paul's casual mention of the talk show until several weeks later, when Tess' knock wakes me up at an ungodly hour. *What is wrong with these people?! Are they all androids? Do they not need to sleep?*

I force myself out of bed, opening the door to find my biological mother waiting for me.

"I was hoping we might go out for breakfast together today?" she asks, and even though the idea of spending a day alone with her makes my anxiety spike through the roof, I'm also relieved. As much as Tess says she loves me, all of the things she's done thus far regarding me have really been for *her*. What was best for her. She hasn't really tried to get to know me.

A small spark of hope fires in my chest as I mull the thought over and fight back my initial reservations. A mistake I'll regret later, I'm sure.

I end up nodding and yawning at the same time.

"That sounds nice," I admit, because it does. It isn't that I don't want to get to know Tess or her other kids. It's just ... why did she have to rip me away from my family, from everything that I knew? Just to bring me someplace where I feel like an afterthought or a relic at best, a burden or an inconvenience at worst. It's been an entire *month* since I last spoke to my grandparents, and I feel more homesick than ever.

"Meet me downstairs in an hour," she says, and then pauses, still dressed in pale blue silk pj's with flowy pants and a

matching cami. She gives my *Overwatch* pajamas a curious sort of look before grimacing slightly. Last week, she made a light suggestion about dying my hair a more natural color; I ignored her. “Oh.” Tess turns away and then pauses to glance back at me, like she’s just thought of something. “And wear something nice. We’re going to the club.”

Heh.

The country club for breakfast.

My small spark of hope flares out in an instant, but I do the dutiful daughter thing, showering and fixing the green and black hair she hates. I even put on a small amount of makeup—mostly just some copper shadow and a touch of lip gloss—but it’s the effort that counts, right?

Wearing nothing but a bra and panties, I slip on the diamond tennis bracelet Tess got me and then stare at the collection of clothes spread out across the floor. A couple more of my boxes arrived yesterday although my furniture is still at least a week out. Freight is *sslllloowww*.

Anyway, what Tess considers nice, and what I consider nice, are surely different things.

I decide on a black jumper with a long-sleeved white shirt underneath, some black and red kitten heels with very subtle werewolf faces on the toes, and a black denim jacket. Since I really am trying here, I remove most of the pins on the lapels before heading downstairs.

Parrish is in the kitchen, but Tess is nowhere to be seen.

He looks up and spots me there, taking in my outfit with a single, sweeping glance. I notice that he presses his butter knife against the bread so hard that when he goes to spread the mustard on it, it sort of breaks into pieces.

“Is Tess around?” I ask as he watches me, shoving the remainder of the ruined bread into the trash compactor and then grabbing the half-gallon of milk instead. A different teenage face stares back at me with the same headline: *MISSING CHILD. Way to rub it in universe, thanks. Yeah, I remember who I am alright.*

My worries seem small though in comparison to that missing boy's. There *is* still a serial killer haunting the Seattle metro area. Shit, that dude is likely dead, just like the others. There are a lot of them, too, enough to get multiple agencies involved in the investigation.

Twelve teens dead; no clues of any worth.

I know more than I want to, thanks to Parrish and Chasm and their obsession with that Emerald City Murder Podcast. Gross.

Parrish shakes his head in a tacit response to my question, lifting the milk to his lips. My eyes find his throat as he swallows, watching the muscles contract with each gulp. My jaw tightens in response, and I tear my gaze away, glad to see that the sofa is empty and Kimber is nowhere to be seen. I can stand up for myself, but it gets tiring after a while, especially since, even after a month and a half, she won't lay off.

"We're having breakfast at the club," I say, because it feels suddenly awkward in here. There's just something about being alone with Parrish that makes me uneasy. And not uneasy in the way it should. Uneasy in a 'butterflies in the belly and sweaty palms' sort of a way. Nothing's happened between us since the last time we kissed, but I noticed that as soon as Parrish was aware that Chasm was tutoring me, he started leaving his door open so he could spy on us.

"Always fun," he replies succinctly, frowning as he sets the milk down on the counter and drags his arm across his full, pouty mouth. His pants are far too low on his hips, and as per usual, he isn't wearing a shirt. It's like he expects the rest of us to feel privileged for being allowed to see his art. Maybe he should sell tickets?

I roll my eyes, and he narrows his in response.

"Parrish," Tess says when she appears from the direction of the pool area. "I'm getting tired of telling you to use a glass. And to put on a shirt. You have teenage sisters in the home, and they shouldn't have to look at your nipples all day, every day."

Parrish's gold-flecked eyes light on my face, as if in challenge, but he just grabs a wadded up black t-shirt from the counter and yanks it over his head. It strains across the muscles in his upper chest as he tugs it into place, leaving it to gather just above his belly button, so I can see a tantalizing bit of skin between the tee and his pants.

"Whatever," is his response as he takes the milk and moves past me toward the staircase. A shiver takes over me, but since Tess is standing right there, staring at me with that intensity that makes me so damn uncomfortable, I don't react—even though Parrish smells like clovers and clean linen.

My hands fist in the legs of my jumper as Tess looks me over.

Me and my hideous nose, right?

My mouth twitches, but I refuse to let it turn down into a frown. Sometimes, people hurt others without meaning to. If I don't tell Tess how I feel, she won't know or understand. I resolve to do just that during breakfast.

"Shall we then?" she asks cheerily, dressed in a short-sleeved beige suit jacket and matching slacks. With her hair coiffed and her makeup subtle but expertly applied, she looks like a senator or something. I can tell by her facial expression that she isn't happy with my outfit today anymore than she was happy with the one from my first day here.

God.

It's only been five and a half weeks since I arrived on a plane to SeaTac airport, situated in business class beside a woman who was a virtual stranger. Who still *is* a stranger. I feel like I know Parrish better than Tess. My first time on an airplane, and it wasn't for any of the reasons I'd dreamed.

"Shall we take your car?" Tess asks me cheerily, plucking the key fob from the hook in the hall and giving me an overly bright smile. She's trying too hard. Or maybe I'm not trying hard enough. There are no advice columns for how to deal with a situation like this. Trust me: I Googled it. The only things I found were articles about Alexis Manigo aka Kamiyah

Mobley—a girl with nearly the exact same situation as me—and a book titled *The Face on the Milk Carton*.

Neither of those things helped.

I still feel alone and weird when I'm at home. School isn't so bad now that I have Danyella and Lumen. Since neither of us has any real dating prospects—Parrish does not count as one, even if I were inclined to want him to be—Lumen and I have let the rumor that we're going out hold tight. It keeps my social status up so that people generally leave me alone. And by people, I mostly mean Parrish.

“Sounds great,” I reply back with as much carefully calculated perk as I can manage. Together, we get into the BMW and Tess proceeds to give me a quickie driving lesson. After that, we leave the garage and I'm disappointed to see that the reporters are back, although substantially less in number. The best thing for drama is to remove the kindling from the fire. People get bored quick and move on just as fast.

As we drive, I play with my phone, just so I don't have to absorb the awkward silence in the car.

There's a text from an unknown number.

You got a B on your Japanese test, huh? Not bad, Little Sister.

A smile tilts my lips before I get control of it. Tess keeps flicking her eyes my way, like she wants to say something but doesn't know how. I'd rather not try to find a way to explain that I'm grinning at a text from Kwang-seon 'Chasm' McKenna.

I program Parrish's BFF into my phone and then try to think up a witty reply. When nothing comes, I send a meme that shows a girl perched on a boy's chest like he's a computer chair, her mic on and her screen showing a record number of kills.

He responds with a string of skull emojis and a pic of himself giving the middle finger.

I'm not entirely sure where we're at as far as friendship goes, but this is better than the quips we were throwing at each

other for the first few weeks. I guess he *is* sort of a nice guy, when he isn't being hypocritical and trying to kiss me by a lake that he seems to own. Grr.

Turning the volume down on my phone, I very quickly pull up Parrish's TikTok just to see if the video he made about me is still there. It is, and I frown, closing the app quickly. I'm not entirely sure why I thought he'd remove it, but I'm disappointed anyway.

"We could shop for things for your room today," Tess suggests as I wonder why shopping is the only thing she seems to want to do with me. I'm not much for hikes, but I'd prefer if she asked me on one. Or we could watch a movie together. My grandpa and I always cooked together, but ... it seems like that's not Tess' thing. Nor is gardening, another activity I enjoyed doing with my family. We could hang out in the pool together. Hit up a brick-and-mortar bookstore. Or do 'the Kindle thing' that Maxine and I still do together: pick a genre of book and set a fifteen-minute timer. We have to come up with five new titles we've never seen before, and then we each get to pick what the other person is reading and come up with a review. "I saw some really cute things at Pottery Barn Teen."

Pottery Barn.

If ever there was a store that was further away from my vibe ...

"Once my stuff from home gets here, I won't need anything else," I say, trying to keep the mood light. "My grandma does woodworking, so the bed is handmade. And my grandpa likes quilting so—"

"The Banks'," Tess corrects, and I pause midsentence to look over at her. "The Banks like woodworking and quilting." Her hands tighten on the wheel as she releases her breath and that trapped feeling comes over me again, like I wish I could unzip my skin and leave Mia Patterson behind forever. I only want to be Dakota Banks. That's it. "Mr. Banks quilts?" Tess queries, like the idea surprises her.

"The shape of someone's genitals doesn't really affect if they can quilt or not," I reply, and Tess heaves yet another

sigh. She's a conservative woman, for sure, and I would call myself ... well, I have no idea what I am. Moderate, I guess. Free-floating might even be more accurate.

"Yes, well, it's not a traditionally male activity," Tess continues, and I wet my lips. The need to argue with her is so intense that I feel my skin aching.

"Does something about the penis stop a man from quilting? Like, does it physically stop him?"

Tess' hands tighten even more on the wheel, and we end up sitting in silence for the rest of the drive. We climb out of the car and Tess leaves it to the chauffeur as I examine the only other teen girl that I see at Whitehall Gardens. She, too, looks like a senator. Everyone here does. Maybe most of them are?

We find ourselves seated at a table near the window overlooking the green. Old men play golf while we sit and each pretend to be absorbed in our menus. The fare is not what I'm used to.

"What is *achiote rice*?" I ask, wondering why every other item on the menu has goat or blue cheese crumbles on it.

"It has ..." Tess starts, putting her menu down and beaming across the table at me in that way of hers, the one that both makes me feel inadequate and sad at the same time. "An earthy, peppery flavor. It's used a lot in Mexican and Caribbean cuisine." *And also, the snootiest country club known to man, apparently.*

"Roasted mahimahi with mojo shrimp and achiote rice it is," I say, folding the menu and putting it aside. The waiter comes as if summoned and whisks it away, placing my cherry soda in front of me.

Tess and I stare at each other.

Awkward silence, my name is Dakota Banks, I think, chewing on my lower lip and searching desperately for something to say. I'm the sort of person who can't stand the quiet stretches, who always has to fill it with chatter.

"Whitehall has a theatre program," I offer up, hoping to spark a conversation that we can both enjoy. Whether or not

Tess likes musical theatre, she's clearly vested in my education. This should do it, right?

"Oh, I know," she says with a lingering sigh as she unfolds and refolds her napkin in her lap. "Nobody ever got ahead by prancing across a stage singing songs from *Grease*. I'd just as soon they scrapped it altogether."

I just stare at her.

Who are you? And how the hell did I come from one of your ovaries? I wonder as I fight the urge to scream.

"But ... you're an artist," I say, confusion thickening my voice as I stare at the candle on the table instead of my bio mom's face. When I finally get the courage to glance up, I see that she's just as confused as I am.

"An artist?" she asks, like it hasn't occurred to her that writing fiction novels is an art form. I always thought ... the language she uses is so beautiful. How is this woman the famous author I've been idolizing since I read my first Tess Vanguard book at ten years old?

"You write novels," I state, like it should be obvious, like I'm telling a grown woman that one and one equals two. "You wrote *Abducted Under a Noonday Sun* and—"

"I wrote that book to find my child," she says, almost like she's pissed off about it. "Writing is not art. It's a job."

This chasm opens between us, one that's gaping and wide and impassable. We're just so *different*. Is it possible for two people with such opposing views to get along with one another? Guess we're about to be a real-life experiment in exactly that.

"Since you've found me now, are you going to quit?" I spit back, with more vitriol and hurt than I realized I was feeling.

"Maybe you don't fully appreciate how much I like money?" she quips right back. More silence. I think about responding with something equally as snippy but decide against it. *Dakota Banks, not Mia Patterson.*

“I joined the theatre program,” I say instead, my voice flat and lacking emotion. “Not to act, because I can’t sing worth a crap, but to work on costumes and set design.”

Tess looks briefly mollified, and then frustrated.

“Theater isn’t exactly a door to success in life,” she begins, and I find myself choking on the very fact that we’re having this conversation. “You’ve got to have a plan, Mia.”

And there it is again.

Mia.

She doesn’t bother to correct herself this time, folding and refolding her napkin yet again.

“Why don’t I just write about my experience as the kidnapped child of author Tess Vanguard?” I quip back. “That should bring in some big money, right? Or maybe I should be a hedge fund manager and make money in a legal but morally twisted and broken and corrupt way?” Tess’ eyes flick around, like she’s looking to see if I’m causing a stir. That panicked feeling in my chest begins to rise again, and bile comes up in my throat. *I want to go home. All I want is to be back home.* “Or maybe I should be a plastic surgeon who offers their step-kid a freaking nose job for her sixteenth birthday that isn’t really her birthday at all?”

I shove up from the table and speed walk as quickly as I can to the front doors, ignoring the curious looks of the staff. My phone is clenched in my hand, but there’s nobody here for me to call, nobody to come and save me.

Instead, I end up sitting on the edge of the curb, looking out at the sea of luxury vehicles in the lot.

After a few minutes, Tess comes out and sits beside me.

For nearly half an hour, neither of us says a word.

“I had the kitchen hold our food,” she says, and I glance over at her, tears dried, emotions in a twisted tangle. It’s like, nobody asked me how I felt about all of this. Not once did the lawyers or the judge or Tess ever ask *me* how this whole situation was affecting me. “I know this is hard for both of

us,” she explains, reaching out to cup the side of my face. I allow the contact, if only because physical affection from her is so rare it may as well be a shooting star. “And I know I’m making a lot of mistakes. I know that, but there’s no rulebook for this. No checklist that tells you how to make your estranged daughter love you. I thrive on rules and routine, Mia. I’ve had to, in order to survive losing you. There were times during those years that I thought I wouldn’t make it, that I ...”

She trails off and exhales, dropping her hand to her lap.

“Please stop calling me Mia,” I tell her for what I’m fairly certain is the thousandth time. “I understand you picked that name for me, but it isn’t the name that I grew up listening to.”

Tess stares at me for a long moment and then pulls in a big breath, nodding briefly. I notice that a single tendril of hair has escaped her bun, making her look much more human and less like, well, a politician. Gag.

“And I don’t want plastic surgery. I love myself for who I am. Love the skin you’re in and all that.” I look away toward the trees rustling at the edges of the parking lot.

“I understand,” Tess says as I glance back to find her watching me. “And you’re right. I shouldn’t ... Paul and I should not have offered you that. Kimber is always asking, and I just thought ...”

“Plastic surgery for teens is a little gauche, don’t you think?” I reply, but Tess just gives me a look.

“I think if surgery makes someone feel better about themselves, then they should do it,” she replies.

“Agree to disagree?” I ask, wondering what that phrase even means. I better get used to it though because it appears that Tess and I are going to have a lot of these moments. She nods and smiles at me, standing up and waiting for me to do the same.

“Agree,” she says, escorting me back into the restaurant.

For the briefest of moments there, I feel another glimmer of hope, like everything is going to be okay.

Of course, that only lasts as long as the meal. As soon as we get into the car, and Tess convinces me to visit some fancy clothing boutique in Seattle, she starts dropping hints.

“You mentioned writing a book about your experience,” she says slowly, carefully, as if she’s weighing each and every word. I glance over at her as she swings blouses across a wooden rack. Even the hangers are made of wood, no plastic or metal here. I stare at the cream-colored items, the white ones, the oatmeal ones.

Hm.

“I was only being facetious,” I admit with a loose shrug. “Writing isn’t my outlet. I’m not sure, exactly, what is, only that I need to create to be happy.”

“Engineering is a form of creating,” Tess suggests as she lifts up a conservative dress with a four-figure price tag. I almost choke. No way would I wear something that costs that much. Inevitably, I’d ruin it by spilling juice or sauce on it and then I’d have massive anxiety trying to get the stain out. “Or coding.”

“To some people, sure,” I reply vaguely, wondering where this is going. I sense something beyond just a motherly discussion of my future career. Anyway, engineering and coding are all fine and dandy. Careers to further technology, to help people live longer, safer, better lives is great. But art is the reason for living those longer, safer, better lives, right? Books, movies, theater, music, video games. Somebody has to make that stuff, too.

“Tech jobs can be very lucrative,” Tess continues, dragging this awkward conversation even further. She picks up an additional two dresses that I hope are for her and not for me. I decide I better pick something out—and I better do it quick or I’m leaving with an oatmeal-colored nun’s habit.

I spot a sparkly black dress on a mannequin and make an immediate beeline for it. It’s pretty much the only thing in this store that I don’t actively despise.

“Could I see this one, please?” I ask, pointing up at it as I pause beside an associate. It seems to be the only one of its kind in the store. She tells me the size to see if I think it’ll fit, and I nod. Tess catches up to me as the employee finishes getting it down.

“Looks like a dress fit for a nightclub,” she says which could be an insult ... or not? Hard to say with her. I glance Tess’ way and try something I practiced several times on the plane. I absorb her profile, the shape of her lips, the glimmer in her eyes, and I repeat the word *Mom* to myself inside my head. Just over and over and over again to see if it’ll stick. “That won’t work for—”

She pauses again and then turns to me as the associate looks between us questioningly.

“Start a fitting room, please,” Tess tells her, handing over the clothes draped over her left arm. Grr. See, I knew they were for me. I despair at the idea of putting on a fashion show for Tess, my mind straying back to a shirtless Parrish and the milk lifted to his pouty mouth. I almost smile as I think about inviting him to play games with me again tonight. That’d be fun, right? Having a gaming buddy just across the hall. “Dakota?” Tess says, as if she’s repeating my name for the dozenth time.

I blink at her, trying to feel some hope that she’s used my actual name for once. Does it sound like grated bits of metal scraping over her teeth? Sure it does. But that’s okay. Rome wasn’t built in a day.

“I’ve accepted an invitation to a talk show,” Tess tells me frankly, and my heart plummets to the bottom of my stomach, shattering to jagged pieces of glass. I give her what must be a look of pure hurt because she seems taken aback. “It’s for next weekend, for the Martina Cortez Show.”

The Martina Cortez Show. Great. Ten years as the number one talk show in the world. That’s ... just fantastic.

“Okay,” I say blandly, because I’m not stupid. I remember the conversation from the limo, of Tess shushing Paul when he

mentioned something about a talk show. “What does that have to do with me?”

I turn away and head for the dressing room as quickly as I can, doing my best to ignore Tess’ tan kitten heels clacking on the floor as she follows. Stepping inside, I slam and lock the door behind me while Tess waits outside.

“Dakota, hear me out,” she continues, and then I see her start to pace on the other side of the door. “Getting our story out there is important.”

“Important for who?” I ask, undoing the straps on my jumper and kicking off my heels. I leave all the items on the floor as I tear my long-sleeved shirt over my head and grab the sparkly black dress. Sorry, Tess, but I am not wearing oatmeal or camel hair or sheep’s wool or whatever ridiculous name for beige the world has come up with now.

The dress slips easily over my head, but it’s a bit tight in the boob area. I love my boobs, to be honest, but I hate that I can never fit them into anything. Still, once I adjust the dress just right, it looks pretty good. A bit short in the front, a bit flashier than something I’d usually wear, but if Tess really wants to buy me a fancy outfit from this horrible store, then I pick this.

“Important for the world,” Tess says, which is ridiculous. “You were stolen from me. Don’t you think other mothers might be out there, wondering where their children are? We could give them hope.”

I open the door to look at her and she gives the dress a raised brow.

“Don’t pretend like going on this talk show is about helping others. It’s about helping *you* and your non-artistic book career that’s ‘just a job’.” I make quotes with my fingers and Tess’ mouth turns down in a sharp frown. We’re like oil and water, me and this woman. I might be *of* her, but I am nothing like her.

Maybe if I piss her off enough, she’ll send me back to New York?

“How about this,” I add, when I realize that she’s pursed her mouth too tightly to get any words out. “If I go on this talk show with you, you let me talk to my grandparents.” Her eyes go wide, and her face pales. That’s when I know I made the right decision not telling her about Maxine. Tess feels threatened by the Banks family. That much is painfully obvious in this moment.

“You are a minor child,” she says instead, taking the wrong tactic with me. I don’t do well following blind orders. “If I say you are going on the talk show with me, then you’re going.” I watch as she both metaphorically and literally digs her heels in. “Your kidnapping might not have been all that traumatic for you, but it destroyed me. I can handle a lot of things, Dakota, but disrespect isn’t one of them.”

I’m seething on the inside right now, but what can I do? What the actual hell can I do? Tess used her money and her lawyers and her influence to separate me from the Banks. Now, she’s throwing that weight around so that I’ll advance her career, too. I don’t feel like a daughter to her, just a pawn, something to be played with, to be pushed around a board until I’m in just the right spot.

“I’d like this dress please,” I breathe, my voice husky with anger.

“It’s too flashy,” Tess says, but then, as if she’s realized she’s pushed me as far as she’s going to get me, she backtracks. “But if it’s the one you want ...”

I slam the changing room door closed before she can finish.

Nothing about my life is what I want.

Nothing.

The graphic features the word 'CHAPTER' in a black, hand-drawn, blocky font on the left. To its right is a large, dark green heart with a pink outline. The number '15' is written in a large, pink, cursive font across the heart. The background is a light pink gradient with faint, dark, sketchy lines resembling tree branches or roots.

The next morning, I get up early of my own accord. I still hate it—and I still don't understand why nobody in this weird family sleeps in on weekends—but there's just something uncomfortable about sleeping four hours past everyone else in the house. Like, when I finally get up and pad downstairs for a drink, I've got mussed bed hair and the whole Vanguard family is dressed and ready for a corporate conference or something.

Today, I waltz in dressed in a cropped *Genshin Impact* t-shirt and jeans to find Maxx, Chasm, and Parrish all seated at the dining table together. Kimber isn't far off, as usual, schmoozing all over Chasm. Somehow, her fixation with him bothers me more than usual. Is it because we almost kissed? Because he's been tutoring me? I don't know.

“Oh, look, it's the orphan,” Kimber quips with a rude sneer, but I am just not here for that shit today.

“Orphan would imply that I have no family at all, not two sets that both want me so badly they went to court over it.” I pad into the kitchen and reach for the handle of the fridge before glancing at my supposed sister to find her face red as the boys all pause in whatever they're doing to watch the exchange. “And anyway, if I were an orphan, do you really think that's something to poke fun at? Are you heartless?”

Kimber shoves up from the table, blond curls bobbing with the motion. She looks between me and Parrish, me and Parrish. It's like she expects him to stand up for her. Instead, he leans back in his seat like he's enjoying the show.

“Are you seriously going to sit there and let her talk to me like that?” Kimber growls at him, and he gives a loose shrug.

“If you’re going to dish it, you should learn to take it. Nobody likes a bully, Kimber.”

With a scream of rage, she shoves away from the table and goes stomping off, but only so far as the entrance to the hall. She whirls around, her face twisting in an expression of teenage fury. It’s okay, I’m used to it. I’m still in that stage myself.

I take the carton of milk—probably the same one that Parrish was drinking from yesterday—and turn around to face her, carefully unscrewing the top. Knowing that he’s watching me, I lift the milk to my lips and chug some.

“Gamer bitch,” she spits, as if that’s an insult of any kind. I smile as I lick the milk from my upper lip. The sound of a chair scraping across the floor briefly draws my attention, and I notice that Parrish is looking sharply away from me, jaw clenched tight, teeth gritted. I return my attention to Kimber’s smug face.

“Listen, I already told Tess that I don’t want the free nose job. She said you were desperate for boobs, so ... have at it. You can take my surgery slot, although I think it’s weird as fuck that you’d let your dad put breast implants in you.”

“It wouldn’t be him, it’d be his colleague!” she screeches back at me like a wild animal, turning and tearing down the hall with angry tears brimming. I let her go and then take another drink of milk as someone slow-claps at the table.

“Well done, Little Sister,” Chasm purrs, cocking his head to one side. His lightning bolt hair draws my attention, but my gaze stays for his pierced mouth. His mouth is about as stupid as Parrish’s muscles. Just ... ridiculously stupid. “Wasn’t sure you had it in you.”

“Weren’t you? The syphilis must’ve already turned your brain to mush. Let me know when you get dick pus so we can form a diagnosis.”

“Why don’t you come and give me a personal check-up?” he asks, squeezing the front of his jeans. I ignore him and finish off the milk, looking around for the garbage can before I

remember that the Vanguard family has a *trash compactor*. Like, who needs a special appliance just to turn their garbage into a Wall-E cube? I'd only ever seen one before playing *The Sims* on my laptop.

"STD free, so ... thanks but no thanks," I respond, feeling my blood heat with the threat of battle. If Chasm wants to start shit with me today, then let him. I'm ready. I sort of thought we were becoming friends, but I guess not.

"Morning, Dakota," Maxx says, which is a nice change of pace from Parrish's apathy and Chasm's lewdness. I pretend not to care that he's here, but that little flutter in my belly says otherwise. I haven't seen in him in a month, not since the night of the party. Although we have been hooking up online to play games now and again.

"Morning," I reply, resisting the warm flush I feel when he glances back at me, flashing that pretty smile of his. "Is Maxine in town?"

X shakes his head in response, but I'm not surprised. Maxie already told me she was drowning in her studies and that she wouldn't be able to come back until next week. Still, it was worth the ask. I'd do anything to share a coffee with her right about now.

"I still can't believe you're dating *her* sister," Chas says, pointing between me and Maxx while Parrish continues to stare out the French doors toward the gray sky above the lake. His face is distant and contemplative, but when he finally turns back to glare at me, there's an edge of cruelty to his features.

Something about me scares him, and the only way for him to deal with that is to lash out. I brace myself for impact.

"Why?" X asks, leaning back in his own chair. He's wearing a lime green, white, and black jacket with the words *Wright Family Racing* scrawled across the back. From what little I could find about him on social media, his family is big into motocross. They race nearly every week, and even have their own custom painted toy hauler to travel in. "It wasn't a coincidence. I sought Maxine out after the news story broke,

and we bonded.” He shrugs his shoulders as Chas lets out an annoying horse-like snort.

My eyes tear away from Parrish’s with great difficulty. To be quite honest, I could probably stare at him all day and forget to be bored. He’s got that sort of face, one that brings immense pleasure just by looking at it. And I hate that. I hate that I can’t let his ugly personality blind me to all that pretty. I suppose I really am just a mammal by nature, huh?

“And by bonded, you mean ...” Chas starts, and then trails off when Maxx picks up an Oreo and chucks it at his head. He manages to catch it in his mouth with a husky laugh, standing up from the table as he crunches the cookie in half and grins. “You sleep with her yet or no?” he asks around a mouthful of food.

I decide then that I actually hate him *more* than Parrish.

“You’re a colossal dick,” I say at about the same time that X adds, “you’re a fucking prick, you know that?”

We look at each other and smile just before Maxx stands up.

“I had fun playing with you the other night,” he tells me, and Chas starts laughing again at the accidental innuendo.

“I’ll bet you did. Sisters. That must’ve been nice,” he muses as I whip a glare his way. I won’t soon forget that at least half his bravado is for show. I’m not entirely certain that he *isn’t* a virgin anyway. He could very well be.

“Do you enjoy sexualizing women and being a misogynistic jockstrap?”

“Do you enjoy being a dime a dozen wannabe Twitch streamer?” he retorts, giving me an awful smile as he pushes back that yellow streaked black hair of his. I won’t soon forget that he thought to shove me in the pool at our first meeting. Or ... that he’s been tutoring me for weeks. Asking nothing in return but my silence. Fuck.

“You don’t have to keep pretending to appease the patriarchy: I think what you did at the party was adorable.”

Was that too much? Seems like it was just enough to irritate him without giving away his secrets.

“Aw, aren’t you sweet?” Chas schmoozes, moving over to the kitchen island so he can lean forward with his palms planted on the counter’s surface. There’s a warning in his face that doesn’t quite translate to his words. “That compliment might just stick if you hadn’t been raised by a bunch of hillbilly idiots without access to the internet. I mean, come on, how the fuck do you raise some random kid that’s dropped off on your doorstep without questioning things?”

My cheeks flush red as shame and anger and frustration wash over me. Does he think he’s the first genius in the world to ever ask that question? Hell, it was the first thing my grandparents asked when they found out. *How come we didn’t know? How could we not know?*

But a missing child in Washington state doesn’t necessarily end up on the news in New York. Sadly, children go missing in every state, every day. It’d be impossible to keep up with all of it. Besides, the world moves quickly. When my grandparents finally did get a chance to catch up on the news, I’m sure they were flooded with stories of plane crashes or natural disasters or murders.

Besides, it wasn’t like Saffron hadn’t dumped a kid off on them before. That, and she had ‘my’ birth certificate. The birth certificate of the real Dakota Banks, the one who died, the one whose place in life I took, leaving behind a ghost in Mia Patterson’s stead.

I can’t tell any of this to Chasm though, not with that awful smirk on his face. The temptation to hit him is there, but instead, I sharpen my mind and go for the jugular. Why not? He just did the same to me.

“Look, I know you’re jealous that I actually belong here. Where do you belong, Chasm? Clearly it isn’t at home because you’re never there. You don’t seem to *want* to be there.” He stands up straight, still smirking at me, but there’s a twitch in his smile that wasn’t there before. “And for all your talk, I’ve

never *actually* seen you date a girl. Is it because they all run in the opposite direction when you open your fucking mouth?”

“Alright, you two,” X starts, as if he thinks he can smooth this over by lifting both palms toward us in a placating sort of way. “We get it. You don’t like each other, but you don’t have to dig for scabs.”

“Oh, really?” Chas asks, circling around the counter to get in my space. But I’m not afraid of him. Actually, the more he tries to intimidate me, the less intimidated I am. If he has to try so hard to put others down, maybe there’s something wrong with him? “Because I think I’d like to see this one bleed.” He leans even closer, dropping his voice to a sarcastic whisper. “Thanks for keeping quiet in exchange for the tutoring. Real nice, Little Sister.”

“Go home to your *own* family, Chasm. You do still have one of those, don’t you?” Even as I’m saying the words, I’m cursing myself for them, regretting them, wishing I could take them back. I know better than anyone else what it’s like to feel as if you don’t belong in your own home. *Also, Chasm smells like peppermint ice cream and his breath is sweet and fresh. Ugh.*

Yeah, yeah, I have a scent fetish for sure.

Something about what I’ve just said shuts Chasm down so hard and so fast that *my* head feels like it’s spinning from the insult.

“Screw you, Little Sister. You can forget about our study session tonight, okay?” He gives me a quick up and down, a dismissive flick of the eyes that has me shifting on my feet.

Much to my surprise, Chasm storms off, leaving me with the ever-silent Parrish and the frowning Maxx.

“I don’t understand ...” I start as Maxx gives me a sympathetic look.

“After Chas’ grandma died,” he explains slowly, casting a quick glance in Parrish’s direction, as if he’s feeling out a reaction. “And he came to live with his dad, he used to cry every day at school. His father was never home—still isn’t—

and on the rare occasion he is, he's hypercritical. Militant, more like. Nothing Chasm ever does is right. He hates being in that big house by himself—hates being with his dad even more. This is like, his second home ...”

Shit.

I've done it again, haven't I? Given it my worst and succeeded and now feel like crap because I made someone else feel like crap. Being mean blows, so why am I still doing it? He started it, but ... Bleh. There's no easy answer here.

I frown hard, but Maxx puts a comforting hand on my shoulder. Much to my own embarrassment, I jump at the contact. *His fingers are too hot, and he's dating my sister, and I'm a colossal asshole.*

Parrish notices the strange interaction between us and narrows his eyes, pouty rich boy mode in full force as he pushes some of that pretty hair of his back from his forehead.

“You're lucky Chasm is so nice to you,” Parrish drawls as I draw my attention away from Maxx with no small amount of effort. The universe must really be out to get me. First, the kidnapping thing. Now, the Maxx thing. I've never felt such a natural, magnetic chemistry to a boy before. And, of course, this particular boy happens to be the love of my sister's life. Heart, meet bullseye. Just stick an arrow right through me. “If I were him, I'd simply point out that blood and money can't erase years of ignorance and poverty.”

“Ignorance?” I choke out with a harsh laugh. I try to reign myself back in, I really do, but I've never been under such constant attack before. “Do you know what your father said when I asked him his opinion of Mitch McConnell?” Parrish just stares at me. “He said *who's that?*” I keep staring at my stepbrother as he keeps that cool head of his, letting his mouth twist into a cruel smirk. He doesn't know who Mitch is either, apparently. If he did, he'd try to school me.

“Maybe Tess would like to know about your visits with the kidnapper's kid?” he muses, and I feel the color drain out of my face. Even with all the quips and bullshit, I never expected Parrish to bring that up. I was under the impression there was

some sort of code between us, some unspoken rule. Let each other's transgressions ride. Guess I was wrong.

"Come on, Parrish," Maxx says, turning and giving his friend a look that reminds me he was once a part of this group, and that he probably fit in well. His handsome face takes on an arrogant tint, something that hints at a bit of ruthlessness hiding beneath the kind façade. "Don't take it that far."

"Really?" Parrish asks, blinking like he's surprised as he turns to his friend. "Because in the past, you haven't had any problems taking things to the brink. Freshman year, you drove a guy to drop out of Whitehall."

Maxx makes a face, like this isn't a particularly pleasant memory for him.

"Yeah, well, people change." He gives me a look and shakes his head briefly before turning back to Parrish. "Just because you acted like a dick once doesn't mean you have to *keep* acting like a dick."

"Don't tell me you've changed your ways for the sister?" Parrish asks with a scoff, like he can't imagine Maxine being worth that sort of effort. "Excuse me if I find that a little hard to believe."

"Well, start believing it," Maxx snaps back, getting up in Parrish's face. "Because I'm done with the high school drama bullshit. Grow up, Vanguard."

The two boys stare each other down as I debate getting involved. Honestly, I'm a bit surprised to hear that Maxx was a tyrant in high school. He seems so ... nice? ... right now.

"Look at you," Parrish drawls, ever the consummate rich boy. He knows exactly how to throw his weight around to make other people look like shit. "The scholarship student with an attitude."

Maxx just throws his head back and laughs at that, raking his fingers through his dark hair.

"Right, Parrish. Rag on me for being middle-class. It suits you, doesn't it? That sort of petty cruelty." Maxx pauses as my eyes flick between the two boys, and our gazes meet. Clash, is

more like. There's this protective glint in X's gaze that makes me feel like I've got an ally in this boy. We stare at each other for a moment before I finally turn to Parrish.

He's watching me, too. More like watching me and Maxx, I think. And he doesn't like it, the way we're looking at one another. *Because he's jealous. He's so totally fucking jealous.* Only ... that makes no sense, right?

"Kids," Tess greets, sweeping into the room in a pair of red Louboutins, a black pantsuit, and a careful chignon at the back of her head. She heads straight for the fancy espresso machine in the corner and goes about making herself a flat white with almond milk. There hasn't been a day in this house that I haven't heard either Tess or Paul or Kimber moaning about how fat they've gotten and how they desperately need a diet. It's a bit ... mm ... toxic as fuck? "What are the three of you up to?"

"Maxx was just leaving," Parrish says blandly, and Tess glances over her shoulder to give us all a look. After a moment, something dawns on her.

"Maxx," Tess begins, turning around to look at him as she crosses her arms over her stupidly sharp suit and gives him a once-over. She looks like a politician again, or like a very office-conscious model. Pretty sure most authors don't write in shoes that cost a cool grand and throw out the positioning of the spine. Seeing as she flip-flops between that mussy creative look and this, I'm guessing she has a meeting with her editor or something today. "Do you have a girlfriend yet at that university of yours?"

I go completely still as Tess' gaze flicks my way. With my eyes, I plead for Maxx to keep a secret. The last thing I need is for Bio Mom to find out about Maxine. If she knows I saw my sister—and will continue to see my sister—things between me and Tess are going to get real sour, real fast.

"Not really," Maxx replies carefully, mulling the words over as his eyes find mine again. Tess giggles—legitimately giggles—and then gives the three of us a coy look that very likely means something I'm going to hate.

“Are you interested in anyone in particular?” Tess continues, her gaze flicking between me and Maxx. Parrish makes a sound behind me, somewhere between a sigh and a scoff.

“Mom, this isn’t going the way you think it is,” he says, but she waves him away with a hand, her eyes glinting mischievously.

“You can’t protect your little sister forever,” Tess replies with about as much subtlety as a dump truck. There’s nothing about that sentence I like. It smacks of this wistful dreamy quality, of a life where I’ve always been here, where I’ll always belong, like Parrish really is my big brother instead of ... whatever it is that he is.

“Protect my little sister?” Parrish echoes as I glance back to find his face rife with confusion. He blinks a few times, and it fades away into a scowl. He gives me such a strange look, one that’s brimming with red-hot ... something, that I’m not even sure how to respond to Tess’ statement. “Oh, that’s right. Mom, Maxx and Mia are dating.”

“It’s Dakota,” I snap back, my cheeks flaming a brilliant crimson as Tess nods her head once and Maxx lets out this sexy little male laugh that very clearly communicates his discomfort with the situation. Pretending Maxine doesn’t exist is one thing, but I cannot and will not pretend to date him. “And we are not going out.”

“We should probably talk about the rules anyway,” Tess says, giving my crop top a displeased flick of the eyes. “But I won’t embarrass you in front of the boys.” She gives me a wink, and I’m instantly reminded of that meme from the movie *Mean Girls*. *‘I’m not like a regular mom, I’m a cool mom.’*

Cue internal groaning.

“Thanks?” I reply, with a very clear question mark at the end of the word. Back home, the rules for dating were pretty simple: hit age sixteen, introduce your love interest to the grandparents, and suffer a humiliating lecture on safe sex. I

have no idea what Tess' rules might be, but I can take a guess: I'm not going to like them.

"No boys in your room unless the door is open; that's one I should probably mention straight-off though," Tess muses, and Parrish narrows his eyes to slits. He seems to do that a lot when he's having trouble controlling his emotions. But I already know that rule, obviously. She freaks out if she finds that Chasm's closed the door during our study sessions.

"No worries on that one. I really do have to go," Maxx says, but I feel that strange heat in my chest, the fire that demands I rebel against this woman who claims to be my mother but really, in all reality, is just a stranger to me.

Besides, I'm so salty about the talk show thing that I could be sprinkled on fries.

"Why can't I have a male friend in my room?" I query, as if I don't understand the implications. "What about a female friend?"

"Well, no girls for Parrish and no boys for you," Tess says, as if that's the most reasonable statement in the whole world, as if it's just a 'duh statement'.

"What if I like girls, too?" I ask, because I do consider myself about a two on the Kinsey Scale of sexuality, meaning bisexual with a stronger preference toward boys. "Can I still have girls in my room?"

"Shit," Maxx murmurs, rubbing at his mouth to hide his smile. He gives me a sidelong look which I ignore in favor of staring at Tess.

She looks completely dumbfounded by my question.

"I ..." Tess starts, while I just stand there with my hands clenched tight by my sides. I cannot even *believe* that she cares so little about my wellbeing that she'd force me to participate in a talk show, of all things, when I explicitly told her that I didn't want to do it.

Just more proof that my wants and needs don't matter. It's all about her.

“I guess no girls in your room either,” Tess spits out finally, a deep frown forming on her prettily painted lips.

“Why?” I continue, just as Kimber comes into the room and pauses to look between the two of us. You’d have to be denser than a box of bricks to miss the tension brewing in that room. “Because of the sex thing?”

“Yes, because of the ‘sex thing,’” Tess replies, making quotes with her fingers. She’s getting angry now, all of that playful coyness from earlier erased. But she didn’t really think she could force me into this interview without some repercussions? Just *thinking* about it makes my anxiety spike to ultra-high levels. Already, I’ve got nervous butterflies and nausea stirring.

“Why can’t I have sex if I want? It’s my body.”

Maxx keeps his hand over his mouth while Parrish’s eyes go from slitted to wide-eyed and Kimber makes a strange yelp of surprise.

Tess, well, I’m not really sure *what* her expression is supposed to be, caught somewhere between a cringe and a glower.

“Until you’re eighteen, it’s my body; I made it.” Tess stares me straight in the face as I grit my teeth.

“So that’s what it all comes down to then? I’m your property. My body isn’t mine; it’s yours.”

“Precisely,” she replies, crossing her arms over her chest as my anger burns into a wild inferno.

“I had plenty of sex back home,” I blurt out, which is actually a total lie. I haven’t had sex at all, ever. But I want to see her reaction. I want her to hurt and burn the way I’m hurting and burning. “What do your stupid rules matter to me now?”

“What an ugly lie to tell,” Tess blurts back, abandoning her coffee as she storms over to me, holding out her hand. “Give me your phone. And once you get upstairs, you can give me your laptop and your PlayStation, too.”

The color drains from my face as I back away from her.

“No.”

I’m already lonely. I’m already sad. I hate it here. I hate it, and I hate her, and I hate Kimber, and I really hate Parrish who’s staring at me like he’s never seen me before. If I give her my devices, I’ll lose my connection to the world at large, to Danyella, to Lumen, most importantly to Maxine.

“Now, Mia. You can have it all back on Monday provided you’ve given me a proper apology.”

“I said *no*,” I repeat, taking a step back as everyone stares at me. “You can’t offer me plastic surgery, tell me I can’t date, and then shame me for challenging your rules.”

“I said I was sorry about the plastic surgery thing,” Tess snaps out, but like she isn’t even sorry at all, like that moment we shared outside of the country club meant literally nothing. “Give me your phone, Mia, *now*.”

“My name is fucking Dakota!” I scream back at her, and then I’m turning on my heel and running for the stairs as fast as I can. Just before I duck into my room, I notice that Parrish’s bedroom door is open. Without giving myself time to question the decision, I chuck my phone onto his desk and then slip back into my own room, slamming the door and locking it.

As I expected, it doesn’t take Tess long to appear with keys in hand, Paul hovering just behind her. The way he frowns at me and pushes his glasses up his nose, I can tell that he doesn’t like me, that he maybe hates me, that he most definitely wishes I didn’t live in his house.

“Phone, now,” Tess snaps at me, red-faced and tear-streaked. She storms over to the TV and yanks out the power cord, collecting my PlayStation and my laptop, too. I let her take those things because I know I can only push this so far. “Phone,” she repeats, but I just shake my head, grabbing my hoodie off the bed and tossing it at her feet. I even turn out my pant pockets.

“I lost it,” I tell her, and then I just stand there as Paul and Tess proceed to tear apart my room, emptying the almost-empty drawers on the dresser, digging through the nightstand, dumping my backpack on my bed.

By the time they’re done, I don’t even feel like a person anymore, just a thing.

That’s the issue with being a teenager: you need guidance and help, but you don’t need to be torn apart, ordered around, and dehumanized. Why the fuck don’t parents get it? Why, why, why?

“If I find out that you’re purposely hiding that phone from me,” Tess begins, letting out a harsh laugh before she rubs at her face and Paul puts his arm around her shoulders. “Keep this up and we’ll start stripping privileges one by one.”

She turns and takes her husband with her, leaving me alone in the middle of my trashed but nearly empty bedroom. As soon as she’s out of sight, I sink down to the floor, crying into my palms in as silent a way possible.

When I hear movement, I lift my face up and find Parrish standing in my doorway, staring at me.

He doesn’t say anything, but I brace myself for an onslaught of meanness and petty bullshit. Instead, he moves over to the bed and starts picking things up, putting odds and ends into the nightstand drawer before refolding the clothes.

“You don’t have to do that,” I whisper, my voice cracking. I feel strung-out right now, empty. And so, so freaking sad.

Parrish scoffs at me and then gives a violent scowl.

“And you don’t have to pretend like you don’t need the help,” he snaps back at me. He pauses for a moment to dig around in his hoodie pocket, withdrawing my phone and then moving over to stand in front of me. He hands it out, and I sit there for a minute, just staring at it. “You shouldn’t trust me. I’m likely to tattle.”

I take the phone carefully from his hand, my fingertips sliding across his palm. Maybe I’m imagining it, but I’m almost certain that he shudders at the touch.

“They shouldn’t have trashed your room like this,” he murmurs, which is up there in the ‘nicest things my stepbrother has ever said to me’ category. I mean, other than, “*Your nose looks good to me.*” That was a real one-liner right there. Almost dropped my panties to the floor.

“I want to go home,” I say, my voice husky and broken. I’m not sure why I say it to Parrish of all people. Like he even cares. He pauses near my dresser, putting a stack of refolded clothes in the top drawer before turning to glance at me. I can’t bear to look at him anymore. He’s too pretty and too mean, and he confuses me with the things he does. One minute, he’s tearing my grandparents apart with Chasm’s help. The next, he’s helping me clean my room.

“I know, but that isn’t going to happen.”

My head snaps up and I stare in his direction, feeling the jagged pieces inside of me shift around and cut. But Parrish doesn’t look mean right now, just contemplative. He moves over to stand beside me again, crouching down so that we’re eye to eye.

“When I told you that Tess was never letting you go, I wasn’t just being mean.”

“I hate her,” I tell him, and he looks away, toward the windows and the weak flicker of sunshine on the surface of the lake.

“You shouldn’t,” he says, his voice this deep but apathetic drawl. Just a boy with too much money and idle hands. I suddenly want to kiss him because I must be a goddamn masochist. “She’s a good person, a good mom.” He looks back at me then and his pretty eyes drop to my lips, taking them in like he thinks I might have some pretty features, too. “Usually,” he adds, standing up suddenly.

I follow after him, wringing my hands.

“You know, girls are conditioned to be people-pleasers,” I start, and Parrish gives a small smirk.

“Well, you could’ve fooled me.” He says it in just such a way that it straddles the line between insult and compliment. I

take a deep breath as I move over to my backpack and lift it from the floor by a single strap. It's ripped, too, sewn back together by my grandfather's careful hand. I added a piece of hot pink duct tape to keep it altogether. When Tess saw it, she cringed.

We don't understand each other, like, at all.

Two sides of one coin, the faces forever separate, never able to look one another in the eye.

"But I'm so tired." I rub my hand over my face before tossing the empty backpack on the end of the bed, bending low to gather the emptied contents. It's like a timeline of my life at the Banks' house: the stuffed unicorn I've had since the day Saffron brought me to her parents, a framed picture of my first camping trip when I was seven, a sweatshirt from my middle school. *Go Lions!* "I know I should be able to be happy here, with such a big house, and I mean, they bought me a freaking sportscar—"

"If money and things equaled happy, then my dad wouldn't drink a fifth of scotch every Friday night and Tess wouldn't have spent every February twenty-seventh crying over a cake with the words *Happy Birthday, Mia* written on it." Parrish shoves the top drawer of the dresser closed and comes over to stand just behind me. Too close, really. Way too freaking close. I can feel his warm breath stirring my hair, that fresh citrus and clovers scent giving way to goose bumps on both of my arms. "Just let me know when you're ready for that design, Dakota. My ink is ready."

Parrish moves away from me, heading into the hallway before I can think up a reply, and closes my door behind him. I wait a moment, text Chasm a quick *I'm sorry* and curl up on my bed for the rest of the day.



CHAPTER 16

The Martina Cortez Show is the most watched talk show in the world with over four million viewers tuning in via live stream, daytime television, and app viewership; it's propped up by the host's granddaughters and their famous TikTok channel. They have more followers than any other account in creation.

I am not happy to see them waiting when we arrive on the set.

Crap, crap, crap, I think as I follow Tess down a long hallway, assistants fluttering around us like birds, flapping their hands like wings and talking into microphones. My bio mom seems perfectly comfortable in this environment, strutting toward hair and makeup like she's the damn host of the show. Makes sense, I guess, seeing as this isn't exactly her first time being interviewed. Being the most famous crime/thriller writer since Agatha Christie might have something to do with that.

Personally, I'm freaking out on the inside. I do okay in social situations, but only ones that I choose. Being forced into a situation that I don't want to be in gets my heart fluttering and my palms sweating. I suppose I *could* throw this whole thing by giving into the panic attack waiting in the wings, but I just can't bring myself to make a scene.

That ... and Parrish is here. It seems sacrilegious somehow to keep showing him all these deep emotions when he's given me almost nothing in return. Glancing back, I see him slouching in a Whitehall Academy hoodie and slacks, hands tucked into his pockets. He gives me a look that would take a

team of specially trained psychiatrists to unpack, so I just turn back around and pretend like I'm not hyperaware of his every move.

“Mia Patterson!” one of the Cortez girls says as they appear on either side of me with matching white smiles and flawless cat eyes; they're not twins but they might as well be. “Who's your friend?” Francisca Cortez—she's the older of the two, the one with a pierced nose, I recognize her from her videos—says as she glances over my shoulder and bites her lower lip flirtatiously.

A small spark of alarm goes off in my chest, but I don't look too closely into it. Doing so would be akin to admitting that I give at least a few fucks about Parrish Vanguard.

“Uh.” That's how eloquent I am. *Uh*. It's all that'll come out as I glance back and see Parrish smiling in a way that isn't human; it's supernatural, how pretty he is.

“Parrish Vanguard,” he says, holding out his hand and offering a coy look to both girls. “Mia's brother.”

I grit my teeth.

There's no way that was accidental; he's coming for me in a big way.

“My name is Dakota, first off,” I begin, but nobody's looking at me. Parrish is eying up the two sisters like he's getting ready to do another bullshit TikTok on their fuckability rating. By the time he's finished shaking their hands, I can see that he's settled on Francisca as the better of the two. I can practically see the gears in his head turning: *charm activated, debonair smile initiated, flirtatious laugh on full-power*. The urge to kick him in the shin just takes over me, and I end up heeling him hard enough in the leg that he curses. “And second, he is *not* my brother. Stepbrother, actually.”

“Oh, stepbrother, huh?” the younger girl—I think her name is Maria—says as she rakes her gaze up and down Parrish's lean form. “I sense a forbidden romance in the making.”

“Maria,” Francisca scolds, having apparently forgotten that I exist as she twirls some dark hair around her finger and moves

in so close to Parrish that they could kiss, if they were so inclined. “Are you going to be on the show, too? Because we have our own hair and makeup people.” Francisca lets out this horrifically fake laugh, one that’s dripping with promise and innuendo.

I envy her in that moment. She seems so confident, so sophisticated and self-assured, so comfortable in her own skin. Meanwhile, I trip over shadows and spend more time plugged into online games than conversations with real people.

One quick glance between Francisca and Parrish and it’s obvious that he’s buying what she’s selling. His gaze flicks briefly back to mine, but he yanks it away just as quickly and I’m left wondering if I imagined it all.

“Last thing you need is some Millennial in skinny jeans screwing it up,” Francisca continues, hooking her arm with Parrish’s.

“How does being a Millennial have anything to do with hair and makeup?” I ask as the girls exchange looks and then laugh. Guess I just don’t get it.

“Nah,” Parrish says, smiling coquettishly. *That stupid fuck!* I think as the Cortez girls steer us into a smaller side room that’s decked out in horrendous shades of pink animal print. “I’m not in the show, but who cares? Pretty sure old boomers are the only ones who watch daytime TV.” My eye twitches as the Cortez girls giggle and flirt, but I take a seat where I’m told as a young girl with a shaved head and a septum piercing steps forward to take over my hair and makeup duties.

“We’re going to Saint Croix this week; maybe you could join us?” Maria offers, ignoring the glare her older sister levels on her. It’s a glare that very clearly says *he’s mine; I saw him first*. I’m not sure why but that alarm bell in my chest starts to blare like a tornado warning. And I’m furious about it. My cheeks feel hot and my pulse is racing, but I do my best to pretend that I don’t care.

“Most tempting offer I’ve gotten all year,” Parrish says with a slick smile, reaching up to run his tattooed fingers through his brown and blond waves. He’s one of those foppish rich

boys who acts like they roll out of bed with this sweet, mussy hair when in reality, he spends nearly an hour in his bathroom every morning. *What a dick*, I think as he meets my eyes in the mirror and smirks. “Especially considering that my new sister here stole my girlfriend.”

“Oh,” Maria breathes, clamping a hand over her mouth as her eyes sparkle with the promise of juicy goss. She drops her hand to her side and leans in conspiratorially. “Is that true?”

“Of course it isn’t true,” I reply as the makeup artist attempts to put a pair of falsies on me. “She left him for me specifically.”

Parrish just keeps smiling, lifting his brows up and letting his gaze slide to Francisca’s in a conspiratorial sort of way. The smirk she gives him in reply makes me feel stabby as fuck.

“Question,” Francisca continues, taking a seat in the chair beside mine and swiveling to face me. “Why are you doing a talk show for old people when you could be insta-famous online? Personal branding is important, and you’ve got clout in spades.” She holds up a hand, like she can already see my name in lights.

The shaved-head girl pulls the pins out of my hair as I stare at myself in the mirror and wish I were anywhere but here. Hell, I’d even take an entire afternoon alone with Parrish if it meant an escape from all of this. I don’t *want* to be famous because I was kidnapped as a baby. That’s not what defines me; it isn’t who I am.

Though I’m starting to wonder, the longer I’m here, who exactly is it that I am in the first place.

“I watched a documentary on being an influencer once; you can rent a private jet for four-hundred bucks an hour and pretend you live a really awesome life.” The two girls stare at me before exchanging a look.

“Hey Parrish.” Francisca swivels her chair away from me like I’m a horrible disappointment. “Come make a quick video with us?” He shrugs and stands up, following the Cortez girls

out of the room and leaving me to the horrible ‘Millennial makeup artist’ who does a fabulous job regardless of her birth year.

As I step out of the hair and makeup room, I run back into the Cortez girls again but they’re substantially less friendly this time around. Apparently I’ve pissed them off. Maybe that’s my real superpower? Pissing other people off ...

Parrish is with them, but his face is impossible to read.

“What did you do? Turn them down for a threesome?” I quip as he lets his gaze drift over to me.

“You only wish I’d turned them down,” he adds with another infuriating smile. “I’m going to Saint Croix next week.” He takes off down the hallway as I grit my teeth and wish a plague of locusts on his stupidly pretty head. Obviously, he’s just said that to get under my skin: Tess would never let him take a trip like that without her.

At least I know I’m not the only one wearing gilded chains.

I ignore him and follow the instructions of a woman with braids like Danyella—I think she said they were called Ghana braids—and an authoritative looking badge with a lanyard. She guides me to the edge of the stage next to Tess.

“You look very pretty today,” Tess tells me, but I can’t summon the energy to look over at her. My palms are sweating and my heart is racing, but it’s a million times different than the way those same symptoms feel when I’m around Parrish. This isn’t an *oh my god, I’m crushing hard* moment, more like an *I’d rather be anywhere but here* moment.

I say nothing. My mouth feels dry; my tongue is like sandpaper. I should be back home with Sally and Nevaeh, looking up colleges and contemplating if we’d rather take a gap year or just not go to college at all. We should be working on summer plans and bingeing Netflix shows together, gossiping about love interests, and watching Nevaeh perform her dance routines in her mom’s driveway.

