

DYLAN PAGE



Choices

THE BLEEDING HEARTS SERIES

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Echoes

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ECHOES

THE BLEEDING HEARTS SERIES BOOK 5

DYLAN PAGE

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FIRST EDITION

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PLAYLIST

Promise - Ben Howard

I'm Just a Ghost - Yaeow

Runner - Dustin O'Halloran

Crash Into Me - Dave Matthews Band

A Different Age - Current Joys

Kids - Current Joys

Opal Ocean - Slenderbodies

Lost Boy - Ruth B.

Your Heart is an Empty Room - Death Cab for Cutie

Marching Bands of Manhattan - Death Cab for Cutie

Behind the Clouds - Yaeow

Head in the Clouds - Hayd

Hurt the Ones I Love - Reagan Beem

I Fall Apart - Hayd

The Way I Love You - Yaeow, Neptune

Till Kingdom Come - Coldplay

Your Song - Cover by Chase Eagleson and Sierra Eagleson

Wake Up - Arcade Fire

Drivers License - Olivia Rodrigo

Ghost - Justin Bieber

Suffocate - Hayd

Sinners - Barns Courtney

Heart Skipped a Beat - The XX

The Funeral - Band of Horses

Heartbeats - José González

For Blue Skies - Strays Don't Sleep

When It's Cold I Like to Die - Moby

Happiness: We're All In It Together - This Will Destroy You

Me - Fjodor

When You Were Mine - Hayd

TRIGGER WARNING

****Warning:** This book is meant for mature readers, 18+.

Echoes is a 150K+ word romance that contains some scenes and situations that may be upsetting for some readers. Includes several triggers and sensitive material such as: sexual assault, bullying (not between MMC/FMC), childhood trauma, violence, and other possible triggering elements.

Please do not read if you are uncomfortable with any of the above. Thank you.**

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblances to actual events, locales, or persons living or dead, are coincidental.

Prologue



HAYDEN - THE PAST, Nine Years Old

WHAT HAD CHANGED? Why didn't they like me anymore? In one afternoon, my life completely flipped upside down on itself. I'd gone from a kid who had lots of friends to the school freak. A loser. No one would sit with me anymore. They all whispered when I walked by, the words they muttered under their breath hurting more than any punch ever could.

"That's him!"

"He's the one with the psycho dad..."

"... a murderer..."

"... killed himself."

"... at the park by Sherwood..."

"Wonder if he's a freak like his *real* dad?"

I remember the shame I felt. The confusion, the hurt, but mostly... it was the betrayal by my mother. Why did she never tell me the truth about the man in the grave? As a kid, we often went to the cemetery and sat close to the lonely headstone in the corner. She planted her daisies while I ran around, exploring, keeping myself entertained. Coming here was boring, and I didn't like that it almost always made Mom cry.

The man in the grave was my father. Not my dad, but my *real* father. The one I would have had growing up had he not died. But this news didn't bother me when I was really little because I'd go home after, and the man who *did* raise me

would pick me up and set me on his shoulders, running around the living room like a horse to make me laugh. He was everything to me. He'd always been there. He helped me learn to ride a bike, and always played games with me while letting me win. Taught me how to swim and hold my breath underwater... what did I care about a man I'd never known?

But there were some things that I couldn't ignore.

His name, my middle name, was like his. So was my hair, my eyes... similarities I had with the stranger but not with my family. Mom and Dad were both blondes with lighter eyes. And my two little sisters and my little brother were exactly the same. I was always the odd one out in our clan. Though I never really noticed it until the afternoon that Theo Hebert made a discovery with a quick Google search and went about spreading the news.

Why he wanted me to suffer, I didn't understand. We'd never been friends, I guess. But as far as I knew, we hadn't been enemies, either. And yet, that October in sixth grade, he made it his mission to see me as the school pariah.

It was lunchtime when it happened. Everyone was outside in the quad, playing basketball or running around the playground, when he stepped outside with a bunch of photocopied papers in his hands and a mean sort of smile slowly lifting the corners of his mouth. I knew from that look that whatever he was about to announce to everyone, it was nothing good. Someone was about to get it. Little did I know I was the intended target.

"Hey!" he called, his voice rising above the chaos. "Hey everyone! Check this out..."

A few kids glanced over, then went back to playing, clearly uninterested in looking at a bunch of papers.

That is, until...

"Hayden Mathers... you guys know how his grandpa is in a motorcycle club?" Theo said loudly.

A few kids peered over as my body went cold. Why did he say that like it was a bad thing? It was known that my grandpa was the coolest, as he came by sometimes to give me a lift on the back of his black Harley. Kids would watch in awe as I slipped on my helmet and climbed on the back, feeling special to have something others didn't. They wished they had my Grandpa J. As much as I loved my mom, dad, and siblings, Grandpa J was the one person I felt an absolute connection to. Our looks, our interest in bikes and music, his light-hearted attitude... he was easily my favourite person.

But now... Theo Hebert was trying to make him sound bad. What the hell was his problem?

I started walking over, my heart thudding heavily and my hands tingling as I sensed an oncoming dread heading my way.

“Well, before, his grandpa used to be a part of a *gang*. A real gang, you guys!” Theo said loudly to the crowd, which was growing larger with each piece of information he unveiled. “He kidnapped people! He was involved in drugs!”

A few kids peeked uneasily at me over their shoulders and moved away as I shifted through the gathering mob, heading straight for that prick who dared try to make my grandpa sound like a villain.

“Did you know that his *dad* was also in the gang? His *real* dad! That guy we've seen at his house and stuff? He's not even his real dad! It was *this* guy!” He held up a piece of paper with a newspaper clipping, a short article with a photo of a park bench, the title loud in my head as I read it.

MC Gang Member Found Dead by Sherwood.

My ears started ringing as Theo read parts of the article aloud.

“A self-inflicted gunshot wound'... you guys know what that means? He killed himself! Held a gun to his head, and BLAM! Shot his brains out all over the place. Hey, I wonder if we all went over to the park after school, if we would be able to find any of his brains that were left on the ground! I bet

there's a stain in the wood from where he bled out." He laughed, turning his sneer in my direction.

Do something, Hayden. But I just stood there, staring at him in shock, my face feeling numb and the ringing in my ears stronger than ever. I had always known that my birth father had died before I was born, but had he really killed himself? Why? Why did he do that? And he and Grandpa J were drug runners? They took people? Was all of this true?

With a shaking hand, I reached up and Theo's smile instantly vanished as he quickly sidestepped me, like he was afraid I was about to punch him out. As much as I wanted to hit him, though, I needed to see the proof for myself. All of this information made me feel sick, my mind whirling as I snatched the papers from his grasp and began reading as quickly as possible.

To my horror, it was. All of it. Even Grandpa J. James O'Hare, by his real name, was listed in articles dating back about fifteen years ago as being involved in gang-related activities that were associated with a mob boss who had been running the crime syndicate in Ashland at the time.

I felt the blood drain from my face as I read each word again and again, my numb, trembling fingers reaching up to touch the dog tags I'd always worn with pride.

... dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound...

... park bench in Sherwood...

... human trafficking...

... drug running...

... MC's, The Celtic Beasts...

The Celtic Beasts... the patch! The patch I wore with pride on a leather jacket that was much too big for me. A jacket that had been given to me by Grandpa J. Did Mom know about all of this? Did Dad? How much were they hiding from me? What else was there?

“... found out that his mom? His mom was his dad’s *sister!*” Theo was shouting over the rising babble from the crowd, who were now all fanning out, giving me a wide berth as they stared with their mouths hanging open like fish. “That’s right. His dad fucked his sister and she had *him!* You know what that means about Hayden, right?” Theo laughed as he did a crude and mean impersonation that was highly suggestive and just outright insensitive. I felt the rage churning in my stomach.

What in the ever-loving fuck? Was that true, too?

The articles in my hands started to shake even harder, the sound of the paper crinkling loud in my ears but not as loud as Theo’s voice. My fingers gripped the dog tags, clenching around them so tight in my palm, feeling the metal painfully digging into my skin. I wanted to rip them right off and throw them away.

“I always knew Hayden Mathers was a fucking freak,” he snickered, turning his pale blue eyes back to me, a look of triumph on his face. The others all started to whisper, their voices rising higher with each passing second, and soon, they all began to hurl insults my way. One kid even spat on the ground by my sneaker. It wasn’t until one of Theo’s friends suddenly shoved me hard from behind, sending me sprawling to the ground, the papers scattering, that any of the teachers supervising realized there was a problem. Except before they could amble over, I’d been hauled to my feet and shoved, punched. Abuse thrown my way from every side; the damage already done. I tried to protect myself, to hide behind my hands, and struggled to get free from the smothering crowd, to run and keep running.

Hit back, Hayden, a voice whispered in the back of my mind. I’d never been a violent kid. I’d never wanted to hurt anyone before. However, when I saw Theo’s laughing face over the crowd, I felt I could now. The thought of breaking him would give me great pleasure.

Hit back. Punch them in their faces... kick them in their guts... make them pay.

I swung my arms, trying to fend off the fists that were raining down on me, but by that point, my eyes were swollen shut from all the blows I'd suffered. My bottom lip was bleeding. I couldn't make sense of the chaos, the yelling, the violence...

Make them pay, Hayden, the voice whispered as I blindly flailed, swinging my fists but hitting nothing before I was roughly shoved onto the pavement. The moment I hit the ground was when the kicking started, and I balled up, covering my head with my arms, trying to hide from the blows.

“Hey, back up. Back *up!*” a voice shouted over the yelling. I didn't recognize them at all. “I said back up! Leave him alone!”

“And what the fuck is some scrawny little girl gonna do about it?” Jace Fogerty, one of Theo's friends, sneered from overhead. But the next thing I knew, he had joined me on the ground, and the kicking suddenly stopped. I squinted through my arms, spotting the bloody nose he was now sporting, and the circle of students milling around us backed away.

“Here, let me help you...”

Tiny hands slid beneath my arms, gently urging me to rise. I bit my bloody lip, ignoring the sting as I fought back tears, the words I'd read repeating over and over in my head while another voice was screaming at me to kill them all. I rose gingerly, wincing in pain, and spat a bloody gob onto the pavement. No one moved forward to help Jace.

I looked at my savior through the tears in my eyes but didn't recognize the face looking back at me. She was petite, thin, at least a head shorter than me. Buried in a pair of jeans that had patches of random material sewn over multiple holes. The AC/DC t-shirt she sported was massive. Even though she'd tied the extra fabric at the back, it still draped around her like a blanket. But it was her face I found myself staring at, the

large, shining pair of hazel green-grey eyes watching me with concern and worry. She was a stranger to me, and yet, out of all the kids here, she was the only one who had stepped in.

“What is going on over here?” Miss Collins’ voice rang out through the quad, finally making her way over. “What are you all doing? What’s... what’s...”

Not now, but later. We’ll make them pay later, the voice promised me as I continued to stare at my savior, wishing I could speak so I could thank her. Only the words were caught in my throat, and I feared that if I said *anything*, I’d break down in front of everyone and cry. I didn’t want them to see me break. I’d never experienced anything like this. I’d always had friends, always gotten along with everyone. I felt like I was in shock. In the background, the ones I thought were my friends had moved away, not saying a word. The only one remaining at my side was this unknown girl, who continued to hold my hand, her own knuckles red from when she punched Jace Fogerty in the nose.

“Oh my God. Hayden! Hayden, are you alright? You, Mr. Carr, Mr. Hebert, Mr. Fogerty, all of you to the principal’s office, *now!*” Though she was late to the scene, she’d obviously been able to put together who had started the trouble, but I resented that she hadn’t moved faster or stepped in sooner. Why had she taken her sweet-ass time coming over? “Hayden,” she whispered, her tone hushed and baby-like, as if she was talking to a kindergartener. “You’re alright. It’s okay, come with me. I’m taking you to the nurse, and then I’ll call your mother—”

“I don’t want to see her,” I snapped, finally finding my voice. I dropped the girl’s hand and turned my back on both of them, fighting back tears as I choked on my grief, my rage, my confusion. I was hurting right now, and I couldn’t deal with it. The thought of anyone seeing how destroyed I was made me want to run and hide.

I could hear the shock in her voice, “I need to call her, Hayden. She needs to take you to a doctor—”

“I don’t *want* to see her!” I raised my voice, the sound breaking as a stream of tears choked me. Even though my face was most likely a bruised mess, numb and throbbing, I could still feel the wet drops as they finally slid down my cheeks. “I want my dad. Please call my dad.”

Miss Collins was quiet for a second and I knew she was taking in the battered sight of me, but as much as the punches, the kicks, the insults had hurt me... it was nothing compared to what I’d learned.

“Okay, Hayden,” she said softly, “I’ll call your father. Come on, let’s go.” She paused for a moment before I heard her say, “What happened to your hand?”

I peered over my shoulder to see the new girl quickly hide it behind her back. “I fell on the pavement while I was skipping rope.”

“Oh honey, please be careful! Why don’t you come with us? I’ll need to make a report to send to your social—”

“No, I’m fine. Really,” she said quickly, cutting Miss Collins off. Her cheeks went pink, and I furrowed my brow in curiosity. Wait, who *was* this girl? She certainly wasn’t in my class, but I hadn’t seen her around before.

“Are you sure?”

“Yep! I’m good! Promise.” She cast me one last look of concern, “Are you okay?”

I clearly wasn’t. Not with my hair a mess, the dark bruises forming all over my body, the blood in my mouth. Tears pricked at my eyes; my whole world having fallen apart in an instant. I was far from okay. Then again, the way she had asked it, the way she looked at me, I got the sense that she didn’t mean it *that* way. She wasn’t talking about me physically or emotionally. She wanted to know that I was *okay* in the sense that I was going to hold it together. That I wasn’t on the verge of breaking completely. I don’t know how I was able to know this. How, with those three simple words, we

were able to get that understanding across, and yet... I found myself nodding and murmuring to her, "I'm okay."

Her serious face tightened at that, her lips pressing together as she nodded in return before spinning on her heel. She ran off towards the playground, the lighter sections of her dark blonde hair catching in the sun. My voice wedged in my throat again. I wanted to thank her, to let her know what she had done, standing up for me when no one else had, just how much that meant to me. But she was already gone, lost in the sea of other kids who had already gone back to their recess games.

"Come along, Hayden. Let's get you cleaned up and I'll call your dad." Miss Collins wrapped an arm around my shoulders and guided me away towards the school. I temporarily forgot about the girl, about the kindness she'd shown me. It wasn't until later that I promised I'd find her and thank her after I'd had time to find the right words. Little did I know that I'd never get that chance. When I returned to school the following week, she was gone as mysteriously as she had appeared.

Chapter one



Hayden - Present Day

IT'S QUIET HERE. It always is when I visit him.

The birds are singing; the first robin of spring jumps from branch to branch on the large maple that blocks out the sun overhead. It's unusually warm for this time of year, and as I wander over the dead, yellow grass, making my way around the pond I see him, alone in his dark corner. When the weather warms up even more, Mom will come by and plant more daisies around the base of his tombstone as she does each year, but right now, it's bleak and drab, everything dead from the cold winter.

I walk right up to it and stop before the stone, reading the name inscribed over and over again. From above, I hear the robin's call to each other, and a chill wind wraps around me like a hug.

"Hi Dad," I whisper.

I don't know why I called him that. That man who acted like my father was at work right now at his garage, most likely lying beneath an engine, covered in grease, cursing despite how much he actually loves working on cars and bikes. I smile. He may not be blood, but he was still my dad. He'd always treated me like his real son. He came to my baseball games and cheered me on until I had been forced to quit shortly after due to bullying. He came into my room at night and read me a story from the collection of kids' books mom

had accumulated, that is, until I felt like I was too old for bedtime stories. Even though I was seventeen now and those things faded away like most childhood rites, nothing had changed.

So why was I here? Standing in a graveyard, talking to the headstone of a man I'd never met? Why did I come as often as I did? I loved my parents, my two little sisters, and my baby brother. My grandpa, despite everything I'd found out about his past and all the uncles at the club... They had been there ever since I was just a kid. And yet, I always found myself coming here, to this place, to speak to a ghost.

I sat on the dead grass over his grave as I always do. Lounging back in the sun, I listened as the robins sang while I remained silent. Sometimes it's like this. I had nothing to say, but I would come all the same and just spend time with him. Other times, I talk about school, what I've been up to, Mom. But today, there is something on my mind... a lot is on my mind.

It was the voices.

For the past few years they'd kept me safe, but they were becoming louder, more frequent. Some of the stuff I thought about scared me. It all felt like a ghost was whispering in my mind, urging me to do what they couldn't.

Staring up at the grey sky between the still naked branches of the maple. "I don't want to be like you." I tell the headstone. "I don't want to be someone people are scared of. But..." I sucked in a long, uneven breath between my lips and shove my shaggy, dark hair out of my eyes, the frustration and anxiety that's been eating away at the back of my mind now coming to the forefront. I can feel it rising, and there's nothing I can do to stop it. "I fucking *hate* them. I hate how they are, how they think, how hollow it feels..." I think about the looks I get from the kids at school, how terrified they are, how they're too terrified to even look me in the eye.

Little Hayden... freak, a psycho like his *real* dad, grandson to a gang member. Before, there had been teasing and bullying

from all those sheep at school, but then the day came. The day I succumbed to the voices in my mind, when I decided not to be a victim anymore. I wore Manic like armour, and I gave Theo Hebert the scars he now carries on his face from “The incident.”

I smiled at the memory and, from the other side of the graveyard, a crow called, snapping me out of my memory.

“Bad crow,” I murmured.

Since the day I permanently changed Theo’s face, I was no longer the pathetic freakshow; a victim the other kids could taunt and tease. Now I was Hayden Shay Mathers, someone to tread lightly around, someone to be feared. I was seen as unhinged, dangerous, and unpredictable. Guys left me alone while the girls who had once taken pleasure in making fun of me and my circumstances simpered pathetically and ogled as I walked by. I curled my lip in disgust. This was my last year of high school. In a month, I’d be eighteen, and then a few weeks after that, I could say goodbye to these people forever.

But...

At the same time, I didn’t want to go through life as someone others feared. I didn’t want to be a psycho, a freak. And even though the name-calling had stopped for the most part, save for a few whisperings about my sanity, I knew Theo was waiting in the wings. Hoping for an opportunity to get back at me. He encouraged the rumours, alienating me even more. But at this point, I knew why it still bothered me. Because I wondered if they were right.

Those voices in the back of my mind didn’t go away. They never did. Some days they were louder, while other times they only whispered. The things they said were dark and unforgiving, and I knew if my mother knew about them, she’d have a breakdown. I know how she felt about my birth father. I’d talked to her about their history and what had happened right after those kids at my school first brought it to my attention.

She hadn't told me much that first day. However, from what little she had told me, I'd surmised that he had been abusive, and that was all I needed to hear. I could fill in the gaps myself, thanks. While I knew they'd been stepsiblings, which had been controversial enough, apparently my real dad *was* a biker who did greasy shit for a big crime organization and abused her. She didn't say if that meant he physically assaulted her, or if it was gaslighting and manipulation; she could never seem to explain it further. But that was enough. Mom also tried to tell me about all the things she had loved about him, things that didn't make him a monster, except it didn't matter to me now. The bad in him that I felt was coming alive in me, was all I needed to know.

Since then, my biggest fear was that I'd be just like him, just like Shay O'Hare. Even though wearing his old jacket and dog tags had kept me safe, I didn't want to carry them with me for the rest of my life. I didn't want to be a person who hurt the people he loved.

"I don't want to be like you," I said again and rose to my feet. I'd keep fighting it; I'd bury it. I refused to end up like he did, broken and lifeless, sitting on a park bench alone. I clutched at the dog tags around my neck and squeezed them, like I was about to tear them off and throw them away.

"I won't be like you," I promised, casting the grave one last, lingering look, my chest tight as I shook my dark wavy hair out of my eyes once again. The longer I held onto those dog tags, the more painful it became. The metal dug into my palms, the physical pain a distraction from what I was feeling. I didn't want to be like him, and yet... I couldn't bring myself to shed what little I had of him. It was all I had of a ghost. I didn't have the heart to get rid of him completely.

As I grew older, the resentment I had for him changed. I still didn't want to be like him, yet I still felt like I wanted to *understand* him.

He'd killed himself. Why? Had he been so tortured that he felt like he had no other choice? Had he suffered that badly?

Maybe he felt like I did, like the world was against him and he had lashed out like a cornered animal, accidentally hurting those he loved. Was that why he decided to just end it all? Did he not feel strong enough to keep living? Did he hate everyone that much?

Like you, Hayden?

No, I don't hate everyone. I loved my family. That was all I needed.

You still feel alone, don't you?

I'm not alone.

But... in a way, you are. They aren't like you, and if they knew what you were thinking, do you think they'd stay?

I closed my eyes and slowly sucked in a deep breath into my lungs, holding it, before slowly letting it free. I let go of the dog tags, letting them fall against my chest.

"Mom says she'll come by next week," I told him. Turning away, I murmured under my breath, "I'll be seeing you."

Chapter two

MADDY - PRESENT DAY

“No! No, you can’t steal my child!”

“Ms. King, please calm down—”

“I will not calm down! You have no right to take my child from me!”

“Ms. King... Ms. King! Please, we are not here to punish you. We are here to help you and your daughter—”

“Stealing my child isn’t helping me! You cannot take her! You can’t!”

“Ms. King, as per court order from the judge, you are currently being investigated for neglect of your child, and as such, we need to come inside and confirm that all is well with Madeline.”

“And I told you to fuck off! Maddy, run... RUN!”

“Open the door, ma’am!”

“Run, Maddy!”

“I said, open the door!”

“Madeline!”

“MADELINE?”

I jumped at the sound of my full name being used and tore my eyes away from the glass of the passenger window. Outside, it was grey, rainy, and bleak, but for the past ten minutes, I saw nothing but the familiar memories of childhood traumas playing like a fuzzy old movie in my mind. I blinked and crouched low in my seat; my hoodie pulled up over my head as my new social worker drove me through the darkening night. At my feet was a garbage bag of my clothes and my old patchwork backpack; my few precious belongings were always packed and ready to go. I saw the signs, and Mom had become more unhinged and paranoid lately. I knew it would end like this.

“They’re looking for me, Maddy,” she said just a few nights ago as she went through our dilapidated hotel room, closing blinds and double-checking the locks on the door and windows. “They’re looking... I can’t pay them back, yet. Fuck, what am I going to do... what am I going to do...” she muttered over and over, her eyes nearly bugging out. She was unwell, her weight at the lowest I’d ever seen, but I knew there was no getting through to her when she was crazed like this.

“Thought we’d be safe... safe here. Safe...” Her eyes welled up with tears as she paced before the bed we shared, while I lay back, staring at the television, unseeing. I felt like a zombie, unmoved by yet another episode of hers. We’d left British Columbia behind about a month and a half ago, and now we were back in Ashland, Ontario, a city I hadn’t seen since childhood, hiding.

“Madeline,” my social worker said again, her tone gentle and soft as she addressed me, “I know things look bad now, but once your mother gets the help she needs, I’m sure the judge will remove the restraining order.”

I let out a little huff and shook my head.

“Something wrong?”

I wanted to laugh. Did this woman really think I’d believe this lie? Mom has been strapped to a goddamn gurney, screaming and wailing about being stalked and hunted by

mysterious faceless men. She was going to the looney bin for a long time. “Look, Mrs. Khan, is it?” I raised my brows at her.

“I am. But you can call me Saanvi,” she smiled kindly at me through a pair of dark-rimmed spectacles.

I sighed heavily and turned away from her direct gaze, feeling uncomfortable. I hated looking people in the eye. I felt like bugs were crawling all over my skin when they did. “Saanvi... you seem nice. Nicer than a lot of other social workers I’ve met,” I said to her honestly. She’d been very calm throughout the whole process and didn’t speak to me like I was a delinquent doomed to repeat my mother’s mistakes, as so many have done in the past. “But this is my last year of high school, and I should be graduating in two months, but I seriously doubt that will happen, given all the time I’ve missed—”

“I’ve talked with a great school nearby, and they will help you catch up on what you’ve fallen behind on...” She was so optimistic it almost hurt.

“What I mean is, I’m aging out.” I cut her off, unable to bear any more of her kindness.

At this, she went quiet, her hands clenching the steering wheel tight in response.

Aging out.

The scariest thing for kids in the foster system to face. Right now, she was taking me to a home that had programs in place for kids aging out of the system. It was almost like a halfway house, run by the government, with two workers living there full-time with the girls who were placed there.

“Mom is going to be away for a long time,” I added. “I have no hope of seeing her again anytime soon. While your optimism is a beautiful thing, I am having a hard time jumping aboard the happy train while my life is a burning dumpster fire.” Lies. All they did was lie to me.

“There are so many programs for kids like you—” she started to say.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but... *now* isn’t the time to talk about it, please?” I squeezed my eyes shut, unable to listen for another second. I’d heard so many false, pretty promises growing up. Been told that things would be okay and that all would be well. That the people who would care for me were kind. I was begged to trust again and again, and each time I did, I paid for it dearly. They said they would get my mom the help she needed, and I’d go back to her and live happily ever after.

It never happened.

It was all lies to make a scared, tearful little girl smile, a band-aid on an ugly, open wound that would never heal. I didn’t want the false hope anymore. It was always so crushing when it never came true.

To my relief, Mrs. Khan did go silent, and left me in peace as she continued out of the city and to the outskirts of Ashland along the highway leading south. It had been eight or nine years since we last lived here. After Dad passed, Mom packed us up and took me west to British Columbia. But after only a month of being back, I was once again placed in the foster system.

As the night descended upon us, the city long lost at our backs, I could make out the tall trees that shrouded the side of the road, a sign to a park called Sherwood, and the occasional mailbox marking a driveway. We were going to a border town, away from Ashland, where my mother would be taken to a hospital for treatment. Even if there was no restraining order, even if I wanted to see her, it would be difficult as I had no license, no car, and no idea exactly where I was going to end up.

We entered the outskirts of the town and though it was almost completely dark outside, people were out and about, walking down the illuminated main street, laughing and enjoying themselves. It looked like a freaking postcard or a trailer for some unbelievably sappy movie.

The car jolted then, Saanvi cursing lightly under her breath when a motorcycle appeared from a side street, swerving a little to avoid hitting us. The seatbelt caught me across the chest, making me gasp as the bike rider moved aside for us to pass. I didn't see what had happened or who was at fault, but I could only guess it was us, as my social worker waved to him like she was saying *sorry*. I sat back in my seat as we passed, my gaze locking with the biker's for the briefest of flashes. He had on a black helmet but had pushed the visor up as we passed, and the silver eyes that stared back at me gave my heart a little jolt.

What the heck was that about?

We left him behind us as we turned up the next street, and though I watched him in the side mirror, he was too far away by now to get another look at. But something about those silver eyes was oddly familiar, like a memory or a dream I'd had long ago. Unable to place it, I shook my head and lounged back in my seat, my mind busy with thoughts of my mother, my life, and what a shitstorm it all was. Saanvi wanted me to be optimistic about my future, though that was easy for her to say. It's hard to be hopeful when you've had nothing except disappointment shoved down your throat. What made it worse was being told to smile through it all while you choked on their empty promises.

Story of my life...



THE HOUSE WAS AN OLD VICTORIAN, a deep blue with pale yellow trim, a porch wrapped around the front to one side, and unique-looking windows. The big one over the front porch roof was even a beautiful stained glass. The light on the driveway was like an old-fashioned gas lamp, though it had long been replaced to accommodate electricity. The glow was

welcoming enough, however. All the same, this wasn't *my* home. It was temporary, just like all the others.

Mrs. Khan pulled up in front, the downstairs lights still on, a shadowed figure standing in the doorway behind the three oval windows of the door.

"That will be Miss Ross. She runs Phoenix House full-time. Mrs. Li comes by during the day," my social worker explained as she shifted into park and glanced over at me, as if my silence was troubling her. "Do you need any help with your things?"

I shook my head, throwing my backpack over one shoulder before collecting the garbage bag of clothes I had. I was about to climb out when Mrs. Khan cleared her throat, catching my attention and making me pause. I turned my head her way, although I didn't meet her gaze, focusing instead on her hands as they gripped the steering wheel tight. "I'll come by to check on you, alright? You need anything," she reached into the pocket of her coat and pulled out a simple, white card with the name Saanvi Khan and her phone number written on it. "You call me, okay?"

"Yeah, okay," I mumbled, awkward and unsure of how to take her kindness as I accepted the card. "Thanks." I opened the door, wanting nothing more than to put as much space between us as possible. Hurrying out, I slammed it shut behind myself as I trudged up the stone walkway, up the creaking porch steps, to the front door, which opened and cast a rectangular pool of light out onto the dead grass behind me. It was April, so the frost at night kept spring from making its presence known.

"Madeline King?" The woman standing in the doorway in a red nightgown yawned and ran a hand through her greying blonde hair.

"The one and only," I muttered.

"Come on in, hon." She extended a hand. When I stepped inside, she didn't actually touch me, which I was grateful for. I

shivered as memories of past foster homes came to mind. *No looking. No touching.* That was my motto, pretty much.

“We’ll go over the house rules in the morning,” Miss Ross yawned again, pushing her round glasses up her nose. She appeared to be maybe in her late-fifties or so, and had plenty of laugh lines around her mouth. But she wasn’t smiling now. Instead, she turned and started trudging up the steps, beckoning me to follow. I kicked off my sneakers and set them on the shoe rack by the door, grabbed my things, and followed her.

“The older girls share this room on the right, while the younger ones under twelve sleep there,” she pointed to the door on the left, where it was half-open. The soft glow of a nightlight shone along the open crack. “There are two washrooms up here and one downstairs. My room is at the back of the house. If there’s a problem, there’s a buzzer on the wall, an intercom system connecting to my room and office. You press it any time there’s an emergency. I’ve made up a bed for you, so you get some sleep and we’ll talk in the morning. Breakfast is at eight.”

It was only a little past ten at night by this point, so I seriously doubted that any of the girls my age were asleep. Most likely lying awake, haunted by their real-life nightmares. Miss Ross opened the door with a careful creak and nodded for me to go in.

There wasn’t much to see in the dark, though I noted with relief that there was a nightlight in here, too, and it helped me make out the three sets of bunk beds arranged along the walls. She pointed to a bottom one that was arranged so that the foot was nearly flush to the bay window in the middle of the back wall. Sure enough, there was a freshly made-up space with an old pink and purple flowered comforter and pillow. I took the hint that this was for me and sat on the edge.

“No sneaking out,” Miss Ross whispered as she turned to head for the door. “I set the alarm every night.”

“I have no plans to be anywhere, so we’re good,” I muttered, my hands gripping the blanket beneath me.

“Alright then. See you in the morning.” With a final nod, Miss Ross shut the door with a quiet snap, followed by the sounds of her footsteps moving to the younger girls’ room to check on them. For a moment, when it got suddenly quiet, my heart began to hammer against my chest, wondering if I needed to go down the hall and make sure Miss Ross wasn’t taking advantage of those girls...

“Be a good girl and lie still, Maddy,” his voice whispered, the memory from long ago flashing to the forefront of my mind as I stared at the doorway. My hands shook as I gripped the blankets so tight that I managed to cut through with my nails, digging a little into my palms.

Monsters are real. They creep into the room at night, lingering close to the shadows, and prey on the innocent ones tucked away in their beds. The ones who cannot fight or protect themselves, who are vulnerable. The monsters come, leaving deep scars that others cannot see.

But the footsteps retreated, moving away from the hall and down the stairs. The seconds it took for her to check on the younger girls was not enough time for anything to happen, and I released a long, shaking breath.

“She won’t hurt them,” a voice whispered in the dark.

I glanced over at the bunk bed across from mine, on the other side of the window, and noticed a shadowed figure laying on the lower bunk as she shifted a little.

“Miss Ross? She’s not like the others. She’s good. A bit of a hard-ass sometimes, but I guess she has to be,” the voice of the girl said, chuckling a little as though she herself had gotten into trouble with the older woman. “But she’s not someone you need to be afraid of.”

“Well, that’s a first...” I murmured, though the girl’s words sent a wave of reassurance through me, easing the tightness in my chest. I ripped open the garbage bag and rooted through it

in the semi-darkness, feeling the material of my clothes to decipher which was my sleeping stuff, finally holding it up to the low glow of the nightlight to make sure I got what I wanted. Satisfied, I stepped out into the hall and into the washroom, closing the door behind myself for privacy, though I noted there was no lock. It didn't matter. Privacy wasn't something I was used to. At this moment, I was so exhausted from everything that happened today that I just wanted to pass out and figure out my next steps—cue survival mode.

I changed into my old, oversized AC/DC t-shirt and a pair of boxer shorts, something I'd always found the most comfortable to sleep in. Swimming in oversized clothes. Always my preference. I washed my face with the soap on the counter and found a spare toothbrush under the sink where a whole collection of stored bathroom essentials were waiting to be grabbed. Unopened, unused. That was kind of nice... because most times when I've been yanked out of my home, I usually forget something random like deodorant, toothpaste, or face wash. But here, it was like they had a stockpile for us to choose from. I grabbed what I needed and brought it back to my room, shoving it deep into my garbage bag before stuffing it under the blanket near the end of my bed.

Another lesson learned... *keep your valuables close when sharing a space with strangers.*

From the bed where the other girl lay, she rolled over and coughed, still awake, but didn't say another word as I climbed under my blanket and tried to settle for the night.

I lay on my side for a long time, staring at the nightlight, grateful for its presence, especially considering I had a fear of the dark, even at seventeen. But my horrors weren't from some childhood fantasy like the witch in the closet or the wolf under the bed. Mine were of large, frightening, monstrous men sneaking into my space. Hiding in the shadows, or moving closer until a large, rough hand would inevitably slap over my mouth to silence my scream.

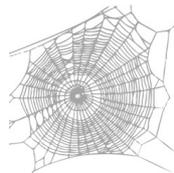
No, it's okay, Maddy. There aren't any men in this house. Mrs. Khan told you that when she explained where she was taking you. You're safe. It's safe here.

Still, like a little kid, I found myself reaching beneath my blanket for my belongings, feeling around until my fingers found the soft arm of my childhood bear, Fuzzy. I pulled him out and squeezed him tight to my chest, my heart hammering at every creak the house made, the sound of the branches tapping against the glass of the bay window, and told myself over and over again...

You're safe.

You're safe.

You're safe...



“I’M ANDREA,” the girl in the other bed introduced herself the moment I woke up. Blearily, I rubbed my eyes, having a hard time coming to. I didn’t sleep much last night. I hardly ever did, especially when I found myself in a new place, and that had been happening too much lately. I always had a shadowed look around my eyes. I sat up and yawned hugely, getting a better look at the space. The room was bigger than I’d thought.

Along with the three bunk beds, there were two dressers and two desks carefully arranged around the space to fit everything. Besides me and Andrea, there was one other girl, but she ignored me completely as she got herself dressed and ready for breakfast, looking like she was still half-asleep. I took the olive branch that Andrea was giving me and smiled.

“I’m Madeline. But everyone calls me Maddy,” I said to her, sitting up and stretching, my head skimming the bottom of the bunk overhead.

“Welcome to Phoenix House,” Andrea said, smiling shyly before making her own bed. She had a lot of bouncy red curls and a spatter of cute freckles across her nose. She was scrawny like me and had the same shadows around her eyes.

I got up, dressed in a pair of baggy jeans and a hoodie, despite the warm spring sun beaming through our room window. I always preferred hiding my body. It was easier to go unnoticed when you didn’t give others a glimpse. You just disappeared, which was how I liked it. I did, however, tie my long, brownish-blond hair back into a ponytail, letting my long, draping bangs hang around my face, and followed Andrea down the stairs to the kitchen at the side of the house.

It was bright and sunny in here. The windows all looked over the wraparound porch, and flower baskets were propped beneath them, though they were empty at the moment. I could picture a bunch of beautiful wildflowers bursting into bloom in the summer and could only imagine how good it would smell. The wallpaper was of a buttercup yellow colour with occasional pink flowers, old fashioned, but it suited the feel of the old house, with the darker trim wood on everything.

There was a long, oval table set up by the windows while a short Chinese woman worked away at the stove, talking animatedly to two of the girls. That must be Mrs. Li, the worker who just came by during daytime hours to help.

“C’mon, have a seat,” Andrea said, sliding down the bench against the wall. I preferred that way, too, so I could see everyone coming and going in the room. I hated having my back to a doorway. I joined her, fully expecting her friendly nature to talk my ear off, but she was silent, fiddling with the napkin she pulled out from beneath her plate, now suddenly anxious as she watched the stove. I noticed then that she’d picked the seat furthest from it. At the corner of my eye, I watched her, noting that she was also covered in heavier clothing than the season required.

“Good morning, girls!” Miss Ross came in then, immediately checking to see who was there and who wasn’t.

Holding her hand was a small girl who looked to be around five, clutching a blanket close to her chin, half hiding her face behind it. But I noticed the scar that ran down the length of her cheek, causing her eye to droop on one side, and I immediately tensed. Miss Ross helped her into a seat and went to fetch some fresh orange juice from the fridge. As she did, she looked over at me and smiled, “How did you sleep, Madeline?”

I shrugged, “Okay...” I murmured, avoiding her gaze by looking down at my empty plate.

“A new house is always a transition, but I hope the bed was comfortable?”

“It was, thanks,” I said quietly, hating the attention on me.

She seemed to get the idea because she turned back to the smaller girl and handed her some juice before moving over to the others at the stove and started dishing out food onto plates. She came over and piled a bunch of scrambled eggs on mine before Mrs. Li brought a stack of toast and cut-up fresh fruit to the table. From around the house, the other girls began to show up, all taking their seats while greeting the women who ran the place respectfully.

It was weird to be in a place that was so... civil. But I still couldn't shake the uneasy feeling in my stomach that I carried with me everywhere.

Don't let your guard down, Maddy. That's when the bullshit happens...

“Madeline,” Miss Ross said from the other end of the table, “after breakfast, I'd like you to come to my office so we can go over the house rules and responsibilities.”

Trap. It's a trap! I tried not to show my apprehension, but my shoulders automatically tensed, and I began poking at my eggs as if razor blades were hidden in them. “Fine.”

I watched everyone around me in my peripheral, eagerly eating their breakfast. Only when no one started choking or throwing up, did I take a bite. Beside me, Andrea seemed to

have settled now that the stove was off, and she was shoveling food into her mouth as though this was her last meal.

I get it...

The younger girls seemed more accepting of the older women, talking about their dreams or something they saw on television, a squirrel sitting on the large maple outside the window, or something funny that happened at school, while Andrea and the other one who eventually showed up, stuck to themselves.

Mrs. Li seemed to be the most loved, as two of the little ones were practically squashed to her side, leaning against her as they ate while the woman spoke gently to them, dishing out another helping onto their plates. Never have I been in a house like this. It didn't seem real. Government employees followed so many rules that it often felt sterile. This place was... homey. But it weirded me out. This wasn't something I was used to.

When we all finished, the older girls immediately started clearing the table and cleaning up while the others dispersed. Mrs. Li helped the young ones get their coats and backpacks as she was going to walk them to the elementary school that was a couple of blocks away. At the same time, the teenagers still had another half hour before they had to be anywhere, though they still slowly got their backpacks together, ready to head off on their own.

“Madeline?” Miss Ross called from the hallway. “If you would please join me?”

Careful, Maddy... I hesitantly stepped into the hall that ran along the base of the stairs. It was made of the same palace green painted boards and yellow wallpaper, though there were framed pictures lining the wall. As I slowly made my way down to the office at the end, I glanced at the photos.

Pictures of Miss Ross and of another woman who must have worked here before Mrs. Li, along with a photo next to it of the house in black and white, in ruins, fully renovated and

fixed up and in colour. The weirdest picture was of a group of men standing next to Miss Ross, holding a cheque for one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, a donation to *The Safe Harbour for Kids Foundation*. The men were rough looking, with beards, bandanas, and wearing leather jackets with a patch on that looked like a skull and a scythe. What the hell was a motorcycle club doing giving money to a charity like this? And if this was a charity, did that mean this place wasn't government-run? Was that legal?

“Madeline?”

I tore my gaze away from the photo of the men, confused and curious, and reluctantly joined her in her office at the back. To my relief, she didn't shut the door. Though to my chagrin, the only chair I could sit in meant by back was to it. Unthinking, I turned the chair to the wall so I was sitting sideways before the desk, arms crossed, eyes on the floor. Miss Ross was already sitting, a folder open on the wooden surface before her. I knew she was looking at a file dedicated to me. How I hated that. Did kids from real families have files like that on them? No... but I did. All the girls brought here did.

“At Phoenix House, things are done a little differently, as I'm sure you've noticed,” Miss Ross said, her tone as gentle as Mrs. Khan's had been. I still refused to look at her, my body tense, waiting for a reason to run. “I saw you looking at the photographs in the hall. The Lost Souls MC chapter here in Ashland started *The Safe Harbour Foundation* five years ago, to help fix the foster situation in the city. I understand you are new to Ashland, so the history is probably unknown to you; however, The Lost Souls have played a significant part in the positive changes here. This is a safe place, Madeline, but I need you to do your part, so we continue to keep this house peaceful and secure for all those who come here.”

“Sounds fair,” I said quietly. I was never a troublemaker and had no intention of starting now. I was just... wary. Unsure. “First, can you tell me where my mom is?”

At that, Miss Ross shifted uncomfortably in her seat, the sound of the wood creaking under her weight. “I’m sorry to say I cannot. That is for you to discuss with your social worker, Mrs. Khan. She comes by regularly to check in, as she is in charge of several of the girls here. She’ll let me know when she wishes to set up a meeting with you, probably next week. You can ask her then.”

I nodded, biting my bottom lip, my feelings a mix of complicated emotions. On one hand, I loved my mother because, well, she was my mother. But on the other hand, I was glad I wasn’t with her. Mom wasn’t neglectful on purpose. I blame drugs and her mental state, a dangerous combination. Her paranoia just seemed to get out of control, especially in recent years. Our house hopping, the sleepless nights spent in shelters. No food, and the crazy conversations I’d overhear as she went on a rambling rant to herself while pacing a space was too much on my heart. I just wanted a place to call home. I wanted to feel safe. I wanted to feel loved. While Mom did love me in her own way, it was tainted. Tainted by her addictions, her terrifying and bizarre fantasies, and her lack of care.

“Now, then,” Miss Ross went on, her tone picking up in an attempt to improve the mood in the room. “Here at Phoenix House, we work together to keep it looked after. The sitting room has a whiteboard with daily chores assigned to everyone here. Every Sunday, I’ll change it. If there’s something you prefer over other jobs, I’ll take that into consideration. For instance, Sawyer loves gardening and being outdoors, so she gets yard work more often than not.”

I nodded, saying nothing.

“Mrs. Li makes the meals, but we do ask that you girls lend a hand. Your days for helping out with the cooking will be assigned to you on the whiteboard as well. We find it important and therapeutic to help teach you all life skills, so other jobs like laundry, helping grocery shop, and such are also part of the deal.”

“Fine.”

Miss Ross didn't seem put off by my silence or quiet way, but I could sense her desperation to make me feel comfortable, because her tone hitched a little, sounding more baby-like than normal. “As for your studies, the high school is close by, and you girls that attend it are free to follow your schedules without Mrs. Li and I needing to follow up. You're nearly adults, so we like to give you a chance to take on the responsibility yourselves—” Ironic, I thought, given the way her voice sounded, all high and squeaky like I was a toddler.

But I just nodded again, giving her nothing.

“You'll attend classes tomorrow after Mrs. Khan collects your schedule and books for us, most likely this evening. She's lined up your classes, and we'll get you set up in any extracurriculars or tutor sessions you may need. If you end up having to go to summer school to get your GED, there's a program we'll get you signed up for.”

“Sounds good.”

I wasn't being like this on purpose, to be complicated. It all sounded fine to me. The resources offered here were better than what I had in other cities on the other side of the country, where you really felt on your own. I wonder if this was all because of that motorcycle club that had started this foundation? I glanced over at Miss Ross, noting her old-fashioned, floral blouse and knit sweater. She reminded me of Mother Goose, yet I couldn't allow myself to drop my guard around her despite all she offered me. I've been fooled so many times before by people who seemed beautiful and good on the surface, only to discover later that they were a demon in disguise.

“Well then, you get yourself settled. There should be two spare drawers in one of the wardrobes upstairs, and then you can explore the house a little. The only out-of-bounds places are my office, unless you need something from me, my private room next to here, and the basement. Check the whiteboard in the sitting room, as I'll be adding your name to the roster

today. If you leave the house, let me know where you're going and when I can expect you back. The town is a lovely place, and it's a beautiful day, so if you want to look around, then you are welcome to."

"Thanks," I mumbled and quickly jumped out of my seat, heading out of the enclosed space as fast as possible. By this time, all the other girls had left the house for school, and I wanted to take advantage of this time to just sit and breathe in peace, alone.

Tomorrow, I'd start again in a new place, with new kids and social groups. I hoped for the best but braced for the worst. I've experienced bullying in the past and been alienated by others being that I was new, different. They'd already established their core groups. I was just an outsider who was temporarily invading their space. While I told myself that I wouldn't be a victim anymore, that if anyone tried messing with me, I wouldn't allow it. That I'd be brave and fight back, although the prospect of doing this made me uneasy.

I didn't want to take shit from anyone; even so, I was never good at confrontation. And any time I'd spoken up for myself, I was never believed, or the consequences of doing so would only earn me more trouble and heartache. Only once, a long time ago, when I'd stood up for someone else, a kid who was a stranger to me, had I managed to push back against the bullying of others. I don't know why I had felt such protectiveness then, over a boy I didn't know at all, but something had spurred to life when I saw the group of kids attacking him. Why couldn't I apply that strength to myself?

Don't be a victim, Maddy. Don't be a victim. Not anymore. You can do this. You can do it...

Easier said than done.

Chapter three



HAYDEN - THE PAST, Six Years Old

“HOLD THOSE CAREFULLY, LITTLE MAN,” my mother’s voice was a little off despite how cheery she sounded. Shaky, like she was about to get upset. I wondered what was making her want to cry this time as I clutched a basket of the daisies she’d brought with us, careful not to let it fall.

“You sure you don’t need me to come?” Dad asked from the driver’s seat, his bright blue eyes peering at us from over the top of his sunglasses.

“If you don’t mind, just this time,” Mom said, bending a little to see him through the open passenger window.

“Hey, no worries. I got company,” he said easily, turning on the radio, one of his favourites playing loudly. He began to air guitar along, head banging as he did, making me giggle at the sight as Mom rolled her eyes, despite smiling at silly Dad.

“Okay, loser, we’ll be back in about twenty minutes, alright?” She chuckled.

“Can’t hear you, I’m living out my dream as a rockstar, surrounded by screaming fans throwing their underw—”

“Ah-ah!” She snapped, stopping him before he finished, “Do you mind?” she added, nodding to me.

He grinned sheepishly as he glanced my way, winking cheekily at me. I grinned wide, now wanting to stay and hang out with him instead of helping Mom with her “gardening

project,” as she called it. “Sorry, sorry! I forget how much he actually listens now.”

“I hear everything!” I announced proudly, and both my parents laughed loudly.

“That’s what I’m afraid of!” Mom chuckled, looping her bag of garden stuff over her shoulder, holding her own clutch of daisies, and gently took my hand, “Okay, be back soon!” She called once more to Dad, who had gone back to his air guitar, then she was leading me down the pathway into the trees.

We’d only moved here a couple of weeks ago, and already I missed the beach. It wasn’t as warm here, either. Still Mom said that this was where we would live now, and sometime soon we’d return to visit. I hoped so.

However...

It *was* pretty here. In a different way. Especially in this place with all the stones. It was quiet, the trees were large and different from the palms where I’d come from, and this was where I met my grandpa.

Grandpa J.

I smiled as I thought of him. I’d heard stories about my grandfather but didn’t meet him until a few weeks ago, and he’s quickly become one of my favourite people. I remember the moment I saw him. Regardless of how nervous I was, his smile and words put me at ease. Something about him was so familiar, in spite of him being a stranger. He looked like me despite his silver-streaked hair and wrinkles around his eyes. Just... an older me. Since that day, he’s been around, stopping by, taking me out for ice cream and to parks while Mom and Dad got our house put together, letting me sit on his cool motorcycle, and not to mention, he gave the best hugs.

But he wasn’t with us today. It was just Mom and I, strolling down the path hand-in-hand between the hedges, now blooming with little white flowers, until we stepped into the clearing. The pond! Ducks!

“Do you want to go feed the ducks?” she asked me, reaching into her bag and pulling out a Ziplock full of birdseed.

“Yes!” I practically shouted, bouncing on my feet in excitement.

Laughing, she handed the bag over and carefully took the daisies from me. The moment I was free of them, I took off, running as fast as I could toward the pond.

“Duckies!” I shouted happily, watching as they scattered upon the water, disappointed that they were swimming farther away. “Come back! I have food!”

Mom’s laughter rang out across the space as she called, “You have to speak gently to them, Little Man! A little more quiet, okay? Just move slowly, and they’ll come.”

“Okay!” I shouted over my shoulder as I fumbled with the baggie. Grabbing a handful of the seed, I threw it at the ducks, only becoming upset when they refused to come closer. I tried to be quiet, to move slowly like she’d said. She always told me not to rush into things, that I needed to slow down and take my time. As impatient as I was, I tried it now, circling the water’s edge, hoping to get closer. Though the ducks still kept space between us, they didn’t flap or scatter as frantically as they had done before. Sitting on the water’s edge, I reached for some more seed and tossed it lightly into the pond, watching as the one with the green head moved closer to investigate.

Feeling a little victorious, I glanced up to see if Mom was watching, but she was kneeling before one of the stones, garden gloves on, spade in hand, digging before it. This stone was farther back than the others, sitting beneath a huge tree, but even with the canopy, sunlight still managed to break through, lighting up my mom’s blonde hair. I ran a hand through my own shaggy locks. I didn’t look much like her at all. Or like Dad. Mine was dark like Grandpa J’s, or at least, what wasn’t silver.

A loud quack snapped my attention back to the water, and I gleefully watched as the ducks approached, nibbling at the few floating bits of seed. I tossed in some more, laughing when the green-headed duck swooped before the others, stealing most of it away.

“Big bully!” I scolded him despite my smile. “Share! You’re supposed to share!” I carefully threw a little towards the others, ensuring everyone got some. When there was none left, I shoved the empty baggie into my shorts pocket and began exploring the space. Some of the stones had flowers in front of them. Others sat alone. And some looked like no one had been by in a long time. They were covered in moss and dirt. The stone Mom was kneeling before looked like it had been alone for a while, but she was fixing that now, using a rag that she’d dipped into the pond to wipe the dirt away, the daisies now planted and reaching up towards the sun.

I wandered over to her, watching as she gathered up her things, putting them away in her bag before standing in front of the grey rock, the words etched into it familiar because I knew my ABCs, but I couldn’t read just yet. At least, big words. However, I recognized one on the stone because it was *my* name. My middle name.

“Shay!” I shouted, smiling as I read the familiar letters. “That’s me!” I said, pointing at the rock.

Mom, however, froze at my words. *Uh oh...*

Mommy’s tears, mommy’s screams, mommy’s fears... she was having one of her, what are they called? An “ep-ee-sode”. What had happened? Was it something I did?

“Mommy?” I said softly, staring up at her, knowing what was about to happen, “Mommy? You okay?”

“H-Hayden,” she whispered, sounding so far away, her wide eyes locked onto the words of the stone, her body shaking.

“What’s wrong?” I reached for her hand, but her fingers were cold and stiff, and she wouldn’t squeeze back. “Are you

okay? Are you sick?"

"Hayden," she repeated, her voice breaking, "Get your father. Please!"

Immediately, I let go, turned, and raced back the way we came. It wasn't far, and the path was the only way out. I knew where to go. Dad would make everything better. He always did. I needed him to save her. *I* needed to save her. I tore along the stones, careful as I avoided the parts of the trees that had grown up over the ground, until I broke free from the shrubbery to see Dad still parked in the car, music playing, though he looked asleep. Racing over to the closest window on Mom's side, I pounded my fist against the door. "Dad! Dad! Wake up!"

His blue eyes snapped open, and seeing me standing there, alone, he sat straight up and opened the door to get out. "Hayden! Buddy, you okay? You hurt? Where's your mom?" He sounded panicked as he ran around the car, reaching for me as his blue gaze quickly moved over my body like he thought I might be bleeding or something.

"It's mom. She's having an... an... ep-ee-sode!" I stammered over the word.

Dad scooped me up in his arms and ran down the path into the clearing of stones that circled the pond, spotting her at once, only now, she was sitting on the ground, her arms wrapped around her like she was cold, shivering so hard I could see her shaking from here. He gently put me on the ground and handed me his phone, opening up a game he kept on it for me to play with sometimes.

"Play with this for a bit, okay, Buddy? Go sit by the ducks and, for the love of God, don't drop that in the water, alright?" He nodded thoughtfully to me, and I took the phone, a little excited now that I got to use it.

"I'll be careful," I said, almost dropping it immediately but managing to hold onto it at the last second. "I promise."

I could see he didn't quite believe me but left to head over to Mom. My anxiousness disappeared as I held the phone up to my face and settled in the sun by the water, focusing entirely on the bright colours of the game as I tried to match the shapes together. It wasn't until I heard a small, tearful, high-pitched gasp that I remembered where I was and what was happening. Looking up, I could see my father holding my mom tight in his arms, whispering softly to her as he rocked her back and forth, stroking her back in slow, easy circles, shielding her from the words on the stone. I still didn't understand what had happened, why she had gotten so upset, but I wasn't going to question it. All I knew was that, somehow, I'd made my mother cry... again.

Shame filled my stomach, and I dropped the phone into my lap as I watched my parents hold each other. Last time, it was because we were eating ice cream in the car, parked by an old railway station, the radio playing as we enjoyed the sunny day. I'd fiddled with the controls until a song came on that I thought was good. I'd told her how much I liked it, but when I looked over at her, she'd gone still, her eyes staring right ahead, the ice cream eventually melting down her arm. Dad hadn't been with us then, and for the longest time, I'd tried everything to make it better. But there was nothing I could do. When she turned and looked at me, her eyes staring into mine, she only seemed to get worse.

Finally, I don't know how long after, she seemed to snap out of it, blinking hard and fast, tears on her face and on mine as I pleaded with her to get better.

"I-I'm so sorry, Hayden," she'd whispered, "I'm *so* sorry!" And she pulled me in for a tight hug, kissing my head. "It's mama's fault. It's my fault. I'm sorry..." she whispered over and over again.

She had pulled herself together and driven us home. When we stepped inside and I ran to play with my toys in the living room, Mom shut herself away in her bedroom until Dad came in from work. He went upstairs, and after a long time, he brought her down and I could see she'd been crying.

I now waited again for him to work his magic.

When she finally lifted her head from his shoulder, giving him a small smile and a quick nod, I breathed a sigh of relief. He looked my way and gestured for me to come over. Eagerly, I got to my feet, raced around the pond to where my parents were sitting, and threw myself into their laps. Hearing Mom's laughter was enough for me to know he'd fixed her again. Dad really *was* a superhero.

“Where's my phone, Little Man?”

Uh oh.

Nervously, I looked back at the spot where I'd been sitting and pointed. The phone was lying by the water's edge. Dad cussed under his breath as he sprang to his feet and ran over.

“No swearing!” I yelled after him, watching as he quickly scooped it up and checked it.

Mom's arms wrapped around my middle and I sank into her embrace, smiling to myself, relieved to have her back. I felt her lips in my hair as she kissed me, whispering over and over, “I love you, Hayden. Love you, love you, love you...”

Chapter four



Hayden - Present Day

“... MADELINE KING...”

“... another girl at the Phoenix House...”

“... not much to look at, bro... too much material...”

“... I hear her mom is crazy. Got locked up over the weekend at an asylum!”

“... she’s too skinny. My huge cock would break her in half.”

I sneered at the whispers exchanged through the halls. Another new face, and the kids in this school greedily drank it up like it was Kool-Aid. I slammed my locker shut, and several other students around me jumped at the sound before quickly giving me a wide berth as I walked down the hall, heading for the cafeteria. I wore my old leather jacket, the patch of Manic sewn onto the arm, the dog tags jingling together at my chest, a reminder to those who might have forgotten whose son I was.

Leave me the fuck alone and I’ll leave you alone.

When I took my seat in the back corner of the cafeteria, I sighed heavily and shut my eyes, letting my head thud against the stone wall at my back. Years ago, my mom told me to be above the rest of these hyenas. She didn’t want me fighting again, and I’d stuck by that. Although, none of the other kids knew about that. So while I didn’t want to be like my birth

father, I wore his old relics like armour every day, a warning to them all, and that's kept me safe and made life at school a little more bearable.

When everyone had snubbed me, it hurt. I wanted them to like me again. I would have done anything. But the day of the incident where I left Theo on the ground in a bloody mess, I was officially labeled a danger and an outcast, meaning no one picked on me anymore. In fact, I was ignored almost altogether. By the time that happened, however, I was fine being on my own. I didn't want them near me. I hated them all. And the friends I thought I'd had? They'd walked away and left me to fend for myself. I honestly had no one.

Except her... The mystery girl who I never saw again.

Whatever. Once I graduated in two months, I wouldn't have to see any of these kids again. I'd be able to choose what I wanted to do with my life and start over as me, Hayden, and not go around being seen as the next version of a man who had died long ago.

I'll be able to shed the armour I've been wearing, his name, and do what everyone else in my family was too afraid to... leave this place behind. I'd take my camera and travel the world; I'd *see* it. I'd get out. Mom and Aunt Casey talked about what they'd wanted when they were my age. The big cities, away from Ashland and all the border towns. Yet here they were, settled, stuck, with no intention of ever leaving.

Students began to crowd the hall, all talking, their voices muffled as they mingled, sounding like white noise in the background as I relaxed in my seat. Peering through my lashes, I kept an eye out, watching to see if any guy here was stupid enough to try to come at me while I was like this. Only what I saw was the usual group of girls who sat nearby, observing me like they were hoping I suddenly changed my mind and wanted to fuck any of them again. When I glanced their way, they all looked down and giggled. Everyone was always afraid to meet my gaze, like doing so would earn them a spot on the gurney or some shit...