Instead, here I am, across the country, standing beside a woman that I don’t particularly like, waiting to go live for

millions of people to gawk at.

I can't fucking wait.

"You'll thank me for this one day," Tess says, but more like she's talking to herself instead of me. Good. I don't particularly *want* to talk to her right now, not after she and Paul ransacked my room, took my things, and forced me to participate in this stupid show.

The lights flicker on and off and a sign that reads *Silence, Please* burns red above the stage.

"Welcome back, *familia*," the host—Martina Cortez—says, introducing herself and the show the way she always does. "Today we have a very special returning guest—bestselling author Tess Vanguard. Tess is the author of over twenty-three novels and winner of the Women's Literacy Prize three years in the running. Not only is Ms. Vanguard a champion for lost and stolen children, but she's also a woman who's experienced every mother's worst nightmare. Let's take a look."

Martina turns toward a large screen on the back wall where a cheesy video begins to play. As soon as her voiceover begins to regale the story of my early life with Tess, dizziness takes over me and I'm forced to brace a hand on the wall.

"From an early age, Tess Patterson knew only two things: that she wanted to be a writer ... and that she wanted to be a mother."

At first, I decide that I can't look at Tess. I just can't. The video and the voiceover might be cheesy, but the story is almost too real. There are pictures and videos of me as a baby—ones that I've never even seen before. You'd think—you would fucking *think*—that Tess would've shown these to me at some point, that she might've made mention of my father, that she'd want to spend any time together at all.

But no.

The only time she wants to spend with me is on the set of some stupid show that my Grandma Carmen makes fun of.

"That day—a day like any other—is when tragedy first struck this small but resilient family."

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I clench my jaw, glancing surreptitiously at Tess. If she finds out that I do, in fact, have my phone, I'm in trouble. If I lose it, I have a feeling that something in me will just break into a million pieces. The small screen in my pocket is a key that connects me to Maxine, that allows me some sort of escape from this new life of mine.

Tess, on the other hand, doesn't seem to care much. She isn't looking at me. Instead, her arms are crossed over her chest and her gaze is fixated on the stage. Based on her expression, you'd think she was about to enter a corporate conference to discuss consumer reports or something. There's no emotion there, none at all.

I turn away from the video and put my hands over my ears. I don't want to hear about it anymore. I don't care. It's as if this is all happening to someone else, anyone else that isn't me. This isn't my life. I'm not Mia Patterson. I'm not some lost and stolen child.

When Tess steps onstage, I pull out my phone with shaking hands, hoping beyond all hope that my grandparents have messaged to let me know they're watching. That Sally and Nevaeh have my back. Maxine, at the very least, knows that I'm going to be here today. It could be a text from her.

Instead, it's a message from Maxx.

Heads up: your sister is freaking out. Your grandparents are being interviewed remotely for the show today. They didn't tell anyone until this morning. Maxine is on the phone with them now, but she'll call as soon as she gets the chance.

My heart drops into my stomach and a wave of nausea takes over me. My grandparents are coming on the show today? I turn back around to find Tess smiling at Martina and nodding her head; they're talking to each other, but all of a sudden, it's like I can't hear anything but the pounding of my heart.

A sense of dread washes over me.

This isn't going to go well for me today.

“What is wrong with you?” a voice asks. I don’t have to look up to know that it’s Parrish.

“My grandparents,” I breathe, because the lady with the badge is turning me around and positioning me on a taped X near the stage. Parrish stays with me, for whatever reason.

“What about them?” he asks, but I don’t have the words to reply. The assistant gives me a gentle nudge in the middle of my back, and I find myself stumbling onto the stage in front of all those people.

The audience begins to clap, but I feel rooted to the spot, paralyzed. Everyone is staring at me, analyzing me, judging me.

I take a few more steps and suddenly find myself sitting in a chair beside Tess. I hardly remember how I got there, I’m just ... sitting. And then there’s even a *smile* on my face. Because I can’t bear to ruin this or make a scene, because I’m still trying with Tess. Because I’m an idiot.

An idiot.

“Thank you for joining us today,” Martina says, leaning forward and offering up a patronizing smile. I don’t think she means for it to be patronizing; it just is. “Would you like us to call you ‘Mia’ or ‘Dakota’?”

The entire audience falls silent. Not like they were before, but like truly and utterly still as they await my answer. It’s annoying, more than anything else. This whole thing is idiotic.

“Dakota, please,” I reply, and several people gasp. I turn toward the audience to stare at them, but Tess gives my leg a squeeze, reminding me that I’m supposed to be looking at Martina. “I think I’ll always want to be known as Dakota Banks.”

“Tess, how do you feel about that?” Martina asks, because part of her claim to fame is that she’s an actress-turned-therapist-turned-talk show host. About as cheesy as Dr. Phil but so stupidly meme-able that people can’t resist talking about it.

That’s me. A future meme.

Nobody:

Literally no one:

Not even clout hungry iNfLuEnCeRs:

Dakota Banks: yes, I love being a kidnap victim!

“I think that Dakota can’t help but feel that way,” Tess replies, as smoothly and easily as if she, too, is a talk show host. Every now and again, there’s that little sliver of humanity in her, when her hair is mussed and she’s wearing glasses and it’s early and she’s muttering plot points to herself in the kitchen. Then there’s ... this. This senator-y stiffness mixed with a touch of wealth poisoning. “She’s been indoctrinated by the Banks.”

“What?” I blurt, blinking as Martina sighs and nods her head, *like she agrees*. Fuck. I’m not here to talk about my burgeoning—and extremely challenging—relationship with Tess Vanguard. I’m here to see my grandparents roasted on the internet.

Shit.

“Speaking of the Banks,” Martina begins, turning back toward the screen. I follow her gaze just in time to see my grandparents appear on the screen. *God. Damn it.* If I hadn’t been struggling to breathe in that moment, I might’ve gotten up and kicked over the camera.

Oh, who I am kidding, I wouldn’t because I always try to put everyone else first. I don’t want to hurt Tess. I don’t know what to do here.

“We have the Banks here, live with us. Carmen and Walter, thank you for joining us today.”

“You’re welcome,” my grandmother says, her mouth pursed, her red lipstick bright. Beside her, my grandpa looks older and more fragile than I remember. I feel suddenly guilty and sick to my stomach. It’s the first time I’ve seen them since the coffee shop. Well, my grandmother that is. I haven’t seen my grandfather since the cab drove me and Tess away from my house for the last time.

“Is this the first time you’ve spoken to Dakota since she moved to Seattle?” Martina asks as Tess remains where she is, facing forward. She doesn’t look back at the screen, not even as my grandmother answers Martina’s question. I don’t understand. Tess seemed fine back in New York? Like, she’s mad at the Banks now? Why?

“It is.” Carmen’s words are short, sharp, and clipped. She isn’t any happier to be here than I am. “Which I think is criminal.”

“What’s criminal is raising a kidnapped child full well knowing that she wasn’t your daughter’s.”

I blink at Tess before turning back to the screen, expecting to see my grandparents aghast and upset at such a stupid declaration. Of course they didn’t know I wasn’t Saffron’s.

Silence stretches, long and painful, before I realize that neither of my grandparents is speaking up.

“Is it true that two years ago, your daughter Saffron Banks came to you and admitted that her child—her real child—Dakota Banks had been dead for years?”

I’m frozen to my seat right now. Paralyzed. My heart has stopped, and I’m fairly certain that I’ve stopped breathing. Hopefully, I’ll suffocate and this whole shitty moment will be over.

“That’s true,” my grandfather begins, and the audience gasps and murmurs. I can only imagine the comments we’re garnering online. “When Dakota—our Dakota—turned fourteen, Saffron admitted the truth, but we didn’t believe her. She’s lied about things like that before.”

“From what I understand, you telephoned the hospital she claimed to have had her real daughter at to confirm?”

Another pause.

“That’s true,” my grandfather says, but I can’t even look at him so it’s hard to place the tone in his words. It’s impossible to decipher without a facial expression to accompany it. “But you have to understand, we still didn’t know the whole story.

We had no idea, until the episode of that stupid show. Frankly, looking back, we might not've made the call at all."

"You kept my daughter from me for years beyond the period where you were guiltless," Tess fires back, finally turning around to face them. It makes sense, why she's angry. Logically, I know that. Rationally, I understand. But this is how she chose to confront the situation? By dragging me here when she knew I didn't want to be interviewed? Forcing this on me when I'd rather dig my own grave and climb in?

"Fuck you," I say, and the entire audience goes quiet. Tess stops talking, my grandparents stop talking, Martina stops talking.

At least for a second.

"Who are you speaking to, Dakota?" she asks softly, like I'm a delicate child whose petals might break. I glare at her.

"You," I say, "because you exploit people." I look up at my grandparents with angry tears brimming in my eyes. "And you two for having an inkling of what was going on and ignoring it." Next, I look at Tess and she goes from seeming angry and self-righteous to wary. "And mostly you. For everything. For thinking more about yourself than me. Eat a bag of dicks." I'm about to launch into a tirade, right there on a live feed, but then someone's storming across the stage with their sweatshirt hood up and grabbing my wrist.

Parrish yanks me up from the chair and drags me across the stage while everyone watches.

Just a few steps later and we're running.

We run down the hall, past the woman with the lanyard, past the Cortez twins who gape at us like we're crazy, and right out the doors of the recording studio. It's misting out here—of course it is, it's the Pacific Northwest (gag)—but that doesn't stop Parrish from dragging me down the steps and along the sidewalk.

A few minutes later, a car pulls up alongside of us and Parrish opens the door.

It's Chasm.

“What’s the matter, Little Sister?” he asks, his voice edgy, like he hates himself for even asking that question of me.

I look back, finding Parrish’s gaze on mine as he takes a step back.

“I’ll tell Tess you’re headed home,” he says, pushing me in before he closes the door and turns back around on the sidewalk.

“Excuse me,” I breathe, trying to stop myself from hyperventilating. “Can you just ... I don’t know, drive me around for a minute?”

The thought of going back to the ice palace is too much for me right now.

Instead, as Chasm drives, I roll down my window and stick my head out, even going so far as to get on my knees so I can breathe in the misty morning air. He leaves me alone for a couple of breaths and then reaches out, yanking on the bottom hem of my already too short dress.

With a yelp, I slap my hands over his and slump back in the car just before we hit a sharp curve and I wonder if I might actually have fallen out if he hadn’t yanked me back in.

“You can’t touch someone’s ass without permission,” I snarl, but he’s already giving me an apologetic look, like he knows something bad happened in that studio. Oh. *Oh*. He was probably watching the live feed.

“You okay?” he asks, but I’m not. He knows it. I know it. Even Parrish knew it. So why doesn’t Tess? How could my grandparents *lie* to me like that?

“No. Fuck them, fuck them all,” I grumble, wishing I hadn’t deleted all my social media accounts so I could go rant somewhere and people would listen.

“You just said that—live. Are you sure you don’t want to be internet famous? Because I’ve already seen GIFs.”

I whip my phone from the pocket on my dress—dresses with pockets are the fucking best—and stare at all the messages flooding in. Sally and Nevaeh, Lumen and Danyella.

Maxx. Maxine. I pick up when an incoming call shows from my sister.

“I didn’t know, Kota. Oh my god, I swear I didn’t know.”

“I know you didn’t,” I agree, even though I’m breaking on the inside. My world already felt flipped upside down, but at least I was getting used to it. Now it’s been turned in a completely different direction and I’m starting to get dizzy.

The Banks knew I wasn’t Saffron’s kid? They might not’ve known exactly who I was, but shouldn’t they have known from principle that something bad happened? Am I mad at them for not coming forward sooner ... or because I still—even after this—wish we hadn’t been caught?

“Why am I here?” I ask to no one in particular, even though Maxine is still on the other end of the phone, crying. “Why am I wearing this?” I look down at the sparkly black party dress that shows off every inch of my thighs and costs more than it should and I feel suddenly sick. Without a second thought, I tear it over my head and Chasm overcorrects the car while simultaneously cursing at me in Korean.

“Little Sister,” he chokes out, sounding like he wants to kill me as I hijack his Whitehall Prep blazer from the back seat and shove my arms into it, buttoning as many buttons as I can with shaking hands. “Do you want to die in an accident today?”

I ignore him in favor of talking to my sister. For whatever reason, I decide to put her on speaker.

“Where are you right now? I’m having issues with my car, so I’m going to have Maxx drive me down.”

“It’s okay,” I tell her, even though it isn’t. I want to tear my hair out right now. I want to get mad at ... someone. Anyone. I’m just not exactly sure *who* to get mad at. Tess, for being angry that she was kept from her daughter longer than she needed to be? My grandparents, for losing the child they spent a decade and a half raising? Or Saffron, the mentally ill and damaged grieving mother who stole me to fill a hole in her heart?

“Dakota, I’m not leaving you alone right now,” Maxine asserts, and I can hear that stubborn streak in her voice, the resolute ring of finality that says she’s not taking *no* for an answer.

“Look, I’ll be fine. This news doesn’t change anything, does it? It doesn’t change the fact that Saffron had a dead child who was named my name, who should’ve lived my life, and I’m here in ... in fucking *Medina* of all places, living the life of some rich girl daughter to the world’s most famous author since J.K. Rowling and E.L. James.”

I’m getting hysterical here, but none of what I’ve said is a lie or an exaggeration.

“I’m getting in the car now,” Maxine tells me, but it won’t help. I won’t be able to see her unless I find a way to sneak out, but you can bet your ass Tess is going to try to talk to me as soon as I get home.

I find my way to the live feed of the show and see that it’s still happening without me: Tess versus the Banks. They don’t even need me there to fight about me.

“Listen, if you want to come, come next weekend. Chasm can pretend we have a study session together to get me out of the house.” I glance his way, but he doesn’t respond. I take that to mean *yes*.

“I’m taking you on a hike,” Maxine declares because, like a true PNW Native, she believes that a hike can cure anything from depression to anxiety to a sprained ankle (don’t ask me how). To be honest, I despise hikes. The only thing that sounds worse to me in this moment is spending time with Tess.

“Fine. I’ll do a hike, but only if you pick one with less people.”

I can practically hear Maxine grinning through the phone, but when she sends a request to turn our call into a video chat, I decline it. If she looks at me now, she’ll see that I have tears running down my face, even though I don’t mean to let them.

“Are you sure you’re okay? This is ... I mean, I don’t even know what to think. I’ll call Grandma and Grandpa after the

show is over and talk to them personally. Don't let them turn into villains in your mind without knowing the full truth."

"I'd never do that," I say, because despite what happened behind the scenes, the Banks were incredible parents to me, and I don't regret a second of our time spent together.

"We're still sisters, no matter what," Maxine tells me, but she doesn't have to say it for it to be true. I already knew that. "Okay, call me later and check in?" I nod, remember that we're not on video chat, and then sigh.

"Fine."

"I love you fierce," she tells me, and I can't resist responding in turn. I know my sister won't let this rest until she's gotten everyone's side of the story, thought it over, and come to her own conclusion. As for me, I just feel tired all of a sudden.

"Love you fierce," I reply and then I hang up, but not without a shred of guilty relief flowing through me.

Even though I know Maxine isn't at fault for any of this, I just ... need a minute to myself.

Chasm is quiet for a while, taking us north toward some place called Gold Bar that looks to be rural as fuck, and we've only been in the car for about fifty minutes.

"I'm sure you'd rather I leave you alone," Chasm starts, and I look back to see him flick a quick glance my way. Something about him seems ... off? It takes me a minute to realize that not only is he missing that signature yellow lightning bolt in his hair, but that the piercings on either side of his lips are missing, too. His hair hangs over his ears, covering the plugs, and his signature eye liner is missing. Also, he's wearing a long-sleeved sweater and khaki slacks, which is completely unlike him. "But I have to at least tell you that you look nice—and completely unlike yourself—today."

I just keep staring at him.

"Really?" I blurt out, letting that ember in my belly go to flames again. It's so much easier to just get angry at someone else and act like that's the real problem when in reality, I have

a million of my own issues to work through. “Is that a compliment or an insult? If I look unlike myself today, then you’re a total stranger. What did you do to your hair?”

Chasm cringes as I reach out and tug on the hair near his face, withdrawing my hand and looking down at the black powder covering my fingers.

“I sprayed it with temporary dye,” he says, looking over at me again, this time with an expression of discomfort that does nothing to make him look like the slouchy bad boy I’m used to. Maybe this isn’t Chasm, but Kwang-seon? Just like I’m Mia Patterson instead of Dakota Banks today. That’s how it feels anyway, like I’m wearing somebody’s else skin, somebody else’s life. “My dad doesn’t like colored hair.”

“And your plugs?” I ask, but I don’t wait for him to answer, sweeping back his hair so that I can trace the curve of his ear with my fingertip. The plugs are still there, just hidden. I smile slightly but Chasm bats my way hand away and lets out a huffing sound, cursing at me in Korean again.

“If you need a translation: that means *back off*. What the hell are you doing? You can’t stroke someone’s ear like that.”

“You grabbed my ass,” I shoot back, but he combs his hair forward to cover his ears anyway.

“My dad’s in town for the week, so I have to look ... the way he wants me to look,” Chasm hazards, glancing over at me, like he’s testing me to see how much he can or should reveal. I’m reminded of Tess’ bitchy *it’s my body; I made it* retort. Chasm’s father must follow a similar thought process. I wonder if he knows about all of the tattoos? Looking over at the back of Chasm’s bare hand on the steering wheel, I guess probably not.

He’s taking a big risk though. It would only take one trip to the lake, one wrong photo posted somewhere on social media, for his dad to find out.

“What about your piercings?” I ask as I wonder if they were fake all along, but Chasm surprises me by smirking in just such a way that his entire face is transformed. *That* is the real

Chasm, and no amount of makeup—or lack thereof, clothing, or hair dye can change that. It isn't about the way your body looks or what you wear, it's what's on the inside that makes you, you.

I look down at the blazer I'm wearing, the one that smells like Chasm, that peppermint and dark chocolate scent that makes my mouth water because I'm a crazy person who smells people to get off.

Despite the clothes, the makeup, the fancy hairstyle the 'Millennial' artist gave me, I'm Dakota Banks. I'm Dakota Banks whether my birth certificate, Tess, or the law agree with that. Even if my grandparents lied.

Still, a few spare tears fall and land on the blazer's lapels, darkening the fabric briefly.

"I use a topical filler," he says, still smiling like an asshole. It makes me like him just a bit more though. That, and he came to pick me up so damn quick. He must've rushed out of wherever he was to get there so fast. *And Parrish is the one that called him.* Parrish. He grabbed my hand and dragged me out of the studio; he found me an escape; he stayed to deal with Tess.

I definitely owe the bastard one, don't I? Or maybe we're just even if you factor in that stupid Tiktok he made ...

"A topical filler?" I ask, and I hate that my voice sounds weak with tears. Chasm pretends not to notice, running his finger along the curve of his jaw.

"Yep. I have a friend who's an actor; he showed me a video of his makeup artist using it on his own facial piercings for a casting call. I waited until my dad was out of town on a business trip, so I'd have time to heal and just ... did it." He grins even bigger, gaze focused out the windshield as rain begins to fall, thick and heavy on the roof of the car. "I almost shit my pants when he came home, and I tried the filler for the first time; I was sure he'd be able to tell."

"Of course you have a friend who's an actor," I murmur with a roll of my eyes, but I'm already looking up videos of

the topical filler he's telling me about. *Hot damn.* I'll admit: I'm impressed. It seems like you take a bit of clear silicone-like stuff and colored foundation, mix them together, and apply it. A rubber pad is laid over the top until it dries, leaving the skin whole and clear. "I didn't even know something like this existed."

"Neither does my dad," Chasm says with a dark laugh, turning into a gravel road and then winding us through a thicket of trees. "Nobody's renting the cabin tonight, so it should be empty ..."

He seems to be mostly talking to himself, so I don't bother responding. Instead, I stare down at my phone—which is still on silent, because Jesus Christ it's blowing up—and see that Tess has messaged me.

The show is over. If you have your phone, now is the time to admit it. I'll also be calling Chasm.

I delete her message and when Chasm's screen lights up with an incoming call from her, I pick it up without asking, and reject it. He glances my way but doesn't stop me.

What can she possibly do to me that'll hurt more than what she's already done? She already stripped me of my old life and forced me into a new one that I didn't want. Ground me, Tess. Take my electronics away ... oh, wait, you already fucking did that.

Except for my phone.

At least I've got my phone.

Thanks to Parrish, that is.

There aren't any messages from him. I try not to be disappointed about that, sliding my phone into the pocket of the blazer as Chasm parks the car near the impressive bulk of a log cabin. And by log cabin, I mean it has walls made out of logs. It's the size of Tess and Paul's house, and probably outfitted with just as many luxury amenities.

"What is this place?" I ask as Chasm turns off the car and climbs out, standing on the driveway and fiddling with his

phone. After a moment, he seems to find what he's looking for and glances up at me as I come around the front of the hood.

"This is one of my dad's rentals," he says, gesturing in the direction of the house with his chin. "But there's nobody here tonight. Come on, I've got the code." Chasm grabs my hand and I'm instantly reminded of Parrish, his warm fingers curling around mine as he yanked me up from my seat and ran with me through the halls of the studio until we burst outside.

I exhale sharply as Chasm pulls me along behind him, taking me up the front steps and inputting the code from his phone into the lock. The door clicks open, and we step into a massive open kitchen/living room area with a wall of windows facing the river.

Chasm doesn't bother to turn the lights on, guiding me through the living room and then letting go of my hand so that he can unlock the back door. We step out onto a deck, pausing beneath an overhang that keeps the furniture dry from the rain.

It's still early, but it's dark today, misty and wet and miserable. Not that I'm complaining; it suits my mood just fine.

"What are we doing here?" I ask, because even though Chasm is sort of part of the Vanguard family, in reality he's a stranger to me. We're alone at an empty house in a town I'm not familiar with and nobody knows where we are. I chew the inside of my cheek and then pull my phone out, sending a quick text to Parrish.

At some sort of cabin-house with Chas, I send as Chasm turns around and leans his back against the railing.

"Checking in with someone? You should do that. Don't get in cars with random boys and let them drive you somewhere remote."

"Don't mansplain to me how to keep myself safe. Be accountable for your own actions."

Chasm smiles lazily at me and offers up a hand in acquiescence. At the same moment, I get an incoming text

from Parrish. *I know where that is. See you at home when you get here.*

I shut my phone off and put it back in my pocket, moving over to stand beside Chas and folding my arms on the top of the railing. The blazer I'm wearing is just long enough to count as a dress; I hope he doesn't mind me borrowing it for a while.

"Not to add to the creepy ambience or anything, but when I'm just really pissed off about something, I come here and I scream."

"You scream?" I ask, glancing over at him and cocking a single brow. He's staring contemplatively at his own reflection in the sliding glass door, like he isn't totally sure he recognizes himself. I do the same, turning so that I can see my own face reflected back at me.

Black and lime green hair, split straight down the middle. Straight bangs that fall just below my eyebrows. Loose waves gathered into a chignon at the base of my neck. A full mouth with a plump lower lip, a large straight nose, round eyes with raven-black irises. There's too much makeup on my face, so I reach up and scrub half of it away, like Mulan on the cartoon Disney movie.

"You totally fucked up my blazer, didn't you?" Chasm asks, and I cringe slightly as he turns to look at me.

"I'll buy you a new one, pinky promise!" I blurt out with a cringe, lifting up my right hand. What I don't expect is for him to reach out and hook his little finger with mine. My lips part as I look up at him and we end up staring at each other for an inordinate amount of time.

He drops his hand and I let my arm fall to my side.

"It's okay, Little Sister. You can keep it." He turns back to his own reflection and sighs, closing his eyes for a moment. I wonder where he was, all dressed up like this? Or dressed down? Either way, I wonder where he was that he felt he needed the costume. "Consider it an apology for pushing you in the pool. I listened to Parrish bitching about you, and I

didn't even give you a chance. And what I said about your grandparents the other day ... you didn't deserve that."

"Is this you giving me a chance now?" I ask, my heart stumbling weirdly in my chest, like a drunk person trying to navigate a hedge maze. It feels like I'm going in circles, making my tummy ache with nausea.

"The thing about this place is," Chasm starts, standing up straight and crossing his arms over his chest. "If you want to just fucking scream, you can scream. But, if you want to just sit in silence, you can do that, too. I'm getting in the car—you do what you need to do."

He moves away, leaving me alone on the deck. At first, I feel stupid standing there, but then I realize that's because I'm worrying about what someone else might think about it. What Chasm thinks, what Parrish would think, what Maxine or Tess or my grandparents might think. I'm worried about getting home quickly so Tess isn't mad. I'm worried about Chasm getting bored waiting for me in his car. I'm worried about what the internet has to say about the show today.

So, here's what I do.

I move down the deck stairs and into the yard, drag a chair under the protection of a large tree, and then I sit in it. My ass gets wet, but I don't care. I put my elbows on my knees, my chin in my hands, and I close my eyes.

For almost an hour, I just sit there and listen to the rain.

Chasm doesn't bother me. And when I finally stand up, suck in a deep breath, and just scream, nobody interrupts me.

When I climb back in the car a half hour after that, he doesn't seem remotely inconvenienced at having to wait.

"Do you feel better?" he asks me as I glance over and see that he's playing Tetris on his phone. He loses the game with a measly score of twelve-thousand points. My eye twitches.

"My highest score is six hundred and twelve-thousand," I tell him, because it's easier to talk about games than it is to talk about feelings.

“Fuck, you really are a simp for games, huh?”

I reach out before I can stop myself, putting my hand over his. He stares down at it like I’ve slapped him.

“Thank you for bringing me out here,” I say, and I mean it. “I owe you one.”

Chasm smirks at me, and it’s the most confident, self-assured expression I’ve seen on any other human being besides Maxx Wright.

I expect him to blurt out some stupid-ass innuendo or insult me again, but instead all I get is this.

“You don’t owe someone because they were nice to you.” He starts the engine and cranks the volume on the radio, saving me from trying to have to force any conversation.

Why would we need to talk? I feel like that’s a perfect place to leave our interaction.

Just ... perfect.

OceanofPDF.com

A graphic for Chapter 17. The word 'CHAPTER' is written in a black, hand-drawn, blocky font on the left. To its right, the number '17' is written in a large, pink, hand-drawn font. The background features a dark green heart shape, a black silhouette of a tree with bare branches, and a faint, sketchy drawing of a person's face in profile on the right side.

CHAPTER 17

Tess is waiting for me at the garage side entrance to the house, arms folded over her chest, her long espresso hair loosely tied and draped over one shoulder.

It's dark now. I had Chasm drive me all over the Seattle metro area and then some. He bought me an iced coffee but mostly, he left me alone. I turned my phone off right after we left the cabin, and I left it off.

I climb out of the car in Chas' blazer and nothing else before realizing how that might look. But then wondering why ... I give a fuck how that looks? I just stare back at Tess and take a sip from my coffee. The slurping sound echoes around the garage as Chasm pauses beside me and hooks a *what the actual fuck are you doing?* look my way.

I pissed Tess off enough by being gone, I shouldn't poke the bear. And yet ... I'm going to poke the bear.

I let my hair out of its bun long ago, so it's all mussed up. And my blazer is still wet because I've been sitting hunched up and didn't give it a chance to dry. This must *really* look like something it isn't.

I keep staring at my birth mother.

“What the—and excuse my language—fuck were you thinking?” Tess' eyes water, but she manages to keep her expression what I'd call 'bitchy neutral'. Like, she's clearly ticked-off but she isn't expressing that. Yet. Her eyes flick to Chasm. “I'm disappointed in you, too. How could you drive my daughter around all day and not think to bring her home or answer your phone?”

Parrish appears in the doorway behind Tess, frowning as he drags his gaze from my borrowed wet blazer and up to my face. My eyes catch his and stick there, my palms sweat, my heart begins to race.

Oh. Oh. Ohhhhh. I have a crush on Parrish.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I have a crush on my stepbrother. If I were at the screaming/silence cabin (how is that not a title of one of my bio mom's books already?), I'd definitely scream right now.

I look back at Tess.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Vanguard," Chasm says politely, which is as nice as I've ever heard him. He must be terrified of Tess to act that nice. I'm under no such curse. She's done enough to me that I'm numb to it now.

"I'm not." *Shit, did I just say that?*

"Excuse me?" Tess asks, blinking at me like she can't quite believe I just said what I said. Parrish looks apathetic to all of it, as he always does, but I'm hyperaware of his presence in a way I wasn't before. It just ... happened today. Like lightning in a gray and distant sky.

"I'm not sorry because I told you I didn't want to be interviewed, and you didn't care. You knew my grandparents were going to be on the show, and you didn't tell me." I'm shaking with frustration, but I don't move. Instead, I just stand there and squeeze my iced coffee like a stress ball. The sound of the cup denting seems so ... *loud*.

"None of that excuses you for running away for an entire day." Tess steps forward and holds out her hand, palm up. "Phone," she says, wiggling her fingers. "Give it to me. I know you have it."

"I really don't though," I say with a small cringe, shaking out the pockets on the blazer so she can see there's nothing in them. I already thought about this and stashed my phone under Chasm's seat. Like Parrish, he seems fine going along with it.

Tess drops her arm to her side with a dramatic sigh, but where can we really go from here?

“You’re grounded again, Dakota. For a month. How does that sound?”

It sounds like I made the right choice when I threw your envelope away, that and the stupid key you have yet to explain. Doesn’t matter. I’d throw the tennis bracelet away, too, if I didn’t think I could sell it and buy myself a plane ticket back home instead.

“Dakota,” she says, and it’s clear in the way that she chooses to emphasize my name that she’s trying here. It feels ‘too little, too late’ to me. “I understand why you’re upset—”

“Do you?” I ask, wishing I could just open the garage door and start running. Couldn’t I? Would she physically chase me down and drag me back here? Or could I escape? Permanently. The thought crosses my mind and disappears just as quick. Of course I wouldn’t do that. Not to Tess or my grandparents ... That moment of selfish introspection at the cabin makes me feel jittery. “If you did, you wouldn’t be trying to punish me right now, would you?”

I move past her and into the house, pausing briefly beside Parrish. We look at each other for a breath, but then Tess is following me, so I’m forced to keep going.

I make it to my room just before her, close it, and then lock it before she can open it. I’m convinced she’s going to pick the lock from the outside and let herself in, but she doesn’t.

I flop down on my bed, leaving the lights off and wondering when my furniture is going to get here. I’m still staring at the ceiling when someone knocks a few hours later, sitting up and heading over to crack it open. Somehow, I think I already know who it is.

“Here,” Parrish says quietly, handing my phone over to me. “Chas gave it to me before he left.” He pauses and his eyes flick to the side for the briefest instant before coming back to me. It feels like he’s looking right past all the bullshit for the first time since I got here.

Opposites attract. Sometimes you start falling for the person you hate. Sometimes, you're not even sure they are your opposite. Maybe they're just so much like you that you can't tell the difference anymore?

I go to take the phone, but Parrish whips it out of my grip for a moment.

"Don't fall for Chasm," he tells me, and it takes me nearly a minute to process that he's just said that.

"Why not?" I ask, but he just shakes his head and pushes my phone against my hand. "Parrish?"

But he turns and disappears into his room without answering me.

Dick.

But I am grateful to have my phone. And I'm thankful for him distracting Tess all day.

I bite my lip and throw my phone on the charger—but without turning it on. I won't risk it, not tonight.

That is, until the memory of waking up in the woods, alone and cold and scared, hits me like a freight train. Never mind. I'd rather risk Tess finding—and subsequently stealing—my phone than waking up outside with a needle mark in my neck.

I turn my phone on, doing my best to ignore the barrage of messages flooding through on every channel. Comments, tags, DMs, emails, texts, voice mail. Just thinking about it makes my stomach flip with nausea, so I don't bother looking. I set the phone up on the tripod and then do my best to disguise it with random junk like a half-empty bottle of lotion and some paperback books.

Only then do I let myself relax, curling into a ball in an unfamiliar room in an unfamiliar state of mind and doing my best to fall asleep.

One sentence keeps repeating itself in my mind, loud and clear—and so do the unspoken implications that followed it.

Don't fall for Chasm—fall for me instead.

The first thing I do when I get up is check the footage.

Not only am I super curious to get to the bottom of the mystery—like, am I sleepwalking?—but it also gives me something to do that isn't checking my messages, looking at social media, or leaving this room. I pause with my phone in my hand and then lay my forehead against the edge of the dresser with a groan.

“Why did I say those things yesterday?” I breathe, second-guessing myself as I stand there and sulk. I feel trapped, both physically and online. Where can I go that I won't be bothered? I end up running myself a bath as I replay last night's interaction with Tess in my head. *“I'm not. I'm not sorry ...”*

Cringe.

Internally and externally.

I just fucked that up, didn't I?

My skin gets prune-y before I get out, and I'm dragging my feet like crazy. Leaving this room means all sorts of things that I don't want to think about right now. Tess. My grandparents. Being kidnapped. *Parrish*.

I grit my teeth.

Fucking Parrish.

I scrub my hands over my face, thinking about Chasm and how comfortable I felt being around him last night. In reality, the last thing in the world I need or want is a romantic interest. Why do I have to be meeting all these people at once? I feel cursed.

“Okay, Dakota, let's just get this over with.” I drop my arms to my sides, shaking out my hands and taking several deep breaths to make sure that I'm calm. Either Tess grounds me or she doesn't. Either Parrish admits to the implications in his words last night or he doesn't.

Parrish's door is closed when I open my own, and a quick check down the hall shows me that Tess isn't in her office. Fantastic. I head downstairs to the main area of the house, and there they all are, dressed and awake on a Sunday the same way they are on Mondays. Every single one of them—but me. Because, of course, I belong here like a fish belongs out of water.

“Good morning, Dakota,” Tess says, very prim and proper and closed-off. She came close to being human last night, but apparently when the moonlight goes, so does my bio mom's feelings.

“Good morning.” I pause awkwardly in my shoe-less, prune-y pajama state, and I think about Chasm. Mostly, I think about the way he waited while I sat in the yard and did my own thing. For a minute there, I didn't give a shit what anybody else thought of me.

So I move over to the cabinet and start yanking things out. I have to improvise since the Vanguard's don't have the most well-stocked pantry in existence. I click a few buttons on the wall oven to get it preheating. Nobody says anything as I start recreating one of my grandfather's recipes from scratch.

But they all *are* staring at me when I glance up from stirring a from-scratch bowl of cornbread batter.

“Would you like to discuss last night?” Tess asks, holding her coffee mug in one hand while the bottom rests in the palm of the other. From behind her, Parrish watches me, sitting at the table between his father and Kimber.

We make eye contact again, but all he does is blink at me, nice and slow.

“No, thank you,” I reply, because if she's asking it as a question then I have a right to say no, don't I?

Another long pause. The TV is playing a conservative news channel in the corner, but nobody's paying much attention to it.

“Are you making cornbread for breakfast?” Tess asks as I spoon the yellow mixture into a pan.

“Why can’t I have cornbread for breakfast?” I reply, looking back up at her. Kimber’s back to scrolling on her phone while the three younger kids move on, chattering with each other. Paul, Parrish, and Tess are all still watching me though.

“Dakota, we need to talk,” Tess finally says, setting her coffee mug down hard on the counter. Coffee sloshes over the edge, but she makes no move to clean it up. She’ll leave it to Delphine, I’m sure.

“About what?” I’m purposely avoiding her eyes as I slip the cornbread into the preheated oven. After that, I wash my hands and start loading the dishwasher.

“You’re grounded for a month, starting today,” Tess begins, and I pause, turning slowly to look at her. Who is this person that’s trying to order me around? I don’t know her. I know the Banks, who, apparently lied to me. But who is this? Tess Vanguard, bestselling author. That’s all I really know.

“I’m grounded for which part, exactly?” I cross my arms over my chest and lean my butt against the edge of the counter. For the briefest of seconds, I swear I see the edge of Parrish’s lip curve up in a sardonic smile, but in the span of a blink, it’s gone and I’m left wondering if I’m only seeing what I want to see.

“For disappearing with Chasm all day and not contacting me.” She sounds resolute, sure of herself, like this is a rule crafted of iron, one that can never be broken.

“If you wanted me to contact you,” I start slowly, meeting her eyes, their color so like my own that it’s startling. I know we’re mother and daughter, but did we really need to look so similar? Lots of people don’t look like their biological parents, at least not to this degree. “Then you shouldn’t have taken away my phone. Or ... planned to take my phone away.” I grin at her, which is maybe a bit cheeky but which I do anyway. “I lost it, but if I found it, you’d just take it anyway so ...”

Tess takes her coffee mug from the counter and dumps it into the sink, frowning so hard it looks like she’s leaving permanent creases in her face.

“Don’t try to pretend that you didn’t at least have access to Kwang-seon’s phone.” Uh-oh. If she’s calling Chas by his real name, she must be extra pissed off. “And there’s no excuse for you leaving the studio without telling me and then staying out to all hours of the night.” The way her gaze sweeps me, I feel immediately judged. “Did something happen between you and him?”

My mouth drops open, and I just blink at her in surprise.

“Happen? Do you mean, did I have sex with him?” I ask, and Tess cringes. “Seriously? That’s what you’re concerned about? No, I didn’t have sex with him because I was too upset about finding out that one, my grandparents lied to me. And two, that you knew they’d be on the show and you didn’t care. You didn’t care that you’d make them look like monsters in front of the whole world.”

“They are monsters!” Tess screams at me, and the force of her anger causes me to take a step back. Both Paul and Parrish stand up from their seats as Kimber pries her eyes from the screen of her phone to stare. “They are monsters, Mia.”

Mia.

There it is, and very pointed, too.

“They’re my grandparents—” I start, but Tess isn’t in the mood today.

She moves across the kitchen to stand right in front of me, an imposing figure in her designer heels and skirt suit. I’m proud of myself for meeting her eyes and standing my ground, as if the heat of her fury isn’t searing my skin.

“They are *not* your grandparents. Your grandparents—my parents—are dead. The Banks are just ... people. Strangers. Maybe they didn’t kidnap you with their own hands, but they aided and abetted that maniac; they knew the truth *years* ago, and yet they kept you from me. So I’m sorry, Mia, if I don’t feel any sympathy toward them.”

“Don’t call me Mia,” I choke out, but the words are caught behind a wave of emotion. They feel weak, and I don’t want to

be weak. “And don’t call Saffron a maniac, she’s ... sad. Her baby died—”

“Yes,” Tess says, her voice sharp as a knife as she stares down at me. Now I see how she’s become such a powerhouse in the publishing world; she’s fucking terrifying. Even if her manuscript sucked—they never do, her books are always painfully well-written—anyone publisher in their right mind would drop to their knees and beg for forgiveness if she looked at them this way. “Her baby died. Dakota Banks died of SIDS. And that’s very sad, but *my* baby didn’t die. My baby is standing right here.”

“I am not your baby,” I breathe, but I can’t deny it. Three DNA tests and one quick look in the mirror is all it took to confirm that beyond a shadow of a doubt. “Not just your baby,” I amend, because I feel cornered. I feel fucking trapped.

“Mom,” Parrish starts, but Tess lifts up a finger to silence him, staring down at me with her raven-black eyes.

“Not just my baby?” she clarifies, her voice cooling from red hot to ice cold. *Shit, shit, shit.* I feel instantly like I’ve made a mistake, but where can I go with this now? Besides, I have a point. If Tess feels her biology allows her instant and permanent access to me—as well as absolute control—then what about my dad? Don’t I at least deserve to know his fucking *name*?

“I have a father out there somewhere, a man that you refuse to talk about.” I keep my eyes on hers, even as my blood pounds in my skull and I feel my heartbeat thundering a million miles an hour. “You say he was a random one-night stand, but I don’t believe you. The way you acted when I brought him up was ... weird.”

Tess’ face pales slightly, and I feel an instant spike of guilt. What if she was ... raped or abused? What if my father is a monster? The thought makes me so nauseous that I feel almost dizzy. I’m not out to hurt other people, I’m really not. What if Tess was trying to protect me by not bringing him up? What am I even doing right now?

“If your father cared about you, don’t you think he’d have stepped forward when our story appeared on every major news site in the country? Don’t you think he’d have found you on social media and reached out? That he’d hire a lawyer to fight for the right to see you?” Tess stands her ground, regaining that fiery rage, that righteous superiority. “You are grounded for four weeks, whether you like it or not. If your *father* steps forward to claim half his rights, you can take up your issues with him then.”

If your father cared about you ...

I swallow hard, struggling to rein in my emotions. If I fully understood what they all were, maybe I wouldn’t have such trouble pulling myself together.

Instead, I turn to go and Tess grabs my arm, causing me to stumble slightly. My phone falls from my pocket and my face blanches just before she picks it up off the ground and stares at it. Her eyes lift to mine for the briefest of seconds before she throws it in the sink as hard as she can, shattering it the same way Parrish did Kimber’s.

This time, when I start to run, Tess doesn’t follow me.

But somebody else does.

Parrish grabs me from behind just as I step into my room, heeling the door shut behind us. His hands spin me around and then he’s crushing me into the sweet-smelling fabric of his hoodie. His fingers hold the back of my head, his other arm wrapped around my waist.

I’m crying without even realizing that I’ve started. Even though I should rightfully shove him away from me and tell him to get fucked ... I find my fingers curling into his Whitehall Prep sweatshirt, squeezing it tight as tears and snot stain the fabric.

I’ve ruined Chasm’s *and* Parrish’s clothes in a twenty-four-hour period.

Chasm.

Something feels off as I snuggle into Parrish and he holds me close, stroking my hair and saying nothing. Is this wrong

or ... is it exactly right? He's my stepbrother, but that doesn't really matter, does it? What does matter is that he's Tess' son, more so than I am or ever will be her daughter. That's the problem.

Also ... also ...

I lift my face up to find Parrish staring down at me with an inscrutable expression. His almond-shaped eyes are dark, the copper color of them obscured with anger. At who, exactly, I'm not sure. Tess? He couldn't possibly be mad at Tess, right? Not on my behalf anyway ...

"Why are you ..." I start, but he doesn't let me finish. Instead, he puts his hand on the side of my face and leans down, his eyes closing as he drops his lips to mine.

When we kissed before, there was anger. There was lust. There was curiosity.

But there wasn't ... *this*, this bone-deep ache, this tenderness, this compassion.

His mouth is hot, the taste of him irresistible. He's fucking delicious and I'm living for it.

We stumble back, still kissing, and my arms go around his neck.

There's tongue—a lot of tongue—and when I press my body to his, I can feel how excited he is through his pants. *If Tess opens the door and sees this ...* I think, but there's something about the inherent danger in this situation that makes it even more exciting.

"Break up with Lumen," Parrish whispers, but his mouth is still so close to mine that I can feel every word as a gentle caress from his lips to mine. "Don't let her kiss you anymore."

"What are you talking about?" I whisper back, but then he's kissing me again, and I feel like I can't breathe. I can't even feel anymore. I just am. I'm here in this moment, existing and taking it all in. If my emotions weren't in a wild tangle already, they'd be an impossible knot. The more we kiss, the more my hands begin to rove down Parrish's back, the more his hands creep down to my hips, the tighter that knot gets.

We hit the edge of the bed and I sit down, letting him brace a single knee on my right side. The mattress dents under his weight, but Parrish doesn't break the kiss. Actually, he's so good at it that I start to wonder if the rumors about him being a standoffish dick at school are really true. Does he pick up girls in secret and practice on them?

"Stop thinking so hard," he murmurs against my mouth, sounding annoyed. "Just don't think right now."

I start to protest, but then ... I'm always up in my fucking head, and I don't feel like being there anymore. I don't want to think about the Banks or about Tess or about some distant, random shadowy figure who's supposed to be my father. At least whatever this is between me and Parrish is just that—ours. Nobody else's.

"Tattoo me," I blurt, before I can second-guess myself. "Somewhere that everyone can see. Somewhere that Tess can see." Parrish pauses, his eyes flicking away for a brief moment. He's indescribably beautiful right now, his foppish brown and gold curls falling across his forehead, his signature frown glossy with saliva from my own mouth. "I honestly don't care what it is. You choose. Anything."

"Anything ..." he starts, and then he's dragging his gaze back to mine and shattering me with it. Why is he so goddamn pretty? Why do I hate him so much? Why do I ... *not* hate him so much? And why in the actual fuck does he go from being an asshole to acting like a savior, all in a single week?

Our mouths clash again, just before his hand slides up under my baggy sweatshirt. The zing of contact between his bare palm and my naked side is electric. A tingling sensation starts at the base of my spine and a heat takes over the apex of my thighs. Part of me wonders if I'd actually do it, if I'd sleep with Parrish.

Is that weird? To even consider that ... If Tess found out, it would kill her.

Part of me likes that idea. The rest of me is horrified by it.

And yet, I don't stop. Actually, it's me that reaches down and encourages his hand to climb higher, to find my breast through the stupid lacey bralette I'm wearing, the one with all the holes in it that doesn't even really fit. It's comfy as hell though.

Parrish squeezes my breast, sliding his thumb over my nipple at the same time. Reflexively, I reach up and cup his junk through his pants. He pulls back, but only slightly, blinking at me in surprise.

"Really?" he asks, that caustic burn in his voice taking on a different note. It occurs to me that every insult he's ever thrown my way—from moment fucking one—has been a defensive technique, something to keep me at arm's length. He wants me. He has since the first second he laid eyes on me.

And vice versa.

I'm no innocent in all of this.

"Really," I repeat, and then I give him another squeeze and he groans, pressing his mouth to mine with a surge of heat that reminds me of that ember in my belly, the one that flames every time he's around. *Gamer Girl in love with her stepbrother. Aghh!* I promised I wouldn't let myself do this, fall for him or ... whatever it is that I feel for him.

I'm not sure how much further we might've gotten if Chasm hadn't opened the door and caught us.

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CHAPTER 18

I must not have inherited Tess' ability to write because when I see the look on Chasm's face, words fail me. In some small way, I feel like I betrayed him. Or let him down. Or ...

"Are you two fucking nuts?!" he growls out, slamming the door and putting his back to it. "Tess is on her way up here."

Parrish stumbles back like he's been punched, putting as much distance between me and him as he can before he stops moving. He's looking at me, not Chasm, but his attention snaps over to the door as soon as a knock sounds on the other side.

The knob jiggles, and I hear Tess' strained voice from the hallway.

"I'm allowing Chasm to continue your tutoring sessions even though you're grounded, but I want you both downstairs." A brief pause as she waits for us to unlock the door. Chasm keeps it closed, staring at me with an impossible expression as I swipe my hands over my hair and shove my sweatshirt sleeve across my mouth to hide the slightly wet, swollen nature of it. "Unlock this door *now*."

Her voice brooks no argument, so when I nod, Chasm opens it without hesitation.

Seeing Parrish in the room with us calms her down a beat which makes me feel ... either gleeful or guilty, I'm not sure. The piece of my soul that's hurting makes me want to hurt her more, tell her that I kissed her precious son. The real me

knows that it isn't a very good idea. I don't want to make Tess angry; I just want her to stop hurting me.

"Get your schoolwork and head downstairs; this isn't a 'hangout'." She makes single quotes with her fingers, and I bite my lip to resist rolling my eyes. Tess looks at me for a moment, but she doesn't apologize or even mention our fight downstairs. It's such a sharp, harsh contrast from the way things are handled in the Banks household. Sometimes we fight and cry and yell, and sometimes that goes on for a while, but we always come back to it. We never just drop it. What good does that do, to pretend the problem's gone away? "Parrish."

"I heard you," he snaps back, shoving his fingers through his hair and then giving her a look like he regrets saying that. Tess turns back to me briefly, but I won't look at her. Instead, I focus on my feet like they're the only things in the room.

"I'll get you a new phone tomorrow," she tells me, all matter of fact, like she didn't destroy the slightly outdated but still super freaking important to me phone that Maxine pitched in to buy last year. Luckily for Tess, I have everything set to upload to the cloud, but what if I didn't? What if she'd just destroyed months or years of precious memories? "But you'll only be allowed to have it during the school day, in case of emergency. Otherwise, it's mine."

I grit my teeth as she turns on her heel and clacks her way back down the hall to her office.

Good.

I hope she writes about this. Maybe then she can reflect on what a bitch she's being.

"Lucky you, a Tess-provided phone," Parrish says, his voice quiet and strange. I lift my head up to look at him but he's staring out at the lake, bored and apathetic and His Great Majesty of Sloths, like he didn't just kiss me and grab my tit and ... oh my fucking god, did I just let him—*encourage* him—to grab my tit?! "Be careful. She'll get in there and snoop through everything." Parrish turns his face back to look at me. "She'll track you."

Seriously? Seriously?! He's doing exactly what Tess was just doing—acting like what just happened means nothing. And I hate that. I hate that more than anything in the world. Emotions matter. They're sticky. They don't just dissipate like water on hot pavement.

“Wait a fucking second,” Chasm says, reaching up to rub the bridge of his nose. I'm happy to see that his piercings are back in, his eyes ringed with liner, and that pretty yellow lightning bolt on full display. Guess that means his dad is gone again? “Do I have, like, a weed hangover from that blunt I smoked last night, or did I just walk in on the two of you rounding second base?”

Parrish tucks his tattooed hands into the pockets of his jeans and tries to take off. Chasm throws his arm out to block him, his palm slamming into the opposite side of the doorjamb as he turns a scowl on his best friend.

“Don't even do that,” he murmurs, low and sharp. And then, much to my surprise, he says something in Korean and *Parrish responds*. Oh my god. He's taught his best friend how to speak his language. It's ... it's so cute. The ultimate bromance. Pretty sure I'd have a tear if I weren't so ... conflicted. Furious at Tess. Furious at Parrish. In ... lust with Parrish? Eww, that's fucking gross.

Gamer Girl got it bad.

As I watch, the two of them have a mumbled conversation in Korean while I try to use my incredible K-drama watching skills to translate it. Unfortunately, I understand little to nothing. Okay, not little to nothing, but just nothing. Nothing at all. Except for my name.

Dakota.

At least they're both still calling me Dakota.

I stand up from the bed and both boys pause to glance my way.

Don't fall for Chasm; break up with Lumen. Why did he ask me those things unless he wanted something more than a stolen kiss every now and again?

“Please speak English for my sake,” I say quietly, and then pause. “Or teach me Korean, too.”

“You can barely handle Japanese, and you need to learn it for school. Why on earth would I add another language to your plate?” Chasm asks, but he won’t look at me. That’s when I realize it: he could ... he might ... maybe Chasm is ... “Get your stuff and I’ll meet you downstairs.”

He drops his arm and Parrish pushes past him, slamming his bedroom door as I stand there gaping. After a second, Chasm turns and heads down the hall, leaving me there to roil in my own confusion. I grab some of my hair with either hand and give it a quick yank, closing my eyes to stem the surge of frustration and hurt that I feel right now.

Chasm and I did sort of, maybe like, have a thing? But Parrish and I clearly have a thing?

Fuck.

I open my eyes to find Delphine watching me, a tight smile on her face as she waits patiently just outside my door.

“Do you mind if I come in and clean?” she asks, but I just drop my hands to my sides and look around.

“My room is as sterile as a doctor’s office,” I murmur, hating every square inch of it. “What is there to clean?”

Delphine pushes her glasses up her nose and comes in anyway, pulling a cart behind her that looks an awful lot like the ones hotel maids have. Only, hotel maids don’t wear silly frilly headbands like they’re working at a maid café in Tokyo.

“Paul and Tess like the sheets changed at least twice a week.” She shrugs her shoulders and then glances in the direction of the bathroom. “And the bathroom bleached from top to bottom at least once a month.”

“Fantastic,” I say with a sigh, and then after realizing I’m being a rude dickhead, I force a smile. “Sorry. I know you have it a lot harder than I do.”

“You don’t know that,” Delphine tells me, starting to strip the bed. I step up to help her, pulling the pillowcases off the

pillows, even though I know I don't have to do it. I'm buying time before I have to face Chasm again; we both know that. "I'm not involved in a love triangle with two guys."

"I'm not in a love triangle," I choke out, but maybe I am and I just haven't realized it yet? If I *were* in a love triangle, I'm certainly not now. Not anymore. The look on Chasm's face when he walked in and saw us ...

"Your blush might say otherwise," Delphine tells me with a grin as I drop the pillowcase on the floor and reach up to touch my cheeks. They're burning hot, searing my palms. "Want my advice on which one to pick?" I blink at her and drop my arms to my sides, waiting for sage advice from a college girl. Because she must be a college girl, right? I've seen her yanking a Washington State hoodie over her head on her way out the door. "Pick neither. Boys are trouble. Stay single and happy."

I grin at her. I mean, she isn't wrong.

"Do you ... I mean, how old are you, if you don't mind my asking?" I start, and Delphine pauses to glance over at me.

"Nineteen. Why?" she asks, and I'm pleased to see that she's the same age as Maxine. And Maxx. Fucking Maxx ...

"If it's not too, like, stupid, or something, you should hang out with me and my friends sometime." I grab my school-issued iPad, my notebook, and a pen with a fuzzy soot spirit on the end of it (it's a *Spirited Away* reference that most people don't get which I love). Delphine watches me gather my stuff and then gives one, curt nod to acknowledge what I've said.

I head downstairs before Tess comes raging, and find Chasm in the dining room with Kimber. She's practically hanging off of him which makes me crazy. First off, she's fourteen and he's seventeen and that's gross. Second, he isn't telling her to stop. Not today.

"Hey," I say, and Kimber scowls at me as she stands up, uncurling her arms from around Chasm's neck. Seeing her draped over the back of his chair like that ... I clearly *am* in some sort of weird love triangle thing that I didn't know about

until just this second. I'm jealous, that's the weird feeling in my belly.

"You really messed up today," she starts, and I close my eyes because I just don't have time for this shit today. It's laughable, thinking that Kimber Celeste could ever be like a sister to me. We might share DNA, but she's no Maxine, that's for sure. I open my eyes again to see Chasm watching us warily. "I've never seen Mom so pissed off in all my life."

"Fuck off Kimber," Chasm snaps, waving his hand dismissively. "Leave us alone so we can study."

The look on her face is priceless—but not in a good 'I want to cherish this forever' sort of way. No, it's more like ... she wants to literally kill me?

"I hope the Seattle Slayer gets you," she spits at me as she storms past, tossing her blond curls at my face. I ignore her and take a seat next to Chasm. At this point, I'm not entirely sure that being taken out by a serial killer would be the worst thing. At least then I wouldn't have to deal with Tess. Really, who could be scarier between the two of them? They're probably a match made in heaven.

"Let's quiz you on *hiragana* first," Chasm says, as if he ever just gets down to business like this. Usually we gossip a bit, or he shows me something cool on his phone. This isn't how it's supposed to go.

"Can we talk about the ... Parrish thing?" I ask, but he just shakes his head at me.

Lips pursed, he murmurs, "nope."

I turn in my seat to stare at him until he's finally forced to look at me.

"What?" he asks, cringing slightly when I reach out to brush some of his hair back from his forehead. It's stuck there because he's sweating like crazy. I'm not sure why, considering it's as cold as it looks in here. Tess likes to keep her ice cavern a chilly sixty-five degrees at all times; she says she can't write if she's hot. *Fuck, authors are divas.* The more

I get to know one personally, the more I dislike them. Are all creative types this insufferable?

“Why can’t we talk about it?” I continue, digging my own grave with my big mouth. Why am I pushing him? If he doesn’t want to talk about it, I should let it go. “Are you pissed?”

He laughs at me then, and it isn’t a pleasant laugh at all. There’s a quiet fury in it that makes my skin ripple in warning. Goose bumps prick over every exposed surface of my body and then some.

“Pissed? Why would I be pissed?” He turns his iPad on and starts tapping the screen like he’s in a boxing match with it. “Here.” He shoves the device into my lap and then sticks a stylus in my hand. “Start writing.”

I open my mouth to protest—clearly Chas is full of shit—but then I hear footsteps in the living room area and turn to see Tess entering the kitchen. My lip curls up at the corner, and I refocus my attention on my work.

When Chasm is ready, he’ll talk. If he ... wants to tell me something, then I guess he’ll tell me in time.

I just didn’t think it would be, like, fucking weeks.

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A graphic for Chapter 19. The word "CHAPTER" is written in a black, hand-drawn, blocky font on the left. To its right, the number "19" is written in a large, pink, hand-drawn font. The background features a dark green, textured shape resembling a heart or a bag, with black, branch-like lines extending from it. The overall style is sketchy and artistic.

CHAPTER 19

Bag of dicks is trending by Monday, and I'm officially an interesting person at Whitehall all over again. The fact that Lumen and I are still 'dating' doesn't hurt either though I feel sort of bad about pretending, especially since Parrish asked me to stop ...

Ugh.

That rat bastard hasn't spoken more than a handful of words to me since yesterday; I should throat punch him. Then again, I did find my pan of cornbread carefully wrapped, buttered, and sitting outside my bedroom door last night—with a single piece missing. Who else would've done that but for Parrish?

Anyway, school is nice because at least I have a place to escape from Tess. Every day I spend in that house is a century too long.

"The only person I really like is my brother Ben," I murmur, helping Danyella go through an old box of costumes that she found in the back of one of the theater department's closets. There's quality stuff in here for sure. Expensive stuff. At some point, it's clear that Whitehall Prep did enjoy putting on a good show.

I mean, I guess they still do, they just like it in the hallways and during parties on the weekends.

"I thought you liked Amelia and Henry, too?" Danyella queries, shaking out a dress and taking mental stock of all the parts she can rip off and repurpose elsewhere. I've learned over the last several weeks that even if she seems distracted, Danyella is a good listener.

It's nice to have her around, especially considering Nevaeh and Sally barely respond to me anymore.

"Amelia seemed okay at first, but the more I'm around her, it seems like she's just a Kimber-in-the-making. And Henry's too shy and introverted. I can't break through his shell."

"You mean he hasn't *let you in* yet," Danyella corrects, lifting up a single finger for emphasis. "Not yet. Give it time."

I sigh and help her gather the costumes into a pile, dreading the idea of leaving the theater. Parrish is acting even colder than usual—didn't think it was possible, but the guy's a pro—and anyway, the only time we've had together is in the car on the way to school with Kimber present. There's nothing I can say around her. Somehow, I know that if she finds out that her brother and I were making out, she'll kick sibling convention out the window and go running to Tess to blab.

There's that, and then there's Chasm.

Chasm.

He was smiling and laughing with a group of friends in the hallway today—most of them girls. Parrish is that cold, rich, King Sloth dickhead that everyone secretly lusts after. Chasm is the smarty-pants sweetheart that everyone's openly in love with. The longer I'm here, the more I see it. That slouchy bad boy thing is all an act. He's like, aggressively good-natured.

And, I made out with Parrish and he saw. He saw his best friend touching my boob.

Danyella picks up the box with a sigh, and I reach out to fix her glasses for her. They fall off her nose about thirty times a day, and she just pops the lenses back in place. It drives me insane. I think she's too in her head to care about smudged or broken glasses.

"You're blushing again," she says, and I look down at the few undone buttons at the top of my shirt. It's quite clear that my boobs are red again. "Is this about the Parrish thing?"

"It just happened yesterday," I murmur, just before Lumen breaks into the theatre like she's in a teen movie from the early 2000s. The whole world should slow down and "*Yoo Hoo*" by

Imperial Teen should be playing. I'm a Y2K expert, thanks to Saffron. The only mother-daughter things she really liked to do with me and Maxine—on the rare occasions she did anything with us—was watch old movies and shop.

Which, you know, is better than Tess even with minimal effort.

“What are you up to, my bitches?” Lumen asks, collapsing into one of the theater chairs and crossing her legs at the ankle. Her other friends look around the place like they've never seen it before—and that they think that's a good thing. They seem to be as afraid of Lumen as Kimber is of Parrish, though, and keep their mouths shut.

“Using bitches as a companionable term doesn't erase decades of its use as a misogynistic insult. I'm sorry, but I don't support the repurposing of hate-filled words.” Danyella sets the box down on the table at the front of the room, but as usual, Lumen ignores her.

“Come to our Young Republicans meeting today,” she begs, and Danyella throws her a dark look. “Not you, obviously. I know you're a left-wing nut.”

“And you're a right-wing nut, what's the difference?” Danyella retorts, labelling the box *Useful Scraps* with a Sharpie. I'm officially in the drama club now, with the title of ‘extra hand’. That is, someone with absolutely zero skills but who's allowed to participate anyway. Thank god for that: this is the only activity Tess will allow me to do after school and only because she reluctantly agreed that extracurriculars look good on college apps. “And you know Dakota falls about dead center. She doesn't want to come with you.”

“I hear you nearly fucked Parrish again yesterday,” Lumen blurts, eyes glittering as she leans forward. Her girlfriends—there are too many, and they're like a revolving door anyway, coming and going so I don't know their names—titter and gossip behind their hands.

With a groan, I sink down in one of the theater chairs and let my head fall back, eyes closed. As soon as I walked into the building today, everyone was staring at me like it was my first

day all over again. I got a lot of high fives though, and some serious nods, acknowledgements of my newfound clout. How this happened, I'm not sure. I guess telling a bunch of people to fuck off on a live feed, and then demanding a famous novelist eat a bag of dicks will do that to a person.

"Is that what I said when I texted you?" I grumble, wishing she'd keep this to herself. Unfortunately, everything of interest that happens is something Lumen believes should be shared with the world. "I said that Chasm walked in on Parrish and me making out."

"Should I be jealous?" Lumen asks, standing up and then moving over to sit on my lap. For the life of me I can't decide if she actually has a crush on me or is just using me. She throws her arms around my neck and leans in close. "Parrish doesn't stand a chance if I turn my full charm on."

"Is that so?" a voice asks from behind me, and I let out an embarrassing shriek. Lumen smirks at the newcomer; clearly she could see him come in the theater through the back door.

"Hello Parrish," she drawls, leaning close and nuzzling her cheek against mine. "Did you come to see what my girlfriend and I were up to?"

"Doesn't daddy hate lesbians?" he asks, but Lumen just laughs.

"The whole world hates lesbians—they're the only group on the planet that doesn't need, want, or care about dick. Unfortunately for me, I'm bisexual. If I could choose my sexuality, I guarantee you that I'd have picked 'lesbian'. Besides, what my dad doesn't know, doesn't hurt him." She presses a sweet-smelling kiss to my cheek before standing up.

What Parrish is doing in the theater today is beyond me. Did he come looking for me?

I turn around to glance at him, but he may as well be in a lecture hall listening to the mating habits of banana slugs. That's how bored he is right now.

"Hey, have you heard that song by Ashnikko? "*Slumber Party?*"'" Lumen asks innocently, and then she makes a V with

her fingers and sings the line about ... well, it's about giving someone else's girlfriend cunnilingus on her couch.

This, at least, gives Parrish a slight tightening of the face that tells me he does care at least a little.

"Are you here to apologize to Dakota for abandoning her yesterday?" Danyella asks blatantly, and my face pales. Parrish turns slowly to look at her, like she's something small that needs to be squashed. To be fair, he looks at most people that way. He must decide that arguing with Danyella is too much, reverting back to his lazy sloth behavior as he turns back to me.

"Your boxes arrived. Tess wants you to come home early today to deal with it." He looks at me like he didn't say all sorts of confusing things to me, about Chasm, about Lumen ... I snatch my book bag off the ground, knocking loose the metal heart pin. With a sigh, I pick it up and hook it back to the strap. Considering the way Tess has been acting, I should just throw it out.

Too bad I'm not that sort of person.

"You're such a coward," Danyella murmurs, but Parrish pretends not to hear her.

"Since you're grounded again, I guess I won't see at my house on Friday?" Lumen calls out, but I just turn around and toss her an overexaggerated grin.

"Don't count on that—there's always a chance for escape." I salute her and then, because I know Parrish is watching, blow her a kiss.

"Is it really okay to pretend to be a lesbian now?" he snaps coldly as I join him on his way out the theater doors. I cast a look his direction, hefting my bag up my shoulder.

"Did I say I was a lesbian? I'm bisexual. About a two on the Kinsey scale, you colossal dickhead."

He grits his teeth and ignores me, but when I reach out to grab hold of his arm—I just want to talk—he reacts like I've gut punched him. Parrish tears his arm away from me and

stumbles back, breathing so hard he looks like he's on the tail end of a marathon run.

"Don't touch me," he chokes out, dropping his bag to the ground to rub at his arm. You'd think I just backhanded him or something.

"Why not?" I demand, stepping forward. Parrish moves away from me until it's *his* back that's pressed into a bank of lockers. In an echo of what he did to me the night of the sleepover, I slam my palms against the metal on either side of him. Luckily, this part of the school empties quick after classes get out. There's no one around to see us. "Look at me."

The words aren't a suggestion, more of a demand. Instead of following it however, Parrish tries to duck under my arm and escape.

I step in closer, until our bodies are pressed tightly together. Pish. You should *see* the way this boy shudders, like I've dumped a jar of spiders on his head.

"Let go of me."

Another demand, but from him this time.

"Why should I?" I counter, pressing harder against him. My breasts squish against the front of his chest as I rise up on my tiptoes and try to get him to look me in the eye. "Aren't you the king of the school? You sure act like you are. Well, tough guy, why do you keep giving me this hot-cold act?"

He turns his beautiful eyes down to mine, and I'm struck once again by the color. *Toasted coconut flecked with gold, a swirl of copper and chocolate and espresso.* And that hair of his ... why does it have to look so soft, like it's begging to be tousled and touched and tugged on?

"Why?" he echoes, like *I* am the crazy person here. "Why?" Parrish grabs my arms from the outside, yanking on them and trying to get me to drop them by my sides. Only, he doesn't have an exceptionally good grip in that position, and I'm much stronger than I look. "Are you insane? Why do you think?"

"Because of the stepbrother thing?" I clarify, and he laughs at me.

“Yeah, because of the *stepsister* thing.” He gives another last-ditch effort to shove my arms down, and I bend my elbows suddenly. What happens then is that he’s able to push my arms down, but also that we end up violently slamming even closer together.

“Why did you ask me to forget about Chasm?” I whisper, feeling this nauseous twisting in my belly at the mention of Chas’ name. Somehow, somehow, I can’t stop thinking about Chasm. Or Parrish. Chasm *and* Parrish. “Why did you ask me to stop dating Lumen?”

This time, Parrish clenches his jaw and looks away. I have the strongest urge to grab his tie and yank his face down to mine. I can feel my heart thundering—no surprise—but I can also feel *his* heartbeat through his shirt. It, too, is racing like a herd of galloping horses. See, I told you: we *are* into each other.

“Are you really into her? Her personality is basically the opposite of yours, but I think you’d be a good match anyway. You should marry Lumen and inherit her empire with her.” Parrish keeps his gaze turned away from me, and I want to just goddamn scream.

“That’s how you feel, huh?” I ask, releasing him and stepping back from the lockers. “Fine then. I’ll keep dating Lumen. Since you don’t give a single fuck anyway. You’re probably right: we make a good pair, an opposites attract sort of thing. I can keep her grounded; she can break me out of my shell.”

I shove off of him and storm down the hallway toward the parking garage. Kimber’s waiting just outside, scowling and tapping her foot.

“Seriously? Mom’s bringing my new phone home today. I need to get back and check my messages.”

I ignore her, storming past and pretending like I don’t know she was on her iPad all night, checking those very same messages. As if she’s missed out on anything by not having a phone for three seconds. I wonder what she told Tess about the

last phone? The one that Parrish smashed the same way he seems intent on smashing my heart into pieces ...

Anyway, I don't care. My furniture is here, my clothes, my things. It'll be a much-needed dose of home.

Even if home was always a lie.

Even if.

My furniture is waiting for me in the space pod that Tess calls my room. My boxes, too. The movers she hired kept everything padded during shipping, and stripped it down for me before I even got home. They stacked my boxes neatly in the walk-in closet that I haven't yet taken advantage of yet.

It'll be interesting, seeing all my plain, hand-me-down clothes hanging in it.

"How was school?" a voice asks from behind me. I don't need to turn to know that it's Tess.

Tess.

The last person in the world I want to see right now.

She doesn't seem to know that she should take my silence as a hint, moving into the room to look at the mix of antique and handmade furniture from my grandma. The hideous bed, dresser, and nightstand that were in here before are gone. Thank the fucking universe.

Tess sits down on the edge of my bed, and when I glance back, I see that she's in her 'messy author' uniform, the one that I like so much better than the Prada heels and the Armani suit jackets. She looks human right now, which makes all of her bullshit easier to swallow somehow.

"I know you don't want to talk to me right now," she hazards, picking up a picture frame from my wooden nightstand. It's a family photo from last year, one with Saffron, Maxine, my grandparents, and me in it. Her face twitches, and

I can see that it's taking a real effort on her part not to say anything. "But I wanted to give you your new phone."

I see a white box sitting on the bed beside her, but how can I get excited about that? A new phone with a new number and all sorts of tracking devices and parent spy software? Gross.

"Thanks." I notice that the box contains an iPhone. Ugh. Why do pretentious rich people always love Apple products so much? My last phone was a Fairphone, the most ethical and responsibility created smartphone that Maxine could find. Oh well. In the scope of things, it isn't such a huge deal, is it?

No, the phone isn't a big deal, but the way Tess trashed it? That was. Incredibly disrespectful and selfish. So, here I am, without a phone or a TV or a PlayStation or a laptop. All I have is my academy-issued iPad which is locked down like San Quentin. I tried to look up a red-footed booby (this is a bird, by the way) to help Benjamin with his science report last night, and it gave me an inappropriate content warning for the word 'booby'.

"Dakota," Tess begins, and I pause, holding a stack of clothes in my hands. When I first walked in here after school, I could *smell* home. And oh my god, oh my god, I can't even begin to describe how much I missed it. There was the scent of pine mixed with the gardenia laundry detergent that my grandpa likes, a hint of sawdust and just a whiff of Nevaeh's body spray. I won't lie: I cried. I went into my bathroom, and I sat on the toilet, and I just cried for about thirty minutes straight.

"It's Dakota now?" I ask, which really does sound bitchy as hell, but I can't seem to help it.

There's a long moment of silence as I carry the clothes over to the dresser and put them in one of the center drawers. My stuff looks so weird in here, a total disconnect from the space-age light fixtures, the wall of windows, and the cold white walls. But at least I feel like I've gotten a small part of myself back.

"I'm happy to call you Dakota, so long as you behave in an appropriate manner."

I grit my teeth against the grating nature of her comment. Behave in an appropriate manner? You mean, just sit there and listen to her call my grandparents monsters on live TV? Or thank her for smashing my phone to pieces in the sink?

I promised I would try here. I promised. I fucking promised. To be quite honest, that's the only reason I'm still here, that I'm putting in any effort at all. Because my family asked me to, because I might put my grandparents and Saffron at risk if I don't appease Tess somewhat.

Because I *am* still a petty teenager sometimes, I unwrap a large, framed photo, grab a nail and hammer from my toolbox (my grandma always preached that it was important for women to learn to fix things themselves) and purposely head over to the pristine bit of white wall between my dresser and the windows.

"Dakota," Tess starts, and I'm not sure what, exactly, she's going to say, because I start hammering the nail into the perfect wall. I can practically feel her cringing behind me as I check the stability of it, and then hang the photo of me, Maxine, and Saffron right there in plain view.

"Yes?" I ask, glancing over my shoulder innocently.

Tess sighs, reaching up to adjust her glasses. Her hair is in a messy bun, tendrils hanging loosely around her face. One thing I've noticed about authors is how one minute, they act like they own the world. The next, they're crying and talking about how their work is garbage and everyone hates them. At least, that's what I heard when I sneaked down to the kitchen last night for a snack, Tess crying to Paul with her office door cracked. She looks like she's still in the second mode right now, the crying one.

"That's a beautiful photo," she says, surprising me. I accidentally drop the hammer on the floor I'm so startled, leaving a dent in the bamboo. Tess blanches slightly, reaching up to tug on the neckline of her sweater with a single finger. The logo on the front of the sweater is from some author event in Australia; I remember following her on Insta, just so I wouldn't miss the photos she was posting.

Feels like a million years ago, to be honest.

“Thanks,” I reply belatedly, moving onto a box of books and pulling them out in fat stacks to line the bookshelf I got at an antique show.

“We could get you a Kindle, if you don’t like reading on your phone,” Tess suggests gently which is nice, but also shows how little she knows me.

“I enjoy print,” I tell her, looking up and then feeling my cheeks blush a bit. “Also, these were Saffron’s books when she was a kid. I found them in the attic, and she said I could have them.”

“Maybe that was before ... all of this?” Tess suggests gently as I narrow my eyes. “If they’re keepsakes, she might want them back now.”

“Because she had no idea I wasn’t her bio daughter until recently?” I quip, continuing to unpack the books. There’s an entire set of first edition *Harry Potter* paperbacks in here, and I smile, touching the spines. Millennials fucking love Harry Potter, don’t they? I have fond memories of Saffron reading these to me as a kid during this rare two-month stint where she lived with us. “She gave these to me, knowing what she’d done. Besides, a gift is something you give without asking for anything in return.”

I put the Harry Potter books on the top shelf before grabbing another box labelled *Books #2*. As soon as I open it and grab a stack, I realize my mistake.

It’s an entire stack of Tess Vanguard novels. Some of them are signed. Some of them I have in more than one cover, because I collect like that, and I couldn’t bear not to have all the editions. The blood drains from my face, and I feel suddenly like I’m naked in front of an entire stadium of people.

I look up and our eyes meet. I haven’t told Tess that I used to like her books, that I read *Abducted Under a Noonday Sun* so many times that the binding fell apart on my first copy. It’s

in a plastic bag at the bottom of this very box, waiting to be unpacked.

“Did you know that this room has been empty since we moved in?” Tess asks softly, her eyes dropping to the books in my hands. My own are shaking, even though I try to tell them to stop, will them to, beg them to. They shake anyway. “We’ve lived here ... gosh, almost a decade now.”

It’s too late, now that Tess has seen the books, so I shelve them beside the Harry Potter set where they’ve always rested, right on the top shelf. Who cares if she knows I like her work? That doesn’t change anything between us. It doesn’t. Because she told me that her writing isn’t art, that it’s just about money, so who cares? I feel no connection to her, none. None at all.

Lie.

Maybe ... maybe I did want to find a connection with Tess? Maybe, because Saffron was barely a mother to me at all, I thought I found one in Tess Vanguard? But she’s making it so hard, so fucking hard on me. We just don’t understand each other at all.

I stay standing, one hand on the edge of a hardcover novel titled *Fleeing Under a Summer Rain*. Tess likes themes in her titles, obviously. This one she claims is a work of pure fiction, but it’s about an ex who mistreats his wife and daughter, so the wife flees with their kid in tow. She subsequently dies, but her daughter, despite being raised by her mother’s murderer, discovers the truth.

The end is fucking tragic, the daughter stabbing her father and killing him.

I shiver and bend back down to dig in the box. It’s mostly Tess novels in here, unfortunately, so I pretend to get fixated on an old game system that was packed beside the books. I won’t let her see the shredded copy of *Abducted Under a Noonday Sun*. It’s too personal, and she isn’t allowed to see it. She hasn’t earned it.

Tess stands up, and I figure she’s going to leave without answering her own question.

“It’s been empty, and it’s stayed empty,” she continues finally, and I focus really, really hard on that game system, pretending to clean dust from all the nooks and crannies with the end of my hoodie sleeve.

“I left it empty for you.” I go completely still, but I don’t look up. I can’t. Tess’ voice is too soft, and I don’t think I can look at her right now. I’m so conflicted, hating her one minute, wishing I could love her the next. “Because I knew I would find you one day. I wanted you to have the nicest room in the house, with the best view. And I was willing to sacrifice everything to make sure that happened.”

She leaves, but she doesn’t close the door. I sit there for a long time, too long maybe, but when I look up finally, I see that Parrish is watching from his own doorway.

My blood chills slightly, and I wet my lips.

“Did you hear that?” I ask, wishing that he didn’t, that he hadn’t.

He just keeps staring at me. Everything about his face, about the way she’s slouching against the doorjamb says he doesn’t care. But his fists? They’re clenched tight by his sides.

“I heard,” he says, and then he steps back and slams his bedroom door.

When I hear him blasting Ashnikko’s *Slumber Party*, I know we’ve taken three steps forward ... and about a hundred steps back.

A graphic for Chapter 20. The word "CHAPTER" is written in a black, hand-drawn, blocky font on the left. To its right, the number "20" is written in a large, pink, hand-drawn font. The background features a dark green, textured shape resembling a heart or a large letter 'O', with black, bare tree branches and a faint, sketchy face in the background.

CHAPTER 20

“Bridge of the gods,” I murmur, looking at my phone as Lumen guns her pretty pink sports car and I end up plastered against the front passenger seat. Sounds like the title of a dope ass book, huh? But it’s not: it’s the name of the trailhead we’re looking for.

“Can you slow down, please?” Danyella grinds out from the back, leaning forward to glare at her friend. “I know my car is stuck at thirty miles an hour, but I know for certain that yours isn’t glued to ninety.”

Lumen rolls her eyes, but she slows down thankfully.

“This is our exit,” I say, just before the GPS chimes in. “Apparently, it’s easy to overshoot the parking lot for the trailhead and end up on the bridge.” I lean forward, so eager to see Maxine now that my grounding is over that I could spit. I’ve tried to sneak out a few times in the last four weeks, but to no avail. Tess has been all freaking over me, and Parrish hasn’t been of any help.

He’s been even more pouty, even more annoying than usual. And Chasm? Well, Chasm seems just fine, back to normal, like nothing at all ever happened between us. I can’t decide which one of them I hate more right now—the one who’s acting like a spoiled brat or the one that’s acting like nothing matters. Both are equally infuriating.

“Who drives three hours to hike a trail anyway?” Lumen murmurs, just as we zoom past the parking lot, and I sigh.

“You just passed it,” I say as Danyella lets out an exaggerated sigh from the back seat. The more I get to know

the girls, the more obvious it is that their constant back and forth is part of their charm. They love to hate each other, and it shows. *Kind of like you and Parrish?* I think, but then ... he won't let there be anything else between us.

"We'll have to turn around then, won't we?" Lumen quips, dressed head to toe in some fancy Kardashian-brand outfit. Frankly, I can't tell any of the Jenners or Kardashians apart, nor do I care to. But Lumen loves them. Danyella says they taint popular culture with unrealistic body standards, and are so greedy that the next *Christmas Carol* remake that comes out should feature a Kardashian-Jenner instead of Ebenezer Scrooge.

"We now have to cross the entire bridge," Danyella murmurs, sighing as we pull up to the toll booth and Lumen pulls forward enough that it's Danyella that has to hand her debit card out to pay the toll. Both Lumen and I have super strict parents: we're supposed to be playing tennis at the country club then spending the night with Danyella. Anyway, she's the only who can use her debit card without a parent scrutinizing the charge and asking where she's been.

After we've paid our two dollars, we continue on past the booth and start across a metal bridge. On either side of us, Oregon's Columbia River Gorge stretches as far as the eye can see. I find myself plastered to the window with my mouth hanging open. I'm not an outdoorsy type of person, but I can appreciate a view.

Danyella and Lumen meanwhile grew up in the Pac Northwest so they just sort of accept this as normal.

"Let me pick a song for once," Danyella complains, trying to reach past Lumen to grab her phone. We've spent the last three hours listening to Yung Baby Tate. Mostly, we've spent the last three hours listening to the same song on repeat — "*Eenie Meenie*" — to the point that it feels like my head's about to explode.

"So we can listen to Italian opera?" Lumen spits out, pretending to gag. "No thank you. I'm driving, so I get to decide on the music."

“This is hardly music,” Danyella mumbles, sighing as she leans back and gives up the fight. We’ve been over this argument already, about twenty times.

“Thank you both for bringing me here,” I say, turning the volume down carefully and doing my best to break the tension. Lumen whips a sharp U-turn at the end of the bridge, and I swear to god, my life flashes before my eyes.

“You’re welcome,” she says, giving me a cheerful, sparkly smile. It took me through most of last week to realize that she actually *is* into me, and is actively courting me. I’m flattered and confused, but I’m rolling with it. Chasm refuses to admit he’s into me; Parrish adamantly denies. So fuck both of them anyway. “Anything for you, of course.”

“Mostly, thank you for not asking us to go on the hike with you,” Danyella adds, and I laugh.

“I’m not much of a hiker either, but my sister’s practically frothing at the mouth to get me on a trail with her. She thinks a good hike can cure any ailment: mental, physical, or spiritual.” I shrug my shoulders, but in reality, I’m excited. My stomach hurts with happy nerves at the thought of seeing my sister again. It feels like it’s been forever. With Tess hovering over my shoulder all the time, I’ve barely even been able to talk to her since the stupid talk show. Speaking of ... “Did you guys see that one of the Cortez sisters is missing?” I ask, but Lumen gives me a look that says *duh, I’m up on all the goss, girl, I know*.

“Her grandmother thinks she ran away; she pleaded with her to come home on yesterday’s episode.” Lumen jerks the wheel and sends us flying partially over the curb into the parking lot for the trailhead; I can already see Maxx’s Jeep Gladiator waiting and my heart lurches strangely in my chest.

Gamer Girl crushing on sister’s boyfriend. Not a promising tagline. I shut that thought down quick.

“That’s terrible; I hope nothing’s happened to her,” Danyella muses, but mostly it’s just celebrity gossip that nobody cares about.

“Holy shit, is that really Maxx Wright?” Lumen breathes as we fly into a pair of parking spaces (Lumen couldn’t park in a single space if her life depended on it) and poor Maxx is forced to hop out of the way to avoid being run over. “I mean, he was hot in high school, but now? Damn.”

“Girl, you’re so thirsty you’re about to die from dehydration.” Danyella rolls down her window to wave at Maxx. Sometimes I forget that they know him, that until this year, he went to school with basically everyone I know. “Hey Maxx, how are you?” she asks as Lumen checks her lip gloss in the mirror on the back of her visor.

“I’m great,” he says with a big grin, folding his arms on the edge of the window and leaning in. “Hey Lumen.”

“Hey cutie,” she says, and then flips the visor back up. “Take care of my girlfriend while you’re on the trails today, okay? I don’t want her eaten by a cougar or kidnapped by the Seattle Slayer or anything.”

“Oh, don’t worry. The Slayer only chooses victims from the Seattle metro area.” Maxx says nothing about cougars, standing up and then opening my door for me. *Shit. But not shit on the cougars part, shit on how freaking cute he is.*

“We’re going to hit Portland while you guys are walking in the heat for no reason whatsoever,” Lumen continues, and I can’t help but laugh. Maxx raises a brow, tucking his hands into the back pockets of his fancy hiking pants. Maxine told me that he bought her a pair, and that they cost almost two hundred freaking dollars. For pants. He might not be ‘rich’ like the other Whitehall Prep students, but the Wrights are loaded when compared to the Banks. “Give us a warning when you’re about an hour out from the lot.”

“Will do,” Maxx says, offering up a little salute. My heart flutters, so I give it a little slap to keep it quiet. *So cringe, Dakota, so freaking cringe.*

“Where’s Maxine?” I ask as I climb out, standing on my toes and trying to peep in the windows of the Gladiator. Maxx waves bye to Lumen and Danyella as they screech out of the parking lot and then turns to me with a smile crafted of gold

and self-assured confidence. *This bastard*, I think, trying and failing to catch my breath.

“She couldn’t make it today,” he says, and my heart crashes into my belly, shattering to pieces. Maxx—or X, as he wants me to call him—raises both hands like he’s trying to ward off a storm. “Nothing serious, I promise. Just a bad case of mono.” He pauses, like he’s just realized that my sister has what’s commonly known as ‘the kissing disease’. “Not from me, obviously. Her entire study group has it; they always share drinks.”

“Why didn’t she tell me?” I pout, wishing I had a phone that wasn’t being tracked by Tess; I left mine back at Danyella’s place. She has Lumen’s number, but that girl’s phone is an explosion on the best of days; she gets like a hundred notifications an hour. Even if Maxine did message us, Lumen wouldn’t have seen it.

“She didn’t tell you on purpose,” Maxx says, still smiling. He reaches out, like he’s going to tousle my hair or something but then seems to think better of it. Part of me wishes he would’ve done it while the rest of me figures it was for the best. *If he’s thinking about tousling my hair, then clearly I fall into the Little Sister category again.* Which is fine. Which, really if you think about it, is good. Great, actually. “She knew if she told you she wasn’t coming, you’d bail. And she thinks you really need this.”

“So she sent you?” I ask, quirking a brow and trying not to notice how pretty Maxx’s dark hair looks in the sunlight. It isn’t mine to stare at.

“She sent me,” he confirms, opening the back door of the Jeep and yanking out a small backpack. “Here.” He hands it to me and then nods his head in the direction of the restrooms. “I got you some basic gear. Maxine helped me out with the sizing. You should go change and then we can hit the trail.”

I swallow back a half-dozen different replies that just don’t seem to cut it, settle for nodding, and then follow his instructions. Once I’m inside the women’s restroom area, I set the bag on the sink and rummage through the contents.

Apparently, Maxx's idea of 'basic gear' and my idea of basic gear are entirely different entities. There's a pair of those expensive hiking pants with the tag still attached but the price scratched off, a metal water bottle that's cool with condensation, a freaking Fitbit, and some hiking boots with thick socks. On top of all that, there's a jacket, a sports bra (this better have been Maxine's idea), and a note.

Maxx is a good guy; he'll keep you safe and on the right trails! I'm sorry I couldn't be there. I love you fierce, and I'll see you soon. Love, Maxie

I smile at the note before folding it up and tucking it into the pocket of the fancy hiking pants.

Once I'm dressed in my new gear, I meet X outside on the trail. He's waiting on a bench, typing something out on his phone.

"Is that my sister?" I ask, and he pauses, lifting his head up to look at me. Our eyes meet and something weird happens in my belly, just like it did that night at the party. See, that's my problem as of late. Lots of people seem to be able to make something weird happen in my belly. So how do I know if any of them are worth pursuing? Or maybe, as Delphine suggested, none are. Having a lover around is hardly a requirement for a happy or fulfilled life. It could, on the other hand, be fun though.

"No, it's Parrish actually," he admits which makes that weirdness in my stomach clench a little tighter. I can only imagine the things he says to Chasm and Maxx about me when I'm not around. When X stands up from the bench, I'm hyperaware of the way he moves, like he's in control of every muscle, every movement. Nothing Maxx 'X' Wright does is an accident. That, and he doesn't apologize for anything either. He grins at me as he tucks his phone away and then looks me over. "I hear from Maxine that you're not much of a hiker?"

I reach up to tug on my black and lime green pigtails, as if that's an indication of my gamer girl status.

"I prefer curb stomping trolls online," I admit as Maxx lifts a single brow in response. "Also, what am I supposed to do

with this?” I jiggle the Fitbit—it’s basically a simple smartwatch for tracking steps, calories burned, and heart rate—around in my hand. “I couldn’t bring my phone or else Tess would know that I’ve left not only Medina, but Washington altogether.”

“Here.” Maxx reaches out without hesitation, taking the Fitbit and hooking it around my wrist. I wish I could pretend that I don’t feel the warmth of his fingertips tingling against the sensitive flesh, but that would be a lie. *Control your actions, even if you can’t control your thoughts.* I exhale sharply as he hooks the clasp and then releases me. “Your sister set it up with your height and weight already.”

And then Maxx hands me something miraculous: a phone.

A phone that *isn’t* attached to Tess’ account, that isn’t subject to Tess’ rules or the weird parenting apps she’s installed to monitor me. My mouth drops open as I take the phone in my hand and turn the screen on, only to find a picture of me and Maxine set as the background.

“It’s a gift from your grandparents,” he says, offering up a tight smile. “After Maxine told them what happened to your phone, they got this for you. It’s your old number, too.”

Tears prick my eyes as I swipe my arm across my face, blinking rapidly to keep the droplets from falling. I haven’t spoken to the Banks since that disaster of a talk show, and even though I’m mad at them, even though I want to spend at least a few minutes yelling at them ... I miss them. I miss my old life. I miss Maxine.

“Chin up,” X says, reaching out to sweep a stray tear from my cheek with his knuckles. “Exercise helps release endorphins.” He pauses briefly and lets his grin morph into something wildly sexy and brimming with self-confidence. No wonder my sister’s in love with him. “Either that or you’ll be panting and sweating so hard that you’ll forget to be sad.”

“Oh, fantastic,” I drawl, just before Maxx reaches out and grabs my hand.

“Let’s do this,” he says, and even though I shouldn’t be gaping at him the way I am, it happens. And I feel so guilty. And yet, before we even hit the actual trail, I’m smiling.

The curving road that leads toward the toll booth separates us from the woods, so Maxx and I pause there for a moment as we wait for a couple of cars and an RV to pass. He keeps hold of my hand until we’re across, releasing it to reach up and run his palm over his hair.

“I have a tendency to set a quick pace, so if it’s too much for you, just let me know.”

I nod and fall into step beside him, climbing a slight incline before the path curves to the right. We end up coming out at another road and going underneath a bridge. I’m just glad that Maxx knows where he’s going because I’d be lost as hell out here.

“The trail starts just ahead,” he says, pointing up a gravel road toward a sign that leads into the woods. “It’s a part of the Pacific Crest Trail, but we’re only going to hike a small portion of it.”

I huff out a breath, acting like my heart isn’t already pounding and I’m not already sweating. I try to surreptitiously check the Fitbit to see how far we’ve walked. *Oh great, one fifth of a mile.* And we’ve only got ... five and four-fifths miles to go, roundtrip.

Damn you, Maxine, I think as I contemplate the idea of spending the next several hours in the heat, sweating and choking on my own spit, walking for *fun*. Like, who does that? Only crazy people and Pacific Northwest natives.

“If you get tired or you just want to turn around for whatever reason, let me know. No judgement.” He looks back at me, smiling still, looking stupid handsome and athletic and confident, like he’s done this a million times before. “But, if you tough it out, you’ll get to see an awesome waterfall at the end.”

“Is it worth it?” I ask skeptically, and Maxx laughs, the sound echoing around the empty road.

“It’s worth it, I promise,” he says, and then he takes my hand again and I know for a fact that if he didn’t belong to Maxine—the most important person in the world to me—that I would’ve fallen for him. Hard. Irreversibly. Inextricably.

Alas, some things are just not meant to be.

Two miles into the hike and I’m hating it as much as I knew I would. I’d much rather be back at Danyella’s, lounging in her hot tub and drinking a bottle of stolen champagne from her parents’ extensive selection of alcohol.

Then again, it’s giving me a chance to get to know Maxx which is interesting.

“So, do you ever call Chasm by his real name?” I ask, just as Maxx wraps up a tale about how he, as a fourteen-year-old asshole, got twelve-year-old Parrish and Chasm to help him steal his father’s credit card so they could buy a bunch of a pay-to-win crap on a stupid app. Needless to say, it didn’t go well for any of them.

“Kwang-seon?” he queries, and then grins again. He grins a lot, Maxx does. He’s always smiling, and when he talks, he gets animated. Also, even though we’re slowly climbing in altitude, he isn’t panting or sweating. Me, on the other hand, I feel like I’ve gone swimming in a sweat bath. My bangs are plastered to my forehead and I’m sure I don’t smell great. “Nah, not much. Unless his dad’s around. If he even gets a whiff of the word *Chasm*, he practically shits himself.”

Chasm’s dad ... I have yet to meet the man, but I’m curious. Who leaves their son in another country for nine years and barely visits him? He sounds like a dick.

“What about your parents?” I ask, huffing and puffing as we come around a corner and I groan at the sight of yet another incline. To be fair, the scenery is stunning. The trees keep us shaded from the sun, and every now and again, I get a peek between them at the valley below. I’ve already seen three garter snakes and more birds than I can count.

“My parents?” Maxx replies, glancing over his shoulder and then pausing when he sees how hard I’m struggling to keep up. He waits for me to catch up and then keeps pace with me which, for him, means slowing down drastically. “They’re alright. A little single-minded sometimes, but who isn’t when they’ve got a passion?”

“For motocross?” I clarify, wondering if he’s ever taken Maxine out on a bike. I bet she’d like that. To be honest, I’m pretty sure Maxx and Maxine are a match made in heaven. Hell, they even have the same damn name.

“If they had their way, I’d skip out on college and work on my motocross career instead, be the next Chad Reed or Ricky Carmichael. Be more like my sister, really.” Even though I can tell this is a bit of a sore spot for Maxx, he doesn’t whine or complain; it’s more like he’s stating basic facts. “They were excited to hear I decided on athletic training for my major though.”

“Athletic training?” I echo, realizing now more than ever that Maxx Wright is essentially the opposite of me. Parrish is basically me with a penis (and an entitled rich boy mantle) while Chasm is a little of both. In academics, Chas is my opposite; in emotions and experience, we’re fairly similar. Aaaand why, exactly, am I comparing the three boys? Either to each other or to myself ... It’s a fruitless exercise.

“Just a gateway degree for my career in sports medicine.” Maxx flashes another one of those pretty smiles at me. “How about you? Any career plans in mind yet? I know you’re only a sophomore, but it’s never too early to start planning.”

“Are you sure you’re only nineteen?” I grumble, and he chuckles at me, this deep, warm masculine chuckle that’s annoyingly charming. Seriously, my sister won the lottery here. I manage to steer the conversation away from future career plans. When I told Tess that I wanted to create things, I meant it. It’s just ... I have no clue what I want to create or how to make money doing it.

Just when I’ve decided that imminent death is upon me—*Gamer Girl needs water badly; Gamer Girl is about to die*—

we come to a crossroads in the trail, and I hear the first sound of running water.

If I had cat ears, they'd have perked up at the sound.

"We're here?" I choke out between breaths and Maxx nods, giving this dramatic flourish of his hand to show me which of the three paths to take.

"After you, milady," he says, and we make quick work of the remaining quarter mile, coming around a bend to find a massive waterfall and a picturesque creek. For a moment, I just stop and stand there, my hands curled around the straps of my backpack, my heartbeat racing from the trek, sweat pouring down my spine. "Was I right?" Maxx whispers, leaning down from behind me, so close that his breath seems to tickle my ear. "Was it worth it?"

"So worth it," I breathe, making my way across a small cement 'bridge' that looks like some leftover remnant from a dam or ... something. It's just wide enough for a single person to cross and only about six feet long. I plop down right in the center of it and start by taking my shoes off. With a deep groan, I drop my hot and achy feet into the cool water and let my head fall back. "This is heaven."

Maxx joins me, taking his shoes off, too, and then unzipping my backpack for me.

"Drink," he commands, handing over my water bottle. For a good twenty minutes, we sit in near silence, catching our breaths, drinking water, and munching down on some hippie-as-hell granola bars that Maxine packed. Mine has a note wrapped around it with a rubber band. *Eat every bite to refuel! Love you fierce, and I knew you could do it—you're at the waterfall, aren't you?* A smile takes over my lips unbidden; only an older sister could know you this well. A *real* sister, which is what Maxine will always be.

Kimber would've sent me with a death wish.

"I'm afraid Tess will never feel like a mother to me." The words come out, even though I don't mean them to. There's something about sitting here alone with Maxx after a long-ass

hike, in front of this beautiful waterfall, that makes me want to talk. “I’m afraid I’ll be stuck here for two years and then, once I’m eighteen and I’m free, I won’t know where I belong anymore. I’m not even sure that if I went back to New York now, that I’d fit in there. So, I guess what I’m saying is, I don’t feel like I fit in anywhere now.”

Maxx is quiet for a long time, so long that I end up looking over to see if he’s even listening to me. He’s leaning back, staring up at the falls with a contemplative expression on his handsome face. Eventually, I realize that he’s genuinely mulling over my words and carefully weighing his response.

Told ya he was just like Maxine.

“Don’t wait around for the world to let you fit in; make space for yourself.” He glances over at me, those emerald eyes of his enhanced by the reflection of the sun on the water and the backdrop of brown and green from the forest. He fits in out here, and, even though I still wouldn’t consider myself a hiker, I feel like I might fit in out here, too. That’s the best thing about nature; we all fit into it if we let ourselves. “Don’t ask for permission; own your space. Take it. If you make sure you’re comfortable with yourself, you’ll fit in wherever you are.” There’s a pause as I bite my lip and turn back to the waterfall. It really is stunning. I mean, it’s no Niagara Falls or anything, but it’s impressive anyway, and the best part is, there’s nobody else around. “As far as Tess goes ...” Maxx sits up straight and puts his hands on the thighs of his fancy hiking pants. “She really is a good person, but she gets caught up in her head sometimes.” He quirks a bit of a smile and flicks his gaze to me. “And I know this is going to sound crazy since we’ve spent all of twelve total hours together, but ... I think you and Tess are more similar than you think. Based on how much Maxine talks about you, it feels like I know you. You have the same quirks.” He reaches out and taps me in the center of the forehead, and I frown.

Am I like Tess? I feel like we’re oil and water. She’s harsh and critical and controlling. If she were more like her books, I might think we were birds of a feather.

“Don’t obsess over it, just ... try to lean in.” Maxx unzips his backpack and tosses me a towel (the dude thinks of everything). “You should dry off and we can get moving again.”

Even though the idea of hiking back the way we just came makes me feel stabby ... I like Maxx’s advice. It’s the best, most encouraging advice I’ve gotten from anyone thus far. *I owe Maxine a serious thank you for lending me her boyfriend today.*

A serious fucking thank you.

On the way back, my tired ass misses a rock on the path, and I end up sprawled on my hands and knees, cursing and bleeding. Maxx is there in an instant, squatting down and helping me into a sitting position. He takes my hands in his and then curses under his breath. He then magics a first-aid kit from his backpack and efficiently and quickly cleans my wounds.

“It’s not all that bad,” I mutter, but I can’t seem to gather the strength to pull my hands away from him. “Guess you’re getting started early on that sports medicine career, huh?”

Maxx chuckles at me again, smoothing antibacterial ointment onto my palms and then tucking away his supplies again.

“Practice makes perfect,” he says, standing up and then holding out a hand to help me. “I’ve got to get those ten thousand hours in.”

“Pretty sure I have ten thousand gaming hours in already. Do you think I could go pro?” I accept Maxx’s help, ignoring the throbbing in my ankle until I try to put weight on it and find myself collapsing again. Like a boss, Maxx catches me before I hit the ground.

“Did you sprain your ankle?” he asks, so close, almost too close. I feel like I’m betraying Maxine somehow by having his hand on my arm.

“No, I’m okay ... I think.” I carefully withdraw my arm and then try out one step. Another. It fucking *hurts*, but I’m almost too nervous to admit it. A quick glance at my Fitbit shows me that we’ve walked about four miles total, meaning we have two left. Two miles, on a bum ankle. Fantastic.

“Mm, I think not.” Maxx squats down and lifts the leg of my pants, examining my ankle with probing fingers. Each time he touches me, it hurts, even though he’s being gentle. “You sprained it pretty badly, Kota.”

Kota.

Being called by my childhood nickname is therapeutic for me.

I exhale sharply.

“Find me a stick to use as a crutch?” I offer, but Maxx is already turning around and bending low in front of me.

“Hop on.” He glances back over his shoulder and catches sight of what must be a fairly skeptical expression on my part. “I’m majoring in athletic training, remember? This is what I was built for. Climb on, I’ve got this.”

“You can’t carry me for two miles ...” I start, but he’s already gesturing at me to climb on again.

“Trust me: I’ve got this.”

I ignore him for a moment, testing my ankle again before I realize with a sharp pang that I’m not going to be able to make it the rest of the way back unless I crawl. Or hop. Yeah, I could probably hop ...

“Don’t make me call Maxine,” he warns, and that does it. I’m hopping up on his back while Maxx catches my legs with his arms. Squeezing my eyes shut tight, I do my best not to think about the fact that I’m not only pressed up intimately against my sister’s boyfriend’s back, but also that my legs are wrapped around him.

Ugh.

This. freaking. blows.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” I ask, because it can’t be easy to carry someone on a hike that I was struggling to manage with only my own weight. Also, I’m up close and personal with Maxx’s neck, and I can see quite clearly that he’s sweating.

“I’ve got you, no worries.”

I do my best to relax, trying to enjoy the ride instead of dreading it. Eventually, I let myself go completely limp against Maxx’s back, hugging his neck, and appreciating his long, steady strides. It’d be relaxing, if I didn’t happen to glance back and see someone following us.

There’s a man, not too far off, wearing a hat and using a walking stick. I didn’t notice him before, so I figure he must’ve come up one of the other trails at the crossroads. He seems to be keeping a quicker pace than us and should pass by soon.

After a while, however, I realize that he’s not going anywhere. He’s not catching up to us, and he isn’t falling back either. Frankly, it’s creepy as hell.

“There’s a man following us,” I whisper, and Maxx pauses briefly, turning us both so he can look back.

“You can pass if you need to; I’ll be carrying her for a while,” he calls out, but the man doesn’t answer. He just keeps walking, but Maxx stays right where he is. My anxiety spikes the closer the guy gets to us, reminding me that girls hiking are never really safe. Men can be monsters for sure.

The man breezes past us, and I swear to god, I get the chills as he goes. His face is impossible to see, with his hat pulled low the way it is.

Maxx watches him for a while, but since I’m riding on his back, I can’t see his face.

“Weirdo,” he murmurs, and I can’t decide if he’s just absently insulting the guy ... or if he’s freaked out by him. Either way, we continue walking, dappled sunlight falling across Maxx’s espresso colored hair.

“If you and Maxine have babies together, they’d all have dark hair.” I tousle Maxx’s hair as I say it, and he stops walking. Seriously, he just freezes right there in the middle of the pathway, and I jostle up even closer against his back, squeezing my eyes shut tight and breathing through the weirdness I’m feeling right now. “Sorry, I have no idea why I just said that.”

There’s a pause before Maxx responds, but I can hear the smile in his voice.

“No worries at all. I wasn’t bothered by it; I was just thinking.”

He continues onward as I frown against his back. *Are he and Maxine already thinking babies? They better not be.* Our grandparents always told us ‘thirty or bust’. They strongly believe in enjoying your twenties and saving that decade just for you. Maxine would never ... would she?

“Do you use protection with my sister?” I blurt, and Maxx stumbles a bit over an exposed root, cursing as he catches himself on the trunk of a tree and turns to stare at me over his own shoulder.

“Really?” he asks, but not like he’s pissed off about it. More like he’s just surprised I had the audacity to say that aloud. I get that a lot, actually. Maxx snorts and drops his chin with a bit of a chuckle.

“I’m not sure Maxine would appreciate you telling me this ...”

I gasp and almost lose my grip on his shoulders.

“You aren’t, are you?” I choke out, gagging on the idea of Maxx and my sister and ... eww. Gross. Just ... no. No way. “She isn’t pregnant, is she?”

“Pregnant?” Maxx echoes, and then he laughs again. “God, no. She couldn’t possibly be pregnant ... unless you know something I don’t? We aren’t having sex, Kota.”

Oh.

Ooooooh.

Oh.

“You aren’t?” I repeat as Maxx starts walking again, this time at a slower pace. That, I did not expect. Maxine had sex with her first boyfriend when they were both sixteen, and then with her second boyfriend when she was eighteen. I’m surprised.

“I’m sort of ... a save it until engagement guy?” he queries, almost like he’s asking himself a question. “Or at least I was going to try. Not for religious reasons or anything but just because it seemed like a good idea to wait.”

“You’re a virgin? Me, too.” The words pop out of my mouth before I can stop them, and I groan. “Okay, I’m being cringey as fuck. I’ll stop talking now.” He laughs at me yet again, but it doesn’t last long. Then he’s stopping on the path, his shoulders going tense as he surveys the switchbacks in front of us. “Did I say too much? The virgin thing was a lot ...”

“That guy is keeping pace with us again,” he says, his voice as cold as iron. It’s in that moment that I can see past the brimming confidence and cocky smile. Maxx is completely serious and it’s freaking me out.

“The walking stick-hat guy?” I ask, because I’m most definitely not Tess Vanguard, and I can’t come up with any better explanation for the hiker that just passed by us. “He’s waiting for us?”

Maxx turns his face back toward me.

“Can I put you down for just a second?” he asks me, and I blink back at him in surprise before nodding. Carefully, he lowers me down to sit on the edge of the path, my butt half-buried in the bushes. Crouching low, he moves forward quickly, taking the path like a housecat searching for prey. It’s quite clear in that moment that Maxx isn’t the prey in this situation; the hiker is.

He bursts around the corner of the path, and I hear footsteps heading away from us.

“Hey man, can I talk to you for a second?” he calls out, and I hear a murmured response as the other hiker hurries away. I

can see him walking the curving path that bends sharply to the right, and I swear, I get goose bumps again. That dude has bad vibes.

“What happened?” I ask as Maxx comes back and bends down to help me climb up again. He doesn’t answer, righting himself on the path and then scooting to the side as a couple with a dog comes around the corner. They smile and greet us before carrying on, proving to me what I’d already figured out from a bumper stick—*You’re in Oregon now. Be nice.*—people here are almost aggressively polite.

“I’m not really sure. He took off when I came around the corner, and then slipped past that couple. There wasn’t much I could do to chase after him without looking like a lunatic.” Maxx is staring down the path, too, like he’s as creeped out by the random hiker as I am. “Huh.” He shakes his head and then gives a shrug that has me bouncing slightly on his back. “There are creepers everywhere, I guess.”

He doesn’t sound convinced which bothers me a little.

Tightening my arms around his neck, I try to relax even though *every fucking instinct* in me says that I should be nervous. Maxx doesn’t loosen up any as we walk. If anything, he gets tenser with each curve in the path.

And, apparently, rightfully so.

The next turn we take ends with something—or somebody—knocking Maxx’s legs out from underneath him. We end up toppling down the side of the narrow path, right into the thick foliage that lines the slope. I fully expect to die in that moment. Or at least break a good thirty bones. Instead, Maxx actually *catches* himself on a low hanging branch. Mostly it’s his feet that go skidding before he releases the branch and ends up hitting his knees *hard*.

I have just enough time to see that hiker with the hat and the stick before I throw myself off of Maxx’s back and take off after the dude. Why I do that ... I’m not really sure. There’s just some deeply buried instinct in me that whispers *predator or prey, your choice*. So, predator it is, I guess?

“Kota!” X is calling from behind me, but I don’t stop. I’m so pumped up with adrenaline that I don’t even notice my stupid ankle until ... I do. The pain crashes into my skull as the brief rush of euphoria fades and I end up stumbling and crying out, sprawling hard on the ground just inches behind the hiker. My fingertips even brush his pantleg briefly before he stumbles to a stop, glancing back over his shoulder. He looks at me for a flicker of an instant—maybe less—but something cold snaps inside of me when I get a read on his expression.

Fortunately, Maxx skids around the corner just behind me, cursing as he struggles to come to a stop ... and then falls right on freaking top of me. He’s warm and big and ... “*I can’t breathe,*” I choke out as he scrambles to get off of me. The first thing he does is whip his head up, but the hiker is long gone.

“He hit you with his stick,” I groan as I fight to get into a sitting position and Maxx curses again, dropping into a squat to help me—even though I’m sure he’s hurting just as bad. Without asking permission, I push the leg of his pants up to inspect the front of his shin. Sure enough, there’s a red mark there. “He hit you on purpose.”

I sound incredulous, but when Maxx swings a look my way, I can see that he isn’t.

“Probably someone trying to rob us ... or something.” He frowns and shakes his head, rising to his feet and holding out a hand to help me up. As soon as I’m standing—with serious help from Maxx—we make eye contact, and he lifts a single brow. When I pretend not to notice, he voices his silent question. “Did you really try to run down a violent robber with a bum ankle?”

“To be fair, it was more instinct than logical, coherent thought.”

“Mhmm.” Maxx offers out his elbow to me. “Why don’t you hop as best you can, using me as much as you need?” He flicks that jewel-toned gaze of his toward the direction of our

fleeing perp. “He could try to ambush us again, and I can’t let myself be caught off-guard again.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” I say, brushing some dust off of his chest and belly with my hands. Then it gets ... weird. I pause and stare at my fingers; he pauses and stares down at me. Then I know for a fact that I’m fucking blushing while simultaneously being disgusted with myself. This is my sister’s boyfriend. Gross. Tacky. Just ... “Eww.” I somehow say it out loud even though I don’t mean to.

“Eww?” Maxx echoes, looking down at my hands. I very quickly draw them back and clear my throat.

“Anyway, you can’t blame yourself for that. Who expects to be beaten with a stick by some crazy guy?” Maxx gives me a tart smile and then leans down, reaching up and finally tousling my hair the way he’s seemed to want to since we started the hike this morning. It feels ... sisterly. But that’s okay, right? It’s actually great because if he marries Maxine then I’ll be his sister-in-law.

“I’m not going to forget you said *eww* when you brushed my shirt off,” he begins, emerald eyes sparkling with mischief. “But also, me. I should’ve expected to be beaten with a stick. I’ve been taking Krav Maga since I was eleven.”

“Of course you have,” I murmur with a roll of my eyes. Why wouldn’t he be an expert in some sort of bad ass-y self-defense training? It makes perfect sense. “Well, then, let’s get the hell out of here before the creep comes back.”

A graphic for Chapter 21. The word "CHAPTER" is written in a black, hand-drawn, all-caps font on the left. To its right, the number "21" is written in a large, pink, hand-drawn font. The background features a dark green heart shape, a black tree branch, and a faint, sketchy face on the right side.

CHAPTER 21

“So,” Maxine begins, just a week later when she finally gets a chance to drive up and see me. Already, she’s declared that Oregon is much prettier than Washington. Considering the only time I’ve been to Oregon, I got attacked on a hiking trail, I’m inclined to disagree. “Do you like him or what?”

My older sister leans forward, planting her elbow on the table and grinning at me like she knows a secret. Considering both Maxx and I told her what happened over voice chat in the parking lot, I’m not sure that there’s anything to tell.

“Maxx?” I start, wondering if she’s sensed some of my creeper vibes. But I swear to you, I’d fall on a sword before I’d ever considering taking my sister’s boyfriend. Maybe if I’d met Maxx first, I’d have been into him. As things stand, he couldn’t be any more off-limits to me. *Chasm on the other hand* ... Grr. I’m not going to think about Chasm, not right now. He’s been acting like he did before we started getting to know each other: a little distant, a little rude, a lot cocky.

My sister snorts and waves her hand dismissively, the ice cubes in her chai latte clinking as they start to melt. She pauses to stir her drink a bit.

“Not Maxx; I already know you like him or else you’d have given me an earful.” She lifts sheepish eyes up to watch me and I’m struck once again by how closely Saffron was able to match me and her other daughter, me and her parents. I *look* like a Banks, from my toes to my teeth to my hair. “Your stepbrother, the wannabe TikTok star.”