That is another reason why I didn't bother going to house parties anymore. I made a few appearances, bringing a friend or two from the club along, appreciating the circle of space everyone gave me when we walked in. Except booze made some of these girls a little braver, and they sauntered right up to talk. After a few drinks, I found myself fucking them in a spare bedroom or somewhere out back ("*Wrap it up, Hayden!*" my dad always told me, advice that I took seriously), and the next day they'd watch me expectantly as if I'd made some vow that was owed to them.

I wasn't an asshole, but I never promised these girls shit, and I'd heard rumours of the crap they tried to pull with football players. Cal Riggs, the quarterback and basketball captain, was caught by some chick using a flimsy condom. She'd actually poked a hole in it. Thankfully I never fucked that girl. She strolled around with the rest, her stomach slowly swelling, and I knew I would never let one of them trap me like that. Honestly, she should have been arrested.

Again, more to back up my whole, *leave me the fuck alone*, policy. That's when I moved on to only fooling around with girls from other schools, which only made the ones here all the more determined, it seemed.

It wasn't until a small figure stepped into the cafeteria that the girls looked away, casting suspicious glances at the heavily clothed person as they wandered along the wall, searching for a spot to sit, before whispering to each other like the hyenas they were. Why, oh why did I fuck these girls?

Because you're a horny teenager, Hayden. What other reason is there?

I opened my eyes to peek at Miss Madeline King, the new focus of the school's gossip. But she was completely hidden beneath the largest navy hoodie I'd seen on a girl, with baggy jeans, holes in the knees, and a pair of old sneakers that looked like they were on the verge of completely falling apart. Didn't surprise me. I knew all about Phoenix House. If the rumours about where she had lived before and what had happened to

her were true, then she *had* been removed from her family's care.

I discreetly watched as she bustled along, hurrying to an empty table adjacent to mine, her back to the wall. Beneath the hood, I could make out her chin and pink lips, which were pressed tightly together. Her face turned to check one entrance to the room and the emergency exit on the other side, before she opened the sandwich she'd brought and took a timid, little bite. She reminded me of a frightened chipmunk... small, on alert, with an innocent sort of aura about her.

Whatever...

I ran a hand through my dark, wavy hair and yawned, wishing this day could be over already. I wanted to get home and work with Dad in the garage out back for a bit. It was one of my few happy places, sitting in silence with him. On occasion, Maverick would join us, and I'd watch him to make sure he didn't get into the power tools or some shit. The kid was a walking hurricane, got into every fucking thing. My sisters, now twelve and ten, could care less about cars and bikes, so they followed Mom around the house like little shadows, though Charlotte was getting into makeup lately. I huffed at the thought of her getting into boys. God help any that tried to come sniffing around. I'd murder them.

From the table where Madeline King was sitting, one of the girls I recognized as a resident at Phoenix House joined her, Andrea Walsh. Her fuzzy red hair was tied back out of her face, and she smiled at her housemate before speaking quietly to her and taking a seat at her side. Poor Andrea... the shit she'd endured made me soften a little. Most of the girls at Phoenix House did. They had enough shit to deal with, and I was pretty sure most, if not all, of them were scared of me. Theo's crooked nose and scarred mouth were a heavy reminder of what the fuck I was capable of. No one needed to know that the "Phoenix Girls" were another reason I went to parties, so I could discreetly ensure they weren't taken advantage of. Like that one time, poor Andrea became the victim... I'd skipped that party.

I thought about my mother and her past. I'd be damned if I let that happen to someone else if I could help it. Unfortunately, I hadn't been able to make it the one time, and that's when Andrea became a victim.

Another thing that set apart the girls who stayed at the Home, was that they were a hell of a lot nicer than most of the kids who came from stable households. Because Grandpa J supported the place, my mom and dad made me volunteer there by shoveling snow in the winter or cutting grass in the summer. Mom also liked to bake cookies and stuff for the girls and would occasionally swing by to check-in. When she eventually had to stop teaching ballet at the local studio due to her knee acting up, she dedicated more and more time to the House.

I got up from my chair and turned away, aware of anyone who looked in my direction yet ignoring them all, though I remained very conscious of the two Phoenix girls sitting together, whispering, their heads bowed over their food.

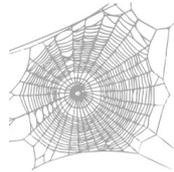
"... not much to look at, bro... too much material..."

"... she's too scrawny. My huge cock would break her in half."

The crude words spoken by the guys in my school rang through my head as I glanced her way, trying to get a peek at her face, but her hood remained in place, hiding her from view. No big deal. It's not like I really cared. I was just curious about the new chick like everyone else.

And yet, when I walked by her table, a voice in my head screamed at me to take another look. I hesitated, halting my step, and when I did, she shrank in on herself, like my walking too close made her uncomfortable. I wanted to roll my eyes, but something about the frightened way she held herself made me pause for a second before I forced myself to keep going. If she was gonna cringe and avoid me like the others, it was just one less person I needed to be concerned about. Now, Theo Hebert... *he* was someone who always had my guard up. I knew he wanted to pay me back for fucking up his face.

Though it'd been years ago, I knew it wasn't over between us, and when I strolled past him and his friends, they were quiet, wary as I passed. But no one moved or followed. I guess it wouldn't be today.



IN P.E., with it being so close to the end of the year, we were pretty much left on our own with options to choose from. We could either go outside to participate in whatever activity was set up in the gymnasium or use the weight room on the second floor that overlooked the gym. I always chose to do weights, as Theo and the others almost always went outside. Still, when I stepped into the small, smelly space, I was disappointed to see they were here, only they were gathered along the glass floor-to-ceiling windows, looking down at the students who chose to do something inside. Ignoring them, I moved to the other end of the room, where I could see everyone behind me in the mirror while I lifted.

As I passed Theo and his cronies, I could hear them muttering excitedly, “Shit... who knew that was under all those clothes?”

Madeline King.

For some reason, my interest was piqued again. Why was I so curious about this girl? Normally, I wouldn't bother, but that little figure swimming in oversized clothes kept snagging my attention for some reason. Glancing below, I realized that the P.E. teachers were getting those poor bastards ready for sprints. Those kids chose wrong today. I could make out the usual girls who always chose to stay inside, followed by the burnout students who preferred the air-conditioned gymnasium to the hot sun. But at the far end of the line, closest to the emergency exit, was someone new, and the moment I caught sight of her, I froze...

She was wearing the usual gym headband that the school gave out, something we all had to wear when breaking a sweat. Navy sweats or shorts, whatever our choice, and a red t-shirt with a bear on the front. She had on sweats and a T, but because the school assigned these clothes, they weren't swimming on her, but more fitting. With no hood to hide her face and her hair tied back in a ponytail, she was finally exposed for everyone to see.

Her eyes were wide, and even from here, I could see how sad they were. Her brow was furrowed, creating a little line on her forehead, as she warily watched the people around her like she was afraid of getting pounced on. Her mouth was full, pouty like mine, but while mine naturally fell into a sort of smirk, hers was set like she was clenching her jaw. She was pale, her body petite, and her hair a dark blonde with a bit of a wave to it. Unremarkable.

And yet...

I found myself staring at her, too, just like the others. I don't know why I kept looking, watching as she stretched. She seemed uncomfortable at being so exposed as she pulled her shirt away from her front and sides, stretching the material like she hated how it clung to her skin. When she stood still, her arms crossed before her body, hugging herself, shrinking away in hopes of going unnoticed. Too bad for her that she'd caught the attention of practically every person within fifty feet of her, including myself. The longer I stared, the more strangely familiar she seemed, and I thought about how much I would like to see her smile. Strange...

The moment she had turned her face away, I snapped out of the weird trance I'd fallen into. What the hell was that all about?

Shaking my head, I went back to the weights, focusing on my breathing and posture as I lifted, all the while listening and watching everyone else in the room, not wanting to be caught unawares. I suppose that was something Miss Madeline King

and I had in common... we didn't trust the kids in this school for shit.

"She's fuckable. Give me a week, and she'll be using crutches to get around." Theo laughed while his friends all sniggered.

Shut your fucking mouth! That voice, which had been surprisingly quiet as of late, suddenly snarled in the back of my mind, coming awake with a vengeance. I felt that old simmering bubble of rage suddenly burst in my stomach at Theo's words, something I hadn't felt since the day I fucked up his face. Only this time, it felt more... possessive. Resentful. *Hatred!*

Really, he should thank me for the scars, 'cause it only upped his "bad boy" image that girls liked. It didn't damage his game whatsoever. So, his wanting to get in the new girl's pants wasn't surprising. He talked this way all the time, and it never bothered me before. But for some reason ...

"Dude, you got Sawyer. It's my turn now," Spencer Carr said with a slight whine. He was even bigger now, while Theo was a bit shorter than me, and leaner. They were the yin to each other's yang, and the two of them were like kings in this school. While Theo was very much the leader of their little group of fuckheads, Spencer was the muscle and garnered as much attention as his friend.

Theo glared up at Spencer with his pale gaze, tossing his dyed blue mop of hair out of his eyes and grinned, biting the corner of his mouth, his teeth hitting the piercing he had there. "We can both have her. I just call dibs first. I don't do sloppy seconds."

Again, that simmer in my stomach felt like it was starting to boil, burning hotter, and I gritted my teeth as I lifted the barbells high over my head, focusing on my face in the mirror, the silver eyes staring back at me not my own. For a moment, I felt their voices fade into the background as my ears began to ring, the reflection in the mirror becoming someone else as

that dark voice that liked to make itself known every once in a while, egged me on.

Give him scars like his friend... do it!

Take the weight in your hand, walk over to Theo, and bring it down on his skull.

Then turn to Spencer and shove his face into the glass window until it breaks and shards dig into his skin.

Then throw them out.

Throw them out the window, Hayden.

Kill them...

“Fine.” A voice snapped me out of my strange stupor and I shook my head, realizing that I was seconds away from dropping the weights to the floor. “If we can’t get to her before, we’ll have Ayla invite her to the Spring Festival.” Theo’s statement rang in my head like a horrible off-key note, the sound making me wince.

“She won’t like that,” one of their friends said, “Ayla? She’s been trying to get back in your pants since break,” and they all laughed.

Ayla... She’d been trying to get in my pants, too. At every party I went to, Ayla would brazenly come up to “talk,” pressing her boobs to my chest, once even running her hand over the crotch of my pants before I brushed her off. The girl had attachment issues. But she knew everyone, was in everyone’s business, and had the attitude of an angry chihuahua. Therefore, she was one of the most popular girls in school. Feared by the girls, used by the guys, and seemingly untouchable.

She was poison, toxic. Nothing about her called out to me or even got me remotely excited. The fact that I wasn’t interested seemed to drive her nuts, as my indifference to her presence always got her in a sulky mood. She’d stare at my lunch table or try to pass a little too close in the hallways, and I’d always intentionally not look her way. In my peripheral, I

could see the way she stomped her foot angrily or glared at my disinterest.

“She’ll do as she’s fucking told,” Theo went on, his eyes watching as the sprints started below, the students running in a line from one wall to another, hoping to make it before the beep. That was the goal: reach the other side of the gym before a shrill blast went off over the speakers. And every time, it sounded with a more rapid succession, which meant, you had to run faster with each sprint. It was about pacing, and the highest level someone ever made was fifteen, and they’d been running on their own for four stages. The Beep Sprint was absolute fucking hell.

“She’ll take my dick,” Theo spoke softly, watching as Madeline King made it to the other side with ease, long before the first beep went off, “And then she’ll lie there and take Spencer’s. And if she says a fucking word about it, I’ll make her life hell. It’s not like she has a family to hide out with, right?”

Kill him, the silver eyes stared back at me from beneath my dark brows, furious, violent, that burning in my stomach now building to rage, *Go over there and fucking kill him, Hayden!*

Throw them through the window... take the broken glass and carve it into their skin, give them a smile... drag them by their ankles and throw them onto the train tracks... throw them in the gorge in Lockemiere—

God, fuck! I was losing it... I was fucking losing it!

Quickly, I dropped the weight onto the floor where it thudded heavily with a crash onto the mat, turned, ignoring our coach who was supervising, watching from the corner of my eye as the others all moved warily away from me as I passed. My breathing was erratic, and it took all my self-control to slow it, to suck the air in through my nose, hold it for two heartbeats, and then exhale, but I couldn’t stop shaking in my rage. I rushed to the boys’ room, terrified by the thoughts in my own head. Running the water in one of the

sinks, I cupped my hands before splashing my face several times. Gasping for air, my hair slightly damp, and water dripping from my face, I lifted my gaze to stare into the mirror, expecting to see a monster glaring back. But it was just me. Hayden.

I needed to get a fucking grip.

I don't know why those assholes talking about some chick I didn't even know got under my skin, and I couldn't let myself lose it. Not again. Mom and Dad had been very clear that I would be expelled if anything else like what happened with Theo happened again. I was so close to being done with this place. I couldn't fuck that up now. But every time I thought of her, a strange feeling would rise in my chest, twisting about uncomfortably. *Temptation*.

So I bailed out of gym, heading to the locker rooms early to shower alone and change for the last class of the day, which thankfully, was an elective and my favourite. Photography.

Photography was easy, quiet, and I could be alone. Though I had to share the dark room with other kids, we were free to wander on our own to get a shot, sometimes volunteering for the school paper to get photos of any sporting events, plays, or the like. We'd filter in and out of class, usually only two of us using the dark room at a time, while others were wandering the halls, sitting at one of the desks to plan out their next project, or catch up on homework. But to me, this class was my ticket out of Ashland forever.

I did all my photography on the weekends or outside of school. As far as anyone was concerned, I didn't do anything for this class. Only my teacher knew which photos were mine, and published them anonymously in the local paper, as they tended to be her favourites. I wanted to take my camera and travel, getting paid for my pictures while exploring the world. Miss Mills was a bit of a hippie, so I knew what sort of stuff would get me an A. Any other shots I took were for me.

But today, I sat at one of the desks, working on some math that had been assigned for tonight, my head bowed over my

work, while only a few kids came in to either use the dark room or to sign out a camera. I was too shaken up over my rage from gym, and I needed to calm the fuck down. So I kept busy with schoolwork, ignoring everyone as I focused on Geometry. With photography, there's too much time and calm where my mind could start to wander, and I'd only get myself all worked up again.

“Excuse me, Miss Mills?”

A sweet, quiet voice spurred me out of the endless equations and 3-D shapes I'd been staring at for the past ten minutes and peeked up from beneath my lashes to see her... Madeline. She stood in the doorway, her wide eyes staring around the almost empty workroom and its unconventional set up of desks but also science lab tables, shelves of supplies, and the door at the back with the bright red light that indicated the dark room was in use.

Miss Mills smiled and gestured her in, the hundreds of beaded bracelets she wore on her wrist clinking together. “Come in, come in! You're Madeline King, right?”

“Maddy,” she corrected her, smiling ever so slightly, but tiptoed over. She was in her sweater again, though the hood was down, her dark blonde hair combed back into a high ponytail, her long bangs framing her doll-like face.

“Maddy! Welcome to Photography 12! I understand you are a resident of Phoenix House?” Miss Mills asked, checking the form the girl handed to her to sign.

“I am,” she mumbled, hugging her backpack to her chest.

“Very well, that's no problem. I have cameras that I loan out to students for this class. Go ahead and pick one from the cupboard,” she handed her a set of keys.

Madeline, or Maddy, seemed taken aback by this information. Maybe her other schools didn't have teachers as trusting as ours? I wouldn't know. But she took the keys, albeit hesitantly, looking nervous as she chewed on that full bottom

lip of hers, holding my attention, and wandered around to the back, giving me a wide berth.

Huh... I didn't like *that*. And *that* thought was weird as fuck. As was that same, strange sense of familiarity I felt whenever I saw her face. I shook my head and tried to refocus on my math work, but everything said between Miss Mills and Maddy King held my attention. Our teacher helped her sign on to one of the classroom computers and brought up a program to teach her how to use the camera she'd selected, everything from adjusting the focus, setting up the flash, and how to best take shots with it, etc. I glanced over often, staring at her back as she was turned away from me, and found myself wanting her to look over so I could catch another glimpse of her eyes. Those wide eyes that looked so sad...

But she didn't. She was probably as afraid to meet my gaze as everyone else was. *That* left a sour taste in my mouth. Why did it put me on edge?

"... looking for volunteers to photograph the school play that will be performing mid-June to celebrate the end of the school year. I can give you extra credit!"

I refocused and listened in as Miss Mills went on and on, talking to Maddy about the sign-up she'd been hinting heavily to me to take part in for the past month. Looked like she was now trying to get the new girl involved.

I watched as Miss Mills continued talking, letting Madeline King know about what the job would entail, but my eyes immediately locked into the frozen figure in the chair. Maddy was stiff in her seat, as still and motionless as a statue beneath the hand that rested on her shoulder, which belonged to Miss Mills. In fact, Maddy's shoulders were hunched, her head angled away, and though I couldn't see her face as her back was to me, I was certain she was looking away. She was uncomfortable as hell at the physical contact. How did our teacher not see that?

Remove her hand. Just get up and slap her hand away so she's not touching her!

God, that voice wouldn't shut the fuck up today, but at the same time, I found myself in agreement with pretty much everything it had said... especially in regard to Maddy. For once, it wasn't just craving justice through violence... there was a *want* there. That temptation from earlier came back stronger than any feeling I'd ever known.

"Sure, I guess," the girl whispered, her voice barely audible.

"Oh wonderful! I'll put your name down. You'll have a couple of weeks to get used to your camera, to play around and practice." She raced over to a sheet pinned on a bulletin board and scribbled her name down on one of the many empty rows. "So by the time it's opening night, you'll be ready. And you get to watch the show for free, too, which is great for—"

"I'll do it, too, Miss Mills."

My voice rang out before I could stop it, cutting through the room like a knife, and I found myself faced with a rather surprised Miss Mills.

"Really, Hayden?" She sounded shocked as she stopped, pencil suspended above the sheet. I couldn't blame her for the confusion. I was the best photographer in school, and she had been chasing me around for weeks to volunteer to take photos for the local paper of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I'd brushed it off, not needing the extra credits that came with the volunteer position. But for some reason, now I found myself changing my mind entirely and with no idea as to why.

"Yeah, I could use the extra credits," I lied. *Why did I lie? Why was I signing up? What the fuck was wrong with me?*

"Excellent!" she said excitedly as she jotted my name beneath Maddy's. I swear, this woman was a walking, talking, bouncing ball of happy energy... impossible to snuff out. "You two will make a great team, I'm sure! Might as well acquaint yourselves with the theatre, you two."

Maddy turned away to gather her camera and shabby, jean bookbag. Her head bowed as she rose to her feet and stood aside, waiting for me. She looked nervous as hell, that same timid little chipmunk I'd seen in the cafeteria. As I shoved my books and stuff into my own bag, Miss Mills went over and put a hand on her shoulder again. "Hayden is a great photographer. You're in good hands!"

The girl flinched as soon as our teacher's fingers gripped her, but the older woman was seemingly oblivious to her discomfort. Maddy shrugged her arm away and stepped out into the hall, putting distance between herself and Miss Mills, who still didn't have a clue.

"Help her out, okay, Hayden?" She said earnestly as I stalked past. "You're familiar with the camera she's using."

"Sure, and ma'am?" I paused in the doorway, not looking back, as I snapped, "She doesn't like you touching her." I stepped out to join the lone figure in the hall, not waiting to see her reaction because I didn't care. She should have noticed that Maddy wasn't comfortable; she should have treated her with more care, knowing she was a resident at Phoenix House. But she hadn't. I shouldn't have had to step in like I had.

As I found myself standing next to the sad little person, to my surprise, she lifted her head. Her wide eyes stared up at me, a glimmer of... appreciation there, though it was mixed with something else... like she was confused, resulting in a flood of pink flowing to her cheeks. I watched as the corner of her mouth lifted ever so slightly and realized she had heard me. I found myself lost in those eyes... which were a bright hazel, shades of grey and green combined with long dark lashes fanning around them. They were such sad eyes, but... also so hypnotic and beautiful, I froze. Forgetting why I was standing out here with her in the first place.

Those eyes... I knew them. I knew them, but... from fucking where?

"Where is the theatre?" She asked softly, her voice as quiet as ever.

Shit... that's right. The theatre. "This way," I grunted and forced myself to walk away, only comforted when I heard her light footsteps follow.

Closer... let her get closer...

I wanted her next to me, but Maddy kept a careful distance between us, about ten feet, which was too far apart for my liking. Maybe the other kids at this school had told her about me, and she was terrified. The thought of her wanting nothing to do with me, along with the fact that she wanted space between us, made me feel mildly irritable. Like it offended me that she saw me as just another asshole in this place. Now, why the hell should that bother me?

Be patient with her, Hayden. She's been through enough...

That's true. She was a Phoenix Girl. The only reason she was at that place was because she'd come from somewhere I'd never understand. I couldn't treat her like anyone else. She deserved better than that. So I respected the space she put between us, walking casually and carefully, my path deliberate and precise so I wouldn't startle her. I wondered if she *had* been told things about me, about what I'd done to Theo, about my family. Was she already judging me?

She smiled at you, Hayden. You're okay. Just relax...

Right, relax. But I still wanted her closer. "Here."

We'd stopped before a set of double doors, one of which I held open for her, remembering what my dad had taught me about being a gentleman. Though I'd never done this for the other girls I hooked up with, I found myself doing it now for Maddy.

The room beyond was pitch black, but the theatre was always dark when not in use. Maddy's eyes changed from anxious to suddenly fearful, going wide, what little colour was in her face vanishing as she took a timid step back and fervently shook her head, "No," she said in a hushed voice. She clutched her backpack tightly to her chest, almost like a

shield, the terror of entering the dark unknown becoming more evident as the seconds ticked past.

I tilted my head at her, wondering if she was actually scared of the *dark*, of all things, and not me? As a kid, I'd had a nightlight, but now, at seventeen, I'd long ago grown out of that childhood fear. She avoided my stare, eyes darting every which way like she had in the gym, searching for an exit.

She's scared... the realization hit me hard, and I instantly found myself searching for a solution to put her at ease. I didn't like seeing that tremor of apprehension on her face. I'd fix it.

Without a word, I stepped into the room first, knowing exactly where I was going, and flicked on the light as the door began to close behind me slowly, and waited. The house lights were still dim, not reaching the darker spots at the back of the stage, but I hoped it would be enough to put her at ease.

Don't rush her. Let her come to you on her own.

Just when I thought she wasn't going to come at all, her fingers caught the door just before it shut completely, and she peered through the crack. It was adorable to see, like a nervous deer, innocent and beautiful but curious.

She took a breath and opened the door just enough to slip inside. Her backpack was still clutched to her chest, her gaze finding me almost immediately. I was standing off to the side, well out of bounds of her ten-foot minimum, and she took another deep breath, as if she was reassuring herself she was safe.

She was safe, I thought.

The theatre was arranged in three tiered sections for seating, all angled towards the stage below, with four aisles leading to the platform above where she was standing. I, however, made my way down one of the aisles to the dark stage below, pulling my camera out of my backpack, which I let fall to the floor with a thud. Then I began to take pictures of

the space, hoping that if it looked like I was ignoring her she'd relax a little.

Since when do I care if someone is relaxed around me? I thought, but shook the thought away as I carefully watched her out of the corner of my eye. She'd made her way down the steps, stopping about halfway to the bottom of one aisle, looking around the room in awe, like she had never seen a theatre before. This one was okay, for a high school. The seats were a deep red fabric, the aisles lined with royal blue carpeting, and golden lamps lined the walls on the sides. But the ones my mom took me to in Ashland were much more extravagant.

Neither of us spoke as I slowly walked around the stage, acting like I was exploring, though I'd been here many times before. I just wanted her to drop her guard a little, and I thought that if I acted disinterested, she'd loosen up a bit. Again, why did I care? But the silence between us was comfortable. I hated mindless chatter. This was... peaceful.

I didn't realize I'd stopped what I was doing until I found her eyes on me and realized I'd been staring.

"It's... nice," she said awkwardly, shifting a little where she stood.

"It's fine," I murmured and reluctantly turned away, taking a shot up seating section C, before turning to B to do the same. When I peeked back at her, I held up my camera, tempted to go ahead with the shot, but paused, "Unless you want to get caught in the photo, I suggest you move."

She didn't. I don't know why, but she remained where she was, staring in my direction, her nervousness changing. I could see it in her eyes. Her fear was slowly ebbing away, switching to one of curiosity and intrigue. So I focused and snapped before turning and backing up to the first row of seats to get a shot of the stage. It wasn't raised as the theatre in Ashland but instead was completely at level with the floor seating, with everyone looking down. It reminded me of

photos I'd seen of a colosseum; instead of surrounding the audience, it would only take up about a third of the space.

She watched me as I made my way around the room, moving up one aisle of stairs to get a shot of the stage, before descending down to go up another. For some reason, knowing she was looking at me was... *thrilling*, and I found my heart beating a little faster at the thought. Self-consciously, I moved around, trying to put on the act of not caring when, with each passing second, it only became more apparent that I *did* care. I cared very much. I was careful with each pass, making sure I never crossed that boundary she'd set before, moving down several steps to move past without brushing by too close, despite how much I wanted to. I gripped my camera to refrain from reaching out to her.

"So... we're just going to attend the performances and take photos for the school paper?" she asked tentatively as I drifted up the far staircase to the very top to survey the room. She lowered her bag onto one of the seats and pulled out her own camera, fiddling uncertainly with it as she followed my lead by snapping shots of the stage from where she now stood.

"Not the school paper but for the town, yeah," I said, just loud enough for her to hear as I held up my camera and took a shot of the entire seating area, making sure I caught her in the flash. "It'll be simple enough. No one at school reads the local paper anyway, so if our shots come out like shit, no one will notice."

"Miss Mills will," she said thoughtfully, taking several nervous steps closer to the stage.

"Yeah, well..." I shrugged and took another shot as I moved down. "She's easy enough to sway to our favour. And just by signing up we basically get an automatic pass, so it's no big deal." I knew I was skilled with a camera, so even if Maddy's photos turned out like crap, I was confident that mine would hold up. If not, I knew Miss Mills well, and she always appreciated volunteers. We had nothing to worry about.

“She seems nice,” Maddy ventured, turning on the spot in the middle of the black floor of the stage. The floor creaked beneath her, inconvenient when putting on a show, yet the school didn’t have the funds to fix it. Seeing her standing on the stage, her gaze moving about the room, I stopped to watch as she let her guard slip away, those bright eyes taking in the curtains and empty seats with admiration. I couldn’t help myself. When she spun to look in my direction in the audience section, I snapped another photo, catching her in a flash. She smiled a little, blinking hard to clear her vision, though I was disappointed to see her take a step back, as if I would pounce now that she was temporarily disarmed. “What are your thoughts?”

I let my camera hang around my neck as I moved through the seating, finding a spot close to the center back wall. Conversing with another student in this school was a little strange. For so long, I’d been silent in these halls and classrooms, only speaking when addressed by a teacher. This change, well, it felt... nice. When I thought about talking with any other kid in this place, I immediately recoiled, and it hit me. It wasn’t that it was nice talking to someone... it was just nice talking to *her*.

While she watched me, I held up my camera again, peered through the viewfinder, and took another photo of her. She blinked again and shook her head, like I was being annoying, and I smirked when she rolled her eyes at me. “I think we should attend some rehearsals and get a better feel with the proper lighting.”

She made a face, like the idea of having to sit through rehearsals for a high school play was *not* at the top of her to-do list, and I couldn’t blame her. However, the sight of her wrinkling her nose at the thought was too cute, and I found myself chuckling. But I was coyly trying to find a reason to spend more time with her.

“I know, I know... not my first choice of how to spend a night, either. If it makes you feel any better, the theatre kids aren’t that bad. They might get a little *too* into it, but I’d say

that's better than them half-assing Shakespeare." I hoped that I could convince her, because all I could think of was that I was running out of time. And I wanted reassurance that I'd get more than just this one class to spend with her. The bell would ring any minute, taking her away from me, and something deep in my chest hated that thought.

Don't let her get away, the voice hissed. Keep her close, Hayden.

Her voice went flat, sounding sad as she murmured, "I've never been to a play." She slowly turned on the spot, staring at the multiple dark curtains pulled aside. The dark spacing between them led somewhere backstage, and she shivered at the shadows there. Taking a tiny step away, closer to me, I noticed smugly.

Yep, she was scared of the dark.

But you know there's probably a very good reason for that, Hayden. "I wouldn't count high school performances as real plays," I said, letting my tone soften, the carefree and disinterested way I'd been carrying myself disappearing as I watched her. I hated the forlornness in her voice. "But the ones in the city are great."

"You've been to real performances?" She furrowed her brow, like she hadn't been expecting this from me. I get it. It's not like one would expect someone who stormed around this place in an old MC cut to be into plays and ballets.

"My mom used to be a ballerina," I explained, taking a seat on one of the chairs along one of the middle aisles, kicking a foot out, trying to get control over the strange, protective feeling that was building in my chest, the sensation of familiarity getting stronger the longer I looked at her. "My dad takes her to shows occasionally, but my whole family goes to the ballet for Christmas every year. It's like a tradition." Except I'd bailed last year... and the year before. My feelings from school had slowly begun to seep into my home life as time passed.

Her pink lips curled at that, as if the idea was sweet and endearing to her. “I would like to see the ballet at least once in my life,” she said, her tone changing. “My mom used to put on a cartoon movie of “The Nutcracker” every Christmas, our own little tradition. I always wanted to be Clara, to be a ballerina and have my own nutcracker who would turn from the ugly, poor, punished doll into a prince. We would travel to the Land of the Dolls and live in our beautiful kingdom, in love, victorious over the Rat King and his mice...” Her voice trailed off sadly, and again, that need to rush over and console her overwhelmed me, even as I gripped the arms of the seat, forcing myself to stay in place.

Don't scare her...

“I’m sure my mother could get you tickets one year,” I say, keeping my tone light and easy, “she’s friends with the director.”

Maddy half-smiled and muttered, “Thanks,” her voice flat as she looked away from me to inspect the stage further. “But I won’t be here next Christmas...” she muttered. I could tell that she didn’t believe me, and her half-whispered comment about not being here struck me like an electric shock.

Don't let her leave! The voice hissed.

Maybe I wasn’t the only one who wanted *more* than this place. And her avoiding my eyes now was a tactic. I could tell. She thought I was hiding my true feelings; somehow, I’d lost credibility in her eyes. I didn’t like that. Frowning, my dark brows pulling together, I could feel that dark call flood throughout my body. That ache, that impulse, becoming stronger and harder to ignore, now rushing through my system. Her response really fucking bothered me, but it wasn’t her fault. She’d probably been let down so many times that she didn’t know any different. Only she *had* opened up to me a little. Was that something she did with everyone, or was I an exception? I hoped it was the latter.

I watched as she lowered her head, her toe rubbing over the little Xs marked with tape on the stage, symbols to help the

actors find their places in the dark. But the entire time she moved, I sat there, watching, hating that she saw me like all the others. I wanted to change that. I needed to smooth over the situation. I needed her to see that I was different. I didn't know why, but something about this sad little figure drew me in.

The bell was about to ring, though, and I was almost out of time. She was also standing right beside my book bag, and though I wanted to be closer to her, I didn't want to invade her space.

"Maddy," I called.

She looked up at the sound of my voice, only to find my camera pointing right at her, the flash momentarily blinding the space. She rubbed her eyes before raising a brow at me like it was official... I was now classified as annoying as fuck in her eyes, but I didn't care. It was fun teasing her. Smirking, I started down the steps toward her, moving slowly but deliberately in the direction of my book bag. Her irritation quickly vanished when she realized I'd been warning her of my intentions, and she skirted away, moving up the other aisle to her own bag, though she moved with less speed and caution than before. It was a more trusting pace, like she knew turning her back to me wasn't something she needed to be concerned about.

That made me feel better, at least. Maybe a little trust *was* forming here. I just needed to move slowly and be mindful of what she was comfortable with. While the voice in my head was raging, practically screaming at me to move in and close the space, I forced my feet to slow, to hold back and maintain and respect the space she needed. My hand clenched my camera hard, my insides squirming like I might be a little sick, as I fought like hell against the dark pull.

Maddy grabbed her bag and carefully put her unused camera back inside before turning back to me. She held it loosely in her hands, no longer using it as her shield, and the corners of her mouth curled up just a bit, the sight lifting my

heart a little. I thought she'd say something, but instead, she hesitated just for a few seconds before she turned and climbed up the rest of the way, leaving me alone in the large, empty room with nothing except the sound of my blood rushing in my ears as my heart raced at the sight of that beautiful smile.

To not listen to the darker impulses in me had been exhausting, physically and mentally. I needed a reprieve fast. This girl was seriously fucking with my mind, and I had no idea why. All I knew for sure was that I didn't want to scare her, to fuck it up.

You know her, Hayden.

But how? How did I know her? I gritted my teeth and snatched at my own bag, reminding myself to be gentle with my prized camera as I packed it away. Maybe later, once I developed these, I could look at the photos I'd stolen of her, and maybe, hopefully, something would click.

Chapter five



MADDY - PRESENT DAY

PARANOID MADDY.

Scared Maddy.

Lonely Maddy.

Liar Maddy.

“Shhhh... be a good girl and lie still, Maddy.” His warm hand moved away for a moment before the blanket was ripped out of my grasp. The cool night air in the room made my skin pebble with goosebumps, and though I tried to grab the comforter back, he just pressed down on my stomach to keep me in place. He began to rub slow, sick circles on my belly, and I couldn’t help but whimper in my little trundle bunk as I squeezed my bear. The girl asleep on the bed next to me was utterly unaware that the man of the house had crept in like a creature in the night. His hand began to drift a little lower, his fingers pushing the hem of my nightie up to reveal my bare legs, underwear, and stomach. “That’s right... doesn’t that feel good?”

I shook my head and squeezed my eyes shut. It didn’t feel good. It felt wrong. This wasn’t good. This was bad. I wanted to cry out for help, hoping that his wife would hear and come in and save me, but what if that made him angry and he hurt me like Mommy’s boyfriends had? My lip quivered as I lay there feeling so confused and helpless, tears leaking out of my

eyes as I breathed hard and fast through my nose, trying to block out the feeling of his sweaty, hot hand drifting down...

Down...

Down...

...

...

“What do you say if anyone asks if I’ve been here?” He always asked me afterwards.

I was laying on the bed, tears streaming down my temples and into my hair, staring at the ceiling, feeling like I was going to be sick. I parted my lips, only I couldn’t find my voice.

Mr. Foster’s hand squeezed my shoulder painfully, snapping me out of my trance, and gave me a shake. “What will you say, Maddy?” he hissed.

“I’ll say it never happened,” I whispered, my voice breaking.

“That’s right. It never happened. You’ll be called a liar, Maddy. No one will believe you. Do you understand? You’ll be a liar.”

“WATCH IT!”

A shoulder roughly shoved into mine, the force sending me flying sideways into a locker. Shocked, I glanced up at the offender to see a boy I recognized from my science class smirking at me. It occurred to me then, that not only had he pushed me, but he’d copped a feel in the process. His buddies were all guffawing like a bunch of goons, which told me this had been planned. Knowing that he’d grabbed me, touched me, sent a wave of nausea through my system, and I wanted to vomit right then and there onto his expensive-looking shoes.

He touched me...

At school yesterday and today, I'd been back in survival mode, but I was relieved to find everyone more or less leaving me alone, until now. It had been just that one mishap with Miss Mills, though I kept reminding myself that it had been harmless. Innocent. And even though I didn't like her hand on my shoulder, I kept reminding myself that she wasn't a threat. She wasn't trying to hurt me, but I still cringed anyway. It was just a reflexive reaction; I couldn't help it. Miss Mills didn't seem to notice, and I'm sure anyone else wouldn't have seen it as anything other than a friendly gesture.

But Hayden had seen.

For some reason, that knowledge had my insides jump excitedly with a strange, unknown feeling, reminding me of how I felt in the theatre with him when I caught him watching me. My cheeks actually went pink at the memory.

Except now, I was alone, and my personal space had been violated. Story of my life...

In a flash, all my memories of the touching, the groping, the blubbery kisses that had sought out my flesh; all of the unwanted attention, came rushing back. So as I stared into this boy's black eyes, I felt my entire body start to quake. My jaw clenched as I struggled to maintain my composure. But seeing him laugh with his friends, the cruel smile on his face, it was like he'd poured salt on my wounds. I looked around at the other kids, and while some frowned, they didn't intervene. A few others, like that blue-haired boy and his group of friends, were lounging at their lockers nearby and watching with interest. Probably waiting to see what I'd do. The girls who usually hung out with them were close, too, a few of them glaring at the group who'd accosted me, while some appeared just mildly curious, like they were about to watch a boring television show.

"Gotta say," the black-haired guy shook the fine, dark fringe out of his eyes and smirked at me. "That hoodie she's wearing is hiding *nothing* beneath it. Disappointing..." He laughed with his friends.

I gripped my books tightly, my rage churning in my stomach as I chanted repeatedly in my head, *Don't be a victim, Maddy. Don't be a victim! Stand up for yourself! Fight back!*

I wanted to be brave. I wanted to fight. I wanted to go over to that smug asshole and use my science textbook to smash it across his face. I wanted to scream at him and tell him how gross he was, how he had essentially just assaulted me, that he had messed with the wrong girl and... and...

And I couldn't.

My racing heart, my shaking hands, the way I could hear my pulse in my ears, and the memories coming up and crashing noisily like waves in my head made me freeze. I couldn't fucking do it. And *that* made me feel worse than anything. Sucking in an uneven, broken breath, I bowed my head, my cheeks red, and pressed my lips tightly together as I struggled to keep my composure.

"Sorry, guys," he laughed, raising a hand and gesturing to them all to follow. "It's a shame. She looked like she had something worthwhile under all those layers. Pity." And he sauntered away with his group following, but not before they cast me pompous grins as if they'd gotten one over on me. The hallway began to clear while I remained where I was, feeling stuck in place, still trying to control my breathing.

Closing my eyes, I counted backwards from ten, slowly inhaling, holding my breath, and then exhaling. I focused on relaxing first my fingers and toes, then my knees and elbows. When I got to zero, the bell had rung, and I fully expected to find myself alone... but I wasn't.

Hayden was there. His fists were shoved deep into the pockets of his leather jacket, the material pulled taut, his jaw clenching and unclenching again and again. His dark hair hung over his eyes, messily strewn about his face in a way that I found suited him. I hadn't seen him amongst the crowd, but there he was, standing by the door to the stairwell opposite me. His dark brows were furrowed like he'd witnessed the whole thing and had found it distasteful. I quickly avoided meeting

his gaze, but I could still see him in my peripheral. Why was he still here?

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice steady, calm.

I glanced nervously at him, noting that, despite how he sounded. Even at this moment, with my nerves a jumbled mess, I found myself admiring him. “Yeah, I’m alright...”

He straightened from where he was leaning against the frame of the open doorway when he saw that I was calming down, his eyes sliding into the direction where that guy and his group had disappeared. “He touched you?”

I grimaced as I thought about the hand that had swept up so quickly to press across my chest before shoving me, the cruel smile, the words that hit as hard as the impact into the locker...

She looked like she had something worthwhile under all those layers. Pity.

Wordlessly, I nodded and bowed my head, surprised I admitted it.

Liar Maddy. Paranoid Maddy... making up stories for attention. Trying to get people into trouble. A problem child. Compulsive liar. Paranoid fantasies...

“Was it more than just a push?” He asked, his voice sharp and cutting. However, I knew that whatever disgust I heard in his tone, the simmering anger I could sense there, was not directed at me. I don’t know how or why I knew it; I just did.

Still staring at the floor, I nodded again and sucked in a shaking breath, willing myself not to cry in front of him. “I told myself I wouldn’t be a victim again,” I admitted, the words falling from my lips before I could stop them. Why did I find myself opening up to this strange boy? It was like I had no control over the word vomit. I just... started telling him things. Things I never talked about with others. “I guess I failed.”

At the corner of my eye, I could see him vehemently shaking his head as he shifted his attention back to me. “Shut that thought down *right now*,” he whispered intensely before glancing again down the empty hall. His vehemence caught me off guard, but not in a bad way. It sounded... protective? Is that what that was? I couldn’t be entirely sure. He inhaled a long, steady breath before continuing, “Unfortunately, I don’t think the others actually *saw* him grab you. If you had gone over and punched him or some shit in front of everyone, that would be enough to get you in trouble.”

He took a small step toward me, but I didn’t flinch away. I remained where I was, head bowed, eyes on the floor. When I didn’t react to his step, Hayden took another, then paused again. And then he took another. Only when I felt like his height overshadowed me, did I suck in a quick breath of unease, and he halted two steps away. His hands were still in his pockets, his gaze on me, unfazed by my reaction.

“I learned that if you want someone to pay, if you want justice, then you need to wait... Be patient,” his voice dropped so softly, that if anyone stepped out of any of these classrooms, they wouldn’t be able to hear him. His words were for me alone. “Be patient, Maddy. You’ll see justice served soon. I promise,” he vowed.

Slowly, I let my eyes flit up to him, wishing I wasn’t so nervous. However, the moment I locked with his silver gaze, framed by those long, dark lashes, I felt immediately caught in a web. I was struck by how unique of a shade they were... like a mirror, or the blade of a knife. It didn’t seem fair for someone to be so... *beautiful*.

Hayden stared into my eyes, making me feel like he could see directly into my soul, and I began to tremble for another reason. The corner of his mouth lifted just the tiniest bit, the smallest of smiles, and he murmured again, “I promise.” Then he turned and walked away, leaving me alone in the empty hall.

Something about Hayden stood out to me. Why did it feel like we'd met before? Even as I wracked my brain over and over last night, most of my childhood memories were so overwhelmed by my destructive home life I could barely remember what it was like bouncing around from school to school. The kid's faces all blended together, all overshadowed by the turmoil I suffered outside of the playground.

I thought again about yesterday and how Hayden had moved about the theatre as I stood in the middle of the stage, feeling like a fly caught in the middle of a web, powerless, out of its element, the spider circling, waiting for an opportunity to pounce. Only, it hadn't scared me as much as I thought it would. Being alone with someone in a semi-illuminated space, with them standing between me and the exit. Any other time, I would have had a full-out panic attack, only with Hayden, it was different.

She doesn't like you touching her... he had noticed.

When I'd first refused to enter the theatre, I thought he'd be completely weirded out by my strange and unusual behavior. Hayden, however, didn't look at me like so many others had before. He seemed confused, but curious, then determined. He'd gone in first and turned on the lights. That consideration helped me muster enough strength to move my feet and go in after him. He'd maintained a distance between us, further soothing my nerves, and I also got the sense he was wholly aware of it. It wasn't by accident. But he never questioned or made me feel silly for silently needing it.

She doesn't like you touching her... his words reverberated in my mind over and over.

His voice was deep, dark, but I could feel something there. The smidgen of warmth to it, like a hint of melted chocolate. Knowing he'd been watching me, that he could see my discomfort with Miss Mills and had decided to address it... I could feel my cheeks turn pink at the memory and released a long, drawn-out breath. My heartbeat began to slow, but still I felt that same jumpy feeling in my stomach from earlier when

I thought of the obscure, solitary figure that moved through the halls on his own. It was thinking of him that I finally found I could breathe again.

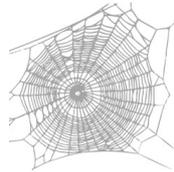
I thought about the beauty of the school theatre. That building clearly had money being put into it, unlike the other schools I'd attended in the past. Plus, my mother could never afford to take us out anywhere like it, though a few times she did manage to scrape enough together to take me to the movies, but the theatre we'd gone to was dingy and dilapidated. As a child I never really noticed or cared. I was just excited to go out, get popcorn, and watch a movie. But being here now, in this beautiful place, those memories now only reminded me of how dire our situation had been.

I only became more aware of that fact when Hayden had snapped several pictures of me. Although the blinding flash had started getting a little annoying after a bit, I suddenly realized that I'd never actually had my photo taken. Growing up, Mom hadn't taken me to sit on Santa's lap, and by then, the phone she used was a flimsy disposable thing she recharged whenever she had money available... that is, money she wasn't spending on drugs or other bullshit. Having him take those photos had been different but kind of fun. I wanted to see how they would turn out, but he likely erased them afterward. I wouldn't blame him. That wasn't part of the assignment. I was just in the way, and I got the sense that he was just enjoying teasing me with the flash.

But then he'd caught me off guard by telling me about his mother and their family tradition at Christmas. To hear a boy like him, one with a frightening disposition, who wore an MC jacket and seemed to move around the school like a feared boogeyman, talk about ballet like it was nothing to be embarrassed about was strange. But in a good way. It spoke volumes about his confidence and how he saw the world... different than his peers.

"I'm sure my mother could get you tickets one year," he said, "she's friends with the director."

I frowned as I remembered these words. I've had people make promises to me many times over the years; band-aids, I called them. Niceties to cover up a moment of awkwardness, empty promises.



DON'T SEE ME... don't see me... don't see me...

“Hey, new girl,”

I slink down a little in my seat, my head still bent over my food tray, hood pulled up in hopes of hiding from the world. Except my wish didn't come true. When I heard the high-pitched feminine voice, I felt slightly reassured before raising my gaze. I found myself staring up into the bright blue eyes of a very pretty blonde girl wearing a cheer uniform in red and blue. She stood on the other side of the table with two others flanking her, and I immediately thought of *Mean Girls*. They'd come from one of the tables across the way. I'd noticed them yesterday, giggling, chatting, all beautiful and admired, no doubt the popular girls of the school. They were in my gym class, too, but they hadn't spoken to me then. They were also in the hallway earlier when I'd been accosted and had moved on without doing a thing.

Brace yourself, Maddy, I thought, my hands clenching tight into fists on my lap as I straightened a little and forced myself to hold her gaze, despite how uncomfortable it made me. “Hey, cheer girl,”

She stared at me like a deer in headlights for a moment as if confused, before she glanced down at her uniform and giggled. “Oh, yeah, I'm on the squad. Go Bears!” She clapped her hands, raising a fist in the air as though she was on the field performing for everyone. At least she was smiling.

I forced the corner of my mouth to rise ever so slightly, trying to mimic her smile, a habit of mirroring I'd picked up over the years to blend in, but remained where I was, still guarded, "Yeah, go Bears..."

"You cheer?" She asked, her tone still friendly and light.

I shook my head. "Never. Didn't stay anywhere long enough to really have a chance to try out for anything."

"Oh, that's right! You live at Phoenix House." She took a seat opposite me, her two friends copying her. While I inched back ever so slightly, the bench I was sitting on creaked from the shift in weight.

Why was she here? What did she want? "Uh, yeah. Just moved in over the weekend."

Her smile was replaced with a look of... sympathy? I think that's what it was. But for some reason I felt like something seemed off about it. She nodded and looked pointedly around the cafeteria. "A few girls who live there go to this school. I suppose you've met them already, though."

I peered around, recognizing Sawyer, but I didn't see Andrea anywhere. In fact, since we got to school today, she'd sort of disappeared. Huh... had she gone home? "Yeah, we met." From the far end of the room, I could hear that asshole who'd shoved me laughing with his friends and my nails dug into my palms beneath the table.

I promise...

I glanced over at Hayden who was lounging like a confident, lazy king in his corner. His hair was messily strewn about his face, his leather jacket on, and one leg kicked out in front of him. He radiated an air of authority, a warning for others not to come near, even though practically every girl in the vicinity heavily admired him. He looked so detached, so above the others, but not in a cocky, asshole way—more like... he just didn't belong.

When he had walked into the room, I'd instantly shrunk down, hoping he hadn't noticed me. I was bashful from earlier

and how I'd opened up to him... *again*. I wasn't used to talking with guys, as I usually went out of my way to avoid them altogether. But the moment he passed by, I felt the urge to peek up and get another look at his face. To my surprise, he was already staring down at me as he passed, and when our gazes locked, they lingered for several seconds before he turned away to head to his table. Since then, he's just been quietly sitting there, watching, looking like he was scouting the cafeteria and everyone in it, a quiet observer.

"Well, I'm Ayla." The girl flipped her blonde hair over her shoulder and smiled brightly once more.

"Maddy," I murmured softly, nodding to her.

"I just wanted to come over and welcome you. As the head of the Student Social Committee, I sort of make it my duty to be available to all newcomers."

"That's nice of you." I found myself looking away from this girl, wondering what she was up to. Nobody was this nice without some ulterior motive. Most people in this town seemed kind enough, but it didn't put me at ease. If anything, it made me even more nervous. Something about all the smiles, the gentle words of encouragement and affectionate shoulder pats seemed off. Not entirely fake, but also not wholly genuine either.

Hayden doesn't feel fake... I thought to myself.

"Also," Ayla went on, "the Spring Festival is happening in a few weeks. It's a big deal and everyone goes, so you can come with us."

"Oh!" I flushed hard; the idea of being surrounded by so many people, their bodies closing in around me, hit a nerve. I hugged my arms around my middle as I shrank in on myself. "Thanks, but I'll pass—"

"We can give you a ride there," Ayla went on like I hadn't spoken, "The weather should be warm enough by then, so if you need a summer dress I can loan you one. I have about a hundred!" She tossed her head back and laughed like this was

the funniest thing. Seriously weird. She glanced at the table with the douchebags I'd encountered earlier and smiled wide, "Don't worry, we'll go with Theo and his group, so Lucas and his friends won't bother you."

"Lucas?"

"Lucas White, that guy from... uh, this morning?" She cleared her throat, seemingly a little uncomfortable.

So that was the asshole's name, the one who'd shamelessly groped me. I pushed him out of my head, not wanting to remind myself of how triggered I'd been. But who was Theo? I hadn't thought I'd met him yet. It didn't matter, though. I didn't like hanging around guys, in general.

You felt okay with Hayden. "I'm okay. I'm not super into big on crowds—"

"We'll come by in the late afternoon, or early evening," Ayla said dismissively. "Plus, I know Sawyer and Andrea will probably go, too, so you'll have your housemates around."

I swallowed hard, feeling like a weight was pressing down on my chest. Maybe I would be okay during the daytime, but I didn't think I wanted to go to a huge event with this girl and her friends. Crowds made me uneasy, not to mention I wasn't feeling the vibe with her and her group. Ayla felt like the exact opposite of me in almost every way: beautiful, curvy, and confident. As nice as she was acting, I didn't think we would mesh very well together. "I don't know..."

"It'll be great!" She rose to her feet and grinned. "I'll see you in gym, 'kay?" She blew a kiss at me before heading back to her table of friends.

I released a long, shaking breath, hating that I hadn't spoken up for myself like I'd promised. Sagging in my seat, I unknowingly glanced at the corner where Hayden was sitting. To my surprise, his focus was entirely on me, his piercing, silver eyes staring right through me. At once, my cheeks flushed as I hastily turned away, deciding that I needed some air.

Shoving the rest of my food into my backpack, I quickly got to my feet and scampered out of there, having no choice but to pass Lucas' table. They all laughed mercilessly as I hurried past, but it was the other table where alarm bells had gone off in my head. I'd caught the one boy with the blue hair and grotesquely scarred mouth and chin staring while I was eating, mostly when Ayla had been over here chatting to me. However, his friend, the large one with the short, dark hair, scared me even more. The guy reminded me of Hayden, in that he didn't smile, blink, or look away when you caught him staring. But there was life missing in his eyes, and that lack of warmth frightened me worse than the others. I definitely wanted no part of it. When I passed them, I got that sinking sensation in my stomach that always came around men I couldn't trust.

The dangerous ones. The bad ones...

When Ayla returned to them, I had no doubt that one of these boys was Theo, and if that was the case, then I was absolutely going to pass on hanging out with them at the festival.

As she had promised, Ayla and her small troop of friends joined me in running laps in gym class. I tried to be patient with their endless babble and questions, as most were a little more personal than I was comfortable with. Like, was it true my mom was really in a mental institution? Was I born with an addiction? Did I know my dad? I got the sense that they weren't trying to be cruel, more just... ignorant. I evaded their questions as best I could, taking advantage of my speed to put distance between us so that they fell behind.

Overhead in the workout room, I caught that same blue-haired boy and his friends watching, laughing, their voices muted behind the glass. Off to the side, Hayden was working out alone. His stare was fixated on his reflection in the mirror, seeming so focused that I felt safe glancing up every so often to catch another glimpse of him. He was lean, yes, but he had more muscle definition than the other boys, save that one who was friends with blue hair. Hayden came off more mature,

older, like he didn't belong in that room of boys who only half-assed their workout routine, since they were too busy watching the girls jogging around the room. Mainly probably to see their tits bounce, I thought with distaste. I never felt more grateful to have smaller cups than I did at that moment. Lucas may have made fun of my smaller chest size, but I didn't need his approval.

Who cares if that Lucas asshole made fun of my tiny boobs? I'm not trying to impress him, I told myself. Fuck him.

"Okay, everyone, rest and stretch!" the P.E. teacher called after blowing her whistle.

Gasping, feeling light sweat on my forehead, I sank to the floor at the wall opposite the weight room, all doors visible to me as I kicked one leg out and held my toes, stretching. When I peeked up again, Hayden was just disappearing through the doors, leaving earlier than expected. Where was he going?

"Oh my God, he was *not!*" Ayla's high-pitched giggle alerted me to her presence as she and her friends came over to where I was, laughing and whispering. They'd barely broken a sweat as they'd been more speed-walking than anything but took a seat as they pretended to follow instructions, slouching or angling their bodies, more posing than anything. They continued to snicker, eyeing the boys above, obviously putting on a show for them.

"He totally was, Ayla," one of her friends giggled. "He was watching you the entire time!"

She rolled her eyes and scoffed, "Puh-leeeeeease! I mean, yeah, Spencer was good, but *Theo*... Mmmm, I'll take that dick again, please."

They all laughed together, like a chorus of hyenas, while I bowed my head over my knee, choosing silence as the topic was uninteresting to me. I couldn't care less about those boys. That is, until...

"God, what I wouldn't give to have a go at Hayden," one girl said.

At the name, my ears perked up.

“You wish! He’s picky as fuck.” Ayla sounded put out. I wondered if that meant she’d been rejected. I wasn’t a sexually active person, thanks to my old foster father and boyfriends of my mother. I was averse to sex and had always harboured a more anxious and unsettled association with it. But for the first time ever, I felt disappointment. Upset about the idea of her and Hayden together. The very thought of them having any sort of prior intimacies surprisingly stung.

“I hear that he and that Beth McLeod from Fuller High fucked more than once...”

“Yeah, well, Hayden doesn’t fuck girls from here,” Ayla snapped, “Besides, I heard he was super drunk and probably didn’t even know it was her. Apparently, he was moaning someone else’s name.” Her tone was incredibly suggestive, and I switched legs, noting that the ugly side of her was rearing its head. I couldn’t help but wonder who this Beth was, the bitterness in my chest blooming like a Venus Fly Trap.

“How do you know that?” one of her friends asked suspiciously.

“Hey, it was at a party. Lots of people were around. I imagine they could hear through the door,” She sounded smug as hell.

“He wasn’t calling for *you*, Ayla,” the first girl said, sounding annoyed.

“I didn’t say that. Everyone else did,” she responded haughtily.

I cringed at the conversation and rose to my feet, ready to get the hell out of there, but our teacher had us help with setting up badminton nets for the next class instead of more sprints. By the time we finished, my mind was more than made up about Ayla and her group. As kind as it was of her to try to include me, I was going to find a way to avoid them. Something about her attention and hospitality had a nasty film to it, like something unclean clung to every word she said. It

reminded me of some foster homes I spent random increments of time in. They seemed beautiful and sparkly on the outside, but once I got in, reality hit me hard in the face, and it wasn't so pleasant. So, I took Ayla's goodwill with a grain of salt, remaining watchful and wary, and decided I'd distance myself as best I could.

"See you, Maddy!" she called when our teacher dismissed me when I finished setting up my section.

"Bye," I murmured, exiting the gym as quickly as I could. I cleaned up, dressed, and headed to photography, wondering if I'd be alone in class today, or if some of the other kids would be there this time. But mostly, it was one name that kept repeating itself in my mind.

Hayden. Hayden. Hayden.

Ugh, stop it, Maddy, I thought. You're as bad as the other silly girls.

Yesterday he'd been polite in the theatre, but that was because we were both working on an assignment together to earn extra credits. Nothing more. As for the strange feeling that we'd met before, well, that was a pipedream. But this morning in the hallway...

I promise. The sincerity in his voice, the way he stared at me, the burning warmth that radiated from behind those beautiful eyes made me feel more seen than I ever have in my entire life. And for once, I didn't mind it.

But no. I reminded myself that I was just fantasizing, getting a crush or whatever and that it was all doomed for failure. I tried not to let guys get close enough to me. My defenses went up. No guy who ever showed interest in me was ever honourable. I was nothing more than a toy, something they could play with.

I was *never* anything more...

I simply wanted to graduate so I could leave this place and do whatever I wanted, not as I was ordered. So when I walked into Photography, I fully expected to see Hayden. I would be

sure to keep a careful distance between us, fighting that crush that was coming to life. I'd nip it in the bud before it got too far. Except when I walked in and found the space empty, save for the red light shining to indicate the dark room was in use, I felt crestfallen. Disappointed.

Miss Mills, the only occupant, didn't seem to notice the frown on my face as she greeted me jubilantly. "Maddy! How did you and Hayden get on yesterday? Will you still do the assignment? Think you got your camera figured out?" Her questions came like rapid fire while I fought to control the disappointment of not seeing Hayden here, despite the fact I had literally just promised myself I'd keep my distance to avoid my feelings from developing further.

"Oh, um," I said distractedly, "I need more practice with it, but I should be okay for the production." I took a seat at one of the empty desks. "Is, uh, Hayden here, by chance?"