“Parrish?” I echo, trying and failing not to grit my teeth when I say his name. The first thing he did when he saw me limping into my room with Maxx’s arm around my waist was act concerned, helping me onto my bed and then giving Maxx a *look* that was damn near impossible to interpret. But as soon as Maxx left? I got the third degree from him about my hike. As if it’s any of his business. “He’s been a dick all week.”

“How come?” Maxine asks with a frown, glancing up at a young couple as they enter the café. A quick glance over my shoulder shows me what, exactly, it is that she’s smiling about. Their PDAs are off the charts. Gagging, I turn back to my sister.

“How come?” I repeat with a dry laugh. “Because he hates me.”

“Maxx thinks he likes you,” she tells me, causing me to damn near spill my mocha. Maxie pretends not to notice me blundering around with my drink as she glances casually at her phone. She wants me to call my grandparents, but I’m still annoyed. For almost two years, they knew I might not be their granddaughter? Why call the stupid hotline from that damn Netflix show then? Why couldn’t they have just let things be.

And that’s when I realize it. I’m pissed off at the Banks. Furious, even. What good did calling that number do anyone? Tess can’t get back all those years with her lost child; the Banks can’t regain the happy high school years with me they were planning on. Basically, it’s just a huge clusterfuck. Even if it was the ‘right thing’ to do, that doesn’t make me any less angry.

I swallow hard and take a sip of my drink.

“Why would Maxx think that?” I finally ask, when I realize that my sister’s going to draw this out as long as she possibly can. She grins at me, sitting up and adjusting her *Life is Better in Oregon* hoodie. While I’m frothing at the mouth to get home, Maxie is a full convert. She *wants* to stay in the Pacific Northwest for at least a few years after graduation.

“See, I knew you couldn’t resist.” She leans in toward me conspiratorially, lowering her voice like we’re still in a small

town and everyone knows everyone. “He says it’s because Parrish never talks about girls—*never*. But yet, he can’t seem to stop talking about *you*.”

I can already see where this is going.

“He bitches about me to his friends you mean?” I clarify and once again, Maxine waves her hand dismissively.

“Did I say that? You inferred it. Doesn’t make it true.” Maxine sips her drink loudly and then pauses as the doors to the café open once again and she gets caught staring at yet another lovey-dovey couple. I start to turn around to confirm the source of her sudden awe.

“Just because Parrish talks about me all the time doesn’t mean he wants to shove his tongue down my throat again—” I stop talking. One, because I said the word ‘again’ and I haven’t even told Maxie about the last time my stepbrother kissed me. Also, because both Parrish and Chasm are standing right there, staring at me.

“Whoever said I didn’t want to shove my tongue down your throat again? You never asked.” Parrish deadpans the entire delivery, and to be fair, I have to give him credit for that. In reality, I’m sure I’ve just ticked him off all over again; his hands are clenched into fists on either side of his body.

For his part, Chasm just tucks his hands into the pockets of his black jeans, affecting a casual slouch and a level of disdain I’d only have ever expected from Parrish himself. *He is mad at me, isn’t he?* And more specifically, he’s mad at me because of Parrish. That just has to be it.

“Parrish,” I begin, rising quickly from my chair at the same moment as Maxine. “Kwang-seon.” He gives me a sharp look and a brow raise in response. “This is my sister, Maxine.” I hold out my hand to indicate her and lift my chin proudly. *If either of them try to ruin this moment for me, I swear to fuck, I will do worse than curb stomp their avatars online.* “Would you like to join us for coffee?”

There’s a long hesitation there before the boys look at each other, exchanging one of those silent best friend messages that

make me miss Sally and Nevaeh all over again, but vastly appreciate the friends I'm making in Danyella, Lumen, and even Delphine.

"Why not?" Chasm replies finally, turning back and giving me a tight smile. "I'll order us coffee; the three of you can chat." He saunters off as I resist the urge to flip him off, settling back into my seat as Parrish takes the bench closest to the window, situating himself directly between me and my sister.

And then he just fucking *stares* at me.

"Why are you here?" is what pops out of my mouth next. Oops. Maxine gives me her *you're being a rude dick, be nice!* look. I pretend not to see it. "Don't tell me you just happened to pop into downtown Seattle for coffee and coincidentally chose this exact place?"

Parrish sits up straight and then flicks a quick look my sister's way.

"Of course it wasn't coincidental: Chasm knew you'd be here so he wanted to come." Parrish crosses his arms over his chest. "He has a crush on Mia." My sister blinks several times at that, her gaze shifting over to study Chasm's back before falling on Parrish again.

"Her name is Dakota," she says firmly, in a tone I well recognize. Parrish is *this* close to getting his ass handed to him. "And you're Parrish, the stepbrother who's in love with her."

Parrish laughs at that, this loud, sharp sound that reminds me that under that foppish rich boy disguise, there's a spoiled rotten brat crouching.

"In love with her? I can barely stand to be in the same *room* as her." He turns a much less amused expression my way. "So this is her, your pretend big sister? Does she know you stole a dead baby's name?"

My mouth drops and this time, it's me who has to blink through the shock a few times before turning to my sister. The

expression on her face tells me she already knew, so that, at least, is a relief.

“You didn’t think that might be important information that needed to be handled in a sensitive manner?”

Parrish ignores me.

“Is it healthy, anyway, to keep this charade going? It’s killing my mother.”

“If Maxine is my pretend big sister then Tess is your pretend mom.” The words fall out of my mouth like they’ve been summoned by a dark god. The way Maxine is staring at me, I’m prepared to admit to witchcraft and take a burning at the stake. She’s never seen me like this before, this angry.

“Fair enough,” Parrish breathes, but he’s gritting his teeth and squeezing his hands into fists on the tabletop. “So why do I care more about her feelings than you do?”

I lean in close to him, and he shivers as my hair sweeps across the back of his right hand. There’s this stupidly strong urge in me to reach over and grab his face, shove my tongue down his throat like we did in my room that day.

“Because,” I begin, my own teeth clenched tight, “just like Maxine really is my sister—DNA aside—Tess really is *your* mom.” I pause and exhale, reaching up to rub a hand over my face and forcibly relaxing my jaw. “Anyway, what on earth are you talking about? What’s the matter with Tess now?”

“You told her you were going to Lumen’s,” he tells me, breathing heavily, hands still clenched into fists. “But you’re not at Lumen’s, now are you? You’re here. With Maxine.” He pauses again, and my gaze drops to his lips. Across the table from me, Maxine lets out a long, low breath that turns into a bit of a whistle, and I yank my gaze back up to Parrish’s eyes. “You forgot to turn your phone off; she’ll be here any minute.”

He leans back in his seat as my eyes go wide and flick over to Maxie’s. She’s up and out of her seat so quickly that when the front door to the café does open, and Tess strides in with a dark expression, my sister is already slipping into the bathroom at the back of the room.

“Mom,” Parrish says, sounding as bored as ever as he lounges in his seat. Tess pauses and looks over at us, still frowning, her eyes flicking to me before moving back to her son again. “What are you doing here?”

There’s about a three-second delay before the café door opens once again and Lumen appears, red-faced and flushed and wearing this absurdly conservative suit. She looks like a CEO or something. Without skipping a beat, she tosses her honey-colored ponytail over her shoulder and flashes a grin in Tess’ direction.

“I almost forgot about my interview today,” she says, shrugging her shoulders loosely and then slipping easily into Maxine’s seat. “Thanks for keeping my drink cold for me.” Lumen picks up Maxie’s chai and slurps it with a sigh.

Tess doesn’t look convinced, turning to face us and crossing her arms over her chest. She could be Lumen’s colleague, dressed in a black skirt suit with a white button-up underneath. She barely looks at Parrish, her attention focused on me instead.

Personally, I’m about three seconds away from a heart attack. I can hear my pulse thudding in my ears, and my palms are so sweaty that when I try to pick up my drink, it nearly slides out of my hands. My eyes meet Parrish’s from across the table. He and Chasm just saved my ass, didn’t they? Fuck.

“Hi.” I give Tess a skeptical look that I’m not entirely sure she deserves. Like, it’s weird as hell that she followed me here, but also, she has a lot of trauma when it comes to me and disappearing. I try to be sympathetic. Also, I *did* lie to her about going to see Lumen today.

“Hello.” Tess moves over to stand beside the table, pausing to rap her knuckles against the surface. She looks a bit chagrined which isn’t totally fair considering I was seeing my sister behind her back. Her fears are very real, apparently. “What are the four of you up to?”

“Discussing our plans for the three-day weekend,” Parrish replies smoothly, leaning back in his seat as Chasm approaches the table with two drinks in hand. He sets one in

front of Parrish and then grins at Tess before sliding onto the bench beside his best friend.

“Hey Tess.”

“Chasm,” Tess replies carefully, her raven eyes sliding back to me. Meanwhile, poor Maxine is trapped in the bathroom for the indefinite future. “I ... think I owe you an apology.” She pauses and then puts her hand to her forehead, closing her eyes for a moment as I cringe internally.

While on the one hand, I feel like she has no right to keep me from my sister, I also feel bad for making her feel like a crazy person when she most definitely isn't one. Her suspicions are dead accurate.

“Allow me to apologize,” Lumen suggests, rising to her feet and giving one of those award-winning smiles of hers. She could charm a leprechaun out of his own gold with that grin. “I should've clarified our plans with you.”

“No, no, you're allowed to go out and get coffee,” Tess suggests, opening her eyes and huffing out a breath. “I'm sorry. I'm just wrapped up in this deadline; I haven't released a book in months and my readers are getting impatient.” She trails off and blinks a few times, like she didn't mean to give up her insecurities so easily. “Oh, but you kids don't care about that. I just ... I'm going to grab a coffee to go and leave.”

She heads for the line as I turn wide eyes back to my ... friends? I mean, I know Lumen's my friend, but I guess Parrish and Chasm are, too? When the fuck did that happen? Don't we all hate each other? I mean, I *do* hate Parrish a lot ...

“You're welcome,” he drawls, lounging like he's on a throne crafted of gold. He has so much easy confidence but at the same time, there's a frightening level of insecurity beneath the façade. It shouldn't be intriguing but somehow it is anyway.

“Did I say *thank you*?” I quip back, when really, I should probably thank them all. “How did you guys put this together?”

“Lumen and I share a tutor,” Chasm says, shrugging and using the general chatter and the clink of dishes in the café to keep his words hidden from Tess. “We decided to come to your rescue. After all, I didn’t want Tess to take away my tutoring privileges. Looks too good on my college apps.”

I narrow my eyes at him as Lumen chuckles and unashamedly continues to drink Maxine’s iced chai. She deserves that and a whole lot more, I have to admit.

“Your three suitors, all together at one table,” she says, which makes my face flush red. “Lucky you. You could have your own harem.”

“Speak for yourself,” Parrish snaps, giving Lumen a dark look that she returns. I still have no idea what their deal is. When I first met them, I assumed they were a couple. That, or exes at the very least. Now I’m wondering if there’s a part of the story that I’m missing. My stepbrother turns that punishing gaze of his back to me. “You’re her only girlfriend.”

“Lucky me then,” Lumen challenges back, turning her brown gaze back to Tess. She’s on her way out the door now with a coffee in hand, giving a loose wave to our table before she disappears into the crowd passing by through the front window. “That was a close one, Dakota. You should be more careful.”

And she’s right. If Tess had caught me with Maxine, what then? Would she pursue a case against Saffron? Threaten my grandparents? Hell, Maxine is an adult: Tess could make my sister’s life a living hell.

Speaking of ...

“Thank you,” I say finally, even though the look on Parrish’s face makes me want to grit my teeth. “All of you. Excuse me a minute.” I push up from the table and head into the bathroom to find Maxie in a texting frenzy with Maxx.

“X says hi,” she tells me, offering up a watery smile. “Is she gone?”

“She’s gone,” I reply, hefting a tired sigh. “Did I tell you that she’s forcing me on a family trip this weekend?” My

sister's brows go up as I glance her way.

"Where to?" she asks, sliding her phone back into her pocket. She's wearing denim overalls today with a t-shirt underneath, a pair of hiking boots on her feet. I suspect she's going to sneak a hike in before she drives home.

"Bend," I reply, shrugging loosely. "It's a town in Southern Oregon. We'll be so close to you but so far away. I highly doubt it'd be safe for us to see each other while I'm there."

Maxine watches me carefully for a moment before taking out her phone again and holding it out for me.

"Call grandma and grandpa." She gestures with the phone for emphasis. "I know you're mad, but you can't avoid talking to them. Remember: we don't have to agree but we always talk problems out."

It takes me a second to accept the phone from her, but I do, excusing myself from the bathroom and slipping outside the café's patio. It's raining—it's fucking *always* raining here—but I'm used to it now. Leaning against the side of the building, I make the call and my grandmother answers on the first ring.

"Dakota," she says, blinking surprised eyes at me. "Oh, Dakota." Interestingly enough, I can see Saffron sitting at a lounge chair behind my grandmother. Saffron and I haven't spoken since I saw the documentary four months ago. Seeing her there, the woman I used to call *mom*, the woman who turned the lives of so many people upside down, I'm not sure what to think.

She smiles at me, but it's the smile of a broken woman.

"Honey, your grandfather and I have been wanting so badly to talk with you." Grandma Carmen waves her husband over as I swallow a lump of nervousness and try to still the shaking of my hand. I can see from the tiny thumbnail of myself in the corner of the screen that I don't look so good.

"Kota!" my grandfather calls out, like we've been separated for eons. The sound is enough to choke me. He slides into the chair beside my grandmother, blocking Saffron from my view.

“Are you alright? I’m so sorry about the talk show. We wouldn’t have agreed to go on if we’d known what was going to happen.”

“I don’t blame you for that,” I say, trying to get used to this strange discomfort. Saffron. I guess I hadn’t realized how fucking mad I was at Saffron. There’s empathy in me for her, but there’s also this deep-seated rage I hadn’t realized I was holding onto. “But I do blame you for calling that hotline. I hate that I do, but I do.” The words come out in a breathy rush, and I close my eyes tight, thinking about how they might’ve known for two years that I wasn’t their bio grandkid. Two freaking years. What changed? “I’m not even angry that you might’ve known I wasn’t really Saffron’s kid. I don’t care about that. I care that you didn’t love me enough to be selfish.”

The tears brim then, the ones that I promised I wouldn’t shed when I first got here but that keep coming and coming anyway.

“Dakota,” my grandfather starts, exhaling sharply and then glancing over at my grandmother. “I don’t know if this helps any, but I ... I regret it, too. I regret it so much.” He drops his face into dirt-stained hands, and my heart clenches so tight that it feels like it might never beat again. *He’s been working in the garden and I’m not there to help; he regrets it. He regrets. He regrets it.*

“I’m so sorry, Kota,” Carmen chokes, just barely managing to keep herself together. “I didn’t think it would be like this. I thought ... well, I thought we’d at least be able to visit each other. But I couldn’t do anything different than what I did. Tess might not be any of our favorite people, but she’s your mother. She’s a woman who lost her baby through no fault of her own.”

I blink through the tears, but it’s hard to tell how much of the wetness is from the rain, and how much is salty sadness.

“Let me talk to Saffron,” I say, my voice hardening slightly. “I want to hear the story from her lips.”

There's a brief pause as my grandfather lifts his head up and turns to give my grandmother a look.

Before either of them get a chance to reply, there she is, snatching the phone away. Her face is so familiar, so maternal to me. Even though she was never really a mother, she was the only one I ever really had. Her eyes are dark; her hair is dark. We could very well be related. If it weren't encoded in our DNA ... But that's one thing nobody can hide from, is it? It can't be wished away or erased; I am Tess' daughter and that's a fact.

"Has she told you about your father yet?" Saffron asks, her voice on the edge of hysteria. She doesn't look well. Actually, she's never looked well, not once in my whole life. She's always been sick and sad and broken. Always.

I just blink at her, because what could she possibly know about my bio dad? What does she even care?

"Why did you pick me?" I ask, because that matters. It matters because there's no way she just happened to stumble upon a child with such similar looks to her own. Clearly, she'd been watching Tess and me for some time before she pounced. "Did you know my sperm donor or something?"

She owes me answers to such simple questions, surely. Instead of offering them up, Saffron snaps at me.

"Has she told you? If she hasn't, she should—before he finds you." Her eyes dart to the side, as if she's looking for someone.

"Saffron!" Carmen reprimands, but her daughter ignores her, moving into the house and locking the door before either of my grandparents can stop her. I'm torn between putting her words down as a psychotic rant ... and being deathly curious about them.

"Well?" she repeats as I stand there reeling in the rain, my tears replaced with water as confusion swaps places with sadness. "Tess Vanguard doesn't care about you, Dakota. Only I do. I'm your real mother." Saffron points at herself, dark circles under her eyes and wrinkles in her forehead that Tess

doesn't have. They're nearly the same age, but they look so different; they've lived such different lives.

"Is that so?" a cold voice asks from my left.

An icy terror filters through me as I turn to the side to see Tess, poised on the other side of the metal railing that separates the patio from the sidewalk. She holds out her hand, the other wrapped so tightly around her coffee cup that her fingers are leaving indents.

Her expression is one of the scariest things I've ever seen in my life.

No. No, no, no. What the fuck have I done?! I wasn't careful enough.

"Give me the phone. Now."

I'm left with little choice but to comply. The situation is already bad enough.

I had my sister's phone over to Tess and watch as the women in my life who could claim the title of mother—for very different reasons—stare at each other.

"Haven't you done enough?" Tess breathes, her shoulders stiff, and her expression murderous. "I took pity on you because you're obviously a very sick woman, but if I find out you've contacted my daughter again, I will destroy you. Don't believe me? I have the resources to bury you."

Bury you. I see where Parrish gets his attitude from. Nurture won out over nature in that case.

"Dakota deserves the truth," Saffron replies, her voice like a whisper in comparison to Tess' steely tones. "She has a right to know. I protected her. Me, and only me. I was the only one that cared."

"Contact my daughter again, and you'll be spending the next two decades in federal prison."

Tess hangs up the phone and then studies it in her palm.

"Whose phone is this?" she asks me, just before Maxine pops out the back door of the café with an oblivious smile.

“Did you get a chance to talk—” Maxie starts, and then she goes completely still, the color draining from her face as Tess looks up and their eyes meet. Uh-oh.

“What the fuck are you two doing out here?” Parrish demands, slipping out the door behind my sister. It takes him about half a second to notice Tess standing on the other side of the railing. “Shit.”

“Shit is right,” Tess says, stepping a bit closer to the railing and holding Maxine’s phone out to her. “I want the two of you out front—*now*.”

My knuckles rap against the doorjamb outside of Parrish’s room. Neither of us has a door anymore: Tess and Paul removed them both and left the two of us without a shred of privacy.

“Hey.” The sound is soft, almost inaudible. “Can I come in for a second?”

Parrish ignores me, shoving clothes into a duffel bag to prepare for the trip tomorrow. We’re driving six hours south to stay at Paul’s mother’s vacation home. Should be a fun drive, considering Tess wants to murder us both. I could barely sleep last night. One, because not having a door is an oddly traumatizing experience. Two, because every time I closed my eyes, I could see Tess’ dark expression in my mind.

“Might as well. You’re my only companion for the next few weeks.” He yanks the zipper on his bag before turning a surprisingly mild expression my way. I’ve been avoiding him since yesterday’s incident. The risks were mine to take, but I feel bad for dragging Parrish into it. Even Chasm is banned from the house for two weeks.

Grounded. Again. I can barely go a day before receiving another sentence.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, choking back the pain. I have no idea what’s going to happen to Maxine or Saffron or my grandparents. Tess really does have the power to make all of

their lives miserable. She's taken all of Parrish's electronics, too. The only thing she doesn't know about is my second phone, but I haven't even turned it on since yesterday; I'm afraid to see what might happen if she finds out that I have it. "For dragging you into this, I mean. You were trying to save my ass and instead, I insulted you at the café ..."

Parrish pauses for a moment, hands on his duffel bag, and turns to look at me. He's much less angry than I expected, and I'm not sure what to make of that. Also, his hair is delightfully mussed and falling across his forehead in a glorious fop. I want to tousle it, and then kiss him, and then ... shit, I don't know.

"Don't apologize for other peoples' decisions," he snaps, and then closes his eyes in frustration. "I'm not here to tell you how to live, Dakota, but I will say this: it gets exhausting after a while."

"Is that why you don't apologize for anything?" I try to make it a joke, but when Parrish opens those honey-almond eyes of his to look at me, I get chills. *He's so beautiful, so fucking beautiful.* And not just on the outside. There's a thread of kindness in him that he tries to pretend isn't there. By all appearances, he's just a rich dickhead. Underneath it, he's actually *nice*. Even though I just think the word, it chokes me a bit because I hate to admit it.

He helped me escape the TV studio; he held me when I cried; he tried to save my ass at the café.

"What do you think Tess is going to do?" I ask when it becomes clear he has no intention of answering me. I move into Parrish's room, pausing beside his desk and picking up the fake hand he uses to practice his art on. It's been inked with an incredibly complex design made up of stars and moons; every square inch is filled with color. It's absolutely stunning, but I can't seem to make myself say it aloud.

"Do?" he queries back, his shadow falling across the desk. He's standing right behind me; I can feel his breath stirring my hair. *Shit. Shit, shit, shit.* I turn around suddenly, almost too quickly, and find myself face to face with him. Something is different between us, something that changed that day when he

followed me upstairs and pulled me into his arms. “She’s already done it: do you not see the missing doors?”

Parrish plucks the hand from my grip and cradles it close to his chest, like I’ve somehow marred his precious artwork.

“Is this the tattoo you want to give me?” I ask him as he opens one of his nightstand drawers and I see a bunch of fake body parts—mostly hands and feet—stuffed into it. All of them are covered with ink. “Holy crap. When I snooped in your room before, I’ll admit: I avoided that drawer in case you had crispy socks or something in it.” A laugh escapes me as Parrish raises a single brow in surprise. “Honestly, I’m glad I didn’t look. I know those are just silicone, and that you need them for practice, but it sort of also makes you look like a serial killer.”

“Who knows?” Parrish replies, his voice surprisingly light considering the punishment Tess handed down to both of us. The scariest part of it all is that she hasn’t said a word to me about any of it. After she called us out at the café, we got in the car, came home, and handed over our electronics. She and Paul took our doors and then ... that was it. Back to being WASP-y again. “Maybe I am?”

“Don’t forget: we share a hallway. I see your comings and goings.” I plop down on his bed, even though the very act of it makes him cringe. I pretend not to notice; if he asks me to leave then I’ll leave. Like I said, setting and respecting boundaries is important. “Anyway, you never answered the question: was that design for me?”

Parrish turns toward his desk—that is, away from me—and puts his hands atop it. He seems pained by something, but I’m afraid to ask. This sort of light, easy conversation is rare for us. We’re usually fighting or ... making out, I guess.

“I haven’t been able to decide on a design for you.” His voice is low, thick with contemplation and maybe even a dose of surprise. When he glances over his shoulder to look at me, our gazes lock and I feel trapped in it, mired in this strange connection we’ve seemed to have since moment one. “*Who the fuck are you. And what are you doing in my house?*” Well,

okay, maybe not since moment one ... “Or maybe I’m not supposed to decide for you? Why don’t you pick something for yourself?”

“You’re the artist,” I say automatically, but then again, he has a point and I hate to admit that. “Guess it can’t hurt to give it some thought, am I right?”

“You’ll have my ink inside your skin forever.” That’s his reply. Like, really? Who says things like that? “I would say it’s definitely worth some thought.”

“There’s always laser removal.” Parrish turns the rest of the way around, perching that perfect ass of his on the edge of his desk. He folds his arms over his chest, and even though he’s wearing that stupid Whitehall hoodie of his—the gray one with the ironic best and brightest quote on it—I can see the muscular set of his shoulders. I know he works out: I’ve seen it. Did I ever mention that there’s a home gym downstairs? Did I need to? Nah, the Vanguarders are that rich. The only thing we’re missing is an indoor bowling alley. Cue the eyeroll. “Well, there is.”

There’s a long pause where neither of says a thing. After a while, the silence just gets too heavy for me to take.

“Thank you, by the way.” The words hurt a little bit coming out, but they need to be said. “I owe Chas and Lumen thanks, too, but ... you got punished because of me.”

“I made my own choice.” He rises to his feet and flicks the light off. There aren’t any screens in here now, so the room is plunged into total darkness. My breath catches as Parrish moves over to the opposite side of the bed and lies down beside me. After a moment, I lie back, too, and end up staring at a ceiling covered in glow-in-the-dark stars.

“Tess put them up when we moved in; you’re not allowed to judge.”

I turn my head his direction, even though I can’t see him just yet. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, my mind wanders, and I end up trying to mentally calculate how far apart our mouths are. Or what the risks are of lying here beside him with

no door. If Tess comes in and sees this, what will she do? What will she think? At this point, what else can she take away from me? No punishment is greater than being stripped of my ability to see and contact Maxine or talk to the Banks. Nothing. I decide to stay right where I am.

“I wasn’t judging. I like them, actually. I want to be the sort of person who can put glow-in-the-dark stars on their ceiling when they’re fifty years old and still smile about it.” I turn my attention back up to the ceiling, listening to the low, easy cadence of Parrish’s breathing.

I can smell him, too, which I know sounds creepy as fuck. He just ... god, he smells good.

“Why do you always wear that perfume?” he asks, like he’s annoyed at me but also like he can read my mind. Did I make a loud sniffing sound or something? Dear god, please tell me I’m not embarrassing myself here.

“Me?” I ask, genuinely confused. “I’m not wearing any perfume. You’re the one that douses himself in freaking dewy clovers and citrus every day.”

There’s a long, pregnant pause there that makes me sweat a bit.

“Dewy clovers?” A genuine laugh follows that question, one that’s masculine and smoky and more relaxed than I’ve ever heard it before. Parrish and I have known each other, what, three months now? First time I’ve heard a laugh that sounds so genuine, so stripped of its caustic bullshit and princely rich boy echo. “I’m not sure what, exactly, a ‘dewy clover’ smells like. But I can promise you this: I’m not wearing anything either.”

My heartbeat mysteriously picks up speed, racing so fast and so loud that it actually drowns out the sound of Parrish’s breathing. I wonder if he can hear it, too? There’s a rustling as he sits up and ... does something. I think he’s taking off his hoodie and ... wow, has it been this fucking hot in here all along or ... I’m sweating up a storm all of a sudden.

“So ... we’re just smelling ... each other?” It sounds a lot weirder coming out of my mouth than it did in my head.

Another long pause.

I adjust my arm, and it brushes up against his, bare skin to bare skin. It’s an accident, but no less potent because of it.

“Get out of my room, Dakota.”

“Yep, it’s time to leave.” I stand up and pause awkwardly at the open door before padding through and crawling into my own bed. The lights in my room are already off, but it’s not quite as dark, moonlight streaming through the wall of windows. If I listen carefully, I can hear Parrish adjusting his covers. “Hey Parrish.”

Several seconds pass before I hear him sigh.

“Yeah?”

“Should I be looking forward to this trip ... or dreading it?”

Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in.

“I’ll be honest,” he says, his voice so quiet that I have to lay perfectly still to hear it. “It’ll probably suck. Most trips with Kimber do.”

I stifle a laugh, but I can’t keep the smile off my face. It only lasts for about a minute though before I start thinking of Maxine’s forlorn expression as I climbed into Tess’ car. I could see her on the sidewalk, dark hair plastered to her forehead by the rain as she watched us drive away. I have no clue when I’ll be able to talk to her again, let alone see her. Or my grandparents.

And Saffron ... what the hell was that all about?

“Has she told you about your father yet? ... If she hasn’t, she should—before he finds you.”

A strange thought comes to me, about that night when I woke up outside, the night that I keep telling myself was a dream. Even with all my other electronics gone, I’ve got the new phone Maxx gave me. I’ll keep recording every night, just

to see. So far, nothing's happened and I'm starting to truly believe it was a nightmare instead of a reality.

But then ... I just can't shake the sense of wrongness that Saffron gave me with that conversation. Before he finds me? Why wouldn't I want my bio dad to find me? Is he a monster? Did he hurt Tess? Are any of the things she wrote in *Fleeing Under a Summer Rain* true?

"Go to sleep, Dakota, and stop thinking so hard." Parrish's voice surprises me. Somehow, I thought he was already asleep.

"Do you know anything about my bio dad?" I reply, and once again, there's a significant amount of time before Parrish replies.

"About as much as I know about my bio mom. He was a bad person who hurt Tess. You're better off without him, trust me." There's some more rustling, and I can't help but wonder if he's ... like, maybe he's jacking off?

"Are you touching yourself?" I whisper, and I hate how weird my voice sounds when I ask that.

A minute later, there he is, standing in my doorway and glaring at me, face limned by moonlight.

"Would I really do that? Without a door? If you need to relieve some stress, go do it in your bathroom." He hesitates there for a second, like he isn't sure why he came all the way in here to begin with. Eventually, he sits down on the edge of the bed, denting the mattress in just such a way that I'm reminded of our last make-out session, of me putting his hand on my boob, of ... everything. "I like your furniture."

Oh.

I wasn't expecting that.

"Thanks," I hazard, my body stiff with the knowledge that his is so damn close. I can smell him again, but I'm not about to mention that ridiculous social faux pas aloud ever again. "My grandma made some of it. The rest of the pieces came from antique shows."

"And the Tess Vanguard books?"

Shit. I should've known that was coming.

“Once upon a time, she was my favorite author.” It feels like an admission of guilt, especially after what happened yesterday. Tess is stifling, and controlling, and so ice cold she could probably construct an igloo from her feelings. But I can't deny the truth. “I guess, if I'm being honest, she still is. Even though I don't like her.”

Parrish doesn't respond to that, and after a few minutes, I end up falling asleep with him still sitting there.

Surprisingly, when I wake up later to pee, he's still there, curled up on the far side of my bed without any blankets. I manage to get out, pee, and climb back in without waking him. After a second of hesitation, I cover him up, turn the opposite direction, and put our backs together.

In the morning, it's Delphine that finds us like that, knocking on the doorjamb and waking us both up.

We don't say anything about it. Parrish gets up and heads back into his room before Tess shows up. And then ... we climb in the car and start the drive.

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A graphic for Chapter 22. The word "CHAPTER" is written in a black, hand-drawn, blocky font on the left. To its right, the number "22" is written in a large, pink, cursive font. The background features a dark green, textured shape resembling a heart or a large drop, with black, bare tree branches and a faint, sketchy face in the upper right corner. The overall style is artistic and hand-drawn.

CHAPTER 22

“It’s like an old west movie threw up on the landscape,” Kimber murmurs, scowling and scrolling on her phone as the luxury SUV rambles up a long, curved driveway. I wouldn’t have put it exactly like that, but I have to say, I’m fascinated by the change in scenery that I’ve noticed on our drive.

Outside the window, the earth is red-brown and dusty, dotted with ponderosa pines and Russian thistles, a far cry from the dewy green landscape up north. I even spotted a tumbleweed, a real-life, honest-to-god tumbleweed rolling down the sidewalk on our way through town. Bend, Oregon is famous for its outdoorsy, ‘old west’ sort of look, but unlike Kimber, I’m enjoying the view.

There isn’t much else to enjoy, to be quite frank. Tess is as cold and shut off as ever; Paul spends about four of the six hours on the drive actively talking on his phone. Kimber is so glued to her own phone screen that she legit failed to realized we’d even stopped at a gas station and started crying about how she had to pee twenty minutes later. Ben is wrapped up in some mid-grade sci-fi novel while the twins bicker over which games they want to play on their iPads.

As per usual, Parrish slumps in the corner of the back seat. If he’d had the choice, I bet he would’ve put more space between us. Thing is, this is an eight-seater SUV with eight people in it. Ben is on my left; my right thigh is pressed tight to Parrish’s. He’s barely looked at me let alone spoken to me. I can’t decide if that’s just because of the oppressive atmosphere or if he’s being weird about last night.

“Are you mad because we slept together?” I whisper, using yet another one of Paul’s phone calls as cover to speak frankly. The look Parrish throws my way is venomous. “Seriously, it’s not that big of a deal.”

He leans in toward me, his words a quiet hiss that I doubt anyone can hear but me.

“I’m into my stepsister. That’s a problem.”

And then he sits back up and perches his chin on his hand, elbow resting against the window as he gazes out at the high desert landscape. I’m too shocked to say a damn thing in response. Instead, I end up sitting there and staring at him until the house comes into view.

By house, of course I mean a fucking *mansion*.

As soon as I see it, I realize I’ve underestimated the Vanguards, that Danyella was right when she said *wealthiest person on campus* in regard to Parrish. The house is enormous, an abstract reality in the middle of a beautiful desert landscape. It looks obscene to me, to be quite honest.

Parrish looks back at me, as if to get a gauge on my reaction.

“Don’t look so shocked,” he murmurs under his breath, but how can I not be? He just admitted that he’s into me with words for the very first time. Of course, I didn’t really need to be told that. Words are cheap; actions are all that matters. With every action he’s taken recently, he’s been telling me how he really feels. Have I been doing the same? Am I into him in a way that’s deeper than the physical?

“We’re here,” Tess says, trying and failing to inject cheer into her voice. She sounds like she’s on her way to a funeral. She doesn’t look back at us, focusing instead on driving the SUV—it’s not even a rental, just another car that they own—as Paul wraps up yet another phone call.

As we come around the last bend in the driveway, I see some sort of luxury coupe in a metallic silver parked near the front door.

“Shit,” Parrish murmurs just a split-second before Tess slams on the brakes and we all go flying against the constraints of our seat belts.

“Your mother is here?” she hisses to Paul, whipping her head over to her husband in just such a way that he almost recoils. He manages to get himself together and reapply that haughty surgeon tone of his before responding.

“When she heard we were coming, she cancelled her annual trip to Grenada to be here.” Paul and Tess just stare at each other as I try to imagine what it might be like to take an annual vacay to the West Indies. Jesus, these people are extra as fuck.

“To meet Dakota?” Tess queries, casting a quick glance back at me. She looks nervous which makes me nervous. Tess is like Elsa on steroids, the grand supreme ice queen. If Paul’s mother strikes such fear in her, then I better steel myself for some serious drama.

Also ... *“I’m into my stepsister. That’s a problem.”*

How can I not be obsessing over that?

Paul murmurs something so quietly to Tess that I can’t hear it. Whatever. If it’s about me, I probably don’t want to know anyway. She parks the car beside the silver coupe, and we all climb out, groaning and stretching and in most cases, bitching.

“God, I hate it here,” Kimber grumbles, pulling on one of her blonde curls as she scowls up at the house. “The Wi-Fi is shit, and I can’t get a signal on my phone.”

“Oh, the trauma,” Parrish spits back at her, and then the two of them get into some sort of physical tussle that has me raising my eyebrows. What was it that Tess told me on my second day in Washington? *“We do not resort to physical violence in this house.”*

Hilarious.

I ignore them while Paul deals with the altercation, following Tess into the front door after she punches in the key code.

“Hello?” she calls out, lifting her sunglasses up and perching them in her hair. She looks around the relatively small bottom floor without going into any of the bedrooms, and then goes up a set of stairs on the left. I go with her because ... what else am I going to do? I can't use my secret phone around her, and she monitors everything I do on the one she gave me. For all the use it has, it may as well be a paperweight. “Laverne?”

“There's no need to shout, I'm right here,” a woman snaps as we round the corner at the top of the stairs. The woman—I'm assuming this is Laverne Vanguard, Parrish's paternal grandmother—glares at us from her spot at the head of the long dining table, a glass of wine in her left hand.

“Laverne,” Tess says, as pleasantly as possible. There's an edge to it though that scares me. Fantastic.

Parrish is right behind me. Actually, when he comes up the stairs, he pauses way too close to my back, and I swear that we're vibing off of each other. It's as if there's this magnetic pull between us. All I want is to be close to him, as close as I can get.

“Who are you?” Laverne asks, looking right at me. Her gaze is sharp and cruel, and not terribly unlike her grandson's. The same toasted coconut color, the same almond-shaped eyes. But there's a coldness to her expression that makes every look Parrish has ever given me burn like fire.

I swallow and take a long, slow blink to steady myself. Her words are intended to hurt, just the way Parrish's did when I first met him. I'm prepared for this.

“Dakota Banks.” Just that. I step forward and hold out my hand. Laverne looks at it like it's diseased, but only until her grandson slides up beside me.

“Dakota is Tess' daughter, but you knew that already,” he says in just such a way that I can tell he's used to having sway with his grandmother. “Be nice, Grandma.”

“I'm trying,” she whispers under her breath, the autumnal shade of her hair so similar to Kimber's that I can't help but

wonder if Kimber inherited Laverne's rotten personality along with it. "Well, it's nice to meet you, Dakota. Since you don't have a bedroom here yet, you can pick one out in the basement."

"Um, thanks?" I query back, glancing over at Parrish to see his jaw clenched, teeth gritted together in annoyance.

"I'll take a room downstairs, too," he says, reaching down to grab my hand. I'm so surprised by the move that I don't protest when he drags me toward a separate staircase past the kitchen. I let out a whistle as I pass a wine fridge on the right, a gargantuan kitchen island on my left.

Surprisingly, the basement stairs are carpeted and not hardwood like the rest of the house. When we get down there, I'm even more shocked to see a pool table, a shuffleboard table, and a few vintage arcade machines in the corner. It doesn't look quite like the fancy pants palace upstairs.

"This was the first house my grandfather ever bought with his own money," Parrish tells me, letting go of my hand and looking down at me. We're just staring at each other, and it's impossible to deny that something has changed, that even though he's been ignoring me for weeks, it's been as hard on him as it's been on me. "My grandma was the one with the family money; she's the Vanguard." He looks past me, toward the cozy basement area that feels so much more like home than any place I've been on my journey thus far. It's practically normal down here. I say practically because most people I knew back home—besides Nevaeh—couldn't afford a pool table let alone have a place to put it. But it's better, much less extreme and gauche than the rest of the house. "Anyway, this is the only part of the house that my grandma didn't remodel. She couldn't bear it, since my grandpa was the one who designed it before he died ..." Parrish trails off and then shakes his head, exhaling sharply and then pushing those foppish waves of his back from his forehead.

"I love it." Parrish startles a bit at my words, but I ignore him, moving into the room and opening doors. The first one leads to a surprisingly spacious bedroom with a queen bed, a desk, and a dresser. There's even a small coffee maker, an

electric teapot, and a series of teas and coffees in a tray beside them. “When she said basement, I’ll admit, I got like, *Harry Potter under the staircase* vibes, but this isn’t like that at all.”

“Mm.” Parrish follows behind me as I continue down a short hallway, pausing to open another door and finding a fancy-pants bathroom with a huge tub. “Okay, so my grandma did get her hands in the bathroom, but that’s the only part of the basement she touched.” I grin as I close the door, continuing around the corner and finding yet another bedroom. This one is much smaller than the last with a pair of twin beds and a desk with an ancient looking desktop computer on it.

I turn around to find Parrish waiting in the doorway, one arm outstretched, palm pressed against the doorjamb. He’s frowning gloriously at me. Like, the expression is so exaggerated that it’s almost cute.

“This will be my bedroom,” he declares, his tone one that’s intended to brook no argument. I cock a brow at him.

“It’s so sterile in here ...” I start, looking around at the mostly bare walls, the small beds, the dinosaur of a computer. “What does your other room look like? The one that isn’t in the basement?”

“I’d rather be down here—away from Kimber and my dad and my grandma and ...” He trails off and then stops himself, as if he almost let some secret piece of information slip. “I’d rather be down here.”

“Away from Tess?” I query, but Parrish gives me such a dark look that I decide not to push it any further. I move towards the door, pausing just in front of him when he makes no move to scoot back or drop his arm. “Into your stepsister, huh?”

“Jesus.” Now he really does drop his arm and move away from me, heading right for one of the arcade machines. And ... oh my god. Oh my god. I let out a small shriek, squeezing in beside Parrish and bumping our shoulders together.

“This is ... it’s *Gauntlet Legends!*” I choke out, turning an excited look his direction. This time, it’s his turn to raise his

brows.

“So?”

“So?! This is a classic! Late nineties, totally iconic.” I press the two-player button and flash Parrish a grin. “Play with me?” He looks back at the screen with a strange expression, but I’m already picking my character—blue Valkyrie for the win. “One of the best multiplayer dungeon crawlers ever made.”

“You really are a gamer nut, aren’t you?” he asks, sounding exasperated, but he picks a character anyway and off we go.

Kimber eventually finds her way downstairs, scowling when she finds us engaged in the game together.

“Seriously? That game is so old it belongs in a museum.”

“And your face belongs in a Ripley’s Believe it or Not. Get the fuck out of here, Kimber.” Parrish doesn’t falter in his gameplay, watching my six as I open a treasure chest. He’s not bad, I’ll admit. Not as good as Maxx, but not bad.

Maxx. Maxine. My sister.

I swallow hard but push the emotions back, focusing on my kick-ass Valkyrie avatar instead of my pain. That’s what I like about gaming, the ability to become someone or something else for a brief period of time. But in the end, reality always wins out. You can’t escape who you really are, can you?

“I hope the Seattle Slayer gets both of you,” Kimber spits, shoving Parrish’s shoulder before she takes off. He ignores her, scowling as he focuses on button mashing with me. We make it about halfway through before we’re both dead, and the game ends.

I hazard a glance his way.

“Tackle this again after some food?” I ask and Parrish nods. He doesn’t look at me though. Actually, he looks nervous as fuck, and I can’t figure it out. Is it because he admitted that he’s into me? Has to be.

We end up heading upstairs to find Tess, Paul, and Laverne seated around the table. Somebody ordered in, so there’s

plenty of Chinese food to pick through. Also, it seems my bio mom is deeply entrenched in a bottle of wine.

“You don’t understand how the author world works,” she drawls, swinging her wineglass around in just such a way that liquid slops over the side onto the floor. Paul scrambles to clean it up while Laverne glares. The toxicity in the air is pungent; my immediate instinct is to GTFO. “Most people are social climbers. They use you until they get to the rung they want, and then they abandon you.” She snuffles and downs the rest of her wine as I approach the table with caution.

“Well, what did you expect when you got into the business of writing fairy tales?” Laverne quips as I cringe internally, piling my plate with fried rice while Parrish goes for the chow mein. “I don’t see why you continue churning out those ridiculous pulp fiction novels. You hardly need to work at all. You should be spending more time with the children.”

My shoulders tense and Parrish notices, flicking a warning look my way. It quite clearly says *don’t fuck with Laverne, Dakota*. Only ... I’m not really paying attention to him. Instead, I’m focused on Tess’ exaggerated frown. I’m still angry with her, obviously. But I also want to see how she claps back at the matriarch of the Vanguard family.

“I write because ... oh.” Tess snuffles again, looking at her empty wineglass like she can’t quite understand how it got that way. “I wrote to find my daughter, Laverne.” Tess gestures at me, drawing both Laverne’s and Paul’s attention my way. Fantastic. I keep adding food to my plate and acting like I’m not listening. “But there’s more to it. I just ... I can’t explain it.”

I lift my head up to look at her. Her comment from that awful lunch at the country club—*Maybe you don’t fully appreciate how much I like money?*—rings in my head. Was she lying then? Does she see her work the way I do, as art, as something important?

“The children need a guiding hand,” Laverne continues, giving me a look. The way she looks at me, it’s that same cold assessing gaze I got from Parrish in the beginning. Clearly, she

isn't impressed with me either. "Someone has to be around to do it."

"Guess I'll deal with the fallout later, won't I?" Tess quips right back, pouring herself more wine and sloshing it all over the table in the process. She's definitely one of those Millennials who has shirts that say things like *It's Wine O'Clock* and *Eat, Pray, Wine*. Not that I blame her. Actually, it's one of her more intriguing qualities. "Maybe Paul should quit *his* job and deal with the kids?"

Laverne ignores her in favor of staring at me.

"How did you manage to find your way into this family?" she asks, which surprises me.

"Grandma." Parrish's tone holds a sharp warning that Laverne either doesn't notice or chooses to ignore.

"It just seems odd to me that you heard about a wealthy family looking for a lost child and then magically appeared, ready to enjoy all the benefits that come with it."

Tess slams her wineglass down on the table and stands up, her chair legs scraping across the floor.

"She took three DNA tests, Laverne. And look at her. I mean, really look at her. You're always scheming and plotting behind other people's backs, so you assume everyone else is doing the same." Tess throws back her wine as I stand there with my plate of food and try to decide if I should run or simply chuck my body out of one of the upstairs windows. Surely the high desert would be more forgiving than this crazy family?

"What do you think of your new sister, Parrish?" Laverne asks, as if she didn't just call me a gold digger and a liar two seconds prior.

Parrish slams his plate down on the table so hard that it cracks before turning to look at his grandmother.

"First off, she is *not* my sister. Stop calling her that." I hear the same words from him that he's been repeating like a mantra since moment one only ... the meaning is different. I catch myself holding my breath and force out a long exhale.

“Second ... she ...” He chokes on the words for a moment before reaching up and running his inked fingers through his hair. “She’s alright. She definitely isn’t here for fun. Who would be? This family fucking sucks.”

“Parrish.” It’s a warning from Paul this time.

“And you can’t make someone love you by controlling them,” Parrish says next, surprising the crap out of me. He looks up and straight at Tess. “You shouldn’t keep her from talking to her sister and her grandparents.”

“Parrish.” This time it’s Tess, but she’s practically choking on his name.

“This is exactly what I’m talking about,” Laverne continues, oblivious to the tension in the room. “You let the boy cover his skin in gangster tattoos and then find yourselves surprised when he talks back.”

“This is his art,” I blurt, surprising myself. “And he’s damn good at it, too. Have you ever looked at his sketchbooks? Do you even care?” I double the portions on my plate, slapping the food onto it with a vengeance. “Excuse us.”

This time, it’s me who grabs Parrish’s hand and drags him away from the table.

We end up sitting and sharing the plate of food at a small table on the opposite side of the room from the shuffleboard table.

“Did we just defend each other?” he asks me, staring hard at the fried rice instead of my face. “When did that happen?”

I do my best to stifle a smile, but it comes through anyway.

“I have no idea, but I like it. It’s much better than you ‘burying me’.” Parrish cringes slightly at the reminder of his opening challenge to me back in February. He picks at the rice with his fork.

“I’m sorry about my grandma. She’s a bitch, but we all put up with her because she’s a billionaire and everyone wants her money when she dies.”

“She’s a billionaire?” I ask dryly. “Like for real? Also, that’s pretty dark.”

Parrish lifts his head up to look at me.

“For real. Also, you’ve met her. Would you willingly hang out with that woman?”

I guess he’s got a point.

We finish our food in silence before Parrish stands up from his stool.

“Goodnight, Gamer Girl.”

I watch his retreating form, trying and failing not to at least glance at his ass in the tight jeans he’s wearing. After a few minutes, I head up the small set of stairs that leads to the first floor.

“Hey,” I whisper, crouching down beside Ben. He’s sitting in an armchair in the living room reading a book. And not on an e-reader or an iPad or a phone, but like, an actual paper book. God, I love this kid. Give us some time and I might actually come to think of him as a brother. “Which room is Parrish’s?”

He points me in the right direction before diving right back into his book. His most frequent arguments with Tess and Paul often involve the phrase ‘just one more chapter!’ so I know we’re kindred spirits. I slip into the room and close the door behind me, putting my back to it and pausing to survey the room.

It’s fancy, much fancier than the one in the basement. There’s a king size bed, walls painted a charcoal gray, and an entire bookcase full of coffee table style art books. He’s even got an attached bathroom, a walk-in closet, and a huge window looking out at the manicured portion of the yard.

In short: it’s about a million times better than the one in the basement.

Uh-oh.

Parrish Vanguard ... I hate him.

But also ... I think I like him.

A lot.

Too much probably.

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CHAPTER 23

The next morning, we're supposed to meet at the China Hat trailhead to go on an ATV tour. Not that it doesn't sound like fun but doing anything with this family involves loads and loads of drama.

"I hate ATVs," Kimber whines, the sound of her voice making my ears ring. Now that I've been here for a while, I can see why Parrish is always slumped in a corner with earbuds in, scrolling mindlessly on his phone. There's a lot of in-between time, most of it spent arguing in tight, quiet voices or waiting for people to finish primping. Paul and Kimber are the worst offenders by far, checking and rechecking themselves in the house's mirrors before deigning to join the rest of us outside.

"We're spending time together as a family whether you like it or not," Tess hisses, yanking open the driver's side door of the SUV. She looks hungover and pissed off. Also, she still isn't talking to me. I can't decide if I'm happy about that or if it bothers the fuck out of me.

"She'll get over it eventually," Parrish tells me, and my cheeks—and yes, my boobs—flush red at the sound of his voice. I'm having a hard time looking at him right now. Seeing his room last night—more specifically, seeing what an awesome room he was giving up to keep me company—made me realize that fighting my feelings for him isn't getting me anywhere. I may as well just be honest about it.

Only ... not right this second.

“Get in the car, Kimber. *Now.*” Tess is growling at this point, slumped in the front seat of the SUV with a pair of designer sunglasses on her face. Her mouth is carved into a deep frown, and she’s very clearly avoiding having to talk directly to me.

Parrish finally drags himself off the bench at the end of the driveway, giving me a long, studying look as he passes by. It’s too much, that look. It makes his brown eyes blaze with gold, sharpens that bored apathy of his into something much more interesting.

Dangerous.

That’s what he looks like today, like someone I should stay far, far away from.

We resume our positions in the backseat, but the atmosphere is even tenser than it was yesterday.

As Paul and Tess argue in low tones up front and Kimber furiously taps out a message on her new phone, Parrish and I stare at each other.

“Can I sit by the window?” Ben asks Parrish, giving him this adorable little brother pout that makes me miss Maxine like crazy. Coming to the realization that I’m not just a little sister anymore, but also a big sister is a weird one. As a former baby sister, the shift in dynamic is staggering.

“No.” Parrish doesn’t fall for the adorable moue (likely since he’s been a big brother his whole life) and turns away, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Pear-Pear, *please,*” Ben whines, and I clamp a hand over my mouth to stifle a snort. That’s not the first time I’ve heard the nickname ‘Pear-Pear’, but it’s funny as hell anyway. “Pear-Pear, I threw up when we got here yesterday.”

With a snarl, Parrish yanks off his seatbelt and scoots closer to me. Since we’re both wearing shorts, our thighs end up touching again, and that hot flush returns to my cheeks and boobs. I end up staring down at the places our bare skin is touching like I need a fire extinguisher or something. *Fuck, am I the only one who thinks it’s hot as hell in here?*

“I told you not to fall in love with me,” Parrish murmurs in such a quiet voice that I know I’m the only one that can hear him. He sounds strained, half-ready to break. Maybe I’m not the only one with a problem here?

“Who says that I’m in love with you?” I whisper back, and he turns this anguished look on me that does all sorts of strange things to my body. My stomach twists into a knot, nausea overtakes me, and my heartbeat picks up speed so fast that I feel faint.

He ignores me as Tess backs out of the driveway, taking us back down the winding drive toward the main road. We hook a left and continue on for about fifteen minutes before reaching the trailhead.

And oh, what a fifteen minutes it is.

My bare thigh against Parrish’s bare thigh, Kimber’s overdramatic sighs, Amelia and Henry’s squabbling. Ben is the only person who isn’t annoying, digging into a middle grade novel called *13 Treasures* by Michelle Harrison.

Pure agony, is what that drive is. Fucking agony.

As soon as we pull into the dusty parking lot, Parrish is scrambling up and over Ben, throwing himself outside with the zeal of someone fleeing a fire. I wait for Ben to climb out and then join the Vanguard family as they assemble around a large toy hauler trailer. To the right of it are four Polaris ATVs and some rando white dude with a dark tan, a sunburned nose, and absurdly white teeth.

“Let me drive,” Parrish murmurs, getting way too close to me. He’s so close that Tess actually gives him a warning look, like she thinks he’s quietly insulting me rather than ... whatever it is that he’s doing. “We should talk.”

I swallow hard, but what can I say to that? We most definitely need to have a conversation.

The guide gives us a rundown on safety features, rules, and how to drive the ATVs before handing out helmets and letting us pick our own rides. I’ve never done anything like this, but it looks fun. Or, it would be if Parrish and I weren’t doing ...

something. Crushing on each other? Lusting after each other? I have no idea.

He grabs the rearmost ATV and takes the driver's seat, leaving me to climb into the passenger side. Tess takes Kimber and Amelia in the frontmost ATV while Paul, Ben, and Henry grab the middle one.

Once the vehicles are started, and we're slowly rolling forward, following one another and letting the instructor lead us across the road and onto the trail, it's nearly impossible to hear anything at all—even Parrish. At the very least, this gives us the privacy we need.

“What are we doing?” I shout out, letting out a small sound of excitement as we hit a bump and catch some air. The ATV hits the ground hard, but the shocks are good, so it's just fun rather than jarring. The wind is whipping my face and hands, but the sun is hot. The landscape is a fascinating mix of Douglas fir, western juniper, native lupine, and red-brown dirt. I'd appreciate it more if I weren't wrapped up in a romantic rendezvous with my own stepbrother.

Ugh.

Yep, yep, I've done it. I've become a teen novel trope. There it is. It's all over for me.

The thing is ... sometimes tropes are there for a reason. Because they're fun. Because I'm getting a stupid ugly thrill out of having a crush on Parrish Vanguard.

“You tell me,” he yells back, slowing the vehicle down at the next turn to give Paul a chance to speed up. Parrish glances over at me, but his face is impossible to read beneath the visor of the helmet. “Do you like me or not?”

I just stare back at him, that hot ember in my belly fanning into a flame. *God, he's annoying sometimes.*

“Do *I* like *you*?” I query back as he hits the gas again, plastering me to my seat the way he does when he drives his zippy sportscar around. “Do you like me?”

There's a long pause, long enough that I start to wonder if he even heard me. I figure probably not, since the wind is so

loud, and the train of ATVs is raucous.

“Yes.”

Just that.

That one reply, it staggers me. It kills me. It rearranges every single thing I thought about Parrish in an instant. I mean, I still can't stand the guy. He's rude and dismissive, hot and cold, bitchy, moody, spoiled. So fucking spoiled.

And yet ... he stands up for people he loves. He cares more about Tess than he does himself. He's there whenever I need a shoulder to cry on, or a place to escape to.

“Yes.” This one's from me. I don't have to clarify which question of his I'm responding to. He knows. We both know. “So what do we do?”

Another long pause as we climb into the mountains.

We're approaching a massive, fossilized lava flow on one side, coming up to the line of stopped ATVs before he finally answers.

“I don't know, Gamer Girl.” He takes off his helmet and looks out to where Tess is, climbing out of the ATV so that our guide can show off the old rock formation. To be fair, it's impressive as hell, covering the forest floor in a twisting, pock-marked surge of black rock. Tess waves for us to catch up and Parrish frowns. “I have no fucking idea.”

After checking out the lava flow, Parrish and I switch places and I get to drive the ATV up to the top of the butte. The 360-degree views of the Deschutes National Forest would be a real treat if my palms weren't sweaty, and I wasn't constantly replaying my conversation with Parrish.

I don't know, Gamer Girl.

It's quite clear at this point that he's putting off his interest in me because of Tess. To *protect* Tess. She wants us to be siblings, but that's just not something we're ever going to be,

unfortunately. The thing is, there are billions of fish in the sea, so why did I have to fall for Parrish? Other than Maxx Wright, he's probably the most unattainable human being on the planet.

Why not someone like ... Chasm McKenna?

I wet my lips, hands clenched around the steering as we head back toward the trailhead. As per our guide's instructions, there's a decent amount of space between us and Paul's ATV. In fact, I don't see him or anyone else as I follow the winding trail toward the road.

For a moment there, I wonder if my wandering mind hasn't gotten us lost. There was a fork a while back, and though I'm fairly certain I took the correct side, maybe I was confused? Parrish seems checked out, and he certainly isn't talking to me anymore.

I decide it doesn't matter; if I got lost, the guide will come and find us eventually. If we just stick to the trails, we'll be fine.

The sound of another ATV brings me a surge of relief as we crest the next hill. I expect to see Paul and Tess and the guide on the other side of it. Instead, there's nobody there. A quick glance over my shoulder shows me another vehicle coming up on us quick.

"Pull over and let this douche pass," Parrish grumbles, his voice barely audible over the roar of the wind. The trails around here are pretty popular, especially in summer, so I figure he's right. Pull over, let this person go on their merry way so I can keep our chill pace going.

I slow down and pull completely off the trail, parking in a relatively flat spot with scrubby groundcover. We idle there as the other ATV comes up on us, my fingers tapping out a rhythm on the wheel as my eyes flick in Parrish's direction. He looks entirely miserable.

"We don't have to be impossible, you know," I tell him, but my voice is pitched too low. I'm not even sure he can hear me over the engine.

Slowly, he turns to look at me, his toasted almond gaze hidden behind the helmet's visor.

Next thing I know, our ATV is lurching forward, sliding through the dirt toward the dip in the trail. I slam my foot down on the brake automatically, wondering if I somehow hit the gas or ... but no. The movement is too violent. My body ends up slamming into the steering wheel as we pitch forward, right over the edge.

We've been hit so hard that our vehicle tips upside down, the world spinning and swirling around me. I see trees and sky and ground, and it feels impossible to tell which end is up. That is, until the roof of the ATV smashes into the dusty ground, swirling red-brown clouds around us as I choke and sputter. I feel weightless and yet impossibly heavy all at once, hanging upside down and held in place by my seat belt and nothing else.

"Dakota!"

It takes several seconds for me to realize that Parrish is screaming my name. I feel his hand clamp around mine, and then someone's reaching in through the window and undoing my seat belt. My shoulder hits the roof just before my neck does, and pain shoots through me as I crumple out of my seat. Whoever it is that took off my seat belt, they're grabbing me, dragging me through the window and onto the hot dirt.

I'm so disoriented that it feels impossible to make sense of the situation. *Did they ... did they hit us?* I wonder, thinking of the other ATV. If so, they might be hurt, too. Or maybe it's the driver that's rescuing me right now?

Only, this person doesn't seem to care if they're hurting me or not.

I'm being dragged across the ground, my bare legs burning as they scrape and tear over hot rocks and spiky shrubs. A door opens beside me, and I realize that whoever this is, they're trying to put me into their own ATV. *Are they ... is this a kidnapping?*

“Hey!” It’s Parrish’s voice. I blink a few times, my vision obscured by the dust, trying desperately to get my mind together. “Hands off my gamer girl, bitch.”

My eyes find the damaged front end of the ATV as my ‘rescuer’ tries to lift me up and put me into the vehicle. That’s when it all comes together: *yep, he hit us. Accidentally? Purposefully?* I have no idea.

I’m also not willing to wait around and find out.

With a scream, I kick out hard and nail my attacker right in the balls. He lets out a wail and drops me to the dirt where I scramble to my feet, stumbling away and tripping over another rock. My knees hit the ground hard, but when I turn around, it’s Parrish that’s behind me. He grabs me by the hand and yanks me to my feet before turning on the driver.

Parrish doesn’t skip a beat, picking up a huge rock and tossing it at the other guy as I struggle to catch my breath. The rock makes contact with the man’s helmet, but Parrish isn’t done there. He picks up a huge stick and wields it like a bat, standing in front of me like a shield.

It’s a bit heroic, a lot sexy.

The driver of the other ATV hesitates, and even though I can’t see his face because of his helmet, there’s something about him that strikes me as familiar. The fine hairs on my arms stand at attention as a chill ripples through me. *Do I know this person? Have I seen him somewhere before?*

“Why don’t you fuck off to whatever hole you crawled out of?” Parrish snarls, still holding the stick up like a weapon. The driver starts toward us, reaching inside his jacket like he’s going for something—more specifically, like he’s going for a weapon.

Seconds later, I hear the roar of a motor, and our guide appears on the trail just up ahead, clearly looking for us.

The man drops his arms to his side before hopping back in the ATV and taking off the way he came, cutting across the dirt to the opposite fork of the trail.

What. the. fuck?

I turn to look at Parrish, his helmet tossed aside, his eyes wide as he stares at the retreating dust cloud left by the other ATV.

“Was he ... trying to kidnap me?” I ask, but Parrish doesn’t answer me. Instead, he reaches down to take my hand, curling his fingers through mine.

And that’s it.

I’m sold.

I’m sold on him, on the possibility of ‘us’, on the thrill of the impossible.

Sure, I hate the guy, but I like him, too.

And that, that’s what’s going to get me into trouble.

The conclusion that Tess, Paul, and our guide seem to agree on is this: the other driver hit us on accident, thought I was injured and was trying to help me, and then panicked about liability before taking off.

Sounds reasonable.

But then, I was there. That’s not what it felt like. The way he dragged me across the ground, the way he took off when he heard the other ATV. No, it doesn’t seem right. I can’t shake the feeling, even as Tess fawns all over me and Parrish, her overprotective mothering instincts clicking into full gear.

We make a police report, give our statements, and then move on. Because it was just an accident, right? Other than a few bumps and bruises (and a seriously sore neck on my part), there aren’t any injuries. Nobody is missing. Everyone is together.

“Are we finally forgiven?” Parrish asks as we pull into the parking lot of the world’s very last Blockbuster Video. Like, for real, the *very last one*. For those unfamiliar with Blockbuster Video (meaning me, who just looked this up on my Tess-given phone), a Blockbuster is a video rental store

that used to rent out, well, videos and then later DVDs and Blu-rays before streaming was a thing. “When we get home, do we get our doors back?”

Tess ignores her son’s question, parking near the front of the store before glancing back to give him a look. Her gaze slips over to me, and I see it, that thing I didn’t want to believe but I’ve known was true for a long time anyway: crushing disappointment. *I am a crushing disappointment.*

I just stare back at her.

“We’ll talk about it when we get home,” she says, getting out of the car with the rest of the family following suit. I’m not exactly sure why we’re here or what need we might have for a video rental store, but Parrish takes pity on me.

“It’s tradition: we come here during every trip and rent a movie, grab some popcorn.” He shrugs. “My dad says it’s ‘an experience’. Anyway, they have some dope hoodies if you don’t care about ancient technology.”

I smile at him, but I can’t seem to make myself laugh.

I’m too creeped out by the incident earlier; my mind is making connections that shouldn’t be made. The hiking incident. Waking up in the woods. Do I have a stalker or something? What gives? Part of me wonders if I shouldn’t tell Tess, but then, our relationship isn’t exactly on solid ground. To tell her about the hiking incident, I have to admit to leaving the *state* to see my sister. Tess was pissed enough about my visit to the coffee shop. And the woods incident? How do I know if that was even real? I’ve been filming myself sleeping every night and as far as I can tell, the only crime that’s being committed is the excessive amount of drool my poor pillow’s been subjected to.

Tess and I don’t exactly have an open dialogue.

“Thank you,” I tell Parrish, turning to glance his way. He’s already on his way out of the car, but he pauses briefly to look back at me. “For trying to save me.”

“I didn’t do anything,” he replies, his voice much softer than usual. “You saved yourself by kicking the dude in the balls.”

He turns away, toward the massive yellow sign that stretches across the front of the building. “Do you really think he was trying to help you? It didn’t look like that to me.”

“Didn’t look like that to me either.” I join him outside on the pavement, heading into the air-conditioned building with its blue carpet and shelves filled with DVDs and Blu-rays. Wow. Parrish was right: it’s like an archaeological study in here. I could probably find dinosaur bones if I looked hard enough.

The Vanguard family is wandering the aisles, picking up cases and reading descriptions on movies. Even Kimber is participating without complaining which is a weird sight to behold. Parrish breezes past me to head toward the snack section of the store, loading up on popcorn and Whoppers and red licorice that he piles on the counter like this isn’t his first time at the rodeo.

“Parrish,” Tess calls out, holding up a case in the air. “I bet I know what your vote’s for.”

He joins her, taking the case from her hand and turning it over with a frown. One of his brows goes up as Tess laughs, throwing her arm around him in a rare gesture of affection. Kimber, Ben, Amelia, Henry, and Paul join them, and the family takes a vote between three different movies.

It’s in that moment, standing by the door by myself that it hits me: I *want* to fit into this family. I want to, but I don’t. I might never be able to. And yet, the family that I left behind in New York, the family that attends Washington State, I might not be able to see them for years.

Years.

As Parrish said, there are ‘dope hoodies’ here. I bury myself in the task of looking through them, so nobody has to see me cry.

Later, when we get back to the house, I go straight to the basement to avoid having to talk to Laverne. The way she looks at me makes me feel even more unwanted, even more like an outlier.

I’m lying on my bed when I hear a soft knock at the door.

“Come in.” I glance toward the door as Parrish opens it and slips inside, closing it softly behind him.

“We’re getting ready to start the movie,” he tells me, but not like he wants me to join, more like he’s just stating facts. Without asking, he sits down on the edge of the bed. Can’t really blame him considering the number of times I’ve burst into his room and gotten on his bed without permission. “I’m guessing you’re not interested in watching it?”

He looks at me, dressed in a different Whitehall Prep hoodie than the gray one he usually favors. Did I mention that our school has a mech shop? No joke: we have sweatpants, sweaters, vests, windbreakers, joggers, socks, custom sneakers, headbands, etc. There’s no shortage to WHPA gear.

“Mm.” It’s not much of an answer, just a grunt. Part of me *does* want to watch the movie, to laugh with Ben or tease the twins. To sit beside Parrish, mostly. For Tess to stop looking at me like I’m the world’s biggest failure. I didn’t do anything wrong by seeing Maxine: *Tess* is the one in the wrong for taking the Banks away from me the way she did. Bringing me here to live with her, I suppose that I can understand that, but banning me from seeing or even talking to my family? Not cool.

At the same time that I’m thinking about going upstairs and joining the Vanguard family movie night, I feel like I’m betraying the Banks. I should be strong here, should stand up to Tess, maybe even find some glee in her suffering. And yet, I can’t. I just can’t.

“I don’t want to watch it either,” he says, rubbing at his elbow. He pushes the sleeve up to examine it, revealing a huge blue-purple bruise. We’re both a little banged up from earlier, that’s for sure.

“You don’t have to bow out because of me,” I tell him which, apparently, is the exact wrong thing to say. He grits his teeth in annoyance.

“Yeah, maybe I do. Because I feel bad for you. Because I wouldn’t want to watch a movie with Laverne either, especially not after the way she treated you.”

“Which isn’t much different from the way you treated me when I first came to Medina.” I sit up, tossing my black and lime green hair over my shoulder. As Parrish watches, I comb it out with my fingers and start to braid it. “Anyway, you don’t have to feel sorry for me. You can go watch the movie if you want.”

There’s a long pause there.

I look up to find him staring at my fingers, almost as if he’s mesmerized by the act of me braiding my hair. He lifts his gaze up to mine even as my pulse begins to race, and I sense that we’re on the precipice of ... something.

“I’d rather be down here.” Another pause. “With you.”

I exhale sharply, leaving the finished braid to hang loosely over my shoulder. Without a hair band, it’ll come undone, but oh well. This is so much more fucking important.

“Why?” I ask, and Parrish gives this sharp, dangerous laugh. See, back to the dangerous thing again. He’s all wrong for me. He’s Tess’ son in ways that I’ll never be her daughter. We can’t be together, not without hurting her. I bite my lip, which isn’t at all a usual move of mine. I snatched this habit from Maxx.

“You’re kidding, right?” He says, looking me over like there’s something there that should be obvious. “You’re loud and opinionated and pushy, always in my room, touching all my things.” I raise a brow at him, but he isn’t done. Instead, he turns toward me and crawls up on the bed, until he’s got an arm braced on either side of me and our faces are far, far too close together. “You’re stupid good at video games and you like weird things, like those odd little horse statues all over your bookshelves.”

“They’re Unicornos, and they’re collectible art—” I start, but Parrish cuts me off by leaning forward and pressing his mouth against mine. His lips are soft, but the pressure is firm. Without even having to think about it, I open to him, sliding my arms around his neck and pulling him close. *There’s that scent again, that dewy clover and clean linen and citrus smell.*

And he's right: I seriously don't even know what I mean by dewy clovers.

Somehow, our tongues end up tangled together and the kiss deepens. Parrish lowers his body against mine until he's essentially resting on top of me. It's delicious, the feel of his mouth against my own, the heat of his body. I can even feel his heartbeat, thundering away at least as quickly as my own. Maybe faster. No, definitely faster.

My fingers tease those chocolate waves of his, and an excited thrill shoots me. I end up grabbing a handful of it and tugging. The motion encourages Parrish to kiss deeper, to press harder into me. Somehow, he ends up between my legs, and it feels so damn good. We might be fully clothed, but there's a certain friction to him, rubbing up against me the way he is.

We break apart briefly, but just to breathe, just to mingle our breaths more like.

My right hand slides between us, searching out the firm bulge in his academy-issued sweatpants.

"Is this okay?" I ask as he stares down at me, partially propped up on his elbows. The room is mostly dark, the only light coming from the TV mounted to the wall. It's not even playing anything, just sitting on a row of Netflix K-dramas, waiting for me to choose a new treasure. This though ... this is so much better.

"You have my express consent," he says which gets a smile out of both of us. Not that consent is funny or anything. Personally, I find it sexy as fuck.

"You're sure?" I repeat, even as I give him a little squeeze and he lets out a sharp exhale. "If Tess finds out—"

"Please don't talk about Tess right now," he whispers, and then he's kissing me again and I'm sliding my hand beneath the waistband of his pants. It isn't much of a journey to find the velvety hardness waiting inside, the silky skin that makes his stomach muscles contract when I tease my fingers across it. "Fuck."

“Roll over,” I whisper, withdrawing my hand. He does, almost so quickly that it’s comical. I straddle his thighs and look down at him, those dark eyes staring back up at me. I wonder how many times he’s done this before? The rumors going around Whitehall sort of paint Parrish as like, a nun? Yeah, kind of like a nun. When Lumen told me I was the only girl willing to cop to sleeping with him (a lie), she was right. Nobody else will admit it. Doesn’t mean he’s a virgin or anything but ... he could be.

We stare at each other for a while before I reach down and tear my shirt over my head, tossing it to the floor. I’m wearing that stupid bralette thing with the holes in it again. Doesn’t really hold my boobs, but who cares? It’s comfy, and it keeps the nips from chafing.

“What are you thinking about?” he asks me, and then he cups the side of my face with his inked hand. I can’t even take it, the feel of his skin sliding against mine. I lean down and kiss him, loving the feel of his strong arms wrapping my waist. Parrish squeezes me so tightly that I wonder if he ever plans on letting me go. I like it, feeling wanted that way. He must like it, too, considering the sounds he’s making.

“I was thinking about my nips chafing,” I reply, and he snorts at me. The humor dissipates like smoke when I sit back up and push his hoodie and shirt up his chest, revealing his hardened nipples. There’s ink everywhere, like on every square fucking inch. It must’ve taken a lot of time to do all of this work. I run my palms across it, enjoying the way his muscles tense beneath my touch. “Also, I lied.” I lift my gaze back to his face. “Your art is ... it’s exquisite.”

He swallows hard as I drag my nails down his skin, back toward his dick.

“Not all of this is mine,” he admits, his gaze sliding to the right for a brief moment. “Some of it was done by Chasm ...” He trails off, and I think we both realize what the implications in his words are. Chasm. Chasm ... maybe he and I have a thing? I don’t know. All I know is that I really, really like Parrish.

“Regardless, you’re the canvas, and you’re beautiful,” I tell him, wrapping my fingers around the heat of his body. He bucks his hips, letting his head fall back, his lids growing heavy. It’s almost surreal that we’re in here doing this, like it’s a dream that I don’t ever want to wake up from.

What happened to *as if, Little Sister? Or I’m going to bury you?*

Those moments seem so far away from this one, as if an eon has passed rather than a handful of months. Doesn’t matter. The connection was there from the beginning, when we looked at each other and that hatred boiled up like flames, consuming us both.

Parrish was attracted to me, and he didn’t want to be.

I was attracted to him, and I didn’t want to be.

Birds of a feather.

My fingertips trace his body, feeling up his most intimate parts with a curiosity that burns.

I remember the way he shuddered at the café when my hair brushed against his skin, leaning forward and letting the frayed end of my braid tickle across his skin. He lets out a sharp hiss, eyes closing as I tighten my hand around his body. My mouth ends up on the side of his neck, tasting the slight saltiness of his skin. We both showered when we got back, rinsing the dust from the ATV accident off, so there’s a faint tang of soap there, mixed with Parrish’s naturally attractive scent.

Is it attractive to everyone or just me?

My lips kiss his pulse, tongue trailing down the side of his throat until I find his chest. Gently, so as not to hurt him, I scrape my teeth lightly against the scales of a blue-green dragon, following the length of it until I get to the tail. When I move back up, I get bolder, flicking my tongue across one of Parrish’s nipples.

“Holy shit,” he murmurs, shaking now, panting hard. “I can’t take much more of this.”

I pause briefly, lifting my head up to look at him.

“It’d be nice if we had some lube ...” No sooner has the suggestion left my lips than Parrish is grabbing my hand away from his dick and bringing it to his mouth. He licks my palm with long, slow strokes of his tongue, wetting my skin as I stare at him in abject fascination. My own body is quivering, a pulsing at the apex of my thighs that makes me want to wiggle and writhe against him.

“Nice and wet.” He releases me, our eyes locked together as I find his velvety body again and wrap my fingers around him. His hips try to move with me, but I’m sitting atop his thighs, pinning him down, holding him in place.

We’re in the basement of his grandmother’s house, with Tess and Paul and the kids upstairs. It’s dangerous to do this, a huge risk to both our futures in this family. Yet it doesn’t matter. We may as well be in a different universe right now.

Ours mouth find one another again, tongues sliding together, tasting each other. It’s glorious, like the opening of a brand-new door that leads into an undiscovered world. I never want it to stop, this feeling that’s untangling inside of me, like a plant with reaching tendrils, blooming flowers, bloodied thorns.

Parrish is writhing now, his hands clamping down on my waist and squeezing hard. We’re pressing into one another, his pelvis pushing up off the bed, my own rubbing against his thighs. He starts to move faster, kisses me harder, building this hot frenzy between us that makes it hard to form rational thoughts.

When he shudders and digs his fingers even harder into my hips, I bite the side of his neck, and it’s game over. For him, anyway.

“Shit,” he murmurs, shaking and swallowing hard as I continue to run my tongue along his pulse. “Here.” Parrish sits up slightly, tearing his shirt and hoodie over his head and handing them to me. Presumably, it’s to clean up with. “Sorry about that,” he adds as I clean my fingers off with the fabric. It’s sort of ... all over the place, but we’ll deal with that later.

“Sorry for what?” I ask, and then he’s grabbing the back of my head and kissing me all over again. He very carefully slides his hand under the waistband of my pj pants, making certain he doesn’t get any of his own release on his fingers. And then, oh my god, he strokes along the wetness of my panties, and I forget whether my name is Dakota or Mia or something else entirely.

“Oh.”

“Oh?” Parrish asks, pulling back just enough that I can see the cocky, satisfied smirk on his lips. “You like that, Gamer Girl?”

“Very much so,” I breathe, gasping as he pushes the panties aside and slips a single finger into me.

“Roll over.” I don’t miss the way he repurposes my command from earlier nor do I miss the way that I also scramble to comply. As soon as his finger slides out, I miss it and wish it were back. I shove the pants down my hips and Parrish helps me tear them over my feet, chucking the fabric aside before he positions himself beside me. The fingers of his right hand stroke over the fabric of my panties, paying special attention to the places that make me gasp and writhe the most. “Tell me what you want,” he asks, biting my ear and making me wish we were alone so I could let out all the happy sounds resting on the tip of my tongue.

“Put two in,” I breathe back at him, and he makes this ... god, this pleased purr that has me writhing all over again. Parrish kisses all over my face in a way that’s more affectionate than lustful, like he’s been waiting for this moment forever.

“Done.” Parrish does as I asked, slipping two fingers into the aching heat of my core, using his thumb to continue stroking my clit through the panties. He never stops kissing me either: on the mouth, the forehead, the neck. When he moves that hot mouth of his to the bralette and takes one of my nipples between his teeth, I almost die. No joke. Write that epitaph because I’m on my way.

That's when I wonder if I'll really do it right now, go all the way with him.

I want to.

Oh my god, I want to so badly ...

"Hey Parrish," I whisper, but it's hard to think with his fingers sliding in and out of me the way they are. "Do you want to ...?" I start, but I don't get a chance to finish because he's staring down at me with those beautiful eyes of his. It's practically edible, that gaze. Honey and toasted coconut and chocolate, all twisted together in this powerful stare that has me quivering beneath him.

"Want to what?" he asks very carefully, very slowly, almost like he's unwilling to put the idea in my head.

"If you have protection, we could maybe ..." I trail off again and then suck in a deep breath. If you can't say it, you're not mature enough to do it. "Fuck?"

"Fuck?" he queries back at me, and I cringe. Not a great word choice maybe, but it's already out there. Oops. Parrish pushes his fingers in even deeper, all the way to the knuckles, and I throw my head back into the pillows. "I don't want to just fuck you, Dakota."

Just fuck ...

"What do you want to do then?" I whisper back, but then he's covering my mouth with his own again, his hand moving faster, pushing in harder and deeper. The feel of him inside of me is exquisite, a sensation that I won't soon forget. My stomach muscles clench so tight that they almost hurt, and I feel this coiling deep inside of me. It's a pressure that needs release, a wave that wants to break. "Keep going," I choke out, too far gone to finish our conversation just yet.

If he doesn't want to 'just fuck' then what else does he want to do?

"Dakota, I—" Parrish starts, nuzzling against the side of my neck. He's about to say something else; I'm about to fall through a wormhole into an entirely different universe, one that's crafted of pure pleasure.

But then we hear it.

Footsteps.

He pulls back just enough that I can see the color drain from his face, and then he's rolling off the side of the bed onto the floor. He hits with a grunt as I scramble to my feet in a near panic. I can taste my own heart; it's all the way up in my throat, choking me.

Rather than try to get dressed, I act like I'm getting *undressed*. I tear the bralette over my head just seconds before Tess raps her knuckles on the door and then opens it because, you know, I don't deserve any form of privacy.

"Mia—" she starts, but even though I hate the sound of my not-name, I'm too rattled and disoriented to care. "Oh, I'm sorry."

Tess blanches and steps back, closing the door quickly.

There's an awkward moment where I just stand there, panting and aching, my thighs clenched, body quivering. I was so close, so freaking close ...

"Do you happen to know where Parrish is?" she asks, and it takes me three tries to answer.

"No idea. He mentioned the movie and then I think he went outside ..." Is that a good lie? I hope it is. I really hope like hell it is. I notice Parrish's hoodie on the floor and kick it under the bed before I snatch some clean clothes from my bag and yank them on.

There's definitely evidence in here that we were doing, um, certain things. I'd rather Tess didn't come back in. In an effort to prove that nothing's wrong, I open the door wide and step out, scooting past her to head for the bathroom.

"Would you like to watch the movie with us?" Tess asks me softly, and I pause. I'm not looking at her, facing toward the back door that leads to a cement patio. The arcade machines are on my left, the bathroom door on my right.

I glance back with yet another forced smile. I'm getting good at those, aren't I?

“Actually, I think I’m going to study a bit. Finals are coming up quick.”

“Okay ...” Tess hazards, reaching up to run her fingers through her hair. I turn away, hoping I can make it to the bathroom before she tries to engage in anymore conversation. My mind could not be further away from here right now. *Parrish*. All I can think about right now is him. “Dakota, I’m sorry.”

That gives me pause.

First off, she used my actual name. Second, she’s apologizing?

I turn around, a spark of hope flaring in my chest.

“I’ve been giving you the cold shoulder, and that isn’t fair.” We stare at each other down the length of the hallway. I’m hyperaware that Parrish is listening in, but somehow that makes this easier, like I have an ally now or something. “You’re my daughter, and I want you to be a part of this family.”

My smile gets a little less forced feeling.

“I’m sorry I went behind your back, Tess. But I really do love the Banks; I miss them. I miss Maxine, and she’s so close —”

Uh-oh.

If I were a writer like Tess, I might say something like: *The expression on her face was nothing short of a landslide. Where once stood a mighty forest, there was only mud. It was as if the whole world came tumbling down in an instant, toppling trees, smothering homes, bathing the world in quiet pain.*

I’ve infuriated her. Again.

“Yes, well, I accept your apology.” Tess raises her chin and levels a look on me that could kill. “But I’m not budging on this. If I find out you’ve contacted them, or if you’ve seen that girl, I will ship you off to military school. Do you understand me?”

I just stare back at her, eyes wide, mouth gaping. All those happy, sparkly, bubbly feelings that Parrish churned up inside of me disappear, and I'm left free-floating in the middle of an emotional void.

"You'd ... send me to military school for talking to my family?"

"This *is* your family," Tess snaps back at me, and then she closes her eyes and pinches the bridge of her nose. When she opens her eyes to look at me again, I have to take a step back. The force of her stare is like a blade to the heart. "When you turn eighteen, I can't stop you from doing what you want. Until then, you are my daughter. *My* daughter. Not Saffron's. Not Carmen's. Mine. You, Parrish, Kimber, Ben, Amelia, Henry ... you're my entire life."

"Possession isn't love—" I start, but the way she's looking at me tells me that I better stop now before it's too late.

"Let's let the subject lie, shall we?" she asks, and this time, it's her that forces a smile. "I really am sorry about ignoring you all weekend. Maybe tomorrow you can ride with me in the front of the SUV and Paul can sit in the back?" She cocks a brow like this is supposed to be funny, and then turns on her heel to leave.

For several minutes, I just stand there and stare after her.

Eventually, Parrish comes to me. He's fixed his pants and slipped his shirt back on (the hoodie is um, dirty), and he smells so good, feels so warm when he wraps me up in his arms and pulls me close. I can hear his heart thundering, digging my fingers into the fabric of his shirt and closing my eyes. I won't cry today. I won't.

This time, when I pull back, it isn't me who has tears.

It's Parrish.

"Are you okay?" I ask because he's gritting his teeth even as his eyes get watery, flooded with emotion that he tries so damn hard not to show. His King Sloth act is just that: an act. He pretends not to care because he cares too much.

“I don’t know what to do,” he whispers, looking down at me with such pain, like his very soul is being ripped in half. “I just don’t know. Tess is ... she’s my mom, Dakota. She’s my mom, and you’re her daughter, and I ... I can’t do this.” Parrish tears away from me, heading down the hallway as I chase after.

He tries to close his door, but I shoulder my way in anyway, watching as he presses his palm to the wall beside the window. His head hangs down, and he’s panting like he’s run a marathon.

“I thought you liked me,” I say, and now I’m wondering if I might cry, too.

“I do,” he whispers, glancing back at me, his pretty hair falling across his forehead. I can’t stop thinking of his eyes as he looked down at me, burying his fingers in my heat. It felt so good, too, so magical. Why is this happening? Why, why, why? “I really do.” He turns around to look at me, his expression stark and exposed, intimately vulnerable. “I was attracted to you from the first moment I saw you.”

I laugh, but the sound’s a little snifflly.

“I thought my fuckability rating was a three?” I ask, trying to make light of the situation. Parrish gives me this sad, awful smile in exchange.

“I gave Chasm a two; it’s all bullshit, Dakota. Everything is bullshit. You’re the only real thing that I have.”

“Please don’t say that,” I whisper, because it feels like I’m being told goodbye somehow, or like I’m being broken up with.

“You’re an eleven, you know? At least for me.” He looks away, toward the window above the desktop computer. I wonder if that, too, belonged to his grandfather? “But I love Tess. She’s always been there for me. All my best memories are when we’re together. My dad is ...” He lets out a sharp, angry laugh. “My dad just doesn’t get it. Tess always has. Tess has always taken care of me. This would kill her, absolutely *kill* her.”

“She doesn’t have to know,” I continue, taking a step forward. “We could just keep it to ourselves ...”

“Forever?” Parrish finishes for me. “Because once I let myself have you, really have you, I’ll never be able to stop. And it wouldn’t matter if we were thirty: if Tess found out, she would disown us both. I don’t want to lose her; I already lost my mom once.”

I just keep staring at him in complete disbelief. What have we even been doing for all these months? This careful love-hate dance. What was our talk about in the ATV? What did we just do?

“Is this what you do with all your girlfriends?” I whisper, wishing a hole would just open up and swallow me. Parrish gives me a soft, sad sort of look that’s actually a million times worse than his scowling or his eye narrowing or those times he curses me out when we bump into each other in the kitchen.

“I don’t have girlfriends, Dakota. I hate people. I hate everyone except for you, and Chasm, and Tess.” He pauses for a second and then sighs. “Oh, and Maxx. Sometimes. When he isn’t annoying me.”

“This was your first time ...?” I trail off, leaving the question hanging in the air between us.

He just keeps fucking staring at me.

“Does it matter?” he asks, but then, as if he can sense that I’m on the verge of a meltdown, decides to add, “yes. I don’t just mess around with people. I’ve never liked anyone before the way I like you.”

Ugh.

I feel like I’ve just had Cupid’s arrow shoved right up my ass. This conversation is equal parts enlightening and devastating.

“It was just easier for me to pretend,” he continues, moving toward me again. As soon as he’s within grabbing distance, I dig my fingers into his shirt and press my forehead against his chest. He stiffens up briefly before wrapping me in his arms. “It was easier to pretend, Dakota.”

“So now what?” I whisper as he strokes my back, and I wish we were still half-naked in my room.

“Chasm really likes you,” he tells me, but even though I also sort of like Chasm, all I can think about is Parrish. “Maybe ...”

“Don’t. Don’t say it. I don’t want to talk about Chasm right now.”

We stand there for a long time, too long probably.

Eventually, I pull back and so does Parrish.

“So now what?” I ask, wondering how it’s possible for life to go from ‘greatest moment of my existence’ to ‘steaming pile of dog shit’ in an instant. “You don’t even want to try?”

He looks away for a moment before running a tattooed hand over his face.

“I didn’t say that. I just need time to think.” Parrish looks back at me, the edge of his mouth quirking up in a slight smile. “Do you need my help cleaning up?” he asks, and I nod, because I’m not about to clean up the mess from his orgasm. I didn’t exactly get one myself.

We head back to the room together, and he collects both his hoodie and my bralette from the floor, snatching the top blanket off the bed and throwing all the items in the washer. Luckily, there are two laundry rooms in this house: one on the top floor and one down here.

“Leave your door open?” he suggests as he turns around, parking his ass against the side of the machine and crossing his arms over his chest. I nod and start to turn away when he reaches out and grabs my wrist; our gazes clash with a rush of heat. “For what it’s worth, I don’t like the way she treats you. I don’t know why she’s doing it, why she’s being so mean to you when she’s always been so affectionate toward me.”

I very carefully extricate myself from his grip. Not because I don’t want him to touch me, but because I do. So, so, so, so much.

“Like you said, I’m a crushing disappointment to her.” I offer Parrish a weak smile before heading into my room and curling up on the bed with just a sheet. He follows me in, covers me up with a spare blanket from who knows where, and then heads into his room.

After a while, I hear his words, soft and vulnerable in the quiet: “goodnight, Dakota.”

He may as well be saying *goodbye* for all it’s worth.

I don’t sleep very well that night.

Not very well at all.

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CHAPTER 24

As promised, Tess makes me ride in the front seat of the SUV with her while Paul sits in the center row and Kimber is pushed into the back (much to her oft-voiced frustration). The ride back to Medina is hell. Pure, unadulterated hell. I miss Parrish already, and he's just a few feet away from me.

Once we're home, things don't get much better. I still don't have a door and neither does Parrish. There are few ways for me to escape from him unless I hide in the bathroom.

"It doesn't have to be weird," I whisper to myself after a particularly awkward encounter in the hallway. But it is. Because I touched his dick, and he put his fingers in me, and mostly, it's because we confessed our feelings for one another. That's the weirdest part of all.

I'm so relieved to head back to school on Tuesday that I practically throw myself out of Parrish's car and sprint through the parking garage with my book bag flopping against my side. Both Danyella and Lumen can tell right away that's something off with me, but I'm not quite ready to talk about it, so I just brush it off.

By the end of the day however, I feel like there's a scream trapped in my chest, clawing to get out. I wouldn't mind paying another visit to Chasm's cabin to let out some steam.

By the end of the week? I'm ready to sprint my ass over there on foot; if I don't let out my frustration, I'm going to break. Parrish is being nice, almost *too* nice. Pair that with Chasm's false cheer, the lack of a bedroom door, and Tess'

near constant hovering, and my sanity is wearing dangerously thin.

Why did I do this to myself? I wonder, my chin parked in my hand, my elbow resting on the surface of a desk. Mr. Volli is droning on and on about ... something. It's not that I don't understand it today—thanks to Chasm, I actually do—but that I'm not listening. I'm more than ready for the week to be over.

“Let me guess: this is Parrish related,” Lumen says, far too loudly, waking me from my stupor just in time to realize that I've spaced out and missed the fact that class is over. The day is over. *I'm free.*

“Huh?” I blink myself out of my coma, glancing up to find the honey-haired princess of the school lording over me. Her hands are parked on her hips, her skirt a scandalous few inches shorter than it was during lunch. If Lumen has somewhere to go after school that isn't home, she usually rolls her waistband up even further, to the point that the skirt looks more like a costume than an actual uniform.

“You're daydreaming about Parrish again.” She leans forward and puts her palms flat on the desk, giving me the eye. “I'm starting to get jealous.”

“Ms. Hearst,” Mr. Volli calls out as he stacks books together on his desk, “unroll the skirt, please.”

“Sexist,” Lumen murmurs, but she unrolls the skirt as he asked. I'd agree with her in most cases, but I've seen multiple dudes wearing skirts here at Whitehall and at least three of them got in trouble for the same reason. As Ms. Miyamoto likes to say, *pubic hair and genitals need not touch any school surfaces.* “Anyway, you've lost your mind.”

“I haven't,” I promise her, standing up and grabbing my bag. “I'm just tired.” She gives me a look, but that's not a total lie. All week, I've had serious trouble sleeping. I'd say it was the whole ‘made Parrish come and also got fingered by him’ thing, but really, it's more about Blockbuster. About the way I felt when I saw the Vanguard together, how I wanted to be a part of it ... and how once again, I was further away than ever.

Then there's the issue with the ATV. Someone hit us, and it didn't feel like an accident. Actually, it seemed very, very purposeful. Add in the hiker and that night in the woods ... Ugh. I scrub both hands over my face.

"Everything okay?" Mr. Volli asks, pausing beside me. He smiles warmly and reaches up to adjust his glasses. He's what I would call 'painfully average', as in, you would never remember his face in passing. The way he styles his hair though, and the glasses he wears, the cute plaid bow ties? He's adorable.

"Everything's fine," I reply, but I can't seem to make myself smile through it.

"Of course everything's fine," Lumen declares, tossing her hair in just such a way that her perfume drifts over to me. It smells like roses and ... like, cashmere or something. Does cashmere have a smell? "You've got your girlfriend by your side." She casts Mr. Volli a look as he crosses his arms over his chest and waits for us to leave. He seems mildly amused. "And I don't just mean *female friend*, Mr. Volli."

"Students' love lives are none of my business. Out, Ms. Hearst," he tells her, shooing us out and locking the door. We run right into Ms. Miyamoto, but she only offers up a smile as she passes by, looking like she's in a bit of a hurry. She heads straight into the second-floor teachers' lounge, and I catch a glimpse of a walking stick through the door. It reminds me of the hiker that assaulted me and Maxx, and I start to get fidgety.

"There's another party at Antonio's tonight," Lumen tells me, but I'm already shaking my head.

"Tess barely lets me out of her sight at this point; it isn't going to happen." Just talking about my bio mom makes me queasy. Our talk in Bend didn't exactly go the way I hoped it would; it just made things worse. Meanwhile, I'm still texting Maxine with my second phone, but just barely. Even then, only in the bathroom. Parrish and I are supposed to get our doors back today, so I haven't exactly had a ton of privacy.

Parrish. Fuck.

I just need time to think. That's what he said to me. Think? Think about what?

"So what? You've snuck out before; you can do it again." Lumen pauses as Danyella joins us, looking like she's ready to throw herself off a bridge. I don't blame her: I'm exhausted and I'm not the director of the production. In just two weeks, the school's version of *Wicked* premieres in the Whitehall theater. After that, the crew will travel around the Pacific Northwest for most of the summer putting on performances. They even get to perform at the famous Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Oregon.

As an 'extra hand', I'm not really invited to go with the rest of the crew, but that's okay. I figure I could use the Ashland performance to get Tess to let up a bit, head down and visit Maxine ...

"Not this time. I think I need to talk to Tess tonight." Just the idea of approaching that woman scares the crap out of me. But I can't take it anymore. She can't punish me forever. If she isn't going to be adult enough to talk to me first, then I'll fucking do it. She can just sit there and deal with the fact that a sixteen-year-old has better manners than she does.

"You're talking to Tess tonight?" Danyella repeats, like her brain is busy with about a million other things. "That's good. Just remember to stay calm." She taps the side of her head as her pink glasses slide down her nose and come dangerously close to falling on the floor. Lumen reaches out to fix them for her. "Use your empathy, Dakota. Try to get into her headspace."

"You're too mature for your own good," Lumen spits with a dramatic eye roll. "It's annoying, honestly."

Danyella tosses her a skeptical look.

"You and your father could use a good heart-to-heart as well," she begins, but Lumen's already waving her off. Her eyes zero in on someone down the hall in the same way a hawk might zero in on a mouse.

“Hey dickface!” she calls out, drawing the attention of nearly every person in the hall. That’s Lumen for ya, a true queen bee. I don’t follow the direction of her gaze because I already know who it is that she’s staring at: fucking Parrish. “What did you do to Dakota? She’s been a schizo all week.”

“Schizophrenia is a mental health condition, and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t use that word,” Danyella murmurs, but she also knows that telling Lumen anything is near pointless. The girl does what she wants, when she wants. I’m so fucking relieved to have gotten on her good side. On Wednesday, she ended up in a freaking fistfight in the parking garage with a sophomore girl who called her a slew of names that I dare not repeat. How that got started, I’m not even sure.

“Did you do something?” Chasm asks, pausing beside me. I pretend like I don’t smell mint and dark chocolate, that Parrish didn’t actually suggest that I leave him for his best friend. This school really is full of weirdos. I used to think I was one, what with the vibrant hair colors, the video game obsession, and the grandmaster rank on *Overwatch*, but this is next-level. Rich kids are disturbed. “Huh, Pear-Pear? Something we should all know about?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Parrish drawls, like he’s bored shitless. Thing is, when I glance over at him, I see his tattooed hand squeezed tight around the strap of his bag. *He hides his feelings because he feels too much.* It’s like I know a secret that nobody else does, and I can’t help it: I like the idea of that. “You ready?” he asks, looking right at me.

I nod because words won’t come.

Chasm, who’s still banned from the house for another week, looks between the pair of us like he can sense that something’s different. I don’t like it, the way he’s studying me and Parrish with those pretty amber eyes of his.

“Party tonight at Antonio’s,” Lumen repeats, and Chasm snorts.

“Obviously. How could you possibly think I didn’t know that?” he replies, slouching back against the lockers. He slides

his hands into the pockets of his slacks. “I’ll be there. It’d be nice if my best friend joined me for once.”

“I already told you: there’s no way in hell that Tess won’t be checking on us. She comes into our rooms every thirty minutes—at least.” Parrish sighs heavily and closes his eyes, like he’s struggling to regain his composure. All week, he’s been sitting on his bed and drawing. I haven’t seen any of his work—he hasn’t offered to show me—but he gets so into it that he often doesn’t notice me if I stand in the doorway and watch.

“Danyella?” Lumen asks, but our friend is already shaking her head.

“Too much work to do for opening night. Sorry.” She shrugs her shoulders, but she doesn’t sound very sorry. Danyella doesn’t mind a party every now and again, and she isn’t a complete teetotaler or anything, but it’s about as much her scene as it is mine.

“Guess it’s just me and you then?” Lumen queries, and Chas shrugs, like he couldn’t care less either way. She turns to me and, before I can think to say anything at all, leans in and presses a glossy kiss to my mouth. “Consider going out with me for real. Stop thinking about Parrish all the time. Trust me: I spent years doing it.” She flicks him an angry look, and he scowls. “He’s a waste of time.”

Lumen takes off down the hall and, after a moment, Chasm follows.

“Lord help me,” Danyella murmurs. “Do me a favor, Dakota, and don’t date either of them.” She heads after the group, leaving me alone with Parrish.

“Shall we?” he asks, and based on the tone of his voice, he may as well be inviting me to a funeral.

“Yep.”

I follow after him, letting Kimber take the front seat, so I can hide in the back.

Just like I did the day that I arrived in Medina.

So much for progress.

I end up falling asleep as soon as I get home, tossing and turning through these terrible dreams where I'm in the ATV all over again, feeling it tip over, feeling that man grab me and drag me out the window. In the dream, he's also the hiker, beating me with his stick until I wake up sweating.

A glance at my Tess-given phone shows me that it's not quite eleven o'clock. So much for a quick nap. With a groan, I force myself out of bed to change out of my uniform only to notice that I do, in fact, have my door back.

Thank fuck.

Being able to talk to Parrish was nice, but we haven't actually talked but for that one night. We've barely spoken all week. I guess this is his 'thinking time'. *He has to decide, Dakota*, I tell myself, dropping my skirt to the floor and switching out the blazer, dress shirt, and tie for an oversized t-shirt and fresh panties. *He has to decide if you're more important than Tess.*

Because that's what it all comes down to, doesn't it? Me or her. He can't have us both. How silly is it that he even needed to say that to me? Of course he can't choose me over Tess. She's his freaking mom. I'm a practical stranger. That, and teenage romances never last, do they? We'd probably have broken up before the summer was out anyway.

It's just ... it doesn't feel like that.

It feels like my heart is broken and the whole world has been turned upside down.

"Snap out of it, Kota," I murmur, slapping my hands against my cheeks. I'm being ridiculous. Parrish is just a boy, and I'm only in high school, and ... well crap. Rational thought isn't working for me right now. The heart is weird like that; you can rationalize with it all you want, but it rarely listens.

I flick my bedside lamp on—this gorgeous ceramic based beauty to finally replace the space-age monstrosity I used to have in here. The room is flooded with warm, yellow light that

helps offset the white walls and the built-in chrome fixtures on the walls.

Hefting my book bag up, I realize that I left my secret phone inside it. Not good. Tess easily could've rifled through it while I was sleeping. Also ... I glance back at my dresser where the phone tripod is sitting. I was so tired and emotionally worn out that I forgot to set it up to record.

I grab my Tess-given phone from the surface of the nightstand and move over to put it on the tripod.

I am most definitely not expecting to see the pink envelope that Tess gave me back in February, the one that I crumpled up and threw in the bathroom trash. The envelope is open, its secret missive lying atop it in a wrinkled sheet. The blood drains from my face as I pick it up, smoothing out the page so that I can see the elegant, confident curves of Tess' handwriting.

Dearest Mia is how it starts which, to be frank, makes me not want to read it at all. Tack on the fact that she clearly dug it out of the garbage and then left it in here while I was sleeping, and I am all sorts of creeped out. That's not the only thing she left me for: the iron skeleton key is there, too.

"What the hell?" I murmur, looking between the letter and the key as I try to figure out what my bio mom's motives might be here. Between this and the metal heart pin she left for me on my first day here, I'm wondering if she doesn't have unresolved intimacy issues.

I take the key in my left hand, pausing when I hear footsteps in the hall. My arms drop to my sides as I glance toward the door. A piece of paper slides underneath it before the footsteps retreat, and I hear Parrish's door close softly, the sound as familiar to me now as the creak of the staircase back home.

Taking both items with me, I move over to the torn piece of sketchbook paper and squat down beside it. As soon as I see what's on it, I forget how to breathe.

Parrish has left me a little gift with a note scribbled in the corner. He might consider Tess his mother, but his handwriting

is so different, slanted and unsure, almost scratched out. Somehow, it seems to fit him perfectly.

I know I told you to think about what you wanted, but here's an idea to get you started. Roses are a symbol of forbidden love. Also, it's the state flower for New York. Thought you'd appreciate that.

There's a green rose in the center of the page, the color of it similar to my hair, this brilliant green that fades to black at the edges. It's a dynamic piece, an optical illusion that speaks to Parrish's raw talent. As I stare at it, I can almost imagine the petals unfolding, like the rose is blooming before my very eyes.

The composition sprawls across the page, tendrils of black spiraling out, dotted with thorns and oval shaped leaves. There's a wash of colors behind it, splattered like a rainbow of spilled ink. The most ominous part of the piece however is the arrow that pierces the rose, drawing ruby red blood from the very heart of it.

I take the page in hand and stand up, my pulse a mimicry of the crashing waves on Lake Washington. It's windy tonight; I can hear the force of it pressing up against the walls of the ice cavern, like the clawed fingers of a monster asking to come in.

"Damn you, Parrish," I murmur, sitting heavy on the edge of the bed and staring at the page for so long that my eyes get blurry. Is this what he's been working on all week in his room? Flipping page after page in his sketchbook, colored pencils echoing into the hallway with a pleasant scratching sound. He could've filmed that and uploaded it as an ASMR video, that's how soothing it was to me.

Using the skeleton key as a paperweight, I set the drawing down and take a deep breath.

I'm not sure I can face Parrish right now, not with my emotions so raw from seeing the drawing. He very clearly put a lot of work into it, a ton of thought.

Instead, I shake out Tess' wrinkled letter. It isn't very long, but the way she's written it, it could very well go into her next

novel.

Dearest Mia,

I know that to you, we've only just met. That's understandable. The way you look at me, with a healthy mix of suspicion and unbridled curiosity, is no surprise. But to me, you are my heart, the pulsing beat that keeps me going, that pumps blood through my veins.

You are my inspiration and my muse, the lost daughter of a novelist who doesn't know herself without the aching chasm of loneliness she's gotten so used to straddling. Who am I if I'm not missing you? A stranger without purpose, an artist without a canvas, a mother to a child she doesn't know.

It's going to be an adjustment for both of us.

I've gotten what I always wanted and, although my joy could swallow the universe in its magnanimity, I'm not sure where that leaves me. A traveler without a trail, an adventurer without a map. It's going to take time, but I believe that love can truly reach across any void, even one that seems endless.

Let's get to know each other, my sweet daughter.

In the meantime, I'll sit back and let you come to me.

I won't be perfect.

I'll still be a parent (so don't even think about asking to party all night).

But I'll wait, patiently, for you to come to me. To talk. To meet me, really. Because even though we've met in the most basic sense of the word, we are strangers.

So. Happy birthday, daughter. Happy birthday to the most beautiful stranger I have yet to meet.

Love, your adoring mother

I drop the letter to my lap.

The wind continues to howl outside, but in here, everything is quiet. Too quiet. There's far too much room for my thoughts to invade, my insecurities, my frustrations.

I was supposed to read this letter three months ago.

Tess has been waiting for me for three months.

So many things make sense to me all of a sudden: the absence of questions during my first week of school, the way she holes herself up in her office but leaves the door cracked, the tensing of her shoulders when we run into each other in the kitchen.

That isn't to say that I forgive her for the things she's done. She has a lot to apologize for. But then ... maybe I do, too?

I reread the letter several times before opening my nightstand drawer and slipping it in along with the key and the drawing from Parrish. Part of me wants to go to him, to let him hold me and rub my back while I feel this situation out, but ... I can't. I can't let him hold me that way if he's just going to push me back.

Instead, I slip my earbuds in, start up *Cry* by Ashnikko—guess I really am a simp, huh?—and curl up to go back to sleep.

In my dreams, I relive that moment in the basement with Parrish over and over and over again.

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The title 'CHAPTER 25' is displayed in a stylized, hand-drawn font. 'CHAPTER' is in black, and '25' is in pink. The text is set against a background of dark, gnarled tree branches and a green, textured shape that resembles a heart or a large leaf. The overall aesthetic is dark and somewhat macabre.

CHAPTER 25

Delphine wakes me up in the morning, as she usually does. Saturdays and Sundays be damned; it's early to rise in the Vanguard house as always. I feel bad for Delphine though; she's here six mornings a week now.

“Whatever happened to that other girl you mentioned, the one that used to clean on weekdays?” I ask on the tail end of a yawn, reaching up to scratch at my head as I blink through sleep-blurred eyes. Delphine is already whisking the curtains open and spraying the already-clean glass with Windex.

“JJ?” she asks, glancing back at me with a nervous expression. “Nobody's seen her for months.”

That perks me up a bit. If I had cat ears, they'd have swiveled forward at the news.

“She's missing?” I ask, feeling this pit open up in my stomach. I wonder if the Seattle Slayer got her? The way Delphine's looking at me makes me wonder if she's thinking the same thing. Even if it wasn't him, there's a chance it's something worse.

“The police think she took off, but I don't know if I believe that. She'd just started dating—” Delphine begins, pausing at the sound of a knock on the door. Tess enters without waiting for me to call out which annoys me ... until I remember the letter. She left it for me on purpose, right?

A bit of hope fills me, but it's squashed out just as quickly by the look on Tess' face. She seems worried about something. Hopefully nothing to do with me. I'm not sure how much more I can take.

“Have you spoken to Lumen today?” she asks me, and I cock a brow. She should know if I have: she has spyware all the fuck over my phone, and I (supposedly) don’t have any other electronics to use at the moment. “Apparently there was a party last night, and she didn’t come home.”

Alarm spikes through me as Delphine stops scrubbing the window. I hadn’t realized how loud the squeaking of the glass was until just now. It feels almost stiflingly quiet in here.

“Lumen is missing?” Parrish asks, coming out of his room dressed in a bunch of expensive Whitehall gear. He looks like he’s about to head out for a run. Only, I know he doesn’t go running because Tess won’t let him; he has to use the home gym instead. Poor little rich boy, am I right? “What’s so unusual about that? This happens all the time.”

“Not since I’ve known her,” I retort, forgetting for the briefest of seconds there that we had a moment in Bend. And not just an emotional moment, but a physical one. Those were all firsts for me. I swing my legs out of bed as Tess sighs.

“Lumen Hearst has gone missing once or twice ...” she hazards, but I can see that her mama bear instincts are flaring. She’s a bit more bear than mother in my opinion, but whatever. *Also, the letter, Dakota. The letter.* My face heats up and Parrish notices. His gaze sharpens, but not in a bad way, and then he ... hooks a smile at me?

Wow.

Wasn’t expecting that.

“She disappeared in Colorado for three fucking days during freshman year.” Parrish lifts up a hand as Tess gives him a look that clearly says *watch your language, bro*. Maybe without the ‘bro’ part though. She isn’t that interesting. “Then, on our sophomore class trip to Disneyland, she left the park and somehow ended up in San Francisco. If there was a party last night, and Lumen was at it, then she probably took off with some new friends to the Bahamas. She’ll turn up.”

“Either way, I’d like for both of you to call and text her,” Tess says, glancing over at Delphine. She gets right back to

cleaning, as if she wasn't listening in on the entire conversation. "And please let me know as soon as you hear from her. Her father's out of his mind with worry."

Tess disappears down the hall without mentioning the letter, without so much as giving away with a single furtive glance that she left it here last night. No mention of getting my door back either.

"She'll probably call you in the morning, bitching about a hangover," Parrish tells me, but I'm worried anyway. I grab my Tess-phone from the dresser and type out a quick message before giving her a call. No answer. Parrish watches, arms crossed, as he moves over to lean in my doorway. Like Tess, he doesn't mention the drawing he left for me either. "Do you think we could talk later?" he asks me, flicking his gaze up to Delphine.

Nausea overtakes me in a wave because I know what this is about. And I'm scared. Terrified, maybe, is a better word.

"Yeah, for sure. I should probably talk to Tess first though. I finally got around to reading that birthday letter she gave me and ... it's heavy." Parrish watches me while I talk, his slight smile turning back into that neutral pout he enjoys so much. He has the mouth to pull it off, I'll admit. He nods as I glance his way.

Our eyes meet, and I swear, the air between us starts to ripple with heat.

Before I decide to say *fuck it* and go after Parrish first, I force myself to open the topmost dresser drawer, snatch some clothes, and disappear into the bathroom. Once I've showered, brushed and dried my hair, and gotten dressed, I finally emerge.

Both Delphine and Parrish are gone, so I decide that now's the time.

I'm going to talk to Tess.

I'll tell her I read the letter. Maybe we can actually have a conversation where she doesn't threaten me the way she did at Laverne's house? I'd like that. A lot, actually.

Since she spends a good sixty hours a week in her office, I decide to look for her there first.

“Tess?” I ask, knocking on her office door and pausing as it swings open of its own accord. The room is empty, sunlight slanting across her desk and over the typewriter with a nearly full page hanging out of it. I hesitate briefly, intending to turn around and go downstairs to look for her.

Instead, I find my eyes drawn to that page of blocky text, to the words that I used to admire so damn much. With every one of Tess’ books, my admiration grew. The way she weaves such beautiful words together, the humanity in her emotions, you’d never expect such a cold and distant person to be responsible. I’d even been looking ahead at her book tour schedule to see if I couldn’t make it to NYC or something to meet her.

Hah.

Now? I’d do almost anything to *un*meet her.

Then I think of the letter, of the way it made me feel to have her pretty words directed at me. I could just glance at the page to see what she’s working on?

There’s something about it that calls to me, some lingering spark of admiration. *If I read those beautiful words, maybe I can find a way to connect with her? Maybe something about her writing will reveal itself to me and I’ll understand her better, the same way I did with the letter?*

It’s a stupid idea and really, shame on me for invading my bio mom’s privacy.

It’s inevitable, what happens next.

Each step I take into that room is like a knife, inching closer and closer to my heart. You never know when it’s going to happen, do you? That agonizing pain of betrayal, an emotional wound that rips open inside of you like a chasm. Beside the typewriter, there’s a stack of paper with a cover page: *Returned Under the Guise of Night*.

I pause in front of the desk, reaching out to straighten the curled length of the page, careful not to smudge the ink with my fingers.

Nothing about our reunion was what I thought it would be. The way she looked at me, the coldness and detachment in her gaze, it was what made the DNA test necessary. The girl was like a reflection of myself as a young woman, with eyes the color of damp earth, high cheekbones, and a proud nose. Her mouth and my mouth were matching shapes, even our hands were synonymous. Every part of her was like an extension of me and yet, I couldn't bear it. I couldn't bear the idea that this person, this stranger, was my Mia.

Blood was drawn.

DNA was matched.

Not once, but three times.

I had to be sure, because my dreams and hopes were being dashed to pieces all around me. How could my daughter be alive and well and yet look at me like I was the enemy? How could my daughter look at me like the interloper in her life, like I was the true villain in this story, the real kidnapper.