She shook her head. "He might be out shooting for independent credit. You are welcome to do the same, if you like. Try to get used to the camera?" She smiled. Her trust and faith in her students were honestly astounding. She truly believed they were out doing assignments for her class, when, most likely they were doing anything but. I kept my thoughts to myself, however, and shook my head, wondering where Hayden might have gone. He'd left gym much too early and was still M.I.A. "I'll just do a little homework and try it out in the garden when I get back to the house." I muttered, pulling my science work out of my bag.

"Oh yes, I've seen photos of that place." Her smile was so wide it threatened to stretch her face and break it in two. "It really is a beautiful property. Give it a month, and there will be flowers everywhere. You wait and see!"

When she turned her attention back to her laptop, leaving me in peace, I released a tense breath and sagged in my seat, staring at the work before me, but none of it made sense. The words jumbled together, looking more like hieroglyphs than anything. Realizing that Hayden wasn't here had completely

spoiled my mood, and knowing that a boy not being present had ruined it only made me resentful. I wasn't the girl that got all worked up over boys. Hayden, however, was undeniably beautiful in a way that elevated him above the others, and his demeanor and air of royal authority only added to his allure. But still, I have never been gaga over a guy before. They always repelled me.

Even as I tried to concentrate on my homework, I kept thinking of his hypnotic eyes. The way he had spoken to me, as I relived yesterday and this morning over and over in my mind. Suddenly I jumped at the sound of the bell ringing, now realizing I'd wasted an entire period daydreaming. Frustrated, I packed up my stuff and headed into the hallway, walking to my locker to grab my jacket.

But as I slid my arms into the sleeve, I noticed that the usual buzz and happy chatter that usually filled the air at the end of the school day felt different. The tension was thick in the air, the murmurs covert and hushed, while kids ran from group to group, their voices buzzing like an excited hive.

"... found in the dumpster behind the school..."

"... got the shit kicked out of him!"

"I heard his fingerprints were burned right off!"

"You're making that up!"

"No, it's true! The skin was on the ground!"

"... Lucas White..."

"... will be in the hospital for a while. Gonna need skin grafts!"

"You're full of shit..."

"*You're* full of shit!"

What in the ever-loving fuck? I peered sideways at the nearest group to me, catching bits and pieces of information as they all spoke over each other, each one trying to get out what they had to say.

Lucas White, the guy who had felt me up earlier, had been found beaten to hell and discarded in the school dumpster, his hands burnt, and too injured and frightened to speak.

I could feel eyes on me, the whispers about what he'd done that morning apparently enough to put me on the suspect list, but I didn't care. Miss Mills could back me up. I had been in gym and then photography, fantasizing about a boy I'd never have. I had witnesses. Not to mention, Lucas had been much bigger than I, and from the sounds of it, someone had seriously fucked him up.

Good.

I slammed my locker shut once I got my jacket on, grabbed my bag, and hurried past the other students who surprisingly gave me a wide berth. They seemed terrified, almost apprehensive as I walked by. What the hell? Confused, I glanced at them only to have them avert their gazes, like they were nervous to be anywhere near me or meet my eye.

“... Hayden Mathers...”

I stopped in my tracks, the sudden appearance of him leaning against the wall close to the doors, knocked the air from my lungs. He was wearing his usual leather jacket, the one with the cool patch on the arm, his bag slung over his shoulder, a motorcycle helmet in his hand, and his attention was focused entirely on me. When our gazes locked, I felt all the chatter around us, all the people and commotion, fade into the background, becoming nothing more than white noise.

Hayden did nothing, said nothing, the time between us stretching on forever. I was sure we had been standing there for an hour, rather than just a few seconds. What was he doing? Finally, he nodded, the movement slight and quick before he turned and departed, disappearing through the doors like a ghost. It was like he had never been there. Everything then seemed to move faster than before as time caught up around me, and the noise rose as everyone whispered to each other.

You'll see justice served soon, he'd said. I promise.

“Hayden...” I whispered, shaking my head slightly from side to side. No, he didn't... did he? *Did he?* It made no sense. Did he really do that to Lucas? Why did he bother? I refused to believe that he did. And *if* he did, then it couldn't have been over me. He must have had some other problem with the guy, and just used what happened today as an excuse to act upon his own feelings.

Warily, I glanced around at the other students, who continued to skirt around me as they began to depart, ready to head home so they could all talk on social media about the drama that had unfolded today. Did they think Hayden did this for me?

What did I think?

While they were all clearly terrified of him, I was not. Even the gory thought of him burning the fingertips off of Lucas' fingers didn't have me trembling in my sneakers. The act was so violent and disturbing that any normal person would be seriously upset by the news, but I felt peculiarly indifferent to the suffering Lucas obviously endured. I didn't feel bad for him, and I certainly wasn't afraid of Hayden. I just didn't understand why. Why to all of it?

Because he won't hurt you, Maddy...

I didn't know why. I just... *felt* it. I couldn't explain it. But rather than standing here all night dwelling on it, I moved through the crowd, grateful for the space they gave me now, and headed back to Phoenix house, all while fighting back a small smile.

Chapter six



HAYDEN - THE PAST, Thirteen Years Old

IT WAS SPRINGTIME, a couple of years after my life did a complete 180. The ground was muddy as hell, and when I came outside for the lunch hour, all I wanted was peace and quiet. Just some time to myself. My life had become absolute hell. Every week, I spent my time running from Theo and his friends, or avoiding the nasty stares and insults slung my way from the other kids. Even though I'd left elementary school behind, junior high had proven to be no different. I moved through the crowds each day, wishing someone would *want* me. Wishing they'd see me as something other than an outcast, a freak.

Like she had...

I avoided the main hangout spots, like the basketball courts and quad, knowing what would happen if I ventured there... the other kids would call me something nasty or vulgar, or someone would throw a rock, a stick, or garbage in my direction. I learned that if others came too close, then no good would come of it. It was a trap. I'd be grabbed, pulled roughly aside and out of sight from the teachers and windows of the school, then I'd get the shit kicked out of me again. Then I'd have to go home and do my best to hide the marks from my mother as best I could. If she saw them, she'd run down to the school and throw a fit. Teachers would then speak to their classes about bullying and how we should all be kind and love

each other, blah, blah, blah... it never did anything. Nothing would change. A week later, it would just start all over again.

So, I'd avoid her to spare my mother the heartache of seeing me come home with a new black eye, a cut lip, or some swelling on my forehead. I began to pull away from my family, and any spare time I had that I wanted company, I spent with Grandpa J at his place or The Lost Souls MC club. At first, Gramps always questioned my injuries, his dark brow furrowed with worry and concern, but I'd always dodge his questions. If he kept at it, I'd just leave and hang out on my own until it got late and I'd have to go home. So, after a while, he learned to not say anything and would give me a space where I could rest my mind and my broken soul.

And now, it had been eight days since my last beatdown. I was wary, knowing full well that I was due. I kept looking around, avoided groups of kids, and just tried to enjoy the fresh spring air. I stayed close to the school, carefully keeping the supervisor who wandered the grounds in sight.

I was lounging against the brick wall of the school, gazing off toward the soccer field down a short incline. The thing got flooded every year in the spring, and so the kids typically avoided it until the warmer weather dried it up. As my eyes wandered, that all-consuming loneliness began to seep in. That heaviness in my heart, which settled on my shoulders, weighed me down. Kids walked by, ignoring my presence. No one would look at me. No one cared to. No one *wanted* to see me. Not unless I was getting my ass kicked or found myself surrounded by hecklers.

I felt my breath catch in my throat, lodging there like I'd swallowed a stone, and ignored the stinging in my eyes. Crying about it did no good. I'd learned that enough by now. However, sometimes, the urge to just break down and scream until my throat bled became overwhelming. Ultimately, I'd smother it down, choking on my hurt so no one would see. Hiding it from the other kids, who would only gain satisfaction from seeing me break, and hiding it from my family, who

would only hurt *for* me. Neither of those things I wanted to happen. Therefore, I carried my burden alone.

“NOW!”

I jolted in shock, spinning sideways just as Theo and his friends sped around the corner and grabbed me, dragging me down the incline and out of sight of the teachers. Gritting my teeth, I kicked as hard as I could, wrenching my arms to try to free them so I could try to punch these assholes in their ugly fucking faces. I began to shake as adrenaline and my will to fight surged through my veins like fire. I let my head fall back and yelled for help, but the call was drowned out by the shouts and laughter of Theo and his friends. A few other kids had seen them grab me, and they eagerly ran over, hoping for a show, acting as a wall to hide us from the supervisor’s eyes.

Whenever I was being tormented, it was the only time I was seen...

“Here, over here!” Theo shouted, sounding much too excited. Whatever they had planned, I knew it was something different this time. I could tell they were getting bored of the usual bullshit they unleashed on me, because their punches had been a little half-assed lately, if I was being honest. The pain hadn’t hurt nearly as much as it used to, and I was getting better at learning how to tuck myself for protection, letting my back take most of the blows.

Only when I saw where they were taking me did I feel a wave of panic rush through my body, almost like icy cold water was running down my spine, and I tried to plant my feet into the ground with the hopes of stopping it. But Spencer, Theo’s huge, bulky friend, lifted me up just enough that my toes dragged along the ground, and I knew that it was all over. I was a victim... *again*.

Ahead of us sat the soggy, muddy field, and Theo stood over a puddle lined with thick, sopping piles of muck. The others all laughed raucously when they realized what these assholes were going to do to me, and I felt such bitter hatred towards them. Sheep. Fucking sheep. All of them. None of

them came to this place every day, having to look over their shoulders in fear. They didn't suffer from that aching loneliness, the hurt. I wasn't anything to them other than a punching bag.

I was more than that... I thought. I'm more than just the son of a psycho murderer... aren't I?

Spencer forced me to my knees in the sopping mud, the cold water seeping through my jeans as he twisted my arms painfully behind my back, and paused. I glared up at Theo who stood across the puddle, and clenched my jaw, rage burning through my blood in a way I'd never known.

Kill them, Hayden... the voice whispered.

"You're just a loser, Mathers. No one wants you here," Theo said, smirking like the pompous asshole that he was. "No one wants you. No one would miss you if we made you disappear. So really, we'd be doing the world a favour. You came from shit, so we're sending you back." His pale eyes flickered up at Spencer and he nodded.

A hand painfully gripped the hair at the back of my head so tight, I could feel a few strands rip free, and I found myself shoved downward, straight into the cold, dirty, watery muck. Even though I kicked and struggled while struggling to hold my breath, I couldn't find a way to break free.

Kill them, Hayden, the voice screamed. Fucking kill them!

I could hear the others cheer and laugh; some even echoing Theo's words as I gagged into the mud. There were even a few sharp kicks into my sides, which only forced more air from my lungs. A few had evidently felt brave enough to attack someone entirely at their mercy. Their words rang in my ears as I felt the world start spinning around me, like I was falling into a nightmare.

"Die, loser!"

"Fucking freak..."

"Hayden is a psycho just like his sister-fucking dad!"

“... push harder, Spencer! Kill the trash!”

My lungs screamed. My legs kicked out, and even though my eyes were closed, I could still see lights flashing behind my lids. Similar to all the times prior, when I kept praying *she* would appear again. The angel who had stepped in once before, mysteriously returning as she had before. Her face had faded over the years, my memory unable to hold her image together. Although the feeling I had when she'd stepped up for me when no one else would, always burned strong in my consciousness.

I wished she would come back so I could thank her, the feeling I had when she'd held my hand so gently, I had finally felt... *seen*.

Only she wasn't here, and now I could make out Jace Fogerty joyfully shout something indiscernible as I kicked my legs, almost sure I was about to pass out. I was. The dizziness was overwhelming, my hands and face going numb, and the last thing I could hear was their laughter. Their cruel, enthusiastic shouts rang in my ears as the world began to fade around me, until finally, everything went black.

I thought I'd died. It was cold, dim, and silent. I was lying on my stomach, head resting sideways in the muck. There were no calls, no jeers or sadistic laughter. For a moment, I hoped that perhaps I'd been saved again, that she was back, and I could finally get another look at the face of the only person here who had shown me any compassion. But as I sucked in a breath of cool air, the sound broken and raspy as I coughed and took another, I peered around only to find myself alone. Slowly, I lifted my head, though I didn't feel I had the strength, or the will, to get up from the mud and water. How could I go home and let my mother see me like this? Or dad? My little sisters? I couldn't.

The world around me began to blur from my tears, and I found myself staring at a bit of white amongst the brown, dead earth. I blinked hard, clearing my vision to see that a blooming daisy was just a few feet in front of me, growing through the

yellow grass and the mud. It stood alone, a thing of fragile beauty, and I thought of my mother and the daisies she loved so much, the ones she planted at his grave...

I couldn't help it.

I felt the tears come despite how hard I tried to hold them back. At once, I felt like a dam had broken, and shame washed over me. What good would crying do? It wouldn't change anything. But I couldn't help myself. For a moment, I wished I hadn't woken up...

I let it all out. Sobbing into the mud, I thought about how I hated my life, hated where I'd come from, wishing that none of it had ever happened.

I don't want to be like him, I thought.

Sniffling, I slowly rose to my knees, wincing in pain from when someone had stepped hard into the middle of my back, helping Spencer in his attempt to drown me, and eyed the daisy again. I wanted to crush it, to rip it out of the ground and tear it to pieces. If it was a sign from *him*, then I didn't want it. Fuck him! Look what being Shay O'Hare's son has gotten me!

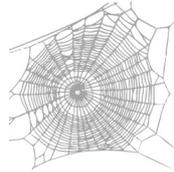
Kneeling there in the mud, I felt such a weight settling on me that for a minute, I deliberated just lying back down in the dirt. What if I just gave up... right here, right now? What if I walked into the woods and never came out again? What if I went to that park in Sherwood, sat on the bench, closed my eyes, and never opened them again? My fingers twitched at the thought of ending it all. Would death be better than this? Would nothingness be the peace I wanted?

How would I know?

Coughing hard, a spittle of blood fell from my nose into the mud, and I reluctantly forced myself to stand. I pushed those dark thoughts out of my head, instead changing my focus to assessing the damage. Gingerly, I touched my nose, lightly checking it, but I didn't think it was broken. Just bloody. I couldn't go home, not with my family there. I didn't

want to go back to the school and face my peers like this. There was only one place I *could* go.

Grandpa J...



“HAYDEN!” Grandpa’s mouth dropped at the sight of me standing on his doorstep, covered in mud, my hair a mess, and blood leaking from my nose. I’d skipped the rest of the school day and gone straight to his house, a little trailer on an old piece of land he had owned for ages. The old cabin he’d had here burned down long ago. It had been cleaned up, and a double-wide had been moved into its place. I’d come here, hoping he was home and not at the club. To my relief, his black Harley was parked in his rocky driveway.

“Hey, Gramps,” I mumbled, holding the hem of my shirt to my nose. “Can I come in?”

He stepped aside, his eyes wide in shock, his mouth hanging open as a tinge of red appeared on his cheeks. He was pissed. “What the fuck happened, kid? You fall off your bicycle or something?”

“Sure, let’s say that.” I moved over to the kitchen counter and sat on the barstool, resting my aching body. I wanted to open up to him. *So* badly! Except I didn’t think I could bear the look in his eyes when I revealed that his grandson was a fucking loser...

He didn’t ask me anything else, just limped off to the bathroom (evidence from an “old injury”, he said) and came back out with a first-aid kit, one I’m certain Mom or Aunt Casey had bought for him, since that wasn’t something he’d pick out for himself.

I sat in silence as he wet a rag and cleaned me off, his dark eyes taking in every cut, bruise, and patch of mud, and I could

tell he was fucking livid by how his nostrils flared and his jaw ticked. He ran a hand through his mostly grey hair, the dark sections few and far between now. The old tattoos on his hands had faded with age, but even so, I could see more of myself in him than anyone else.

I loved my grandpa more than anything. Even after I learned about his old MC club, I didn't have the heart to punish him for it. I wanted to ask him about what he'd done, about the Celtic Beasts, but whenever he came around for dinner or picked me up after school on his bike, any dark thoughts or questions I had disappeared. Whoever Grandpa had been back then, he wasn't anymore. I knew that. Especially since the Lost Souls did so much for the city of Ashland. They were constantly throwing charity events and drives and opened safe houses for kids in the foster system, giving them another place to go, somewhere safe and monitored by trusted workers at all times. Grandpa J wasn't the bad guy. He was my hero.

“Gramps?” I whispered finally.

“Yeah, Hayden?”

I pressed my lips together, wanting to tell him so much, but the words always seemed to get stuck in my throat. I wanted to ask about my real dad, to know something about him that wasn't in the papers. I'd asked my mom, but her history with him was too painful for her. She'd always break down and retreat at any mention of him. So, I learned to avoid the topic of him altogether. But with Gramps, I felt like if anyone could tell me something about him, he would. He had been his father, after all.

“What was dad like?”

He furrowed his brow as he finished wiping the last of the mud away from my forehead, leaning in to look closely at my nose, gently pressing on the sides to check for a break. There was none. “I'm sorry to say I didn't know your dad when he was your age. I didn't run into him until he was a teenager.

What I *can* tell you is what I *thought*, and that was that I thought he was a piece of shit creep who—”

“No, no... not Dad. I mean, my *real* dad.”

Gramps froze. Similar to a literal statue with his hand suspended in the air, the pain that filled his expression tore right through me. To my horror, for a moment I thought he was going to cry, judging by the way his eyes shone and his chin began to shake.

“I’m sorry, never mind. I was just curious. I thought...” *I just want to know that he wasn’t a complete monster. I want to know that there is hope for me, that I’m not doomed to be like him. The voices...*

“No, it’s okay, Hayden. You deserve to know,” Gramps cleared his throat as he turned away to collect some tissue, which he offered me. I pressed it to my nose to help stop the bleeding and waited, watching as he cleaned up, trying to be patient as he gathered his thoughts. “At your age, your dad was... reckless,” Gramps said finally, smiling a little as he spoke gently about his son. “Unpredictable, confused, misunderstood... *passionate*.” He said the last word with a fierceness I hadn’t expected. “He was determined to prove himself, wishing for acceptance by so many, while simultaneously battling for independence.” Gramps cleared his throat again as if it had suddenly gone dry and pressed his hands onto the countertop, leaning over it like the weight of the world was settling on his shoulders, a feeling I knew very well. “And when he loved, he loved with every part of his being. That’s how it was with him. Either he loved you completely, or not at all. And he loved your mother more than any other thing in this world.”

I listened with rapt attention, clinging to every word he spoke, not realizing how much I needed to hear this. I knew my dad had abused my mother; I just didn’t know the details. She tried repeatedly to reassure me that he wasn’t a complete monster, but when the information came from her, I had a hard time believing it. My free hand clenched into a fist in my lap,

my focus entirely on him as he continued to speak, wanting to hear more.

“He was talented. Gifted with music, like you,” finally, some semblance of a smile appeared on his face, his somber expression shifting. “His ability to play the guitar was something else. He could hear a song on the radio and play it right after.”

I felt my heart lift a little. Hearing something positive, something *good*, about the one whose blood I shared gave me hope. And as it came from Gramps, it felt different than when it came from my mom. It felt impartial. If anyone was going to be straight about things, it was him.

“He was smart. Mature for his age. He could read people like a book. I swear,” he shook his head and chuckled, “you couldn’t get anything past him.” His moment of lightheartedness vanished at that, though, the sullen mood returning. He stared down at the countertop, his face vacant, as he got lost in memories for only a minute. Then he shook himself and gazed down at me. “Why do you ask, Hayden?”

“I just... I hardly ever hear anything about him. Most of it comes from...” My voice trailed off as the thought of Theo and the others made my stomach roll in rage and despair.

“Kids at school?”

I nodded. “The usual shit that you can find online. News stories, you know?” I bowed my head then, choosing to stare at the floor, finding it difficult to meet his eye.

His eyes roamed over the blood and mud-covered rags, putting everything together, and grimaced, inhaling deeply through his nose like he was trying to gather himself. I sensed he was as pissed as I was about the bullying I was going through at school, but he didn’t know the extent of it, only that nothing was being done.

“Your father never took shit from anyone. Whenever they tried, and they did, trust me, he’d dish it right back at them. If there was one thing your father refused to be, it was a victim.

That is, until..." His voice drifted off and I knew exactly what he was referring to.

The bench...

"If you let people walk all over you, Hayden, they'll never stop. You gotta stick up for yourself, kid."

I stared at him, surprised that he wasn't telling me to be a good boy and sit and take it. Mom was a peacekeeper. Always has been. She hated fighting of any kind, so I always tried to abide by that. But it was getting more challenging, especially with the voices speaking up more and more.

However, I was afraid of being what the kids said, that I was just like him. "But what if I... what if..."

"Hayden. Your dad did some bad things, that's true," Grandpa J glanced at me then, his face somber yet determined, like he was desperate for me to understand what he had to say. "But he wasn't a monster. He was human. A very broken human who fell into a dark hole and couldn't find a way out. One of the biggest mistakes your father ever made was to hide away. He wouldn't talk about how he felt until he'd snap and explode and hurt everyone around him," Gramps said. "And your mother was a victim, a bystander hurt by that vicious pattern. Don't hole up and hide, kiddo." He straightened and turned to me. I sensed he was getting to the point he wanted to make, so I listened carefully. "You don't want to be the one who hurts the people they love. But don't let others hurt you. It's *your* life. *Yours*. Stand up for yourself. There's no shame in that."

I felt my lungs constrict as I stared up into his dark eyes, wishing I could be brave, that I could stand up to Theo and the others without losing myself. "I'm afraid to..."

Gramps nodded like he understood so much in those three words. "The trick is balance, Hayden. Balance. People are not solely black or white. The kids at school who did this to you? Do you think what they do to you makes them any better? Fuck no!" He shook his head, his anger flashing in his eyes.

“Defend yourself against those who would hurt you. Cherish those you love. Understand?”

Wear me as armour... the voice whispered. And unleash Manic upon them.

I thought of the dog tags I used to wear every day to school, once proud to have something of my real dad with me. The day that Theo ruined my life, I'd shucked the tags into my sock drawer and hadn't looked at them since. Even the leather jacket I'd inherited with his MC Patch sewn onto the shoulder was shoved into the back of my closet.

Unleash Manic on them... be Hayden with those you love... the voice whispered to me.

“Yes, Grandpa, I understand.”

Chapter seven



Hayden - Present Day

FOR ONCE, I was taking my time, leisurely jerking myself off. My eyes shut as I thought of Maddy. At first I'd been desperate, fisting myself hard and fast the moment I turned out the lights and got into bed. Only the more I focused on the memory of her face, I began to slow, changing up my usual routine. I thought of the expression on her face when we first locked eyes in the hallway. Frightened, reminiscent of a nervous deer. The green and grey of her gaze swirled together, framed with long lashes, giving her a doe-like look. But it was her smile, the one she'd given me after I'd told off Miss Mills for touching her. It'd been small, not a truly full smile, yet the sight of it was stuck in my head.

Sucking in a deep breath between my teeth as I squeezed the base of my cock, I thought about every part of her. The chaotic way her dark golden hair swept about her face and shoulders when she bowed her head to stretch in gym class. Or when I'd managed to close the distance between us in the hall today, the pink colour of her pouty lips capturing my attention. I had been so close I could make out the small trail of light freckles over her nose. Every part of her had me completely fucking hooked. Even in that giant hoodie, the torn, baggy jeans, I didn't care... Madeline King was gorgeous.

I squeezed three fingers along the underside of my dick, the pads of them calloused from my guitar. I didn't give a shit that they were sore as fuck from the strings as I played for

hours tonight; I needed this reprieve. My thumb pressed back on the opposite side and moved a little faster, the mess and entanglement of my emotions from the day spurring me on.

How I had felt when Lucas White had shoved her, touched her... the *rage*. The blinding, burning rage. I ought to get an award for how I'd managed to refrain from ripping him apart right there in the hallway. But I wasn't a loose cannon anymore. The voices had screamed at me to kill him, to make him pay for daring to touch her in any capacity, but I managed to hold back, reminding myself to be patient.

Then, when I had stared into her hazel eyes, seeing how upset she was, how torn and anxious the whole ordeal had been for her, I wanted nothing more than to pull her into my embrace and promise I'd never let that happen to her again. That had been harder to control, as hard as it had been to hold back from destroying Lucas. I fisted my hands in my pockets to help fight the urge, the temptation to reach out and take her.

Don't hurt her, Hayden. She needs space... the voice had whispered to me. As much as it pained me to hold back, I somehow managed it and instead focused on making Lucas suffer for daring to touch her.

I didn't want to think about that now, however. I'd already made him pay for what he'd done, and it had been glorious. He'd never go near her again. Quickly, I shifted my thoughts back to her.

Imagining the feel of her frail, slender body in my arms had me grinning wickedly in the dark, the pad of my thumb rolling over my tip, spreading my precum around to use as extra lubricant, before I fisted my cock again and began to stroke harder, faster, cupping my balls with my other hand as I pictured myself laying between her legs on the ground, my hands moving beneath her sweater to cup her small, soft breasts...

What would she sound like moaning beneath me? Squeezing her slender legs around my waist, her hands clinging to me as I fucked her? I wanted to see her smile and

writhe beneath me as I played with her clit, stroking it as I thrust as deep as I could so that she could envelop me entirely. I wanted to bury myself in her, but mostly, I wanted her to *want* me to. I wanted her to take me, to cry out in ecstasy and whisper in my ear as she begged for more. I wanted to feel her tremble and hear her whimper when I took her, only to wrap around me and hold me close instead of pushing me away.

I began to squeeze harder, stroke faster, my breathing heavy as I kept going. I tried to paint a picture of what she looked like beneath those thick layers, tried to imagine how she would feel, and it brought me closer, but it wasn't enough. I could feel the sweat on my forehead and shook my dark hair off my face as I began to thrust my hips up into my hand, desperate for release, but no matter what I imagined, I just couldn't get there. I gritted my teeth, my muscles tightening as I tried to keep it down so I wouldn't wake anyone, but I was quickly growing frustrated as I balanced on the precipice, seemingly unable to go all the way.

Just picture Maddy...

And I did. I thought of what I knew of her. Of her face, her voice, how she moved, how I could read her emotions on her face. I pictured her body language in how she responded to me, and I could feel that sense of protectiveness and yearning hit me all over again. Seeing her in the theatre, lost in the beauty of it, her beautiful eyes wide, the dim lights from overhead somehow managing to catch the lighter strands in her hair, her wet, pink lips parted...

“Uggghhhh!” I groaned as I came hard, the pressure of the explosion more intense than ever before, shaking as my hot cum made a mess in my hand and around my legs. Heart pounding, I lay limp on my bed and slowly opened my eyes to stare up at the stars through the skylight of my peaked attic bedroom. *That* had been fucking incredible, and all I had to do was see her. What I would give to have the real thing.

As that satisfying sense of relief washed over me, even though I wanted to sleep, my mind drifted to much darker

thoughts.

...

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...

Lucas' dark eyes widened in fear when I grabbed him out of the hall, dragging him into a hidden alcove beneath the stairwell. I thought of the pathetic way he'd begged as I moved us out the side exit and into the back alley behind the school, a hidden spot by the dumpsters already set with what I needed to prove my point to him... Madeline King was off-limits.

Lifting him into the air by the front of his shirt, I smashed him against the cold, brick wall, staring into his panicked face, before leaning in to whisper in his ear, "So, Lucas, you like to assault girls?"

"Wh-what?" His voice cracked like he was going through puberty. "No-no, I've never—"

"What you did this morning, in the hallway, when you touched Maddy—"

"Whoa, whoa, I didn't do anything!"

"You *touch*ed her," I went on, ignoring how he had just interrupted me. "And tried to make a fool out of her in front of everyone,"

"She's lying. I didn't fucking touch her. It was just clout!"

My head tilted sideways as I narrowed my eyes at him, "So you lied to make yourself look good, then? To look like some fucking wannabe hotshot in front of your friends?"

"It was just jokes, Hayden! Fuck!"

"Yeah, just jokes... do you have any idea how much damage a "joke" can do to someone?"

He had the nerve to roll his eyes. "Not my fault some people got mental problems..."

“*Mental problems?*” I could feel my nostrils flare as his words struck a chord with me. “Is that what you think it is? That pieces of shit like you aren’t the fucking problem? Some people are teetering on the edge of completely losing themselves, like they’re on the verge of falling off a cliff, but they’re *just* managing to hold it together... and then you come along, you sad little prick, and you give them that push with your *joke*.”

“Hayden-Hayden...” His moment of bravado quickly changed again as my rage escalated with each word I spat, my hands that held him in place shaking so much they made his teeth rattle and hair fall over his eyes. “I’m sorry, man. It wasn’t anything big. I just—”

“Wanted to take advantage of another girl from Phoenix house, I get it.” I scoffed, shaking my head at him, “I know what you did to Andrea at Theo’s party. You think I don’t? The whole fucking school knows what you did to her, and guess what, it didn’t make you popular. It just made you look like a sleazy fucking creep who takes advantage of intoxicated girls ‘cause he can’t get laid sober.”

“Theo was there, too!”

“No one said they saw him. They saw *you*, though. They *heard* you...”

“She doesn’t even fucking remember!”

“Oh, she does.” I shoved my face close to his, speaking to him through clenched teeth as I thought about how Andrea Walsh scuttled through the halls like a timid, wounded animal. That girl had been through enough already without this useless shit adding to it. I thought about my mother and how she was when I was younger, recovering from whatever the hell my birth father had put her through. The quiet way she’d disappear, lost in her memories as she stared off at nothing. It was a look I knew well, that I saw on most of the girls from Phoenix House. This was precisely why I tried to protect them. “She fucking does.”

And he went after Maddy... he crossed the fucking line!
Maddy carried that same haunted look as the others. Maddy, who nervously moved to avoid people. Who hated being touched and who he had violated earlier. “And then today, you decided to have a go at Maddy,” I told him.

“It was crowded, you know that. Bitch got in my way—”

The moment he said, *bitch*, there was a ringing in my ears, a high-pitch squeal that almost hurt. White hot fire burst to life in my gut, and I just reacted.

Make him pay, Hayden... unleash Manic.

And I did.

Viscously, I yanked his body down as I brought up my knee, thrusting it as hard as I could into his stomach. He gagged and spittled all over the pavement, gasping for air, but I couldn't make myself stop. I brought my elbow down, fully intending to get him in his spine, but changed my mind and connected with the back of his head with a loud *crack!* I did it again and again, my rage blinding me to the pain in my arm. I jerked him upwards, shoving him back into the wall again just as my fist connected with his throat, and he immediately choked, gasping. Spitting even more, only now there was a hint of red, and tears were streaming from his eyes. Lucas' voice garbled in pain, unable to speak, his hands reaching up to protect himself, hands that had touched her...

I released him as he sagged to the ground in a pitiful heap. Kicking my leg up, I brought my heel up, smashing down over his sternum in quick succession until I heard several splintering cracks. Lucas was still spitting up blood and drool, emitting a pained moan from deep in his stomach as he curled up in a ball. But no one would hear him back here. Moving slowly, leisurely, I walked around him, disgust and fury still very much alive and burning in my veins.

More, Hayden... more!

He touched her...

His filthy hands violated her.

Make him pay...

Reaching behind the dumpster, I found the can of WD40 I'd prepared. I had left gym early to work on this little toy, feeling like it was appropriate for his crime. There was a lighter superglued beneath the nozzle, and I had several elastics tied beneath it. Putting on a welder mask and gloves that I'd stolen from the shop class, settling my weight as I sat on his stomach, I seized his wrists and held them up over his head and away from myself.

"You're a dirty piece of shit, Lucas," I told him.

"N-nooooo... Haaaaaydennnn..." he wailed, choking past the damage in his throat.

"You going to touch another girl without her consent again?"

"Nooooo... I wooodnnnn'd..."

"And you won't say anything about who did this to you, right?"

"I poooooomisssssssss..." he slurred, tears falling back into his hair. "Noooo onnnnnne..."

I held his pathetic, pleading gaze for a moment, searching, before I nodded. "Good. I believe you. Because if you *do* say anything, just remember..." I leaned down, staring intently at him from behind the dark black screen of the mask. "I'm the son of a psychopath. My family belongs to one of the city's most dangerous and powerful groups of people—The Lost Souls. You come at me? You say anything? And you won't just suffer another beatdown, you'll never be found. You got me? You'll *never*. Be. Found."

Lucas nodded fervently, the hope returning to his face. "You'll let meeee gooooo?" He groaned, his throat still filled with anguish.

I paused, glancing at his hands, which I still held high above his head, the makeshift flamethrower in my other. My masked face turned back to him and I leaned in a little closer

once more. “That depends... when Andrea Walsh asked you to stop, did you? Did you give her mercy? Did you take pity on her?”

“I-I...”

“Don’t lie to me. People heard you. Be honest now...”

“Hayyyy-dennnn, pleaaaaase!”

“You did. And today. You touched Maddy. Didn’t you?”

At once, his entire body tensed beneath me, and I knew I had my answer. Without another word, ignoring his unintelligible pleas, I flicked the lighter with my thumb before moving the elastics into place to keep the flame alive, then pressed down on the nozzle of the WD40. Lucas’ screams were broken and disconnected from his wrecked throat, while I cast the raging flame over his fingers, burning away the pain they’d inflicted on others, on Maddy...

Maddy’s face when he’d shoved her... her face when she realized she’d been violated... the pain, the fear, the way she tried to hold herself together thinking she was alone amongst the crowd. But I saw. I saw...

...

...

...

Fuck, I needed to calm myself down.

Jumping out of bed, I focused on cleaning myself up, a little disturbed by how worked up I was getting again, and desperately paced my room, trying to calm down. When it didn’t work, I stomped over to my backpack, sitting on the side of the bed as I ripped open the zipper, remembering something I’d stashed away earlier today. I searched in the dark, my fingers gliding over books and pencils until they brushed along the smooth edge of a photo I’d developed last night after school. Snatching it up, I got back into bed, sucked in a deep breath, and held up the picture to stare at it in the semi-darkness.

It was of Maddy.

A shot captured of her in the theatre. It was one of the first ones I'd taken where I had caught her unaware, completely candid, in the moment. Her eyes were wide and beautiful, her lips slightly parted as she turned to stare at me. My thumb stroked the corners as I gazed at the image, my mind finally soothed. I savoured the photo for a few more minutes before carefully placing it back into my bag. As I lay back on my bed, I remembered the expression on her face when I checked in on her at the end of the day. There was confusion but also indifference as the news of Lucas' fate spread through the school like wildfire. I watched as the crowd parted for her and smug satisfaction soothed my nerves. I'd dumped Lucas, discarded my supplies in another dumpster in town, and returned to ensure people were leaving her alone. They got the message. Madeline King was off-limits.

You can take her, Hayden...

No, I can't. I don't know anything about her, really. So why was I so... obsessed?

Because you know she belongs to you.

She belongs to no one.

But you want her, take her...

No. I'd unleash Manic on others, but cherish the ones I—

I stopped myself before I could finish that thought. I reminded myself again how I didn't know a thing about her. That I was obviously physically attracted to her, but that was it. I rolled over in my bed and tried to fall asleep, but her face kept me awake long into the night.

Eventually, I did drift off, but it was listening to the voice whisper to me, *Get closer to her. Get close... until she lets you hold her. Then you can take her. You can have her. Just get closer...*

Chapter eight

MADDY - PRESENT DAY

ALL THE GIRLS at Phoenix House could talk about last night was what happened to Lucas White, though I noted that none of them appeared too upset about it. Sawyer seemed to have picked up all the gossip from the other kids at school and regaled us at supper with everything she'd heard. Lucas had been jumped, beaten, and his hands suffered intense burns and was hospitalized. There was talk about him needing skin grafts, but this was all speculation for now. I noticed that Andrea, especially, seemed most unbothered by the news. She sat at my side, quiet, and ate her food with no bother to the gory details Sawyer gave us about them finding melted bits of Lucas's flesh on the ground.

"My goodness, Sawyer!" Miss Ross choked on her milk at that little tidbit and turned to shield the ears of one of the younger girls, Carol-Ann, with her hands, "Can you *not* share that at the supper table? Especially with the little ones around?" She nodded towards the three younger girls, two staring wide-eyed at Sawyer, their forks suspended halfway to their mouths.

"Sorry, Miss Ross," Sawyer said, looking a little sheepish, before turning back to Andrea and me and murmuring in a hushed undertone, "But it was *super* bloody, though."

"Sawyer!"

"Sorry, Ma'am!"

I bowed my head over my plate as I ate my own food, thinking of that little nod Hayden had given me. The suspicion that he'd acted upon my behalf was too mind-boggling. Why he cared about what had happened between Lucas and me, or that he felt like he had to take such violent measures to avenge me, was too much to believe. So I chose to think that if he *did* do that to Lucas, it was due to some other conflict between them. It was all circumstantial.

When the lights were out at bedtime, the nightlight flicked on as we all lay in our beds in the dark; Sawyer whispered more details to us. Lucas apparently had several fractured ribs, his windpipe had significant swelling, which was causing respiratory problems, and there was even talk that his vocal chords were damaged.

I wanted to feel bad for him. I *really* did. He was a stupid seventeen-year-old boy. Did he deserve such a beatdown? Maybe, maybe not. All I knew was that I wouldn't shed a tear over him. Rolling onto my side, with Fuzzy clutched tight in my arms, I focused on the crack in the doorway as I tried to relax and tune out the others. But when Hayden's name was mentioned as a suspect, my ears perked up. No one had proof of why he did it, just that they *thought* he did. There was nothing linking him to Lucas, and as far as we knew, no one had been reprimanded or brought in for questioning by the school or police. And Lucas wasn't saying anything. That, or he couldn't because of his vocal chords being fucked to hell.

I could detect a hint of trepidation when Sawyer mentioned Hayden's name, however. Fearful. She never said why, nor did they expand on her suspicions of him being the culprit, but I could hear it in her tone. Hayden Mathers made her, *and* Andrea, uneasy. Why?

I'd been at this school for only two days, and while most kids ignored me, I had gotten uncomfortable when others would give me their attention... Lucas, Ayla, and the group of boys she hung around with.

But Hayden... I felt uncomfortable around him for an entirely *different* reason. Picturing his face as I lay in bed, I envisioned his molten, silver stare. His smooth, pouty lips. His dark hair messily strewn about his face. And all it did was make me feel like I had something jumping around in my stomach, causing my heart to race, and I squirmed a little to get more relaxed. Hayden made me nervous, but in a way I'd never experienced. I wanted to get closer, only I was also afraid to. I wanted to run. But... I also wanted him to catch me. And *that* was a concept utterly foreign to me. It was stupid, and it made no sense whatsoever.

All I knew for sure was that I was definitely developing a crush, but I was also curious about Hayden Mathers... something about him felt familiar. He saw me and reacted so differently than how he behaved with everyone else. It didn't feel fake. It felt... real. Whatever the hell that meant.

With a frustrated sigh, I rolled over, taking the chance in turning my back on the door.

You're safe here, Maddy. You're safe, I chanted over and over in my head. I closed my eyes and reimagined those hypnotic eyes with the long dark lashes as they stared, and I began to relax a little, welcoming the distraction. For once, the thought of someone seeing me didn't put me on edge. It brought me comfort. Only then could I allow myself to sleep with my back to the room.



“HEY GIRL!” Ayla and her friends surrounded me that morning at my locker, all chattering away, Lucas’s name being mentioned once or twice in the indiscernible babble. “Crazy end to the day yesterday, hey? Poor Lucas!” Her large blue eyes widened as she leaned against the locker next to mine and flipped some of her blonde hair off her shoulder.

My gaze flicked over her, noting how she was leaning into me; her arms were folded over her chest. Even with the innocent expression on her face, I detected something off about her cheery tone. It hinted at abrasiveness, like what she was saying was false. She didn't feel bad for what happened to Lucas. She reminded me more of a bloodhound on the search for a scent that would lead her to more information, and she was hoping I was a major clue.

"Pretty nuts, yeah. Sawyer filled us in at the house," I said dispiritedly, not caring one way or another. Lucas was just another face of many I've added to my list of offenders. I cared nothing for him. But at the same time, I thought Ayla coming to me to talk about him was strange. She was there when he accosted me in the hall and did nothing. She must know how uncomfortable I felt about him. So why she expected any kind of empathy from me was strange.

"It's weird, isn't it? He went at you that morning, and just a few hours later... he's hospitalized," she added.

Tread carefully, Maddy, I told myself. While I had my reasons for not trusting men, girls, I'd learned, were even craftier. I remember the other girls I shared a room with at the foster home I'd been brought to when I was a little older. They brought me into their little clique, making me feel like I was one of them before they set me up for trouble. They enjoyed seeing me get punished by the mother of the house, who seemed to get some sick satisfaction from making me cry.

Paranoid Maddy.

Scrawny Maddy.

Liar Maddy.

Ugly Maddy.

Their words hurt in a different way than what I'd endured from Mr. Foster and my mother's boyfriends. The insults, the accusations that I was a paranoid liar when I finally had come forward with claims of abuse by the men in my life, left scars

that were invisible to everyone else. I was the only one who knew they existed.

“Yeah, very weird,” I said, slamming my locker shut after collecting my books. If she was trying to implicate me, I wouldn’t let it happen.

“People are saying that Hayden did it,” she said suddenly, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly.

“Hayden Mathers?” I glanced down the hall where I knew his locker was, but there was no sign of him. I ignored the disappointment in my chest, wondering if he wouldn’t be coming to school today. Again, I thought about that little nod he’d given me before he had left and suppressed a little shiver.

Be patient, Maddy... he’d told me. Had he really done it? Was he capable of such violence? Why he cared about what had happened, that he felt like he had to take such violent measures to avenge me, was too much to believe, so I focused my attention on Ayla. She’d been watching my reaction and the corners of her mouth tightened. Perhaps seeing something in my face she didn’t like.

“I wouldn’t know,” I told her, “I went straight from gym to photography. I didn’t talk to Hayden at all.” I told her truthfully.

“No? You didn’t see him in photography?”

“We both saw him in gym,” I said, automatically coming to his defense.

“He left early,” she pointed out.

“He was in the dark room in Miss Mills’ class,” I lied. Why? Why did I lie? Why was I protecting him? I had no idea if he was in there or not, and yet, her implying that he was guilty was irritating me in a way I hadn’t anticipated. I don’t know why everyone avoided Hayden Mathers, why he seemed to prefer to be on his own, and why they were accusing him now, but I didn’t care. Evidently, I’d already taken a side, and it wasn’t hers or Lucas’.

Her brows had shot up at this information, and behind her, all of her friends were hyper-focused on us, watching the exchange in rapt attention. “Oh? You guys share a class together?”

“Yeah.” I noted her sharp tone when she said that. This news wasn’t to her liking. “We are partners for a special project.”

“That so?” Her fake, innocent look she’d been attempting to hold into place vanished, now replaced with an ugly sort of grimace. She did *not* like this. Not one bit. I could feel the tension building between us, her entire mood shifting to something ugly and unpleasant, “Well, isn’t *that* nice? Hopefully, you’ll get through it *unscarred*,” she laughed, the sound entirely fake and hollow, and her followers echoed her sentiments with high pitch giggles. Sheep. They were acting like I was missing out on some joke. “I mean, knowing where Hayden comes from, *I’d* certainly be worried about spending alone time with him.”

Liar, I thought. Just yesterday, she’d been going on about wanting him to fuck her. I saw right through her jealousy. Why she was trying to make him sound like some psycho was baffling, however. Again, why was this school so biased against Hayden? “I’m not worried,” was all I said, ready for this conversation to be over.

She shrugged, a sneer lifting on her overlined lips. “Well, it’s your funeral.” I knew her ominous comment was meant to get to me somehow, to make me feel uneasy and afraid. “You might want a number on standby in case you need... *saving*.” She laughed. I had no idea what she was talking about, but I knew she wanted to make me uncomfortable. She wasn’t actually trying to warn me of anything. She was getting too much pleasure out of her attempts to scare me, and *that* was all I needed to officially end any sort of “friendship” she’d been attempting to force between us. But it didn’t work. All it did was piss me off.

“You know what, Ayla?” I told her, managing to hold her stare with my own despite how anxious it made me. “While your invitation was nice in itself, I’ve decided that I *won’t* be going with you to the Spring Festival.”

Whatever she had expected me to say, it definitely hadn’t been this. Her brows shot up, eyes wide, and she straightened a little, caught off guard. “What?” she said, incredulously.

“What I’m trying to say is that I’m not interested. Thanks, but no thanks.” Without waiting to hear her response, I turned and walked away, fighting all my old habits by refusing to look around to check what she was doing. Knowing that my back was fully exposed to someone who did not have my best interests at heart had all the hairs on my body standing on end. Usually, I would have backed away, keeping the danger or threat in my view. Not this time. I told myself I wouldn’t be a victim again, and I needed to work on being stronger. Turning to see her reaction would give her some of that power back, and I wouldn’t allow it. Besides, I comforted myself with the thought that she’d be crazy to come at me in front of so many other students, wouldn’t she?

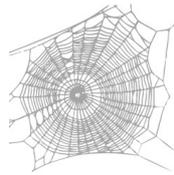
Lucas did.

But Lucas was an idiot, clearly. Ayla had to be sneakier than that. She was a ringleader, the Queen of the school, a title she had fought for and taken, not earned. I could tell. She couldn’t show the ugly side of herself so openly before everyone else. That would only make *her* look bad, which she didn’t want. I knew I’d have to be careful around her from now on, but it would only be for the next two months, and then I’d be free.

Comforting myself with these thoughts, I turned the corner of the hall, heading for my science class, feeling a sense of pride in my chest. I wasn’t used to that. It felt good to stick up for myself. Different, weird, but good. Carrying that feeling through the school with me, I went to my morning classes with my head held high for once, my hood pushed back, and tried to ignore the whispers, the names *Lucas, Hayden, Maddy*, all

hanging in the air like a heavy perfume. I still didn't understand why they had all automatically painted Hayden as the culprit, but I knew I was innocent. I had nothing to feel ashamed of. With that, and following my whole, *don't be a victim*, mantra, I tried not to let it bother me.

But I couldn't help but wonder... *why? Why Hayden?*



BY THE TIME lunch came around, I was a little worn out by all the paranoid whispering and stares. All morning, people had acted like they were walking on eggshells around me, giving me a wide berth in the hallways, which had been a nice change. Except the stares and attention were giving me anxiety. So much for not wanting to be noticed. So instead of eating at my loner table in the cafeteria, I grabbed my bag and headed outside into the courtyard.

It was the first of May, and spring decided to show up today.

It was warm, the sun shining, and there was hardly a cloud in the sky, but apparently, all the kids in school had the same idea as me. The courtyard was packed, and I immediately felt a tightness in my chest. There were groups scattered everywhere, lounging on the benches that surrounded the statue of the school mascot, a giant grizzly bear, and on the rock walls that encircled the stone space, leading down a flight of stairs to the sidewalk and street below. I diverted to the side, taking the short path leading to the grassy plain surrounding the school, strolling beneath the giant oaks and maples lining the edge to hide us from the street below. Other kids were using the shade from the trees and the building to hide under, all while enjoying their lunches and friends.

I couldn't help but envy them a little. They all looked so carefree. I couldn't remember the last time I felt that way, or if

I ever did. At the same time, I wondered how many of them were hiding behind those smiles... sad, suffering, but not *quite* broken yet.

A soft strum snapped me out of my sullen reverie, the sound out of place here. I scanned the area, wondering if someone was playing music on a speaker or something, when a dark figure sitting beneath a massive oak on their own, a guitar in their hands, captured my attention. They were almost lost in the shadows, their dark hair and clothing helping them to blend in. I squinted a little, holding a hand up against the glare of the sun, and found my eyes locked with a silver stare.

Hayden...

Everyone was situated far from him, and he was lounging beneath a large oak with a guitar in his hands, looking like the same lazy king as he did in the cafeteria. It was like he didn't have a care in the world, the picture of innocence. It made me think that maybe he *hadn't* attacked Lucas, after all? And yet, the others continued to cast judging stares in his direction. However, I noted not all were frightened. Groups of girls were batting their lashes his way, but he didn't seem to notice.

His silver stare was still on me, ignoring all others as he lifted a hand in my direction. His guitar pick was still between his thumb and forefinger as the remaining three beckoned me with a little curl.

I found myself clutching my bag to my chest, my heart fluttering in a way I'd never felt before, and sucked in a sharp breath between my teeth as I joined the others in ogling him. I was lost as I remembered yesterday and how he had spoken to me after Lucas's public groping, the way he'd looked at me at the end of the day, his little nod, like something had been accomplished. Why did he give me so much attention while seemingly he avoided all others?

I was nothing special.

For a moment, I assumed he must be confusing me with someone else, or perhaps another person was at my back. At

the thought, I quickly whirled around, the hairs on my neck standing on end at the thought, but no one was there. Timidly, I peered sideways back at him, wondering if my overreaction to nothing put him off. But all Hayden did was smile crookedly at me, one corner of his mouth lifting like he found it rather endearing, and he beckoned again.

I found my feet carrying me across the grass, out of the sun and into the shade of the wide-reaching branches of the oak, the limbs budding with new leaves, ready to stretch out and soak up the light. I didn't stop until I was about five feet away, unable to resist studying every part of him. How his disheveled dark hair fell partially into his eyes, the intense beauty of his silver gaze, the way his forearms flexed as he shifted his guitar a little, keeping it between us, further soothing my anxiety. I could treat it like a shield.

But I wasn't afraid. Not of Hayden. Not really. Without thinking, I took another step closer and waited for him to say something, wondering why he had summoned me over while he lounged with his instrument, looking like he hadn't a care in the world. With his other hand, he slowly reached up and tousled his hair, brushing it back off his face, his expression softening when I had closed the distance with that extra step.

"What's up?" I asked finally when he continued to watch me with a strange sort of guarded, yet gentle, expression. What was going on inside his head?

"I thought you might like to sit with me," he reached around his guitar and patted the grass, before leaning back against the trunk of the tree as if it was no concern to him what I chose to do. Yet, I could see how his jaw was clenching and unclenching repeatedly, as though something *was* bothering him. I wondered what it was.

He wasn't *telling* me what to do. Not like how it felt when Ayla had invited me to the Spring Festival. Hayden was offering, leaving the choice up to me to decide if it was what I truly wanted. My hands, which still clung to my backpack, tightened a little, clutching the material as I hesitated, unsure,

doubtful, afraid I was being set up, that there was some alternative plan behind this act of kindness.

Hayden isn't like the others.

You don't know anything about him, Maddy.

But he's been kind...

It's a trap. Why the hell would he be interested in you?

You always say trust your instincts. Trust them now.

Slowly, I sank down to my knees, the grass beneath them half-dead, half-ready to burst to life with green beginning to grow through. I kept a hold of my bag but settled as comfortably as I could and watched him curiously, wondering what this was all about. Instead of saying anything, Hayden just brought his guitar in and fiddled with the strings for a moment before he started playing again. The music was comforting, the gentle strumming beautiful. With the warm spring day, the quiet serenity and peace all the background noise. The traffic, the laughing, and the constant chatter from the other students all melted away until all I was aware of was Hayden and me.

“Do you play?” he asked me after a minute, his expression still soft, searching, as he spoke to me with that same gentle calm he always did.

I shook my head, scoffing a little as I huffed out a breath and lowered my gaze to stare at the green blades of grass desperately trying to grow, to break free from the clumps of dead, yellow carpet that suffocated it. Carefully, I began to pull the old, withered pieces away, giving the new ones more room to breathe. “We never had a lot of money lying around,” I said, thinking about how, despite mom’s attempts to give me anything, it always ended up sold, the money going to her habit. I bit the inside of my lip, both hating and pitying her.

“I could teach you,” he offered.

He's just being polite.

“That’s okay. I don’t have anything to practice on.” I glanced longingly at the beautiful, dark wooden piece in his grasp, thinking about how nice it would have been to have been able to have such a treasure.

Hayden watched me carefully and I had a sense he was stripping me down, staring into the depths of my mind, looking like he very much wished to understand. He shifted a little, raising a knee to balance the guitar’s neck, and held out a hand to me, palm up.

“Here,” he said softly.

Though I hesitated for a second, my curiosity and the comfortable atmosphere he’d created won me over. I slowly inched my hand over his, noting how badly I was shaking. If I could see it, he definitely could, but he did not comment. His lips pressed together ever so slightly at my touch. Cautiously, I let my palm rest lightly over his, my fingers jumping a little at the contact before I forced myself to relax.

Trust your instincts, Maddy. Hayden is not like the others, I reminded myself.

Though my heart was pounding, I forced myself to calm down, eventually letting his hand support entirely the weight of mine. His was warm, with rough callouses from the strings, but I found it oddly reassuring, my racing mind starting to go quiet as he gave me a minute to get used to his touch.

With his eyes never leaving mine, his fingers began to close one by one until he held my hand with careful tenderness. Again, Hayden was one of the few people who responded to what I needed with such precision and understanding, I felt my trust in him only grow. He gave a little tug, indicating I should move closer, so I shifted on my knees until they were almost touching his, watching as he guided my hand to the strings, turning it over to slide the bottom of my fingers to particular spots on the fretboard.

“Press here,” he instructed, his deep voice sending a strange thrill through my body. “And here... then move your

index here...” Supporting the neck of the guitar, he handed me the shiny, black pick with his other hand. “Now strum.”

I clumsily let the pick drift over the strings, the sound not anywhere perfect like when Hayden had played, but it certainly sounded better than any attempt I’d done in the past. As a kid, if I ever saw a toy version in the store the few times mom took me shopping for a present, I’d just strike the strings without understanding how the instrument worked. It always sounded like a mess and because of that, mom never got me one. That and they were always too expensive. But hearing this sound, hearing what it *should* be like, had the corners of my mouth twitching a little and I strummed again.

“That’s a C-chord,” Hayden said.

My gaze flickered to his, and he was watching me with that same handsome, crooked smile. My cheeks flushed, but when I went to pull away, his hand carefully held onto mine. Not in a dominating, aggressive way, but more like an encouraging guiding fashion. He shifted my fingers, changing chords. With a little nod, I took his cue to try again.

“That’s G,” and with a final shift and strum, “And D. Those are the three easiest chords to learn for acoustic. Try again.”

With his encouragement, I clumsily moved my fingers along, trying to remember the original placement. When I made a mistake, he smoothly corrected me, guiding me to the right place over the fretboard, and then persuaded me to keep going. Before I knew it, I moved from one to the other, albeit it didn’t sound as steady nor like any song I knew, but I caught myself smiling. I looked up at him, loving this despite how feeble it sounded, only to find his expression burning, his eyes moving around my face so intently, like he was studying every part of my features with the smallest of smiles on his lips, and he enjoyed what he saw.

Seeing him so close, with the intensity of his look, realizing that I was allowing him to even touch me, my knees

pressed into his thigh, I felt my breath catch for just a moment, before I relaxed.

You're safe, Maddy. He won't hurt you.

How did I know that? I couldn't say. I just... did.

And seeing Hayden's face, his eyes, everything so close, he was even more beautiful to me. The messy, dark hair that fell over his face, halfway shielding his eyes from the world, those eyes that were so hypnotic and bright, such an unusual colour, framed with long, dark lashes... I felt like I was being hypnotized. The silver orbs were practically glowing, heated with warmth and something else I couldn't explain as I hadn't ever had someone look at me this way before. It caught me completely off-guard, and I found myself speechless. Instead of saying something witty or clever like so many other confident girls, I just stared right back, cheeks pink, my hand trembling ever so slightly as I pressed hard on the strings.

Hayden slowly moved his hand up the neck of the guitar until his fingers brushed over mine, the calloused pads of them light, like he was stroking them, trying to reassure me that he would be careful. "You're safe, Maddy," he murmured, his touch still feather-light. Something in his eyes made me feel like there was some burning question he wanted to ask, except he was holding back. In fact, it felt like that was all he was doing.

Holding back.

My breathing became shaky, but I nodded, believing him. Hayden could make me feel both protected and afraid at the same time. Deep down, I *knew* I was safe with him, but old habits die hard.

When my fingers began to tremble ever so slightly, he let go and relaxed back against the trunk of the tree, slowly lowering the guitar. I instantly put my hands into my lap, feeling both a strange mix of relief from breaking our touch and disappointment.

"Have you eaten yet?" He asked, changing the subject.

I shook my head as he reached into the discarded, black bag at his side, pulling out a brown paper bag with what looked like a colourful robot scrawled on the front in red and blue marker. It was obviously done by a child, given the messy and untidy scrawl... that, or Hayden was just not gifted with the talent of an artist's hand, but I doubted it. When he caught me staring, he straightened his throat and pressed his lips together, his cheeks reddening ever so slightly—a moment of vulnerability. “My little brother likes to draw pictures on days I bring lunch to school,” he explained. “He’s five.”

“I think that’s sweet,” I said, slightly turning my head to see the robot better. “I’m an only child. In a way, I suppose that’s kind of a blessing.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I only had to worry about myself.” I sighed sadly a little at the thought. What if I had a little brother or sister with me all these years? What if we shared a bed when Mom’s boyfriends or Mr. Foster snuck into the room? What if he tried to touch them the way he touched me? The thought had my chest compressing as I felt a rage simmer in my heart. Him torturing me? I dealt with it the best I could. But if he had tried anything to a sibling, I could see myself fighting back; nails to the face, slapping, biting, unable to bear the idea of a smaller version of myself being put into a situation where they were powerless, confused, and afraid. I wouldn’t have allowed it.

I blinked hard and turned away from Hayden, pulling my own lunch out of my lunch bag, a pink and purple one from Phoenix house and the floral water bottle that was packed with it. Glancing up, I saw how the corner of his mouth curled up at the childish style of my own lunch and couldn’t help but return it. Amongst a sea of teenagers who were too cool for anything remotely out of style or different, and then here we were with our colourful lunch bags like we were back in second grade. The only thing that would complete the picture would be if I were in a romper with my hair in pigtails and he was wearing some superhero cape all day and night.

When Hayden sat up and began to remove his black leather jacket, all I could think of was that he was anything but childlike. His arms flexed as he slid them out of the long sleeves, the shirt clinging to his chest in a way that told me there was nothing but pure muscle beneath the fabric. He carefully placed the jacket aside, resting it on top of his bag like it was something sacred, and breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s better,” he breathed, shoving his hair back again. Hayden peered at me with that beautiful, inquisitive silver stare and asked, “Aren’t you hot, Maddy?”