She may be my child by blood, and my love might be eternal, but that doesn't mean I have to like her. It doesn't mean I can't wish for things to be different, that I can't have regrets. Sometimes—oftentimes, really—I wonder if it might've been better for both of us if we'd never found each other.

She'd have the fantasy of her false family; I would have my dreams.

For now, they are dashed. For now, I must live with the fact that this person, this Mia-impersonator, is the one that I am bound to, obligated to, related to. Because even as I find myself crying at night over the person I wish she was, I know that I will never be able to let her go.

Without thinking, I tear the page from the typewriter, holding it up to hazy eyes. I'm not sure if I'm tearing up or if I'm just angry or ...

“What are you doing?” a voice asks from behind me. I don't have to turn around to know that it's Parrish. When a tear finally falls onto the page in front of me, I look back at him. There must be something in my face that mollifies his usual

bitterness because he doesn't mock me when the tears begin to flow like saltwater rivers, carving grooves of pain into my face.

I turn and move toward him, handing out the paper in my hand before sweeping past him without a word. I'm slipping into my room when he catches up to me, blocking the door from closing and stepping in behind me.

"This doesn't mean anything," he says, shaking the page like it's thoroughly pissed him off. Clearly, it's a follow up to *Abducted Under a Noonday Sun*; clearly, it's based in reality. "It doesn't."

A small, wry smile takes over my mouth, but it just tastes like salt and misery when I lick it away. Did I think things were going okay here? I mean, school isn't nearly as bad as I'd expected. But home? Home is much, much worse. That letter last night gave me false hope, but it *was* written three months ago, right? Things have changed since then.

Somehow, I'd been under the notion that no matter how much Tess and I squabbled, that there was some spark of unconditional love inside of her that would allow me to rebel and express my feelings without facing any repercussions. Somehow, I thought that I could fight back until I was too tired to fight anymore and she'd ... I don't know, be there to help pick up the pieces?

"Parrish," I start, because I'm not really sure what else to say. Instead, I turn away from him and move over to the wall of windows, suddenly hating that I've got the lake view and he doesn't. My fingers rest against the glass as I gaze out at the water and try to ignore the sick, hollow feeling inside my chest.

I put my forehead to the cool panes and close my eyes for a moment. I'm not sure what I expect out of Parrish, but it isn't for him to leave. He does, however, storming out without another word and letting the door slam into the wall. He doesn't even bother to close it.

That doesn't mean I have to like her.

Tess' words ring in my head like the chiming of a bell, a constant clanging that I can't shut out, not even when I put my hands over my ears to drown out the sound. It's impossible to escape from, a cacophony that exists only inside my own head.

As quickly as he left, Parrish comes back. As soon as I hear his footsteps, I open my eyes and look back, watching as he walks in and slams down the black metal trash can from his room. In his right hand is the stack of Tess' manuscript. He throws it into the can and then looks up at me, slipping a lighter from his pocket.

"Here," he says, holding it out to me on the palm of his hand. His face is impossible to read, a closed book with no cover, no title, no hint of genre. All that's discernable there is that he has a story to tell, that he's a book worth cracking open. "Burn it."

"Burn it?" I repeat, feeling that hollowness inside of me echo with anger. *How dare she?! How dare she tear me away from everything I've ever known and completely upend my life then have the audacity to hate me for my feelings toward her? It isn't right; it isn't fair.*

Then again, nothing in life is fair, is it? It isn't fair that Saffron's baby—the real Dakota Banks—died. And it isn't fair that Tess had her child stolen away because of it. It isn't fair to the Banks who raised me and loved me and taught me so many things to lose me. It isn't fair that I somehow got caught in the middle of it all.

Burning Tess' manuscript won't change that. Besides, she might enjoy writing on a typewriter for novelty's sake, but surely she has other copies of the book? Only an idiot or a narcissist would write a single paper copy and leave its integrity up to chance.

I look from the lighter to the manuscript, and I wonder. I wonder if this really is Tess' only copy. I wonder what she'd do if I burned it. I wonder what she'd do if she knew that I read it.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask Parrish, and he frowns at me, like he's absolutely furious somehow. At me or at Tess,

I'm not sure. Maybe with himself? It's impossible to tell. I turn all the way around to face him, absently playing with the diamond tennis bracelet around my left wrist. The sun hits the metal heart pin that's attached to my book bag, reminding me of yet another one of Tess' random gifts, of her secret birthday letter that was essentially an antonym of the novel she planned to publish for the whole world to read. "You always choose Tess over yourself."

My words seem to have a strange effect on Parrish. His brown eyes darken substantially, and he looks away, his jaw clenched, his fingers tightening around the lighter.

"Just take it before I change my mind," he growls at me, but I can't do it. I can't seem to move from that spot. I don't care about Tess. At least ... I told myself I didn't care about Tess. What does it matter if some random woman likes me or not? Only, she isn't just a random woman. And she isn't just my bio mom. She's a woman who carried me for nine months, who gave birth to me, who raised me for two years until I was stolen, a woman who never stopped searching, a woman whose love for me didn't seem to be able to be questioned.

Now that I've lost it, I'm not even sure where to go from here.

With a huff and a sigh, Parrish pockets the lighter just in time for Tess to pop her head into the room. She doesn't look very happy.

"Is that my manuscript?" she asks, choking on the words as she steps inside, her eyes going from the trash can to my face, to Parrish's. He turns toward her, his expression something I've never seen around Tess before: disappointment.

"I didn't want her here at first, but I do now," he says, taking the lighter back out of his pocket and chucking it in the can beside the stack of papers. "It seems like you're of the opposite opinion? You should be ashamed of yourself."

Without another word, Parrish turns and leaves my room, closing his bedroom door behind him and leaving me alone with Tess Vanguard formerly Tess Patterson, mother of Mia Patterson who, apparently, is me.

I am Mia Patterson.

“Dakota,” Tess starts, the name foreign on her lips, some curse in another language that she doesn’t understand but for the distaste it leaves as it rests on her tongue. “Did you read this?”

“I read enough of it,” I say, because I don’t care what else is in that book. The part that I just read was written today. *Today*. I know I haven’t been the easiest person in the world to get along with lately, but I’ve tried. I went along with the birthday celebration even though I felt sick the whole time. I went along with the talk show even though it turned into a monumental disaster. Tess won’t let me talk to my family back home; I had to sneak out just to see my sister for coffee, and now I’ve lost even that.

I hate all of this. I hate it.

The silence between us is more than enough of an answer.

“So you brought me here and you don’t even want me?” I ask. Then and only then does it really and truly hit me, how lost I feel, how disconnected from fucking anyone except maybe Parrish. Parrish. Of all people.

“You’re an eleven, you know? At least for me.”

“I’ve never wanted anything more.” Tess says the words, but they don’t show on her face. It’s that perfect blend of desperation and frigidity that she seems to specialize in. It’s like she’s two different people at the same time: the mother I always wanted and my worst enemy, wrapped into a single package. “But I can’t apologize for the things I wrote. Dakota, it’s no secret that we’re having trouble connecting. That’s not unexpected.”

A harsh laugh escapes me, and I end up sitting down heavily on the edge of my bed. I’m so fucking glad in that moment that it’s my real bed, the one that my grandmother made for me. It gives me strength somehow, even though she’s nearly three thousand miles away from me.

“Tell me about my father,” I say abruptly, folding my hands in my lap and leaning over. My green and black hair falls

across my arms like a blanket. At this point, I wish I'd let Parrish ink me so I could reveal it to Tess, just to see the shock on her face. "You owe me that much at least—especially since you dislike me so much."

"I love you, Dakota," Tess protests, but we both know that isn't the same thing, not at all. "Your father isn't important. He's nothing. He's nobody." I lift my gaze up to look at her. She may as well be carved of ice for all that her expression gives anything away. On the other hand, those words were fire.

She's hiding something.

"Saffron knows more than I do."

"Saffron is a liar and a kidnapper. Whatever nonsense she was whispering in your ear, you may as well forget it." Tess stares me down like the self-made multimillionaire she is, like I'm yet another hill to be climbed and conquered. "No amount of guilt-tripping will change my mind. Now, if you'd like, we could go to a family therapist and—"

"A therapist?" I snap back, shoving up to my feet. "We don't need a therapist to talk to each other; you're the one who always runs away. I'm trying here, Tess. I'm trying so fucking hard that sometimes I just want to throw myself into the goddamn lake. Why can't you just *talk* to me?"

Tess throws her arms up like she just can't deal with this anymore, taking her manuscript and storming out of the room. I follow her into the hallway, but we're nowhere near done.

"Tell me about my fucking dad!" I scream, even though I know I'm being hysterical here. Tess ignores me, stepping into her office and slamming the door behind her. I know I shouldn't, but I follow her anyway, pounding on the door even though I know she isn't going to let me in. "I have a right to know who he is! And as soon as I find him, you can bet your ass that I'm out of here—permanently. DNA is all that matters, right? Well, I've got his DNA in me, too." I pause here, breathing heavily, my hands clenched so tightly into fists that I'm drawing blood. "Even if I stay here until I turn eighteen, I'm out. I'll drive off at midnight on my birthday and you will *never* see me again." Another pause. Each second of silence

infuriates me even further. “Oh, and by the way: I’m dating Lumen. You hear me? DATING!”

“Hey.”

Parrish grabs me by the shoulder and turns me around. I end up with my back pressed to the door of Tess’ office, breathing so heavily that I’m starting to see stars. I’m mad. Angrier than I’ve ever been in my life. It’s suddenly hit me that I don’t know who I am or what the fuck I’m doing here or—

Parrish’s hot mouth crashes into mine, and then my fingers are digging into the fabric of his hoodie so hard that I’m probably bruising his chest. *We shouldn’t do this here*, I think, but what does it matter? So what if I fuck Tess’ precious son? Who cares? She doesn’t like me anyway, doesn’t even think of me as a daughter.

I’m property to her, just another shiny trophy on her wall of bestsellers.

“Come with me.” Parrish grabs my hand and we run down the hallway, just barely making it into his room before we’re kissing again. My arms are around his neck, his are wrapped around my waist. He’s so warm and comforting in that moment. If we hadn’t made that connection in Bend, then I might’ve been worried. I might’ve wondered if I wasn’t using him in that moment to comfort myself.

But that isn’t it at all.

Somehow, in the last three months, I’ve fallen hard for Parrish.

“This is going to kill Tess,” he murmurs against my mouth, but more like he’s apologizing to the universe rather than trying to convince either of us to stop. “It’ll kill her.”

“Good.” I shouldn’t say it because I don’t mean it, but ... fuck that. And fuck her. How could she write such horrible things about me? And with every intention of publishing them. Of profiting off of them. That career of hers that she can’t seem to decide if she loves or hates.

Guess I’m not the only part of her life that she’s confused about.

“Take your sweatshirt off.”

Parrish complies, ripping that stupid school sweater over his head and then taking my face between his inked hands. He kisses me with a desperate sort of reverence but also with a careful and cracked reluctance, like this is something he’s been wanting to do all week and wouldn’t let himself.

He’s not wearing anything underneath, revealing a sea of ink that I feel compelled to touch, ensorcelled even. My fingertips trail down his bare midsection, causing him to suck in a sharp breath. I watch enthralled as his stomach muscles contract with the motion. He really is pretty, his body fully on the side of *man* rather than boy. It’s too much.

I kiss him again and this time, I bite his bottom lip and make him groan.

“You’ve really never done this before?” I ask, and then after a heartbeat, I add, “have sex with someone?”

“No.” Just that one word. Parrish stares at me, his face like thunderclouds in a summer sky, rumbling and dark and moody and yet somehow appealing anyway. “Why did you have to be Tess’ daughter? Why? You’re the most forbidden person on earth for me right now.” Here he pauses and I suck in a sharp breath. “And also, the only person that I want. Dakota, I’ve made my decision.”

“Do you have a condom?” I manage to get out, because I can’t possibly give that the reply it deserves, not right now. Parrish cringes and grits his teeth, shaking his head once before we’re interrupted by a knock on the door.

The person on the other side doesn’t wait for us to answer, and my heart launches itself into my throat with panic as I imagine Tess opening it to find us in this state. Even as I tell myself that I want to hurt her, I’m afraid. Why, I’m not exactly sure.

But it’s not Tess.

Instead, it’s ... Chasm.

He looks like someone just punched him in the stomach, like he can’t breathe, like he’s dying. My rebellious heart

plummets just as quickly and I feel sick.

“Here,” he says, opening his book bag and pulling out a handful of condoms. Without waiting for either of us to answer, he drops the pile on the small dresser near the bedroom door. And then he looks at me, like really looks at me, and that same rebellious heart cracks in half. “I hope you two know what you’re doing.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Parrish snaps back at him, raking his fingers through his beautiful hair.

“Kwang-seon,” I start, but Chasm just raises his hand as if to beg me to stop. Pretty sure there isn’t anything I could say right now that would make him feel better. I’m ... I think I might be in love with Parrish. Even if it’s a shallow, teenage-hormone induced love, I don’t care. It’s there, and I can’t deny it.

Chasm lifts his head up to look at Parrish, meeting his friend’s eyes with the most serious expression I’ve ever seen on his face. He says something in Korean, but Parrish doesn’t respond. When I look back at him, he seems pissed.

“Please teach me ...” I start, but Chasm just scoffs at me.

“Can it, Little Sister,” he says, and then he’s slamming the door in our faces.

For a moment, Parrish and I just stand there in silence.

I feel torn in half. One side of me wants to stay here with Parrish forever; it’s the only place I want to be. The other half is desperate to chase after Chasm, to ask why he’s here, to find out why he looked so broken at seeing the two of us together.

But then Parrish puts his hands on my shoulders and turns me to face him. The second half of me, the part that’s enthralled by Kwang-seon, it goes quiet. Dims. Shadows cover that moon and block out all of its silver night. All I can see is Parrish’s face, like the sun as it shines down on me.

He reaches out with his right hand and presses the lock on his bedroom door. Won’t stop Tess from unlocking it, but it’ll buy us time.

“This is worth the risk.” I say it aloud because I have to hear him agree with me. I have to or else I can’t go through with this.

Parrish takes my face in his hands again, and I can’t help but feel a little flutter at how well it fits. It’s as if his palms were crafted to hold me like this. He takes my mouth with his, and that’s it. Nothing else in the world matters. It’s just me and him, wrapped up in our feelings for one another. It’s warm inside this cocoon, and nothing like I’ve ever experienced before.

“More than worth the risk,” Parrish tells me, his lips moving against mine. I let my head fall back as my eyes close, my tongue dancing against his as we kiss like long-lost lovers reunited. It’s been a week since we last kissed, but it feels like a century. “Fuck, you taste good. And you smell good, too. Are you sure you’re not wearing any perfume?”

“Are you sure you’re not rolling around in dew-kissed clovers every morning?” I retort, and he chuckles at me, nuzzling against my face and then reaching out to grab a handful of condoms from the dresser. Not sure how many he thinks he needs, but damn, I appreciate the enthusiasm.

“Come.” Parrish pulls me over to his bed, falling onto his back and dragging me on top of him. He feels so alive beneath me, like his entire body is thrumming with electricity. It creates a current between us, lighting me up, turning me on, making me hyperaware of every place our skin touches.

I sit up, dragging my shirt over my head and tossing it aside. This time, I’m prepared. I have a super sexy bra—

“Are these Super Nintendo controllers printed on the fabric?” Parrish asks, squinting at the design. Oh, that’s right. I put the comfy bra on for my talk with Tess, and I was going to change it later just in case ... Shit.

“I’ve got a black lace one in my room; I’ll just go and—”

“You’ll do no such thing,” he warns me, pushing the sports bra up and over my breasts. I stop breathing for a moment, the feel of the air against my nipples a startling sensation. This is

the first time anyone's ever seen them bare. Parrish waits for me to untangle the bra from my hair and toss it aside before sliding his inked hands up my body with a special sort of reverence. "How is it that I find everything you do sexy?"

"You're into dorks, I guess?" I query back, but the joke falls flat. I can't possibly make jokes right now, not after the emotional rollercoaster I've just been on. Not with Parrish's dark eyes taking me in like he's committing my body to memory. "I'm unapologetically dorky, that's for sure."

"Unapologetic," he murmurs, sitting up enough that when I lean down, we can kiss. My hair falls forward, blanketing his chest as I grind my hips against his taut stomach. "Fuck, that feels nice." He pauses and glances at the nightstand where the pile of condoms is waiting. "It'd feel even better if you weren't wearing anything at all."

I roll off to the side, lying beside him on the bed as I kick off my pants and underwear (before he can see that they're a matching set to the bra). I'm so focused on getting the items off that I don't notice him watching me until I'm fully naked.

Parrish looks me up and down, lying on his side with his head propped in his hand, his elbow resting against the mattress. Slowly, carefully, he reaches out and runs his palm over my right breast, making my nipple tingle with the contact. He continues down, stroking my belly and then venturing further until he finds the hot, aching spot between my thighs.

He leans down and kisses me again, at the same time petting my clit with his thumb and making my body thrum. I arch up into his touch, encouraging him without words to keep going. If I were thinking clearly, I might remember that Chasm is likely in the house somewhere falling to pieces. Tess is in her office pacing a rut in the floor. Lumen is missing.

But a spell has been cast, one that holds both me and Parrish in its thrall.

He continues to play with me, taking cues from my body, from the breathy sighs that escape my parted lips and fall right into his. We never stop kissing, not as he strokes me into a

frenzy, not when he slides first one and then two fingers in. It's like we're living off each other's breath, like our hearts are pumping each other's blood.

"Faster," I murmur, and he grunts, beyond words at that point. When I look down and see his inked fingers pushing inside of me, my entire body flushes red. My face blushes; my tits blush. I can't seem to stop staring as Parrish moves his mouth to my neck, picking up the pace, thrusting harder and faster and deeper. "Wait, wait, wait," I gasp out when the pleasure gets to be too much. He pauses for a moment as I lift my right hand to the side of his face, digging my fingers into his thick hair. "Let me do you."

"Let me finish you, Gamer Girl." Parrish bites the side of my throat, and I groan, slapping a hand over my mouth to cover the sound. We should've put music on or something; this is so damn risky. When I close my eyes and listen for sounds from the hallway, I vaguely hear *Mr. Brightside* playing from the direction of Tess' office. *Perfect*.

Parrish trails his hot mouth down to my breasts, flicking his tongue against the bare nipple. It's like he's testing me, seeing how much I can take, seeing what I like best. When he realizes that I'm arching into him, he presses his entire mouth to it, sucking on the nipple as I clutch his head to my chest.

His hand continues at the same pace, holding a steady rhythm until that strange, coiled energy inside of me snaps free, sending those electrical currents into my fingers and toes. It paralyzes me, that pleasure, as I dig my fingers into Parrish's back, leaving crescent shaped marks in his skin.

It hits fast, but fades slowly, leaving me panting beside Parrish as he stares down at me. He's deadly serious now, and oh so intense. He's tossed his sloth crown aside in favor of a blazing ring of fire, one that seems to set him alight as he sits up and swings his legs over the edge of the bed.

I prop myself up on my elbows, but that's about all I've got the energy for. My eyes take in the perfect curve of his spine, the muscles in his upper back, the ink on his shoulders as he

shoves his sweats and underwear down to the floor. He snags a condom before turning back to me, his body in full view.

This is my first time seeing him naked and I must say ...
“Impressive.”

Oops.

I said that aloud, didn't I? Fuck.

“Impressive,” he repeats, his mouth quirking into this adorably cocky smile. “Which part?”

I snort at him.

“The tattoos, obviously,” I choke out, but my eyes slide back down the length of his body to his most impressive part. I'm staring, and I can't help myself. He doesn't seem to mind, waiting there for me to take him in before he finally turns and crawls across the bed toward me.

Parrish pauses beside me, looking down at me while I stare up at him.

“When you first walked into this house, I couldn't believe it. I didn't want to believe it. The most beautiful girl I'd ever seen, and she could never be mine. It killed me.” I swallow hard and try to turn away, but he reaches out with a single finger and takes hold of my chin, gently encouraging me to look back at him. “Then I got to know you, and I knew it wasn't just the way you looked. It was everything about you. Your everything is beautiful.”

“My everything?” I repeat, because that might just be the most incredible thing anyone's ever said to me.

Parrish frowns and flicks his eyes away from me for a moment before looking back.

“I don't have Tess' gift with words, but I don't know how else to say that I'm enamored with every part of you: body, heart, and soul.”

Fuck.

Oh fuck.

That feeling of falling comes over me again, but this time, Parrish is there to catch me. He slides his arms around me and presses our bodies together, kissing me like I'm the first *and* last woman he'll ever need.

Our bodies begin to move of their own accord, and that's when we both know it's time.

Parrish props himself against the pillows and tears the condom package open, taking the sticky ring in his fingers and staring at it for a moment before he slips it on.

"You're good at that," I breathe, and he gives me a sharp look.

"Cucumbers, sex ed project at school." Parrish climbs over me, threading the fingers of his left hand through mine. With the other, he guides himself to the sweet spot between my thighs and locks gazes with me. "Ready?" he asks, but he must be able to see the answer in my face because he's already smiling.

"Ready."

With a smooth, easy slide of his hips, Parrish pushes himself into me. For a second there, I can't breathe. All I can do is look up at him and squeeze our joined hands together, savoring the warmth of his body. He exhales first, like he, too, was holding his breath. I do the same as he releases my hand and I end up with my arms threaded around his neck.

Our mouths clash together as our bodies begin to move again, thrusting and grinding, churning up more of that indescribable pleasure. It washes over me in a warm wave as I lock my legs around Parrish and he makes a deep, satisfied male sound that has me digging my nails into his back again.

We can't get close enough, it seems. I want to get *closer*.

"Oh, Parrish," I breathe against the side of his face, licking along the length of his jaw as he undulates his body against mine, into mine, filling me up and spiriting away all the bad feelings from earlier, replacing them with new and exciting things.

His body is firm with muscle but so sensitive to touch that he moans and bites my neck when I squeeze his ass, when I trace his spine, when I tug on his hair.

“If you keep doing that, I won’t last long,” he growls at me, but the sound isn’t unpleasant. Instead, the feel of his lips against my ear makes me moan, and I’m pulling him to me, encouraging him to rock hard against me, bury himself deep. The bed is creaking, but I can still hear that damn song playing in the distance, drowning out any suspicious sounds.

Later, I’ll learn that Chasm was waiting there, just outside the door. That he eventually pushed off the wall and went downstairs, that he jumped into the pool with all his clothes on.

But in that moment, even if I knew that, I’d still have stayed.

Because love is a double-edged sword, and Parrish was my blade against everything in my life that wasn’t going the way I wanted it to.

“Dakota,” he breathes, kissing me hard and deep, biting my lower lip. His body is like a storm, striking me, lighting me up. I want more. I want to live in the storm forever.

With a deep, guttural groan, he drives himself into me with more force than before, pushing even deeper. The sensation makes me cry out with pleasure as I grab his hair and pull, and he shudders against me, coming so hard that his entire body trembles above me before collapsing.

The weight of him is soothing; the heat of him is electrifying.

“Don’t move,” I murmur when he goes to roll off. “Not yet.”

We stay as we are for a minute more before he pulls out and disposes of the condom, taking me into his arms and tucking my head beneath his chin. Neither of us speaks for some time, and I’m about to drift off to sleep when his hand slides down my side and cups my ass, giving it a little squeeze.

“Again?” Parrish murmurs, and a smile curves my lips.

“Again.”

And so it goes until the sun sets and the stars come out—both the ones in the sky that twinkle like diamonds as well as the ones above our heads, casting a greenish glow across the bedroom’s ceiling.

“I wish you didn’t have to go,” Parrish says, leaning in the doorway of his bedroom like he’s done a million times before. This time though, it all seems shiny and new, like we’ve transcended into another world together.

I smile, and I know I’ve probably got that disgusting lovey-dovey couple face on, the one that everyone wants to make but nobody wants to see. *Just like Maxine*, I think, and then for the briefest of instances, I see Maxx in my head and shake the thought away.

“I wish I didn’t have to go either,” I reply, leaning in my own doorway. We’re about three feet apart, but it somehow feels like leagues. I already miss the feel of his skin against mine. Parrish has his right elbow pressed against the doorjamb, his face against his fist. He’s smiling at me, too, which is such a crazy thing to see. The guy *never* smiles. That’s why I hate him. Or ... hated, in the past tense?

“If it weren’t so risky, I’d have you stay with me,” he continues, sighing and then sliding his left hand over his face. “But she can’t find out like that. It has to be planned.”

“Planned?” I query back, because I can’t quite believe I’m hearing this right. “You want to tell her?”

Parrish drops his hand by his side and gives me a look that’s much more akin to his usual foppish rich boy persona. It very clearly says *duh, what else did you think we were going to do?*

“You deserve to be more than just a secret, Dakota.”

Whoa. I feel like my heart’s about to explode. It’s beating so fast that I feel dizzy for a second there.

You deserve to be more than just a secret.

Fuck.

The guy knows how to charm a girl, doesn't he? I mean, you wouldn't know it since he's an arrogant dick most of the time ...

"When?" I ask as Parrish turns to glance down the hall at Tess' office door. It's been like eight hours since our fight and *Mr. Brightside* is still playing. I get it though. That's how I roll. I once listened to Ashnikko—I know, I know, I'm a fangirl—on repeat for like two weeks straight.

"Soon. Let's just ... feel her out, wait for a good mood." He glances back at me, but his expression isn't playful or cute anymore. It's dead serious. "You should try to find some common ground with her. I know you can't just forgive her for what she wrote—especially if she's planning on publishing it—but you can't fight with her for two years straight either."

"You mean one year, nine months, and thirteen days," I correct, and Parrish gives me a warning look. "But yeah, I see what you're saying."

"We'll tell her together," he announces, exhaling sharply. I guess when he said, 'I've made my decision', he was ... choosing me? "Fuck, maybe we should just get it out of the way and do it tomorrow?"

"You know her best," I tell him, and he takes it like a compliment, nodding in agreement. I bite my lower lip and then scurry across the hall for one, last kiss, throwing my arms around his neck and teasing his tongue with my own. We kiss for quite a while, and things start to heat up all over again.

"Get out of here, Gamer Girl," he purrs at me, putting his hands on my hips and forcibly putting some space between us. The move seems to pain him which I like. "Get some sleep."

The way Parrish looks at me, I almost wonder if he's going to say something else. He seems to change his mind at the last minute, offering up a saucy smile before he steps back and closes his bedroom door in my face for what better be old times' sake.

“You’re an asshole,” I grumble, but I’m smiling, too, as I head back into my room, tripping over my stupid book bag and nearly falling flat on my face. I kick it to the side before I notice a vase full of flowers on my nightstand.

They’re beautiful, this gorgeous bouquet of sunflowers that makes me smile when I brush my fingers over the yellow petals. The smile slides off my face when I realize that, in order to get these flowers in here, someone would’ve had to come down the hall and put them there.

If it were Tess, she would’ve surely knocked on Parrish’s door to look for me. It can’t have possibly been Paul, Kimber, or any of the kids, obviously. So ... “Chasm.”

I breathe his name and close my eyes tight against a rush of pain.

He brought me flowers?

I can’t seem to wrap my mind around it, even as I set my Tess-phone up on the tripod, climb under the covers and curl up on my side. *I’ll ask him about it tomorrow*, I promise myself, and then my mind is inevitably drawn back to memories of Parrish.

No matter what Tess says, no matter what she does, I’ll never regret spending the night with him.

Never.

That is ... until I find out that he’s been kidnapped because of it.

A graphic for Chapter 26. The word "CHAPTER" is written in a black, hand-drawn, blocky font on the left. The number "26" is written in a large, pink, cursive font in the center. The background features a dark green heart shape, a black silhouette of a tree with bare branches, and a faint, sketchy drawing of a person's face on the right side.

CHAPTER 26

“Thought you might like to know that Lumen is finally home,” Tess says when I come downstairs the next morning, dressed in a baggy sweatshirt and sweatpants, like the clothes can somehow prevent her from knowing about me and Parrish until we’re both ready to talk. I just stare at her back; she’s standing in front of the espresso machine, so I’m not sure she knows who, exactly, it is that she’s talking to, me or Parrish.

If it’s me, then she’s made a huge mistake. I don’t want to talk to her. How could she even remotely think otherwise?

She glances back at me, but the expression on her face doesn’t change from pleasant neutral.

“And we’re going to talk about this dating thing.” Tess turns back to her coffee as I do my best to hold back a scream. Does she really not understand the effect her words had on me? I glare at her, but I make my voice as pleasant as I can when I respond.

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.” I move into the kitchen to look for food—I’ve made a habit of asking before I eat anything now which seems to piss Tess off. What would also piss her off is knowing that I slept with her son last night. *I can’t believe we actually had sex*, I think as I stare at Tess and feel the sharp dagger of betrayal bury itself deep in my heart. When she finds out, she’s going to despise me; I just know it. Somehow, that doesn’t seem to matter. She dislikes me anyway, doesn’t she? “I’m glad Lumen’s back. Guess Parrish was right.”

Parrish.

I smile as memories of last night flooding in. That is, until Chasm clears his throat from behind me and I jump. When I spin to face him, everything else seems to fade away. He's staring down at me like I've taken a hammer to his heart, shattered it, made him bleed.

The sunflowers ... ask about the sunflowers. I feel suddenly tongue-tied and disoriented in his presence in a way I've never been before.

"I hope he was at least a gentleman," he grinds out, his voice thick with caustic humor. Tess can't hear us, not with the sound of the milk steaming and the wall-mounted TV murmuring the morning's news. "If he wasn't, I'll kill 'im."

"Chas," I start, but there's something tender and weird here that I feel like I have to explore. I don't regret anything that happened with Parrish, but ... I do regret the way I seem to have made Chasm feel. "When you walked in on us last night —"

He laughs at me, reaching up to tousle my hair, putting me right back into the 'Little Sister' category.

"Don't worry about it. You two deserve each other." He throws the words out like he doesn't care, but there's just something about his face that says otherwise, a crack that I can see straight through. "Lumen's back?" he says loudly, just as Tess' milk finishes and she pours it into her coffee. "That's unfortunate."

"That's enough of that, Kwang-seon," Tess tells him, turning around and leaning back against the countertop as she takes her first sip. "Is Parrish up yet? I think it'd be nice if we did something together as a family today." She gives Chasm a look. "You included, of course."

"Always an honor, Mrs. Vanguard," he says with a disarming smile, but not like it's all bullshit either. He means that. He likes it here, and even if I don't, I can't blame him. "I'll go check on him." Chasm gives me a conspiratorial sort of look, but I haven't seen Parrish this morning.

When I knocked, he didn't answer, so I figured he was still sleeping.

Chasm leaves while I pour myself a glass of orange juice and toss some bread in the toaster. Tess isn't looking at or talking to me which is a relief; I'm not even sure what I'd say. If that's how this family operates—that is, pretending like nothing bad ever happens—then I'll play along. For now, at least.

Because even if I hate it here, I've got Parrish.

"He's not answering his door. Must be tired." Chasm reappears, shrugging his shoulders, but giving me yet another powerful look. I meet his stare, but there's nothing that I can say in front of Tess. Instead, I spread peanut butter on my toast and take the food upstairs.

I end up eating my food in peace, checking my messages and finding one from Lumen. *Party was insane; I woke up in a field with no memory of how I got there.* Huh. That doesn't sound good; I worry about sexual assault in a situation like that. *Dad is not happy; I'll be on lockdown like it's covid 2020.* LOL

With a sigh, I shake my head and rub at the bridge of my nose. I can voice my concerns to Lumen later.

For now ... I set my phone and empty plate aside, heading into the bathroom to shower and change. When I come out, I open my bathroom door to find Tess picking Parrish's lock. The sight infuriates me, if I'm honest.

"What are you doing?" I ask as Chasm stands back, arms crossed over his chest, mouth set into a deep frown. He flicks amber eyes my way but doesn't say anything. I still need to ask him about the damn flowers.

"We've been knocking and knocking, shouting his name," Tess begins, jiggling the little metal pin in the doorknob. She's clearly trying to stay calm, but on the inside, she's panicking. I frown as she curses and yanks at the knob. "I'm worried that he might've hurt himself."

Great. Now I'm starting to freak out.

I wait as Tess unlocks the door and throws it open, moving into the room like she expects to find Parrish lying facedown on the floor.

“Jesus, Little Sister, what’d you do to him last night? Ride him to death?”

I glare at Chas, pushing past him into the room as Tess flings open the bathroom door.

It’s empty.

Tess pauses, putting her hands on her hips, and exhaling a sigh of relief. “He must be downstairs somewhere.” She looks over at the two of us and raises a perfectly manicured and microbladed eyebrow. “Did something happen last night?”

I feel suddenly unsteady on my feet, my tongue tied as I try to puzzle out, exactly, what she means by that. Luckily for me, Chas steps forward to fill in the awkward space.

“Business as usual,” he replies, flicking open the front page of Parrish’s sketchbook. There’s a green rose there, not dissimilar to the drawing he gave me. Chas turns the page and there’s another rose. And another. Parrish has been practicing the design all week apparently. “I ended up sleeping downstairs after we finished our movie, but that’s about it.”

Wait, he spent the night? Chasm spent the night here while we were ... Shit. Last night went from bad to better to best, and this morning ... it seems to be following the reverse of that pattern.

“Nothing happened with us,” I add blandly, which feels like the worst lie I’ve ever told. Something did happen with us, something amazing, something incredible. It was honestly one of the best nights in my entire life.

Tess moves past us and into the hallway, heading for the stairs. All I can think is that Parrish got up and went for a walk or ... something. Maybe he needed time to think? *I’ve made my decision.* He said that, didn’t he? Then we got naked together and crossed off a whole bunch of firsts from both our lists. We talked about telling Tess. He seemed nervous but resolved, excited even.

Did he change his mind since last night? Does he regret what happened between us?

“Don’t look so nervous; Parrish wouldn’t just ... well, you know, with you and then take off. He’s around here somewhere.” *Famous last words*, I think as Chasm struts past me, and I follow.

We help Tess search out the rest of the house: the sauna, the pool, the gym, Paul’s office, her office, the bedrooms, the backyard.

There’s no sign of Parrish.

“I don’t understand,” Tess says as Paul stands beside her, looking supremely annoyed at the inconvenience of a missing son. “His phone is in his room; his car is in the garage. I even found his wallet in his book bag.”

Chasm appears in the doorway and hefts up a plastic garbage bag.

“Checked his trash, but there aren’t any clues.” He gives me a dirty look as soon as Tess nods her thanks and turns her attention back to Paul. “You fucking owe me.” This last part is whispered in my ear just before he takes off toward the garage, and I scoot off my stool in the kitchen to follow.

“Thank you for that,” I reply honestly, because it never even occurred to me that Tess might actually go through Parrish’s garbage and see ... well, evidence from last night. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Yeah, well.” Chasm lifts the lid of the large trash can and tosses the bag in. “I have ulterior motives, you know? He might be your fuckboy, but he’s my best friend. If he gets caught banging you, we’ll never see each other again.”

“First off, fuckboy?” I query, rubbing at the side of my face. I’m worried, but not *that* worried. Not yet. “Second, banging? Pick better word choices.” He slams the lid on the can and turns to give me a dark look.

“I’m not even the one fucking, but yet I’m having to clean up the aftermath.” He lets his pretty amber eyes trail up toward

the ceiling, staring at the white sheetrock as if it might hold the answer as to where Parrish has gone.

“I thought you were banned from the house?” I ask, because he was. For at least another week. Chasm’s sardonic laugh helps fill in the blanks almost immediately. *His dad, this has to be about his dad.*

Bingo.

“My dad has some guests staying over that he doesn’t want me to meet.” Chasm frowns and rubs his hand over his face. “More like, he doesn’t want the guests meeting me. He called Tess and asked if I could stay over for a few nights.”

Ouch.

“I know how you feel,” I start, thinking about yesterday, about that stupid page stuck in Tess’ typewriter. I should never have touched it, my mistake. It would’ve been better if I hadn’t known how she really felt about me. “Last night, I learned that Tess doesn’t like me. She loves me—maybe—but she doesn’t like me.”

“She told you that?” Chasm asks, and I shrug.

“More like, I saw a page from her new manuscript and read it. I think it went something like this: *She may be my child by blood, and my love might be eternal, but that doesn’t mean I have to like her.*” I’m not sure if I’m quoting it right, but close enough. Chas gets the gist.

“Yikes, Little Sister,” he murmurs, echoing my sentiments about his father. “Is that how you and Parrish ...?” He trails off and then shakes his head, shoving his fingers through his bangs and disturbing the pretty perfection of his lightning bolt. “Never mind. I don’t want to know. I don’t even care.”

We pause our conversation as Tess opens the door to the garage, giving us both a look that cuts right to the bone.

“If either of you know where my son is, now is the time to speak up. This isn’t a game; it’s not a joke.”

“We would never lie about something like this,” I say, glancing over at Chasm. His face has darkened up, but he has

no problem meeting Tess' eyes. He really doesn't know either. *Now I'm starting to panic.*

"If we knew where he was, we'd tell you. He probably just went for a walk." Chasm doesn't sound like he believes that, but it's the only rational explanation at this point. "I'll start calling around and see if anyone's seen or heard from him."

"Do you know his passwords?" Tess asks, swallowing hard. Her eyes are red-rimmed, and I can see that this is deeply triggering for her. "We could get into his PlayStation or email or something and check for messages?"

Chasm hesitates a moment before giving a sharp nod and heading into the house.

Normally, I'd be super creeped out at the idea of Tess hacking into Parrish's electronics, but ... I think I'll make an exception this once. Just so we can find him. Just so I can look into his eyes and know that he didn't leave because of me, because of us.

Us.

By eight o'clock, Tess has officially lost it. She's alternately crying and going dead silent, pacing around, checking and rechecking every room in the house. The entire Vanguard family—Chasm and me included—is seated in the living room, awaiting news.

"I've spoken to the police; they're on their way over." Paul taps his phone against his palm, his annoyance diminished from its peak this morning. He's clearly worried, too. And so am I. My stomach hurts so bad, it feels like I've got the worst period cramps known to womanhood. It's all nerves, but it's manifesting in so many physical ways. My head is pounding, my body is sweetly sore from last night and I can't even enjoy it, and I want to scream.

Where are you, Parrish?! What the actual fuck?

“The Seattle Slayer probably got him,” Kimber murmurs, and Tess just loses her shit completely.

“What did you just say?” she snaps, her voice like a bolt of ice. In an instant, she’s standing in front of Kimber and tearing her phone out of her hands. “You’ve just lost phone privileges for a week.”

“Mom!” Kimber screeches, scrambling up out of her seat. But it’s too late. Tess shoves the phone into her purse and then plants her elbows on the surface of the counter, letting out a small scream of frustration that surprises the shit out of all of us.

“I can’t do this again, Paul,” she breathes, and I almost feel sorry for her. No, no, I *do* feel sorry for her, even after last night. I can’t help myself. My empathy flares as I watch her shoulders shake with quiet sobs. Her husband comforts her by pulling her into his arms, and I’m reminded of Parrish all over again, of the innumerable times he’s hugged me close and let my cry.

Fuck.

Kimber comes to a stop a few feet behind her mom, her rage dissipating like smoke. Even she can sense how serious this is. Nobody’s seen Parrish since last night. I’m probably the last person to have seen him, and that does not sit well with me.

“What about the security cameras, Paul?” Tess is asking, and my heart drops. Oh. Shit. If they check the cameras, they’ll see me and Parrish kissing in the hallway. They’ll see us open the door and talk to Chasm. I’m not exactly sure where all the cameras are located, but they might even see him giving us condoms.

Chas and I share an alarmed look, but there’s quite literally nothing we can do about it.

“I checked three times already,” Paul tells Tess, and Chasm’s brows go way, way up. It’s very clearly a *what the actual fuck?* sort of a look. “There’s nothing there. The drive was full. We haven’t actually recorded anything in weeks.”

The look she throws her husband is venomous.

“You could’ve set it to upload to the cloud, or automatically erase over old footage.” Tess’ words are sharp, fully intended to inflict a blow on her husband. She’s hurting and she doesn’t know what to do with that pain.

“I’m sorry, honey. I really am, but what can I do now?”

Tess frowns at him and stands up, starting her pacing game all over again.

“Lucky break,” Chas whispers, sitting a little closer to me than is really prudent. Kimber notices, but she doesn’t say anything, not today. After we get Parrish back, I’m sure I’ll hear *alllll* about it.

“Guess so.” Doesn’t feel like a lucky break. I’d rather have had Tess and Paul see us kissing than spend anymore time wondering what happened to Parrish. Tucking my legs up against me, I wrap my arms around them and try not to let my mind stray down paths of ‘what if’. What if I’d stayed with him last night, risks be damned? If he was upset about something, maybe we could’ve talked it out? Did I pressure him into sex? What if he wasn’t ready?

“Don’t blame yourself, Little Sister,” Chas tells me, reaching out to put an arm around my shoulders. The contact surprises me, but I don’t dislike it. This time, however, Kimber really does level a violent glare in my direction. “He’ll come back. Just like Lumen. Don’t worry about it until tomorrow. If he isn’t back then, we’ll freak out together.”

I give a little nod, relaxing into Chasm’s warmth. But I can’t shake the feeling that something is wrong here. Something is really, really fucking wrong.

By the next morning, the Vanguard house is a chaotic mess. There are detectives in the kitchen, a fresh slew of reporters outside the gate, and a surprise visit from Maxx.

“I got here as soon as I could,” he says, shrugging out of his windbreaker near the garage door. “You really don’t know where he is?”

“Would I have let it get this far if I did?” Chasm snaps back, swiping his hand over his mouth. “Sorry, man, I didn’t mean that. I’m just stressed the fuck out.”

Maxx turns his emerald gaze down to me, but there aren’t any inappropriate butterflies to squash down this time. I’m panicking, to be honest. All I can think is that Parrish spooked after what happened between us and left. What else could it be? Like he said, how could anyone possibly kidnap him out of this house? There’s a gate, five locks on the front door, and a security firm that has three cars that regularly patrol the neighborhood.

There’s no way; there’s just no way.

Except ... people keep mentioning the Seattle Slayer. It seems absurd, to wonder if a serial killer spirited away your family member in the middle of the night, but then, it really does happen to some people. Kimber spent all night sitting in her room with the door cracked, crying and listening to that stupid Emerald City Murder Podcast. Frankly, I’d love to strangle the hosts with their own phone chargers. They’re fearmongers and clout chasers.

“Are you doing okay, Kota?” Maxx asks, and Chasm—bless his black, twisted fucking heart—decides this is his opportunity to step in.

“They fucked each other the night he went missing,” he whispers, and I elbow him so hard in the stomach that he grunts. “What the hell was that for? You do realize we might have to tell Tess at some point, right?”

Maxx shakes his head and puts his fingers to his temples, closing his eyes for a moment to process the information.

“That wasn’t your story to share,” I growl out at Chas, wondering how the hell I ended up in such a crazy situation in the first place. I just like Parrish. He just liked me. That’s it. It shouldn’t be this big of a deal. “And no, we’re not going to tell Tess, not yet. It would kill him if we did.”

“Yeah, well, the Slayer might kill him if we don’t,” Chas retorts as we glare at each other.

“Wait ... you and Parrish?” Maxx echoes, opening his eyes to look at me. That’s when I remember that I told him I was a virgin on our hike together. Great. Just fantastic. What a way to experience my first time. Seems typical that it would end in a clusterfuck and a missing person. “Isn’t he a virgin?”

“*Was* a virgin,” Chasm corrects, and I groan, slapping my own hands over my face.

“That’s not why he’s missing; it’s not.” The protest sounds feeble, even to me, but I have to keep believing that for now. I have to. If he’s not back by tomorrow, then I’ll ... I’ll tell Tess. I’ll just fucking tell her and watch her face morph into one of abject horror. At that point, she won’t just dislike me—she’ll blame me for Parrish’s disappearance.

Not sure our relationship—which is already on rocky ground—will ever recover from that.

“Okay, okay, let’s calm down for a minute.” Maxx drops his hands to his sides, and I do the same, looking up at him with what I’m sure is a pathetic, pleading sort of expression. Any advice or suggestions he has, I’m game to listen to. Something about me seems to get to him, and his cheeks redden slightly. “That and this are not related. You know Parrish: he’s waited this long to sleep with a girl. It wasn’t a decision that was made lightly.”

We all pause at the sound of footsteps, glancing over to see Tess coming down the hall toward us.

“Maxx,” she begins, her voice sniffling, her face red and swollen. She’s wearing her glasses, but they do little to cover the huge black circles under her eyes. Pretty sure she didn’t sleep at all last night. “I’m glad you’re here. Any news?” She sounds hopeful, but it only lasts so long as it takes him to shake his head sadly in response.

“I haven’t heard from him.” Maxx tucks his hands in his pockets. I notice that his hair is a bit ruffled, like he didn’t even bother to brush it after waking up. He must’ve jumped in his Jeep first thing after seeing Tess’ texts. “But I’ll start organizing our friends for a search party. Between us, we can canvass all of his secret spots.”

Tess nods, but she's barely listening at this point, turning and heading back into the kitchen where the detectives are waiting. Also, she either forgot it was a school day or just doesn't care. Not sure I could even handle the thought of going to class without Parrish; it's unfathomable.

"Hey." Maxx reaches out and puts his hands on my shoulders, giving me goose bumps. I look up at him, and he smiles. "We've got this. We'll find him." Chasm watches us both warily but doesn't protest. He needs the pep talk just as much as I do. "Why don't you go get dressed? Chas and I can start making calls, and then we'll all head over to Whitehall to start looking."

"I can do that," I reply, relieved to have someone else take over the situation.

"And don't blame yourself. Parrish wouldn't do that to someone he cares about." Maxx gives my hair a tousle before sliding his phone from his pocket and heading down the foyer toward the kitchen. He's right though, isn't he? Parrish cares more about other people than he does himself. He wouldn't run off, even if he regretted last night. He just wouldn't; I have to believe that.

"Get going," Chas says, gesturing with his head in the direction of the stairs. "Let's find our fucking friend."

As soon as I get upstairs, I take out my secret phone to look for messages. If Parrish were going to contact me, he'd probably do it via this number.

There's nothing from him. But there is a text from an unknown number.

I click the message, just in case. Maybe he's contacting me from someone else's phone? Maybe he, too, woke up in a field like Lumen, drunk from the night before? Who knows what he did after I left his room? It's possible that he had a crisis of conscience and panicked, tried to self-medicate or something.

Much as I hate to entertain the idea that sleeping with me could cause so much distress.

Fortunately, the text seems to hold some answers.

I found Parrish. Can you call me right away? Don't tell Tess.

A rush of relief fills me. He's with someone, a friend probably. He's okay. He's safe. I very quickly make the call, but nobody answers. I'm about to try again when a video call comes through from the same number, and I accept it.

I'm smiling. At first.

The call connects, and it takes me a full minute to recognize what I'm looking at.

It's Parrish, that's for sure. Only ... it's Parrish tied to a chair and bleeding. And oh my god, there's so much blood. It's fucking everywhere. My head swims and my vision blurs as I blink through the panic and my mind scrambles to make sense of what I'm seeing.

"Dakota," he says, his voice ragged and pain-riddled. He barely looks coherent, like he's on the verge of passing out. What. the. fuck. is going on here?!

"Parrish." His name is barely a breath, a promise, a desperate wish as it leaves my suddenly dry mouth. "Where are you? What's going on?"

He shakes his head briefly, his body sagging against the chair. Behind him, I can see a wine cellar, row after row of glimmering bottles against a stone wall. But that's about it. No other clues immediately present themselves, and I'm too freaked out to look for them anyway.

"I need you to do something for me," Parrish continues, lifting his head up to look at the camera. His body looks worn out, but his eyes are sharp, glimmering with violence and unspoken things. "You need to go downstairs and ask Tess a question."

"I'll do you one better: I'm getting the detectives." I stand up suddenly, but Parrish's voice cuts through my resolve.

“No. Dakota, no.” His eyes flick to one side, like he’s looking at someone just off-screen before turning back to me. “You can’t do that.”

“Why not?” I blurt out, my own body flooded with so much adrenaline that my hand is wracked with tremors.

“If you do that,” Parrish begins, licking the edge of his bloodied mouth with his tongue before refocusing on me again. “He’s going to kill me.”

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A graphic for Chapter 27. The word 'CHAPTER' is written in a black, hand-drawn, blocky font on the left. The number '27' is written in a large, pink, hand-drawn font in the center. The background features a dark green, textured shape resembling a heart or a brain, with black, branching, tree-like structures extending from it. The overall style is dark and moody.

Those words echo in my skull, like a bullet bouncing around my brain, destroying me from the inside out. I somehow end up in Parrish's room, pacing ruts in the floor the way Tess was doing earlier. But she's working on fears and assumptions: I'm working on facts.

Parrish is tied to a chair.

Parrish is wounded and bloody.

Parrish doesn't want me to talk to the cops.

"Here's what I need you to do. I need you to go downstairs, and I need you to ask Tess a question. Can you do that for me?" Even as he was pleading with me to save his life, his voice was calm, almost soothing, like he was trying to hold my hand through this.

That just about killed me, the way he looked at me like he was sorry for putting me in this position. As if he has anything to be sorry about at all.

"I can't answer any of your questions, not yet. First, you need to find Tess. You need to ask her about a man named 'Justin Prior'."

Justin Prior.

I tried looking him up online, but it's a common name. There wasn't anything special or noteworthy for me to find. I even tried combinations like 'Justin Prior Tess Vanguard Medina' and other random collections of keywords. Nothing. Fucking nothing.

Now here I am panicking because I don't know what to do. I don't know if I can go down there and ask Tess about some random guy while she's in the middle of a crisis, wondering if her son has been hurt or killed while I know the answers to all of those questions. He's alive. He's hurt. He might be dead if I don't do this.

I bite down hard on my hand to stifle a scream. There are detectives down there. All I have to do is walk my ass down the stairs and tell them what I saw. How would the person holding Parrish captive even know that I've done it? How?

"He's going to kill me."

But fucking hell. Is it worth the risk? Is there *anything* in this world that's even remotely worth the risk to Parrish's life? It's just a question, at the end of the day. Just a stupid, easy question. What it means, and what it has to do with Tess, I have no idea.

Could be a crazy fan, I muse, thinking about the huge crowd of reporters outside. Tess is pretty famous, and she does write a lot of true crime stuff which could put her at risk ... but really? Kidnapping her son? How did this guy even get to Parrish? Did Parrish go out for a walk and get snatched off the street? Did someone actually come in here?

My mind strays to that night in the woods, the one that I've decided to push aside in favor of chalking the experience up to sleepwalking and nightmares. If someone came in the house then, they could do it again, couldn't they? It just seems so ... coincidental that the security cameras weren't recording. Even the outside cameras that are supposed to livestream to the security company picked up nothing unusual. They didn't even catch Parrish leaving the property voluntarily, so what happened? He had to have gotten out somehow.

The door to Parrish's room flies open, and I stifle a small scream. My nerves are fried at this point.

"Relax, Little Sister. It's just me." Chasm pauses, and then, upon seeing the look on my face, slams the door behind him and puts his back to it. "What the hell is going on?" he asks as I sputter and try to come up with a lie. Even now, with just

Chasm in here, it feels like the truth is going to burst out of me and spatter the room with Parrish's blood. "Dakota."

Chasm stalks across the room and snatches my phone from my hand. He sees the text message right away. That, and evidence of the video call that ended almost fifteen minutes ago.

"What the fuck is this?" Chasm chokes out, staring down at the screen. I jump but I don't answer him, not right away. I'm shaking so hard that I can't stand up anymore; I end up sitting on the edge of Parrish's bed without remembering how I even got there. "Dakota, what is this?!"

"Parrish." Just that one word. It's impossible to say more. How can I? What could I possibly say? "It's Parrish. He's ..."

I take a deep breath and rub at my tired eyes. "He's been kidnapped."

Chasm just stares at me like I'm a crazy person before letting out a nervous, breathy laugh.

"Not funny, Dakota. Did you talk to him? If you know where he is, you better fucking—"

"I'm not lying!" I shout out, shoving up to my feet and snatching the phone from Chasm's hand. He looks taken aback, leaning away from me like he doesn't know who I am anymore. Or maybe never did, come to think of it. "I got a video call from Parrish. He was tied to a fucking chair. He was bloody and bruised, Chas. It looks like someone beat the shit out of him."

Chasm just keeps staring at me, but he doesn't move, and he doesn't say anything. He's just blinking through the moment like he can't quite fathom what's going on. I don't blame him. Isn't denial the first stage of grief?

"He told me not to tell the cops. He said that if I did ... they'd ... that they'd ..."

I turn away from Chasm and pace over to the window, shoving it open and climbing out onto the roof. I just need air. I just need to remember to breathe.

"That they'd what?" Chasm snarls, following after me and crouching on the roof beside me as I put my forehead to my

knees and try to think. “That they’d *what?*”

“He told me if I didn’t do what his captor wanted, that they’d kill him. He said they’d kill him.” I’m talking into my knees since I can’t bear to lift my head up quite yet.

“You’re lying,” he tells me, his voice accusatory. “That’s bullshit. None of that is true.”

I lift my head up to look at him and he recoils like he’s been slapped.

“It’s true. Parrish told me I had to ask Tess about some guy named Justin Prior or ... or else.” It sounds like a load of shit, doesn’t it? Like something from one of Tess’ novels. Only ... it’s not. It’s actually fucking happening to me, and I can’t just sit here. I have to do something.

“You’re telling me the truth? Because if you’re lying to me, Little Sister, I swear to fuck ...” He keeps looking at me, waiting for me to deny it, to tell him what a huge, silly prank this whole thing is. I wish. Oh, how I wish it were.

“I swear on Maxine’s life that I’m telling the truth.” Chasm might not understand what a big deal it is for me to say something like that, but maybe he can hear it in my voice, how goddamn serious I am. He starts cursing in Korean and raking his fingers through his hair over and over again. He asks me something that I obviously don’t understand and then rephrases the question in English.

“So you’re going to do it then?” he asks, the color draining from his face as the implications of what I’ve said finally hit him. “You’re going to ask her about this Justin guy?”

I turn away for a moment and then yelp as Chasm grabs my shoulder and uses his other hand to turn my face back to him.

“You’re not going to get my best friend killed,” he whispers, giving me a small shake. “You have to do what he says.”

Hah. What did I say? That the day I arrived here was the worst of my life? What a crock.

No. No, today definitely takes the shit-frosted cake.

I just keep staring at Chasm, blinking through the strange numbness that's slowly taking over my body.

"I don't know ..." I start, but I can already feel it, the unfurling of those dark petals inside of me, the ones that will spread until a diseased rose is pricking my heart and bleeding me dry. I do know. I do. I just don't want to. Isn't it amazing the ways in which our spirits will stretch to accommodate the tricks that life throws our way?

"You damn well do know," Chas growls, but not unkindly. It isn't me that he's mad at: it's the situation. "Listen to me, Little Sister, if this guy really did kidnap Parrish, then he has us by the balls." He pauses, thinks for a moment, adjusts his phrasing. "He has us by the balls *and* the ovaries. He isn't asking much. It's just a question, right? Is that so much to ask in exchange for our friend's life?"

Chasm is right.

I know he's right. I just have a terrible feeling about this. It isn't like I'm going to ask Tess about this Justin person and bam, Parrish will be delivered to the Vanguard doorstep. There will be other requests, I'm sure. This is likely just the first of many. You don't kidnap someone just to get the answer to a single question.