Yes. “Nope, I’m fine.” I lied, bowing over my lunch bag to unzip it.

“You sure?”

No. “Yep!”

“Your cheeks are a little flushed...”

“That’s not from the heat—” The moment I said it, I bit down on my tongue and wished I could teleport myself out of there. He’d undoubtedly seen me checking him out when he removed his jacket, and now I pretty much put my foot in my mouth. I *was* hot, but Hayden was so achingly beautiful that, combined with the day’s heat, I was roasting in my hoodie.

Hayden didn’t comment on my embarrassing blunder. Instead, he just pressed on, “You’re going to cook.” I was instantly reminded of Miss Ross from this morning when she’d called me out for dressing so warm. She had tried to persuade me to change, but I refused, insisting I knew what I was doing. Just sighing and rolling her eyes, she muttered, “Teenagers,” and let it drop. I knew instantly that he’d most likely picked up that saying from his own mother.

“I won’t.”

He sighed a little, probably thinking I was being unreasonable. “Well, I’m not your keeper, but I do think you’d be more comfortable without that thing on.”

I bit my lip, rolling it between my teeth as I inwardly argued with myself.

But then people will see me...

They can already see you.

But they'll see... more of me.

You're nothing special to look at. They won't care.

Hayden will see...

Hayden isn't like the others.

My mind went back and forth so fast it was draining. I didn't even realize I was utterly obliterating the sandwich in the plastic wrapping I'd packed for myself until a careful touch snapped me out of it. I blinked, noting that Hayden's fingers were resting over the back of my hands, pulling me away from my conflicting thoughts.

"Maddy?" he murmured softly.

I felt the shine in my eyes when I tentatively peeked up at him, nervous about what he would think of me being so... weird and strange... all over the simple matter of removing my sweater. But Hayden's expression was anything but judgemental. It was cautious, his eyes warm and full of understanding.

"Maddy," he said again, "You're okay. You've been sitting here with me with your back to all these people for the last ten minutes and nothing bad has happened. I wouldn't allow it, you got me?"

I sucked in a sharp breath between my teeth, never feeling such appreciation and a sense of acceptance from an outsider before. At the realization that I'd wholly dropped my guard without realizing it, I felt a prickle on the back of my neck at the thought of being exposed to the world, that I hadn't been paying attention to those around me. I fought the urge to look. Hayden was right. I'd been safe for ten minutes without knowing it. He wouldn't let someone sneak up on me.

I squeezed my eyes shut, sucking in a deep lungful of air, held it, and grabbed the hem of my sweater, pulling it up and off. The moment I removed it, I felt like I'd removed a shackle

from around my throat, one I didn't even realize was there. I sat there, stock-still, breathing, waiting for something to happen. The breeze was light, the fractures of sunlight beaming through the branches warm, and the chatter around us continued. Slowly, I opened my eyes and peered around nervously. Nothing had changed from before; no one cared. To feel that weight lifted from my shoulders, I felt a smile tug at my lips, and I cautiously peeked over at Hayden, wondering if my odd behaviour was finally taking a toll on him, that he was done dealing with the weird new girl.

But all I saw was Hayden's breathtaking, rare smile... a crooked grin that would have knocked me off my feet had I been standing. I don't think he realized just how beautiful he was, and I found myself lost in that crystal-clear gaze of his.

Before I knew it, his fingers carefully slid beneath mine and intertwined with them, holding my hand in such a comforting, tender way that I squeezed back. "See?" he said, triumphantly, as if he was proud. "You're stronger than you realize, Maddy."

Though his words had the backs of my eyes stinging with unshed tears, I nodded, my voice temporarily lost by his confidence in me.

"Now, let's see what we can save from your mangled sandwich," he chuckled, nodding at the mess I'd made in my brief moment of anxiety.

Despite his desire to buy me a new lunch from the cafeteria, my food was still edible, and I refused his offer. When I didn't finish it, he narrowed his eyes like I was being stubborn or something, but the truth was that I wasn't used to eating so many full meals in a day. With Mom, I usually skipped breakfast, taking advantage of a lunch program at whatever school I was in. At night, supper was random. Some nights, it would be there, and other nights... nothing. I'd learned to horde food over the years, saving whatever I had in a secret spot to munch on when I got stomach pains as I lay in bed at night. I packed away the rest of my sandwich, intent on

saving it for later when I was in bed, while he still seemed so bothered by my small meal.

His own lunch consisted of a turkey sandwich on a ciabatta bun, some fresh purple grapes, homemade rocky road cookies (I'd never even heard of that kind before), and an orange. At his insistence, he made me eat some of the grapes and shared half his orange with me. I tried to refuse one of his mother's cookies, but he wouldn't hear of it. I felt like he was two seconds away from shoving it down my throat, yet holding back since he knew grabbing me would only make me panic. So when he set it on my knee after I shook my head for what felt like the hundredth time, I sighed and gave in. The moment I took a bite, however, I was glad I had. Seeing as his mom seriously knew how to bake. I don't think my own mother ever did. In fact, I know she didn't. I'd never had something homemade before, not like this.

"You're so lucky your mom likes to make you this stuff," I said as I munched away.

"Yeah, she's always been into baking," he said, taking a small bite himself. For some reason, I detected a hint of sorrow there, just a tiny bit. When I looked his way, I caught how his smile faltered, his mood changing ever so slightly when I complimented his mother.

I wondered what had happened there that the mention of his mother would make him react with such melancholy. But I, of all people, knew that things weren't always how they seemed on the outside. People had secrets, some much darker than others, and very few of us bore witness to them. Something had happened between him and his mother, and though he clearly did love her, there still seemed to be some history between them. At least, that was what I was feeling, given his reaction.

"Do you not like Rocky Road?" I asked, prodding carefully.

"I love them. They're my grandpa's favourite, too," he said, taking another bite.

“I think it’s sweet that she still bakes for you,” I said. “My mother never did stuff like this for me.”

I wondered if this little tidbit of information would help him see what a kind thing this was, like the sadness he felt at the mention of his mom hurt me more than my sticky relationship with my own mother. I could see it in his expression, how his tone would drop, like something was not quite right there. I thought maybe if I could point out this kind gesture because perhaps it was something he’d overlooked and hadn’t considered before. “My favourite cookies were oatmeal chocolate chip, but the only time I had one was if it was from a box from the store, and that was *if* we had a box from the store,” I laughed without humour at that. Treats like cookies were a rarity in my house. “Your mom makes you your favourite from scratch and packs them for you. That’s pretty damn special, if you ask me.”

Hayden peered down at the remaining little piece of cookie in his hands, looking like it hadn’t occurred to him. For a moment, he said nothing, before he quickly ate the rest and wiped his hands down on his faded jeans, choosing not to say anything. That was fine. He didn’t have to speak to me about it. But I was still sitting here, the option open to him if he wanted.

Instead, he turned away to pick up his guitar and began to pick at the strings with his fingers, a soft, easy tune filling the air, giving me a reason to breathe comfortably and relax. “Got any requests?”

I took the obvious hint that he wanted the subject dropped and respected that. So I thought of one old song my mom used to hum to me as I fell asleep, *All the Stars*, and listened in awe as he hooked me in with his talent, feeling like, once again, I was in bed in my mother’s embrace. I felt like... I was home. I sat there watching him play, not even realizing I was smiling until he struck the final chord and lifted his beautiful gaze to lock with mine.

For a few seconds, I thought about how uncomfortable I usually felt holding direct eye contact. Hayden's beautiful face, spellbinding eyes and overall whole vibe had me forgetting completely where I was, or even *who* I was. I forgot how I avoided this very thing because, for once, my heart wasn't racing in fear. Why was I so affected by this stranger? This dark, brooding, out-of-place teenager who obviously had some darkness in him that would usually have me running in the opposite direction. The way he secluded himself from others, the way he walked through this school without a care, the crowd parting for him, their fear for him, something that should be a major red flag for someone like me.

And yet... it didn't seem to matter.

I didn't realize I was trembling, not from fear, but something else entirely, until Hayden broke eye contact and made me feel like I was released from some sort of spell. His hair fell over his eyes, shielding them from me and I exhaled a long, shaking breath and hung my head. Cheeks turning pink with embarrassment that I'd stared so blatantly. But then again, so had he.

"The bell is gonna ring soon, Maddy," he grunted, opening the fabric case and carefully placing his beloved instrument inside. He moved stiffly as he turned away, like he was uncomfortable. Had I done that to him? Had my staring made him feel this awkward? I felt my pink cheeks now turn violently red at the thought and inwardly cursed myself for losing control at that moment.

"Yeah, yeah, sorry," I mumbled, gathering the remains of my food together. For once, I hadn't finished a meal. In fact, for the first time in ages, I wasn't hungry.

"Don't be sorry." His tone gentled, the rigid way he'd spoken before now easing, as if trying to sound reassuring. "I just don't want you to be late."

That was... sweet. "Right, gym." I had to run down to the basement where the locker rooms to change were, get into my uncomfortably tight gym wear, and endure an hour of physical

socialization. P.E. was pure hell for me, but one of the only options left for coming in so late in the year. “I guess I’ll see you in photography?”

I glanced his way, wondering if he was still hiding his dark emotions from me, but instead, I found that his bright gaze had opened again. His lips were pressed together, his body held stiffly over his guitar case, like he was holding himself in place on purpose, but he was watching me once more. “I’ll see you sooner than that.” Then he winked. Hayden *winked*. It was strange to see him be a little flirtatious. Or maybe I was reading him wrong? Maybe he was just being... nice? Was this what nice was? Confused and scatterbrained, I nodded jerkily and jumped to my feet, scurrying away from him as fast as I could. Behind me, I could hear him chuckle softly, like my reaction amused him. Face burning, I rushed along, ignoring everyone else in the quad as they all whispered and blissfully moved out of my way like they were terrified.

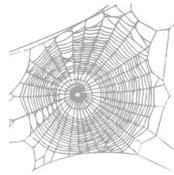
Why was everyone so scared of Hayden? I mean, besides the rumours about him being the one who apparently attacked Lucas, they had reacted like this to him previously. And now, they were treating me the same way.

When I reached the doors leading inside, I paused, peering over my shoulder at him. He was still beneath the tree, standing now and watching me, resembling a dark guardian. Knowing that he was, should have creeped me out or scared me in some way, but instead, all I felt was warmth pool inside as I stared at Hayden’s beautiful face, his spellbinding eyes, his whole vibe making me completely forget where I was, or even *who* I was.

At the sound of someone clearing their throat, I blinked, realizing that there was a group of kids waiting to go inside, too, and I was completely blocking the way like an idiot as I ogled Hayden Mathers like a smitten schoolgirl.

“S-sorry, sorry!” I stammered, and quickly pulled the door open as I turned away from him, cringing at myself for acting like such an idiot. I wasn’t used to this feeling. I felt like I had

no control, and that was making me uneasy. I needed to get my shit together.



“So, you got a thing for Hayden Mathers?” Ayla’s voice broke through my concentration as she settled across from where I was sitting, my legs stretched out before me. The class stretched as we prepared to attempt the obstacle course. Overhead, I was painfully aware of Hayden, who was lifting heavy weights, the muscles in his arms straining against the sleeves of his shirt, making my insides jump at the sight.

“A thing?” I raised my brows at her, wanting to tell her to mind her business, but figured she wouldn’t take that too lightly, given her overall attitude and our conversation that morning. She should know that I had no desire to talk to her.

“I saw you guys sitting together at lunch,” her tone was so fake-friendly it was cringe-worthy. She was a terrible actress.

“Yep,” I muttered, turning to stretch my lower back.

“It looked kinda... *flirty*,” she sounded angry. Why should she be angry?

Because she obviously has a “thing” for him...

“We weren’t flirting. He was showing me his guitar.” I muttered through clenched teeth. Why did I even feel like I had to explain myself to her?

Old habits die hard, Maddy.

At that moment, our P.E. teacher walked in and blew the whistle, clapping her hands as she instructed us to pair up. To my dismay, Ayla closed in the space beside me, indicating she’d selected me as a partner, whether I wanted to or not. Seeing as all her friends and every other student had

immediately sought out someone, I didn't have a say in the matter.

Ayla headed over to a corner and nodded at the wall. "Hands down, and I'll hold your ankles," she told me, indicating she would help me with a handstand. The other teams did the same thing, so I had no choice.

I don't want you holding me anywhere, I thought, my skin crawling. I didn't like being touched, to begin with, and having to put trust in her wasn't something I was even remotely comfortable with. I could feel my breathing coming fast, though I tried to hide it by lowering my head, tucking in my shirt to keep it from flying up when I went upside down and facing the wall on the pretense that I was preparing myself.

It's okay, Maddy. It's okay... it's okay...

I put my hands down on the mat and kicked off the ground. Immediately, I felt her hands wrap around my ankles and help lift them up over my head.

I could feel his fingers beneath the comforter, creeping over my little feet as I slept in the bed, playing with each toe before giving my ankle a squeeze. I pretended to be asleep, even when his hand slowly began to glide up my calf, massaging, caressing... I could feel tears sting my eyes as I tried to ignore it, praying that it was just a nightmare, that I was safe...

But I wasn't.

"Hayden doesn't date," Ayla snapped, bringing me out of my haunting memory.

"Wh-what?" I gasped, ignoring the pain in my chest, fighting back the urge to cry as her fingers gripped harder into my skin.

"Hayden Mathers," she sighed, sounding annoyed. "If you're hoping to catch his attention, forget it. He fucks and then drops you like yesterday's garbage, and he only hooks up

with girls from other schools.” She huffed, sounding seriously slighted.

“I wasn’t hoping for anything,” I said, feeling the blood rising to my face as all my weight bore down on my hands and wrists. I could feel myself starting to shake. “Can you let me down?”

“He’s got a fucked-up family history,” Ayla went on, ignoring my request. “Crazy runs in his blood.”

What the hell is that supposed to mean? I thought. “Hey, I’m getting dizzy. I need to—”

“Have you seen Theo Hebert? He’s got blue hair and sits with all the other popular guys. Well, you know those scars around his mouth? Hayden did that to him.”

Wh-what? My arms began to tremble, mainly when her grip on my ankles tightened, my anxiety and discomfort now getting dangerously close to the surface. Internally, I was battling my inner struggle, fighting between convincing myself it was okay while resisting the urge to run away and hide.

“Hayden went crazy one day and beat him in the face back in eighth grade. Took two adults to get him off. Theo had to get surgery and several fake teeth put in. That’s what happens when your dad is a murdering psychopath—”

“Ayla, let me down. *Now!*” I kicked my toes off the wall, and she stumbled back, releasing me so I fell, the air forced from my lungs when I smacked hard flat on my back. I coughed several times, gasping as tears sprang to my eyes.

“Miss Savard!” Our P.E. teacher shouted as she came storming over. She got down on her knees by my side, her face full of concern as the lines around her eyes deepened. “You know you are supposed to lower your partner down and not drop them! Miss King, are you alright?”

I coughed again but managed to suck in a full breath this time and nodded.

Our teacher looked relieved while still giving Ayla a stern talking to. A warning to be more careful before she moved on to another group of kids. I avoided my partner's eyes as I pushed up off the ground and stepped back. It was official. Ayla Savard wasn't someone to be trusted. Her idea of "friendship" was fake. It was also clear that her reasons for having me join her at the festival were not good. I was going with my instinct on this one, as I should have done so many times in the past. I'd stayed quiet, ignoring the warning signs, trusting the words of others rather than going with my gut, and I always ended up hurt.

Not this time.

"Ayla," I gasped, turning to face her, finding myself staring right into her big, blue eyes, and I could see how disarmed she was to find me suddenly choosing to be in *her* space, head held high, my own displeasure evident in my features as I pressed my lips tight in a grimace. "You can take your fake idea of friendship and stick it up your ass."

There was so much more I could have said, I'm sure. But at that moment, I honestly didn't care. Without saying another word, I spun and headed out of the gym, ignoring my teacher's calls to come back. I'd face that ire later for skipping. However I didn't feel safe, so there was no way I was going to allow myself to remain in a situation where I felt like others had power over me. I wasn't even going to go to my last class, despite my heart giving a little twist at the thought of not seeing Hayden. But I could feel myself starting to spiral, the increased panic slowly spinning out of control, making me feel frantic and terrified. The desperation to soothe myself was all I could really focus on.

When I entered the changeroom, I paced for a minute, Ayla's words ringing in my head like a dreadful, shrill bell.

What she'd said about Hayden, about his unpredictable violence, how he'd scarred that boy, Theo Hebert... it sent a tremor through me that had my heart racing. Had he really done that? Why? Was he actually unstable? The thought that

I'd been alone with him in the theatre and at lunch was very much on my mind as this information sank in. So I was going to skip all that and get out of here, return to Phoenix House, and hide away from everyone else. I quickly changed, grabbed my stuff from my locker and ran straight to the house, hoping for some peace and quiet.

But the moment I stepped in the door, I was met with hysterical crying and screaming, like someone was in pain, and I froze like a statue as the sound pierced my heart.

“No! I don't want to go back. I don't want to!”

“The court has approved visitation with your father—”

“I don't *want* to see him! Please, Saanvi! Please don't make me!”

“Stop!” I screamed, my little body fighting back against the fists that pummeled me. I cowered in the corner of my mother's closet as the dark figure continued his assault. “Please stop, please! I'll be good, I promise!”

“Little, fucking, shit! You fucking flushed it? You stupid, worthless, trash—”

“Please, stop! Please!”

“Your mother is gonna have to pay me back. Did you know that?” Another fist struck my back, knocking the air from my lungs. “Fucking garbage! Both of you! Not worth my...” Punch. “fucking...” Punch. “Time!”

I could hear the struggle in my social worker's voice as she straightened her throat, choking out her words as she tried to console the little girl. “He has attended meetings and counseling and has shown progress. The judge—”

Whatever she was about to say was cut off by a long, loud wail. Heart racing, hands shaking, I gripped the archway frame leading into the sitting room where the commotion was taking place. Sitting in the corner by the stone fireplace, the little girl with the scar down her cheek was curled into a ball, her cheeks red and tears streaming from her eyes. Her brown hair was

messily strewn about her face, as if she'd tried ripping it out of her scalp. Judging by several chunks littered across the carpet, I could tell she'd briefly succeeded. Sitting at her side, Miss Ross was holding one of her little hands, appearing like she was fighting back tears of her own, while the social worker, Mrs. Khan, was on her knees, hands held open, trying to plead with the girl.

“Carol-Ann, it will be supervised visitation. I'll be there the whole time,” she was saying, clearly upset with the news she had to break to the girl, who looked like she was being instructed to jump into a shark tank and told to just trust that it wouldn't bite her. I suppose, in a way, that was precisely what was happening.

“I don't want to!” Carol-Ann sobbed, flinching as though the very thought of being in a room with her father again was physically painful.

I jerked away from the wall, distancing myself from the scene before me, and rushed up the stairs, not caring that I was announcing the fact I was home from school early. I wasn't going to stay long enough for an interrogation. Right now, I just needed to get away. I needed to run, to feel safe. When I burst into the empty bedroom, the sight of my bed made me feel sick as Carol-Ann's cries from downstairs only reminded me of the nights I'd suffered. All I could feel was his hands on me, his blubbery, wet kisses on my cheek and neck, how afraid and ashamed I felt.

Clenching my jaw and pushing my emotions aside, I ripped the comforter back to reveal my belongings stashed at the end. Still, all I wanted was one thing. Sticking my hand into the bag, I felt around for only a moment before gripping the soft arm of my stuffed bear, pulling him free, and rushing over to the window just as Miss Ross began to call for me. Ignoring her, I unlocked the bay window and pushed it open. Effortlessly, I climbed out onto the porch roof, quickly, but carefully making my way to the side of the house. Where I then climbed down the drainpipe. It wasn't the first time I'd escaped this way, and even though this was a new place, I

could still make my way down until I leapt onto the grass and raced off into the woods at the back of the house, disappearing from view.

I didn't stop running until I was completely out of breath. The woods were thick and already starting to turn green from the warmer spring weather, with buds appearing on the limbs of trees and sections of green grass starting to poke their way through the dead foliage and leaves. In my arms, held tight to my chest, I held Fuzzy, my old bear, the only one who had been with me since the beginning. The only one who saw everything. When I finally burst into a clearing, a section of the woods that opened up to a circular area of tall Indian and feathered grass that came up to my knees, I sagged to the ground. I didn't realize I was crying until I sucked in a long, shaking breath between my teeth and wet drops fell from my nose and chin.

Laying here in the soft grass, I hid from the world, the canopy above opening up sections of the bright, blue sky between the branches. Anyone walking by wouldn't be able to see me hiding in the little meadow, curled up like a baby, hugging my teddy bear as if I was five again instead of seventeen. I let myself sob, sucking in breaths of air as I fought back all those haunting memories. Seeing Carol-Ann so distraught had sent me right back to when I was her age, defenseless, confused, and scared. Forced around by the grown-ups who were supposed to protect me. I had just wanted my mother. Only that wasn't possible, according to the social workers in British Columbia. Considering the broken promises they'd made, how ignored I felt when I *did* find the courage to speak up, and how unimportant and insignificant they made me feel, I had never felt safe with or trusted anyone.

So I just stayed there, crying out my feelings. I rarely allowed myself to while in front of others. Because I was almost always around people, there was rarely an opportunity to release my frustrations and embrace how overwhelmed, stressed, and scared I was. I did my best to look like I didn't

care, to blend in with crowds, to be overlooked that I rarely allowed myself to let go and just... *feel*. To just be me. I didn't even know who I was, to be honest. I spent all my time just... surviving.

Chapter nine



Hayden - Present Day

I SAW WHAT THAT BITCH, Ayla, did to her in gym. It took every ounce of willpower I had to remind myself not to hit a girl. Maddy had run off, but I figured I'd see her in Photography. She hadn't shown. I checked the dark room and the theatre, but she was nowhere, and *that* was freaking me the fuck out. I tried to keep it together, telling myself to stay away and give her her space. But that voice was getting harder to ignore.

Find her. Find her, Hayden. Find her... find her... find her...

I left school on my bike, headed home, and immediately set off through the woods towards Phoenix House, determined to check in and see if she was there. Driving up on my motorbike wouldn't escape anyone's notice in the house, and I didn't want the workers who ran the place to know I was snooping around. I tried to tell myself it was due to me doing the right thing, that I was looking out for someone who had no one else. Mom would be proud of me for taking an interest in the charity Grandpa J had established, one she and Aunt Casey were so passionate about. But in all honesty, I just needed to see her, see her face...

And take her.

No! No, I wasn't going to be like that. I just wanted to make sure she was alright. That was all. That was all...

And then, while I had warded with these thoughts as I hurried through the trees, right into a clearing, I stopped myself. I wasn't her guardian. By all accounts, she was as scared of me as she was of everyone else. If I showed up on her doorstep, I'd probably trigger something in her, sending her into a panic state. As drawn as I was to her, I genuinely knew nothing about Maddy.

Take her, Hayden.

No.

You want her.

Yes.

You can have her.

Not that way. It's not right.

You're not right...

I stopped walking, staring in the direction that I knew would take me to that old Victorian home where I hoped she'd be. This was stupid. This wasn't a good idea. Not when I felt half-crazed. So I turned, determined to head back home and stay there, maybe play my guitar a little to distract myself, watch over Maverick, or help Dad in the garage. Anything that would keep me from forcing myself into the life of a girl who wanted nothing to do with me. I wouldn't do that to her. She deserved better.

But what if she does want you?

I stopped again. She doesn't.

She lets you get close to her.

Barely.

She sees you.

No, she doesn't.

Do you see her look anyone else in the eye?

I ran my hands through my hair several times, hating this fight with myself. As much as I wanted to be good, I thirsted

justice through violence and greed, like Manic had a much deeper hold over me than I realized. My entire body tensed, flexing as I fought the urge to turn around to see her, my attempt to be stronger and keep walking home dwindling with each passing second. I wrenched at my hair, hating myself as I felt my rational side start to lose power against the dark... to a part of me that was very much... *him*.

Slowly turning, I opened my eyes only to spot a face staring at me from the high grass, and I thought I was gonna piss myself. I'd already felt my adrenaline rushing through me from my internal debate, so feeling my soul jump out of my skin in shock and surprise nearly gave me a heart attack. It only took a second for me to realize that it was Maddy, like my prayers had been answered, and as I'd wrestled with what I thought I *should* do versus what I *wanted*, some higher power had taken control and plopped her down right in front of me. A sign.

Immediately, I could see she'd been crying, and though my first instinct was to wrap her in my arms and hide her away from the fucked-up bullshit of this world, I knew I couldn't. Not with her. I needed to be better.

"Maddy," I'd said breathlessly, still bent over my knees as I tried to slow my heart, "What the hell are you doing here?"

She struggled initially to answer, the conflict evident on her face, but finally...

"I was triggered by something, so I ran here." It was then that I noticed the bear in her arms, which she hugged tight, and I could feel my heart breaking. Aunt Casey had told me stories about how the foster system used to be in Ashland. Maddy wasn't from here, but I could only imagine how much worse it was in huge cities nationwide. Kids neglected by those meant to care for them, having so little to their name, this bear of hers was probably all she had. Just like Aunt Casey and her old, falling-apart stuffed lamb.

Well, now she'll have you, Hayden.

She fidgeted from where she sat on the ground, looking both nervous and upset, and I scolded myself for forgetting how uncomfortable she could be with direct eye contact. Despite how amazing it had been to be so close to her, to touch her as I guided her fingers over my guitar, I didn't want to push her now. She needed me to move slowly, so I would.

Glancing back the way I'd come, I wondered if I should just leave, but the selfish part of me was desperate to stay, to connect with this beautiful soul. I shifted back to her, trying to relax, hoping she'd sense my aura and feel comfortable before asking, "Do you need someone to be here with you?"

Me. Please say you need me.

My question caught her off guard, almost like she hadn't expected me to make such an offer. Did I scare her, too?

No, you don't. Correction. I hoped I didn't.

She nodded slightly, but it was a 'yes' all the same, and I gratefully sank to the ground about ten feet from her, remembering the distance she'd established between us in the theatre. She'd gotten so close to me today already, except right now, she was hurting. Scared. I had to be careful. For a long time, we said nothing, but it wasn't that awkward silence you get with some people, where they get nervous and start yammering on and on to fill the void. With Maddy, I was just content to sit with her in silence in this clearing, the sun still shining, birds singing around us, safe and alone in our little world.

I liked that. Our little world...

When I peeked over at her, however, her anxiety was clearly starting up again judging by the way she rocked back and forth a little, still clinging to her bear, and I found myself remembering my mother's breakdowns back when I was a kid. How afraid she'd become, how completely distraught and inconsolable she appeared. It had scared me so much back then. Once, I remembered reaching out to her, although the moment she looked into my face, our eyes locking, she seized

up and wept. I felt like I'd done something wrong, that I had been bad, and that I was the reason she was crying. It took a long time for me to move past those emotions.

“My mom used to have panic attacks when I was younger,” I said abruptly. Maddy glanced my way, her hazel eyes peering through the strands of loose hair that fell around her face. I sat as comfortably as I could, feet planted, knees up, elbows resting upon them, watching her closely as I spoke as calmly as possible.

“She did?” Maddy asked softly, brow furrowed.

I nodded, shifting a little in my seat, trying to get more comfortable. “A lot, yeah. Something would happen like, I don't know... a song would come on the stereo or certain motorbikes that drove by. She'd hunch down, cover her ears, close her eyes, and start crying.” I pressed my lips together, studying the ground around me. The memories were still painful. I didn't mention that sometimes... *sometimes*... it was because of something I'd said. “It always scared me when she got like that. I thought she was broken or something.”

“What brought her out of it?” Maddy's voice was a whisper, just loud enough for me to hear.

The corners of my mouth lifted slightly as I pictured my father, with his silver-streak blond hair and goofy grin. “My dad.”

She hesitated a moment before asking, “What did he do?”

“I don't remember exactly, but he'd get down on the ground with her, murmur to her, and hold her. After a bit, he'd call me over to give her a hug, and after that, she'd slowly break out of whatever had sparked her anxiety.” I sighed heavily, remembering watching him bring her back to us, like it was effortless. Meanwhile I always seemed to make it worse. “He's her person, the one who knows her best. The one she relies on.” I glanced over at the beautiful girl sitting with me, feeling my heart twist. “Sometimes that's all we need. Just one person who gets us.”

Her shining eyes stared into mine and for a moment, I felt like my breath got knocked clean out of me. Sitting amongst the new ferns, the fragile beams of light shining around her from the broken canopy overhead, hitting the mix of dark and light strands in her hair, I realized that I wanted nothing more than to be *her* person.

“So he helped her?” she asked, her expression so innocent and trusting, one I wasn’t used to seeing in others when they looked at me. The hurt I felt, knowing I wasn’t my mother’s person and couldn’t help her, suddenly vanished. For the first time in a long time, I felt like I was pulling myself out of my dark hole and standing on firm ground again, like there was hope for me after all. And it all came from the look this girl was giving me now. I wasn’t supposed to be my mother’s. I was *hers*.

I nodded. “She’s not the same person she used to be. She’s happier now. Once in a while, she has a moment, but I think that’s normal. She’s able to pull herself out of it faster and with more control than she had when I was a kid.” I thought maybe it was because I’d pulled away from my family over the past few years, distancing myself. I figured that was the reason why she was doing so much better. But maybe... maybe it was for another reason? Maybe it was just... *time*.

I could see how my confirmation seemed to both soothe and upset her. *Be what she needs you to be, Hayden*, I reminded myself. *Don’t be selfish with her*.

In the distance, a loud caw distracted me, and more out of habit than anything, I murmured, “Bad crow.” I wanted to laugh at that stupid family saying, but my comment brought her back to me. Seeing Maddy’s smile, I no longer gave a shit how ridiculous I felt echoing my parent’s words.

“Hayden,” her voice was hushed, a whisper so faint that if it weren’t already as quiet as the grave in our little clearing, I might not have heard her. As I watched, she bowed her head, her cheeks turning pink as she sat there, her face twisting like she was hurting. She began to tremble, her breathing coming

fast and panicked, and she squeezed her eyes shut like she was fighting off her own demons in her head, just like I do. Worried at the sudden change in her, I fought to remain where I was, wondering what I'd done to fuck it all up.

“Maddy?”

Hold her. Just grab her and hold her, Hayden.

She quickly shook her head, rocking slightly. I got to my feet and slowly inched in her direction, every step anticipating a possible landmine.

Don't scare her. Don't scare her, please...

“Maddy!” I said again, a little louder, hoping she could hear me over whatever toxic thoughts she was possibly struggling with. Suddenly, she jerked, looking up to see me standing closer, having closed the distance between us, reaching for her. I thought for one horrible moment that she'd scream, run, that I'd trigger that impulse to distance herself from me. But she didn't. I could see the longing on her face, her eyes swimming with unshed tears, and for a second, I thought I saw her unknowingly lean towards me, before she flinched back, like something else had a stronger hold over her, something that was pulling her away from me.

“I'm a mess, Hayden. I'm a broken, fucking mess.”

Those words shattered my heart, and all I wanted at that moment was to find the people who had hurt her, and fucking destroy them. I wanted them to suffer for causing her pain, for making her believe their bullshit and lies. I could see the fight reflected in her hazel gaze, one I found myself suffering from each and every day.

She rose to her feet then, clinging to her bear, backing away from me while whispering, “I'm sorry I wasted your time—”

“You didn't, Maddy,” I snapped, cutting her off. No, I won't let her fucking apologize for the crimes of others. She had nothing to be sorry for, and hearing those words made me

want to lunge forward and just take her. Take her away from here so I could make it all better. “You didn’t!”

I risked taking another step, desperate to close the space between us.

“I’m-I’m...” she stammered, and I could see her fighting against what she wanted, versus her own darkness. “I’m not worth your time.”

Rage.

Pure rage.

She’s yours. Take her. Take her now. Show her how much she does matter. Show her how much she’s affected you. How she unconsciously managed to reach into your heart and claim it.

She’s not mine.

Not yet. Show her she’s yours.

Kill them.

Find them, tie them down, and make them suffer.

Carve her name into their skin so they remember what they’ve done.

Smile while they scream...

Don’t hurt her. Don’t. This was too far, too fucking far. This darkness in me, Manic, almost entirely took over at that moment, and I struggled to fight him back as I remembered the words of Grandpa J, the promise I’d made not to hurt the ones I cared for.

I’d break her like *he* broke Mom...

“Maddy, I don’t ever want to hear you say that about yourself... *ever*. Do you understand?” My voice remained calm, leveled, but I couldn’t hold back the ferocity in how I spoke. “You *are* worth it. Do you hear me? I’m telling you that you are.”

When I took another step, she didn't pull away, and I jumped at the chance. I reached for her, hesitating as I gauged her reaction, but she didn't run. Carefully, I let my fingers slide over the soft material of her worn hoodie, closing around it until I could feel her slender arms beneath them, and held onto her, my body shaking as I fought back the rage I was feeling at the thought of someone hurting her. "You are *worth* something to *me*."

Her full, pink lower lip trembled as her shining eyes flickered back and forth between mine, like I was speaking another language. Her brows furrowed; confusion, pain, and the tiniest glimmer of hope were all there in her hazel eyes. "You don't know me, Hayden," she whispered, "You don't know—"

"I *want* to," I told her, fighting to control myself. "I want to, Maddy."

She gasped, the sound faint and hushed, but she still didn't pull away. She continued to cling to her bear as she stared up at me, her body swaying like she was trying to both run and get closer all at the same time.

I lifted one hand, unable to stop myself as I cupped her chin, my thumb stroking the soft, rosy cheek, forgetting everything about taking it slow. "Sometimes, it's not about knowing someone, but just feeling it... feeling that connection, the sensation of something, whatever it is between us, it's right. I feel it now, and I think you do too, but you're afraid because it's new, and you've been hurt so many times before by those you *thought* were your person. The one who was supposed to love you above all else and protect you, and they let you down, but *I* wouldn't do that. I will *never* do that." I could see the tears welling in her eyes as she listened to my little speech.

So much for taking it slow, Hayden.

"I'll be your friend, Maddy."

You want more. Take more!

“I can be your friend.”

I released a long, shallow breath, fighting Manic back, forcing him to return to his cage. I didn't need him now. Maddy didn't need him. She needed *me*. Hayden. Despite the spark I could feel between us, I comforted myself in that there was a surprising passion behind each word I said, allowing me to pull back enough and give her that space. At the same time though, I won't let her run away. Not from this. Clenching my jaw, sucking in a long, deep breath through my nose, I released my hold on her, my fingers prying themselves loose, and I took a step back. She watched me, her eyes wide, confused, concerned. I'm sure she thought I was crazy. Fuck, I'm sure that by now someone has filled her in on crazy Hayden Mathers and his toxic family heritage. They must have.

And yet, she remained unmoving, choosing to stay where she was.

Calm down, Hayden... stay calm. Lock Manic up for now.

But what if she leaves? What if she runs?

Then you will let her.

You can't do that...

No! Unleash Manic on those who hurt you, cherish those you love...

“Hayden,” she whispered, her voice haunting like the high note of a crystalline bell, and a timid, little hand softly touched my shoulder. “I won't hurt you, either.” Her eyes still held so much uncertainty, like she couldn't fully believe anything I'd said. And yet, she was trying. What did that mean? “I-I've never... had close friends before. Not really. I'm worried that I don't know... *how* to be a good friend to you. But I would like to try.”

More. More!

I got the sense that she wanted to say so much more than she did but was holding back. I wouldn't push her. Even though a surge of protective obsessiveness was pulsing in me

like a beast that longed to break free from its cage, I forced him back, reminding him not to make the same mistake *he* made.

“I’d like that, Maddy,” I said, my voice stiff, smiling a little at this small victory, revelling in the touch of her little hand on my shoulder. “I’d like that a lot.”

The corners of her mouth twitched up just the tiniest fraction, a smile—a hesitant one, but still a smile all the same. The tightness at the corners of her eyes relaxed, and I resisted a delighted shiver when her hand slid down my arm, dropping to her side.

“So... what do we do now?” She asked, everything about that question so innocent and pure it touched me. Her lack of knowing the trust she was putting in me to guide her, made me feel stronger. More in control. Then, I silenced Manic permanently. For today, at least.

“Now, I’ll take you back to Phoenix House,” I told her and held out my hand, waiting for her, hoping she’d take it. It was supposed to rain tonight, though I could smell the moisture in the air. I didn’t want her to get caught in it. She peered over her shoulder, back toward her temporary home, her brow furrowed with unease. Had something happened there? Did they fuck up and hurt her in some way?

Manic began to claw at my chest, begging to be set free. What he would do, I had no idea. When I gave in to that darkness, it was like I was just along for the ride, watching my body go through the motions as though under the control of another. I couldn’t chance him having control now, not with Maddy so close and trusting. I needed to slow it down. Move slow; don’t scare her off.

She relaxed some and nodded, agreeing as she slipped her hand in mine, her bear tucked under her arm, and turned in the direction of Phoenix House. I released a quiet, strained sigh of relief, her actions soothing the rising fire in my chest. I wrapped my fingers carefully around hers, relishing in the

softness of her skin, and I guided us through the trees, knowing the path we needed to take.

And then I'll have to let her go... I thought, the pain that came with it twisting my heart.

You don't have to, you know, that other voice chimed in. You could just... take her. Take her home. She's yours, Manic.

No.

I'm not Manic. I'm Hayden. I'm not going to make the same mistakes as you did. I tightened my hold on her little hand as we broke through the treeline, and every step I took towards that house meant I was one step closer to letting her go. But I would, because it was what was right. I wouldn't suffocate her. I wouldn't force her into anything she didn't want. Even if it meant I hurt in the meantime.

As painful as it was to allow her to leave me, I knew it wasn't for forever. This wasn't the end. We were just getting started, and I wasn't going to fuck it up by pushing her. She didn't deserve that. I'd pull back, and be the man she needed.

Chapter ten

MADDY - PRESENT DAY

IT WAS A NEW WEEK, and it was weird, but it felt like a fresh start for some reason. For once, as I ventured down that path of this dark tunnel called life, I could actually see a beacon of light at the end of it.

I wanted to believe it was because I felt like I was starting to come to terms with all the bullshit in my past, that knowing my mother was locked away in some asylum didn't bother me anymore, that I wasn't as broken as I thought. But who was I kidding? I was still fucked up. I was just... dealing with it differently than I had before. I was looking at things with a different view and determination to not let it ruin my present. It was because of Hayden.

He brought me back to Phoenix House after that talk in the woods. That day, he'd been so gentle, so open, and... real. I felt like I saw a piece of him that no one else had. A bit of Hayden Mathers that had been hidden from the rest of the world and he felt safe showing that to me, which was such a humbling feeling, and the connection I thought I had with him only solidified. His sincerity, his awareness and understanding of how I felt, and how I responded to others, wasn't something I was used to from people, and coming from him, I found myself eagerly reaching back.

I wanted to be his person.

When Hayden saw me up to the door, he held me back for just a moment, squeezing it. His silver stare bore into me with such certainty, such trust, such warmth. I felt like he could see directly into my soul and liked what he saw. He said not a word, just... held my hand and watched me like he could for hours, until Miss Ross called me inside. Very slowly, one finger at a time, he let go until only our pinkies were hooked together. Like an embrace.

“I’ll be seeing you,” he said, his voice soft and quiet, comforting like a hug.

“I’ll be seeing you.” I nodded to him, snapping out of my moment when I heard a soft thud at my side. I’d still been holding my bear with one hand, having forgotten that I’d been carrying him around with me the entire time, only realizing now that I’d dropped him. Hayden didn’t make me feel weird about the fact I was clinging to a stuffed animal like a child. He didn’t comment on it or give me that *look*... that judging look that I’ve received from others so many times when they realized I clung to Fuzzy like a security blanket at seventeen. No. Instead, he released my finger and reached down, carefully picking him up and brushing off a dead leaf from his back before gently pressing him back into my arms. With one last lingering look, his gaze flickering between mine, before darting to my lips and back up again, he turned and left, disappearing into the trees like a ghost.

I wondered if he would visit me during the weekend, but he didn’t. Instead, I spent my time helping Miss Ross and the other girls with chores. I watched Carol-Ann closely the day she returned from seeing her dad, and to my relief she was in good spirits. She came home with a smile on her face, ready to play with the others, the sight giving me hope. Looks like I wasn’t the only one healing. At night, when all was quiet, I lay on my bunk, doing my best to study but my attention drifted, and I would end up staring off at nothing as I thought about Hayden Mathers.

The other girls flicked curious looks my way, no doubt having heard about my altercation with Ayla, and that, mixed

with the rumours about what had happened to Lucas, they were definitely wondering what the hell was up. But I had nothing to say. Andrea nervously watched me but said nothing from her bed as she worked on her school assignments. I got the impression she wasn't necessarily afraid, just cautious. Hayden was shrouded with rumour and a shadow that protected him like a cloak, warning others away. My affiliation with him was uncertain; honestly, even I didn't quite understand what it was. We had a connection, that was for sure, but as to what it meant, I didn't know.

So, on Monday morning, despite all the time I spent this weekend pondering away, I felt a flicker of excitement at the prospect of going to school. It wasn't because of the other kids, classes, or extracurriculars. I wanted to see him.

The sun was shining bright through the bedroom window, so I wore a blue flannel shirt, buttoning it and rolled up the sleeves, deciding to opt out of my usual oversized hoodie. Pulling on a pair of jeans, both worn in the knees and patched over with mismatching material, I ran a brush through my hair and tied it up in a high ponytail, rather than letting it fall in my face. I could see Andrea cast a curious look my way at breakfast but said nothing as she took her spot at my side, away from the stove. Even Miss Ross glanced at my attire, the outfit unusual given what I'd covered myself in the week previous.

I told myself it was because it was warmer out, that I'd be sweltering in a sweater. Even though my skin was crawling as their eyes took me in, I inwardly put my foot down and refused to run upstairs to change.

No. When I'd woken up, I had felt brave. My first instinct was to wear this, and I wasn't going to allow my fear to set me back. I was going to be strong and trust my inner voice, blah, blah, blah. I was going to hold my head high, walk into that school, and refuse to hide, even though the very thought sent a shiver through my body. This week was a fresh start, and I was going to *try*.

When I arrived at school, and the crowd in the hallway parted for me, the whispering, the eyes all watching, I reminded myself to be brave, to put one step in front of the other, and to ignore that cry in the back of my mind at the attention.

Hide, Maddy... hide! Don't let them see you!

No, Maddy. Walk straight ahead. Ignore them. Ignore them all. You're okay. You're okay...

Every whisper was like nails on a chalkboard ringing in my ears. Every scuffle or sudden movement around me had the hairs on my body rise on end, like when a deer lifts its head at the sound of danger, and though my heart was pounding in my ears, I forced myself to keep breathing, to keep moving. At my locker, I made myself turn my back so I could focus on the combination, but my fingertips felt numb. I shook out my hand several times, trying to get the blood flowing, as I kept fumbling with the lock. Especially when the whispers around me began to escalate, little bits and pieces caught my attention and distracted me.

“Lucas...”

“... hospital...”

“Maddy... Hayden...”

“Hayden...”

“Maddy...”

I could feel myself start to panic a little as the noise blended together, creating an irritable buzzing in the background. The few words were beginning to feed into my anxiety like poison, and it was getting harder and harder to catch my breath.

“Ayla... gym...”

“Lucas... hospital...”

“Maddy...”

“Maddy...”

“*Maddy!*”

One voice cut through the aggravating, grinding buzz pulling me out of my spiral, their presence like a balm on the burning wounds in my mind, and I melted into them. Hayden was at my side, his body blocking everyone out as he positioned himself around me, shielding me from the prying eyes of the others. I sagged against him, my shoulder pressing into the middle of his sternum, the contact comforting, and I let my head hang as I closed my eyes, trying to get a grip.

“I-I thought I was strong enough to-to...” I whispered, feeling so stupid as I shook my head, trying to ignore the rising crescendo in the background at the sight of Hayden and I together.

“You *are* strong enough,” he murmured, his breath ticking a loose strand of hair by my ear. “Just because it’s hard right now doesn’t mean you’re weak. You’re *trying*, and that’s something to be proud of. Now block these other people out. They don’t fucking matter. I’m here, okay?”

I opened my eyes and peered up at him, his height only more apparent now that I was still slumped against him. He watched me, his beautiful face ever patient and warm. He was so understanding, perceptive and patient with my struggles that I couldn’t believe he was real. How did I get so lucky to have him in my life? I didn’t deserve this.

Reaching around my back, he gently took my hand, lifting it until he placed it upon my lock again, and said, “Now, take a breath, get your things, and I’ll walk you to class, okay?”

I nodded, so grateful to know that he was here at my side, encouraging me as I fought to turn a new leaf, to be braver. He believed I could do it, so I’d keep trying. I did as he said, ignoring all the noise in the background, reminding myself that I was safe and they didn’t matter, and focused on my task at hand: open my locker, put my bag away, get my books out, my student ID, close it, and done.

I felt him lean down, his lips close to my ear, and murmured, “Easy peasy, eh?”

Hearing someone like him use such a good-boy, clean expression was a conundrum in itself, and I couldn’t help but giggle a little as I looked up to see him cast me the tiniest, crooked smirk, as if he knew very well that it was out of character for him. Without preamble, he looped his arm around my shoulders, so casually, I don’t even think he was aware he was doing it, and turned to guide us both down the hall, ignoring all others. His muscles felt like a shield around me. The scent of his leather jacket mixed with a natural musk had me discreetly breathing him in, savouring it. There was a hint of coconut there, too, maybe from his shampoo or something. It made me want to go out and find something similar to use so I could use it myself, carrying that scent around with me.

Having him walk at my side, holding me close, made me feel safer. A little braver. And I straightened as I walked tall, doing my best to shed years of insecurity and fear. It wasn’t until we reached my first class, science, that he seemed to realize that he’d been holding me close to his side this entire time and immediately retracted his arm like he’d been electrocuted.

“I’m sorry, Maddy,” he said, instantly looking shame faced. I furrowed my brow as I stared up at him, wondering if he was truly so repulsed by me that he felt the need to move away.

“What?”

“I-I didn’t realize I was... I’m sorry if I crossed a line or—”

Oh, he was worried that he’d put me in an uncomfortable position by touching me? Knowing that he was so horrified to have caused me any discomfort was so moving that I was speechless as I watched him stammer, his hauntingly beautiful eyes wide and sincere as he went on and on until I finally cut off his apologetic rambling. “Hayden!” I shouted. “It’s fine. I’m fine. It’s okay.” When he continued to look unsure, I

reached out, placing my palm delicately over his chest to feel the hard beating of his heart, surprising both him and me with my sudden daring. At my touch, it began to race faster, and I tilted my head to the side as I gazed up at him, giving him a secret, rare smile in hopes of putting his nerves to rest. “I like being close to you.”

It wasn't until the words fell from my mouth that I realized that this, the way I was touching him, the way we spoke to each other... that this probably was... well, weird. Not normal. I never saw people interact this way. Never on TV shows, in books, in the hallways. People didn't naturally cross such a physical boundary with someone they barely knew. But Hayden and I... were different, but in a good way. In a way that only made sense to us. And when I touched him, I could feel the tension leave his body. Finally, he released a shaking breath and wrapped his fingers carefully around my wrist, giving it a gentle squeeze of reassurance.

I've never let anyone get so close to me before. I never dreamed I was capable of it. But with Hayden, he was an exception. The *only* exception.

“I'll see you at lunch?” I said, my voice rising as a question. Maybe he wouldn't want my company. Perhaps he was getting bored of me, or... or... he wanted solitude. I could feel all my insecurities rushing back at the thought, but I'd respect his choice, just like he respected mine. His gaze, however, seemed to shimmer and radiate at my words, his mouth tilting into that crooked smirk of his that was becoming more frequent as we talked, and he gave a simple, firm nod. “Okay,” I said, returning his smile, slowly retracting my hand, “I'll see you then.”



EVERYWHERE I WENT, I was followed by whispers and stares. Especially at lunch when Hayden appeared in the cafeteria and meandered over to my table, casually sitting at my side as if he'd always sat there. Kicking a leg out before him, he lounged back to rest against the wall behind us, his dark hair that fell over his eyes hiding the silver glare that followed anyone who came close.

We sat in comfortable silence, both eating our lunches without feeling that compulsion to fill the silent void between us. We didn't need to. I was more than happy just having him next to me. It made me feel safer, stronger. Especially when I glanced up to see Ayla sitting at the table where that scarred-faced blue-haired boy, Theo, and his friends frequented. They were watching us with interest, *too* much interest, in my opinion, and it wasn't friendly. Ayla looked like she'd bitten into a sour lemon, while Theo's cold, pale glare seemed... calculating, reminding me very much of the way my foster father would watch me at the dinner table, as though wondering if I would say something and out him, or was wondering if he could take a chance to try to get me alone later.

I peeked at the scars around his mouth, remembering what Ayla had told me on Friday. Hayden had done that to him, had broken his jaw, his teeth, all of it.

That's what happens when your dad is a murdering psychopath...

But Hayden had told me about his dad, about how he would help his mother through her panic attacks. The way he had talked about him in the clearing, the sense of pride and respect he carried in his voice as he told me about him, I got an entirely different picture of his father. I was certain Ayla was wrong, that she was making it all up just to freak me out about getting close to him. She was jealous, clearly, and jealousy made people do ugly things.

Maybe Hayden *did* give Theo Hebert those scars. Maybe he *did* attack him, but I had a hard time believing that it was

unprovoked, that he just lost his mind one day and decided to take out his feelings on some random person who happened to be just walking by. I got a bad feeling from Theo, and if I've learned anything in the past, it was that my instincts were rarely wrong about people. I'd put so much trust into those who were supposed to protect me and ignored the uncomfortable warning that would dawn in the back of my mind. And I paid for it. I was right about Ayla, and I had a feeling that Theo and his group of friends were people to watch out for, too.

So I looked away from their table, letting myself get closer to Hayden, considering there was no doubt in my mind. Especially when he unwrapped the homemade cookies from the saran wrap his mother had no doubt made for him, he passed two of the three over to me. I took one but split the other, handing him back the other half. He took the piece without a word and bit into it, still watching those around us like he didn't trust anyone. Just this simple interaction between us, done with no words, I knew... Hayden Mathers wasn't a psycho. He wasn't a boogiemán. He was good. Misjudged like so many of us. Painted by the wicked brush of society, labeled a threat and outcast...

Well, we would be outcasts together.

Almost absent-mindedly, as he stared off at nothing in particular, Hayden lifted a hand and reached up to play with the end of my ponytail, his fingers curling a lock round and round. He didn't tug, so it didn't hurt. I stayed where I was, eating the sandwich I'd packed for myself that morning, occasionally nibbling on one of his mother's delicious rocky road cookies, ignoring all others around us. I was at peace here with him, simply sitting in silence in a school cafeteria. With him at my side, it made all the difference.

Chapter eleven



HAYDEN - THE PAST, Thirteen Years Old

HIT HIM, Hayden. Hit him.

Fuck this guy. Fucking take him out.

Fuck the high road.

Break his fucking face, Hayden.

Wear me like armour...

THEO HEBERT WAS COMING over to where I was hanging out in the middle of the quad during lunch. I'd been sitting on a stone bench beneath the statue of our school mascot, a giant grizzly bear that stood tall on a collection of rocks, when Theo marched right up, talking loudly about the freak kid with the psycho father. Those dark voices in my head began to speak to me... louder and louder...

Unleash Manic on those who hurt you, cherish those you love...

For years since he ruined my life, I'd silently endured the teasing, the isolation, the constant bullying. I'd been a punching bag for him and his friends, both verbally and physically. I was lucky these guys never managed to hit hard enough to do any real damage, but all that would change. After talking with Grandpa last week, I'd gone straight home and pulled my father's dog tags out of my sock drawer and put them on, wearing them proudly around my neck. The jacket

was too big for my lanky thirteen-year-old body, but in a few years, I'd add that, too.

I'd wear Manic like armour.

“Who else wants to bet that Hayden's a freak just like his real dad?” Theo said loudly for everyone to hear. Several others sniggered, some joining his side to be a part of the “cool crowd” as he rallied to pick on the loner kid with the shaggy hair and silver eyes.

Fucking break him, Hayden. Break him. Break his face... the voice whispered as I chewed on my mandarin orange. I didn't flinch as he talked, refusing to react to his baiting. In the past I might have by snapping or yelling back or trying to make an escape. Not today. Not ever again.

Theo watched me as I casually ate, knowing I seemed bored with what he was saying, and sneered. He didn't like the fact that his words weren't hitting hard anymore. He paused, studying me closely, then said, “I bet he has a collection of neighborhood cats in his basement that he plays with. Do you fuck them, too, Mathers? Skin 'em, and screw 'em?” He watched me as he upped his insults, changing them from the usual stuff to something more shocking for the crowd, hoping to see me hurt.

I refused. He was disgusting, yeah, but I could take this. He was spewing bullshit now. It wasn't true. While the other stuff... my dad, the past, that was different.

“Maybe that's what he used to do, I dunno... hey, you guys know he has sisters, right? Just like his dad did? You know, his *mom-*”

Break. His. Face! Scar him, give him a smile... Turn him into the freakshow. My knuckles were white as I clenched my fists, head down, shaking as I fought for control. Just kept eating my food while seeming like I didn't care. I knew Mom would cry if I got into trouble. Dad would be disappointed. As much as I didn't want to let them down, I was done being a victim.

Wear Manic like armour... I reminded myself.

“Hey Hayden, since your real dad fucked his sister, how do you feel about Charlotte and Emily—”

Everything had gone red at that moment. When my little sisters’ names came out of his mouth, I couldn’t stop myself. I knew I had been sitting still, but then suddenly I was moving. At the same time, my vision and all emotions went numb and hazy. I don’t remember hearing anything; I don’t remember feeling much at all. But when my mind finally did clear, I found myself sitting on Theo’s chest, my fists swinging again and again into his face, the screams from the other students sounding hollow and far away. I could sense others trying to pull me off of him, only I wouldn’t let them. I kept going and going, ignoring the pain in my knuckles. The blood, the crying... no one helped me when I was down on the ground. No one came to my rescue. And yet they were coming to *his*. It made me all the more resentful and bitter.

“Don’t *ever*...” I snarled, swinging a fist down into his chin, “*ever*,” I brought the other in on the opposite side, and the sound of something crunching felt good, a thrill rising in my chest that I’d never known, “talk about my sisters... *ever* again!”

Grasping the collar of his shirt, I yanked him upwards so that our faces were so close that the blood he sputtered hit my chin. I stared straight into his wide, frightened, pale blue eyes. My breathing was shaky, my whole body vibrating like I was electrically charged, and I couldn’t help it. I screamed. I screamed right into his fucked up, bloody face so loud that I could feel my throat tearing apart. A thick arm wrapped around my middle then, forcibly pulling me off before I found myself being hauled back by the principal.

“Hayden!” he shouted, the shock in his voice evident as he took in the sight of Theo on the ground. “What did you do?” His voice was oddly flat, like the sight of the bloody figure was the most disturbing thing he’d ever seen.

“You never did anything!” I yelled, staring at the gathered crowd, wildly eyeing everyone. “None of you ever did anything! You never helped me. *Ever!*”

Except her...

“That’s enough!” our principal barked as several teachers rushed over to Theo to check on him, two of them gasping at the scene as they covered their mouths. “Enough! Come with me. I can’t believe this... from *you!* I just can’t...”

Later, when Dad picked me up after his meeting at the school, he brought me to a walk-in clinic where we discovered I needed a few stitches in the back of my head. My chin had a nasty bruise, apparently from Spencer who had tried knocking me out while I was lost in my rage, though I didn’t even notice the punch. My knuckles were bloody and skinned, but the sting was comforting. The satisfying crunch of Theo’s nose breaking, of his teeth cracking free from his jaw beneath my fist, had rejuvenated me. For the first time in years, I didn’t feel like a victim. I felt like I’d conquered, like I’d finally woken up.

I unleashed Manic...



THAT NIGHT, when Mom had been informed of the situation, the look on her face made my victory quickly turn into shame. The disappointment in her eyes, the fearful way she stared at me after hearing about the way I’d fucked up Theo’s face, seemed to trigger something in her. Her hands rose and pressed over her heart, and she took a tiny step back from me, like I scared her or something, and *that* made me feel sick.

This had happened multiple times in the past, when I’d done something or said something she found disturbing. She’d clam up, freeze, or run. Then Dad would have to come in and

mend the bridge once again. This time, however, I needed her to stay, to hear me out. I didn't want her to think I was a monster. I *wasn't*. I was still me. Still Hayden. Just... another side to me had burst free, coming alive, and had run to my defense.

Manic.

"He said something about Charlotte and Em," I said, the look she was giving me making my heart squeeze and shame pool in my gut. "I couldn't take it anymore, Mom."

"You don't do that, Hayden," she said, her voice hushed, cracking a little on my name, "You can't attack people like that."

"I know, I just... I *snapped!*" I sighed heavily and hung my head in my hands, "I put up with this crap from those kids every day, Mom. I couldn't take it anymore. I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, but I just couldn't. I'm a fucking freak at school! A loser... I'm the son of a murdering psychopath! Do you think that I feel good going there every day knowing that they all know that? I just couldn't take it, especially when he brought up my sisters..."

She was quiet when I told her this, and from the doorway to my attic bedroom, I could hear the light creak on the stairs as Dad joined us. I thought she'd go then, that she would leave him to deal with me as she had in the past. I thought she was done with me, that I'd crossed some sort of line I could never come back from. Tears stung the back of my eyes at the thought, but I refused to let them fall. I couldn't cry in front of her.

Had it been worth it? Or had listening to the voices this time only led me onto a path that would ruin me? I wanted to feel bad for what I'd done, but I just couldn't. At the same time, seeing Mom so upset was killing me.

A light touch on my shoulder had me glancing up, expecting to see Dad, but instead, it was *her* standing there, her green eyes shining with tears.