"Dakota, *please*," Chasm breathes out, tears pricking at the corners of his eyes even as he grits his teeth in frustration. "Parrish was my only friend when I first came here. I didn't speak particularly good English, and everyone was a dick to me. Everyone, even my own dad. He's the only person that cared. My dad doesn't even speak Korean, but Parrish does. For me. He's come to my mom's *jesa* ceremony—uh, that's like a death anniversary—every year since we were *nine years old*. Let that sink in."

"Fuck." I shove up to my feet, running my fingers through my hair like a crazy person.

"Stop that." Chasm takes my hands and yanks them in front of me, holding them tight in his own. When I look up at him, I can only wonder how I thought he was wearing eyeliner all this time. I mean, he does sometimes wear it, but he's also got

the thickest, darkest, prettiest lashes I've ever seen. *Aaaaand now you're going senile, Dakota Banks. Get it together.* Chas very carefully escorts me back through the window and into Parrish's room before turning me around and carefully combing out the knots I just made in my hair with his fingers. It's an oddly soothing gesture. "Now, please. Go downstairs and ask Tess about Justin Whatever-his-name-is. *Please.*"

"Okay," I snap back at him, on the verge of a major breakdown. I spin around to stare at Chasm. Somehow, that calms me down a bit. "I'll do it, but then we need to figure something else out. I don't negotiate with terrorists, Chas."

He nods once and then steps back, opening the door for me.

It takes me a few calculated breaths before I'm able to move, but I finally convince my leaden feet to take a step. Another. Another. In less than two minutes, I'm downstairs and standing beside Tess Vanguard. She's hunched over the table, her fingers in her hair, her eyes bloodshot and wide but staring at nothing.

"Tess." Her name feels like it's stuck in my mouth, that I should maybe floss to get it out. Is that how she always feels when she says 'Dakota'? I hope not. If so, I feel for her, I really do.

"I'm sorry, Mia, but I just don't have the energy to talk right now." She turns away from me, and my nostrils flare with irritation. I should have sympathy for her—and I do—but goddamn it, the Mia thing is getting old.

"I was doing some Google research and I came across a name ... do you know a Justin Prior?"

And there it is.

Tess' head snaps up and she whips around to face me, staring at me like I've grown a second head.

"Justin Prior?" she repeats back, choking on the words. "I don't have time for this today." Tess shoves up from the table violently and starts off down the hall. Since my fucking stepbrother turned lover turned ... whatever-he-is, is currently being held captive, I don't have much choice but to follow.

“I just want to know who Justin Prior is, that’s it. Tell me and I’ll go away, I promise.”

Tess whirls on me then, a purple rage in her face that I’ve never seen before and hope like hell I’ll never have to see again.

“Your brother—my *son*—is missing, Dakota. Do you understand that? He’s *missing*.” She nearly shrieks the last part of this, and fuck ... but I can’t blame her. Of course I can’t blame her. I went missing for fourteen years. Fourteen fucking years without a clue. And look what it’s done to us, look at it. Parrish, her real son, her true son in a way I’ll never be, he’s gone now, too.

I don’t want to do this; don’t make me do this. Please, please, please. Why is this happening to me?

“Please tell me who Justin Prior is,” I choke out, the words burning my mouth as I say them. I’m sore from the other night, and all I want to do is lie on my side and study Parrish’s face, trace his lips with my finger. We started something new and fun together, and now he’s gone, and we have so much we need to talk about ... “Please.”

“Justin Prior is your father!” Tess screams back at me. I almost think for a moment that she might slap me, but she manages to control herself. Closing her eyes and taking a few deep breaths seems to help, but only a little.

Personally, I’m having trouble keeping my own feet in that moment.

Did she ... wait, what?

“Father?” I repeat, my stomach twisting into an impossible knot. Why would Parrish’s kidnapper want me to ask about my father? I stare at her.

“Are you happy now? Your father was a manipulator, a cheater, a liar. He abused me, Dakota. He abused you. I know you don’t remember—and that’s a good thing—but this was something you should’ve left alone.” Tess yanks a hair tie off her wrist and angrily puts her espresso waves into a high pony.

“Is this what you wanted, to break me while your brother could be lying in a ditch somewhere?”

She turns around and storms off while I stand there, shaking and holding back tears. I turn my head to the side and find myself looking at the framed birth certificate, the one with Mia Patterson’s name on it. The field that says *father* is blank. But it should say Justin Prior.

Justin Prior ... My hands start to shake as several, oddly shaped puzzle pieces shift around in my brain, forming a picture that I’d really rather not see at all.

If it weren’t for Chasm, I wouldn’t have survived that moment intact.

“Hey,” he says, padding quickly down the steps and putting warm hands on my shoulders. His amber eyes bore into mine, demanding the truth. “What happened?”

“I think ...” I start, blinking and falling and spiraling into a morose mental state. I make myself look at Chasm, force my eyes to trace his perfect mouth and the studs on either side of it, stare directly into his determined gaze. “I think the kidnapper is my dad.”

Chasm spends the night again, curling up on my bed with me. We don’t touch, not like Parrish and I did when we first slept in the same bed. It’s still nice, a warm body and a comforting presence to chase away the nightmares.

And oh, there are many.

I keep thinking about that night in the woods. If Parrish’s captor—the captor who could very well be daddy dearest—was able to get to him, then he was certainly able to get to me. Are the incidents related? Is what happened to me even real?

I spend the rest of the night awake, staring at the wall across from me and clutching my phone in my hands. Tess is too distracted to care whether Chasm is in bed with me or not, too distracted to spy on me and catch me with the phone. Maxx is

still out there, looking for Parrish, but I don't have the heart to tell him the truth.

Instead, Chasm and I both came up with excuses to skip out on the search party and stayed here. I tried calling the number back, but there was no answer. I've texted numerous times and still, nothing. All I can do now is wait.

I'll give him one day, I think, squeezing the phone tight to my chest. Twenty-four hours exactly, and that's it. If there's no contact, I tell Tess. I tell the detectives. I blow this thing up on social media and get the word out.

Breakfast that morning is sobering and sad. It's Tuesday, another school day where nobody goes to school except Chasm. His jaw is set firmly, a muscle in his neck ticking in anger. He's dressed in his uniform, but he looks like he'd rather jump off a building than actually attend class. Not like he has much choice in the matter: his father called Paul to demand that Kwang-seon either go to school today or come home.

Chas chose the former.

"Your dad's just worried about your studies," Paul suggests, trying to calm him down. His voice is detached though, and his eyes are far away. Even good ol' Dr. P is panicked and stressed now. Parrish has been missing for not one, but two nights. Two. That's a long time to not hear from somebody. "You can come back over after class."

"Yeah, sure," Chas replies, but he's not really listening. Maxx watches him with sympathy, buttering a piece of toast in an absentminded sort of way, like he's physically here but mentally, he's somewhere else entirely. He didn't get back to the house until about twenty minutes ago. The plan is for him to eat, take a nap, and then head out again. He asked me to go with him, but I can't. I have to stay here and watch the phone.

The thing is, I could see the disappointment in his face when I declined. He thinks I'm a monster. Maybe they all do? If they only knew ... I check the time on my Tess-phone. We're getting dangerously close to the twenty-four-hour mark, and my resolve is firm.

No contact, and I tell everyone what happened.

When Chasm gets up to head to class, he reaches out and grabs my wrist, pulling me along with him toward the front door. Maxx notices and gives us both a raised brow, but Tess and Paul are too far gone to care. Kimber notices, too, but who cares what she thinks anyway?

“If you get any messages, let me know, and I’ll be right here.” I nod, but when he goes to turn away, I end up reaching out to grab the sleeve of his blazer. The way he looks back at me, it kills me. There’s something here, something between us, and I don’t have the time or luxury to even talk about it. With Parrish missing, it doesn’t seem all that important. But it is. It’s important to me.

The sunflowers ... he brought me sunflowers.

“For what it’s worth,” I tell him, looking into his amber eyes and wishing I could just fall into them, drown there, escape this place and this hell for just a few minutes. “I’m sorry.” Chasm pauses and then turns back around, reaching up a hand to cup the side of my face.

“Sorry for what, Little Sister? You don’t have anything to apologize for; this isn’t your fault.” But I’m not talking about the kidnapping, and he knows it. He rubs his thumb across my lower lip in a way that really isn’t an appropriate gesture for friends and then drops his hand by his side. We’ll talk about the sticky feelings part of this situation later, after Parrish is home safe.

Because he *will* come home safe. I have to believe that. I have to.

Chasm turns again and heads into the garage, starting up his sportscar and backing out. It takes him several minutes to get through the throng of reporters, and then he’s gone, heading up the winding road that leads toward the academy.

It isn’t until I’m back upstairs with my bedroom door closed that the next call comes through.

I answer right away, sitting down heavy on the edge of my bed as Parrish’s battered and bloodied face fills the screen. I

could cry. I could scream. Instead, I just sit there and soak him in like it's the last time we'll ever see each other. The way he's looking back at me, I wonder if there isn't some kernel of truth in that.

"Tell me what Tess said," Parrish breathes, like he's struggling to get the words out. I'm not sure if what he's saying is fully scripted or just carefully monitored by his captor. By ... my dad? I don't want to even go there, but why else would this person tell me to ask Tess a question like that? This doesn't feel like a 'stranger danger' sort of a situation.

"Justin Prior is my biological father." I've been repeating the phrase in my head all night, but that doesn't make it feel anymore real. Instead, it floats through my mind like a nightmare, like that night in the woods with the needle in my neck ... "Why would your captor care about something like that?" The question is virtually rhetorical. I've already figured out the *who* part of this equation.

What I haven't figured out is the *why*. Most especially, I haven't been able to figure out the *where*.

Where are you, Parrish? Where, where, where?

Footsteps precede a male figure, dressed in a black sweater and slacks ... and a black stag mask with what I'm pretty sure are real antlers attached. The man pulls a chair up in front of Parrish, blocking him from view.

"Hello princess," he says as I swallow hard and try to remember how to breathe. "You must have a lot of questions."

I just stare at the man, trying to place the sound of his voice. *I've heard that voice before, I swear.* But I'm either too addled to place it or it's a voice that I've only heard in passing.

"You're Justin," I say, because even if that isn't the case, I'm pretty sure that's what this man wants me to think. "You're my ... bio dad."

The man simply folds his hands in his lap, watching me through the macabre shape of the stag mask. There must be some symbolism to it that I'm not getting, but I'll figure it out. Give me time, and I swear I will.

“That’s true,” he starts, his voice unflappable, almost eerily calm. Behind him, Parrish groans in pain, shifting so that I can hear the chair creak. “You’re a smart girl. Not a surprise considering we share DNA.”

There’s that stupid fucking word again. DNA. The bane of my existence. Unfortunately, at this point, I can’t run from it. I can’t hide. It is what it is. The only real question here is if this man is telling the truth about who he is.

“What do you want from me?” I ask, trying to bait this guy into giving me something that I can use against him. If I tell the police that Parrish is with Justin Prior, my bio dad, could they look him up? Could they find him before it’s too late? Then again, how do I know this really is Justin Prior? Could be a crazed fan, some psycho off the streets that’s obsessed with Tess’ work.

“You’ve done well so far,” he continues, as if I haven’t spoken. “You follow instructions, but you aren’t a slave to specificity. You know how to interpret things in their own way. That sort of initiative will serve you well in life; I can only hope that your trust in Kwang-seon McKenna isn’t misplaced.”

My blood chills, and goose bumps cover my arms and legs. How does Parrish’s captor know that Chasm knows? What the actual fuck? My eyes flick to the camera at the top of my phone. It’s possible, if this guy is even a remotely capable hacker, that he could’ve hacked in to watch me. The thought is almost too terrifying to consider.

“Why are you doing this?” I continue, because the longer I keep him talking, the more information I can absorb. The mask he’s wearing is so unique; could I trace it to its maker? What about his sweater or his pants, his shoes? Could I find them online, pinpoint them to a specific store?

“Mia, let me take a moment to explain the rules, just so we know that we’re on the same page. It’s important for parents to keep open lines of communication between themselves and their children.” He looks right at me, stares straight through

that screen and into my eyes. There's no recognition in me, no spark of long-forgotten memory, like with Tess' perfume.

He may as well be any stranger off the street.

"You're deranged," I whisper, my hand shaking as I squeeze the phone so tight that my fingers start to cramp. "If you really are my father, why kidnap Parrish and not me?"

The man doesn't seem perturbed by my insult. Instead, he smiles.

"I always keep my promises and honor my vows. I expect you to do the same. I will never lie to you, Mia. In exchange, all I ask is that you never lie to me either." He relaxes back in the chair, crossing his legs and folding his hands over his knee. He's wearing gloves, so I can't see his hands. Unfortunate. A tattoo or a scar might've helped offer clues as to his true identity.

"Well then, how is this for honesty? I hate you." It's a childish thing to say, but I can't help it. He wants the truth? There it is. Besides, if I piss him off enough, maybe I can trick him into giving more away.

Unfortunately, my admission only seems to have the opposite effect. The man pauses, thinks for a moment, and then has the audacity to look *pleased*.

"I understand that, but it won't last forever. Hate is such a useless emotion, such a waste of valuable energy." He taps his foot against the stone floor as I study the scene, committing it to memory as best I can. Also, what he doesn't know can't hurt him: I've installed an app on my phone to record the video call. It's a smoking gun if I hand it over to the authorities. "Here's the deal: you find Parrish Vanguard and you can keep him. You do what I say, and I keep him alive—provided you don't break any of my rules."

"So no lying?" I query back with a dry humor that I don't really feel. On the inside, I've gone completely numb. Out of control emotions won't serve me here. I almost let them get the better of me yesterday; I can't make the same mistake again.

“You will not tell the authorities about our conversations. In fact, you will not tell anyone that will pass that information along. If Kwang-seon talks, Parrish dies. It’s that simple. Consider your pawns carefully.” The man continues to watch me, but there’s not even a shred of emotion to latch onto. He’s as cold as Tess is. Shit, maybe this really is Justin Prior? Seems like they’d be a match made in heaven. “I appreciate your ingenuity in recording this conversation, but I suggest you delete it. If Tess finds that phone—or anyone else for that matter—and passes the information to the police, then Parrish dies.”

“Look at you. Fucking tough guy. Who do you think you are: the Seattle Slayer?” I know I’m pushing the envelope, but I can’t just sit here and smile prettily. I’m going to fight back.

Once again, the man pauses, like he’s considering his words very, very carefully.

“I’ve always hated that name. It’s incredibly gauche, don’t you think? I’d prefer it if you simply called me ‘dad’.” He waits patiently as I blink through his words, doing my best to process them.

“Wait, what?” I query back, shaking my head and pinching the bridge of my nose with my left hand. “You’re not the Slayer.”

“Call me whatever you want. It doesn’t matter. Here are my conditions: play the dutiful daughter, follow the rules, and do what you’re told. Find the right clues. Follow the right trail. Or someone you love gets hurt. Good girls get rewarded; bad girls are punished. Am I making myself clear?”

I sit there in stunned silence because I don’t know how to respond to that. He thinks this is a game? This is a *game* to him?!

When I don’t answer right away, the man stands up and pushes his chair out of the way. He moves out of view of the camera, leaving Parrish front and center. I just sit there and stare at him, at those beautiful brown eyes with their gold flecks. Memories of his hands on my body, of his body inside

mine, of his hot mouth pressed to my lips, come flooding in, and I clamp a hand over my stomach to hold back the nausea.

His captor returns, but this time: he has a knife with him.

“Wait, wait, wait,” I cry out, lunging to my feet, as if I can somehow leap through the screen and save the prince of sloths, like a princess on a white steed, brandishing her sword. “Please don’t hurt him. I’ll do it; I’ll play. I love games.”

He ignores me, cutting Parrish’s t-shirt with the knife and dropping the bloodied fabric to the floor. When he moves aside, I can see it, a long slice along the right side of Parrish’s chest. It doesn’t escape my notice that just a few days ago, my mouth was in that spot, kissing and tasting his sweet skin.

“For every day that you take, I make a mark. Just one mark. But eventually, it’ll be too much for him. Your time limit is entirely dependent on this boy’s strength.” As I watch in wide-eyed horror, he puts the blade of the knife to Parrish’s chest and presses down, drawing blood.

Parrish barely acknowledges it, his eyes on mine, his face stoic even as he sweats, even as he bleeds.

“You don’t have to do this, Dakota,” Parrish finally says, and I can hear in his voice just how much pain he’s in—even if he doesn’t show it. “Just ... forget about me. Go tell Tess. Tell the cops. I don’t want you involved in this shit.”

The man—my father? the Seattle Slayer? one in the same?—just stands there, tapping the bloodied knife against his gloved palm.

“Your decisions are yours to make, Mia. But there are repercussions. Every choice you make has a ripple effect on the world around you. This is an important lesson for you to learn at your age, one that I wish I’d been able to instill in you sooner.”

I stand there for a moment, trying to process all of this.

I’m a gamer, right? I love puzzles. I like to figure out how to beat each level, how to take the top score. Analyzing tricky situations is a specialty of mine. When Danyella joked that I

could be a detective, she wasn't wrong. It's sort of my thing. The pieces click into place.

Teenagers in the Seattle metro area are going missing. Teenagers in Seattle started going missing after my story went viral. Parrish is a teenager. Parrish is missing. His kidnapper is the Seattle Slayer. His kidnapper is my father.

“My father is the Seattle Slayer.”

The words almost hurt when they come out, like my tongue is being scraped by a serrated blade. I taste blood. That's when it occurs to me that I'm biting my tongue so hard that it really has started bleeding. I force myself to stop, still sitting there and watching Parrish through the tiny phone screen. He feels so far away, so goddamn far away.

He just sits there, wrapped in ropes, bruised and bloodied but alive. He's still wearing his pajama pants, the ones he slipped on after we finished making love. The ones he was wearing when I kissed him goodnight and slipped into my room with a goofy smile on my face.

It's surreal.

Had my first time on Saturday. My new love-hate boyfriend kidnapped on Sunday. Sitting here on Tuesday negotiating with a fucking serial killer. All of this could've been avoided if I'd never seen that stupid Netflix show. If my grandparents had never called that awful hotline.

I exhale sharply and shake my head.

“I'd do anything for you, Parrish,” I tell him, and I mean it. He looks devastated by that news, not uplifted, not hopeful. Devastated.

“I wish you wouldn't, Dakota. I really wish you wouldn't.” Parrish closes his eyes tight, but he doesn't stop talking. “If you're determined, I can't really stop you though, can I?” He opens his eyes again to stare at me. We both studiously ignore the psycho in the stag mask. “If you want to save my life, here's what you have to do.”

With my heart thundering in my throat, I stare at the typewriter on Tess' desk. It's the only one I've ever seen her use. She touches it reverently, like it's an extension of her soul. It must be, for her to prefer writing on it when it would be a million times easier to just use a laptop.

Sweat drips down the sides of my face as I touch it, keeping my fingertips light the way Tess does, like I'm just saying hi. *If I think about the page I found in here the other day, will that make this easier?* Only, nothing about this easy. It may very well be the most difficult thing I've ever done.

Chasm told me text him if I got another message, but I can't bring myself to do it. This ... task, or whatever it is, feels too personal. Too urgent. That's the point of it, I imagine. Because if this man, this Justin Prior, really is my father, he's got an agenda in mind.

I could turn him in right now, tell the cops that I know who the Seattle Slayer is. If I did that, would they be able to find him and rescue Parrish before it's too late? But no. No. He wouldn't have told me the things he told me if he thought he could be caught.

Either way, it's not a risk that I'm willing to take. Any risk to Parrish's life is too much.

Please let him be okay, I think as I pick up the typewriter and make my way downstairs. A quick peek down the hall toward the living room/kitchen area shows me that I'm alone for the time being. Not that it matters. The missive was quite clear: *smash the windshield with the typewriter then tell her how you really feel about her; tell her she's a bad mom; tell her she's the reason that Parrish is gone.*

I feel dizzy, almost like this an out-of-body experience. Tess is inconsolable and panicky, as she should be. She lost a child once, and now she's missing another. What if she never sees him again? If I don't do this, that's both of our realities.

With a groan, almost like a strangled cry, I move into the garage and stare at the white BMW sitting pretty on the epoxied floors. I'm about to destroy the very first birthday present that my biological mother ever gave me (that I can remember) with her special typewriter, the one she writes all her bestsellers on.

Gods help me.

Swallowing hard, I move into the garage and then try to sort the logistics of this out. Throwing a heavy typewriter into a car window isn't an easy thing to do. Eventually I just set the typewriter on the roof and climb up beside it, hefting it into the air ... just in time for Tess to open the door and see me standing there.

Pretty sure there are tears streaming down my face, but what can I do?

The life of a boy that I hated, that I've come to love, is on the line.

I could never forgive myself if something happened to him.

"Dakota?" Tess asks, sniffing and red-faced, her eyes puffy and her hands shaking. Paul is standing just behind her, gaping up at me from behind his glasses. *Fuck*. And I'd thought my life was hard before? That was *nothing* compared to this. *Why did she have to get my name right for once? Why couldn't she have called me Mia this time, just to make this a little easier?* I look at her, and all I can do is say how sorry I am with my expression.

I keep the words to myself. Well, those words anyway. There are other words that I have to say, or else Parrish will be the one that suffers. Because of me. This is all because of me. No wonder he hated me, no wonder he wanted me gone; I really did ruin his life, just the way he claimed.

And yet ... the memory of his warm hands on my body, his lips against my own, I can't shake that.

"Parrish left because of you," I say, and then I throw the typewriter as hard as I can into the windshield of the car, destroying both. Small squares of safety glass scatter as Tess

screams, clamping a hand over her mouth to cut off the sound.
“Because you’re a bad mom.”

The words get stuck in my throat, sticky and gross and unnatural. Their shape is foreign and sharp; it hurts to say them. I’m not Tess’ biggest fan, not by a long shot, but she doesn’t deserve this. I don’t deserve this.

I try to convince myself that she does, that it’s her fault I’m here. If Tess hadn’t found me, then he wouldn’t have found me.

My biological father.

The Seattle Slayer.

One in the same.

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CHAPTER 28

I spend the rest of the day lying on my side and staring at the wall, hoping that if the Slayer—oh, I’m sorry, I mean *Daddy*—shows up here, that I won’t see him coming. I put my hands over my ears, even though the house is dead silent.

Dead. fucking. silent.

With Parrish gone, it feels like what little heart was in this place has gone with him.

“Please be safe,” I whisper, and not for the first time. If I believed in any gods, I would probably pray right now. As things stand, all I can do is repeat that mantra and hope that it sticks. “Please be safe.”

After throwing the typewriter into the windshield of my new car, I hopped down on the broken glass and walked right past Tess and Paul. Neither of them followed me. Neither of them has spoken to me.

The worst part of it all though is not knowing what’s happening to Parrish right now. I’ve checked and rechecked my phone about a million times; there are no new messages, no matter how much I wish there were. I end up lying there for hours, living and reliving the trauma on Tess’ face as I used her typewriter to destroy my birthday gift.

Well, look at that, you wanted your dad in your life, right? You got him.

Shoving up from the bed, I stumble into the pristine marble bathroom and fall to my knees in front of the toilet. When I try to vomit, nothing comes up, and I’m left choking over the

toilet bowl with nobody and nothing to help me. Nobody to help Parrish, more like.

“Goddamn it, Dakota.” Chasm appears as if summoned, sweeping my green and black hair back for me as he squats down at my side. “What the hell happened today? There’s glass all over the garage floor.” I grip the toilet bowl, turning my face so that I can look at his.

I wish he could hold me the way Parrish does. I just want someone to hold me right now.

“Can we go into Parrish’s room?” I ask and Chasm grits his teeth, giving a sharp nod. I stand up and rinse my mouth out before letting Chas pull me across the hall by the wrist. Together, we lie side by side on Parrish’s bed. Still not touching. Definitely not touching. “I threw Tess’ typewriter into the BMW’s windshield.”

“You *what?*” Chasm chokes out, turning to look at me. I’m staring up at the ceiling, wishing it would get dark faster so I could see the glow-in-the-dark stars. The whole room smells like Parrish, that stupid dewy freaking clover and citrus smell. It’s honestly making me sick right now. “Why? Did he tell you to do it?”

“Did I mention that Parrish’s kidnapper is the Seattle Slayer?” I reply, as if it’s no big deal, as if people find out their sperm donor’s a notorious serial killer all the time. Just another pothole in the bumpy road of my life.

Chasm sits up like he’s been electrocuted, turning an aghast expression my way.

“You’ve lost your mind, that’s what. If the dude that kidnapped Parrish is the Slayer then that would—”

“Make him my dad?” I query back, my voice much calmer than my actual emotions. “Apparently.”

Chasm just keeps staring at me like he can’t quite process the information. Eventually, he starts running his fingers through his hair and muttering in Korean again.

“That’s not possible.”

I sit up, too, crossing my legs and letting my hair tease my bare knees.

“Maybe not. Maybe the kidnapper isn’t the Slayer. Maybe he isn’t even my dad. But you know what I do know? He has Parrish tied to a fucking chair. Does it even really matter who the crazy fucker is?” I rub at my face. I’m beyond exhausted, but how could I possibly sleep through this? How?

“How does this guy even know about Tess’ typewriter? About the car?” Chasm murmurs, tucking his knees up close to his chest and putting his arms around them. The sleeves of his blazer climb up with the motion, revealing a tantalizing glimpse of his tattoos. I can barely stand to look at them. *Parrish did that; that’s Parrish’s art.* “Anything else I should know about? I told you to call me.” He looks supremely irritated, narrowing his amber eyes in a way that reminds me of Parrish. “I can’t help you if you won’t let me.”

“I know.” I cross my legs and rest my elbows on my knees, putting my chin in my hands. “It just felt so ... personal.” Chasm doesn’t say anything, but he never takes his eyes off of me. I laugh, but the sound is far from pretty. In fact, it’s one of the ugliest sounds I’ve ever heard on my life. So bitter. So twisted. “He made me tell Tess such awful things ... Whoever he is, this is personal. Extremely personal.”

“So you did what he asked. Now what?”

“He wants me to find Parrish,” I begin, thinking about the stag mask, wondering what it represents. A quick search online gave me a possible answer: *fatherhood*. Gross. “This is ... it’s like a game to him.” I glance back at Chas to find him frowning, mulling over the situation and doing what I’ve been doing since this morning: looking for a solution to the puzzle. “As long as I do what he says, he’ll keep Parrish alive. But it’s up to me to figure out where he is.” I pause for a moment, picking at the black comforter beneath us with my fingernails. “He knows you know, by the way. The kidnapper, I mean. He says he doesn’t care who I pick as my ‘pawns’, as long as you don’t tell anyone that’ll try to intervene, like Tess or the cops or something.”

“He what?” Chasm repeats, blinking in surprise. “How could he possibly know that?”

I lift up the phone and give it a little shake before tossing it onto the bed in front of us.

“Take your best guess, but I would assume through the phone camera? How else?” I groan and rake my fingers through my hair. This is a lot to process; I’m fairly certain that I’m still in shock. My emotions are not that of a normal person right now. I feel detached, distant, like this is happening to someone who isn’t me. “Anything interesting happen at school?” I ask, trying to change the subject so I can have a moment to breathe.

“Everyone thinks Parrish took off to escape Tess. It’s like this is a big game to them.” He sighs heavily, but I can easily see that being the case. In a school full of rich brats with private jets at their disposal, this actually happens a lot. Two weeks ago, a senior girl took off mid-class and flew to *Spain* without telling her parents. “Danyella and Lumen were worried about you though.”

They’ve been texting me all day, but I haven’t had the strength to respond. I even have messages from Maxine as well as my grandparents, even with all the risk that entails. Everyone’s worried about me when they should be worried about Parrish instead.

“You look exhausted,” Chasm tells me, uncurling his arms from his legs. “You should try to get some sleep. I’ll watch the phone and wake you up if another message comes through.”

I give him a look.

“I can’t sleep right now,” I say, as if that’s the most obvious thing in the world. “Are you joking? I’m not sleeping until Parrish comes home.” Chasm’s face falls in a way that scares me. It scares me because he looks away, tries to hide it. “You don’t think Parrish is coming home, do you?”

“I think that this is going to go on a lot longer than you think. You can’t forgo sleep for ... however long it takes to resolve this.” Chasm reaches out and pulls me into his arms,

dragging me down to the bed and tucking my head beneath his chin. I go completely stiff, a sense of betrayal snaking through me. It should be Parrish holding me here like this, not Chasm. I shouldn't like Chasm holding me either. It's fucked. It's so goddamn fucked. *Told ya you were cringey, Dakota.* "Shh. Just relax. I've got you, Little Sister. We'll get through this together, no matter what it takes."

His words ring a bit hollow, but even though I know I shouldn't, I curl my fingers around his plaid tie and close my eyes. They're so sore, and I'm so tired, and sleep could be a true escape for me ...

I'm out before I can even finish the thought.

Parrish, I'm coming for you. Please be okay. We can't end things the way we did. There's so much more between us.

So much fucking more.

"Get up."

I open my eyes to see Tess standing over me. Her eyes flick to the side, and it takes me a second to realize that it's Chasm she's staring at. Luckily, he's sitting up beside me and not like ... snuggling me the way he was earlier.

"What's wrong?" I ask, my heart doing this strange flip-flop between fear and excitement. Is Parrish back? Is this nightmare over? Is he dead? Gods, please don't let him be dead.

"You're going to school today." Tess tears Parrish's blankets off of me and drops them to the floor. She can barely stand to look at me. Not that I blame her, after what I did yesterday.

"School?" I query back as Chasm grits his teeth beside me. He's got my phone in his hand, so I'm guessing that Tess surprised him as much as she did me. She won't realize it's my phone though. At least, I hope she doesn't. "You want me to go to school?"

Tess ignores me, turning and heading into the hallway without another word.

Chas and I exchange a look before we both climb out of bed. He hands the phone over—no new messages unfortunately—and heads into Parrish’s bathroom to freshen up. I retreat to my own room, showering in a daze, and donning my uniform.

It isn’t until I’m downstairs with my book bag that it really hits me.

She’s making me go to school? How can I possibly go to school when Parrish is in danger? I need to devote every waking second to trying to find him. You don’t get good at games by not playing them.

Then again, how can I refuse? Tess could send me back to New York which, for the first time since I got here, sounds like a really, really bad idea. The Slayer wants me to find Parrish? I’ll meet that fucking challenge—but I can’t do it from the other side of the country.

Chasm is waiting near the garage door, yawning and swinging his keys around his finger. He blinks several times and straightens up when he sees me, like he’s doing his best to wake himself from a stupor.

“I’m taking us all to school apparently,” he says, nodding his chin in Kimber’s direction as she appears from the living room. The way he looks at her ... and the way he looks at me, there’s no comparison. He calls me ‘Little Sister’, but he doesn’t see me that way, does he? “Morning, Kim.”

“Morning,” she replies, but her usual spit and fire personality is so dimmed that I hardly recognize her. She’s squeezing her phone in one hand but refrains from her usual mindless scrolling. Kimber looks at me, and I’m taken aback by the raw expression on her face. “Do you even care that he’s gone? Why haven’t you been doing the search parties with Maxx?”

“Kimber.” It’s Maxx, standing near the entrance to the living room/kitchen area. He’s leaning his left shoulder against the

doorjamb, as shirtless as Parrish and Chasm usually are. The sight of his naked body is almost staggering, but it's like I'm viewing everything this morning through a hazy lens. I am most definitely not myself right now. "I'm sure they have their reasons," he says, his voice like cool water as it crashes over me. A shock ripples through me, waking me up from my own stupor. "We all process trauma in our own ways."

"Please take me to see her," I whisper, squeezing my hands in the fabric of my skirt. Even though I'm speaking in a whisper, Maxx somehow hears me. That should've been a sign right there. He stands up suddenly, eyes widening as his gaze flicks to Kimber.

"See who?" she asks, turning an angry glare my way. I'm almost relieved to see it. Because if Kimber is pissed off at me, then the world hasn't changed as much as I thought it did. It isn't flipped upside down, it isn't over, and there's still hope for Parrish.

As long as I do what my father wants, there's hope.

"Lumen, stupid," Chasm snorts, taking over the big brother role while Parrish is out of the office. "You know they're dating; everybody does. Get in the car." He grabs Kimber's hand and her face flushes red before the pair of them disappear into the garage.

Maxx pads over to me, and I close my eyes, fighting back tears. Something about him makes me want to be honest, to just let it all out, to tell him everything. But I can't. I'm not even sure that Chasm finding out was a good thing. Last thing I should be doing is putting other people that I care about on the stag-masked psycho's radar.

I look up at Maxx, and his face falls dramatically, losing that edge of irritation that he was trying so hard to hide.

"I must look pathetic," I start with a self-deprecating laugh. "And I'm sorry about not helping with the search party."

"You aren't pathetic at all: your boyfriend is missing." Maxx pauses, like he isn't quite sure that was the right thing to say. Boyfriend? Is Parrish my boyfriend now? I have no idea

because we never really got to talk about it, now did we? “If Maxine were missing, I’d be the same way.”

“You wouldn’t help search?” I retort dryly because I must really look like an asshole now. Berating Tess about Justin, destroying my birthday present and her most prized possession while spouting vitriol, and refusing to take part in the search party. I’m not going to come out of this situation smelling like a rose, that’s for sure.

“Kota, can I ask you something?” Maxx starts, biting his lower lip for a moment and reminding me that even though we haven’t spent much time together, I’ve somehow picked up one of his habits.

“Go for it.” I swipe my blazer sleeve across my face, not caring if it gets gross or not. The state of my school uniform means nothing to me right now. Parrish. I need to figure out a way to rescue Parrish. It’s like ... life has suddenly become a video game. If this is just a game, I can beat it, right? I can rescue the prince from the tower.

“Do you know where Parrish is?”

The question hits me out of left field, and my eyes widen in just such a way that I probably look guilty as fuck. To be fair, I actually don’t know where Parrish is. But I know he’s alive. I know he isn’t safe. I know he’s hurt. I stare at Maxx for so long that his face starts to change, turning into a look of alarm that must be reflected in my own gaze.

I turn away from him, but he won’t let me go, grabbing onto my shoulder and forcefully turning me around. He leans down and looks straight into my face, and I swear, I forget how to lie. It dissipates like water on hot pavement. Nothing but steam.

“What happened? Where is he?” Maxx breathes, and I see this terrible spark of hope in his eyes. He’s worried, but he’s also glad that I know something, that his friend hasn’t just disappeared into the ether. “Dakota, you can tell me.”

The sound of someone coming down the stairs give us both pause. Maxx releases me and steps back as Tess appears in the

foyer beside us. The way she looks at me ... I'll never forget her expression for as long as I live. My cheeks—yes, and my boobs—turn a brilliant red as I remember the feel of the heavy typewriter in my hands, the sound of shattering glass as it made contact with the BMW.

She says nothing as she moves past me, like a ghost has possessed Tess' body and taken away all the fight she had left.

Using Maxx's brief moment of distraction, I slip into the garage, noticing that the safety glass has been cleaned up, and head for Chasm's idling car.

"Wait, wait, wait," Maxx calls out, grabbing my arm before I can complete my escape. "Dakota, you know something. You do. I can see it in your face."

"Can you please arrange for me to see Maxine?" I repeat, because I can't tell Maxx. It's too risky. I shouldn't even have told Chasm. I reach up and carefully remove Maxx's hand from my arm before climbing into the car. He says nothing, just stands in the garage and watches us until we disappear up the road toward the academy.

School is fucking torturous.

Everyone wants to talk to me, but not for the right reasons. They're all salivating to get the scoop on Parrish, but not because most of them are concerned, because they find the entire situation amusing.

Maxx did warn me about Whitehall, after all.

"He suspects something?" Chasm asks me at lunch, standing in the theater while Lumen and Danyella run off to grab us lunch. They both genuinely care, at least, and they've been trying to take care of us both all day. Chas taps his toe against the floor, his back against the front of the stage, arms crossed.

"He won't tell anyone, will he?" I ask, but even as the words are leaving my mouth, I know the answer. Maxx isn't

like that. We might not know each other very well, but I get the feeling that he wouldn't give up my secrets so easily.

“Maxx? Please.” Chasm snorts again and looks away. “He has these annoyingly rigid morals. Sometimes it takes a while to figure out what they are, but once you know, you can be assured that he'll never break them. He won't tell anyone unless he thinks it'll benefit both you and Parrish without a doubt. Until then, he'll keep it to himself. But, he's going to be suspicious as shit until then.”

“Fantastic.” I rub at my cheeks and close my eyes, wondering how Tess could even think to send us all to school while her son is missing. Then again, it's nearly the end of the school year; we can't miss more than a few days without falling behind.

That, and she was probably foaming at the mouth to get rid of me. Can't say I blame her.

I drop my hands to my lap before sliding my phone from my blazer pocket to check for messages. There's still nothing. It's infuriating. No matter how many times I text, it seems I'm not going to get a reply until the kidnapper is damn good and ready. The kidnapper ... my father. I mean, it could be true, but it could also be a bunch of bullshit. It really could be one of Tess' crazed fans; I know there are people out there who are like that.

Googling the number didn't help me either. It's likely a burner phone, so there isn't much I could do with it. The next thing I looked up—with my phone under my desk in second period, mind you—was search for local wineries and houses with wine cellars that are or were for sale sometime recently. Nothing there either. But I'm just getting started.

I nibble on my thumb nail, pausing when Danyella and Lumen head back into the theater with food for the four of us.

“I bet Parrish is in Cancun,” Lumen muses, handing me my tray. I'm not hungry, but I force myself to unwrap the baked potato, dumping the butter and sour cream into it and taking a robotic bite. I'll need fuel, right? Hit points. Hearts. My health

bar. A life gauge. “Or maybe Saint Croix with Maria Cortez. I hear she’s vacationing there until her sister is found.”

I stop with my second bite halfway to my mouth, my eyes flicking to Chasm. He’s giving me a look like he thinks it’s a weird coincidence but nothing more. That influencer, Francisca Cortez, is missing ... Parrish Vanguard is missing. Come to think of it, the Vanguard’s maid JJ is missing, too.

I set my fork down, my stomach twisting with nausea. There are coincidences, and then there are clues. These are clues. Francisca and JJ have very, very loose connections to me, but connections nonetheless.

“Wherever he is, I’m sure he’s—” Danyella starts, but I can’t take so much deceit dumped in my lap all at once. I’m not someone who enjoys keeping secrets. Honesty is refreshing as fuck.

“Parrish and I slept together the night he went missing.” There it is. It’s out there now. Chasm groans, but doesn’t comment. Lumen is standing there with a bottle of green smoothie in one hand, the cap in her other. She’s frozen with the cap halfway back to the bottle, like I’ve pressed pause on her.

“Pardon me?” Danyella begins, blinking heavily behind her pink-rimmed glasses.

“We slept together, and it was the first time. We never slept together before. I just ... let people believe a lie.” I stare at my food and refuse to look at either of them. “I’m sorry for that now. Really, really sorry.”

“Babe, what?” Lumen starts, screwing the cap onto her drink. “You think I didn’t realize I’d made a mistake at the party? I was drunk as hell. Talking to you for five minutes sober, I knew you’d never slept with Parrish. I mean ... until now.” She makes a face as I finally look up and catch her gaze. “I’m honestly not upset just ... jealous.”

“You slept with Parrish?” Danyella repeats, leaning in toward me. “Is that why he left? I’m not asking to be mean, but ... is it a possibility?”

“No,” I say firmly, thinking of that night, of how amazing everything was. Being with Parrish like that was fulfilling in a way I’ve never experienced before. “That’s definitely not it: trust me.”

Danyella and Lumen exchange looks as Chasm lets out a scoff.

“He wouldn’t do something like that: he’d know that I’d have to kick his ass if he did.” He stands up and grabs his tray from the stage. “Enjoy your girl talk. I’ll be outside in the hall.” He does what he says, leaving me alone with the girls. Somehow, he figured it out.

This conversation isn’t about the fact that Parrish is missing; it’s more than that.

He leaves me alone for the rest of the lunch period, so I can talk with my friends.

Just that act alone shows me that he’s just as much of one as they are.

The next message comes as I’m walking out of my last class of the day (one that’s being taught by a substitute as half the teachers have bailed to join the search party). As soon as I feel my phone buzzing, I tear it from my pocket and slip into the theater for some privacy. Danyella’s got a family thing today, so she’s given the entire production crew the day off.

Find a safe space to talk.

I stand there staring at the text for so long that my vision gets blurry, and I have to blink a half-dozen times to clear it.

I’m in a safe space, I reply, feeling a rush of adrenaline take over me. I keep telling myself over and over again that this is a game, that there’s a boss battle waiting for me at the end of it. Parrish is the prince; I’m the knight.

I exhale sharply, squeezing the phone tight in my hand and leaning back against the wall to wait. This I can do. A game. It’s a game. I can beat any game. Any fucking game.

An incoming video call appears on the screen, and I swear, I cannot answer it fast enough.

“Parrish,” I breathe, taking a step forward, as if that’ll somehow get me deeper into the screen to be with him. “I’m coming for you. I promise. I won’t ever stop. I won’t. Even if it kills me.”

“Dakota, don’t,” he chokes out, letting his head fall forward. He seems so tired today, so goddamn tired. “I’m not worth it.” But even as he says that, he lifts his eyes up to mine and they *blaze*. He wants to live, even if he won’t admit it. There’s no shame in that.

“What do I have to do now?” I ask, dreading the next command but knowing that I’ll do it. I’ll do it, and he knows that. *My father*. But I can’t think about that right now. Whether the kidnapper is my dad or not is irrelevant at this point.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Parrish is murmuring, closing his eyes. I wonder if he’s being fed? Given water? Allowed to sleep? The man—let’s just call him the Justin for now—says that he’ll keep Parrish alive, not that he’ll keep him comfortable or even sane. I don’t have a huge window of time here. “Gamer Girl, just let it go. Let me go.”

I meet his eyes, and I hope that I convey how serious I am when I talk.

“I will *never* give up, Parrish. Do you understand that? You might be an asshole, and a lazy sloth, and totally and completely annoying but ... as much as I hated you, I care about you just as much now. So tell me. What do I need to do?”

He swallows hard, wetting his dry and scabbed lips with his tongue.

“You have to set the theater on fire.”

It takes me a good thirty seconds for that to sink in. Parrish just sits there, looking at me, watching me. Maybe he doesn’t think I can handle it? Or maybe he just doesn’t want me to do it? There’s a chance someone could get hurt. There’s a chance I could get caught. Mostly, I’m thinking about Danyella.

“Go into the prop room, douse it with a five gallon can of gasoline, and light it up.” Parrish snuffles, the dried blood beneath his nose a concerning sight. How badly was he beaten before he was tied up? How deep are those cuts on his chest? How much blood has he lost?

The video cuts out and I grit my teeth, that panicky feeling taking over me again. Every time I see him, I can’t help but wonder if it’s the last. I end up putting my back to the wall and sliding down until I’m sitting. That’s where I remain until Chasm finds me a few minutes later.

“You got another message, didn’t you?” he asks me, but I don’t have to answer that question. He knows. I look up to find him watching me, his back to the door to make sure that nobody else comes in unannounced.

“He wants me to set the prop room on fire.” It sounds absurd when I say it. It won’t be the worst thing I do before the end of the school year though. I don’t know that in the moment which is probably a good thing. A great thing, actually. If I’d known all the shit I was about to get myself into, I might not have had the strength to push through. “We need a gas can and a lighter.”

Chasm moves over to crouch beside me, taking the phone from my hand and reading the text before looking back up at me. I never get a call when he’s in the room with me. That’s got to be intentional. The question isn’t ‘*am* I being watched?’, it’s *how* am I being watched?

“You’re serious about this?” he asks me, and I nod, looking up and into his amber eyes. The first time I met him, I was convinced he was one of the prettiest human beings I’d ever seen. I stand by that, even now. The only difference is that I’m starting to realize he’s just as pretty—prettier—on the inside than he is on the outside.

Chasm hasn’t seen the video calls; I didn’t even show him the one I recorded. He’s just taking my word for it. It’s a huge leap of faith for someone I’ve only known for three months.

“I’m serious.”

Chasm hesitates for a moment and then nods, standing up suddenly and offering me a hand.

“I know the girls who run the computer science club; they can access the school’s security cameras.” I give Chas a look, and he quirks a cocky smile. “And when I say I *know* the girls who run the computer science club ...”

I slap his arm and he gives a smoky chuckle, handing me the phone back. For a second there, it’s like nothing is different, like nothing has changed, like Parrish is going to be waiting for us when we come out of the theater.

But that’s not reality.

Reality is that I’m going to set fire to the theater, to the props that I help painted. I’m going to ruin Danyella’s production of *Wicked* that she’s been working on for an entire fucking year.

This freaking blows.

“Let’s start with the gas issue,” Chas begins, reaching into his pocket and sliding out a lighter. He offers it up to me, and we both pretend nothing happens when his fingers trace across my palm. “The janitor keeps a gas can in the shed out back. I only know that because I’ve taken girls—”

“Kwang-seon,” I warn, and he stops. He seems cocky and self-assured, but that’s the truest sign that he’s nervous as fuck right now. The more nervous he is, the more he talks about girls and plays up his slut persona. “Where is the shed?”

Chas gives me instructions on how to find the storage shed while he disappears to the computer science room. How he’s going to get the girls to ... do something with the footage *and* keep their mouths shut after the fire is discovered is beyond me. But somehow, I trust that he’s got my back.

The shed is easy enough to find, situated at the back of the building and behind the student greenhouses. We had greenhouses back at my old high school, too, but we grew vegetables in ours for the school lunch program. Here at Whitehall, they grow exotic plants and do strange experiments with interbreeding and cultivation. It’s never appealed to me.

I pause in front of the shed, checking around to make sure that I'm alone. For the moment, at least, it appears that I am. Unfortunately, there's a padlock on the door and I'm seriously lacking in bolt cutters here. With a curse, I circle the shed, peeping in the windows and spotting the red gas can sitting beside a riding lawn mower. There's a professional crew that takes care of the landscape normally, but just in case a tuft of dandelions or daisies sprouts here or there, they've got an emergency fix on hand.

My eye twitches. I sure wish my worst problem was a stray cluster of flowering plants. That'd be nice.

After several rounds of circling the shed, I realize that I don't have many choices here. Either I break a window and take the can, or I don't do what Justin wants today. He never specified that I had to get this done in a New York minute, but I also know that today is a rare day when nobody is in the theater. Usually, Danyella is there with a handful of drama club members.

I look around for a stray rock, brick, gardening tool, anything at all ... but this is Whitehall Preparatory Academy, where the best shine bright. There's nothing around for me to use; the campus is as sterile and perfect as the Vanguard's ice cavern.

I'm basically out of fucks to give at this point, so I end up slipping my blazer from my shoulders, wrapping my fist in the fabric, and then punching the rearmost window as hard as I possibly can. The old glass gives way easily enough as I rush to knock off the sharp shards around the edges.

Climbing in is substantially more difficult, but I pad the workbench below the window with the blazer, saving myself from the worst of the glass. My feet hit the dusty floor and I waste no time in snatching the gas can, making sure the cap is screwed tight before I shove it out the window and onto the grass.

I manage to escape without getting blood on anything, so I consider that a victory.

Or, as much a victory as someone in my position can have.

Chasm is waiting at the theater when I get back, giving my ruined blazer a look before I shove it into my bag.

“Let’s do this,” I say, carrying the gas can down the aisle between the seats. I use my keys to let myself backstage, knowing with every step that I’m going to relive this moment for the rest of my life and hate it with a passion that burns far hotter than any fire I could possibly set.

This is Danyella’s hard work, my hard work, the work of dozens of students and staff. Dreams, that’s what this production is, a collection of dreams.

“Maybe I should do it?” Chasm asks from behind me as we enter the room and I stand there, staring at the sea of furniture, the stack of backdrops against the wall, and the boxes full of props. Some of these things, I helped make. Some of them I painted while listening to Danyella talk. Some of them were donated.

I can’t believe I’m doing this. I just can’t. How can I go through with this and look Danyella in the face ever again? How?

“No,” I say, my voice firm, maybe even a little scary. If someone has to have blood on their hands, it may as well be me. If Parrish’s captor really is my father, then this isn’t Chasm’s responsibility. And it isn’t Parrish’s. It’s mine. “Stand back.”

I unscrew the can’s cap before handing it over to him. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath, and I try to remember the look on Parrish’s face, the blazing fire in his eyes, the almost eerie calmness of his voice. He doesn’t want me to do this. Maybe doesn’t think that I can. But I will.

Justin keeps his promises, does he? Well, good for him. So do I.

The acrid smell of the gasoline burns my nose as I splash it over a pair of beds intended for Elphaba and Glinda to lounge on while they sing *Popular*. Guess that isn’t happening. I’m crying as I do it, pouring gas all over my friend’s dreams, destroying hours upon hours upon hours of work.

With a whimper, I pull the lighter from my pocket, bend down, and flick the wheel. The trail of gas goes up in an instant, and then Chasm is pulling me up and grabbing me by the hand. He leads me out of the theater and, on my way out, I pause and look around before lifting up the glass cover of the fire alarm.

With a deep breath, I reach out and pull it.

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The title 'CHAPTER 29' is displayed in a stylized, hand-drawn font. 'CHAPTER' is in black, and '29' is in pink. The text is set against a background of dark, gnarled tree branches and a green, textured shape that resembles a heart or a large leaf. The overall aesthetic is dark and somewhat macabre.

CHAPTER 29

News of the fire reaches us quickly. It's everywhere, splashed across social media, highlighted in mainstream news, and most importantly, texted to me via Danyella.

It's over. It's all over. That's what she says. I'm standing in the shower, leaning against the wall with one shoulder and staring at my phone screen. Little droplets of water splash across the surface, but I ignore them. It's waterproof anyway and also, I just don't care. What I do care about is Danyella. Parrish. Chasm.

I step out of the shower and throw the phone on the counter while I dry off. I'm not ready to message Danyella back, not yet. First, I need to clean up and make sure there's zero evidence of what I've done. The horrible, horrible thing that I've done.

"Some people are starting to suspect Parrish of setting the fire," Chasm tells me when I step out of the bathroom in one of the fancy robes that Tess bought for me. He's wearing a robe, too, which is interesting. It must be Parrish's though I've never seen him in it.

"Good. Maybe they'll look a little harder for him?" I sit down beside Chas with a long sigh, my phone hanging heavy in the robe's pocket. It weighs as much as the burden that's sitting pretty on my shoulders, like a stone gargoyle perched atop my head, watching everything that I do.

I lie back on the bed, my eyes catching on the vase of sunflowers that are still resting on my nightstand. They're still fresh, still very much alive, but given time, they'll slowly wilt. They'll die.

It's a macabre metaphor that I refuse to think too much about.

"Hey Chas," I start, but he's already several steps ahead of me, rising to his feet and moving over to the framed family portrait I hung on the wall.

"Don't," he warns me, glancing over his shoulder with a deep-set frown. "I don't want to talk about the flowers; they aren't a big deal anyway." He looks back at the picture as I sit up, digging my fingers into the edge of the bed as I study him. Teenage guys just don't randomly give flowers to their best friend's 'little sister' for no reason at all.

"We don't have to talk about it right now if you don't want to, but ... I'm not going to forget that you gave them to me."

"Who says they're from me at all?" he queries back, but he's already shown his cards. It's too late. "Anyway, don't look too much into it. I just happened to see them on my way over here and figured what the hell."

"That's the lamest excuse I've ever heard in my life. If you don't want to tell me why you brought me flowers, don't. Just say that. You don't have to lie." I watch as Chasm's back tenses beneath the robe and he turns slowly to look at me; the expression on his face says everything.

"You want to hear the truth, huh? You want to hear that I bought the flowers for you because I'm an idiot? Because I thought that maybe, just maybe, you were interested in me the way I was interested in you?" Chasm stalks toward me, and I swear, I can still smell the burn of gasoline, the stink of ash. But no, he's clean and I'm clean; it's all in my head.

I swallow hard, but I don't know what to say to that. Part of me feels ashamed for not chasing after Chasm that day. The rest of me loves what happened between me and Parrish. I don't know. It isn't exactly the time for romance, is it?

"I should never have brought it up," I whisper, and Chasm scoffs, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Besides, I told you: I have a crush." He keeps watching me, this unspoken communication in his gaze that I finally,

finally get. *Oh. His crush, the crush he told me about at the lake is ...* She's me. If Chas is an idiot, then so am I for not seeing it sooner. "Anyway, she's smarter, prettier, and way less dorky than you."

What he's saying, it isn't a lie. It's a game, one with stakes that are much less dire than the one I'm engaged in with Justin and Parrish. But a game, nonetheless.

"I bet she can run a six-minute mile and spends her weekends working out." I try to smile, but the expression falls flat. *I committed arson today; I destroyed Danyella's dreams.* Tears threaten, but I push them back. I can't cry right now; I have work to do.

"Damn straight," Chasm replies, but he isn't even trying to smile. He's watching me so carefully, like he's afraid that I might break. He needn't worry; I'm made of stronger stuff than he might think. "Don't cry, Little Sister," he murmurs after a moment, taking a step toward me. He adds something in Korean, but I obviously don't understand. I wish I did. Oh, how I wish.

I cover my hand with the robe's sleeve and rub away even the possibility of tears.

"Shall we get started?" I ask, pulling the phone from my pocket and doing my best to change the subject. It'd be nice to have my laptop; that'd make things much easier. But there's no way in hell that Tess is going to give it back to me now. This'll have to do.

"Started ..." Chasm trails off and then nods, moving into Parrish's room to grab his bag. When he comes back, I see that he's got his own laptop in hand. Thank god for small miracles. "Just tell me what you want me to do; I'm yours." He pauses, and we both take a moment to process the unintended double entendre. "Put me to work."

"How are your hacking skills?" I query with a raised brow. I'm not technology stupid or anything, but my forte is video games, not real-life detective work.

“Ahh, I’m alright,” he responds with a loose shrug of his shoulders. We settle down together with our backs against the headboard, bare legs precariously close to touching. I decide to give Chas the phone to view the recorded video before I delete it.

I wish I could describe the expression on his face when he sees Parrish for the first time. As much as I care about Parrish, Chasm cares just as much, if not more.

“Do you mind if I play with this a while before you delete it?” he asks, and I nod.

We end up sitting like that for the rest of the night, until both of our alarms go off for school, but it only took me a couple of hours to see that ‘I’m alright’ in Chasm’s language clearly means ‘I’m damn good at what I do’.

It makes me wonder if he really does know the girls in the computer science club ... or if that was just cover for ‘I am the computer science club’.

We’re both bleary eyed and exhausted as we crawl out of bed to grab our uniforms, but I don’t miss the fact that one of the sunflowers has wilted briefly overnight. A single petal drifts to the floor as I watch, and chills creep up and down my spine. That’s not a good omen, not a good omen at all.

“School’s cancelled today,” Tess snaps as soon as we come downstairs. She’s in the kitchen with the rest of the family, nursing a flat white and looking like she got as much sleep last night as Chasm and I did. Once again, Maxx is there, sitting at the table and working on a plate of eggs.

The way he watches me when I move into the room scares the crap out of me. He hasn’t forgotten about our conversation yesterday; he’s just been busy. *Yeah, well, so have I. I was busy setting fire to my best friend’s dreams and trying to figure out where my stepbrother/boyfriend has disappeared to.*

“It’s cancelled?” Ben queries, looking up from his own food. His face is just as red from crying as anyone else’s.