“Hayden, I understand. We all have our limits,” her gentle words had the air I’d been holding in my lungs suddenly release with a heavy gasp as my body shuddered. I lowered my head again, so grateful that she had stayed, that she was talking to me this time. “We all have our limits,” she repeated, “That doesn’t make you a bad person. You are *not* a bad person. You are good. Do you hear me?” Her gentle touch as she cupped my chin in her hands, forcing me to look at her, made the tears involuntarily fall. “You are *good*, Hayden. And nothing those kids say can change that.”

I gasped, sniffing a little as I took in her words, and nodded. I wanted to believe her, so badly. But it was hard, especially after so much abuse for so long.

“What you did was still wrong, but I do get it. I love you, you know that? I *love* you so much,”

My shoulders began to shake at her words, not realizing how much I needed to hear that my mother still loved me. She wrapped her arms around me tight, holding me as I cried like a little kid. Her love, her approval, meant so much. She had suffered a lot when I was younger, with plenty of rocky moments we had to get through over the years, the issues my dad had helped her push past, there had been a time of peace between us before things blew up again. Those years were the happiest for me. The ones where I was just a normal kid with a normal mom and dad. But then it had all changed again, and now I was the one who was suffering.

“Now,” she rubbed my back and gave my forehead a kiss, “I know you’ve been suspended for the week, so I’ll be getting your assignments emailed to me, and I want them all completed before dinner each day. I’ve also taken away your phone for fighting. You’ll get it back in two weeks. Understand?”

I nodded, wiping my eyes furiously as I tried to calm down.

“Okay then. I’m going to finish making dinner. Be downstairs in ten minutes. *Both* of you,” she said as she

stopped by Dad to give him a little kiss before she descended the steps to the second floor.

He carefully shut the door and came over, sitting next to me while running a hand through his silver-streaked blond hair. The crow's feet at the corner of his eyes were exaggerated by the shadows of the semi-darkness in the room. His tattoos weren't as vibrant as I once remembered, but I could still make out the spiderweb inked along the side of his throat. Even that old scar on his face looked bigger and more exaggerated.

"I know why you did it," he said gruffly. "I get it. And I'm proud of you for defending yourself, even if you went a little overboard."

I said nothing as I lay back on the bed, exhausted as I tucked my hands behind my head, watching him.

Dad raised his brows at me, "Don't do it again, alright?"

I smirked a little at that and huffed, rolling my eyes as I turned to stare at the ceiling. Dad, ever the peacekeeper. I'd been expecting this from him.

"Seriously, kid. I almost had to call your grandpa in to pay off your principal. After your week's suspension, you must speak with the school counselor before returning."

"Fine," I mumbled.

"Fine, he says." Dad chuckled and shook his head. "I'm serious, Hayden."

"I am, too. I'll stay on top of my schoolwork, I promise. And I'll speak to a counselor. I'm sorry for making Mom cry, for disappointing her. But I'm not sorry for what I did," I said honestly. When he said nothing, I added, "He mentioned Charlotte and Emily."

He nodded in understanding. "I heard."

"Didn't get a chance to bring up Mav..." I mumbled, thinking of my baby brother, who was only a few months old.

But before I could say anything else, Dad's hand found my shoulder and squeezed it.

“Hey, I said I got it. I'm not mad at you, kid.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. While mom was all tears and emotions, I could always count on him to be at least calm enough to sit and talk to without breaking out into tears. He was the rock in our family. I remember as a little kid how I felt each time he picked me up and carried me on his shoulders or let me sit on his lap while he walked his motorcycle up and down the driveway. He was my superhero, and hearing that he wasn't mad at me, that he understood, was reassuring to me in a way that was different than with Mom.

He reached out and gave my knee a little squeeze. Sitting up, I wrapped my arms around him and relaxed into his embrace, hugging it out with him as we always did, and smiled. “Thanks, Dad.”



IT WAS FINALLY time for a break from the endless chit-chat from all the girls in the house. Mom held my baby brother tight in her arms, his blond hair so light it was like light dusting on his little head. After having two sisters, I was excited at the prospect of not being so outnumbered. Charlotte was always next to claim him, but being almost eight, she could only do it for a short period of time. Emily was just curious about the newest addition and didn't seem to appreciate not being the youngest anymore. Dad caught her stealing Maverick's binky, his baby blanket, even going so far as to regress in her behaviour and demanding to be carried around everywhere. Mom said the phase would pass, but it was annoying as hell. I loved Em, but seeing my five-year-old sister throw a tantrum because she wasn't allowed in the baby stroller almost shattered my eardrums.

It was a couple of weeks after I'd lost my shit on Theo, and after a suspension, I was back at school, only lately, when I walked through the halls, I was given a wide berth. It was strange. After so many years of fearing others, I found that I had become the one to be afraid of. I kind of liked it. For the first time in so long, I felt safe in school.

After supper, I followed my father out back into the small garage near the edge of the woods. Though I'd pulled away from my family over the years, whenever Grandpa J came over for supper, I had a hard time hiding myself away. That night, I was hot on his and Dad's heels as we crossed the yard, leaving my sisters with a movie while Mom gave Maverick a bottle. Dad did a lot of his work in this old bank building, using it as his shop so he could still be home most of the time. It was here where he, my Grandpa J, and I would hang out and get in some "Guy Time" as they called it. Dad had a minivan parked inside, and after handing me a soda and Gramps a beer, he opened the hood and went to work.

"So, Hayden," Grandpa J said casually, sipping his beer as he held a light for Dad, whose blond, greying head had disappeared into the engine while he worked, "You still interested in getting a bike?"

My heart lifted at the thought. For years, I watched Gramps and his friends all ride around town on their cool Harley's and wished I could be just like them. Although, I wanted a fast bike, not a cruiser like the ones they rode. I wanted one like my dad's. "Yes! More than anything, but..." my voice petered off a little as my mother's voice rang in my head, "there's *no* way Mom would allow it."

Grandpa scoffed and shook his head, "She's just worried you'll crash it—"

"More like we're concerned about traffic not seeing him," Dad's muffled voice spoke up from under the hood. "Most accidents are caused by other drivers. I don't like the idea of him riding around Ashland when so many people are careless on the road."

“What if I promise to stay in town?” I asked, hopeful. If I could talk either of my parents into letting me get a bike, it was Dad. He loved road toys as much as Grandpa, but with Mom in his ear, I knew it would take some persuading.

“I think that’s fair,” Grandpa J said in agreement, and I beamed at him, so glad he was supportive. Dad was quiet for a bit as he thought it over while Gramps went off on a spiel about how I could work at his clubhouse cleaning the bathrooms, dishes, or floors to earn money.

Finally, Dad just murmured, “We’ll see,” and returned to work.

Gramps glanced my way again as I stared off at a very old, tattered poster of a band he had listened to years and years ago. The edges were a little torn and wrinkled, the paper not as white as it used to be, covered in dust from the shop and age. “So, kid, any girls at school caught your eye? Isn’t your first school dance coming up?”

“Yeah,” I muttered darkly. The stupid “Spring Fling” dance for middle schoolers was going to be the weekend of the Spring Festival, just one week before my fourteenth birthday. I lowered my gaze, my fingers fiddling with my soda can. Even *if* all the girls weren’t now terrified of me, there was not a single one I’d *want* to ask. For so long they stood by, laughing and name-calling as Theo and his friends went after me. Why the fuck would I be interested in any of them?

“Haven’t you asked anyone yet? It’s coming up fast,” Grandpa said with a laugh, giving me a hearty wink, “You should ask a pretty girl and go have fun. Live a little.”

“The girls in my school are bitches—” I muttered.

“Easy, kid,” Dad called from where he was half buried, “don’t be so quick to judge.”

“Well, they are,” I insisted. Theo, Spencer, and them had roped the girls all into their web of cruelty. The girls were as mean as the guys. I didn’t care for a single one of them.

“Hey, call a spade a spade,” Gramps said, smirking when Dad reached up to smack his shoulder with a wrench. “Usually, people are just going through a hard time, and they lash out. But *sometimes*, a person is just an asshole. That’s just the truth of it.”

I thought about that. Perhaps the girls were going through their own issues that they acted out the way they did. A few of them definitely fell into that category. Mostly though, I just felt like they wanted to look cool and so they followed the crowd in order to fit in. I wondered if I was in their position, if some other poor kid was the one they had all decided to hate, would I have joined in? I pressed my lips together at the thought, feeling sick. I sure fucking hope not.

“Well, I hate *all* of them.” I spat.

Gramps cleared his throat a little to get my attention. I glanced at him from under my dark hair, wishing he didn’t look like my words had personally hurt him. “Listen, kiddo, there’s gonna be people in your life that you are going to love. There will be some you tolerate, and then, there will always be those few you will never get along with. Ever. That’s just how it is. But don’t paint ‘em all with the same brush. You’re all still so young. You got a lot of growing to do. And they will, too.”

“Yeah, right,” I muttered darkly under my breath, but I knew they both heard me.

“Keep your eyes and heart open, kid,” Gramps said. “Love strikes at the most unexpected of times. That’s how it was with me and your grandma,” he said, sounding a little sad as his dark eyes drifted to stare out the open garage door at the green trees, seemingly lost in a memory. But after a minute he blinked, glanced at me, and shook his head before he laughed. “Seen a lot of suckers fall head over heels for a pretty girl. Including this sorry sack of crap.” I could hear the smack, followed by a grunt, and I knew Grandpa J had given Dad a friendly slap.

“You didn’t see shit, old man,” Dad shot back. “Didn’t know a thing ‘till the very last second.”

“Yeah, well, still figured it out,” Gramps muttered indignantly.

I glimpsed over just as Dad straightened, a smear of grease on the hollow of his cheek beneath the scar that ran down his face, as he grabbed a cloth from his back pocket and wiped down his hands. “You and Mom kept it a secret?” I asked, brows raised. Despite what I knew from the kids at school, Mom had always been tight-lipped about her past. But then again, it’s not like I really asked. Especially ever since the day my life fell apart. The gap I’d started to put between my family and me had slowly grown over the years, making it harder to go to her for much of anything.

“We did,” Dad shook his blond hair out of his eyes, streaks of white hidden amongst the gold, and smiled my way. “Well, our friendship, at least.”

“Friendship, my ass,” Gramps grumbled, leaning against the bumper of the van. “Sneaking love letters behind my back for years, text messages, gifts...”

“All friendship,” Dad stipulated, his tone completely serious.

I furrowed my brow, curious to know more. “If you were friends, then... how did you fall in love? When did this happen? What changed?”

I watched as he lowered his sharp, blue gaze to the floor, still wiping his hands over and over with that dirty rag, and the corner of his mouth lifted ever so slightly, his gaze somewhat unfocused as though lost in thought. “She was standing there in the golden sunlight, smiling up at the trees, talking to a crow. When she turned to look at me, I felt myself lose my heart to her at that moment. Since then, it’s been her. Always will be.” He lifted his eyes, his expression shifting from one of cherished memory to one of suppressed anguish. “The past is a complicated, messy thing, Hayden. All you can do is learn

from it and move forward, not let it decide your future. People make mistakes, and that's okay. It's how you move on from them that matters, you got me?"

I wanted to ask more, to know why Gramps had gone quiet, the smile wiped clean from his face as he, too, appeared lost in thought from more painful memories. But something told me that now wasn't the time.

"How did you guys meet?" I asked, wondering how he and my mother came to be despite my real father being in the picture.

Gramps, who at this point was leaning against a workbench, arms crossed, lifted his brows and dramatically swung his head to the side, looking straight at my dad, and said loudly, "That's right, Keenan. How *did* you meet Mina?" His voice was full of suggestion and implication, but Dad just laughed and rolled his eyes to the ceiling.

"We met by accident..."

"Accident, my ass," Grandpa J muttered under his breath.

"Okay, how about... by a series of unfortunate events?" Dad threw Gramps' way, brows lifted high on his forehead. "I mean, everything started because of your biker generation. If anything, it's all your fault." I could hear the teasing in his voice, and though Grandpa pretended to look furious and indignant by his words, his mouth twitched as he took another long sip of his beer.

"Well, you see, kiddo, your mom and I started a friendship at a very young age. Over the years, we became each other's... safety net. A shoulder to cry on, a light to reach out to. We became each other's person. The one who we could be ourselves with and not worry about judgment or disappointment, in ourselves or each other."

It was an answer, and it wasn't. They met at a young age, he said. I considered that for a moment. How was I going to meet anyone who would accept me for who I was? I was Hayden Shay Mathers, the biggest freak in town. No one

wanted anything to do with me. “That sounds impossible,” I said, thinking of all the horrible girls in my school.

“It’s a big world, Hayden. And I gotta tell you, kid, neither of you will be perfect, but that’s okay. If you want to find the one, look for someone you can completely be yourself with. Someone where you can... let go and be silly and have fun with, no matter what you’re doing. It’s accepting each other as you are at the end of the day.”

“So that’s the secret, eh?” Gramps asked, chuckling a little. “Someone to be *silly* with?”

“Someone to be yourself with,” I added, “To be each other’s person?”

Dad’s gaze drifted toward the house where we could make out Mom in the window. Maverick was snuggled up in her arms as she patted his back, her mouth moving like she was singing him a lullaby, a picture of contentment and happiness. “Someone you love more than yourself,” he said softly. I watched as Dad’s whole posture seemed to melt like pudding, the smile deepening the dimples under his beard, looking like he’d just fallen for her all over again. “*That’s* love, boys. That is love.” He flashed that crooked smile of his at the both of us, then turned back to the minivan and stuck his head beneath the hood once more, going back to work.

Gramps’ mouth twitched, and he wiped one of his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt before he straightened his throat and handed me the flashlight, “Hold this for your daddy, eh? I gotta head out.” He gave my dad’s back a friendly slap before he mussed up my hair, chuckling as he limped away, heading for his beloved Harley and disappearing into the night.

I forgot about keeping my distance from family that night, choosing to stay out with my dad, handing him whatever tools he needed, listening to the music on his old player, all the while thinking of what he’d said. Would I ever be lucky enough to find a girl that makes me fall in love every time I see her? I didn’t think so. What Mom and Dad had; it was

special. Something I don't think I, or even Grandpa J, would fully understand.

When I was younger, I remember waking up at night and hearing soft music playing from outside. I'd creep to my bedroom window and peek into the backyard, where I'd find my parents in a tight embrace, slowly moving in a circle on the spot, heads touching, as an old song played hauntingly in the twilight. On weekends, I'd come downstairs to find them sitting in their lounge chairs in the garden out front, with steaming cups of coffee, holding each other's hand as they watched the day come alive. The way my parents looked at each other would often make me gag as a kid and beg them not to kiss in front of me. They would do it anyway. Every time, much to my disgust.

Yeah, when I was younger, I didn't understand how much they loved each other. But as I aged, as my life outside of this house began to spiral, I found myself looking for any sign of kindness, understanding, respect... love. The world seemed ugly and unfair, everyone cruel and mean. For so long, while I had maintained separation from my family as the torture and bullying escalated at school, I missed what was right in front of me. I realized it existed right here in my very home. I'd found it in my parents.

I hoped that maybe one day I would be as lucky as them. That I would find someone who would accept me for who I was... that one day I would love someone more than I could ever love myself.

Chapter twelve



Hayden - Present Day

TODAY HAS PROBABLY BEEN the easiest day I've had at school since I can remember. I felt like that weight on my shoulders was lighter, more manageable to carry. It was something I hadn't felt since I was a kid. Walking through the halls with Maddy, knowing she trusted me, her allowing me to get close, *wanting* me to, sent a strange sensation through my system that left me feeling like I wasn't drowning in this place for once. I still didn't let my guard down completely. I saw how Theo and his minions watched us whenever we walked by in the halls or sat together at lunch. He was spiteful, vindictive, and something about Maddy and I had caught his attention.

He'd always voiced how he wanted to pay me back for fucking up his face, and I kept a vigilant eye on my back ever since. I knew he was low-key obsessed with the idea but had never made a move. He observed, though not like he did now. I swear to fuck, if he touches one hair on Maddy's head, I'll make sure he doesn't have a face left. So, when I caught him, Ayla, and Spencer eyeing us closely at lunch, I made sure to lock gazes with each of them. I narrowed my eyes as I stared Theo down, wishing he could hear my thoughts.

Make one move, motherfucker. I dare you. Give me a fucking reason, and I'll make sure you never lay eyes on either of us ever again. Or on anyone, for that matter. So just give me a fucking reason...

He got the message, looking away to mutter something to his sheep-like followers. However Ayla Savard continued to glare daggers at Maddy, which only made me more nervous for her. Ayla was petty as hell. Always had been. Ever since I fucked that one chick from the preppy school in Ashland at that one party over fucking her, she had been hell-bent on trying to ruin that girl's reputation through online bullying and using the gossip mill. Luckily for that chick, her friends stood by her, recognizing the "mean girl" signs Ayla was exhibiting, and the girl was able to move on with her life. I didn't know her well and didn't care to start anything, but that didn't mean I didn't like what Ayla was trying to do. I'd been getting ready to step in on the sly, keeping my identity hidden while divulging some information I'd heard about *her* to everyone, but when the petty train had failed to reach its stop, I took a backseat.

Now it looked like Ayla had a new target, and I'd be damned if I'd let her try to even start something with Maddy. Looks like I'd have to step in before she started taking shots.

I started playing with Maddy's hair absentmindedly while we ate our lunches, keeping my focus on any potential threat. I know kids were talking about what I'd done to Lucas, which was absolutely right. I'd done it, and I'd done it because of what he did to Maddy. But no one needed me to confirm it. And as there was nothing actually linking me to the incident or to Lucas, for that matter, I was left alone. Most of the students here were smart enough not to think about fucking with me. It was just one group of morons who could never seem to do the intelligent thing and count their losses. Theo had started it all back in the day. Ayla had pushed herself into my business. They both needed to fuck off and leave well enough alone. But they wouldn't. And they only had two months left to do something before we would graduate and be gone, out of their grasp.

Unlike my Aunt Casey and Mom, who had always talked about seeing the world and leaving this place, I would leave Ashland behind me when I got the opportunity. The only

change in my plans now was that I wouldn't be leaving alone. I was going to take Maddy with me.

I just had to keep us safe until then.



“HAVE you ever seen the play? A Midsummer Night's Dream?” Maddy asked me as we roamed through the empty theatre. We had our cameras with us. Only this time, she was the one wandering around, taking practice shots, while I stood in the middle of the stage watching her. It had been agonizing in P.E., watching from the weight room as Maddy stood on her own in the gymnasium below, with Ayla and her friends lurking nearby, shooting her evil bitch-glances. They occasionally looked my way, only to see me glaring, warning them back. I shouldn't have come up here, but my thoughts had been concerned with Theo and Spencer, so I purposefully kept myself close enough to eavesdrop, but they were just going on about the Spring Festival. I'd completely forgotten about the evil bitches that ran this school.

“I haven't,” I told her, watching as she climbed the steps a little before taking a seat on the edge of the right side of the auditorium, lifting her camera up and scanning it around. “But I've read the play.”

Even from here, I noticed that the corners of her mouth twitched just a little, like she thought of something funny. I cocked a brow at her, wondering what was going through her mind when she suddenly said, “Say cheese!” and clicked, the flash nearly blinding me.

“You can't use the flash during the play,” I told her, rubbing my eyes furiously, “The drama teacher, Mrs. Potter, gets pissy if anything goes down in the audience that could potentially distract the kids on stage.” I thought about last year when someone's phone went off in the middle of Sweeny

Todd. She'd gotten out of her seat in the front pew and stared up into the crowd until she found the culprit, then personally escorted them out, all while scolding them like a child.

"Whoops," Maddy fiddled with the camera's settings, her brow furrowed in a way that formed a little line on her forehead, something I noticed she gets when she is uncomfortable or anxious. She probably hated the idea of getting into trouble, and I thought about how she reacted to any teachers or members of authority. She liked space between them, never met their eyes, and always seemed to curl in on herself.

"Don't sweat it. If anything like that happens, I'll take the blame," I told her. Unlike her, I didn't have any fear of authority. Especially to those who weren't my parents or part of Grandpa J's MC. I was a true believer that respect had to be earned. Your age didn't give you a pass.

But Maddy seemed even more anxious when I said this and shook her head, lowering her camera into her lap, "No, Hayden. Don't take the blame for something that isn't yours. That's not fair."

"I don't care, Maddy," I said to her, rolling my eyes and chuckling a little. "Miss Potter is like an angry chihuahua. I'll let her yell it out and then walk away."

"I don't like the idea of you taking the fall for something I've done." The line on her forehead deepened, and I realized how much this idea genuinely upset her. I was oddly touched at the thought of her being so concerned for me, but I still chuckled at the thought of Miss Potter yelling up at me from her five-foot-nothing height.

"Maddy, just let me be the gentleman for you, okay?" I smiled a little, only feeling it broadening when I noticed the pink on her cheeks brighten at my words as she mumbled a shy, "Okay," in response. I slowly walked up the stairs, not liking the distance between us, but had forced myself to allow it when we came in, wanting her to get comfortable after having that hour apart. I noticed that she'd been quiet after

P.E., so I gave her some space. I'd shoved my hands into the pockets of my leather jacket to keep myself from reaching for her. For some reason, I couldn't keep them to myself whenever we got close. I had to keep remembering that I needed to hold back, but then I'd slip and put my arm around her or play with her hair. So, when I approached her now, I stopped several feet away, leaning my shoulder against the wall as I lounged.

She shifted a little, lowering her gaze to the camera in her lap, fiddling with it with a sort of nervous energy, but I spotted the tiny twitch of a smile on her lips, and that beautiful pink blush was only burning deeper. Shy. She was being shy, not scared.

Get closer to her, Hayden.

I deliberated for a moment, watching as she avoided looking my way, and took a chance. "Maddy?" I murmured softly.

"Yes?" Her voice was hushed, and she still kept her face downward, which actually made it easier for me as I reached out and slid my hand beneath hers, wishing to curl my fingers around her soft skin, but instead snaked around the camera beneath her hold, and gently tugged it free. I lounged back against the wall, acting on a pretense like I had just wanted to go through her photos the entire time, and not like I had a moment of weakness in that I had intended to close the physical gap between us. In my peripheral, I could make out the way her cheeks burned brighter, something I hadn't thought possible, and I felt a sense of pleasure at the thought that I made her blush so deeply.

"How are you getting on with this?" I asked, scanning through the photos, noting that in most of them, I'd been caught in the shot.

Had she been trying to capture me like I had her? My thoughts went to the photo I'd taken of her that I kept in my backpack, pulling it out every so often so I could look at her when she wasn't around. I'd taken it the first day we had spent

together here, a shot stolen when she'd been looking elsewhere. That image of her, her wide, hazel eyes so innocent, beautiful, her hair momentarily brushed back from her face, her pouty lips slightly parted, everything about her in that photo gripped me.

"I think it's fine. I have nothing to compare it to, really," Maddy said, squirming a little in her seat. Her hands reached for the end of her ponytail and she began to twist the strands around her fingers, a nervous gesture, but I could tell she wasn't afraid. Not of me. Her body was angled in my direction, her foot resting close to the tip of mine. If she was scared, she would put distance between us, like she had that first day. "But I think it's safe to say that being a photographer isn't my calling."

I smirked a little at that. So many people assumed they could get their photos into National Geographic just because they could press a button. There was a lot of skill, patience, and know-how behind it all. I loved it, and even though I knew I was the best in my class, I still had much to learn.

"It's fun," she added quickly, as if she thought she had insulted me somehow and was fearful of my reaction. I glanced at her from under the hair falling over my forehead. "Don't get me wrong. It's just not a passion like it is for you."

I raised a brow at that, confused.

"It's your passion, Hayden," she said, as if it was apparent. "You get, I don't know... different... when you're behind the camera." She looked away towards the stage, as if she remembered some moment when she'd been watching me and had seen something there. "I think you're one of those people that was truly meant to leave, to get out and explore the world and have your photos seen, to have people get a look at the world through your eyes and see how beautiful it all is."

I stared at her as she spoke, feeling like my fingers were going numb, my mind entirely blank. When she turned and gazed at me, I was completely frozen. I can only imagine how I appeared to her. Terrified, probably. A little confused. How

could she possibly know what I wanted without really knowing me at all? How long have I been in this school, first ridiculed and outcast, then feared and outcast? These kids had been around me since I was five years old, and they didn't know a thing about me. Yet it felt like Maddy, after only a few days, had seen so much more than anyone else.

“Are you okay?”

Her voice brought me back, her eyes staring wide, a little apprehensive, like she was concerned about my reaction. I straightened my throat and turned off her camera, handing it back to her as I tried to act like I wasn't a little shaken by her observation. “Yeah, sorry, just a little distracted.”

“Everything okay?”

The only people who asked me this were my parents and my grandpa, whenever I let them get close enough to truly see me. Besides those brief moments with them, no one else ever wanted to know that I was alright in any sense. I lowered my eyes to the floor, shoving my hands deep into my jacket pockets, and muttered, “Yeah, just thinking about the project. Maybe if you came to my place after school, I could show you some of the old stuff I've done for the student and local papers. Might help you get an idea of what's expected.”

Well done, Hayden, the voice in my mind whispered, sounding impressed. *You came up with that pretty fast. Get her alone with you...*

No. It's not like that.

Are you sure? Are you sure you don't just want to get her into your room so you can—

I'd *never* hurt Maddy. Not like the way you hurt people.

Finally, silence. I glanced up at Maddy. “So what do you think?”

She chewed on her bottom lip, the sight distracting me as I thought about nipping it with my own teeth and dragging it out before I let myself kiss her, my tongue massaging over hers,

tasting her, savouring her... Fuck, I needed to touch her. As the thought crossed my mind, I could feel my dick getting hard as my thoughts quickly descended to ones similar to the other night when I jerked off. In fact, it was a nightly ritual now, where I'd lie in bed and fuck my hand as I thought of her. It was in these moments that the dark voice completely took over, and I indulged in all I held back during the day. I'd imagine myself holding her down as I fucked her, tasting every part of her body, relishing in the softness of her skin, the look of ecstasy on her face as I made her come again and again...

Shit! I shifted where I stood, bringing one leg up to cross over the other, forcing my cock down. Jesus, the last thing she needed was to see *that* pointing two feet away from her face.

“Are you sure? It's not too much trouble?”

God, did she honestly think I saw spending more time with her as a hindrance? Surely, she could see I was barely keeping it together to keep from grabbing her. I was struggling here. I chuckled a little and rolled my eyes. “Maddy, I wouldn't have offered it if I felt that way. I'd be more than happy to help.”

Her lips curled up at that, and she nodded. Maddy's eyes brightened as she gazed up at me from her cozy theatre seat. “Then yes. That'd be awesome.” Despite her words, I could hear something else in her voice—a mixture of excitement and speculation.

“What's up?” I asked, curious. Oh no, was she nervous to be alone with me?

“Nothing, I just...” her voice trailed off for a moment, seeming like she was trying to figure out how to put it into words. “I mean, I've never gone to a friend's house. Never had anyone over to mine. It's such a *normal* thing.”

My heart ached for her. Maddy being at Phoenix House meant so many things. She wasn't with her parents for a reason, and even though I didn't know exactly why that was yet, I could only assume. Drugs, alcohol, abuse... the thought

of her having such a hard upbringing ignited a fire in my veins, and I wanted to take her from that world and give her everything she deserved. Even if it was as “normal” as going to a friend’s house after school.

More than friends... the voice whispered, speaking up again. I ignored it.

“Well, I hope I can meet expectations,” I said to her, smiling a little as I teased.

She laughed, the sound so light and quick I almost didn’t catch it. But it was like bells at Christmas time. Beautiful. Yet gone too soon. “I’m sure it’ll be great. I appreciate the help. I need these credits if I want to graduate.”

“You’ll get them. I’ll make sure of it.” I said, determined. Because if I was leaving Ashland behind me for better things; travel, photography, the world... then I wanted her at my side.

“You promise?” she asked, her bright eyes smiling at me as she rose to her feet, putting her camera back in her bag.

My smile only broadened at her innocence and I held out a pinky to her. She stared at it, almost like the sight made her sad before she grinned a little and looped hers around it. “I promise,” I swore.



“ARE YOU SERIOUS?” She asked as I took the helmet out of the saddle bag. We were in the parking lot by my bike, and despite how apprehensive she sounded, I could see the excitement on her face at the prospect of going for a ride. Grinning, I reached behind her, feeling for the elastic holding her hair and gently pulling it free. It was so soft, the strands like silk beneath my fingers as I combed it out before setting the helmet on her head.

“As a heart attack,” I told her, pulling on the strap beneath her chin to tighten it securely in place. I hadn’t anticipated bringing her home today. It’d been purely a spur-of-the-moment idea, and the fact that she had agreed had sent a spark through my system that hadn’t yet died out. I removed my jacket and held it out for her to put on.

Maddy’s eyes widened with concern. “What about you? Don’t you have a helmet? Or another jacket?”

“I’ll be fine,” I shrugged. “I’ve ridden this way so many times I could do it with my eyes closed.”

“I’m thinking more about other vehicles on the road hitting us. Not your ability to drive.”

“I’ll be fine, Maddy,” I insisted, giving the jacket a little shake as I held it out for her.

“I don’t want you to get hurt if something happens,” she insisted.

“I won’t get hurt.”

“You aren’t Superman.”

“But I kinda am.”

She narrowed her eyes at me, clearly a little irritated by my lack of concern for my own welfare. That or she thought I was delusional. Laughing at the look on her face, I shook my head. “Maddy, I’ll be super careful. We won’t crash, I won’t get hurt, but I want to make sure that *you* are completely covered just in case. Do you think I’d forgive myself if something happened to you?”

“Well, if you’re going to be such a careful driver, then I won’t need the jacket, will I?” She threw back at me, and I sighed, letting my head fall back as I rolled my eyes upward to the sky.

“Humour me, Maddy.” I glanced down at her again, pressing my lips together. If she honestly thought I was going to let her ride on this thing unprotected, she had another thing coming. There was no way I was going to take that chance. I

guess she could see how serious I was, because she finally sighed and relented, turning to slip her arms through the sleeves. The jacket itself was huge, a little big even for me, but it swallowed her up. I walked around to zip it, as her fingers weren't even visible at the cuffs, and smoothed out the shoulders, my hand running over the *Celtic Beasts MC, Manic* patch.

Keep her safe, I thought as I helped roll the sleeves back enough to clear her hands. I turned, climbed onto the bike, and reached out to tug on the leather of the jacket to pull her closer. As her own backpack was significantly smaller than mine, I'd packed it away in the saddlebag and now set mine onto her back, tightening the straps so it wouldn't slump down and potentially get caught under the wheel well.

"Climb up on this side," I gestured to the left side. She approached, seeming both exhilarated and nervous at the same time, and when I kicked out the stand and leaned the bike to the side, she was able to swing a leg over the back and set herself behind me. I righted us and turned the key, turned the kill button, pulled on the clutch, and pushed on the engine button. As it began to rumble beneath us, I managed to make out the whisper Maddy breathed, "Holy shit..." and I couldn't help but burst out laughing. Her swearing was like a lamb trying to take a bite out of a wolf. It didn't make any sense.

I reached behind me and took her hands, pulling her in so I could feel her body pressed against my back, and wrapped her arms around my waist, securing them over my stomach.

"Oh, holy shit..." she whispered again, and I felt like my face would crack from laughing so hard.

"Hold on tight, Maddy," I said to her, and she instantly squeezed so tight it was like a baby monkey was clinging to my back. I pulled in the clutch and kicked the shifter into first gear.

I always rode my bike around in the spring, summer, and fall, so the sight of me starting my bike wasn't new to anyone, even to the kids at school. Today however, with Maddy

holding onto my back and me laughing so openly with no reservations, had everyone watching. From the other side of the row of parked cars, I could make out Theo standing by his Lexus, a gift from his powerful, rich daddy, no doubt, accompanied by Spencer, Ayla, and them all glaring in my direction.

I ignored them, not caring, as all my focus was on the girl sitting on the back of my bike, and I took off, carefully moving through the parking lot and into the streets with my precious cargo.

At first, she'd nearly squeezed the life out of me, but as we quickly drifted through the streets of our little town, she began to relax and would lean into the turns with me. I knew she was looking around, taking in the sights that this place had to offer. The little stores on the main street, the flowers on the trees that were blooming, the families that wandered about together, all enjoying the nice weather. This place *was* a great spot to raise kids, but it wasn't my dream. Mine had always been to escape and see the world. The only change now was that I wanted to bring Maddy with me.

My home was located just outside of town, down a private road, surrounded by trees. When we'd first moved here from Florida, we had to crash in an apartment rental while my dad worked to raise enough money to buy a place. Only Grandpa J had surprised Mom with a home a couple of months later. The house itself was modeled after the Tudor homes, with a large front lawn and forest all around. Completely private and serene. My mom's flower garden out front was already showing signs of green stalks poking through the dirt, a few tulips having beat everything else as the colourful petals reached for the sun, accompanied by a few wildflowers, daisies, and my Aunt Casey's favourite, white hellebore.

It hadn't occurred to me until now that my mother would be home, and if she saw me bringing in a girl, she'd no doubt assault her with kindness... offering cookies or other baked goods, showing off the family pictures, asking questions because she was nosey as hell. My little brother, Maverick,

would saunter over, all cute and shit, and distract her by asking to be held, play Candyland with him, or watch him to see how high he could jump. Luckily, my sisters Charlotte and Emily were breaching on becoming preteens and wouldn't give a shit that I had a friend with me. Most likely, by the time they got home, they'd disappear into their rooms to call their friends, listen to music, and do whatever the hell ten-year-old girls did. I just needed to escape the others.

Though I'd created a gap between me and them over the past few years, the wedge had been necessary to keep them from seeing the darkness that had come to life in me or the pain in my eyes. I hid from them for so long, opening up for only small bits at a time. I knew they missed me. If I was perfectly honest, I missed them, too. However, I wanted some more time with Maddy alone. I didn't want to share her with my family. Not yet.

So I guided my bike down the long drive and around the curve that led me to the back of the house, where my dad kept his garage for work projects and our bikes. The door was open, and I could hear his rock music blasting while he worked away. If I thought my mom would be bad at the sight of a girl with me, I *knew* Dad would be worse. Way worse. I wouldn't be able to take the teasing. I parked us a little ways away from the garage alongside the house, shifted into neutral, and turned off the engine quickly.

"This side," I said to her, gesturing to the left to keep her from burning her leg on the engine. She hopped off easily and turned to face me, her big smile catching me off guard. I'd never seen her smile like this before. It was... beautiful.

"That. Was. Amazing!" she gushed, reaching up to unbuckle the helmet. She took it off and shook her hair out, the soft mix of light and dark blonde locks flying wildly about her face. The sight of her like that, wild, happy, open, and wearing my leather jacket, did things to me, and it made my heart race. "I'm so jealous you get to do that every day!" she went on, not noticing how much the sight of her knocked the air from my lungs.

“I’ll pick you up and drop you off, then,” I said at once. I wasn’t offering. I was telling her. *Careful, Hayden. It’s her choice, remember?* I told myself. Looks like Manic took charge for a second there. Ease back, be what she needs you to be. “If you like?”

“Hell yeah!” she said excitedly, handing me the helmet. I set it down and before she could gather our backpacks, I picked them both up, leaving her empty-handed, and gestured for her to head to the backdoor. Most likely Mom was with Maverick in his room, or in the basement where she put together routines and costumes for the dancers at the dance studio in town. Though she didn’t teach anymore, she was still involved. As long as she didn’t spot us, I’d be free until dinner to have Maddy all to myself.

Sure enough, when we stepped inside, I could hear the music echoing up the stairs from below, followed by Maverick’s little giggle. I could smell dinner in the oven, Mom’s meatloaf. So I hurried down the hall to the front where I led her up the stairs to the second floor, then up the third set to my attic bedroom, a choice I’d asked for when I turned twelve. Dad had wholly renovated this space for me so I could have my privacy, and in return, I promised to be respectful and not blast music all hours of the night, something Charlotte still had a problem not following.

“This is your room?” Maddy asked, staring around the space.

The ceilings were arched on the side, making the tallest point in the middle of the area, but it was big, and I always kept it neat as I liked order. My bed was in the far corner, my guitars and posters of bikes lined up along one wall by my desk, and my dad had added a bay window at the far end to let in more light. It looked out into the forest, into the direction of Phoenix House, something I was very aware of since I first noticed Maddy.

“Yeah,” I set our bags by my desk and pulled out an album my mom had put together of all my published work,

something she had surprised me with on my sixteenth birthday. I was very aware of Maddy as she wandered in, first removing my jacket before placing it neatly on my bed. She began closely inspecting all of my things, looking genuinely curious about the stuff I'd collected over the years. Embarrassingly, she immediately found the old stuffed rabbit that had once belonged to my mother, something I kept on my bookshelf arranged by an old photo of me and my parents at Christmas time when I was three years old. She found that, too, and inspected it, smiling wide as she cooed, "You were such a cute kid!" before carefully studying my mom and dad. Her brow furrowed slightly as she looked at the picture, and I wondered if she noticed I looked nothing like my dad. Or how little I looked like my mom? How I was lacking the blonde hair everyone else had. Nevertheless, she said nothing as she put the frame back on the shelf and breezed through my books, murmuring, "Read that, and that... I liked that one," as she inspected the titles.

Finally, she wandered over to me, spotting the album in my hands. I settled on the floor and she joined me, crossing her legs and sitting so close our knees almost touched. I wanted her closer, but again, I had to respect her boundaries, or it would never work.

Wordlessly, I opened it and pointed out the multiple clippings my mother had made, with brief descriptions of when and where it had been published, including the articles it was used for. Maddy carefully took the album from my hands and quietly flipped through it, pausing on each photo. For a long time, she just meandered through the album while I watched, taking in everything about her. I liked the little freckles on her nose and the mix of green and grey in her eyes. How her hair had such a fascinating mix of light and dark. Her fingers were long and slender, her nails a little chewed, most likely from anxiety. I did that on occasion, too, only realizing it after.

"I knew you were meant for this," she said, and I blinked, not realizing I'd completely zoned out of the moment.

“Huh?”

She laughed a little and gestured at the book. “This. I told you that you were meant to have your photos seen. You’ve already got a head start.” She closed the book and stared at the leather cover, running a finger along the binding. “You’re going to see great things, Hayden.”

Would it be so wrong if I just grabbed her and kissed her now? I lifted a hand, hesitating as it hovered behind her back. So close to touching her, yet not entirely closing the distance. From the floor below, the sound of one of my sister’s stereos turned on, some carbon copy auto-tuned song now blasting up through the house, breaking the silence and snapping me out of my moment of weakness. I pulled my hand back and ran it through my shaggy hair, like that was what I’d intended all along.

“Mind if I check out your camera?” She asked suddenly, handing me the album.

“Sure, it’s in my bag,” I said distractedly as I got up and put it back into the drawer. It wasn’t until my bag was in her hands and she was unzipping it that I remembered the photo... the one of her I carried around. I kept it in the small leather case with my camera, and the thought of her finding it sent a wave of panic through me.

“Wait! Don’t touch that!” I shouted suddenly, terrified. What would she think if she knew I had something like that? A creep. She’d think I was a creep. She’d leave. She’d want nothing to do with me. I grabbed the bag in her hands and ripped it away, turning my back on her as I reached inside and removed my camera, hiding the photo at the same time, shoving it into my pocket instead. “Here,” Turning back to her, I held my camera out, only Maddy wasn’t there.

I spotted her crouched in a corner, her arms crossed over her chest, all colour gone from her face so that she resembled a ghost.

“Maddy? Oh, God. *Maddy?*” I hurried over to her, forgetting about the camera completely as I dropped it, and reached for her. Only, to my horror, she held out a hand, stopping me from closing the distance. “Maddy, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to yell. I-I...” I tried to think of a reason, an excuse, as to why I’d reacted the way I had. How could I tell her the true reason without scaring her even more? “I’m sorry!”

“It-it’s okay, Hayden,” she whispered as she sucked in one long deep breath between her lips, held it, and slowly let it exhale out. “It’s okay...”

“Clearly that’s not true or you wouldn’t be like this,” I said, wishing I could take it back. That she’d let me in and try to make it up to her. “I didn’t mean to yell, it’s just... it was my problem and I just reacted.”

“And this is mine. I’m just trying not to let it ruin me.”

I stared at her as she continued to breathe in and out slowly, but I noticed how her legs were shaking a little as if perched in this deep crouch was becoming more of a challenge. “Maddy, would you sit on the floor with me?” I asked and got down to my knees before her, hoping that she could see I was *not* like the others from her past.

Maddy stared at me for a moment as I looked up at her, pleading with my eyes for her to trust and forgive me. She jerked her chin a little in some semblance of a nod, and sat on the floor, too. We faced each other, and I found myself breathing with her, not touching but watching each other as we went through what she needed to keep herself steady. After a minute, she allowed her arms to relax, and to my surprise, she reached for me. Her hands sought mine and I eagerly held them out for her to take, fingers intertwining between mine, her gaze never leaving my own. She continued to breathe slowly and steadily for another few minutes, before the tension in her hands slackened.

“Are you okay?” I asked, tentatively.

Slowly, she nodded and closed her eyes, like she needed a moment to ensure she was absolutely certain. “Yeah, just... it just triggered something in me.”

“A memory?”

She nodded once more.

Knowing that I had unintentionally made her remember something that sent her into such a spiral left me feeling disgusted with myself. I’d have to work on how I reacted in my own moments of panic so that I wouldn’t inadvertently hurt her.

“My mom had lots of cruel people around her. People she brought into our home, around me...” she said softly, her eyes still closed. “Men who hurt her, who used her, and who didn’t give a shit that I was just a kid, that I had no idea what was really going on. So when I reached for them, wanting to play, or just wanting attention, love, anything, when they reacted by shouting and screaming or with violence, I eventually learned that they didn’t want me. I learned to hide. To curl up in a ball and hope to go unnoticed, because that’s what they wanted. I was a nuisance. I was in the way of what they wanted... my mother.” Slowly, Maddy opened her eyes, the swirl of hazel staring straight into my soul.

I didn’t realize I’d been shaking as she told me this, not until she gave my hands another gentle squeeze. I felt sick as she revealed this small glimpse into her life and what it had been like for her growing up. It made me appreciate so much more what I had, what I’d pushed away in my own family, and hurt for all she’d been denied.

“My mother chose so many things over me,” she said, her voice breaking a little at the mention of her mom. “So many things. You’d think being ignored, screamed at, and neglected for so long that you’d become immune to it. And maybe it gets easier with time, but it will always hurt somewhat.”

“Drugs?” I asked, putting two and two together.

She nodded. “That and she owed a lot of money to people. Those two things combined made her incredibly paranoid, so we moved around often, which is how we ended up here. But when we got to Ashland, she had a public meltdown and someone called social services. She’s in a mental health center now.” A small tear slid down her cheek, and my heart fucking broke.

“Maddy.” I leaned forward ever so slightly, trying not to invade her space but demanding her full attention all the same. Her gaze flickered to mine apprehensively, like she was afraid of what I would say. “Your mother loved you,” I told her, thinking of my own mom and all the shit she’d gone through. All the times she’d had a meltdown, where she became terrified or looked so fucking broken, I realized now that she had *always* made it clear how much she loved me. “She absolutely did. But she got lost in something more powerful than her, and it took away her voice and her ability to show you how much.”

Her eyes began to shine and her lips pressed tightly together as I spoke, her chin wobbling just slightly even as I kept going, because she needed to hear this.

“You were a victim by those choices she made, and so was she. Those people? Those men who came around? They weren’t worthy of you. They didn’t deserve you or her. They took advantage of the both of you. They’re pieces of shit that deserve to rot in hell for what they’ve done, because I can promise you, you weren’t the only ones they did this to. You weren’t singled out. You were a bystander, someone innocent who got caught in the web of their bullshit. You didn’t do anything to deserve any of the crap that you were dealt. You understand me?”

She lowered her eyes at that, staring down at our laps like hearing this was too painful for her. I wouldn’t allow her to not listen. Releasing one of her hands I cupped her cheek, my thumb stroking away one of the tears that slid down her face and forcing her to look at me.

“Do you understand?”

She was silent, her mouth still pressed together like she was afraid to say anything in case she burst into tears. But I could still see that doubt in her expression, the history of pain and hurt.

“She wanted you, Maddy,” I said, trying to keep my own voice from breaking. “I promise you she wanted you. I mean, how could she not?”

At that, she blinked fast, several more tears slowly falling in the process, looking stunned by my words, doubt in her eyes.

I smiled a little, shaking my head minutely from side to side. “How could she not?” I whispered, leaning in just a little, wishing I could close the small gap between us with just a kiss.

Maddy’s eyes flickered back and forth between mine for a few seconds, like what she was hearing was something completely foreign and unknown to her. Next thing I knew, she was kissing me. Her soft lips were pressed to mine. For one panic-stricken moment, I thought I’d crossed the line and had grabbed her, forcing a kiss on her against her wishes. Only, I hadn’t moved.

Her lids were closed, her hands having released mine were now moving up my arms until their soft touch was interlocking behind my neck, tangled in my hair, before she pulled back, now looking nervous as hell and like she wanted to run. Maddy had kissed me.

“Oh my God. I’m sorry, Hayden,” she said, blushing hard, about to let go, “I-I just... I don’t know what came over me. I—”

Although I didn’t let her finish before I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her back to me, kissing her softly at first, but then I couldn’t stop myself. I opened my mouth against hers, encouraging her to do the same, and Maddy sank into my arms. Her lips moved with mine in a way that I had

fantasized about, and only made me want more. More of this. More of her. Just *more...*

My tongue glided against her lips, and her little sigh nearly made me break completely. I held her tighter, her fingers clenching at the curls at the back of my head, spurring me on as I moaned into her mouth and tilted my head the other way, searching for more as I continued to kiss her deeply.

“Hayden,” she whispered against my lips, her hands now releasing me, and I felt her move back what little she could as I held her.

She wants me to stop.

No. She's yours.

She wants me to stop, I told myself again.

She kissed you first.

And now she needs me to stop it.

“Hayden?” She said again, her voice small and sweet.

Take her....

I could feel my body shake ever so slightly as I forced myself to pull back, my arms reluctantly releasing her so that my hands slid down to her sides, and I rested my forehead to hers. We both closed our eyes, breathing in uneven, shuddering breaths. My hands rested on the floor on either side of her, clenched into fists and my body tense as I fought against the urge to keep going. I couldn't let that happen. I wouldn't do that to Maddy.

“I'm sorry,” I whispered, still fighting back my darker impulses.

“Don't be.” There was truth in her voice, absolute certainty as she spoke those words, and I peeked at her through my lashes. Her cheeks were flushed, eyes shining, and the corners of her pretty pink lips that I had just kissed were turned up into the most breathtaking of smiles. Fuck, she was beautiful.

Grinning in return, I cupped her face, feeling like I could kiss this girl forever.

“Mina? Key! Anybody home?”

Maddy’s body instantly jerked at the call, pulling back and staring wide-eyed at the steps leading downstairs from my room to the second floor. “Who is that?”

“Grampa!” a high-pitched, shrill little voice shrieked with excitement. Maverick.

“My Grandpa J and my little brother,” I said, my fingers curling around hers to reassure her. “He stops by for dinner, sometimes.”

Maddy inhaled deeply; the smell of Mom’s meatloaf was more prominent now that enough time had passed for it to cook. I watched her, curious as to what meals at Phoenix House were like, wondering when the last time was she got to sit down and have a family meal. Before I could stop myself, I asked, “Did you want to stay for dinner?”

She peeked up at me, a mix of confusion and curiosity on her face. She used her free hand to run her fingers alongside her ear, like she was combing back a loose hair that wasn’t there. A habit of hers, I’d noticed. It hadn’t occurred to me, then, just how different she had been today. Sure, I noticed her clothing wasn’t as baggy, obviously. It’s the first thing I saw. However her hair being pulled back, a curtain that she usually used to hide behind, wasn’t accessible to her. The way she’d walked through the halls, head high, trying to ignore the discomfort she typically had when moving through a crowd, showed she was trying. She was fighting, and damn, I was proud of her for it.

“Um, dinner? I don’t know...” she murmured, sounding so unsure of herself, I couldn’t help but decide to step in and just take the reins.

“Yeah, we’re going to go downstairs and get something to eat, okay?” I told her. I wasn’t going to ask this time. I’d been giving her choice after choice till now. Except at this moment I

think she needed me to direct her, to take charge. I could sense how overwhelmed she was, and I suppose today was a lot of firsts for her. “Then after, I’ll take you back to Phoenix House, okay?”

She blinked up at me, uncertain as she bit the inside of her cheek. “You’re sure?”

“Absolutely,” I said without hesitation, unable to help myself as I reached up and cupped the back of her neck. I could feel the smile on my face broaden when she didn’t tense up or pull away. It felt like she was melting under my hand, the reservation in her expression shifting, though still a bit doubtful. I gave her a small shake and pulled her towards me so I could give her forehead a kiss before I got to my feet and held out my hands for her to take, just as I heard my father’s call from downstairs.

“James!” His shout came from the back. “You gonna bring your old, wrinkled ass in here for some supper or you just stopping by on your way home?”

“Well, you annoying motherfu—”

“Ah, ah!” Mom hissed, which I could hear all the way from up here, cutting him off quickly. “*Mind the language, please!*”

Grandpa J chuckled, “Sorry! Sorry. I’ll get out of “club mode” now. Promise.”

It occurred to me then that by joining my family for supper tonight, I’d be introducing Maddy to them. I made a face when she turned and started down the stairs ahead of me as I thought about the teasing and the *looks* I was about to endure from my dad and grandfather. They were going to make this pure hell for me, I just knew. I typically avoided family dinners, save for when Gramps came by, so it would be expected that I’d come down.

Taking her hand, I positioned myself slightly ahead of her, so I would end up walking into the kitchen first. Maddy hung back a bit, her steps short as she followed, the noise from

downstairs causing her to jump a little. I hoped I could get into Mom's ear first so she'd keep the others in line. She would understand. I just needed to—

“Well, there's the smartass punk now!” An arm looped around my neck and yanked me away, my grasp around Maddy's hand breaking free as my grandpa pulled me into the space, forcing me down to my knees as he bore over my back. “You may be getting some muscles there, kiddo, but I'm still the wrestling king around here!”

“Gramps! Ge-off!” My voice was muffled against his bulk as I struggled to free myself from his grip. Seriously, he was old as fuck, but the guy still managed to hold his own, even with his bad leg.

“The only reason you're the king is because I *let* you win, old man,” Dad said from somewhere behind us. “If I used my full strength, I'd break your hip.”

“Excuses. Lies. The usual,” Grandpa J said, holding me in place with disturbing ease. “You've just been away from the gym for too long. Gone soft.”

“James, for the love of God, you're going to choke him out!” Mom scorned him, and I could hear her moving around the kitchen, the clatter of utensils ringing together. “Charlotte, would you please help me set the table?”

“Who's that?” my sister shouted, and a surge of desperation had me ripping myself free from my grandfather and lurching to my feet.

My mother stood as still as a statue in the kitchen, hands halfway done wiping off on a towel, staring at the entry, seemingly confused. *Everyone* did. Emily, who was curled up on Dad's lap in the sitting area, was gawking. Both of their identical icy blue eyes were locked on the newcomer. Grandpa had straightened up, his dark eyes flickering to a spot over my shoulder and back to me again, while Maverick ran right past me, his wavy blond hair bouncing as he did.

“Hi! I’m Mav! Who are you?” He asked boldly, not at all surprised nor concerned to find a stranger in his home. He was probably so used to people coming and going here that it just never fazed him. Aunt Casey and my uncles, cousins, guys from the club... this place should have a revolving front door.

“I’m Madeline King, but you can call me Maddy.” Her voice was light, friendly and open, not fearful or nervous like I’d anticipated. I turned to see her crouched onto her haunches as she spoke to Maverick on his level, both of them grinning wide as they took each other in. God, I was gonna lose her to my little brother.

“Mom.” I hurried over to her, needing her on my side, “This is Maddy. She’s a friend from school. I was wondering if she could stay for dinner.”

“Bringing a “friend” for dinner, hey, kid?” Grandpa J’s voice rang out loudly and suggestively at my back. I held my mom’s green gaze, silently pleading with her to understand and help save Maddy and me from the inevitable teasing.

Mom, however, gave me a tiny nod. The corners of her mouth twitched as she fought back a laugh and stepped around me, heading over to where Maddy and Maverick were still chatting. Something about building Lego towers or whatever. “Maddy? I’m Hayden’s mother.” She held her hand out to her, and even though her back was to me, I knew Mom would be flashing her warm smile that always seemed to put people at ease.

Maddy rose to her feet, and I could see the effect that my mom had on her. She’d tensed at first when my mom’s hand stretched her way, but my girl was brave. She was trying. So she reached out and took it. Only Mom didn’t shake her hand; she squeezed it slightly and covered it with her free one. It was a gesture I’d seen her do with everyone, one that seemed to make people feel safe.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Mathers,”

“Please, call me Mina,” Mom turned and nodded over my shoulder, “That old man is James O’Hare, Hayden’s grandpa, and that’s his dad, Keenan, lounging like a lazy sack over there. My daughters, Emily and Charlotte.”

Maddy nodded to everyone, though I noted she quickly averted her gaze from my grandpa and father. Hmm... I thought about what she’d said about the men her mother would bring home. Was this a reflection of their isolating, abusive treatment of her? Something told me no, that there was something more disturbing and damaging behind it all. This wasn’t the right sort of reaction to what she’d told me. It felt more... *fearful* than just uncomfortable.

“Maddy, eh?” Grandpa said, his eyes still moving between her and me, a playful grin creeping up. And I immediately shot him a warning look. “You new here in town?”

Of course, he would notice right away. He may have responsibilities in the city of Ashland, but he knew this town and the people here like the back of his hand. Being Prez of the reigning MC meant Gramps was everywhere and had an ear in everything.

“I am. I’m living at Phoenix House.” Maddy’s eyes moved over The Lost Souls MC cut he was sporting, obviously having been filled in on how the club had started the foundation that was helping her.

At that, his demeanor changed completely. The playful, teasing way in which he was looking at me, the way he was speaking, dropped. His smile became more genuine, his hands instantly going into his pockets to hide from her, and he took a step back on the pretense of resting against the back of the couch. “Phoenix House, hey? How do you like it so far? Are you finding everything okay? Is there anything you need?” He asked, his tone serious but light, sounding more concerned now than anything.

“It’s really nice, thank you,” she said as Maverick reached up to tug on her flannel shirt. She bent down and said, “Miss Ross and Mrs. Li are really kind.”

“Any supplies you need?” Gramps asked, “We try to keep everything filled up, but we’re due for a drop-off soon.” He and the club made sure that it was always stocked with supplies. Food, toilet paper, feminine products, and standard medicine were kept locked in Miss Ross’s office.

“Everything is great,” she assured him. “Really. I don’t need much.” She cocked her head towards Maverick, who whispered something in her ear and she grinned wide and chuckled at whatever little secret he’d told her. “But thank you,” she added to my grandfather, “I appreciate everything.”

“How is the food there?” Mom asked. “I’ve been meaning to come by with some goodies for you all, but I didn’t hear back about allergy concerns for the newcomer, which I assume is you?” She was in the middle of pulling the meatloaf out of the oven. At the same time, Charlotte resumed setting the table in the sunroom for everyone, adding extra spaces for Gramps and Maddy.

“Mrs. Li is great. She’s shown me how to make things like scrambled eggs and stuff.”

It hadn’t occurred to me that the girls there might not know how to make something as simple as scrambled eggs. Had she gone so hungry that she didn’t even have that available to her? It made my stomach fall at the thought of it.

“I can come by and show you a few things, too. I’ll bring some recipes, and you can pick whatever you like,” Mom smiled at her again, that same smile everyone loved so much. The one Dad always says could make the stars fall from the sky.

Maddy’s returning one, however, though it was small, hesitant, unsure... was so beautiful it was like watching a sunset on a summer’s day. I stared, lost in that smile, wishing she’d let go of that doubt and anxiety and allow herself to be happy without worrying about betrayal or consequences.

At the sound of someone clearing their throat, I blinked and looked to the side to see Gramps watching me with a

knowing look. To his credit, he said not a word, only winked and turned, scooping Emily up out of Dad's lap and carrying her over to the table. My sister was a princess; unlike Charlotte, she loved being doted on.

Dad got to his feet and came towards us, his silvery lined blond hair swept away from his face, a small smear of engine grease on his forehead, and he came to my side, hands in his pockets, his icy blue stare examining me carefully. "So..." he said, wagging his brows, "have a good day at school, then?"

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, it was fine,"

"Seems like it." He grinned like an imp, and I had to hold myself back from punching his shoulder. "Like a *really* good day."

"It was," I hissed between clenched teeth as Maddy entered the kitchen to help Mom serve out portions onto plates.

"How long were you hiding in your room for?"

I pressed my lips together as my dad murmured softly to me. "Just an hour or something like that," I finally admitted.

He nodded, then reached up and slapped a hand on my shoulder. "Fine. Just remember to wrap that shit up, okay?" And he turned and headed to the table, taking his place at the end.

Oh God... kill me now...

"Hayden, you and Maddy can sit by the window," Mom called, bringing plates over to everyone. Maddy followed, Maverick now in her arms as he pointed to the chair he'd decorated in stickers to indicate that it was *his*, demanding that she sit on the other side. I followed, noting that Grandpa J was in his typical spot, the same one he insisted on each time. The chair at Dad's side that faced the windows. It always made me nervous when I'd catch him looking out into the treeline, like he was watching for something, but nothing ever happened.

What could happen? What was he expecting?

I pulled out Maddy's chair while she got Mav settled into his seat, holding it until she took her spot and carefully slid her in. I ignored my dad and grandpa's cheeky grins and sat down on Dad's other side, grabbing the bread basket to pass to Maddy first.

"Went to see Lindsey this afternoon," Grandpa J said as he took a big bite of his meal.

At once, the mood between the adults shifted, with Mom going from smiling to concerned, and the grin wiping clean off Dad's face before he asked, "How is she doing?"

"She's okay. The club has her back. Always will." I could hear the strain in his voice as he kept his eyes on his plate. "Jenny got into the local college. She wants to become a reporter."