“Not yours, buddy,” Paul says, reaching out to give his son’s shoulder a squeeze. It’s literally the first time I’ve ever seen him show physical affection to his children. Guess losing his oldest knocked some sense into Dr. P. “Just the high school. There was a fire in the theater.”

“It was purposely *set* on fire,” Kimber corrects, cutting her fried eggs into pieces and playing with the runny yolk. I just freeze where I am, my book bag slung over one shoulder, my feet rooted to the floor. Luckily, Chasm is a far better actor than I am, sauntering into the room like he doesn’t have a care in the world.

“Any news?” he asks, and even though we both know more than the rest of the family combined, he can’t seem to hide the small spark of hope in his words.

“Nothing,” Tess chokes out, her hands shaking around her mug. She lifts her gaze up to mine, and I feel that sick, sad feeling inside of me twist into a dark shadow that overwhelms every part of me, drowning me in pain. How can I keep this up? How can I keep lying? “You really haven’t heard from him?”

“If I knew where he was, I’d tell you,” I whisper back, sliding my book bag off my shoulder and tossing it beside one of the stools at the breakfast bar. I’m in desperate need of sleep and so is Chasm, but I’d rather spend our day searching for Parrish.

Last night was a total wash, but Chas had the brilliant idea of looking up wine aficionados in the area. We figured if we could find someone who liked to, say, collect expensive vintages or bid on rare bottles at charity auctions, maybe we could get a lead. Other than his own father, there were about six other locals in Medina who fit the description.

Then again, that’s assuming Parrish is even in the Seattle metro area. For all we know, he could be ten states away by now. But it’s a start and that’s more than we had yesterday. Also, Chasm was able to take the audio from the call and run it through voice matching software. Don’t ask me how: I’m not

the genius valedictorian hacker who likes to play dumb with everyone around him.

We didn't get any matches unfortunately, but that isn't to say that we couldn't. Or that we couldn't track the phone number if we had the proper resources. Obviously, law enforcement could do all of this and more, but I get the feeling that Justin is a little more cautious than that. If he truly is the Seattle Slayer, then he's been fooling not only local law enforcement but also the FBI for *months*.

Tess eventually disappears, driving off in her Mercedes while Paul readies the kids for school.

"Whitehall is closed until Monday, but your mom wants you to stay put," he tells me before he leaves, and I nod, taking a bite of my own eggs, the ones that Chasm cooked for me because he's awesome like that. "Kwang-seon, your dad wants you home before lunch."

Chas balks at that, but there's no point in arguing with Paul; he has no control over what Chasm's father does.

"God-fucking-damn it," Chasm snarls, throwing his fork into the sink so hard that it bounces back out and lands on the floor. Delphine, who's in the process of cleaning the kitchen, heaves a tired sigh and picks it up. I'd apologize to her if I had the energy for that sort of thing.

"It's okay," I tell him, even as he rakes his fingers through his ebon-black hair and curses under his breath. "We can video chat or something."

"If my dad wants me home, then it's because he's planning on riding my ass into the ground. He won't let me ..." Chasm lets his gaze slide over to Maxx. He's finished his food, leaning back in his chair with his orange juice cupped between his hands. Kimber's sitting beside him, glaring at me for having the audacity to talk about video chatting with her crush. "Anyway, he'll make sure I'm studying in his office with him all night. I'll be trapped, Dakota."

"What is it exactly that the two of you are so desperate to keep working on?" X queries, his voice edged like a blade.

He's furious and frustrated with both of us at this point. "What the hell is more important than going out and looking for Parrish?"

We exchange a look that just seems to set Maxx off.

"Kimber, could you give us a minute?" he asks, turning to her with a forced smile. She gives him a wary look, like she has no intention of doing any such thing.

"Kim, come on. Go upstairs and give us a second, and I'll take you to coffee after Parrish comes home." Chasm raises his brows at her, and her face flushes as red as my tits usually do.

"Fine." She shoves up to her feet and takes off. I lean back on my stool to watch her, ensuring that she's well out of earshot before turning back to the boys. Delphine seems to realize that we need a moment and quietly excuses herself as well, heading into the gym area to clean the equipment. Tess and Paul want it wiped down twice a week, even if nobody uses it which just seems like a total waste of energy in my opinion.

"You don't think I'm worried about Parrish, too?" Chasm asks quietly, turning to look at Maxx and leaning his ass against the kitchen island. "I'm doing everything that I can."

"How much can you really do sitting behind a computer or staring at your phone?" X challenges, giving me an assessing look. He wants to ask what I know, but he doesn't want to do it when Chasm's around. Great. I'll need to add 'avoid my sister's boyfriend' to my list of things to do.

"You always say things like that," Chas retorts, getting irritated. "As if life isn't real unless it's lived outside, burning calories, dripping sweat. Don't be stupid. I can do all sorts of things from my computer that are a hell of a lot more useful than trudging around Medina looking for a needle in a haystack."

Maxx stands up quickly, the chair scraping across the floor. For a second there, it seems like he might actually start a fight with his friend. Instead, he puts his palms flat on the table, lets his head hang low and lets out a long, tired exhale.

“Tell me then,” X continues, his voice low and dangerous. I wonder if Maxine’s ever seen this side of her boyfriend before? His anger *is* justifiable though, isn’t it? I know he’s just worried about Parrish, and I can’t blame him. He *should* be worried. If he knew what I knew, he’d understand exactly how dire the situation is. “What are you doing? Hacking into red light cams and looking for license plates? Searching the FBI’s database with your fingerprint samples?” He lifts his head up, green eyes blazing.

Chasm sneers back at him in response, and I stand up abruptly, doing my best to break the tension.

“We searched every account that Parrish has for clues.” That’s true, although it isn’t all that we did. But I won’t lie to Maxx. So partial truths and omissions it is. “His email, his PlayStation account, Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, Steam, Discord, even online banking. We’re searching for digital trails, Maxx.”

He just stares at me like he’s never seen me before or, more likely, as if he made a huge error in judgement, like I’m not the person he thought I was, the person he wanted me to be.

“Don’t ask for permission; own your space. Take it. If you make sure you’re comfortable with yourself, you’ll fit in wherever you are.”

I bet he’s regretting offering up such sage advice to me now; I know I look like a total asshole in all of this.

“You haven’t called your sister,” he says, his voice accusatory and laced with suspicion. X stands up straight, shirtless and beautiful, and then he turns away to head for the balcony doors. That’s when I notice his tattoos, these angelic white angel wings that go from his shoulder blades all the way down to the waistband of his pants and then beneath them.

I’d recognize that work anywhere: it’s Parrish’s.

I suck in a sharp breath, closing my eyes against a sudden wave of melancholy. *I should’ve let him ink me when he was here, so I’d have a piece of him at all times.* When I open my eyes, I see that Maxx has propped the doors open, letting the

breeze tousle his chocolate hair as he stares back at me. He's leaned up against the edge of the doorframe like he's waiting for a response.

Oh, that's right. Maxine.

"I've been busy." What a feeble excuse. But it's the truth. What else can I possibly say? *Sorry, this creeper in a black stag mask who says he's my father as well as the Seattle Slayer had me set my school on fire, so I haven't had a chance to call.* "Maxine will understand."

X scoffs, shaking his head like he's disgusted with me. He disappears onto the balcony and finally slams the doors behind him.

"Be careful with him," Chas tells me, his gaze focused on the doors and not on me. "He isn't as nice as he wants everyone to think."

Chasm takes off like he's about to leave but pauses beside me instead, reaching up a hand to play with my hair. I watch mesmerized as he twirls the lime green strands around his fingers.

"I've got to go start my hair and makeup." He releases my hair and taps at one of his lip piercings for emphasis. "I'll check in with you before I leave. Keep up the search and I'll be in touch."

With a small curse that reminds me of the way he said *fuck it* at the lake before he kissed me, Chasm leans in and presses a warm kiss to my forehead, taking off down the hallway before I even know how to feel about it.

With Chasm gone, the house feels lonelier than ever. I end up spending the first half of my day texting and calling people. Lumen is easy to talk to. Sally and Nevaeh, too. The rest of the people on my list are so emotionally draining that by the time I'm done, I'm going to need a nap.

Danyella spends nearly thirty minutes sobbing on video chat while I sit there and cry with her, apologizing over and over and over again.

“Don’t be sorry,” is what she says to me. “You didn’t do anything wrong. But when I catch the bastards who did this ...” The sharp sound of her laugh will haunt me for years to come. Apparently, word has gotten around that the fire was, in fact, arson. I’m not sure if the authorities leaked something or if it’s just Whitehall gossip. Either way, it’s not a good sign for me or Chasm.

Reluctantly, she lets me go so that I can call my sister next.

“Oh my god, Dakota, are you okay?” Maxine breathes, leaning in toward her computer screen like she can hug me right through it. And oh, how I wish she could. “I’ve been calling and texting for days, but I wasn’t sure if that woman ...”

“She’s on a warpath,” I agree, glancing away toward the wall of windows and the lake. “*Was* on a warpath, I should say. She’s too worried about Parrish right now to pay much attention to me.”

“What do you think happened to him?” Maxine asks as I look back at the screen, wishing I could tell my sister everything and knowing that I’d do anything to keep her from getting involved in this. Parrish’s pleas for me to walk away, to give up on him, they make a lot more sense when I think of them in the context of Maxine. *He really cares about you, Dakota*, I tell myself, but it’s not much of a revelation.

I knew.

I fucking knew that.

Tears prick my eyes, but I dash them away. Been doing that a lot lately, haven’t I?

“I don’t know,” I reply carefully, ensuring with every word that I’m not lying. I really don’t know what happened, why Parrish was chosen, how he was taken without anyone knowing. “But I miss him. Maxie, I ... we ...” Her face

softens as understanding dawns. She had her first time at sixteen, too, so I know she gets it.

“Oh, baby sister,” she murmurs, reaching two fingers up to touch the screen. “I knew you liked him.”

“I think I’m in love with him?” I query back, shaking my head at the thought. “I know I haven’t known him for very long, and that I’m probably too young to think something like that, but ...”

“Whoa, whoa,” Maxine soothes, stopping my self-deprecating rant in its tracks. “When love hits, it hits. Feelings are never wrong or right; they just are.” She pauses briefly, pushing her dark hair back from her face. “Maxx says you’re not participating in the search parties? I told him that didn’t sound like you, that if you weren’t helping you had a reason.” I nod, but I can’t tell her what that reason is. My silence is enough to communicate that. Maxine and I know each other too damn well; I can’t get anything past her. “Whatever that reason is, it’s valid. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do, Kota.”

“I know.” I sniffle slightly and rub at my nose. “I need to call Grandma and Grandpa and let them know what’s going on.” I pause briefly, wetting my dry lips. I’m so freaking tired right now, I can barely keep my eyes open. “What happened after Tess caught us? I mean ... what did she do to you?”

Maxine looks supremely annoyed, the corner of her lip curling up in disgust.

“That doesn’t matter right now. How about we worry about that after Parrish comes back?”

I nod, glad to be able to set aside at least one problem in favor of a much, much bigger one.

Justin Prior. The Seattle Slayer. What if it’s all true? What will Maxine think when she finds out that my blood is tainted with a killer’s? What will my grandparents think? Will that change our relationship?

I can’t allow myself to believe that.

“I’ll call them now,” I tell her, and she nods, giving the screen a kiss before we say our usual goodbyes. “Love you fierce.”

“Love you fierce, baby sister.”

As soon as she hangs up, I dial my grandparents, noticing that they answer the call without Saffron present. With all of this crap going on, I can’t help but wonder if she didn’t somehow know.

“Has she told you? If she hasn’t, she should—before he finds you.”

If Saffron didn’t know anything, then she must be prophetic because all the things she told me seem to be ringing true. But how? How the fuck would she know anything at all about my biological father?

“Is there a way for me to contact Saffron?” I ask after I’ve had a chance to talk for a while. The look on Carmen’s face tells me that wasn’t the best question I could ask right now. She seems wary, almost afraid.

“It’s probably best that you don’t see or talk to her for a while,” she hazards, giving my grandfather a look. “Tess wasn’t happy with us for contacting you, to say the least. And Saffron was having a really hard time with it. She’s ... well, she’s staying in a facility for the time being.”

I cock a brow, but I don’t really know how to respond to that. Saffron has always been a little sad, a little flighty, a little weird, but I never thought of her as someone who’d need to be committed or anything.

I decide to let the subject go for now, allowing myself just a few minutes to enjoy talking to my grandparents with Tess out of the house. Once I’m done, I curl up on my bed with an alarm set on my phone. Just thirty minutes and I’ll get up, get online, and see what I can’t do to help locate Parrish.

Unfortunately for me, I don’t wake up until hours later, when it’s already dark out.

The first thing I do is snatch my phone and check for messages.

There's one waiting for me.

I don't want your studies to slack because of this; it's nearly finals and you should be studying. I'm going to give you the rest of the week off, and we'll start fresh on Monday. Rest well, princess.

I just stare at the words, my jaw clenched tight as I resist the urge to throw the phone against the wall. What the hell is this guy playing at? My studies? Give me the rest of the week off? What the actual fuck?

You're kidding me, right? You want me to study when someone I care about is bleeding and hurting and suffering? What sort of monster are you?

The response comes almost instantly.

The fatherly kind.

And that's it. Just that. I send several more texts that he ignores, and then I shove up to my feet, wrenching my bedroom door open. Parrish's is closed, but I can hear someone moving around inside. Even though I know it can't possibly be him, a surge of stupid hope takes over anyway, and I find myself yanking the door open and stumbling inside.

It's Maxx.

He's sitting on the edge of Parrish's bed, looking worn out and hopeless. Pretty sure he didn't mean for anyone to see him that way. As soon as I set foot in the room, he stands up.

"Kota." I love that he uses my nickname, but I'm not particularly thrilled to see him. He's too perceptive. He knows that I know something, and he isn't going to let it go until he finds out what that something is. "Are you okay? I knocked on your door earlier, but you didn't answer."

"Must've fallen asleep," I offer, which is not at all what I wanted to say. I was sleeping while he was out searching for Parrish. That doesn't make me look very good and, for some strange reason, I want to look good to Maxx. He's my sister's boyfriend, after all, and she's more into him than any boy she's ever been with. What if they get married? How will I ever live this down?

“Mm.” X ruffles up his hair with a sigh, closing his eyes for a moment, like he’s doing his best to regain his composure. “I’m sorry about earlier; I shouldn’t have come at you like that.” *Sounds like someone was talking to Maxine*, I think, forcing my tired lips into a semblance of a smile.

“No problem.” I pause, eyes flicking to the side where Parrish’s sketchbook is sitting, one of the green and black roses featured prominently on the exposed page. “For what it’s worth, I do care about Parrish. I want to find him just as much as anyone else.”

Silence stretches sticky and uncomfortable between us.

When I look back at Maxx, I find him staring at me.

“You know something,” he repeats, that edge of danger in his voice again. “Something big. I just can’t figure out why you’re keeping it to yourself.”

A shameful flush crawls up my cheeks and boobs, and I turn away toward the hallway.

“I don’t know as much as you think I do, Maxx.” I start back toward my bedroom, but he ambushes me, sliding around in front of me and slamming his left palm into the wall beside my head. His gaze is intense as he leans down toward me, that cool, sporty smell of his overwhelming me. I wonder if, like Parrish, that’s just his natural scent that I’m picking up on. I hope not. I hope it’s just cologne. Yeah, it’s got to be cologne. “What are you doing?” I choke out, looking up into his green gaze and wishing a hole would appear in the floor to swallow me up.

“I like you, Kota, I do,” he tells me, and my heart contracts strangely. It’s a physical reaction that I can’t control, even as I find myself disgusted by it. “But if I find out that you and Parrish are up to something, I won’t forgive either of you.”

“Up to something?” I repeat, feeling a bit of that disgust morph into anger. “You think I’m doing this on purpose?”

“You know something, but you won’t tell me what that something is. Surely you and Parrish knew that you could never actually have a relationship. Tess isn’t the sort of parent

who'd allow her stepson to date her daughter; it would never happen."

"You're insinuating that we'd put Parrish's entire family through something like this over a love affair?" I'm tempted to slap Maxx, but I squeeze my hands into fists instead. "You don't know me and clearly, you don't know Parrish very well either. He always puts people he cares about above himself. How insulting."

Rather than back away, Maxx leans even closer into me, like he thinks by pressuring me like this, he can get me to talk. Our faces are disturbingly close at this point. If someone were to walk in on us, they might get the wrong idea.

And oh, how wrong they'd be.

I'm much closer to punching Maxx Wright than kissing him.

"If you don't tell me, I'll keep digging until I find out. I'll watch your every step, Dakota."

"You do that," I snap back at him, turning my face so that our noses touch. That gives him pause and he seems to realize what he's doing, pulling back slightly but keeping his palm pressed to the wall by my head. "Make me out to be the enemy. I'm used to it by now."

I go to move past him, and he grabs my arm, his fingers burning where they touch my skin. Our eyes meet. It's impossible to deny that we have a natural chemistry. There's just something about him that calls to me and vice versa, but if this is his true personality coming out, then honestly, I'd rather Maxine broke up with him.

"I'm sorry, Dakota, I really am. But if I think it'll help Parrish, I'll do whatever it takes—even if it means hurting you." He turns away from me and heads down the hall, leaving me to stare at his back, at those perfectly inked angel wings.

A lot of care went into that design. I know Parrish and Maxx are close, but I can't let Maxx's zeal interfere with what I have to do.

And I'll do anything to save Parrish.

There is no bridge that I won't cross, mark my words. Mark my fucking words.

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A graphic for Chapter 30. The word "CHAPTER" is written in a black, hand-drawn, blocky font on the left. The number "30" is written in a large, pink, cursive font in the center. The background features a dark green, textured heart shape, a black silhouette of a tree with bare branches, and a faint, light-colored face with closed eyes on the right side. The overall style is dark and moody.

CHAPTER 30

“Maxx is such a dick,” Chasm mutters on Monday, watching me gather my things for class. I haven’t seen him since Thursday, but we’ve been able to text on and off. Needless to say, we haven’t made much headway in locating Parrish. How are we supposed to do that with such little information?

What was it that Justin said? *Find the right clues. Follow the right trail.* But what clues? What fucking trail?

“Yeah, well,” I start, thinking about Maxx. Holy shit, I have to say, when that boy gets it in his mind to make someone else’s life hell, he’s damn good at it. I believe what Parrish said, about Maxx causing a guy to drop out of school when he attended Whitehall. Maxx warned me about the other students, but he’s just as bad as they are. For the last four days, he’s been watching me, as promised. Whispering reminders that he knows I know something, insinuating that he might tell Tess. It’s driving me nuts. “He’s worried about his friend, and he knows I’m hiding something. I can’t entirely blame him.”

I hook my book bag on my shoulder, checking my phone for the billionth time. Justin hasn’t messaged me since Thursday either, but he did say we’d ‘start fresh’ on Monday. So where is he? Where’s my text, my video call? I’m desperate to know how Parrish is doing.

Meanwhile, I have to head to Whitehall. I have to see the ruins of the prop room. I have to comfort Danyella when I’m the source of her pain. How messed up is that?

“He was out of line regardless,” Chasm growls, gritting his teeth in frustration. “I should rightfully kick his ass.”

“But you won’t, because you know he’s got a point. He suspects us for a reason.” I head into the hallway with Chasm following, already dreading the day before it even gets started. I can’t imagine things are going to improve from here on out. I’m averaging maybe three hours of sleep a day if I’m lucky. Last night, I couldn’t bear to close my eyes. All I could think about was Parrish and that knife pressed to his chest. He’ll have seven marks by now. Seven. I can’t even imagine what he’s going through.

We head downstairs to where Maxx is waiting, leaning against the wall near the garage with his arms crossed over his shirt. It’s black and green, another *Wright Family Racing* tee. His stare is so intense that I can’t help but fidget underneath it.

“Dude, really? Why don’t you find something better to do?” Chasm gets up close and personal with his friend, but I grab him by the blazer sleeve and force him back a step. I’m not about to see two childhood friends get into a brawl because one of them rightfully suspects the other of lying. It’s not Chasm’s fault that he can’t tell the truth, but it also isn’t wrong of Maxx to be angry with us.

“Oh, believe me. Once I get even a hint of the bullshit you two are up to, I’ll have a lot of better things to do. I might tell Tess. I might tell the cops. Who knows? Depends on the situation.”

Chasm goes to lunge forward, but I throw my arms around his waist, squeezing him tight. The move seems to stun him. It also serves to confuse Tess as she comes out of the kitchen area to see me hugging her son’s best friend like we’re an item or something.

“Dakota,” she warns, but at least she gets my name right. I release Chas as quickly as I grabbed onto him, my face flushing as I stumble back and turn to face her. Tess looks like a different person right now, like all the silly, quirky parts of her—the parts that mumble plot points in the kitchen or choose typewriters over laptops—have been squashed. She’s

all cold, frigid multimillionaire today. “Make sure you come home early; I’ve already called the school to let them know you’ll be leaving after lunch.”

She turns and walks away, but she doesn’t tell me why, exactly, she wants me home.

“The entire family is going on the news to plead for information on Parrish; Tess is even offering a million-dollar reward for information leading to his safe return.” Maxx stands up straight and sighs, giving Chas and me a once-over. “You will be here for that, right?”

“Go fuck yourself,” Chasm spits, shoving past him as Kimber comes down the stairs to join us. She gives us all a weird look, but her spirit is as diminished as everyone else’s. Parrish is to Kimber as Maxine is to me. She loves him, even if they don’t always get along.

I use her as a shield to escape Maxx. I’m not sure I can handle another confrontation like the one we had on Thursday. But as I’m trying to slip out, he grabs me by the arm and Kimber slips past me.

Shit.

“I think I can get you out of the house tomorrow if you pretend to join the search party; Maxine really wants to see you.” I nod, but he doesn’t release me, wetting his lips like there’s something else he wants to say. Instead, he lets go of me and we exchange a long, studying sort of look. “I’ve decided that if you’re not talking, you must be in danger.”

I blink at him because, like, that’s a huge jump to make. Isn’t it?

“Why would you think that?” I whisper, unable to make my voice raise even a single decibel.

“Because you’re not the sort of person who’d do something like this intentionally.” Maxx leans back, putting one foot up against the wall.

“You’ve been spending too much time with Maxine.” I snort and shake my head, but Maxx gives a derisive laugh that makes me pause.

“No, it’s not that. It’s you. I’ve been looking at you through the wrong lens. You’re not like other people, Dakota Banks. I liked you straight off, first moment I met you. That’s never happened to me before. I refuse to believe my instincts about you were wrong.” He crosses his arms over his chest, still watching me, taking me in with those beautiful eyes of his. Once again, his words ring with confidence, with a self-assuredness that I find almost staggering.

“Arrogant, much? I must be a good person because *you* think I am? You’re a cocky asshole, Maxx Wright.” It’s a quip not unlike one I might’ve once slung at Chasm or Parrish. Guess Maxx and I have a like-hate thing going on, too.

“Exactly that,” he agrees, completely unapologetic. “Enjoy your day at school. Meanwhile, I’ll keep searching. I’ll find a way to get you out of this.”

He pushes up off the wall and takes off. I admire his confidence, I really do, but I’m afraid that this time, it’s a bit misplaced.

“I’m sorry, Maxx,” I breathe, and then I join Chasm and Kimber in the car.

Off to the academy we go.

Most of the teachers are back today. That’s not a good sign. It means they’ve given up on finding Parrish. I don’t like that, not at all. It’s only been ... shit, it’s been nearly eight days, hasn’t it? Eight days since we slept together; eight days since he went missing.

It simultaneously feels like the blink of an eye and yet also a century. Millennia. Eons.

“Most of the costumes are salvageable,” Lumen calls out, helping with the cleanup in the theater. I headed over here after fourth period, even though my legs shook, and I felt a bit dizzy. The entire place smells of smoke and everything is wet from the sprinklers and fire hoses.

Danyella looks like a different person, presiding over the cleanup with a stoic expression that looks as fragile as the stained-glass windows that cracked from the heat. I did that. I ruined the hundred-plus year old windows, the most beautiful part of the theater.

I hate myself for it.

“Don’t do that,” Chasm whispers, lifting up a soggy box and cursing when the contents fall onto the floor at his feet.

“Do what?” I reply innocently, bending down to help him collect the ruined props. I can barely stand to look at any of them. Each and every one is like a thorn to the heart.

“Blame yourself,” he murmurs, reaching out to brush some of my hair behind my ear. The touch isn’t unwelcome, but it doesn’t feel right. It just doesn’t.

“Please don’t do that,” I whisper back, pulling away from him. He doesn’t seem to take it personally, scooping the damaged items into a trash bag.

“You don’t have to help with this,” Danyella tells me, coming over to squat beside me and Chasm. She picks up Glinda’s wand, the very same piece that she was holding the first day I met her. We’ve come full circle, but in the worst possible way. “I know you have to get home for the press conference.”

“It’s okay; I want to help,” I tell her, doing my best to fight back tears. “We’re going to make this production happen.”

The way she smiles at me ... fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. I couldn’t feel any worse about this if I tried.

“We’ve decided to cancel the production this year,” she tells me, and my eyes snap up to her face. She’s *smiling* at me. Why? Why couldn’t she just scream and rage and throw something? I wouldn’t blame her even then, but it’d be easier to deal with than this quiet acceptance. “Instead of doing *Hamilton* next year, we’re going to do *Wicked* again. That’ll give us a chance to make it even better.”

She stands up, taking the soot-covered wand with her and holding it in her hands. There are several seniors in this year’s

production. Pretty sure I see both Elphaba's actress and Glinda's actress crying together in the corner. Neither of them will get to reprise their roles.

I've ruined their senior year.

Chasm keeps a careful eye on me, like he thinks I might spill the beans. But I'm not that stupid. It would defeat the entire reason for doing this.

"We should get you home," he tells me, and I nod, giving Danyella and then Lumen a hug before I let him escort me out of the theater toward the parking garage.

It's on the way there that my phone buzzes with an incoming text, and Chas and I turn frightened looks on one another. I throw my bag on the ground, bending down and tearing the phone from the front pocket.

I'm going to give you an address; go there now. A box will be waiting. Take it where I tell you.

That's it. No video call. I rise to my feet as Chasm scoops up my bag for me, and then I show him the text.

"What the hell?" he asks, wrinkling his nose. "I don't like this, Dakota. A crazy guy tells you to deliver a box and it's never good. Boxes, in general, are never good. Haven't you seen the movie *Se7en*?"

"It was one of Saffron's favorites," I say, the blood draining from my face. There's a famous scene at the end of that movie where Brad Pitt pleads with Morgan Freeman to tell him what's in a cardboard box that's mysteriously been delivered. It's implied that Brad's character's wife is in it. More specifically, her severed head. "I just ... I can't with speculation. Let's just go."

"What about the press conference?" Chasm asks, jogging to catch up with me. I give him a look.

"He said *now*." I hold my phone up for emphasis. "Now, Chasm."

Tess is going to fucking kill me for this.

But I bet that's the point, isn't it?

Parrish's kidnapper ... he must really be my father. Who else would care what Tess thinks of me? It's a sobering thought. Even now, I'm trying to convince myself that none of it is true. His kidnapper is some random fan, some *Mercy* type nightmare that Stephen King dreamt up. I can't be related to this guy; I just can't.

And yet ... I know that I am. I know it.

"Shit," Chasm curses as I do my best to think up an excuse. He opens the door for me which I like, but which I can't think about just now. I flop down on the seat, tapping out a message to Tess on the phone she gave me.

Not going to be able to make it home in time for the conference.

Just that.

She'll be furious later if I'm lucky. Stone-cold if I'm not. When she asks me where I was—

Wait.

Tess doesn't have to ask, does she? Because she tracks my phone. She already knows.

"Wait for me?" I query, but before Chas can answer, I'm up and out of the car again, jogging back into the massive stone building that houses the academy and storing the phone in my locker. "Sorry, Tess, but you're not tracking me today."

I almost forgot about that. Almost. But I can't make any oversights, no matter how small, or I'll lose this game. That's for damn sure.

"You're one smart cookie," Chasm says grimly, watching as I slip back into my seat and hook my belt. I hope he's right about that, about me being smart. I'm going to need every freaking neuron I have to find Parrish.

Speaking of, after we've plugged the address into Chasm's GPS and turned right on the road leading toward the highway, I get the call that I've been waiting for. *Finally*. I've never hit answer so quickly in my entire life.

“Parrish.” The way I say his name gives Chasm pause, and he pulls over to the side of the road. He’s careful to keep out of view of the camera, but close enough to see his friend.

“Dakota,” Parrish replies, his skin pallid and sallow, his lips cracked and dry. I can see the marks on his chest, four marks with a slash through them, another two beside it. There’s so much blood, so much fucking blood. It’s glimmering on his belly, soaking into his pajama pants. He isn’t going to last very long like this. And yet, I’ve found nothing that will help us find him. Nothing. “I’m going to give you the address to deliver the box to.”

“How are you doing?” I whisper, fighting back tears, shaking with adrenaline as I touch my fingers to the screen and wish with all my heart that he was here with me. “Is he feeding you? Giving you water?”

“I really wish you’d stop this,” Parrish whispers, closing his eyes tight. “I wish you’d give up on me.”

“Don’t fucking say that!” Chasm snaps, and Parrish’s eyes fly open. I allow Chas to take the phone—Justin never told me I couldn’t. He did tell me to choose my ‘pawns’ carefully, didn’t he? Well, I have, and I’m putting all my faith in Kwang-seon McKenna. “You have to keep fighting. Dakota needs you back. You can’t just sleep with a girl and take off. That’s fucked.”

Parrish stares at his friend for a moment before managing the saddest, weakest smile I’ve ever seen on another person.

“If I don’t come back, Chas, take care of her for me.”

“Seriously?” Chasm chokes out, his own hand shaking as he holds the phone between us. “Shut the fuck up. That’s ridiculous. Of course you’re coming back. We’re going to find you.”

“Promise me, Chas,” Parrish pleads, closing his eyes again and leaning his head back against the chair. He says something else, but once again, it’s in Korean, and I don’t understand it.

“No!” Chas shouts, but then the video call ends, and he’s throwing the phone on the floor in a fit. He punches the

steering wheel and then digs his fingers into his hair, leaning over and putting his forehead against the wheel. “No. No, I won’t accept that.”

“What did he say?” I beg, picking the phone back up and turning to face him. “Tell me. Please.”

Chasm turns his head slowly to look at me, but the devastation etched there is almost too much to handle.

“He said he doesn’t think he’ll last more than a few more days. He wants me to stop you from following Justin’s orders.”

We just look at each other for several minutes before I turn back toward the windshield and, without a single word passing between us, Chas starts the car and off we go.

Because we both know that we’re not going to give up.

We’re both willing to pay the price for Parrish’s safety, no matter the cost.

And Justin Prior—bless his heart—knows that.

The GPS takes us to the parking lot of an out-of-business diner in North Sultan, a small Washington town that’s about forty-five minutes from Medina. It’s technically a Seattle suburb now with disturbingly high housing prices, but the locals who live here don’t see it that way. It’s still got that small town feel, and with a population of less than two hundred and fifty people, we don’t have any company in the parking lot.

The box is sitting near the front door.

It looks sturdy as hell, with a hinged lid that’s currently shut, but unlocked.

Chasm and I stand there for a while just staring at it.

“I can smell it from here,” I breathe, choking on the sickly-sweet scent. It’s mixed with this awful tang, one that reminds me of the iron skeleton key that Tess gave me. On our way

here, we stopped and grabbed some rubber gloves from a nearby convenience store.

I'm starting to think that was a good idea.

I'm the first to move forward, squatting down beside the box and running my hand across the smooth wood. It's a beautiful piece, something that I'd put at the end of my bed to store extra blankets in. I give it a pat.

"Don't do it," Chasm warns, standing behind me with his hands laced together behind his head. His face is chalk white and he looks half-ready to keel over. But I can't just drop this trunk onto someone's porch without knowing what I'm delivering; I can't. "Dakota."

I ignore him, turning back to the trunk and wetting my lower lip. The latch flips up easily, unlocked as it is. Bracing my hands on either side of the wooden lid, I lift it up, listening to the creaking of the old hardware.

It's the smell that hits me first, that awful copper tang that seems to sit so heavily on the back of the tongue. I gag before I even realize what it is that I'm staring at: a dead girl. A dead girl in a familiar maid uniform, one that's now stained with crimson. It isn't Delphine, but the original maid—what did she say her name was? JJ? the girl I met on my second day here.

"Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit," Chasm murmurs, and then he's stumbling away and vomiting into the bushes. Me, I'm just fucking frozen there, staring down at the girl's disturbingly white face, her parted lips, her glassy eyes. "I told you not to open it!" he screams at me, and a second later, the lid slams shut. I just barely manage to pull my hands away before my fingers are crushed. "Are you goddamn insane?!"

I'm still just sitting there, kneeling in the gravel and struggling to find my breath. Each inhale tastes like copper. I'm slowly suffocating, but I can't move. I can't think. It's a struggle to stay conscious, to be quite honest. Every molecule inside of me screams for me to call the police, to call Tess, to do *something* other than what it is that I'm doing right now.

The thing is: my bio dad has made it quite clear what his rules are.

If I mess this up, Parrish dies. There is no part of me that's unsure that he'd actually go through with it. I already know he will. This right here is a warning to me, a reminder that this isn't just murder theater. He *will* go through with it. In fact, he has, on plenty of occasions.

I've never hated myself more than I do in that moment.

Chasm is pacing and cursing in Korean, running his fingers through his hair with wild, frantic movements. He knows as well as I do what has to happen here.

"Help me move this," I say, somehow managing to find my feet even though my brain has shut off and my body's gone numb. Chasm looks at me like I'm a crazy person.

"What the hell is wrong with you? I'm not fucking touching that thing." He points to the chest with a gloved hand. His entire body is shaking, but he manages to put on a good show, looking more pissed off than anything else. "You really want to drop a dead body on someone's doorstep? You think that's a good idea?"

My eyes snap up to his as I force my feet to stay planted and do my best to ignore the wavering of the world around me, this tilting and rocking sensation that must be a stress-related symptom. What did I say when I arrived here in Seattle? That it was undoubtedly the worst day of my life?

I almost laugh at that. Almost. But then I remember the poor dead girl in the box and how she isn't involved in any of this and yet paid the ultimate price because of it. Saffron kidnapped me; Tess lost me; my bio dad lost his damn mind. It should be me in this box, not her. Me.

"Yes," I tell him, and I mean it. "Yes, I do." I look back up and our gazes clash. He knows that we have to do this; I don't have to convince him. We'd do anything for Parrish, the two of us. His best friend and his ... whatever it is that I am to him.

His gamer girl, I guess.

“Fucking Christ,” Chasm snarls, but he moves over to the wooden box anyway. Together, we heft it up and carry it over to his car, shoving it into the trunk as he curses and mutters under his breath. “I already sort of figured that I was going to hell.” Chas steps back and then uses some bungee cords he had stored in the trunk to keep the box in place. We can’t exactly close the trunk; his zippy little sportscar isn’t nearly big enough to hold the ... box. “Guess this seals the deal.”

Just think of it as a box, I tell myself. It’s just a box, not a person.

It also proves that JJ was, in fact, a victim of the Slayer. Because of me. Because she was my maid for all of one day. I feel fucking sick to my stomach.

“Let’s go.” I climb in and Chasm does the same, resting his forehead on the steering wheel for a minute before sitting back up and starting the car. “If it’s too much for you—” I begin, but he doesn’t let me finish, casting me this death glare that gives me the chills.

“I’m not leaving you to do this alone, and I sure as hell am not leaving Parrish to get killed by some deranged lunatic. Are you kidding me? I know you don’t like me, but you really have low expectations.” Chas backs out of the parking space and off we go, following the directions that were given to us.

“Whoever said I didn’t like you?” I whisper, because it’s just too much to ask me to talk any louder than that right now. There is a *dead girl* in the trunk of my stepbrother/boyfriend’s best friend’s luxury sportscar, a girl that was killed by my supposed bio dad who also happens to be the Seattle Slayer whose victim count just clicked up one from twelve to thirteen.

If he killed Parrish, too, then it’d be fourteen ...

I was missing for fourteen years.

Could be a coincidence or ... not.

I clamp a hand over my mouth and lean back in the seat, doing my best to think about anything but the bloodied corpse in the trunk. Well, it’s not even really in the trunk, is it? It’s

half-hanging out for the whole world to see. It could theoretically fall out onto the road, crack open, be exposed to anyone driving by ...

“You don’t have to like me. Just don’t ask me to stay out of this; it’s insulting.” Chasm turns up the music, and I lean back, wishing that the moment were different so that I could correct him. *I do like you. In fact, I’ve just realized that I have a crush on you. Isn’t that sick? The guy I like is missing and could very well end up dead, and I’m thinking about you. That’s all sorts of messed the hell up.* “Don’t you think these tasks are escalating rather quickly?” he asks me, but I can’t respond to that right now.

I don’t even want to think about that.

I just have to work harder, do more research, figure out the trick. Because in every game, there’s a trick, something to make it all so much easier, to nail that high score, to snag that grand master rank, to kick big boss Bowser’s ass. *Something.*

“We have to find Parrish. Period. There’s nothing else to it. There are no alternatives.”

Chasm grunts but doesn’t reply.

About an hour later, we pull up outside a house with cheery yellow siding and an impressive garden out front. There are flowers in every shade, blooming prettily along the edges of the driveway and the sidewalk. In the center of it all, there’s a bright green lawn and a bird fountain with small songbirds hopping around in it. The house sits just outside a town called Granite Falls, another Podunk place in the middle of nowhere. This is the only house for miles.

Great. I’m sure that’s a wonderful omen.

“Fucking hell,” Chasm chokes out. “Whose house is this? We’re not, like, delivering this girl to her parents or something, are we?” He looks over at me, and I meet his eyes. I don’t have an answer to his question, but I sure as hell hope not.

Burning down the theater was the worst thing I’ve ever done in my life.

This is worse than that.

Much, much worse.

At least nobody was hurt in the fire; somebody is dead this time.

JJ. An eighteen-year-old girl who did nothing but end up in the wrong place at the wrong time.

We get out of the car, unhooking the bungee cords and then carrying the box to the front porch of the house. There was nothing in my instructions that said I had to knock or ring the bell or anything, so I don't. Instead, as soon as we set that box down, Chasm and I turn to leave.

Only ... someone comes out of the house and sees us.

My eyes meet his and a cold chill skitters through me. Every instinct in my body tells me to run. Every cell. Every chromosome.

I know this guy, I think, just before another thought crosses my mind: *is this him? Is this my father?*

Dear god, I hope not.

"What are you doing here?" the man asks, which sort of helps to answer that question. He runs his tongue across his lower lip which most definitely isn't a good sign. Chasm has my arm in his hand already and he's tugging me down the path.

Unfortunately for the pair of us, we don't get very far.

"Wait a second," the guy tells us, drawing a gun from the waistband of his pants and pointing it at us. "The two of you aren't going fucking anywhere."

Chasm stares at the gun like he can't quite process what he's seeing. This is a far cry from our time at the lake, isn't it? When I danced to *Working Bitch* and he tried to kiss me against the trunk of a tree. How the hell did we end up here of all places, with a dead maid in a box, and a gun pointed at us?

"Get in the house." The man gestures with the gun before leaning down and cracking open the lid to the box. Unlike any

normal human being, he doesn't seem to have much of a reaction to it. Actually, he seems ... annoyed?

This is not the boss, Dakota. This is the sub-boss.

In which case, he'll be easier to beat but far more annoying than the final monster. That's how games always work. Somehow, thinking about the man with the gun as a stupid shitty sub-boss makes the situation easier to deal with.

"Dakota, run," Chasm whispers, and then he shoves me to one side and freaking tackles the guy. The gun falls to the floor as both men crash into the wall, grappling with one another. There are precious few seconds to waste, so I don't bother overthinking the situation.

Instead, I'm throwing myself on the floor and going for the weapon. The man that Chasm's attacking is no amateur though, and he kicks the gun away before I can grab it. I scramble to my feet at the same moment that Chasm is shoved back. He ends up falling against me and we hit the ground together hard enough to knock the air out of me.

The man reappears above us with the gun back in hand.

"Nice try, kid, but no dice. Get the fuck up." He kicks Chasm as hard as he can in the stomach, preventing him from rising to his feet. Instead, he lies there on his side, clutching his belly and coughing hard. Fear spikes through me as I push to my feet, hands raised, doing my best to distract the man from Chas.

"Look, we didn't come here to hurt anyone," I say slowly, studying the man in front of me. He's fairly indistinct, white, middle-aged, balding. There isn't much to him, nothing that might make him stand out in a crowd. The only distinct feature he has are his eyes, this pale blue color that only helps to enhance the disturbing nature of his stare.

It's like he's undressing me with his eyes, and I hate it. I feel helpless. Just like I did on the hike.

The hike.

This guy is the hiker. I know it. I know it as sure as I know the sun will rise tomorrow.

“You’re the hiker,” I say, and the assertion seems to surprise him. “You were there; you hit Maxx with a walking stick.”

“Fuck me,” the guy murmurs, and for some reason, my statement seems to make him nervous. “That’s why you’re here then? He sent you.” The guy curses some more as Chasm struggles to sit up, but I very carefully put my foot on his side, telling him as quietly as I can to stay down and be quiet.

“You’re the ATV driver, too,” I suggest, although I’m much less sure of this part. “You hit us on purpose.”

The man scratches the side of his head with the barrel of the gun, not like it itches. More like he’s starting to panic and isn’t sure what to do with himself.

“Get in the bedroom,” he tells me, gesturing down the short hallway with the revolver. “Now.” He points at Chasm with the gun and meets my stare with a pair of soulless eyes. There’s a sense of wrongness around this man, an instinctual residue of perversion that makes me physically ill. He’s looking at me like so much meat, like I’m not even a person.

I’d rather die than go into the bedroom.

“No.” Just that one word. I stand firm, holding his gaze. Based on his behavior, I feel like he knows who I am. *The Slayer’s Daughter*. If he hurts me, he might end up like the girl in the box. We both seem to be aware of that. There’s always a chance he’ll refocus his aggression on Chas, but then, he has no idea who Chasm is. For all he knows, we’re both off-limits.

“You think you have a choice, bitch?” he spits at me, dropping the weapon down so that it’s pointing at my leg. “You think I won’t shoot your ass and then just take what I want?”

I smile. Maybe not a great choice, in retrospect, but I feel like my hunch is right. This guy can’t hurt me without drawing the wrath of Parrish’s kidnapper. Whether he’s the Slayer or Justin Prior or not is irrelevant: he’s dangerous either way.

“I really don’t think you will,” is my response, even as Chasm grabs onto my ankle in warning.

“I said now!” the man screams, and then a gunshot goes off, startling me. It’s like a car backfiring inside the walls of the house; the sound is deafening. I clamp my hands over my ears, squeezing my eyes shut tight.

After a moment, I risk opening them to find ... It takes me several tries to piece together what I’m looking at. My hands drop by my sides as Chasm finally finds his feet, standing up beside me and staring down at the man. He’s slumped against the wall in front of us, holding his leg and howling. It takes me almost a minute to register that, what with my ears ringing and all.

“You fool,” a voice says, just before a man walks out of a nearby bedroom holding a gun. “You animal.”

I stare at the newcomer because it’s just occurred to me where I heard the kidnapper’s voice before.

In class. At school. Sixth period. Mr. Volli.

“What the fuck?” Chasm chokes out as Mr. Volli pauses beside us, reaching up to adjust his glasses. He’s not looking at us though. Instead, he’s staring at the bleeding man on the carpet, looking at him the way one might inspect a roach they’ve just squashed.

Is ... Mr. Volli my dad?

Alarm bells go off in my bed. *That can’t be right. It’s too obvious. Think harder, Dakota.*

Regardless, whether Mr. Volli is my bio dad or not, he’s the one who was wearing the mask in the video call, that’s for damn sure.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” the man on the floor screams, clutching at his leg and rocking back and forth with the pain. “I knew I never should’ve gotten involved in this shit.”

“No, you never should have raped and killed that maid. You’re a pervert, no worse than an animal. I don’t like people who can’t control themselves.” And then Mr. Volli pulls the trigger again and Chasm yanks me against him, holding me in his arms like he can use his own body to protect mine.

When I look back, I see that the bullet wasn't aimed for me or Chasm. Instead, it's gone right through the skull of the blue-eyed man.

He's dead.

Mr. Volli, my sixth period teacher, has just killed someone in front of me.

The smell is ... god, it's horrible. Gunpowder and iron, that's what it smells like. I press my face into Chasm's uniform, inhaling his dark chocolate mint scent and wishing I were anywhere but here.

"Where's Parrish?" Chas demands, but his voice sounds like it's underwater. I wouldn't be surprised if we both had permanent hearing damage from the gunshots. I push back from him just enough that I can turn and see Mr. Volli standing there, dressed all in black like he was during the video call.

"You know the rules regarding Parrish," he explains, like that was a silly question. "Now." Mr. Volli moves toward us, holding out the gun. "Take this and fire two or three shots into Mr. Fossier's body."

"The fuck?" Chasm blurts out as I press my back against his front, seeking comfort in his warmth. I can't stop staring at the dead guy, at the spatters on the wall behind him, at his sightless eyes, his bloodied leg. I'd never seen a dead body before today; now I've seen two. Now I've seen someone murdered right in front of me.

"It'll leave fingerprints on the gun and gunpowder residue on your hands to keep you accountable," the computer science teacher explains, still holding out the weapon like he's certain neither of us will use it on him instead. "Just a precaution. I'm sure you'd rather see Parrish alive than shoot me, but you never know." He gestures with the gun yet again as my stomach churns and my mind rebels against what I'm hearing.

He wants us to ... shoot a dead body. So that we look guilty. So that we can't tell the authorities.

"Don't mind him. He was a rapist who couldn't control his urges. Less than a dog. If you think about it, he wasn't even

really human anyway.” I mean, Mr. Volli has a point. Rapists aren’t human; they’re trash. But still ... that doesn’t mean I want to hold a gun or shoot a corpse or be involved in any of this.

I look Mr. Volli straight in the face, into brown eyes that are too pale to be reminiscent of mine. But then, I know where I got my eye color from. My eyes are Tess’ eyes. But are there parts of me that came from this man?

“Are you Justin?” I ask, but Mr. Volli just continues to stare at me, the gun held in his outstretched hand.

“Take it.” He waits until I finally reach out, curling my fingers around the weapon.

“Dakota,” Chasm warns, but we’ve already been through so much, done so much to save Parrish. The guy is already dead, and now here I am, with a weapon in hand.

“If I shoot you, maybe I go tell the cops everything from start to finish. Maybe we find Parrish safe and sound and this is all over?” I grip the weapon, placing my finger on the trigger and then pointing it at Mr. Volli.

Still, he doesn’t seem concerned.

And I have no idea if I could actually do it, kill a person like that.

It’s unfathomable.

“Maybe,” Mr. Volli replies, giving me a small, polite smile in response. “Or maybe I’m not Justin, and you disobey the Slayer’s orders, and then we’re all dead. What do you think about that?”

I glance back at the dead guy. *The dead rapist*, I tell myself, because that makes it a little bit easier.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I raise the weapon, close my eyes and fire.



Chasm takes me back to his place since we can't exactly drive through a horde of reporters with blood on our clothes. I'm so distracted by what I've just seen that I barely register the grandiosity of his home. It's a palace compared to the Vanguard's place.

"Over seven-thousand square feet of misery and loneliness," is how Chasm introduces it as we drive through the front gate and into a brick courtyard with a fountain. He parks the car beside the front steps and we both climb out, heading into an impressive foyer and up an even more impressive set of marble steps.

It occurs to me that this isn't the same house that I saw before, the one with the lake beside it.

"This is your house?" I query, blinking in surprise as Chasm pushes open a door to a hallway and then leads me down to the end. He pauses beside another door to glance back at me, a wry expression on his face. There are spatters of blood all over his shirt and neck. I wonder if he knows that?

"Oh. Yeah. The other place you saw is the house we lived in when I first came to the United States. My dad's seen some success since then." He snorts and pushes open the door, leading me into a massive bedroom with an attached bath. This doesn't look like his room anymore than the other one did, more like a hotel suite or something. "Normally, it's a vacation rental. I've been begging for years to live there by myself, but he won't have it." Chasm kicks open the door to the bathroom and starts the shower, turning around to face me. "He's got friends staying there now or else I would've taken you there."

He hooks his thumb in the direction of the shower.

"Go ahead and rinse off. I'll go next." He starts to leave when I reach out and grab onto his arm, pressing my forehead to his bicep.

"Please don't go," I whisper, pushing back the assault of images in my brain. The dead maid, the disturbing coldness on that monster's face, Mr. Volli's awful smile. Is he really my dad? Has he been watching me in class for three months and plotting?

The thought makes me sick.

“I don’t want to be alone,” I add, waiting with bated breath for Chas to respond.

Finally, as if he’s given it some thought, Chasm steps back from me and takes off his own shirt. Together, we strip down and climb into the shower together. It’s a huge fucking shower, bigger even than the one I have back at Tess’ place. There’s more than enough room for us to share without touching.

We stare at each other, the blood draining off our naked skin and swirling down the drain. If I were in a different state of mind, I might find something wrong with this. But there’s nothing sexual between me and Chas, not right now, not after what we’ve seen, what we did.

Eventually, we climb out and Chas gives me some of his clothes to put on.

“Do you mind if I use your laptop?” I ask, pointing at his desk. He looks confused, but he nods anyway, sitting down on the edge of his bed to watch me.

I log into an account I haven’t touched since the news of my kidnapping went viral.

Followers? A metric fuck ton. It’s like, the meager pittance I had before has multiplied into a storm. The internet can be a cruel, dark place, but it doesn’t have to be. It’s a weapon that can be wielded for either good or evil, depending on the hand that grasps the hilt.

Carefully, I open the computer, lift Chasm’s headset on, and start the webcam.

“Hey everyone,” I say, trying not to panic at the sheer number of followers I’ve somehow acquired during my absence. I promised myself I wasn’t going to use the fame of being a missing kid to make a career for myself. But this is different. This is about life and death. About Parrish. About *me*. I make myself smile because the *three million* people that are now subscribed to my channel can never know that this is anything more than a game. Just a game, like any other. Only,

it's a game where the leaderboard is my life, where winning means getting back my stolen crush.

I'm coming for you, Parrish Vanguard. That much I promise.

I wait for the number of live viewers on my video to reach four digits before I toss my green and black hair over my shoulder, plant my chin in my hand, and pretend like I didn't just see someone die in front of me a few hours ago.

I'll play, Dad.

Start the game.

“Who wants to help me catch a serial killer?”

To Be Continued ...

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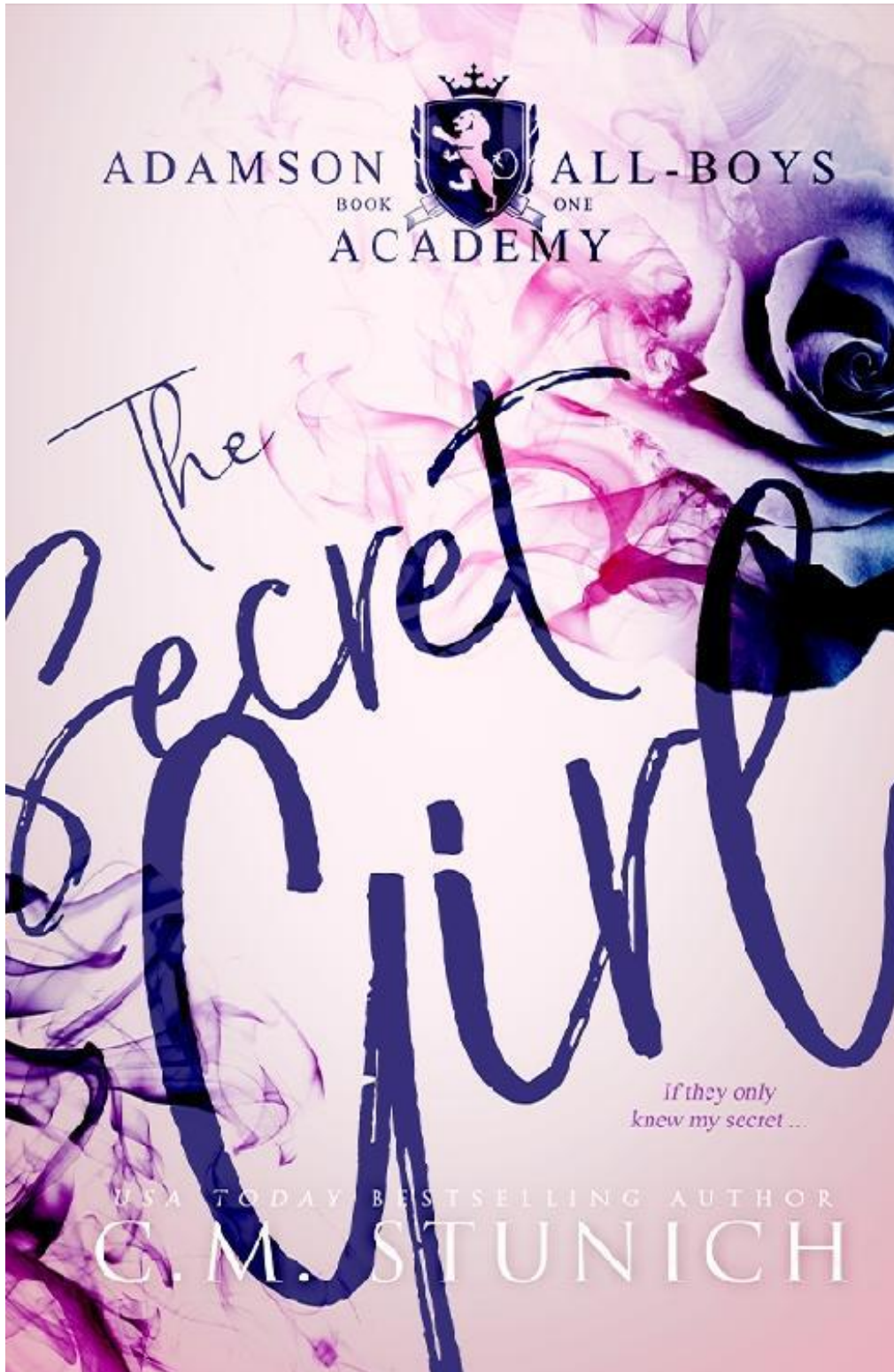
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About the Author

C.M. Stunich is a self-admitted bibliophile with a love for exotic teas and a whole host of characters who live full time inside the strange, swirling vortex of her thoughts. Some folks might call this crazy, but Caitlin Morgan doesn't mind - especially considering she has to write biographies in the third person. Oh, and half the host of characters in her head are searing hot bad boys with dirty mouths and skillful hands (among other things). If being crazy means hanging out with them everyday, C.M. has decided to have herself committed.

She hates tapioca pudding, loves to binge on cheesy horror movies, and is a slave to many cats. When she's not vacuuming fur off of her couch, C.M. can be found with her nose buried in a book or her eyes glued to a computer screen. She's the author of over a hundred novels - romance, new adult, fantasy, and young adult included. Please, come and join her inside her crazy. There's a heck of a lot to do there.

Oh, and Caitlin loves to chat (incessantly), so feel free to e-mail her, send her a Facebook message, or put up smoke signals. She's already looking forward to it.

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