"Good for her. She's always loved writing," Mom said, her voice overly chipper, like she was trying to lighten the somber atmosphere, which was pretty typical of her—always rushing in with a band-aid to lighten the mood.

"Always been nosy, too," Gramps chuckled, "Snooping around the club with a notepad and pen, asking questions about everything. *What kind of dog do you like, James? What do you think of the new law against noise after eleven o'clock? Do you like the new mayor? What do you think about the changes in Lockemiere? Do you think it was right to intervene?* I swear... that kid was made to be a reporter."

Dad nodded; his lips pressed tight together before he cleared his throat several times. "Good for her. We're all proud to see her do so well."

"We should have them over for a BBQ, Key," Mom said to him as she helped cut Mav's food into smaller bites. "It's been too long since we saw her and Lindsey."

"Whenever you want, Sunshine."

I leaned over a little to Maddy and whispered at the corner of my mouth, "Lindsey was the girl of a member. She and her daughter have been friends of the club for a long time."

“*Was?*”

“Charlotte,” Grandpa said loudly, looking over at my sister as she picked at her food, her mind elsewhere as always. “You going to any camps this summer?”

“No.” she rolled her eyes.

“I thought you had fun at that one you went to last year. What was it for again? Gymnastics?”

“That’s lame. I don’t do that anymore,” she pulled her phone out of her pocket and without skipping a beat, Mom took it from her hand and tossed it over to the couch before turning back to Maverick to help him cut up his food. At twelve, Charlotte was more than ready to leave her childhood behind and become a teenager. She’d undoubtedly adopted the attitude.

“That’s a shame. I thought you loved gymnastics?”

“I quit.”

“It kept her from her new favourite hobby... *boys*,” Emily said, grinning wide at her big sister like she just outed a major secret.

“Shut up!” Charlotte hissed at her.

Emily stuck out her tongue in retaliation just as my dad sighed and said loudly, “Girls, enough. Keep it civil, please?”

“Mav, eat your peas! Come on, bud,” my mom pleaded with him, but he turned his face away, lips pressed tight together.

“*Dad!* I need my phone!” Charlotte whined.

“Your mom says no phones at the table, and I stand by her on that. This is family time—”

“Ugh! Why do you guys hate me so much?!”

I rolled my eyes and muttered under my breath, “I’m sorry...”

However, Maddy cast me a tiny smirk, like I was the one overreacting, not my sister. Then she scooped up some peas on her fork. She turned to Maverick, catching his attention, and took a bite. “Mmmm, these are *so* good. And you know what? They give me superpowers.”

At once, he narrowed his eyes at her in disbelief. “Superpowers?”

“That’s right. Did you know I can see in the dark? That’s because I eat my peas.” Maddy took another scoop and ate them. She pretended to try to sneak some of his own peas off his plate, but Maverick giggled and blocked her, taking a bite himself. He gagged twice but managed to swallow after about five seconds of chewing.

“Is Casey and them all coming to the festival on Saturday?” Dad asked after the chaos with Charlotte eventually settled.

“She is, and all the boys, too,” Mom confirmed.

She and Aunt Casey had been close ever since we moved here twelve years ago. I wanted to invite Maddy to go to the festival with me, but if my aunt and uncles and cousins were going to be there, we’d most likely run into everyone at some point... and how in the *hell* was I going to explain their dynamic to her? It weirded a *lot* of people out. Especially my Gramps, who took a long time to adjust to their unusual lifestyle. Mom, of course, had been accepting from the start, which meant Dad automatically followed her lead. But what would Maddy think?

“Maddy, will you be coming with us, too?”

I froze in horror, my fork halfway lifted to my mouth as my mother blurted out the question. Fucking hell. I could *feel* everyone looking at us with interest, but I stonily kept my face on my plate, wishing I could just disappear.

“Oh, um... I don’t know? I—” In the corner of my eye, I could see her looking my way nervously, checking with me before saying anything. I needed to step in and save her.

“I was going to ask you,” I said, meeting her gaze, rubbing the back of my head and discreetly flipping my dad off while he sniggered at my back. “I just didn’t get a chance to,” I added pointedly, hoping my mom would catch it.

“Only if you’re sure?” she said, as uncertain as ever. She actually believed I didn’t want her with me? Fuck that.

“Of course, I’m sure. I’d like you to come, if you want. You’ve never seen the Spring Festival here, right? It’s awesome.” I could feel myself start to ramble nervously, the fear of being rejected by her in front of my family almost too much to bear. And I swear, if my dad and Grandpa didn’t stop snickering behind my back, I’d shove their food in their faces. I used to attend the festival with my family when I was little, but when I pulled away from them, I skipped the last couple of years. Now, my mother was inviting Maddy to attend with the family, knowing I’d obviously have to be there, too. Sneaky, Mom. Very sneaky.

“It sounds like fun. I’ve never been to a festival before so... I have no idea what to expect.”

“Cotton candy!” Maverick practically shrieked, breaking the ice as everyone giggled.

“Yes, Mav. Cotton candy!” Emily laughed, as excited for sweets as he was.

“That’s settled, then! We’ll pick you up at Phoenix House on Saturday. I’ll talk to Miss Ross and let her know where you’ll be and when to expect you home.” My mom’s eyes shone as she smiled at Maddy and me, looking like... I don’t know. Something about this whole situation had just given her some sort of new light. Some fresh perspective on something. She looked... relieved.

“Okay, sounds great.” Maddy’s hazel stare met mine; for once, her smile looked free. She didn’t seem nervous or unsure. She actually looked excited, the anticipation of something she was looking forward to with no reservations. I reached for her beneath the table, finding her hand on her lap,

entwining my fingers with hers. At once, my emotions calmed, my breathing evening out, though my heart still raced in my chest as I looked at her. This girl was going to destroy me.

Chapter thirteen



MADDY - PRESENT DAY

EVERY NIGHT THIS WEEK, as I snuggled under my blankets, crushing Fuzzy to my chest, I dreamed of silver eyes and Hayden's kiss. Whenever he touched me, placed his hand on the small of my back, or played with the ends of my hair, I felt my stomach flutter and my heart race. I could feel the blush creep up on my cheeks, and *every* time, he smirked in that cocky but attractive way that made me nudge his side with my elbow to make him stop. Smartass. He knew full well what he was doing. But to his credit, Hayden's teasing was never over the top to the point where I got uncomfortable or frustrated. Whenever he looked at me with those hypnotic eyes, I found myself always forgiving him and wanting nothing more than for him to kiss me again.

But he didn't.

And I was too bashful to put myself out there again. I don't know why I had kissed him first that day in his room. I think it must have been a combination of feeling overwhelmed and triggered and his beautiful words that just spoke right to my soul. An impulse rose within me, and I went with it without hesitation. His returning kiss had been so... *sensual*. I could *feel* his longing, like he'd been restrained for so long and I'd just given him the key to unlock his chains.

Until that moment, looking back, I realized that I'd never been kissed before. All my life, I'd been forced to experience things beyond my years and against my will. Or I didn't

understand what was happening; the feelings of the circumstance were unpleasant and full of horror and my pleas were always ignored.

Very quickly, I rolled over and huddled under my blankets. *Don't go there, Maddy. Don't think about that.*

I focused on Hayden. On the dark, messy waves that fell over his face. His smile which made my knees shake, and his touch which always made me feel safe. Slowly, my tensed-up figure began to relax, first my fingers and toes, then my knees and elbows. Soon, I was drifting off with a little smile on my face as I recreated that moment with him over and over.

It was a lot for me yesterday to be sitting there with a group of people, two of them full-grown men, but I did it for Hayden. And if I was being completely honest, for myself. I didn't want to say goodbye to him. I wasn't ready to. So I braved heading into the unknown, experiencing what felt like a real family environment for the first time since, well, ever...

Though I'd been nervous as hell, I had promised myself I'd try, and I don't regret it. Despite how anxious I was, I still found myself enjoying the atmosphere, the playful teasing between Hayden and his grandfather, who kept waggling his eyebrows at him for some reason. It felt like... a true home. But I *was* glad I had a few more days to warm myself up to the idea of attending this festival with him and his family. And from the sounds of it, *even more* family members would be tagging along, making it even more nerve-wracking for me. Having supper with just his immediate family had been chaotic. That was the best term I could think of to describe it. There'd been *lots* of inside jokes I didn't understand, but I didn't feel like they were making fun of me. Poor Hayden seemed to be getting the brunt of it from his dad and grandfather.

I had gravitated towards Maverick, his five-year-old brother, for most of the night. Though his mother did ask me questions about myself, her soft-spoken way was comforting, but I was still nervous. The women in my life tended to betray

me to the men. Though she seemed different from them, I guess old habits die hard. I just needed time.

Then I took the week as a warm-up to prepare myself, and when I woke up the next morning, I excitedly dressed and got ready for the day, eager to see Hayden again.

However, when I stepped out onto the front step to walk to school, he was next to his bike, helmet in hand and jacket slung over the back seat, waiting for me just like he'd promised. The most thrilling thing was riding on the back of Hayden's bike yesterday. The speed, the way we flowed through traffic like water, how warm he was when I held onto him. My hands had clasped over his hard stomach, and I'd been grinning like an idiot, not remembering the last time I'd smiled so big. His soft leather jacket was huge but so comfortable, and the smell of the old leather was different from anything I'd known. It felt like a piece of Hayden wrapped around my shoulders, keeping me safe.

And today was no different.

I sat on the back seat while he wrapped his jacket around my shoulders and helped roll up the sleeves, and I breathed in the leather and coconut scent that was so... *him*. He placed the helmet on my head and strapped it on, making sure it was snug and comfortable before he swung his leg over the beautiful machine, and I got my chance to wrap my arms around him again. As we flew past the cars, the wind whipping around us, his body flexing and shifting beneath my hold, I couldn't help but turn my face into his back between his shoulders and breathe him in.

Huh, I think I was getting a little obsessed. This wasn't normal, was it? I barely knew Hayden Mathers, and yet...

I rested my cheek between his muscles and couldn't help the smile that threatened to crack my face apart. Nothing about my life had been conventional, so why should this? For the first time in so long, I wasn't faking expression nor walking on eggshells in fear of upsetting another. But screw convention.

My feelings and my decision only solidified when we stopped at a red light, Hayden balancing the bike easily before resting one of his large hands over both my own, which were still clasped over his hard stomach, and gave them a squeeze. When the light turned green, he lifted one to his lips, giving it a soft kiss before returning it to its place, and we took off again, taking another turn down the drive to our school.

Kids stared at our arrival, and though the feeling of so many eyes watching my every move had my skin crawling a bit, I felt a strength inside me that I hadn't felt before. A large part of that was having someone at my side that I felt such an unexplainable connection to, an understanding, a trust that was accepted without question or full comprehension. It was like we were both just putting whatever faith we had left into this feeling and were going with it, exploring it as we went.

I decided to take a leaf out of Hayden's book. I'd seen him ignore others as he walked through the halls of this school, but I knew that he was always aware, always on alert. I could feel it yesterday in the cafeteria. He looked like he didn't have a care in the world, but I'd watched him, noting how his silver stare would flicker to specific groups of kids who seemed greatly interested in our pairing. The blue-haired, scar-faced boy, Theo, and his gang. Plus Ayla and her cronies. They watched us as Hayden parked the bike and I quickly climbed off, fumbling with the helmet until he came to my rescue. He unclipped it and pulled it free, then combed his fingers through my hair to get rid of the tangles. I surreptitiously glanced over to see Ayla glare daggers in my direction before flipping her hair over her shoulder to talk to Theo, who simply stared at us. His arms crossed over his chest, looking like he wasn't listening to a word Ayla said before he turned to his scary, larger friend, the one I was pretty sure was called Spencer Carr. Why did I get the feeling that they were scheming? They looked so... angry.

Those scars around his mouth? Hayden did that to him.

Hayden slipped an arm around my shoulders, turning us toward the school without giving the others a second glance,

as calm and as beautiful as ever. Like someone fully in control, unafraid, unconcerned, even though I knew inside he was aware of every person in the vicinity. I followed his lead, ignoring the unease I felt as I turned my back on the others, but I trusted him, so I strolled along at his side, staying close.

Inside, the kids parted as we headed down the crowded hallways, and I kept my focus on some distant point until we reached my locker. I slipped out of Hayden's jacket, which he promptly put back on, hiding the muscle of his bicep from the gawking eyes of the other girls, and gathered what I needed for my morning classes. Hayden escorted me to the science lab, stopping outside the door. I peered up at him, caught off guard by how his mirror-coloured eyes almost glowed as he studied me.

He reached up, resting his forearm on the wall over my head and leaned over me, closing the space a little more between us. It enclosed us off to the kids who were ogling, making me feel like we were in our own private little bubble once again. I felt him touch my free hand hanging limply at my side as I gazed up at him, his pinky finger locking around my own as we fixated on one another, both caught in some sort of trance. As I drank him in, the voices in the background drifted in and out, their words becoming indiscernible, white noise.

Hayden lowered his face a little more until the tip of his nose lightly drifted against mine, his lips pressing to one corner of my mouth, then the other. "I'll meet you after class, okay?" he whispered.

I *think* I nodded. I tried to speak, but all that came out was a small sigh before his lips brushed over mine, pausing for just a moment, before ultimately closing the space. They were soft but unyielding, the kiss gentle yet searing. Warmth spread throughout my body as he released my pinky, his hand gliding up my arm until he could cup the side of my neck, his fingers curling around the nape. His lips parted a little, his mouth moving with mine, head tilting to the side as he smoothly

sought to deepen it for *just* a moment before stopping completely.

I opened my eyes, feeling like I was being released from a spell. His pupils were blown, his cheeks reddened ever so slightly, and I could feel how his fingers trembled just the tiniest fraction as he released me, seeming like it was almost painful for him. Finally, the corner of his mouth lifted into that gorgeous, crooked grin I loved, and he murmured, “I’ll see you soon, Maddy,” before disappearing into the crowd.

Kids were staring open-mouthed at me, looking like they were in complete shock by what they’d just witnessed, and I blushed hard as I headed into class, taking a seat at one of the lab tables as quickly as I could to avoid everyone else. The harsh whispers escalated as more and more of my classmates arrived, and to my dismay, that one larger boy who hung out with Theo, Spencer, joined me at my table, along with one of his buddies. It had originally been those two and Lucas who hung out together in this class, but they were short one member now. Why the hell were they sitting here?

I peeked up at them and to my horror, both were watching me with deadpan, expressionless faces. Spencer’s gaze was dark, almost black, his dark brown hair a shade lighter than Hayden’s, but he wore his pushed back and away from his face, not hiding. Those black eyes bore into me. It was unnerving, far more intimidating than if he’d been glaring. His crony had a lighter shade of eyes, his face a little more pinched, his physical stature not nearly as massive or bulky as Spencer’s, but he looked ratty, like someone who was born to be mean. What the hell was their problem? The fact that they were watching me without shame, without embarrassment of being caught staring so blatantly, had my palms turn instantly clammy, and my heart started to race as the feeling of ants crawling under my skin began to slowly eat away at me.

Don’t notice me... don’t notice me! my mind begged, old feelings now suddenly rearing their ugly heads, demanding my focus, obliterating the perfect moment I’d just had.

Our science teacher, Mr. Zhao, an older man with thick square glasses and almost completely grey hair, came rushing in then in his usual excitable mood, explaining what we were about to do today. The whole class turned their focus to him, all except the two boys at my lab table, who continued to watch me like two corpses.

Don't look at me! I thought, my fear shifting a little. Seriously, what was their problem? *Don't look at me!*

"Look at Maddy! Why are you crying Maddy? What has you so scared?"

"The dark, I don't like the dark! He comes in the dark. He watches..."

Laughter. Cruel laughter. "Liar, Maddy. You're a little liar."

"I'm not lying!"

"Everyone, look at Maddy. Look at her... she thinks someone is coming for her! Who would want her? Who would want that ugly, skinny thing? Look at her..."

Crying. I'm crying as all the other children in the room now watch, listening to my foster mother as she laughs and points at me. I want to disappear and pull my blankets up to hide under. But she doesn't allow that. My foster mother rips the blankets away.

"Look at her, everyone! You don't like that Maddy? No? Then stop lying. Stop lying!"

I'm shaking hard, knowing that I'd awaken later in this room in the dark, the shadow in the corner staring at me. They were all staring...

"... a shadow! What fucking bullshit lies is this? Who would be watching you?"

"He does!" I cry.

"Who?" her voice deepens, the threat there. I bite my lip, refusing to play into her game. She doesn't want me to say it,

but at the same time, a part of her does. She's gotten herself worked up. She wants to vent, to take it out on me. To take out her anger, resentment, all of it, on me. Her unfaithful husband, her horrible husband, her perverted husband...

"Who, Maddy?" Her voice rises as she begins to shriek, "Who is the shadow? Say it!"

"I don't want to!" I cry, trying to grab the blankets back so I can hide.

"Who? Who is it? WHO?!" She throws the covers aside and rushes me, slapping, hitting, kicking while I wail and cower. "Who, Maddy?!"

"Maddy?"

I blink, snapping to attention and to my horror, the entire class is now looking at me. Mr. Zhao stands at the whiteboard, his face puzzled and concerned, and I realize he was calling on me.

"Uh, s-sorry, Mr. Zhao, I—" I glanced over to see Spencer and his friend smirking ever so slightly, like they know they've rattled me. "I didn't get much sleep last night and I..." my voice trailed off pathetically as I tried to think of a white lie, fumbling and stammering my way through it unconvincingly.

"Are you alright?" Our teacher asked, still looking a little worried. "Do you need to see the school nurse?" He wasn't mad that I hadn't been paying attention. He was one of the few teachers in this place that I actually liked. He had such an easy-going, innocent way about him that put me at ease. And even though he had given me an opportunity to leave the class to catch my breath, a part of me didn't want these two dickheads to get the better of me.

"No, thank you, Sir. I'm alright."

The moment Mr. Zhao turned back to the board to explain what he was going to present to us, something about compounds affecting flame colouration, I put my elbow on the tabletop and rested my chin on my palm, flashing my middle

finger to Spencer and his companion. I thought I heard the smallest snigger and cough, but thankfully, they looked away. Good. I tried to rest my nerves, shaking off the haunting memory as I watched Mr. Zhao light up a portable Bunsen burner and then proceed to mix multiple minerals into separate small bowls of salt, making the brightest of colours.

Because we were so close to the end of the year, he gave us permission to spend the rest of class studying for exams, the time something I desperately needed. Last night I'd stayed much too long at Hayden's and hadn't even thought about homework, but despite how different the experience had been for me, far from anything I'd ever known, I had enjoyed it. Even though his grandpa and father made me nervous just by being men, they were funny in how they ribbed each other throughout dinner. And the gentle, easy way they showed affection to their children made it easier, especially when Maverick seemed to throw himself into everyone's arms with no fear.

My nerves around them were my hang up. Nothing they had done. And having Hayden at my side made it easier to delve into an unknown situation and I was actually able to let go of my usual reservations and just enjoy the moment. When it had gotten late, the time slipping away much too quickly. And unbeknownst to me, his mother had insisted on driving me home, with Hayden accompanying us in the backseat.

So I pulled out my textbook and notes and began going through the different chapters, hoping to catch up on the time I'd lost last night. Across from me, the other two boys followed suit, but I got the sense that they weren't trying to focus like I was. Not a page turned, nor did they scribble anything down. Occasionally I'd hear them mutter something to each other, but whatever it was, I was almost certain it had nothing to do with science. It was distracting and only made me anxious as my heel began to tap in quick succession against the table leg.

I had a horrible, sinking feeling that Spencer wanted to say something to me but was waiting for the right opportunity. I

could see him at the corner of my way, watching before whispering to his friend again, occasionally glancing at our teacher like he wanted to make sure he was far enough away, but then he'd shake his head and apparently think better of it. It was too quiet here to speak openly without being overheard, and Mr. Zhao made his way round and round the room, offering assistance to anyone who needed it. Whatever Spencer wanted to say to me, he wanted privacy, and that scared the shit out of me. I waited with bated breath for the bell to ring, hoping that Hayden would find me fast.

When there were two minutes left before the bell, I quickly packed up my things. The moment I did, so did Spencer and his buddy. I sat on the edge of my seat, facing the doorway, the volume in the classroom picking up now with lighthearted chatter, everyone ready to move on to their next class before lunch.

“Not yet, Jace,” Spencer whispered under his breath.

I wasn't supposed to hear that.

I didn't wait.

There were still thirty seconds left of class but hearing him mutter those words sparked the fight or flight instinct in my gut. Without looking at either of them, I got to my feet and ran the hell out of there. No way was I going to give them a chance. I skirted out the door when Mr. Zhao had turned his attention to clearing the whiteboard and hurried as fast as I could down the hall, hoping to get as much distance between myself and those two boys as possible. I was just starting to feel like I'd gotten away safely, when a hand shot out and ensnared around my upper arm as I tried to rush past an archway leading to a stairwell. Whoever it was, they were grasping so tight it pinched my skin painfully under my flannel top. I cried out as I found myself yanked viciously sideways into the alcove beneath the steps, pressed back into the wall as a hand came down over my mouth, the other arm of the person crushing hard over my chest to keep me in place.

I was staring into the pale gaze of Theo Hebert, his pale face reminiscent of a ghost. I could make out the many scars around his mouth and jaw, some fine lines like they were surgical, while others were a splotchy mess of healed white skin, as though they were webbing spanning across the smoother surface of his face like a spiderweb. In the background, I could hear the quick, heavy approach of footsteps, soon followed by Spencer's deep accented voice as he greeted Theo. Apparently unsurprised to see him here. The three boys surrounded me as I was then dragged deeper into the shadows under the stairs just as the bell rang, and the rumble of footsteps as hundreds of students left their classes drowned out my muffled cries.

Theo leaned in close, as close as Hayden had when he had kissed me, his lips by my ear, and hissed, "Shhhh... shhhh..." in warning.

My eyes were wide in fear, my mouth silenced behind his hand, my whimpers smothered and drowned out as I listened to the sea of sneakers, flip-flops, and converse shoes climb and descend the steps overhead. My heart was racing in my chest, my mind whirling with a hundred different thoughts.

Theo's hand covering my mouth... *his large, sweaty palm covered my mouth...*

Me trying to call out for help... *a small girl crying in the room, hoping to be heard...*

Spencer and Theo crowding around me, blocking me in... *Mr. Foster's large, sweaty body pressing against mine, suffocating me... I couldn't get away.*

Jace kept watch, peering out from the shadows while Spencer played with a strand of my hair, tightening it round and round his finger before pulling on it painfully. Then he'd let go and do it all over again. Eventually, the clatter and chaos of students quieted, and when the bell rang, there was nothing. The only sound now was my desperate breathing as I fought to get air through my nose, hoping I wouldn't pass out and make myself even more vulnerable to these assholes.

“Good. I don’t want any interruptions,” Theo says, almost conversationally, like this was totally normal. He pulled back just a bit, his face still much too close to mine, and he grinned wide without showing his teeth, his face only becoming more disfigured. “Now... Maddy, right?” he waited until I nodded, his hand still tight over my mouth. “I wanted to talk with you, but I don’t want you to scream. You got me?”

“That’s right, no screaming, Maddy.” Spencer’s arm drifted around my shoulders, his hand gripping my arm as he squeezed me tightly into his side, threateningly.

“If you scream, we’ll just have to drag you outside, and God knows where that will lead to.” He looked and spoke like having to physically move me against my will was more of an inconvenience for him, rather than something disturbingly sinister. “Although if you promise to stay quiet, *I* promise you’ll walk away from here in one piece.”

Fucking psycho... I thought, realizing that that’s what they called Hayden.

“So will you? Be quiet so we can talk?”

I narrowed my eyes, struggling to focus as I inwardly fought back all the demons in my mind. They’d awoken and were now battling it out to overpower me, reminding me again and again of how powerless I felt. But I’d promised myself that I would be strong. I needed to survive. I needed to get myself out of this situation. I couldn’t afford to let them distract me now, to bring me down and make me feel like I was nothing.

Inhaling deeply, I held the air for a moment before nodding in agreement to his terms. Theo let go, though his fingers slid unnecessarily down my mouth so it dragged my lower lip with it. Jace stepped back, still keeping watch, but angled himself so that he was cutting off the one opening available to escape.

“Well, Maddy, first things first, I’m Theo Hebert. This is Spencer Carr, and that’s Jace Fogerty.”

What would Hayden do? How would he deal with these pricks?

Even as my eyes flickered to Theo's scars, I shook that thought away. It was out of the question for me to fight these three. So instead, I said nothing, not even bothering to look at the others. I stood as tall as I could, staring straight into Theo's pale eyes, though it caused my hands to twitch uncomfortably. Looking straight at him made me want to vomit, my fear and discomfort now at their peak. But I'd made a promise to myself, and I was going to fucking fight back against the demons that haunt me.

Be like Hayden...

I could see how my reaction surprised Theo by the way his dark brows rose on his forehead, arching almost prettily before he placed a hand on the wall by my head. A power move, no doubt, hoping to disarm me again.

"I want to make one thing clear before I start, Maddy," he said, regaining his composure as he leaned in again, like he knew lingering close was key to my discomfort. But I remained silent and continued to hold his gaze, waiting for him to get to the point. "I don't give a shit about you." The corner of his mouth lifted in a cruel smile, as if he hoped this would upset me in some way. However it wasn't what I expected. Plus I honestly didn't give a shit, either. "I don't give a shit about you, but... I've been waiting for something, for a *long* time now. I've been waiting patiently and hoping for a chance for justice. Do you know what that feels like, Maddy? To be the victim?"

My brows rose unwillingly at that. What the hell was he going on about?

"You see," Theo's nose touched my jaw, and he ran it along the line to my chin as he spoke, his breath hot on my throat and making my skin crawl. "I think you do. You're a Phoenix Girl, right? You've been abused or you were touched or some shit, and now you're all fucked up from it. But you've never had a taste of vengeance. Wouldn't you like that? To

reap retribution? To make things fair? Of course you would.” He pulled back, his pale eyes staring unblinking into mine, and his smile broadened, “Of *course* you would,” he repeats, his voice so quiet it was like a hiss. “You see, my dad is a powerful man in Ashland. Lawyers make a lot of money, and they know a lot of people, so they can make things happen. They can persuade people to give them what they want or else... you know, information will slip out and...” he pulled back a little more, suddenly snapping his fingers sharply in front of my face, his smile becoming more twisted with each word he spewed. “Their reputation, the business they’ve grown, the secrets they’ve hidden from their families are *aaaaaaaall* out in the open.” Theo was practically singing these words, like he was getting way too much enjoyment out of this.

“So here’s the thing, Maddy,” he went on, “I know *all* about you.”

“Everything,” Spencer added, his French accent strong as he whispered in my ear.

“I know where you came from. I know how many foster homes you’ve been in. I know that your mom is in an asylum right now and she’s probably not going to get out for a *long* time.” He spoke without empathy, stating facts that he could care less about. They were just pieces of information he was using for whatever vengeance or justice he felt he was owed.

Hayden.

“It would be a shame if something happened to your mother, you know?” He pouted his lower lip, the silver piercing there bending with it, and I had to remind myself to take a breath. “I mean, I know there’s security in those places, but it wouldn’t be hard to make someone on the inside... *turn*. If you know what I mean. It’s amazing what people will do for money,” he chuckled. “My father could just ask for a favour, so to speak, and then... *poof!*”

“What does my mother have to do with anything?” I asked finally, my mouth completely dry, eyes wide as I understood

what he was saying. This kid was completely fucking unhinged.

“As I said, Maddy... we all want justice, what is owed. And I am owed.” He stared at me blankly then, the silence stretching out between us that it became stiflingly uncomfortable, the air filling with tension and unspoken threats. Suddenly, Theo lunged at me, slapping his hand right by my head, hitting the wall so hard that it actually made my eardrum ring, my whole body flinching but was unable to go anywhere as Spencer still held me in place. Theo seized my jaw tight, squishing my cheeks into my teeth, and yelled, “LOOK AT MY FUCKING FACE! Do you think I am not owed?! Do you think I fucking *like* these scars?!” His spit hit my chin and I squeezed my eyes shut against the sudden, viscous onslaught.

“Theo, shut up! Someone will hear,” Jace hissed as he stuck his head out from our hiding place, clearly worried about us being overheard.

But the moment his friend had told him to, ‘shut up’, Theo’s eyes widened with a sort of demented kind of craze and he spun around, forgetting about me in that moment, and punched Jace in the back of his head with a sickening crack, sending him staggering forward as he clutched his skull. When Theo went to hit him again, Spencer released me and reached out, grabbing his friend’s arm, speaking in a low undertone, “*Soyez silencieux!* Enough now, stop it! *Arrêt!*”

Run!

I broke away from the wall, easily slipping past Spencer with my small size, and out of the stairwell. Behind me, the boys began to shout to each other, but I didn’t even bother looking back. I just sprinted down the hall, heading straight to the main entrance of the school where the office was. But as I rounded the corner and sprinted into the large, open lobby where students liked to linger on cooler days, I found Hayden there, hand on the door to the office, looking like he was about to enter, too. The moment he saw me, taking in the sight of

how obviously terrified I was, how I was running like the hounds of hell were on my heels, he let go and hurried over, arms spread wide. Wordlessly, I reached for him and threw myself into his arms, holding him tightly as I gasped breathlessly.

“Maddy! Where the hell have you—”

But whatever he was about to ask was cut off by the arrival of heavy footsteps, the presence of the three assholes now clear, and I knew he was putting two and two together.

“What the fuck is this?” Hayden’s voice deepened dangerously, rage building with each word he spat. “What the *fuck is this?!*”

“Nothing, Mathers, we were just having a talk, is all,” Theo said, his footsteps stopping some distance away. Hayden’s hold on me tightened comfortably, like a cloak around my body that hid me from the cruel wickedness of the world. “Not my fault she lost track of time and made herself late for class. Right, Maddy?”

“No, no, you don’t get to do that!” Hayden’s voice wasn’t his. It was strange how different it sounded, accompanied by his fury, like he’d become a totally different person. But I still wasn’t afraid of him, unlike the other three boys, because when I glanced over my shoulder at them, they had retreated several steps, even Spencer. “You don’t get to lie about her. You don’t get to speak to her! You don’t even get to breathe the same *air* around her, do you fucking understand me, you little prick?”

Though Theo was nearly as tall as Hayden, he wasn’t as filled out, and I could see how the word ‘little’ bruised his ego. That seemed to hit him harder than anything, which spoke so much about what mattered to him as a person. He was being honest about one thing, at least... I didn’t matter to him. Nothing did. It was about him and his sense of justice. Of vengeance.

He took a step toward us, but Spencer's hand shot out like a whip and seized his shoulder, murmuring something softly to him from under his breath, indiscernible to us. It didn't help that he and Theo were clearly bilingual, so their muttering in French only heightened my panic.

"You're lucky that we're standing right in front of the office," Hayden added, his voice softening like he knew they were all on dangerously thin ice here, "because if we weren't, you know what I would do. You *know*..." his voice was full of suggestion, and to my surprise, the corner of his mouth lifted in a sadistic sort of grin. It was so unlike Hayden, so dark and foreign it caught me by surprise.

Instinctively, I tried to pull back, but his hold was unbreakable, and he easily kept me in place. Normally I would have completely lost my shit if this happened with anyone else, but I don't think Hayden was fully aware. His anger and menace weren't directed at me. This other side to him was just for Theo. So I pressed my forehead against his chest, feeling his heart's heavy, rapid beating, and wrapped my arms around his waist, giving him a gentle squeeze.

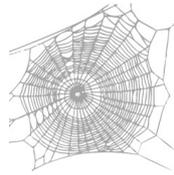
Please come back to me, Hayden. Come back...

At my little embrace, his body jerked, and one of his hands came up to lightly cup the back of my head. I listened as he sucked in a long, deep breath, held it, then released it in a long hiss. His other hand softly stroked my back, running up and down in long, lazy circles.

"Get the fuck out of here, Hebert," he said at last, his words still strong and sure, but they held much less anger there, which calmed me. Hayden was back. "And don't go near her again."

"Like I give a fuck, Mathers..." Theo rolled his eyes, shoving his hands into his pants pockets, and sauntered away, trying very hard not to look disappointed or furious with how things had turned out. Hayden watched them leave, unmoving, until they rounded the corner of the hall and disappeared from sight. Only then did he lean down to kiss the crown of my

head, releasing me only to take my hand and gently tug, urging me to accompany him. I did, not caring about missing my classes. I just needed peace right now. I needed to speak with him alone and there was no way I was going to be able to focus on anything else. Not after all of that.



WE RETURNED to the field where I'd run to with my bear. Only this week, it had seemed to come alive. Little white flowers dotted the thick grass and ferns, daisies, and the leaves on the trees overhead were budding, ready to burst open. Hayden had driven us to his house on his motorcycle and then led us here, both of us laying down sideways on the soft green bedding, face to face with each other. He had scared me a little back there, momentarily transforming into someone I didn't know, but I had him back now. That's all that mattered.

Hayden reached out to hold one of my hands, the other brushing my hair back behind my ear so it was away from my face, and ran his thumb slowly back and forth along my cheek. "What happened, Maddy?" He whispered finally. He was the exact opposite of what he'd been in the lobby at school. He was calm now, his face still obviously pained and anxious, but he was Hayden again. It was strange to see him become a sort of Jekyll and Hyde. To his credit, he didn't lose himself. However, I was concerned about how he would respond to what I had to tell him. Would he flip out and rage? Would I be able to handle witnessing that or would it trigger me? Would I become afraid of him, just like all the others at school?

I sucked in a long, drawn-out breath between my teeth and rolled onto my back, staring up at the blue sky beyond the far-reaching branches, the clouds that sailed past a mix of strange shapes. "He said he wanted to talk."

“To talk...” his voice was filled with disbelief, but he didn’t press on. He just waited as I gathered my thoughts, trying to think of the best way to approach this.

“He and his friends approached me after class, and Theo said some things,” my fingers twisted about in a knot over my stomach while Hayden continued to watch me, lying perfectly still at my side. I was purposefully downplaying the incident, worried about upsetting him. “He went on about how his dad is a powerful sort of guy, rambled on about wanting justice...”

At that, Hayden’s arm flinched ever so slightly, and though the sudden movement had startled me, I still felt confident enough to continue.

“He mentioned my mother briefly, about knowing about me and my past, but whatever real point he wanted to get to, he didn’t get a chance. He kind of lost control over his emotions when he mentioned justice again and his scars,” it was at this point that I watched Hayden closely. His face was like stone, unmoveable, expressionless, but not in a way that was disarming like Theo and his friends. Though I’d witnessed Hayden’s control cracking, he never seemed to lose himself to his emotions, not like Theo had. But maybe I was wrong. Maybe all the stuff kids had whispered about was true. Either way, I wanted to know what *his* side was. What his truth was. “How exactly did he get those scars, Hayden?”

It was Hayden’s turn to roll away and stare at the sky, like he was afraid to witness my reaction to whatever he was about to confess. I told myself to keep quiet, to give him a chance. He’d seen me at my worst, right here in this very spot, so I would be strong for him now.

“I suppose it all starts and ends with... my father.”

I immediately pictured Mr. Mathers, the silver-streaked blond, tattooed goofball who clearly loved his children and his wife. He was beyond gorgeous, the whole family was, to be honest, and though I was naturally nervous around him and Hayden’s grandpa, that was more because of my fucked up past than anything. Mr. Mathers was sweet and funny, giving

off a more playful vibe. How could a product as twisted and dark as Theo Hebert's scars come from someone like him?

Crazy runs in his blood. Do you know Theo Hebert? He's got the blue hair and sits with all the other popular guys. Well, those scars around his mouth? Hayden did that to him. That's what happens when your dad is a murdering psychopath... Looks could be deceptive. Had everything Ayla told me been true?

"The man you met at dinner, he's my dad. He's the one who raised me and loved me my whole life. He's the man I look up to and who I most want to be like. My real father..." Hayden's breathing began to shake, his anxiety was skyrocketing. "The one I'm actually *related* to, is dead."

Don't stare at him, Maddy. It will make him feel judged, like he's on trial or something. I bowed my head to look towards our feet, which were stretched out in the ferns, daisies blooming around us. Our hands lay side by side, much like our bodies, only they were a hair's breadth away. Slowly, I reached out, my pinky curling around his, a signal of support without crossing too much of a physical boundary. I wasn't sure if this was exactly what he needed, but it was all I could think of doing at that moment.

That little gesture, that small physical connection, seemed to be exactly what Hayden needed because his own little finger curled back around mine, like they were locked in an embrace, and he took another, long breath before continuing.

"My father wasn't a good person, Maddy. He was guilty of a lot of shit. A *lot* of fucked up stuff that has never been denied by anyone still around. He was a criminal, a lunatic, and he hurt a lot of people, one of them being my mother."

Mina Mathers, his beautiful mother who smiled so radiantly at the supper table as she laughed with her family, doing her best to make me feel welcome, her bright green eyes always flickering from person to person, like she was silently tallying everyone's mood, making sure all were happy and content. She had such a calming sort of aura about her, that

despite my reservations at first, I found myself gradually relaxing and lingering close to her and Maverick at dinner. She'd alerted Miss Ross at Phoenix House as to my whereabouts, had insisted on driving me the short distance home, waiting until I'd stepped through the front door and it had closed and locked behind me before she departed. The thought of someone hurting her made me feel sick.

Perhaps what Theo said about wanting justice wasn't as crazy as I'd initially thought. My own mother was a victim of men more powerful than her, who used drugs as a means to control her and take and take and take... maybe I *did* want justice.

"Over the years," Hayden went on, his brow furrowing like he was lost in thought, thinking hard about all the memories and information he'd probably held onto for so long concerning the man who he shared blood with. "News about my father's criminal activities became public knowledge around my school, and as a result I was ostracized. No one wanted anything to do with me, and I became the prime target for bullying. For years I put up with a lot of shit from Theo and his friends... and a few times I almost died because of it. There were moments, Maddy, where I... I felt like—" He shuddered, his voice breaking as everything came flooding back to him, and I felt my heart twist as tears filled my eyes at the pain in his voice. "I honestly felt like I was more like my father than I realized. He had killed himself, you see. He ended his own life, and sometimes I debated doing the same thing."

At that, my entire body shuddered like I had just suffered a spasm. The thought of Hayden being so down and broken made me want to wrap my arms around him like a shield and protect him from the world. And maybe I would have, if he hadn't found the strength to continue.

"Then one day I just... snapped," he said point-blank, his shimmering silver eyes still focused on the sky overhead. "Theo came at me, spewing his usual bullshit and he said something that just set me off because it made me feel so

much like *that man* that I lost it. You see... my mom and my father were stepsiblings. They grew up together, and from what little I know, their relationship changed as they got older, and my father became... *unhinged*. The day I snapped, Theo had mentioned something about me and my sisters and I just..." he stopped, biting his lip hard like he couldn't say it, but he didn't need to. I could put it together for myself.

I intertwined all of my fingers with his, one by one, further cementing my support, encouraging him, reassuring him that I was still here with him.

Hayden squeezed my hand in return and found the strength to keep going. "I gave Theo those scars. I don't remember exactly what had happened. It was all such a blur, like a hazy dream I can't remember. I only recall screaming, people pulling at me, being dragged off of him. After that day, everyone became afraid of me, and I used that to my advantage. They all thought I'd become my father, a psychotic madman capable of anything, and I wore it like armour to keep myself safe. But over the years, I feel like a part of me *is* very much like him, and it's something that I've always hated about myself." He reached up with his free hand and roughly rubbed his eyes, hiding his tears from me as though afraid I'd judge him if I saw him cry. I ran my thumb along his hand, wishing he wouldn't think that way. "My mom, though, she always tried to convince me my father wasn't all evil. She would tell me stories about them growing up, happy things that she remembers and cherishes, but I have a hard time believing them. She was a victim of his abuse. Surely she's just fucking... I don't know... brainwashed or some shit? Stockholm syndrome." Again, he furiously wiped away the tears, sniffing hard as he avoided my gaze.

"What kind of things did she tell you?" I asked after a minute, once he'd gotten more control over his breathing.

He paused, probably trying to remember something, anything, that was good. "She told me about how he'd carry her around on his shoulders when she was a young girl. That

he would let her put chains of flowers in his hair, even in front of his friends.”

I giggled a little at that, loving the mental imagery as I imagined a smaller version of his mom placing a crown on a faceless man’s head, as I had no idea what his father actually looked like. “Some nights, when she had a nightmare, he’d bring his guitar into her room and play it for her until she fell back asleep.” *Hayden plays guitar. Something beautiful that he and the man he fears to be like share.* I squeeze his hand again, waiting for more. “She said on Friday nights they’d play board games and watch movies together. That he always tried to make time for her. She said that...” he chuckled a little breathlessly as he thought of the memory, “a few times he even let her paint his toenails, but then he’d go around in socks, even in the summertime, to hide them from his friends until they chipped away. Then he’d let her do it again weeks later.” I grinned at the thought, once more picturing Hayden, only now sporting bright pink nail polish. “She said he was protective, that even though he had inner demons, he had a part that loved so much it was blinding to everyone.” His voice was quiet as he said it, soft, like maybe something in those words suddenly had a different meaning to him now than before.

Very slowly, he turned to look at me, a shine visible beneath his eyes from the tears he’d tried to hide. I shifted a little closer to him, resting my head on my arm, and continued to stroke his hand with my thumb. “Your father sounds like a lot of people,” I said finally, thinking over everything he told me. “I’ve always firmly believed that people are neither inherently good nor evil, but just shades of both. Everyone is hurting; everyone has a story.” I thought of my mother and the words Hayden had told me only last night. “Your father sounds like he had a darker life than others, but that doesn’t mean he was wholly bad. I imagine he had quite a different life growing up than you, right?”

Hayden’s gaze unfocused ever so slightly before nodding.

“Right. And Hayden? All of that, everything you told me about him, the good and the bad... they were his choices. *His* mistakes and *his* moments of sincerity. What he did has nothing to do with you. We are *not* our parents. You are your own person, and you have *nothing* to be ashamed of. Theo and his friends? They fucking pushed you. They pushed you to a breaking point and you snapped. You know what? I probably would have to. So would a lot of people. But they’ll never know because they will probably never have to go through what you have. Ignorance is a luxury a lot of people are blessed with. That doesn’t make them right and you wrong.”

Hayden watched me speak, his eyes skipping between mine before flickering down to my mouth and back up again. I could see how his face relaxed at my words, his grip on my hand getting stronger, like he was relieved I wasn’t running for the hills. I rolled even closer now, until my leg was pressed against his side, our heads so close they were nearly touching.

“Don’t be afraid of where you come from, Hayden. I know it’s easier said than done. Trust me, I know. But look at how far we’ve come.” I smiled a little at that, thinking of being here with him in this moment and everything that happened leading up to it. “I say we take all the hurt we’ve suffered, all that bullshit slung at us, and say goodbye to it. I don’t want to reflect on everything I’ve been through and let it ruin everything now. I’m tired of it. I’m so fucking tired of being afraid, of feeling like I’m nothing. I know it’s not going to be easy, but fuck it, I want to try. Don’t you?”

The corner of Hayden’s lip curled up just a bit, a trademark he shared with his dad, the man who raised him and loved him all these years, and I felt my own grin broaden at the sight of it. “I do. I really do,” he whispered.

“Then let’s do it. Together.”

“Together.” Hayden released my hand, only to reach above my hand to pull at something. Next thing I knew, he was tucking a daisy behind my ear, smoothing my hair away from my face, before leaning in to kiss me.

We lay there together as the sun shone around us in the clearing, holding each other, smiling into our kiss as a strange sense of lightness seemed to overpower us. It was like a heavy weight was being lifted from our hearts, like carrying the burden of our emotional scars was going to be a little easier now. For the first time in my life, my feelings didn't betray me. Despite how briefly we've known each other, that pull, that sense of rightness between us, only strengthened at this beautiful moment. This was right. It was the rightest thing that I've ever known.

Chapter fourteen



Hayden - Present Day

AFTER YESTERDAY in the clearing with Maddy, I'd felt such a relief, such a weight lifted from my shoulders when I came clean to her about everything. And she'd accepted it all without judgement or screaming in terror. She'd embraced me with such sincerity and understanding that, upon realizing it was the first time that I'd really connected to another person on such a deep level, it overwhelmed me. Ultimately, it only made me more sure that this feeling I had, this growing obsession, was not bullshit. It was right.

Today, I was practically glued to her side, and when she reached for my hand to hold as we walked the halls, I felt like my face would crack from how big I was smiling. I knew the sight had rocked several groups of kids. I doubt any of them have seen me smile in years, but I wasn't thinking of them.

Well, *almost* all of them.

Theo, Spencer, Ayla... their little gang of fuckheads were always high on my radar when they were close by. As much as I wanted to beat the shit out of them for cornering Maddy, she pulled me out of that spiral with a simple squeeze of my hand as she rested her head on me, her presence keeping me in the light.

It had been a good day, and even though I wanted her to come over for dinner again, she insisted that she needed to

study. Reluctantly, I agreed and dropped her off at Phoenix House before I got home and walked into complete chaos.

“No, no, absolutely not!”

“It’s *one* night, James...”

“I don’t care. I don’t want that fucker anywhere in this town!”

I’d stepped inside, fully expecting to see Grandpa J hanging out with Dad and joking around with the family as he joined us for dinner again, but instead I walked into a full-blown fight between him and Mom. Quietly, I sat on the bottom of the stairs, listening to their voices echo down the hall from the kitchen. I never heard my grandpa and mother get into it before, so this was a bit of a shock. Bewildered, I eavesdropped, wondering what the hell could have come between them that they were yelling at each other.

“Casey deserves this, James,” Mom’s voice gentled as the sound of Gramps pacing in the kitchen like a furious bear practically rattled the windows. From what I could tell, Dad and my siblings were nowhere around. I wondered if he’d taken them out when this broke out?

“I’m sure, and your friend is more than welcome to come to the festival, but *he* is out!”

“He’s redeemed himself more than enough times. What about what happened a few years ago in Lockemiere?”

“Yeah, and we all know what fucking happened there, didn’t we? Lindsey and Jenny are alone now, because—”

“He was not responsible for what happened to Gavin,” Mom said firmly, not raising her voice, but it was filled with absolute confidence.

Gavin. Uncle Storm...

I closed my eyes at the mention of him, slowly breathing in as I tried to push the overwhelming grief aside. That had been a dark time in this house, at the club. It was a long time before Grandpa J could smile again.

“Then what about Shay?” Gramps practically spat the words and the moment he did, it was like all the oxygen was sucked out of the house. Mom went deadly quiet, and even *he* had stopped pacing like the words he’d just spoken had hurt him more than he had anticipated.

Finally, after a minute of silence, Mom whispered, “What about him?”

Gramps sighed heavily, as he spoke with a sudden sense of calm. “I mean, what about what happened to him? The whole reason he’s not here anymore is because of *that man*. The only reason he came to town was because he was hired to—”

“I know about all of that. I know what he would have done to me to get to Shay.”

“And you’re comfortable, knowing that information, having *him* around? Around your nephews? Around your own children?”

Mom sucked in a long breath, the sound reminiscent of a hiss, followed by the scrape of a chair being pulled out as she took a seat. I remained where I was, frozen like a statue as I eavesdropped, wanting to run, but at the same time, I was desperate to hear more. “Shay’s actions were his own, James. Maybe things would have gone differently, but we’ll never know because he made the call in the end. No one else did.”

“I had to live under that man’s control for months! That psychotic monster...”

“He kept you alive. You *and* Gavin—”

“He *killed* everyone else! Your youngest boy is named after his other grandfather! And he ain’t here anymore! Why is that? Who killed Maverick, Mina?”

My mom was quiet as Gramps also slid a chair out from under the table, the sound harsh on the wood floors before he collapsed noisily into it with a heavy sigh.

“I saw it all happen. I saw *that man* kill off the entire Black Spades MC. And you know what? He was *laughing*

while he did it, while he set the warehouses on fire. I remember sitting with Gavin at the end of that dock, hearing him walk towards us, knowing that I was responsible for fucking all of it... the reason we were caught up in that bullshit with Elias in the first place. That crazed lunatic was there because I agreed with Bull to align with the Faceless. Look where it got us all..."

Gramps went quiet after his ramble, his breathing heavy and uneven. I wished I could see him, see how my mother was responding to his broken admission, but she just let them marinate for the longest time, waiting until my grandfather's shuddery breaths evened out.

"He let you live," she said finally. Grandpa let out a slight sniffle, like this information was almost too much for him to handle. Mom went on, still speaking in that same calm tone that always seemed to settle people, that felt like she was wrapping her arms around you like a hug. "James. You made a lot of mistakes back then. We all did. And so did *he*. From what I've heard, he's been living... *more* of an honest life now, and he's kept his word."

Gramps made a noise as if he were about to cut in, but Mom hushed him gently before continuing.

"I've forgiven you for a lot of wrongs. And I've forgiven Shay. You know why? Because I know that you two aren't monsters. Everything you both did was never meant to hurt. Was it misguided? Yes. Abusive? *Abso-fucking-lutely!*" Gramps sniffled hard, but he let her keep going. "I made the decision to forgive. And you know what? I didn't do it for you, or for *his* memory. I did it for *me*. Because the weight of it all was suffocating me. It held me down, always holding me back from truly letting go and living my life. Everything kept coming back to all the bullshit, and I just got so fucking tired of it all."

Mom sniffled a little. Knowing she was crying was like a wrench twisting my heart. I remember from my childhood how often she would break down and hurt. How often she

would cry and panic. Over the last few years, it happened less and less. I thought perhaps it was because I'd pulled away from my family, but now that I thought of it, I rarely heard or saw her crying. The change was so subtle and gradual I missed it. I can't remember the last time Mom had an episode.

"Sometimes it still hurts, though I don't let it destroy my happiness *now*. You've come so far, James. And I *love* you for how amazing you have been to me, to Keenan, and the kids. Especially to Hayden." She added softly. "He's needed someone like you in his life, and I think you needed him, too. Even though you've tried making things right, you've never really let go and allowed yourself to be happy. Don't let your past dictate how you live in the present. This thing with... *him*? Let it go. It's one night. It's for your daughter. Do it for her."

Gramps said nothing for the longest time, and when he finally sniffled, I could hear the sound of a chair scraping and then silence. Everything I'd overheard had been... a lot. To say the least. I felt a little numb from it, like it had been too much, but at the same time, I'm glad I overheard it all. It put more things into perspective than I'd thought. It answered a few questions I hadn't even thought to ask. Maverick Mathers, Dad's father. I never thought to ask about him, where he was, what had happened. The information about Uncle Storm... one day he was here and a week later, we were all crying and mourning him. I knew he was gone because of "club business." Why haven't I asked for more information? Why didn't I think to? Simple. I was just a kid.

Things are different now, and I thought of Mom's words, about not letting the past control the present. She was right. While it *did* hurt sometimes, why did I allow it to continue to seep into my life now and ruin the moments when I felt more at peace than I have in years? I thought of Maddy and of the short time in which we've spent together and how close I'd come to letting all the fucked-up history of my life scare her away. Even though the voice in my head was still there, I felt stronger, like I could stand against it and tell it to shut the fuck

up. I thought about what it would feel like to be free of those dark impulses, but it had been so long since I felt so clear and at peace with myself that it felt strange. It was going to take time to get used to, but I was determined to follow Mom's example and try.

Quietly, I got to my feet and, as carefully as I could, opened the front door wide without making a sound, then slammed it.

"Hayden?" Mom called from the kitchen.

"The one and only!" I said, kicking off my shoes and thumping them onto the mat before I headed down the hall. Gramps was sitting at the kitchen table, his back to me, head bowed, but I could see he was furiously rubbing his face, trying to hide the evidence of his crying, no doubt. Though Mom's eyes were a bit red, she smiled wide at the sight of me, looking a little surprised that I'd joined them. She pulled me in for a hug, something she hadn't done in some time. Mainly because I wouldn't allow her to. Normally, when I came home, I ran up the stairs and hid in my room, appearing only once in a while, barely talking. I'd become such a ghost in this house because of all the bullshit I went through at school; I never gave her a chance. But now, I did. I wrapped my arms around her and squeezed, only now noticing how much taller I was than her. Her head came up to my chin.

"How was school?" she asked me.

"It was... nice."

"Nice?" Mom pulled back a bit to look up at me, her green eyes studying me close, but a smile was creeping onto her face. I haven't used that word to describe "school" in a long time. She noticed.

I just nodded. "Yeah. Nice." I let her go and went to the fridge, pulling out the milk carton.

"Use a glass, please," she said before heading to the pantry and bringing out some dried pasta.

“Would it be *nice* because of a pretty blonde girl who’s caught your eye?” Gramps called from the table, his teasing voice replacing the broken one.

I shot him a glare over the rim of my glass as I took a sip, and decided to ignore him. I’ve seen him and Dad go at it with each other, and if you retaliated, it only seemed to feed them and give them ammunition to keep teasing. That’s why they’d always get caught in a loop with one another, both trying to one-up the other and get the last word in.

“Leave him alone,” Mom sighed, rolling her eyes as she started prepping supper, “You’re gonna scare him from bringing her over again.”

“I was just asking,” Gramps said, feigning innocence.

“Yeah, uh-huh. Why don’t you focus on your own life, Romeo. When was the last time you went on a date, eh?”

Gramps pressed his lips together and shook his head, “Got no interest in dating.”

As long as I’ve known him, Grandpa J has always been alone. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him with another woman. Not even those times where I used to stop in at The Lost Souls club, washing dishes or mopping floors to earn some extra money. Never did I see him even flirting with the girls that worked there or stopped by for a drink or a meal.

“You need to put yourself out there,” Mom said as she filled a pot with water, “You’re hanging around here almost every night.”

“You saying you’re tired of me?” He chuckled.

“Not at all,” she said. “Just figured that since you always have so much to say about everyone else’s love life, maybe you need to focus on your own.”

“Not interested in having a love life. Haven’t since...” Gramps’ voice trailed off and Mom gave him a look, her brows furrowed in concern, and I knew who they were both

thinking of. *Grandma Emily*... the woman for whom my youngest sister was named after.

“Well, if you don’t want something serious, then at least a *friend* you can have fun with and keep company. I heard you talking to Key the other night about us going somewhere. You need to focus on yourself, since you’re clearly bored!” She laughed.

“I only told Keenan that if you guys wanted to take a trip, I’d be more than happy to stay and watch the kids for you guys.”

“Keenan and I get plenty of date nights in. Don’t you worry about that. He arranges for a sitter and everything.”

“What about *me*?” Gramps sounded a little scandalized. “He doesn’t call me in to babysit?”

“You’re the president of The Lost Souls. You’ve got enough on your plate as it is. By the way, will you guys have the usual MC tent in place this year?”

Gramps kicked out a leg and muttered under his breath for a moment before nodding. “Yeah, but we’re making it a bit of a historical segment this year. Gonna feature Keenan’s old club, seeing as they were probably the only law-abiding thing in Ashland at the time. They deserve to be talked about.”

Mom’s face softened at that, watching Grandpa with a curious expression before she went back to work on chopping some vegetables for a salad. “I think Key will appreciate that, even though the MC life wasn’t for him, it’s nice of you to honour Maverick’s club.”

“Yeah...”

I’d always known Dad was in a Motorcycle Club once upon a time, but he never talked about it. Ever. This conversation and the argument Gramps and Mom were having was probably the most I’ve ever heard it mentioned. All I knew was that it had been targeted for years by a crime boss and eventually wiped from the surface of the earth, save for

maybe two, during the historic *Dockside Massacre*. But to this day, Dad is the only surviving member.

I excused myself to go upstairs and tried to take a leaf from Maddy's book by actually opening mine to study for finals, which were creeping up on us. But I kept getting distracted, doodling on the margin of my notebook, realizing I'd covered it in spades.

Shutting it closed, I sat back in my chair, running my hands through my hair, and glanced over at the black Celtic Beasts jacket that I'd so carefully laid out on my bed. For a long time, I sat there, staring at it, not realizing I was clutching the dog tags I always wore around my neck, squeezing hard at the edges as my mind swirled with random thoughts that made no sense, and yet, I felt like I was coming to a decision, one I never even considered before.

I don't know how much time had passed before Mom called up the stairs, asking if I'd like to come down for supper, and I snapped out of my strange trance. "Be down in a minute!" I called.

I looked again at the jacket, Manic's jacket, and chewed on my bottom lip for only a moment before I officially made up my mind. Rising to my feet, I gently picked it up, feeling the soft leather, running my fingers over the MC Patch. For years I'd worn Manic like armour, using it to protect myself from the world. But... I don't know if I wanted to anymore. I was still wary of Theo, obviously. Especially after what the fucker and his friends did to Maddy the other day, but I didn't need to cloak myself with the memory of a dark ghost. *He'd* kept me safe for years, but now, I just wanted to be me. Hayden.

I went over to my closet and carefully hung it up in the back, stroking the patch one last time. "Thank you, for keeping me safe for so long..." I whispered.

It was easier than I thought, letting go. It didn't mean goodbye. I still kept the dog tags around my neck, a small token from the man in the grave that I didn't feel a need to part with. They didn't have "Manic" written on them. They were a

symbol for Shay, the side of him that my mom and Gramps spoke of with love and not fear. I'd keep that part of him close to my heart.

But I was ready to say goodbye to Manic.

I let my clothes fall back into place, hiding the jacket from view, and closed the doors to my closet before I turned and headed down the stairs, feeling lighter, feeling like I'd just shed a piece of me I was finally ready to bury. I didn't feel bad about it. It felt right. And when I joined my family for supper, I paid more attention to the conversation than usual, listening as Gramps and Dad talked about the final plans and set up for the MC tent that weekend. Emily was giving Mom a hard time at my side about having spaghetti *again*, while Charlotte was sneaking texts beneath the table. I decided to help Mom by focusing on Maverick, cutting up his pasta for him, chuckling when he copied me for every bite or sip I took, his wide green eyes and mischievous little smile a reminder of how much I really had. Especially when I compared it to Maddy and the other girls at Phoenix House. I actually had it pretty good. I was one of the fortunate ones.

Whenever I laughed or smiled at the table, I could see Mom's perceptive gaze flicker my way, and her lips would always curl up with a secretive grin. But to her credit, she never mentioned Maddy or prodded me for information, unlike Gramps, who was *heavily* implying that he fully intended to embarrass me Saturday night when he had a chance to talk with my new "girlfriend."

"How long did it take you to potty-train, Hayden? Four years?" He laughed, "Why was that... you were scared of the "monster who drank your pee-pee," right? Will you be okay with the port-a-johns at the festival? What will that pretty girl of yours think when she sees the dark spot on your pants when you can't hold it in, hey?"

Yeah, I was pretty damn lucky.



IT WAS LATER THAT EVENING, after Gramps had left and Mom was getting Maverick ready for bed, that Dad and I went out to the garage to work on our bikes together. He turned on a playlist, the voice of Bob Dylan filling the space as he sang about the shelter between him and his love slowly crumbling over time. As sad as it sounds, the song itself is beautiful and Dad was always a sucker for a nice acoustic melody.

We worked in comfortable silence for a while, though occasionally he'd hum under his breath to a catchy verse or two. That was the thing about the time I spent with my dad; we didn't feel the need to fill the quiet with endless chatter like my sisters did. It was nice just to have company but also some peace.

I glanced over at him often, noting that the silver in his golden hair was more prominent lately, like middle age was starting to catch up to him. The scar along the side of his face wasn't as noticeable, only when he smiled and the crow's feet at the edges of his eyes pulled it tight. I remember asking him how he had gotten it, and he'd said something about being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I'd been a little kid when I had asked but hadn't thought of it since.

"I know I'm good-looking, kid, but I'm married," he said, polishing the black exterior to his bike. His icy blue eyes flickered my way and he winked.

I chuckled and rolled my eyes, murmuring under my breath, "You know, I heard that modesty is an attractive quality in a person."

"Yeah, but I never said I was modest. Besides, I already got me a girl, so I don't have to worry about what others think."

“Good God,” I laughed and shook my head, momentarily forgetting my task as I got up to stretch, my back cracking a little before I collapsed in one of the stools set up by the work benches. Dad got up, too, though his joints sounded far creakier than mine. I noticed how he winced ever so slightly as he put his hands on his knees for a few seconds, bracing himself, before he rose all the way.

“Old man,” I muttered under my breath, smirking when he flipped me off behind his back as he opened the fridge in the corner and grabbed himself a beer.

“Just means I’m like a red wine, appreciated with age.” He tossed a soda to me, but I didn’t open it, having fallen for his tricks multiple times in the past when I’d open it only to find myself covered in the sticky, fizzy drink. Dad loved practical jokes, and his shaking soda cans were a classic. Instead, I tapped the top, letting it settle as he joined me on the second stool, sighing heavily as he muttered, “But I think I *am* getting too old for this shit,” like he suddenly realized that maybe I was on to something.

The thought of Dad being too old to do anything was a shock for me. It never really occurred to me before that he could be anything other than Superman. He’d always been fit, healthy, strong... a figure any son could admire. But now, his face and hands had lines that I’d never really noticed before, and to see him move a little more stiffly had me instantly regretting my teasing. He spent his days bent over the engines of cars and bikes, working hard on them. How much longer could he go on doing that?

“So, what gave you the urge to check me out so hard? Jealous of my good looks?” he asked, taking a swig of his beer before he flashed that crooked trademark grin my way.

I shrugged, still giving my drink a little more time, and stared at the floor. “I guess I was just wondering...”

“Wondering what?”

I shrugged. Did I really want to get into it tonight? But after everything I'd overheard today and the questions I'd long forgotten about or hadn't considered, they were nagging me. Glancing at him, seeing that he was staring off into the trees, made it easier than if he'd been watching me. "How did you get that scar?"

Dad didn't react except to bite the inside of his cheek. He was quiet, letting my question sink in so he could process it. I waited, knowing he was taking his time to find the right words. Finally, he took another sip of his beer and without looking at me, he spoke with a gentle steadiness I hadn't heard from him in a long time. "You know that The Lost Souls fought for this city... that it was taken from that group of criminals when you were just a kid..."

Yes, I remembered. It was why we moved back here, away from Florida. Once upon a time, Ashland had been a moderately safe place to live, until... it wasn't. I thought about Gramps and Mom and their conversation about the Faceless... Shay O'Hare... and the mysterious *him*.

"When I say that The Lost Souls took it, I mean they killed for it."

I blinked a little at that, but at the same time, it didn't surprise me. Of course, that's how it happened. I read about what Gramps and my birth father had done for the Celtic Beasts. But at the same time, it still hurts to think of my grandfather as a killer.

"*I* killed for it," Dad finally whispered, taking a longer sip from his beer.

This. This rocked me. *Dad* killed people? This guy who held my mother's hand any chance he got? Who tucked me in at night or slept at my side as a child when I'd been scared of monsters? The one who carried my sisters on his shoulders when we'd all go out together for what he'd call a "family fun day"? *He* killed people?

His gaze swung my way, his expression somber and strained. “I fought alongside your grandfather during the fight. I killed, and I don’t regret it, kiddo.”

I didn’t realize I’d dropped my drink until the loud *thunk* sounded as it landed on the pavement alerted me to the fact. The drink began to hiss and spray as it burst, and I quickly kicked it out of the garage and onto the grass. I stepped away from him, trying to process this information. I had a hard time believing it. In fact, I felt a little sick. Was there anyone in my family, any man, who wasn’t some psychopathic murderer?!

“Hayden,” Dad said, setting his beer down on the counter so he could lean forward, his elbows resting on his knees as he demanded my attention. “Look at me.”

Only I didn’t want to. I wanted to vomit.

“Hayden!” he snapped, raising his voice a little.

Unwillingly, I did as he asked. Except I continued to work on slowing my breathing, hoping that he was just fucking with me, teasing me like he always did.

“I’m not proud of it. Ending someone’s life isn’t something you can just brush off and walk away from. It lingers with you, sticking like oil, and you can’t ever fucking wash it away. I remember the face of every person I’ve killed, some before that war, some during... but never after. And I’d do it all again because I did it for this family.”

“Don’t use us as an excuse!” I snapped at him, my shock now shifting to anger.

“It’s not an excuse!” Dad’s eyes widened like he looked truly appalled. “Do you honestly think I enjoyed it? That I did it because it was easy? No, I did it because I had no other choice. I did it to free this place of the evil that had been running it into the ground for over a decade. I did it because I wanted your mother to live freely, without a target on her back. I did it so you could come home and meet your grandfather, so you could have one piece of the man you...”

He stopped then, his lips pressing tight together, and I could see how his eyes began to shine. He shook his head, swallowing hard before continuing, his tone gentling, “I have always loved you like a son, Hayden. And I know that someone else never got a chance to know you, to be the father to you that you deserve. But he’s gone, and I didn’t want you to lose that. None of the bullshit that we’ve all been through is your fault. It’s not even *his* fault. It was the Faceless... it was their fault. And I wanted them to pay for everything they’d done to your mother, to you, to me...” He shuddered a little, shaking his head as he furiously wiped his eyes and stared out into the trees again. “My father and I didn’t get along, Hayden. He wanted a life for me that I fought against for years. We parted on bad terms, and I never got a chance to repair that bridge because those people killed him. I didn’t want you to lose a bridge, too, if something ever happened to your grandfather...”

Outside the garage door, night was falling, the sound of frogs and crickets filling the air, and in the bushes along the edge of the forest I could make out fireflies drifting in and out of the newly bloomed foliage. From the house, the warm glow of the kitchen lights spanned across the dark lawn, and I could make out my sisters hanging out on the couch off the dining area. Some reality show they both watched religiously playing on the television. Mom was probably upstairs, still getting Maverick to sleep.

“I did what I had to do,” Dad went on, “To make it safe for everyone. But I didn’t want to be a part of that life after. When I was offered to be president of The Lost Souls, I turned it down.” I stared at him in surprise at hearing this. I’d always known Gramps as the Prez. How different would things have been if Dad had accepted that role? I couldn’t imagine. “Your mother never wanted that life, kiddo, and neither did I. For the longest time I had been trapped in it, thinking I’d never get away. However when Ashland was taken back, it became my chance, and I didn’t hesitate. There’s a reason my road name was Dodger when I was a Spade.”

“Dodger?” I laughed half-heartedly at that. Dad never talked about his biker life. I had no idea he even had a road name.

The corner of Dad’s mouth lifted slightly at that as he nodded. “Yep. Dodger. Always finding ways to skimp out on meetings or duties. I never showed an interest in club shit. I liked the bikes but didn’t like the life. It had taken so much from me in my childhood that I had no appreciation or respect for it.”

I paused before I moved back to my stool, plunking down in it, and I took in everything I’d just been told. “So... you got the scar in the war?”

He nodded. “I’d been fighting alongside your grandfather, with the remaining two members of the Spades at my side... Taz and Scotty. We were trying to close in on the Faceless and their leader, a prick named Cartier, when all three of us got surrounded by the fuckers. I was trying to break through since Cartier was making a run for it. One of our allies was running after him alone, and I was desperate to get through to help. I’d been sparring with one when his buddy sucker-punched me and slashed at my head with a machete. The only reason he didn’t do more damage was because... because...” His voice got tight as he spoke, and he pressed his mouth together again.

“I didn’t want the biker life, kiddo,” he said again, “But that doesn’t mean that they were bad guys. Not the Spades. They were loyal, and Taz was one of the best. Scotty, too. But I had been closer with Taz, you see, him being more like a little brother. He saw what was happening, knew it was the best shot we had and stepped in to give me a chance to break away.”

A tear finally slid down Dad’s lined face, but he didn’t wipe it away. Instead, he grabbed his beer and turned it upside down, holding his arm out so that the alcohol spattered onto the dirt and grass just outside the door, then he threw the empty bottle across the room where it landed with a perfect shot into the recycling. Sighing heavily, he leaned against the

counter and stared at the ceiling. “I found him later, him and Scotty, in the same spot where we had been fighting last. They died together, sacrificing themselves so I could get a chance to get in there and fucking finish all the bullshit.”

I stared at my father, seeing a side of him I had never known.

Dad had always been such a rock. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him cry before, just like Gramps. Now I know he just dealt with his baggage, his trauma, so differently than Mom did. Than *I* did. But he was hurting, too. “Did you... *finish it?*”

Finally, he wiped his face clear of his tears and cleared his throat. “I saved my ally, and then he saved me, and *he* finished it.” Was all he said.

His words, his explanation, all of it whirled around my head like a hurricane. Today was a serious information overload. I thought about what he said, about the Spades, that regardless of them being *good*, he still hadn’t wanted the biker life. He ended things, severed those ties, and moved on. Although I still wondered if he had held onto a small piece of that side of him all these years. Something to remember it all by.

“Who *was* Cartier? What was his deal?” I asked, thinking about the reports of Gramps and my birth father being involved in a gang. If Cartier was running it all, then who the fuck was he? Where did he come from?

“He was part of an organized crime syndicate. The son of some hotshot from Montreal, old money. He had branched out and tried making it on his own.” Dad grimaced at the mention of him, glancing at me somewhat warily, like he was hesitating to tell me more. “He’s the reason your real dad is no longer in the picture.”

I felt my body go cold at his words as if a bucket of ice water had been dumped on my head. “Wh-what? I-I thought my dad had—”

“Your dad was Elias Cartier’s number-one guy for a short period of time.” His hands gripped his knees as he leaned forward, putting all of his weight on them, his head hanging like he couldn’t look at me. “But he backed himself into a corner, and Elias hired someone to take him and your mother out. That’s why I stepped in and hid your mom away. We moved to Florida, where my extended family had an MC established...”

Florida. I had a few memories of that place, of sunny beaches, of an old garage my dad had worked at for years, of visiting dockside markets as he carried me on his shoulders. Then we came back here, and I saw snow for the first time. I met my grandpa, and we settled in permanently.

“I know I took on a role for you without asking, and maybe I didn’t have permission to, but I *wanted* to be there for you. *So* badly.” Dad’s voice caught in his throat and he reached up to quickly wipe a tear away, still avoiding my stare. “You were just a baby, and when you came into this world, I couldn’t help but fall in love with you, kiddo. You were so innocent and had a chance to live a life none of us had. None of the bullshit we adults did in the past should have affected you as it has over the years. I’m so sorry for that.”

I reached out, giving his shoulder a squeeze. The moment I did, he let out a small, gasping exhale and reached up to squeeze my hand back, his look of appreciation and relief so clear as he smiled at me with eyes swimming with tears. Wordlessly, he got to his feet and pulled me up with him, hugging me hard as he patted my back.

“It’s okay,” I whispered, my voice breaking as I hugged him back. “It’s okay.”

“Fuck everyone else. All those little dipshits at your school? In a couple of weeks, they won’t matter. None of it will fucking matter. It’ll still hurt, but you can do anything you want to do to start over, and I’ll help you make sure that happens. You deserve to be happy, Hayden. Seeing you suffer

these past couple of years the way you have, I feel like we all failed you.”

“You didn’t, Dad,” I hissed vehemently, feeling my own tears choke me up as I quickly came to his defense. “I promise you, you didn’t. I know I’ve been a fucking mess, and I’ve been carrying around a shadow for so long now, but I want to let it go. I want to be... I want to be *happy*. I want to live by the example you set for me as a man.” For so long, I’d called Shay O’Hare my *real* father, but I’d been wrong. This whole time, *this* man had been there, had protected and raised me as his own. He’d been the example I looked up to, the one I admired and wished to be like.

This man was my real father.

Dad gave my temple a kiss and gave my back a final hearty slap before he let go, sniffing hard as he fought for composure. “I don’t deserve that,” he chuckled, trying to joke it off.

“There’s that modesty I was talking about.” I grinned as he laughed harder.

“Oh man.” He wiped his eyes and strolled back over to his bike, getting ready to resume his polishing job. “Thanks for making me weep like a baby. Fucking hell...”

I was about to join him when a thought occurred to me, an idea I hoped would be possible. “Hey, can I ask you something else?”

“Is it about my saddest childhood memory or some shit? ‘Cause I’ll be honest with you, I don’t think I have it in me to cry anymore tonight.”

“No, no! More like... a favour.”

He tilted his head sideways in question, especially at the way I was smiling hopefully at him. I never really asked Dad for help with anything, but this was something only he had an answer to.

Chapter fifteen



MADDY - PRESENT DAY

SEEING Hayden on Thursday that week, watching as he pulled up in front of Phoenix House on his bike, I immediately noticed the new jacket he was sporting. It was a grey colour, with a completely different patch on the shoulder and an emblem stitched on the back. When I stepped down from the porch, I could make out the name, *Dodger*, on the banner that ran over the back of his shoulders, and the black spade with flames flowing out from behind. It was a gorgeous jacket, and it suited his darker features, the grey of the leather making his silvery eyes only shine brighter.

“What the heck is this?” I asked, lightly running my finger over the soft, buttery leather.

“My dad’s old jacket.”

I raised my brows in surprise. Mr. Mathers had been in a club, too? It didn’t match his personality, at least, from an outsider’s perspective. He came off as such a homebody. Not like Hayden’s grandfather who had an obvious edge to him.

“I felt like a change,” he went on, helping me with my own helmet before he sat back down. I climbed on behind him, wrapping my arms tight around his waist, and we took off. As we rode along the streets, he’d occasionally reach back with one hand to give my leg a squeeze, or to rest his hand over mine when we stopped at a red light. Instead of riding straight

to school, this morning he brought me to a small bakery where he purchased us a pastry and coffee.

When he removed his helmet, he ran his fingers through his dark curls, combing them back and off his face for once, and I caught myself staring at him in awe.

Holy... fucking... shit. Hayden Mathers was one good-looking bastard. And for some reason, he had gravitated towards me, of all people. And today, he seemed different, a little lighter, even warmer than before. I felt it in the way he touched me, gentle and sweet, or how he carried himself. He'd always been confident, but it was less... edgy. It was like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

I didn't question it as we sat together, leaning on his bike in silence, people-watching as they went about their morning. The air was fresh, true spring now upon us as the leaves overhead had bloomed enough to flutter in the cool morning breeze. Tulips had been planted in the town's flower boxes, the pink, yellows, and purples adding a sort of simple beauty to the place. This place really wasn't that bad, I thought. It was pretty, in fact. A quiet, simple place that felt safer than the cities I'd grown up in.

The moment we finished breakfast, Hayden turned me on his bike, his large hands securely gripping my waist as he spun me about to face the front. The intimate gesture had my cheeks burning and though I know he noticed judging by the small hitch at the corner of his mouth, he said nothing as he slipped the helmet back on my head, and climbed on to get us to school.

When we got there, I wasn't the only one who noticed a difference in Hayden. *Everyone* was openly ogling. His jacket was the first thing that was whispered about, obviously, but even the change in his demeanor was evident to them. His expressionless scowl was replaced with a satisfied sort of smirk, and with his hair pushed back off his forehead, his silver eyes stood out even more. He walked at my side, arm around my shoulders, as sure of himself as always. When we

passed by Theo and his group, I noticed how Ayla's glare was highly focused on me while the look of confusion and suspicion on the boys as they took in the change in Hayden had me instinctively pressing closer to his side. It made me nervous, but he seemed unperturbed as he strolled along.

All day, as we walked together down the halls, when he'd meet me after class, when we'd part, eyes followed. Kids were pointing out the new jacket, and at lunch, Ayla and her band of bitches glowered at me like I'd offended them somehow. Surely after our altercation in the gym, our feelings toward each other were mutual? I doubted she very much wanted my friendship, and I certainly didn't want hers. And yet, she looked so sour. The only thing I could think of that could possibly be the reason behind her sourpuss expression was that Hayden was at my side and not hers. I remember how she and her friends had talked about him. They were all obviously "digging his action" as Sawyer would have put it. Maybe they were jealous?

Well, when Hayden slid his hand up my back, making me shiver, to run his fingers through my dark blonde hair, it only made Ayla's lips press more firmly together, as if she'd bitten into a lemon. And when he brushed a loose strand away from my face, leaning in to give my cheek a slow, sweet kiss, she angrily tossed her hair and turned to her friends, their heads all leaning in together as they talked softly amongst themselves.

I was so confused. Theo was literally sitting several seats away. I'd gotten the impression that they had some sort of a "thing" going on. She'd mentioned him and Spencer before, and had been staying close to him for the past two weeks. So why was she so butthurt?

Well, either way, it wasn't my problem. I just wanted to stay in my safe little bubble with Hayden and forget everyone else.

I admired how he seemed so unbothered by it all. Though he was still always watching, he never stopped looking like he didn't give a shit about any of them. Maybe a part of the

reason why he was so good at playing the part was because it was true. He didn't care about any of this. The high school politics, the people who played pretend, who didn't know who they even were as people yet. Hayden was looking forward, while so many were stuck in the now.

We only have a few weeks left, and then we'd be free. But free to what? What did Hayden want to do once we graduated? What were his plans? I never really thought about my future before. I only just learned to take things day by day because life never went the way I'd hoped. So I learned to stop hoping, to stop dreaming, because I always ended up disappointed.

But now, for the first time, I felt like maybe, somehow, there *was* something to hope for. I just didn't quite understand what it could be yet.



WE DIDN'T NEED to spend as much time in the theatre as we did each day, but Hayden and I always gravitated there during photography, on the pretense of searching for the best seats or checking out the lighting. With the play coming closer, sets were starting to appear, cardboard cut-out's half-painted, or wooden structures half-finished, and littered the stage from the drama and woodworking class. We were always alone here during the last hour of the school day, leaving when the drama teacher came in for after-school rehearsals.

Though we checked out the props, costumes, and set designs, we were always careful not to actually touch or get too close. Thinking of the hard work those kids put in after hours to get this play ready just for me to come along and ruin things didn't sit well with me, and Hayden's feelings seemed to mirror mine. Plus, I didn't want the drama teacher to kick us out. She was a tiny woman but reminded me of an angry chihuahua.

Today, I sat relaxing back on one of the seats, my legs stretched out onto the stage as Hayden meandered through the half-finished sets, peeking out at me from around a fake tree with his camera aloft, sneaking a photo or two. When I spotted him by the curtain, I crossed my eyes and stuck out my tongue, smiling when I heard him chuckle before snapping the shot.

“Can you believe school is almost over? Forever?” I said suddenly, all my thoughts from previous nights now spilling out of me. I’d been lying awake all week, daydreaming about Hayden, reliving moments of soft touches or gentle kisses. But when I wasn’t thinking of him, I was stressing about life, about what was to come. “Twelve years of school and then... poof! So long, good luck!”

“I know. I can’t wait.” He walked around, aiming his camera upward at the lights to take a quick shot. I watched him, curious, wondering... Hayden genuinely sounded excited, so sure of himself, and I honestly hadn’t expected it. I felt a little ashamed assuming that he had no plans for his future. Why shouldn’t he? Just because I was a mess didn’t mean he was, too. He stopped for a moment, looking my way. His gaze was as perceptive as always as he took me in, as if he could see straight into my soul. “Aren’t you looking forward to it?”

“In some ways, yes. Absolutely. In other ways, I guess I’m a little scared,” I said honestly, playing with the buttons on my yellow and black flannel.

“I think it’s normal to be afraid. This is something we’ve all been working towards since we were born... to grow to the point where we can walk on our own and take our lives into our own hands without our parents or teachers to guide us.”

“As insightful as always,” I smiled at him. I loved how poetically he looked at the world. It wasn’t normal for someone his age, but then, I think his life experience forced him to age beyond his years. My thoughts drifted to everything

he'd told me about his mother, his father, his birth father... the bullying... it was a lot for someone so young to take in.

He just shrugged. "It's the truth."

"I suppose. I guess I just don't feel ready."

"Why is that?"

It was my turn to shrug and I concentrated on the black buttons on my shirt, avoiding his stare. "Given how... unstable... my life was growing up, I think I wasn't able to see that far ahead."

The corners of his eyes tightened and his lips pressed together, like my words struck a chord with him. He leaned against the corner wall of the stage, the black curtain swaying ever so slightly behind him from the slight breeze that came from the ceiling vents. I kept my eyes down, the heat in my cheeks rising the longer he watched me so intensely.

When I couldn't take it anymore, I straightened my throat and bit the corner of my mouth before I asked, "What about you? What are your plans? University? Art school?"

"I'm going to travel the world," he said.

Yes, I could see him becoming a great photographer. Maybe even one of the ones who shot for the great nature magazines or shows, who would slink through marshes or climb mountains to get their shots. He would live freely, a roamer, an adventurer. The corner of my mouth lifted at the thought of him living his dream, while inside I felt such a wrench in my heart at the thought of him being so far away.

"That sounds about right." I glanced at him, "Hayden Mathers, Artist Extraordinaire and Explorer of Worlds! How are you going to do it?"

"Probably backpack at first, take photos and sell them to earn money. Might start a blog or something as I go," he began to walk in my direction, though his path was indirect as he'd pause here and there to presumably check out another prop or something. "You're coming, of course."

“Oh?” I felt my heart lift a little at that and I couldn’t help but laugh. “Am I?”

“Obviously,” he smirked, “You’re going to see the world with me.”

I laughed again, the thought and how confident he sounded as he said it, actually filled me with a sort of giddy warmth. “Really? Backpacking for years while you take pictures, hey?”

“Well, once we get enough money, we can get one of those conversion vans or buses and travel that way. I can make a mini photo studio inside and you can have a space where you can explore your interests while we are on the road. It’s perfect!”

The more he talked, the more excited he became. His beautiful smile broadened and his eyes seemed to sparkle at the thought and before I knew it, he was off, explaining “our future” to me.

“We can wait a year while we work on our conversion together, making it exactly how we want it. Then we’ll leave and we’ll have our little home with us. My dad will help, I’m sure, and teach me how to do some of the engine and electrical stuff so that if we get caught up somewhere I can fix it myself. You can take the time that we’re making it to find whatever it is you love to do. Something we can use to fund our travels, like my photographs. How amazing would it be to wake up and step outside and see mountains or desert, forest, and not the rows and rows of suburban houses?”

Amazing, I thought. It sounded amazing. And because he seemed so sure, so excited at the prospect, I found myself actually eager for once, the concept of living while traveling, of taking time to find something I loved, and doing it with him at my side, felt invigorating all while a sense of calm washed over me. “It sounds... perfect.” I said, unable to hide the smile that was nearly splitting my face in half.

Hayden watched me for a moment, his own broad grin relaxing and next thing I knew, he had walked right up, held

my face in his hands, and ducked down to kiss me. This kiss was different. It was fervent, deep, intense as he cradled my face. I reached up, my hands clasping the soft, leather collar of his grey jacket, like I needed it to keep myself upright as I eagerly kissed him back. If I could have this every day, this feeling now with him, I'd be happy forever.

Hayden sank down to his knees before me and gently broke away, though he still held on, his face so close to mine I could feel the warmth of his breath on my lips. "So it's settled, then? That's our plan?"

It was absurd, really, and for once, I understood what adults meant when they called teenagers "hopeless romantics" or "fools for love". Not that I thought this was love, but it was something *special*, something just between us, and I didn't want to let it go. I wanted to explore it, to see for myself, because I'd been listening to others my whole life and all it's done is leave me in a pit of isolation, distrust, and misery. Everyone could call me a fool all they wanted because, for the first time since I could remember, I felt safe. Happy... *hopeful*. "That's the plan," I agreed.

Hayden's thumb stroked my cheek, that wide, confident smirk of his making my knees shake, before he leaned in to kiss me again, and I felt like my head was spinning. His lips were so soft, yet demanding, as they danced with mine, effortless, swimming, dizzying. Kissing Hayden was like what I imagined touching paradise would be like. Something so unattainable, that you could only fantasize about it, and then when you finally got a taste, it eclipsed all dreams and understanding. I could kiss him forever...

Finally, he pulled back, ever so slightly, our lips still brushing against each other's, our eyes closed, breathing in tandem as we clung to each other. I had to laugh a little, the sound light and breathless, as I whispered, "This is ridiculous."

I felt him smile again, and he gave his head a little shake. "To everyone except us."

“We hardly know each other, and we’re planning on basically riding off into the sunset in a makeshift van to live as artists or whatever. It’s silly.” I was putting up a small wall of defense. I was pulling back. I knew it, but I couldn’t help it. I needed to protect myself and it was just a habit at this point. As much as I loved the picture we had painted, I had to admit it was all fantasy. It wasn’t real and it wouldn’t be. Was it fun to imagine and dream about? Of course, it was. Would it actually happen? Probably not. The reality check burst my little bubble and I felt my mood start to sink like a stone in a pond, the ripples that were my pain spanning out to the shore, hitting again and again.

“Maybe so,” he agreed, coming back down with me, our moment of make-believe gone. When I opened my eyes, however, his were still shimmering bright with... hope? I couldn’t tell. But that confident smirk was back as he kissed the tip of my nose and murmured, “Maybe it *is* a little... *silly*.” I giggled, the word so innocent and strange coming from his mouth, “but there’s nothing wrong with a little silliness. Not if it makes you happy, and I think we deserve that, don’t you?”

I released the lapels of his leather jacket, my hands gliding down to squeeze around his wrists, and rested my forehead to his. “I do.”

Hayden’s smile broadened on his face, his thumb still stroking my cheek, and I melted into him, feeling *incredibly* silly, indeed. I was a smitten kitten, utterly twitterpated, and if that made me a fool, I guess someone better give me a jester’s hat, and I’ll wear it proudly.

“Then fuck what others think,” he said. “And let’s just be silly.”

“Silly Vanilli.”

His brows furrowed for a second before he chuckled, “*What?*”

I giggled and shrugged, “I have no idea where that came from.”

We both laughed a little, letting go of each other as we came down from our moment, and I glanced at the clock at the back of the theatre. We had about fifteen minutes left, which meant the drama teacher would be coming in a few minutes to start setting up for rehearsals. “I need to use the washroom.” I got to my feet, scooping up my bookbag.

“I’ll meet you at your locker, then?” he confirmed, heading up the steps behind me.

I looked back over my shoulder at him, smiling at the way he spoke like he was asking permission, still. “As if that’s even a question,” I said to him, loving the little smile he gave in response to my statement. As always, he kept extending the choice to me. I appreciated it, but I felt like I was ready for him to just... take over. At least, sometimes. Making the decisions all the time was starting to make me anxious. What if I picked wrong? What if I was choosing something he didn’t want? What if *he* was uncomfortable? I would always put my safety first, but now I wanted to consider him and his feelings, too.

I was thinking about this as I hurried down the hall and disappeared into the girls’ room, wanting to get back to him as soon as possible. I was washing my hands, a little lost in my own thoughts, until the sound of the door bursting in had me jumping to attention, spinning about to see Ayla, Nova, and two other girls who palled around with them.

For several seconds, no one moved or said a word, and the space between us felt like a vacuum, sucking all air out of the room. My ears were ringing in my head as my heart began to race, the look of jealous fury that Ayla Savard carried as she glared daggers my way was chilling, and it said all I needed to know without words. I *knew* what was about to happen. I’d seen that look before, in shelters Mom had taken me to, right before someone jumped us.

Automatically, like a frightened cornered animal, I ran. I know it was fruitless with them blocking the door, but I dodged to my right, then spun around on my heel and weaved

left, avoiding Nova's arms as her dark, purple-streaked hair hit my face. One of the girls, one whose name I did not know, tried to make a grab for me then, but I reached up, taking advantage of my longer reach to push her back against her shoulders, sending her flying back into the wall. That was when someone snagged my hair, grasping my ponytail so tight it jerked my head back, cricking my neck in the process. Gritting my teeth, I turned, ignoring the sharp pain in my scalp as several hairs were ripped free so I could land a punch on the taller girl who was holding me back. I brought my fist in sideways, striking her hard in her upper abdomen on the left side. She grunted at the impact, but I was already bringing my left fist in, hitting her other side, before she released me, keeling over as she held herself, gasping for air.

That was when I felt something strike the middle of my back. *Hard*. I fell forward, sprawling onto the cold, tile floor with a hard smack as my palms struck the ground, protecting my face. Next thing I knew, a foot was pressing into the middle of my back, right into my spine, and I cried out in pain.

"Fucking get it together," Ayla's voice snapped at her friend from behind me, indicating who was pressing down on me. "Grab the bitch and drag her in there,"

Sharp nails dug through my shirt as the foot moved away, hands now lifting me enough so I found myself dragged to a stall. Nova shoved me against the toilet, the porcelain digging into my sternum, one of her hands getting a better grip on my ponytail to hold my head in place, hovering over the cold, stinking bowl, waiting.

"I honestly don't know what it is the guys see in you," Ayla's voice was like venom as she spat the words out from somewhere at my back. I flailed my arms, reaching, hoping to break free. Except the fourth, skinnier girl moved into the claustrophobic space, standing on one of my calves with her booted heel before seizing my wrists to pull my arms painfully backwards, immobilizing me. "Hayden... Theo... Spencer... what is it about you? You got some magic pussy or some shit?"

I gritted my teeth, sweat dripping from my forehead as I continued to try to shift out of position, hoping to find some weakness in their grip to break free.

“Why Hayden bothers with you is a complete fucking mystery. You’re trash. Your mom is trash, and you’re going to end up like her, locked up in some insane asylum, strapped to a bed, getting raped by the orderlies and drugged up so that you drool over yourself and shit your bed.” She giggled at the bleak future she painted for me. Honestly, I’d be lying if I said her words didn’t bother me. I’d always worried about the same thing. What if I ended up like my mother? I didn’t want to, but I’d seen that time and time again, where kids who hated their parents eventually started acting out and living the very lifestyle that brought them to the foster homes in the first place.

Nova’s grip tightened on my hair and my tears fell into the toilet water as Ayla continued.

“And Theo... I suppose revenge is best served hot and steaming,” she mused. “Poor Maddy. You’re just a pawn to them. A pawn in their petty plan for vengeance.”

So Theo had put her up to this. Fucking hell...

I let out a shriek then, the sound echoing sharply off the walls of the enclosed space before the skinny bitch holding my hands slapped a hand over my mouth, silencing me.

“Drown the cunt,” Ayla said. If poison could be a sound, it would be her voice as she hissed those three words.

The hand smothering my face ripped away, and I found myself plunged face-first into the cold water. I struggled hard, my legs kicking, arms fighting against the restraints. I could hear Ayla laughing loudly through the splashing and panic, her back and forth with her friends barely discernible through the splashing and chaos I was going through.

“... ugly trash...”

“... Theo wanted—”

“Think Hayden will...”

“Who cares? She’s fucking done...”

“What about—”

“-won’t get caught. Theo’s watching...”

“Keep her still!”

“Shut her up!”

“It’s hard!” Nova squealed when I managed to lift my head enough to gasp a lungful of air, my lungs screaming and burning as I sucked in a loud breath. “She won’t stay still!”

“She’s a scrawny, fucking loser! Just shove her head in and get it over with! Theo can’t distract Hayden forever!” Ayla hissed, stomping over to see what the holdup was.

Nova tried again, but when I shifted backwards against her legs, it was enough that when she managed to shove my head down, I was nowhere near touching the water. Without pause, I let out a scream, praying that a teacher would come running.

“Shut the bitch up!” Ayla snarled. “No one can see us here with her. You! Watch the door!”

There was a scramble behind us as one of her friends clambered to her feet, still wheezing from where I no doubt had managed to elbow her in the liver. Meanwhile, the scrawny one who was holding my arms back let go to cover my face with her palms, trying to silence my cries.

Paranoid Maddy.

Scrawny Maddy.

Liar Maddy.

Ugly Maddy.

“End it!” Ayla spat, the intense hatred in her voice clear. Her and her friends’ words rang about my head, all of it a jumble of information, my racing heart unable to slow to think for even a second about any of it, except to wonder... *why?* Why were they doing this?

Revenge is best served hot and steaming... she'd said. This had nothing to do with them. It was about Theo. Theo and Hayden.

Fuck. This!

As the hand moved away from my mouth so I could be shoved forward, I lunged, ignoring the hairs that ripped away from my scalp, and bit into the palm, my teeth latching hard. The girl screeched like a banshee, hitting the side of my head as she released my wrists. I swung back, striking her side with my elbow and she stumbled away, crying from her injuries.

Nova, however, acted fast seeing that I wasn't as secure as before. Wordlessly, she shoved me forward, trying to bury me again in the cold water. I gripped the sides of the porcelain bowl, clenching my jaw as I tensed my body, pushing back against her weight.

"Fucking drown her, you idiot!" Ayla joined us in the small space then, adding her own weight to the back of my head. As far as I could tell, one of her allies was still keeping watch, still wheezing away. I think I seriously did some damage to her. The other was now curled up with her bloody hand, sobbing away somewhere behind us. Now I just had these two bitches to deal with. I fought back, writhing in their grasp, turning and twisting myself to keep them from moving me forward. There was water everywhere, soaking into my pants and dripping from my hair. Nova even slipped a bit on the wet tiles under our feet, making me fall in deeper. Heart in my throat, my face numb, my lungs exhausted from the fight, my eyes widened as I knew my strength was withering away. Ayla managed a better grip on the back and pushed just as the door to the washroom burst open, the heavy footsteps running in.

The impact of the door bursting open smacked the girl who was keeping watch right in her face, knocking her backwards off her feet and to the floor with a heavy thud. There was a scuffle that ended much too quickly, followed by the sound of something or someone hitting the wall with a loud, sickening

smack. Next, one of the bitches was yanked away from me, followed by a grunt and another thud. Finally, Ayla was pulled up, bringing me with her, but I was promptly dropped to the floor, coughing, sputtering and shaking. I didn't hear what happened, only that I found myself lifted to my feet and pulled into the arms of my savior.

The smell of his leather jacket, the fresh scent that was so... *Hayden*... overwhelmed me, and I burst into tears as I clung to him, fearfully looking around to see what the hell had happened to the bitches who just tried to kill me. Nova was on the floor, lifting herself up like she'd been thrown, appearing dazed. Ayla, however, was moaning incoherently from the corner, looking like she'd hit the wall before slumping to the floor in a heap. The other two were on the ground as well, though they had huddled back, staring at Hayden in fear as if they knew they'd royally fucked up now.

Hayden did that? I thought, staring at the sight of the four of them. I never condoned men hitting women, but in this case, I felt a sense of gratitude fill my heart. Good. Fuck them! They deserved what they got. The bitches tried to *kill* me! But I was too shaken up to vent my feelings. As much as I wanted to beat the ever-loving shit out of them, I couldn't stop sobbing, my breaths coming out in quick, little gasps.

Hayden turned from the four girls, leaving them behind as he guided me out of the washroom, hurrying us down the hall just as several teachers and students poked their heads out of their classrooms, curious as to what the commotion was all about. Neither of us looked back as we headed outside, Hayden leading us directly to his bike. Perching me on the seat, he finally let go, only to frantically look me over like he was terrified he'd find some serious injuries on me. I was certain I looked like a mess, with my ponytail loose and disheveled, long strands dripping with water. I know my nose was red and running, my eyes puffy and filled with tears that couldn't seem to stop the flow as they slid down my cheeks, mixed with the leftover water droplets on my skin. I couldn't stop shaking.

“Maddy, breathe. Slowly breathe with me,” Hayden said, holding my hands like delicate flowers in his grasp, his face twisted with a mix of pain and pure rage. His jaw was clenched so tight, I worried about his teeth cracking together. His cheeks were blazing, his previously combed back hair now falling over his face again, the dark side of Hayden now making an appearance. But it didn’t scare me. It made me feel safe. I obliged, forcing myself to match him as we slowly inhaled, stopped, and held our breath for several counts before we released it. Mine was still shaking badly, but after a minute or two, I felt my control coming back.

From the double doors, students were beginning to appear, some looking around curiously before spotting us, while others had their bags slung over their shoulders, completely unaware of what had just happened.

“We need to get out of here. Are you okay to ride?” he asked me earnestly, cupping my face and ducking down so he could look into my eyes for an answer. I still couldn’t speak, but I nodded, wanting to put as much distance between this school and myself as possible. I’d suck it up to make it happen. Hayden immediately removed his jacket, wrapping me in the grey leather before slipping the helmet over my head. We tore out of there as the bell sounded, leaving many questioning in our wake, but we’ll deal with the consequences tomorrow. I just needed to get away.



AT FIRST, I thought he would take me back to Phoenix House, or even to our little spot in the woods. Instead, I found us pulling into the driveway of his home, the beautiful, manicured lawn greeting us, his mother bent over her flowerbed while little Maverick ran around on the grass as he blew bubbles.

As we pulled up, his mother looked around, her long, blonde hair tied into a long braid, her smile wide from beneath the brim of her sunhat as she waved in welcome. But when Hayden stopped and I removed my helmet, her smile disappeared, eyes widening as she took in the sight of me. Her green gaze flicked from Hayden and back to me again in question, concern clear in her expression.

“Maddy? My God, are you okay? What happened?” She got to her feet, throwing her gardening gloves to the ground as Maverick ran over, shouting with joy at the sight of us, clearly not old enough to read the mood.

Though I was still shaky, I did crouch down to allow the little boy to throw his arms around my neck in greeting, hugging him back as Hayden approached his mother, determined and serious as he murmured to her softly, his words too quiet for me to hear. When he finished, his mother’s eyes only widened further in shock, looking at me one last time before she waved us all into the house, leading the way. Hayden took Maverick from me, urging me to follow his mother inside.

Mrs. Mathers had momentarily disappeared while Hayden led his little brother and me into the kitchen, where I gingerly took a seat at the table, feeling light-headed and confused. Everything that had just happened was whirling about in my head and I couldn’t make sense of it. All I knew for certain was that Ayla had just tried to kill me, and it seemed to be on Theo’s orders. Hayden pulled up a chair across from me, his hands flying about as he went to touch first my shoulders, then my knees, like he was afraid I was seriously hurt and he’d only cause me further pain by touching me.

But Mina Mathers appeared then, a bundle of clothes tucked under one arm, and a first aid kit in the other. She came over, her steps light and careful, like she didn’t want to scare me. That was laughable. She was as close to a princess or elven figure that I could think of. This woman was the least scariest person I’d met in my life.

“Maddy?” she said in that same calming voice she used when we first met, “I have a fresh change of clothes for you. They might be a little big, but they’re dry and comfortable.” She placed the carefully folded long-sleeve shirt and sweats onto my lap and stepped back, giving me my personal space, and pointed to a short hallway off the living area. “There’s a washroom there you can change in. You can shower if you like, too. When you’re done, we’ll get you fixed up, alright?”

I nodded appreciatively, my heart so filled with a mix of overwhelming emotions that this kindness was almost painful. I wasn’t used to having someone look out for me after something like this. All those times in foster homes, or with my mother’s boyfriends, or the men who were chasing us... I was left to lick my own wounds.

Hayden held me up by my elbow, walking with me down the dark hall so that he could show me where to go before he left me in peace to change.

His mother had been right. Her clothes were a little big for me, but they were comfortable and clean and dry. My own belongings were covered in toilet water and, to my surprise, blood. Where had that come from? I felt around the back of my head, wincing at the spots where my hair had been wrenched, but as far as I could tell, there was nothing. No cuts or bloody messes. Relieved at that, I stepped into the shower and quickly washed myself, wracking my nails over my skin in determination to rid the feeling of being touched so aggressively. I wanted to wash that feeling away, to ignore how it reminded me of the other times I’d been grabbed so similarly.

Calm yourself, Maddy. You’re safe.

That’s right. I *was* safe. I was with Hayden, in his home. How could I feel any safer?

When I stepped out of the shower, I could make out the bruising that was starting to appear on my arms and legs. I turned about in the mirror, the large splotch in the middle of

my back reminding me of Ayla's foot as she pressed it down to keep me still.

From out in the kitchen, I could make out the murmured voices of Hayden and his mother talking. At one point it sounded like he had started shouting, but she had quickly calmed him, and all seemed to be well between them. While I was grateful that he brought me here, I didn't want to be a burden. I was going to have to face the school if the girls reported the incident. I'm sure they were already coming up with some bogus story that I attacked them in the washroom or some shit. The question was, who would they believe? The shining, popular girls of the school? Or the new girl who had a sketchy background? Trash.

Sighing in defeat, I quickly dressed in the pale grey top and navy sweats, balling my own clothes up before I stepped out to face everyone.

Mina looked my way, smiling wide as she rose up from the chair I'd been occupying and held a hand out to me. Nervously, despite her smile and how warm she was, I stepped forward, unsure of what she was going to do or say. Would she believe me? Or just think I was a liar like everyone else? I glanced at Hayden who was watching me closely, his expression still distraught from what had happened. He saw it. He had no doubt about who was innocent and who was guilty here. But he nodded encouragingly, so I put my hand into his mother's, and she cautiously gave it a squeeze, like she knew I was on edge.

"It's okay, honey," she guided me back to the chair so I could sit, "Just relax a minute. I've got a pot of tea on. And I made fresh cookies today. Do you like s'mores?"

"Never had them," I admitted, my legs, my back, every part of me now starting to hurt as I sank into my seat.

"Oh, well, you're in for a treat! Let me fix you up a plate, and I'll call Miss Ross at Phoenix House to let her know where you are. You're more than welcome to stay for dinner, you know," she spoke like the prospect of me staying was

preferable, not just out of courtesy. Maybe that was true, but I still felt anxious about invading her space with my troubles. She took out her cell phone and selected a number to call, moving away from the room as it rang.

“Hi, Miss Ross? It’s Mina Mathers calling... yes. I’m good, thank you, how are you? Excellent, excellent... listen, I have to let you know about an incident that occurred today at school...”

Oh God... would Miss Ross believe me? She’d inevitably have to tell my social worker, and then I wondered if Saanvi would believe me. The very thought of Hayden’s mother taking my side seemed impossible, and I felt myself starting to spiral.

They won’t believe me. They’ll think I’m lying. They’ll call me a liar.

Liar Maddy...

“You’re a liar. How dare you make this up about your father?”

“He’s not my father...”

“We’ve given you a home! We’ve fed you and clothed you and this is how you repay us? By making up nasty stories? You can get out. Get out, little girl! You can stay in the goddamn shed!”

I started to hyperventilate; the idea of being forced out into the dark night was almost as terrifying as Mr. Foster sneaking into my room like a snake.

“I-I’m sorry! Please, don’t make me go out there,” my gaze whipped to the backdoor that overlooked the woods. I could make out the border of the trees, the forest beyond as black as coal, the shed she referred to just sitting at the edge. My little heart hammered like a jackhammer against my bony chest, and my eyes filled with tears as I stared up at my foster mother, my little body trembling. “I’m sorry!”

“It’s too late for that, little girl. Get your ass out there! Now! NOW, you little liar! You’re a liar, Maddy. A liar! You’re a liar, Maddy. You’re a liar, Maddy...”

“Maddy?”

I blinked, snapping to attention. My hands were cradled in Hayden’s, and his mother was staring at me from the counter. Her phone call now over, and concern giving her a worry-line between her brows.

“Do you want cream and sugar in your tea?” she asked me.

“Oh, uh, sure. I mean, yes, please.” I blinked several times, desperately trying to clear my mind before I focused on the silver eyes across from me. Staring into those mirrored depths helped, and the longer I looked, the easier it was to breathe.

It wasn’t until a steaming mug of hot tea and a plate with *six* cookies was placed in front of me that I realized his mother had been speaking, and I flushed, embarrassed at my rudeness.

“... a look and just make sure you don’t have any broken bones or anything. Does that sound alright to you?”

“Huh?” I looked around, confused, meeting her inquisitive green stare. “I’m sorry?”

“I said we should check you over while you tell me your side of what happened. Hayden already explained his. But I want to make sure you didn’t sustain any serious injuries. I told Miss Ross I would escort you to the doctor’s office, if that would make you more comfortable?”

Paranoid Maddy...

“You’re paranoid!” My foster father laughed when I rejected the opened soft drink he offered. I wasn’t normally allowed to have those. Too much sugar; my foster mother said. “It’s just between us, okay? Enjoy it!” Again, he pushed the drink in my direction. I was sitting on the floor of the living room, trying to focus on the Lego I was building... a home.

“I don’t want to get into trouble...” I murmured, avoiding his stare, praying that he’d leave me alone. It had been over a

week since he visited me last, and I knew it was only a matter of time before he came again.

“You won’t get into trouble. Live a little. Have a drink!”

“No, thank you.”

“I said, take the drink, Maddy.” The jolly attitude of his was shifting. He was getting angry. I hated that. It scared me more than when I made my foster mother mad. But I didn’t want to take the drink. I didn’t want to be bad. And the last time I took a drink from him, I got sick... So sick.

“I-I...” I started twisting my fingers together, unsure, now panicking as I found myself caught in the middle of a hard place. What should I do? Take it and risk getting sick again? Possibly getting caught by my foster mom and being punished. The Shed...

Or...

Risk getting my foster father angry. And that was a terrifying possibility.

I took the drink, careful to keep my lips closed as I pretended to take a swig. He noticed.

“I said, drink it!” He hissed, glancing towards the backdoor where my foster mom was lounging in the sun out back. “Stop being so paranoid, Maddy!”

Tears welling up in my eyes, I took a small sip, only to have him lunge forward and tip the can back, forcing a huge mouthful. I coughed and sputtered, but he wouldn’t have it. He forced more down my throat, all while muttering, “After everything I do for you! I take care of you, don’t I? I’m nice! I’m a nice man, Maddy. You need to be more respectful! Stop being such a paranoid, griping little leach!”

What was worse... when I ended up in emergency early in the morning, my little body battered and bleeding, the doctor touched me without permission, making it hurt even more, and I was told again and again I was a liar, that I was a

compulsive, lying, paranoid little girl who made up nasty stories about the kind couple who had taken her in.

“No, thank you,” I whispered, ducking my head. “I’d rather not go to a doctor, please.”

Hayden’s face crumpled, like he could see the fight draining from my face, like everything I was feeling, he could see, clear as day. He could see it all right there, and it was killing him that he couldn’t save me from my past.

“Have a sip of your tea. It’s blueberry. I promise you it will calm your nerves.” Mina took the other seat at my side and reluctantly, I turned to face her as I showed her all the marks on my legs, on my arms, telling her about how I was cornered, trapped, about what Ayla had said, about the near-drowning, all of it. It was easier than I thought to tell her. Though at first I’d been hesitant, nervous about how she’d react. The sincerity in her face, the way she’d always ask before feeling around an injury to “check for breaks” as she put it, gave me a sense of reassurance that she wouldn’t do anything without my permission.

Hayden had disappeared briefly during my explanations, storming away like he was enraged. I had seen the way his face flushed, how he clenched his fists as he stomped off. Worried about what he’d do, I was about to follow when Mina stopped me, shaking her head, “Don’t worry about him, hon. He just needs a moment to collect himself. That’s how men are. They like being our protectors and the moment they feel like they’ve failed, we need to let them get that feeling out so we can all move forward.”

“He didn’t fail me,” I insisted. “Hayden saved me.”

“I know it.” Mina’s smile was kind, soft, and she took one of my hands in hers as she sighed and took a sip of her own tea. I’d been slowly drinking mine, loving the flavour, and had even managed to finish two of the cookies despite the fact I’d been talking almost non-stop for the last ten minutes. “But men take that responsibility so seriously. They want to protect us from the evils of the world, and even when it’s out of their

control, they have a hard time letting that go.” She sighed heavily again, and I couldn’t help but think of what Hayden had told me about her. She had her own messy past. I imagine she had been through something similar with Mr. Mathers.

“We want to protect the ones we love,” she went on, “but it’s inevitable that we can keep them from harm. That’s life. We need to forgive ourselves when it happens. Carrying that kind of guilt is unfair. Hopefully, Hayden will learn to be kinder to himself.” She glanced down the hallway where he had disappeared, his footsteps ringing as he went upstairs and stomped around.

“I wish he would, too,” I said, staring up at the ceiling.

She gave my hand a little squeeze, followed by a pretty smile, seemingly appreciating my words. “You need to follow your own advice, I think,” she said.

“Huh?”

“Maddy, we *all* need to be kinder to ourselves.” She grabbed one of the cookies with her free hand, taking a small bite as she smiled at the back of Maverick’s head. He was sitting before the television, watching an old movie about an ogre and a donkey, laughing that sweet belly laugh that little ones have. “Everyone needs to be kind. For you never know what someone is going through. It could be the worst day of their lives, for all you know, and your kindness could make all the difference. But...” her gaze flicked back to me, “I think people find it harder to be kind to themselves. The words we think about ourselves we would never dare to say to another. The words echo in our minds because we let them. We hold back from being happy, from enjoying the *now*, the good. It took me a long time to learn that lesson.”

Hayden chose that moment to come storming down the stairs, and to my surprise, he had a hairbrush in his hand and a scrunchie, both clearly from either his mother’s or one of his sister’s rooms. Mina got to her feet and wandered over to the pantry as she started pulling things out of the cupboard to start on dinner while Hayden retook his seat. I was about to turn

around to face him, but he held my chair in place and made a little click of his tongue.

“Just stay there,” he said as I sat straight, wondering what the hell he was going to do. To my surprise, he started combing out my long, wet strands, careful not to snag. We sat there together, his mother moving around in the background and Maverick occasionally calling out to us to watch a scene he particularly enjoyed about the short, mad little antagonist of his movie who was determined to be king.

Hayden’s fingers moved through my hair, weaving out sections until he began to do a French-braid, catching me completely off-guard. But his touch was feather-light, and he carefully entwined the sections down my back, tying it off with the scrunchie. I felt his handiwork, surprised, and turned to him in wonder.

He simply grinned and winked. “Growing up with two little sisters, you learn how to do hair.”

Chapter sixteen



Hayden - Present Day

I WANTED TO KILL THEM.

When Theo had approached me in the hall, he claimed he wanted to talk about the “misunderstanding” from the other day when he and the guys had tried to talk to Maddy. He claimed he was trying to “right the wrongs” between her and the bitches he had sucking his cock each night. He yammered on about wanting peace between us and all that bullshit, delaying me from checking on her. It’d been too long. Finally, I sidestepped him and upon hearing a heart-breaking, muffled scream, I knew... I fucking knew something was wrong. Had I known sooner, I would have killed Theo right there in the hallway.

While my mother had fixed her up, it took every ounce of control I had not to let Manic slip back into the driver’s seat. I wanted to go back to that school, to find Theo and those fucking cunts and end them all. The world would be a better place without them. They could see what it felt like having their own heads shoved underwater, feel the fear and desperation when you realize you can’t suck in any air, as your lungs scream in protest and burn while you panic. I wanted them to feel that and *more*. I wanted them to be so afraid that they’d...

No, Hayden... no. Don’t think that. That’s too far, I told myself. I stormed upstairs and paced, trying to find a reason to keep myself from leaving to take care of those assholes, and I

found it when I passed Charlotte's room to see her lounging on her bed, her head hanging upside down off the edge as she played with her phone. When she saw me, her eyes widened in alarm, no doubt seeing the rage on my face as I paused in the doorway.

"Hayden!" she gasped, dropping her phone to the side as she straightened herself, "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"Just... just need to calm down."

She gestured me inside, something she rarely did. My sisters treated their rooms like little shrines. *No one* was allowed entry. Especially Maverick and I, not that I cared. I had no reason to go into their rooms. But I appreciated the gesture and took the invitation, hoping it would distract me from darker thoughts.

"What's going on?" she asked, confused as she righted herself on the bed and hugged her pillow to her chest. Her wide green eyes, much like mom's, were fixed on me, her face serious and concerned, a rarity for someone her age. She never had to worry about bullies and shit, thank fuck. I'd have slammed that shit down.

"Just the usual high school bullshit, kid," I muttered, wandering over to her bookshelf. Not long ago, it used to hold her beaded necklace and bracelet-making kit, endless stuffed animals, pretty unicorn statues, and strawberry-flavoured lip balm, but now... it was slowly changing. The beads were gone, and so were most of the stuffies, save a select few. And one unicorn remained, a gift from Dad. Now it had pre-teen makeup in bright colours and sparkles, innocent stuff as Mom was always adamant about the girls not growing up too fast. There was hairspray, brushes, mirrors, and clips, a photo of her and her friends from last summer at the beach, and the family's latest Christmas photo where we were all forced to pose in front of the Christmas tree. Although Charlotte was aghast about having her picture taken, she kept this one out for all to see, a sign that she still was that same little girl who used to follow me around wherever I went. In the photo, you can

see her somewhat hiding her face, turning it towards Em and Mav, who were both smiling wide, hyper from the morning of gift opening. Dad had his arms around Mom, both of whom were laughing, and then there was me...

I stood at the back, arms crossed, a surly look on my face. I wasn't even facing the camera. My eyes were staring off to the side, angled towards the window. You could see how much I was hurting, how isolated I was making myself. I don't remember why I was in a mood that morning, why I wasn't smiling with the rest of my family. I know I'd alienated myself from them, but how had I allowed it to go so far that I looked like I didn't give a shit at all? How did I get so lost?

"Hayden?"

I looked away from the photo to Charlotte, realizing how much she'd changed while I'd been off feeling sorry for myself. She was so much older now, and it wasn't just because of the strawberry lip balm or sparkly eyeshadow she had no doubt applied while at school, hiding it from Mom's eyes. The fullness of her face was gone, and I could see now how much she looked like our mother. She'd changed, and I missed it. The guilt was starting to pool in my stomach. I loved my sisters. I always hinted at serious repercussions should the kids in my school allow the bullying I'd endured to trickle down to their younger siblings so that Em and Charlotte would become new targets from the next generation. I hadn't allowed that, and I was so fucking glad to see her smiling with her friends, enjoying her life. Meanwhile, I'd been wasting mine.

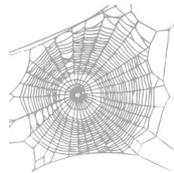
"Sorry, I'm a little..."

"Distracted?" She grinned at me, a look of mischief coming into play. "Would that be because you have a *girlfriend*?" She closed her eyes and made kissy sounds, hoping to embarrass me, but I wasn't the least affected by it. I wasn't ashamed to call Maddy my girlfriend. I like the sound of that... *my* girlfriend.

I rolled my eyes at her, now noticing the brush and pretty scrunchie she had sitting next to the photos, and I held them

up, “Speaking of girlfriends, mind if mine borrows this tonight?”

Emily furrowed her brow, no doubt wondering what kind of weird crap Maddy and I did together, but shrugged and said, “Have at ‘er!” and she rolled onto her back again, head upside down, and brought her phone back up to her face.



I’D PROBABLY SEEN my mother angry two or three times my whole life. Sure, she had her moments where she was frustrated because kids do dumb shit, and I had been no exception when I was little. Same with the girls and Mav. But to see her seriously mad? Like, where I think she was about to blow up on someone and ultimately lose her shit? I could count on one hand how many times I’ve seen that, and I still would have fingers left over.

There was the time Dad had helped me make a potato cannon in secret, and we ended up blowing a hole through Mom’s pretty, white-painted fence that lined the front of the house. She chased him around the yard with the broom, yelling and screaming at him while he ran for cover, his arms over his head. Or the time Gramps came by and gave me a firework for Canada Day, which I set off in the backyard, only to have the thing fall over and shoot off toward the house, sending sparkling light flying into the windows. Mom had a serious conniption, and for about ten minutes, we were all yelling at each other, debating about whether she was having a stroke, a heart attack, or had just gone completely comatose. Her face was bright red, her hand on her chest, sputtering over her words while Dad, Gramps, and I yelled about what was the best thing to do. Finally, she got to her feet and fixed my grandpa with a look that would have had me pissing myself and running in the opposite direction had it been directed at

me. I didn't think she was capable of looking so freaking nutty and furious. Well, Gramps didn't come by for two weeks after that, and when he did re-emerge, it was during the hours that he knew my dad would be home, using him as a barrier between himself and my mother.

Now, I was knocking another finger off my hand when I was called into the principal's office the next day, surprised to find her sitting in a chair across from Mrs. Felton, watching her with that terrifying, narrowed stare as she drummed her fingers on the wooden arm of her seat. The school counsellor was standing just behind Mrs. Felton, looking sombre, but the moment I stepped into the room, he scowled like he disapproved about every single part of me. I arched a brow at him, not caring about his opinion. He'd done jack shit over the years to stop the bullying in this school. Not just about the stuff that was said about me but the crap that Theo, Ayla, and their gang did to every other kid that they refused to accept as equal members of the student body. Yeah, Mr. Price was a cowardly piece of shit.

That was when I realized that Maddy was also here, sitting in a chair against the wall with a woman I didn't recognize standing at her side, like she was a support system.

What in the hell?

"Hayden, please have a seat," Mrs. Felton said, indicating the vacant chair beside my mother. Our principal was a rigid little woman who wore overly large, rounded glasses, her grey hair swept up into a tight bun at the back of her head. I know she and my mother have butted heads multiple times over the years about what to do with me. Looks like we were in for another round.

My mind flashed to the image of Lucas White lying on the ground, his burning flesh still very fresh in my memories. He was still in the hospital, getting ready for skin grafts. I felt zero remorse over what I did. I'd do it again. In fact... I thought about Theo and Ayla and how they had set us up yesterday to attack Maddy in order to get at me. I would do the very same

to them, given the chance. I wondered if somehow they had put together a connection to me and Lucas? Most likely, it was because of what happened yesterday, as Maddy was here. I was just getting paranoid, I guess.

I glanced at her as I took a seat in the empty chair. She was nervous as hell, her right leg bouncing up and down repeatedly, her hands twisted in her lap, her face tight and anxious. Something I noticed since day one was how nervous she got around authoritative adults, and us being brought in here was not a good sign. We were in trouble, and that thought was terrifying her. Fuck...

“Madeline. Hayden. Do you know why we summoned you both here today?” Mrs. Felton asked us, her hands clasped on a folder that was sitting closed on the ugly, off-white laminate desk.

“Uh, no?” I said, lounging back in my chair as I tried to get comfortable. I wasn’t going to let this woman, let alone the asshole standing behind her who hadn’t stopped glaring at me this whole time, intimidate me. “Have I been made Valedictorian, or something?”

“Your attitude will not get you very far in life, Mr. Mathers,” Mr. Price intervened.

“*Excuse me!*” my mother snapped, her nostrils flared and cheeks tinged pink with rage as she turned her death stare on the dickweed still standing. “You can mind *your* attitude! Don’t you dare speak to my son or any student that way! Especially given the circumstances, you have no idea what has truly happened here.”

“That’s what we’re hoping to find out,” Mrs. Felton said, her large eyes observing me. Whatever we were here for, it appears that she and Mr. Price had determined that I was most definitely guilty. Again, my gaze flicked to Maddy, wondering why the hell they had dragged her in here.

“And we will discuss it. But don’t presume to *know* anything until after, thank you.” Mom regained her composure

before relaxing back again.

“Well, let’s proceed, then. Miss King! Where were you during the last period yesterday afternoon?” Mrs. Felton barked at Maddy, making her jump, and suddenly everything clicked.

Ayla... That fucking bitch.

“I-I was with Hayden. We have photography...”

“And where were you two during that class? Not in Miss Mills’ room, as she has already confirmed it.” She snapped.

Oh holy hell, this woman is fucking asking for it. My hands gripped the arms of my chair tight. I hated how she was talking to Maddy, as though she was guilty of *anything!* This cunt had a lot of fucking nerve...

Mom reached over then and gave my knee a slight squeeze. I glanced at her, but her green stare was still fixed on Mrs. Felton. But she knew. She knew how upset I was getting. She needed me to calm down. *Maddy* needed me to calm down. I couldn’t fly off the handle.

Reign Manic in, I thought. Now wasn’t the time or the place.

“We-we were in the theatre. We’re the photographers for the school play, so we’ve been spending Miss Mills’ class in there... Hayden’s been helping me practice with my—”

“And, at any point, did you leave the theatre before the bell?” Mrs. Felton cut her off.

Bitch! Manic roared in my head.

“Well, yes. I had to use the washroom—”

“And what time was this at?”

Seriously, she needed to stop cutting Maddy off! I was about to lose my ever-loving shit.

Again, Mom gave my knee a squeeze, and I discreetly took in a deep breath, holding it to try to calm the fuck down.

“I-I can’t remember. It was close to the bell because the drama teacher came in for rehearsals. We left so that she could—”

“Did you happen to run into another student while in the washroom, Miss King?”

“Mrs. Felton, if you could let Maddy talk and explain without being interrupted, I think that would be appropriate,” the woman standing at Maddy’s side said suddenly, obviously catching on to the tension and accusatory way that she was being addressed, and she didn’t like it. Good.

“Saanvi, I’m trying to get to the point here,” Mrs. Felton’s rigid posture seemed to tighten even more, like a rod had been rammed up her backside. “I don’t need rambling information that has nothing to do with the issue.”

“We’re trying to hear out Maddy and Hayden’s side of the story, actually,” the woman, Saanvi, said patiently. “We can’t do that if you don’t let them talk.”

At my side, the corners of Mom’s mouth twitched like she was pleased to know this woman was on our side.

Mrs. Felton squirmed a little, like a kid who was caught being naughty, but didn’t push back. She only readjusted herself, reclasped her hands again, and turned back to Maddy. “Miss King, did you happen to run into other students in the ladies’ room?”

Maddy’s hands were still writhing in her lap, her leg bouncing as her shining hazel eyes anxiously peered up at our principal. But upon meeting the direct stare behind those massive, round glasses, Maddy immediately cringed and her head dropped to her lap.

Hello, bitch! I thought furiously as Mrs. Felton proceeded to glare her down. *She doesn’t like being stared at! Get a fucking clue!* Again, I had to suck in another breath. If I lost it, it would only give her and Mr. Price more ammo against us. I knew now that Ayla had obviously reported us, most likely claiming that Maddy had attacked her, and I was complicit

because I had probably witnessed or been told about the altercation.

“I-I was washing my hands when-when...” Maddy swallowed hard, and upon seeing her struggle, Saanvi ducked down to whisper in her ear, the words indiscernible to everyone else. But whatever she said, it seemed to encourage Maddy to keep going, because she nodded, closed her eyes, and continued with her side of the story, “Ayla Savard, her friend Nova. I’m sorry, I don’t know her last name, and two of her other friends came in.”

Mrs. Fenton’s brows tightened. Something didn’t match up already. Fuck, what did Ayla tell her?

“Then what happened, Miss King?”

“Ayla and her friends cornered me. They-they...” Maddy gulped hard, her eyes still closed. I could see Saanvi reach up like she wanted to put a hand on her shoulder for support but stopped at the last second, knowing it wouldn’t be appropriate or would help. Hmmm... I bet this woman was Maddy’s social worker. “I was attacked. I was dragged by my hair, stepped on, and shoved into a stall where they stuck my head in the toilet.”

Mr. Price bent over to whisper in Mrs. Felton’s ear. Her face looked so sour it was like she’d just sucked on lemon-flavoured dick.

When he finished saying whatever the fuck it was to her, Mrs. Felton nodded to Maddy, “And then what happened, Miss King?” Her tone was highly skeptical. She wasn’t accepting one word of Maddy’s story.

“Hayden came in, pulled them off me, and brought me home.”

All eyes flicked to me and back to Maddy again. “*Home?*” Mr. Price cut in then. “What *home* would that be, Miss King? We called Phoenix House this morning, and Miss Ross confirmed that you didn’t come in until after eight last night.”

That was probably the only truthful thing he’d said yet.

Maddy had stayed late at my place for most of last night. After she'd finished her tea, when I was done French braiding her hair, she stayed close to me and my mom. She helped us make dinner, which was grilled honey chicken, green beans, and mashed potatoes. When Dad had come in, he'd cast me a mischievous smile at the sight of my *girlfriend* being there, but to my relief, after Mom had a quick, whispered conversation with him, he left us alone and entertained Maverick while we got everything ready for supper.

Afterward, Mom had insisted that Maddy stay and join us for a family board game, something we hadn't done in ages, as I'd become so anti-social. But she brought out an old favourite, *What Do You Meme?* and we spent a good hour playing and laughing before Dad put Maverick to bed and Mom drove Maddy back to Phoenix House.

I hadn't seen Maddy smile so much in the company of other people besides me. Mom truly had a magical way of putting people at ease. Because of her work with Phoenix House and the Foster System that Gramps had helped put in place, she was more perceptive to the needs of the girls who lived there, which was another reason why she was so great with the volunteering she did with the house.

"Our home," Mom said then, speaking up, great dislike written all over her face as she looked at Mr. Price like he was some bottom-feeder blobfish. "Maddy has been a welcomed guest in our house, and after she was attacked, she and Hayden came to *me*."

Mrs. Felton's eyes narrowed ever so slightly, not like she was angry but more confused. I guess our story wasn't matching up with what Ayla had told her after all. She and Mr. Price kept glancing my way, like there was more to the fabricated story they hadn't disclosed yet. "You saw Madeline after?"

"I did," Mom cast Maddy a sympathetic and reassuring look, and I knew how much she wanted to reach out and hug

her. “I can confirm that she sustained several concerning injuries from the attack.”

“Like?” Mr. Price was still skeptical, “I see nothing on her.”

“And you *won't* see them, *Sir*.” Mom snapped at him.

“What injuries?” Mrs. Felton asked, her large eyes looking over to Maddy, who still looked panic-stricken as she curled in on herself in her chair. Fuck, the very sight made my heart wrench. I couldn't help it. I got to my feet and immediately went over, sinking to my knees to look up into her beautiful face, ignoring the others in the room as I kept my sole focus on her.

Maddy flinched, but upon opening her eyes and seeing me there, she relaxed enough into my touch that I knew she was alright.

“Tell them, Maddy. It's okay,” I said as I took her hands in mine and squeezed, hoping to shield her from the scrutiny.

Her breathing was still shaky, but she nodded, her eyes on mine, leaning on me as I'd hoped she would.

“Mrs. Mathers said there was a bruise on my back and cuts on the back of my head... there's bruising and swelling on my legs and on my arms and wrists...”

“From when the girls held her down so they could fucking drown her!” I added, looking over my shoulder at everyone, holding their stares as I burned with rage. They needed to hear us, to understand how close Maddy came to actually dying.

There was little silence after this, before Mrs. Felton straightened her throat to speak. “Miss Savard has claimed that you, Miss King, approached her in the girls' washroom and began to bully her regarding her relationship with Mr. Hebert. I don't condone bullying, especially in regards to your dating lives. It's not tolerated in our school.”

“Are you kidding me?” My mother spoke up then. “How many times has this school stood up for Hayden?”

“The bullying that Hayden went through occurred at his junior school, Mrs. Mathers. There has been no record of it happening here—”

“No, no!” Mom straightened up, her crazed look now coming alive as her anger began to churn. “No, you cannot sit there and tell me that my son has not endured bullying at this school these past three years!”

“There have been no reports of any such thing, Mrs. Mathers,” Mrs. Felton snapped. “Whereas in this case, Miss Savard has shown me the evidence of an attack with her split lip and bruised forehead... which brings me to Hayden.”

“What about Hayden?” Mom’s eyes widened in alarm while I myself forced my expression to remain as neutral as possible.

Fuck...

“Miss Savard and her friends were physically assaulted, Mrs. Mathers. And they claimed that it was Hayden who attacked them after the verbal altercation with Miss King.”

A strange, buzzing sort of stillness filled the office at these words, and it all clicked into place. Since Ayla hadn’t succeeded in hurting Maddy the way Theo had wanted, they were going to try to get at me like this. I had to admit, it was creative, and what made it worse was that they weren’t wholly wrong. I *had* thrown the girls off of Maddy. I *had* hurt them to save her. Ayla’s cut lip and bruised face was because I’d grabbed her and sent her flying. Her hitting the wall like she had was just bad luck on my part. Honestly, I wish they’d told me she’d gotten stitches down her face. She deserved it. But again, I kept myself as outwardly unaffected as possible. I’d learned that being patient, holding in the rage and rebuttal made you less likely to say and do things that would otherwise make you look guilty. Another reason why I had to keep Manic at bay.

“You’re saying that you believe my son physically attacked four girls?” My mom’s voice was dead serious, each

word spoken slowly and loudly so that they could not be mistaken.

“I am saying that *that* is what the accusation is.” Mrs. Felton insisted, but I could tell that she believed that side of the story over Maddy’s.

“How-how *dare* you...” *Oh shit*. I watched as my mother slowly rose out of her seat, and I found myself wishing Dad had come with her. Mom’s hands were clenched into fists and shaking. Her rage was shifting into something else. Something...

Uh oh... an episode.

Her eyes were starting to shine, like she was about to cry, her breath coming out short and in small gasping pants. Something had triggered her. Hard. *Shit, shit, shit!* What the fuck do I do? How do I fix this? How do I get her to calm down?

Maddy released my hands then and jumped to her feet, her chin lifted as she faced our principal and counsellor and declared, “Hayden didn’t do that to them. *I* did.”

Everyone turned to look at her in surprise.

“Maddy?” Saanvi whispered, sounding as shocked as I’m sure I looked. What the hell was Maddy doing?

“I mean, I was fighting for my life,” Maddy went on, glancing at my mother who still looked so distraught and lost at the mention that I’d hit not just one girl, but four. “I was cornered, they had threatened me, and when they put their hands on me, well, of course I fought back.”

“You did that to them? *You?* One versus four and you managed to inflict that kind of injury upon all four girls?” Mrs. Felton stared at her in disbelief.

“I learned to protect myself growing up the way I did. Even though they still managed to get me into that stall in the end, I fought them off as best I could. I was trying to defend myself.”

Ding! Ding! Ding! Atta' girl, Maddy! The magic words were spoken. She acted in self-defense.

“Then how did you get away, Miss King? How did you manage to escape *four* girls if they were in the midst of holding you down in that stall?”

How this woman was still not believing our side of the story was beyond me. Why did people like Ayla Savard and Theo Hebert get away with so much bullshit?

Maddy slowly looked down at me, as I was still sitting on the heels of my feet on my knees before her, like I was worshipping the very ground she stood on. In a way, I suppose that was true. I was. This girl... she was trying to protect me. To spare my mother's hurt. We both knew I was the reason that Ayla's face was temporarily fucked, but she was taking the blame. I minutely shook my head at her, not wanting her to compromise her reputation at this school or risk the trouble she could possibly get into by doing this, but she placed her hands on my shoulders and smiled at me, a smile so breathtaking that I forgot whatever it was I was about to say in her defense.

“Hayden saved me,” she said, her voice so sure and strong. I'd be shocked if anyone here heard anything else but the truth in her words. “He pulled them off of me and got me out of there.”

“Is this true, Hayden? You didn't hit any of the girls? You didn't strike anyone?” Mrs. Felton's voice broke the silence that followed, but I didn't even bother looking her way, especially when I was busy admiring the beautiful girl in front of me.

Maddy's eyes tensed at the corners, like she was silently begging me not to refute it. But how could I let her take the blame for something I'd done? I couldn't...

At my back, I could hear my mother's muffled snuffle, and the sound damn near broke my heart. I knew she was praying that what Maddy was saying was true, while my girl's fingers

began to dig into my shoulders, warning me, urging me to go along with her. *Goddamn it...*

With a jerky nod, I muttered, “Yes.”

Behind me, Mom let out a shuddering gasp and I could hear the heavy thump as she collapsed in her seat, the relief obviously overwhelming her. The tension in Maddy’s face vanished, softening as she, too, appeared comforted by my compliance.

“Well then, I think that pretty much settles everything,” Saanvi spoke up then, speaking with loud authority, “I think it’s clear that Maddy was acting in self-defense. As Mrs. Mathers herself viewed the injuries she sustained, we know that Miss Savard was lying about the attack, as she did not mention any sort of physical quarrel between her and Miss King.”

“I still don’t condone fighting in my school,”

“Be that as it may, Mr. Mathers here is not guilty in this case and therefore his presence is no longer required. We can discuss punishment for the girls in private, yes?”

Mr. Price wasn’t buying any of this, but he said nothing as Mrs. Felton agreed with Saanvi and apologized to my mother before dismissing us. My mom held out a hand to help me up from the floor, but I kept my focus on Maddy. I took her hands in mine, holding them tight before I whispered, “I’ll wait outside for you.” It was almost lunch hour, but I felt like skipping out the rest of the day. We only had a couple of weeks left, and most of the days in class were write-offs as we spent most of our time studying for finals which started next Wednesday. We could afford a skip day.

She only nodded as I was forced to leave her behind, accompanying my mother out into the office before seeing her to the main foyer of the school. The moment the office door closed behind us, she let out a great, shuddering sob and wrapped her arms tight around my neck, stretching up on her tippy toes in order to reach me.

“Hey Mom, it’s okay...” I hugged her back, relieved that I’d spared the details of how I’d saved Maddy when we were talking last night. All I’d said then was that I pulled the girls off of her. I didn’t mention the force behind it, or how I’d roughly thrown them. Nor did I dare mention how I wished I’d done more. That would scare the fuck out of her. Hearing Maddy’s story today only collaborated with what I’d said.

While I felt terrible about lying to her, in this case, I think for her mental health, the white lie was for the best. She looked like she was about to have a full-blown panic attack back there when it was indicated that I’d used excessive force on the girls. That the suggestion I’d perhaps even hit them, was enough to have her losing her shit. I didn’t want that for her. I didn’t think she would be able to handle it. So I buried my guilt and hugged her back, hating myself while at the same time, I knew I’d react the same way again if it meant saving Maddy from those bitches.

When Mom finally let go, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a Kleenex, sniffing as she dabbed her eyes and nose. “I’m sorry, Hayden. I just... I was just worried that—”

“It’s fine, Mom. Ayla is a liar and she’s had it out for Maddy since she got to this school.” This was a fact. She had lied about the story of yesterday’s events, so I didn’t let myself feel guilty for saying it.

“But why would she drag you into it?” Mom asked, her green eyes still shining. “That’s what I don’t understand.”

“Theo Hebert.”

At the mention of his name, her lips pressed together tight as she nodded. She knew his name very well. He’d been the source of the change in my demeanor, the reason behind my depression and shift in personality. Not to mention, she knew that the scars he carried were because of me. We had a long history, and she knew most of it. She cursed very lightly under her breath, uncharacteristic of her, but nodded, understanding. “I hate that little punk.” She said at last, and I couldn’t help

but laugh in surprise. Mom hardly ever spoke like that about people, so when she did, I knew she meant it.

I slung my arm around her shoulders, escorting her out the front doors and into the sun where, overhead in the trees, a crow began to caw furiously at a squirrel which squeaked angrily back at it, both fighting over something we couldn't see.

“Bad crow,” we said in unison, before we broke out laughing at our ridiculous family custom.

“Well, I'm just relieved we got that sorted,” Mom said as she chuckled a little and stuffed the Kleenex back into her jeans pocket.

“Do you think Maddy will get into much trouble?” I asked, anxiously, wondering what the hell was happening back in the office.

“I don't think so. Maybe a day or two suspension for fighting, but it was in self-defense. Saanvi won't let them ruin her future, so don't worry about that.” Mom's words and her smile was enough to reassure me that all would be well. Because if it was something that could potentially fuck up Maddy's future, I didn't care. I would march back in there and come clean. “Is she still going to come with us to the festival tomorrow?”

“I hope so.” I thought about what it would be like to have her amongst my extended family. My uncles were a little... intimidating. At least to outsiders. Uncle Lee was a huge guy, but he was like a teddy bear, while Uncle Shaw mostly kept to himself. But Uncle Vail was a little like Dad, though he had more of a hard edge to him that made people back off.

“It will be a great time, I promise.” Mom gave my shoulder a squeeze. “And don't worry about your uncles,” she added, like she could read my worries on my face, “I'll explain to your Aunt Casey. She'll keep them in line,” She winked. I wanted to laugh at that. Yeah, maybe my uncles were

intimidating bastards, but Aunt Casey was the ringleader. She'd keep them in check.

“Thanks Mom.”

After so many years of holding back, hiding from her, it felt nice opening up again. When I was little, my mom and I had such a close bond. I loved her more than anything. Yes, her episodes scared me, but I was a kid. I moved past it as best I could once I saw her smiling again.

The bell rang then, signalling the lunch hour, and she let me go, like she knew I'd rather people not catch me having a heart to heart with my mother. “I'll see you later, okay?” With a flip of her long, blonde braid, she headed off towards her little white car, the fear and anxiety that had spurred to life for that brief moment in the office forgotten. I had to admit, she'd really fought hard to come this far, and I felt a sense of pride as she waved, smiling at me, before she backed out of the stall and pulled away. If my mother could get over demons, it gave me hope that I could conquer mine, too.



“SO YOU'RE SUSPENDED UNTIL EXAMS?”

“Yeppers!” Maddy was balancing on a fallen tree, walking along the trunk with her arms extended out, swaying this way and that. I resisted the urge to jump to my feet and make her get down, the fear of her falling and hurting herself blasting like a siren in the back of my head. But I quashed it down, knowing that was the unreasonable side of me. Manic's side. “But Ayla and her friends got the suspension *plus* have been forced to volunteer for the graduation dance.”

“That's not enough,” I grumbled, wishing the bitches had gotten worse.

“It's fine.”

“No, how can you be so calm about it? They basically got a slap on the hand for almost drowning you!” I thought about what it had looked like storming into that washroom, seeing Maddy so outnumbered, forced over on her knees, her head half-soaked and hanging over the end of the toilet as two of them pushed her down. Fucking hell... just picturing it again had my blood boiling. And Maddy had been so fucking scared, so shaken up, so nervous in that office I didn't understand how she was so level now. It was like it never happened.

Maddy shrugged, casting me an innocent little smile. “Trust me, I agree with you. But what more can we do? We're lucky that we managed to get by the way they did. I could see the way that douchebag, Mr. Price, was looking at you. He wanted to nail your ass to the wall. Is there bad history there, or something?”

I sighed and lazed back from where I was lounging on the ferns, my dad's old jacket laying across the grass as a makeshift blanket. Relaxing back on my elbows in the sun I continued to watch her as I explained. “He thinks I'm responsible for what happened to Lucas White,” I said, remembering when I'd been called into the office and questioned hard by him and a cop. But there'd been no proof and nothing linking me to the crime. Lucas sure as shit wasn't talking. So I got away with it.

Maddy's sharp gaze shot my way, standing precariously on one foot as she kept her balance. “But you did do something to him... didn't you?”

I shrugged, “I'll just say that what happened to Lucas was unfortunate, but when you're an evil asshole who preys on those more vulnerable, I like to think karma strikes back.”

She pursed her lips in disapproval but didn't push it. I think deep down, a small part of her was happy to learn about what had happened to Lucas. But we didn't need to discuss it further. “Either way, the shit with Ayla is on record, it's dealt with, so if she tries something again, there's already

documentation of her coming at me, so the faculty will be watching her closely.”

I didn't believe that she was just “okay with it”, but I appreciated the way she was putting on a brave face and trying to move past it. She jumped down from the tree, landing softly on the ferns in the clearing, our favourite spot to hang out together. A beam of sunlight was shining down on her, hinting at the golden and dark tones of her hair, her eyes practically sparkling. She was breathtaking.

“Thank you for what you did,” I said, unable to take my eyes away.

Maddy grinned and winked, “No problemo.”

“No, it was a big deal, Maddy. You shouldn't have lied.”

“And then what would have happened, hm?” she asked, tiptoeing through the daisies and greenery as she made her way over to me. “You would have been expelled and probably arrested for assault. On a girl, no less. You'd have a record, and your future would be damaged because of it.” Maddy sank to her knees, looking down at me with a look so full of sweetness that I swear she was made of sugar. “You don't deserve to have your life fucked up because of *her*. You saved me, so let me help you.”

With the sunlight shining behind her, it gave her a sort of halo around her head, the lighter strands of her hair glowing, her slightly parted, pink mouth, just begging to be kissed. What did I do to deserve this girl?

I reached up, holding her chin between my cupped fingers, stroking her full bottom lip with the pad of my thumb. Maddy sucked in a sharp breath but didn't move away. If anything, the swirling grey and green of her eyes shone brighter, and I felt like I was looking at an angel. Reaching up, I kissed her, my hand reaching round to the nape of her neck to hold her in place. I couldn't stop myself. I needed more of her.

My other hand reached up to snake around her waist and I pulled her into me, lying back on my jacket so that she lay on

top, uncaged, but still in my hold. Maddy didn't pull away. Instead, her little hands came up and cupped my face, her touch light and soft. But the feel of her body... her curves pressed against the hard planes of my muscle... I've been fantasizing about this nearly every night now.

I swept my tongue across her lower lip before she opened for me, and I kissed her deep, languorously, taking my time so I could be in the moment and just enjoy tasting her. Eventually, I let my hands roam, running over the curve of her ass to give it a squeeze, before I slid my palms over the swell of her hips and held the small of her waist. Maddy's breaths came out in small pants, and her own grip moved to my hair, where her nails raked through my curls until she fisted them, causing me to moan into her mouth at the possessive hold. But when she shifted on top of me, rubbing against my groin, I really fucking lost it for a second, because I stopped holding back and I just let my desires take over.

Holding her by her waist, I flipped us, with her staring up at me from the jacket, her lips swollen from our kisses, eyes shining in the sun, cheeks rosy. She was so fucking beautiful I just wanted to bask in her presence. But I needed more; I wanted to *feel* her. So, holding my upper body up on my elbows, moving so slow it ached to hold myself back, I began to swivel my hips against her. I moved my hands in to hold her face, watching her reaction, needing to see her.

Maddy's pupils were blown, her little gasps and now moans like music to my ears. She reached up, gripping the sides of my t-shirt, and didn't pull away. Instead, her legs spread, giving me better access, and I groaned as I bent down to steal another kiss from her. I may be a horny as fuck teenager, but the last thing I wanted was to hurt Maddy in any way. Her approval made me feel like I'd just won the fucking lottery. Her trusting me this way was like a gift I'd be forever grateful for, so I had to keep reminding myself not to get carried away.

I gyrated my hips against her pelvis, my cock rock hard at this point, and Maddy only pulled me into her, eagerly kissing

me back.

“Hayden,” she sighed into my ear when I pulled away to kiss the side of her throat, and I nearly came in my pants as I shivered.

“Are you okay? Do you need me to stop?” I asked, my voice hushed as I somehow managed to choke out the words.

“Don’t you fucking dare.” She licked the shell of my ear and it took all the self-control I had to not rip her pants off then and there so I could bury my face into her pussy. I nipped at the side of her neck as I slid my palms down to grab her ass, maneuvering her the way I wanted, thrusting against her a little harder, making her tremble beneath my touch.

Never have I wanted anything more than Madeline King.

“Maddy...” I moaned as I picked up the pace a little, pulling the collar of her flannel shirt aside so I could latch onto her shoulder and suck. Her body arched against mine, pressing back to meet me for each pump of my hips. How fucking amazing it would feel to be inside of her, but not yet. No, I wouldn’t push her that far this soon. It’s easy to forget that we really don’t know each other, that we’re essentially strangers, but after meeting her, I believe that some people are *meant* to find each other.

I tenderly cupped her chin and turned her to face me, so I could look into her eyes as I drove us further along to the edge. I wanted us to fall over together, and I watched her closely to gauge her reaction. Maddy’s lips were swollen from my kisses, her cheeks flushed, everything in her expression so trusting and... fuck me, *heated*, that I knew she was close.

“Come with me, Maddy,” I whispered, my lips brushing against hers. When I tilted her pelvis up a little, I noticed how her eyes widened and heard the small gasp that escaped her. I grinned in response, keeping her in this position, rocking again and again, maintaining that rhythm that had her curling her fingers into my shirt, twisting the material as she pressed back.

“H-Hayden,” her voice began to shake as she whispered my name. “Hayden... oh... my God... *please!*”

“Hold onto me, gorgeous,” I murmured, picking up the pace just a little more. “I got you.”

“Shhhhhhhiiiiiiiiit! I’m so close, I-I... I...” She gasped, her eyes now squeezing shut as she clung to me for dear fucking life. Fuck, if she didn’t come soon, then I was gonna lose all control. I was *barely* holding it together. But just when I became worried that I was gonna nut in my pants before her, Maddy let out the most glorious, sexy-sounding moan I’d ever fucking heard in my life. Her legs kicked out, her body trembling hard as she shuddered and a moment later I felt myself come. I groaned loudly, wishing there weren’t so many barriers between us, but holy shit...

I tried to pick up everything I could about this moment so I could store it away to always remember. Like, the smell in the air, that fresh, almost wet, smell of spring, mixed with the woods, the trees. The feel of the buttery soft, grey leather beneath Maddy, and then the feel of the earth under my knees, cushioned by the thick grass and springy ferns. The sounds of robins calling to each other from a distance, and the faint breeze rustling the leaves. But mostly, I focused on the girl lying beneath me, so utterly beautiful it made my heart ache. This moment with her now, gazing up at me with that blush on her cheeks, that little smile on her pretty, pink mouth, was perfect.

With one trembling hand, Maddy reached up to cup my cheek, and I couldn’t help but close my eyes briefly and lean into her soft touch. If I died now, I’d die a happy man.

“Are you okay?”

My eyes snapped open, and I looked down at her in confusion. “I’m more than fine. I’m... I...” my voice trailed off as I failed to say in words how I was feeling. I settled between her legs, laying down on top but held my weight up with my elbows as I let my fingers trace the sides of her neck while I gazed at her. “How about you? Are you okay?”

A little smile teased her lips and without hesitation, she nodded, sending a flood of relief through me. Had I crossed a line, had she been too scared to stop me, I would never live it down. Leaning down, I pressed several small kisses around her face, her cheeks, her nose, and her lips, making her giggle. That sound was truly music to my ears. I readjusted myself, ignoring the wetness in my boxer briefs, and lay with my head resting over her chest, my fingers still roaming along her neck, into her hair, her collarbone. Any part of her I could reach.

“I didn’t realize that I could ever allow someone to get this close to me,” she said softly, her fingers now combing through my wavy hair. The very thought of someone else having touched her sparked a match in me. Who the fuck had touched her before? Not that it mattered, but I couldn’t help that flicker of jealousy rearing its ugly head. When I tried to look up at her, however, her hands gently but firmly held my head in place. So I stayed, realizing she didn’t want me looking directly at her as she said this.

“What do you mean?” I asked, choosing to stare off at the side, to the greenery mixed with the white daisies that had bloomed to life around us.

Stay calm, Hayden. Just let her speak...

Maddy sucked in a long breath between her teeth, like she was preparing herself, but I knew she wouldn’t have brought it up unless she wanted to confide in me. I just needed to be patient and wait for her to share at her own pace. “Growing up the way I did, I...” she stopped abruptly, and for a horrifying moment, I thought she was about to shut down like Mom used to. But when I moved to look at her again, she refused to let me budge. “I was exposed to a lot of... *things*... at a very young age. Things that kids shouldn’t be forced to-to...”

Fuck.

Rage. The *rage*. Manic was fighting in his cage, begging for me to let him out, to unleash him on the sons of bitches who dared hurt her.

“I thought that I’d been ruined for all others. That there would be no way I could ever allow someone to get close to me.” Her fingers, which had frozen the last time I’d tried to move, started twirling around my hair again, the touch more relaxed now.

I gave her a moment to breathe before I asked softly, “How far did it go?”

For a brief moment, Maddy’s fingers clenched my hair, not painfully, but enough to signal her stress before easing up. “Far. Too far. When it did, it was the last time I was in foster care. My mom started moving us around as much as possible. Then, after she stiffed the people she got her stuff from, we ran east again.”

I didn’t need to ask her what she meant by “stuff.” Most of the girls in Phoenix House were there because their parents suffered from substance abuse. The only difference between them and Maddy’s mother was that Mrs. King was locked away in a psych hospital in Ashland.

“I never dreamed that someone could make me feel without the sting of betrayal or feeling shame, disgust, fear...” she whispered, her voice more thoughtful than sad. “It’s a weird feeling... to be around someone and not be afraid. To want *more*.” She gave a lock of my hair an affectionate little tug, “And then you come along with your sexy leather jacket, and your motorcycle and bad boy persona and just smash down the walls I’d put up. I feel like I’m seeing the world again in a way I never thought possible.”

I slid my arms beneath her back and squeezed hard, hugging her to me. Though her comment about my jacket, my bike, and the whole dark, broody character I embraced for years made me chuckle a little, I couldn’t ignore how affected I was by her words. Hearing that I had made such a positive, life-changing impression on her, that I’d somehow managed to help her when I felt like she was the one saving me did things to my soul.

I turned, pressing my lips to the skin exposed beneath the few unbuttoned sections of her shirt, right over her heart.

I made a vow, then. Never again would I allow someone to try to take control of Maddy's life. Never again would I allow someone to hurt her. Inside, Manic vehemently agreed, still wishing that he could push me further to find her foster family, the ones who betrayed her, and punish them the way they deserved.

But no...

That was what that darkness in me wanted. I had to be what Maddy *needed*, and right now, she needed me to just be here with her, holding her, keeping her safe.

Chapter seventeen



MADDY - PRESENT DAY

“So, they’re all like, *together* together?”

“Yeah...”

“But she’s married to one of them?”

“To my Uncle Vail, yes.”

“But has kids with your Uncle Shaw and Uncle Lee?”

“Yeah...”

“And they all just... live together this way?”

“Pretty much.”

We’d just arrived at the Spring Festival that I’d heard so much about these past few weeks, and as I sat in the backseat with him and his sisters and little brother, while his dad drove us here in their minivan, I’d been prepped on the family dynamic of his Aunt Casey. Mrs. Mathers, or Mina as she insisted on being called, had chimed in here and there to help Hayden with the explanation, looking unbothered by the whole thing. I could tell he was worried about my reaction to this information because he’d been squirming in his seat the entire time, keeping his face angled away while casting quick, curious glances in my direction like he thought I was about to pull open the sliding door and bail out of the van as it moved.

Honestly, it was a surprise to hear about his aunt and her unusual dynamic with his three uncles. But, I mean, what did I

care? Apparently, they'd all been together since childhood, so I guess it worked for them. Had they not told me about it, I would have just gone on with my life, unaffected and unaware of their lifestyle. Knowing about it, well, it still didn't bother me. I'd seen enough one-on-one relationships fail time and time again, so it's not like that way was the secret to love. While a multi-partner parallel wouldn't be something I was interested in, I wasn't about to stop others if it was what worked for them.

Mr. Mathers, or *Keenan* as he laughed at me every time I addressed him so formally, parked the van and we all piled out, heading towards the bright lights, music, and chaos of the infamous Spring Festival. It was twilight, the last rays of sun disappearing over the water of the St. Lawrence River.

The grounds were set alongside the water, so the air smelt of saltwater and fresh springtime flowers. Hayden held my hand as we followed his family inside, Keenan covering the cost for all of us, even me, and we wandered near what looked like the beginnings of rows upon rows of food trucks and tents.

“Remember, if for whatever reason we get separated or you get lost, the meeting place is the Drop of Doom!” Mina raised her voice to be heard over the crowd, pointing up at an intimidating high tower. It was easily the tallest thing here, and no doubt that you could see it from any point on the grounds. As I watched, a circular set of seats rose up, up, up... all the way to the top and just sat there. I felt my palms go clammy as I watched, wondering why the hell anyone would think that was fun, when the thing suddenly dropped! My eyes nearly bugged out of my skull as the screams from the riders rang out.

“Want to try it?” Hayden asked, noticing where I was looking.

“No!” I said at once, taking his hand and clinging to his arm, like it would prevent some invisible force from dragging me in that direction. He chuckled and squeezed my hand back.

As Keenan argued with Charlotte, who was demanding to be allowed to wander off on her own, and Mina held onto Maverick who was attempting to bolt towards a cotton candy stand, I waited with Hayden, who was holding Emily's hand with his spare.

“Mina! Key!”

I looked around to see a large group approaching us and knew at once that this was Casey St. James and her family.

Casey was beautiful, and I could see how she, Grandpa J, and Hayden were related. They had the same dark, wavy hair, a familiar look about their faces, though her eyes and James' were dark, and Hayden's was light. She was beautiful, and I could see the smallest of bumps beneath her light blue maxi dress. Was she pregnant?

Mina cried out happily and hurried forward, giving Casey a huge hug, both swaying side to side on the spot, before she released her and stood back, admiring her stomach. Evidently, this *was* new.

As they both chattered away, I studied the others in their group. Two men. Two *very* intimidating men. Without meaning to, I took a step back, just on reflex, as I usually did around guys. I started having an easier time around Keenan and Hayden's grandfather, as they seemed like a pair of goofballs and gave me plenty of space to feel comfortable. These men, though, had a strange edge to them I hadn't expected.

“It's okay,” Hayden whispered, his mouth close to my ear, wrapping his arm around my shoulders, “I promise you, they're good. You're safe.”

I nodded but remained where I was glued to his side while Keenan greeted the men with handshakes, shoulder slaps and boisterous “How the hell are ya's”. For a few minutes it was pure chaos as everyone talked over each other, raising their voices to be heard, moving from person to person for a hug, but Hayden hung back with me, though he let go of Emily's

hand so she could run at one of the men, an absolutely huge man with a beautiful dark complexion and dreadlocks, who lifted her high into the air, spinning on the spot as she giggled. Clearly, he seemed to be a favourite, as Maverick was next, demanding to go for a “helicopter ride”, too.

I realized then that one of the guys was missing. I was certain that Hayden had told me there were *three* uncles. Where was the third?

“Yeah, he finally got his turn,” Casey was saying as Mina gave her belly a little pat, “Was relentless as hell about it...” she cast serious side-eye over her shoulder at the most gorgeous of the two men, one with bronze coloured hair and lighter, hazel eyes like mine. He was the one I was most nervous of, as his face seemed to be fixed in a semi-scowl as he continuously cast looks around the outside of our group, like he was watching for some potential threat. Why was he so paranoid? I could feel my own skin starting to crawl as I wondered if maybe he had a real reason behind it, and started looking around, too.

“Hey, I told you it was going to happen,” he said, having overheard Casey’s comment.

“Stubborn ass,”

“That’s right,” he said, unbothered by her remark, and slid an arm around her waist, though he continued to watch anyone who came too close to the whole family.

Casey rolled her eyes and grinned at Mina, her back and forth with her partner clearly a normal interaction between them. “Anyways, I’m due near the end of October, beginning of November.”

“Well, congratulations, you two!” Mina gave Casey another hug, though I noted the bronze-haired man never actually let go of her. Hayden’s mother turned to us then and beckoned us forward. Hayden’s arm remained where it was around my shoulders, and he encouraged me to move with a little nudge but waited until I managed to summon the strength

to move my feet. To my relief, he stopped with enough space between us and these newcomers to make me feel comfortable. It's not that I didn't completely trust his family, but old behavior, instincts, all of it, it's hard to change and let go of and for me to just blindly put my trust in other people.

However, I trusted Hayden, so I forced myself to take an extra step, and gave a little smile, all while wishing the earth would just swallow me up.

"Casey, Vail, Lee, this is Maddy King. She's staying at Phoenix House and is a *very* close friend of Hayden's." Mina winked, and I could see how in my peripheral, Hayden shot her a surprised look, like he hadn't expected her to tease like his dad and grandfather.

But when she said *Phoenix House*, Casey and Vail's expressions changed completely. His edge vanished and softened, and she lost her sort of cheeky teasing, both morphing to gentle smiles and brusque sort of tones now changing.

"It's nice to meet you, Maddy," Casey said, not moving forward to shake my hand like she had the others. She stayed back, maintaining the space that had been set between us. "Are you new to the Ashland area?"

"I am." I could feel all eyes on me, and I shrank a little more into Hayden's warm, muscular side, "From British Columbia."

"Ooooh! West Coast girl! Fancy shmancy, Hayden." Casey winked at him. "Welcome to Ashland. The festival is great! I really think you'll enjoy it."

"Thank you," I returned her smile, my anxiety starting to lessen.

"Welcome to Ashland, *West Coast Girl*," Vail said next, shooting me a beautiful smile as the hand that was wrapped around his wife moved to give her stomach a little caress.

"Thanks."

“Wait, what? Hayden has a *girlfriend*?”

Beside me, he bristled as the large man with the dreadlocks moved forward next, Maverick now perched on his broad shoulders. He flashed a flawless white smile, but stayed back as well, looking me over before he introduced himself, “Nice to meet you, Maddy. I’m Lee, the cool uncle.”

“Psh!” Vail rolled his eyes at him, “You wish. We all know I’m the cool uncle. You’re just another one of the kids.” He ran a hand through his bronze hair, fussing it up a little, but it suited him. It rather reminded me of the way Hayden would brush his hair around, leaving it looking like an intentional mess.

“One of the kids, the fun one, the favourite... it’s all the same.” Lee shrugged and reached up to swing Maverick around to set him on the ground. It was then that I noticed all the kids that were milling around us, the oldest being a boy who was maybe two years older than Charlotte, with dark eyes and almost white, blond hair. He was standing with Emily, holding her hand as they watched a few other festival goers play a game that involved balloons and darts.

“Hey, you two! Get back over here!” Lee called over to them, and they hurried back into the middle of the group. There was also a little boy who was probably between Emily and Maverick’s ages, with dark curly hair, an olive complexion, and almond eyes that reminded me of Casey’s. He was ridiculously cute and was spinning in a circle, staring up at the lights of the rides until he got too dizzy and fell over laughing. Maverick immediately followed suit and did the same, until both boys were struggling to walk straight.

“Where’s Shaw?” Keenan asked, watching all the kids like he was keeping tabs, making sure there were no stragglers.

“He wandered off to the MC tent to talk to James,” Lee said, nodding to a huge, black tent that was set on the opposite side of the entrance.

“MC tent?” I asked, looking to Hayden for confirmation.

“The Lost Souls; Gramps’ motorcycle club. They put on this festival each year and so they have a tent up about the club’s history and about its businesses in Ashland as well as its charities. Wanna see?”

“Yeah, sure!” I was eager to move around a little and was curious about The Lost Souls. Phoenix House was one of their projects and it was unlike any foster care home I’d been in. It was safe, well run, and though I didn’t feel like I was part of a family, I found it getting easier to fall asleep at night without the fear of a dark shadow sneaking into my room.

Paranoid Maddy.

Scared Maddy.

Lonely Maddy.

Liar Maddy.

No! Don’t think of it, Maddy. You’re here, with Hayden. You’re safe. You’re safe...

“C’mon, let’s go,” Hayden guided us along, the rest of the family all chattering over each other, the kids running to and from game stands or face painting tables, to which Casey and Mina promised them they could have done after we met up with Grandpa. The group of us probably looked like an insane picture of a modern family, and I couldn’t help but giggle a little at it. We were the strangest looking family I ever saw, not at all what I always pictured in my mind growing up.

“Robby James Knight, get your butt over here *now!*” Casey shouted as the little curly haired boy and Maverick made a break for it and ran to a clown that was juggling fire tipped batons.

“Mav! *Mav!* Don’t you dare! Get back here!” Keenan broke away from the group after the boys and snatched them up, snagging Robby by the back of his coveralls and Maverick by the back of his pants, hoisting them off the ground as he turned and made his way back to us, muttering something about needing leashes.

Hayden chuckled and guided me into the tent, the loud music and noise from the crowd dying down a little, making it easier to hear each other.

Inside the black canvas was a huge dome, room for about twenty tables, all set up with different displays with photos, mini models of buildings, bikes, posters, and men wearing leather cuts, patched with a skull and scythe, wandering about, welcoming people and answering questions. There was even a beautiful, shiny black Harley sitting in the center of the room, like a display piece for people to drool over. Though the sudden proximity of about a dozen biker men was terrifying for me, Hayden's cool composure, how comfortable and relaxed he seemed, put me a little at ease. If he wasn't concerned, I had no reason to be, I told myself.

Be brave, Maddy. You got this. You're safe.

“Hey! It's the Goon Squad!”

Hayden's grandfather, James, appeared from the side of the tent, getting up from an information table to run over and greet us all. He was accompanied by a man with white, blond hair, who looked very much like the older blond boy with Casey's group. This must be the third uncle, Shaw. But something about him seemed different than the others. While Vail and Lee were loud and confident, Shaw moved with a quiet sort of stalking walk, like he hoped to be as unseen as I did. His crystal blue gaze caught mine briefly, before we both looked quickly away.

“Wait, what the hell is this?” I returned my attention to James, who was staring at Casey's stomach. He dramatically turned to the three men, looking from one to the other. “Who did it *this* time?”

“It was my turn,” Vail raised a hand, unapologetically, smirking a little as James sucked in a deep breath through his nose.

“Serenity now!” James shouted to the ceiling of the tent before shaking his head and enveloping Casey in a huge hug,

whispering in her ear, smiling despite his initial reaction to the pregnancy. When he released her, however, he actually enveloped his son-in-law in a hug as well, slapping his back, albeit a little harder than necessary I noted, congratulating him. The family had dispersed some, moving around the tent as they explored the displays and talked with the MC members like they were all very familiar with each other. Of course, they were. If James was the president, then I suppose they all spent a lot of time together.

“Want to check out the tables?” Hayden asked me and I readily accepted, glad that he moved us in the opposite direction of everyone else. His family was honestly great and fun, but I was a little overwhelmed. Not to mention, his Uncle Shaw remained quietly at James’s side, not saying a word, while actually being more watchful of others than Vail had. Something about him was dark, not in a way that made me afraid of him, per say, but in a way I recognized in kids I’d met in foster care. Something bad had happened to him, once upon a time. I could sense it. It made me curious.

But I pushed those thoughts aside as Hayden showed me around, talking about the history of The Lost Souls and how they had taken the city of Ashland back from some major crime lord about twelve years ago. There were details of the fight, which literally sounded like a major street fight on the city streets between hundreds of bikers and the men who worked for this syndicate. To top it off, apparently James *and* Keenan had been a part of it.

I glanced at the two men, Keenan who had stopped trying to rally up the kids so he could give his wife a sweet kiss as they stared out of one of the tents exits, watching the lights of the festival reflect off the river. She rested against him, looking so peaceful as her fingertips trailed over that spiderweb tattoo on his neck. James, who was helping the older, blond-haired boy climb onto the display Harley, with Shaw close to their side, who was smiling wide at the joy on the kid’s face as he reached for the handlebars.

James and Keenan were such... sweethearts. I couldn't think of another word to describe them. They were family men; playful and funny. And yet they had killed people... fought in a major gang-war. How much had they struggled to get to this point where they appeared to be so happy and content with their lives? Were they still struggling with their bloody history? Or had they found a way to move on from it? I was betting on the latter.

"I know it's hard to believe," Hayden said, noticing my stare. "It shook me when I first learned about it."

"It's hard to imagine..."

"I know. But just shows, even the happiest looking person can have a messy, painful past." He moved over to a long table that was shrouded with black linen, photos and displays talking about an MC named The Black Spades and The Celtic Beasts very prominently displayed here. "However, if you look at it another way, it actually makes me fucking relieved to know."

"What do you mean?" I asked, studying the patches of the two clubs, the fiery spade just like the one on Hayden's grey leather jacket. The blue dragon the same as his Manic one.

"Just because your past is dark, doesn't mean you can't have a happy future."

I glanced up at Hayden, his point clicking into place in my mind. We both have suffered, in different ways, but we both experienced such pain and trauma already in our short lives. I thought about the picture he'd painted for us in the theatre... of us traveling around in a makeshift van, seeing the world together, finding our passions. Maybe, one day, it *would* be possible. We had promised each other we'd try, but that was on the pretense that we were unsure that we could ever really move on. But evidently, there *was* hope. We *could* be as happy as James and Keenan now found themselves.

I reached up then, my hand caressing his cheek as I felt my face break into a ridiculous grin. Hayden had a way of making

me see the world through a colourful lens, rather than the bleak black and white I'd borne before. Reaching up on the tips of my toes, I kissed him sweetly, silently thanking him.

“Ooooooooohhhhhhhh! Ha-ha, yeah!”

Both our eyes flicked open and we slowly panned sideways to see his Uncle Lee standing on the opposite side of the tent, pointing at us both and laughing raucously. Vail, Keenan, and James joined in, all applauding while all the kids made faces of disgust or uncaring, and Mina and Casey simply rolled their eyes and moved on, with Shaw lingering close by like a silent bodyguard, though I noted that his lips were twitching with amusement.

My cheeks went pink as I pressed my face into Hayden's chest to hide, while he wrapped an arm around my shoulders and shouted something obscene to the men.

“Language, please!” Mina's voice called.

“Hayden, *whyyyyy*? Why would you do that? That's where cooties come from!” Robby's voice sounded confused and pained, like he had just witnessed his cousin committing a serious offense.

“Cooties! Cooties! Cooties!” Maverick laughed, running over to Hayden and me. He reached for me, and I gratefully took the distraction to pick him up, grunting a little from his weight. Next thing I knew, he had grabbed my face in his little hands and forced me to look at him as he planted a big, wet kiss on me.

“Hey! Enough of that, little man! That's *my* girl!” Hayden took his brother from me, who was now laughing from deep in his gut, the sound so contagious that I found myself breaking out in a giggling fit.

Hayden let Maverick down, taking my hand to lead me over to his family. I glanced back at the table we hadn't finished viewing, noticing near one end there was a photo of Hayden on display. I furrowed my brow as I squinted back at it. *Was* that Hayden? It certainly looked like him, but it seemed

off. There was more scruff on that man's chin, his body a little larger under the same Celtic Beasts jacket. But I swear it was him...

"Okay, okay, let's get some face painting and rides in before the kids have a conniption," Keenan said, guiding the troop out of the tent. "You joining us for a bit, old man?"

"Yeah, I can have one of the guys cover for me." He pointed at one of The Lost Souls members, who nodded and took James' chair at the Information Table. "Let's go have some fun, eh?" he said, taking Emily and Robby's hands as he followed us out into the festival grounds.



THE NIGHT of the festival was unlike anything I ever experienced before. Moving alongside Hayden and his family, experiencing their dynamic, being welcomed so warmly into their large, strange brood, wasn't what I had expected. And yet, despite how nervous I was about the large number of people around me, how close they were, the loud noises and chaos of it all, I found myself smiling and laughing more than I had since... well, ever.

When the kids got their faces painted, I told Hayden I had never had it done before, and he immediately made me take a seat, too. The woman gave me a mask around my eyes that looked like peacock feathers, then Hayden got his face done, the scary-looking but amazing skull-like face she gave him only made his silver eyes stand out all the more. When we turned to the rest of the family, I noticed how his Aunt Casey took a small step back at the sight of his skull painted face, but she quickly recovered and complimented us with the rest.

Huh, wonder what that was about? She didn't seem like the type who spooked easily.

Afterwards, Shaw turned up with bags of cotton candy, candy apples, pogo dogs, and bags of popcorn, handing them around to everyone. He gave me a particularly fancy candy apple, one decorated with caramel and rainbow sprinkles. I thanked him, still shy around Hayden's uncles, but the darkness around Shaw in particular was beginning to change for me, becoming more gentle, watchful, like a quiet protector in the group. He simply nodded at my thanks, casting the smallest of smiles before he gave Hayden a huge pogo dog.

"Want a bite?" Hayden held it out to me after he'd taken one, and I accepted, loving all the new experiences I was having. I'd never had festival food, and though it was greasy and sugary, I was having too much fun to think about the stomach ache I was probably going to have later.

Our large group moved along the thoroughfare, checking out the games and challenging each other at the ones meant for adults. Keenan, Vail, Lee, and James all went head-to-head with the shootout stand, each holding BB guns as they attempted to hit a target, the goal to eliminate it completely.

"I think Vail is going to win," I said, watching as he took a stance, appearing more focused than the others.

"Nah, you'll learn that Uncle Vail is all talk. The one to watch is Gramps," Hayden said, stealing a bite from my candy apple. I reached up to wipe a few straggling rainbow sprinkles from the corner of his mouth as we watched the men battle it out. Mina and Casey had taken the kids to try the water gun game next door, while Shaw lingered close by, ever the watchful guard dog. One moment of sweetness I caught was when he moved behind Casey and gave her a little kiss as he walked past her, reaching around to rub her belly with his hand. One thing I noticed about the uncles, was that even though Robby was clearly Lee's, and the older blond boy, Felix, was Shaw's, they treated all the kids the same. And though the newest one was evidently Vail's, seeing Shaw rub her belly only told me he would love this child as much as he loved the others.

“Hah!” James yelled in triumph then, slinging his BB gun down onto the table with flourish, “Never challenge the old silverback. He always comes out on top!” He lifted his fists high into the air in victory before accepting a large baby chick plushie from the carny, handing it off to Emily who eagerly stepped forward to take it. He gave her a little kiss on her cheek as she thanked him, bouncing on her feet, before running off to show Mina her new stuffy. Beside us, Lee had suddenly hooked Vail in a headlock, telling him he needed to say, “Mercy”, in order to be released, but clearly, Vail was stubborn, and refused as he struggled to free himself.

“Alright everyone!” Keenan moved forward then, giving Charlotte’s braid an affectionate little tug as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, glaring at a group of boys around her age who had evidently been eyeing her, “Now that we’re all sugared up, who wants to go on some rides?”

“Me!” Robby, Maverick, Emily, and Felix all shouted at once, running over to claim tickets from the massive rolled up bundle James produced out of thin air.

“What do you say? Want to catch a ride?” Hayden asked as the adults moved away, guiding the younger ones to the tamer rides, rather than the insane looking roller coaster that the littlest boys were clamouring to go on. Nervously, I checked out our options. The thought of going up so high making my palms sweat a little. Huh, never realized I was afraid of heights. Then again, I’d never been in a situation where I had to think about it before.

“I’ve never been on a ride, so I don’t know...” my voice trailed off with uncertainty, a mixture of nerves and trepidation heavy in my tone.

“Let’s start off easy, then. Look, everyone’s going on the Merry-Go-Round,” Hayden pointed to the short line his family had joined. That ride, with the statue animals fixed upon golden stands, the slow movement as it turned, looked like the perfect one to try as a first timer. I nodded and followed in his

wake, my anxiety shifting to elation as I eagerly waited with them all in the line until it was our turn.

Hayden led me to a pair of horses that were standing side by side. I climbed up on the spotted white and brown one while he took the black looking stallion on the inside. Around us, there was a rush by the kids to get the animal they wanted, which meant the adults were left with whatever was available. I giggled at the sight of Lee climbing onto a large ladybug, the comical contrast of his size versus the delicate insect almost too much for me. When I turned to see Keenan and James both perched on a pair of ducklings, I couldn't hold it in, and I burst into a fit of laughter. Hayden beamed at me, chuckling as the music started up and we slowly started to revolve.

My horse rose up and down as we spun, and at one point, Hayden reached out to take my hand, and gave a gentle tug as he leaned across the space between us. I carefully met him in the middle, hanging onto my horse as I met his kiss, closing my eyes against the bright lights, tuning out the disgusted calls from his sisters and cousin Robby. I thought maybe kissing in front of his family would be a no-go. I had expected it, but Hayden didn't seem to care, neither did the adults. They were all in their little bubbles, with Mina and Maverick sitting together on a pretty pony, Charlotte hanging out with Felix in a wagon, Casey standing by the mirrored center with Shaw holding her in his arms. I never expected to fit into a family like this one, but now that I had, it was strange how much I enjoyed it.

At night in my foster homes, or the broke down apartments my mom holed us up in, I had dreamed of a house with a white picket fence, my father alive with us once more, Mom healthy and unafraid, with maybe a little sister or brother. The perfect picture of a family. But If I had to choose now, between my old dream, and this reality, I'd pick this one every time.

“Want to go off on our own for a little bit?” Hayden asked me as the ride began to slow.

I nodded, despite my feelings about his family, I did want to enjoy some time just with him.

The ride came to a stop and we all filtered off, but James bolted ahead, pushing people out of his way before he limped as fast as he could to the closest trash can and ducked his head inside. The guys all heckled him as he upended everything he'd eaten. Clearly, he hadn't handled the spinning too well. Emily rushed to his side, the stuffed chick he'd won for her still in her arms, and reached up, trying to rub his back as he spat a little more into the trash and re-emerged, looking a little pale in the face. He took her hand, giving her a shaky smile, before we all grouped up to decide on the next excursion, while Hayden quickly murmured to Keenan that we'd be temporarily heading off on our own.

"Meet us at the Drop of Doom for the fireworks, alright?" I noticed how he slapped a couple of twenties in Hayden's hand before he gave a smirk that I suddenly realized Hayden often mimicked. It was funny to see where he got it from.

"No worries, we'll be there," Hayden pocketed the cash and wrapped his arm around my shoulders, guiding us away from the brood.

We wandered on our own for some time, mostly people-watching, until Hayden decided he wanted to try one of the games. He picked the basketball one, and to my surprise, he was actually really good. He sank all but one, and when the carny handed him a tiny, pink monkey, Hayden slapped another five bucks down, insisting on trying again. When he hit all his baskets, I found myself cheering and clapping for him as he grinned wide at me, waggling his brows like he'd just done something super sexy and manly. He took the huge teal elephant with a rainbow draped across its back and handed it to me.

"Had to win something big for my girl," he said as I took the soft plushie in my hands.

"My hero!" I giggled, giving it a hug before accepting his hand to move on.

“How about we try that one?” Hayden said, pointing up at the large rotating Ferris wheel, “It’s a step up from the merry-go-round.”

I stared up at the giant, brightly lit circle that rose up into the night. It was as tall as the Drop of Doom, and I immediately felt my hands go clammy as I dropped his to clutch my teal elephant, shifting from one foot to the other where I stood.

“Hey,” Hayden leaned down to whisper in my ear, “You can do this, Maddy.”

I sucked in a long breath between my teeth. Hadn’t I told myself I would be brave? That I’d try? I did. And though facing something like this wasn’t exactly what I had in mind, he was right. “Let’s go, then.”

“Yeah? You sure?”

“You ask me again and I’ll back out.”

He chuckled at that and gave my new elephant’s nose a tug, “Well then, Miss *West Coast Girl*, let’s go!”

Oh God, why was I doing this again? I thought as I found myself now sitting in a red and gold lined steel bucket with only a single bar sitting across my lap to hold me and Hayden in. *Why, why why? Screw being brave. Let’s get the hell out of this death trap!* But before I could change my mind, the ride moved, and we swung backwards and up.

I cried out in surprise, only to find we’d stopped as quickly as we started, causing the bucket to rock forward and back in a way that had me practically weeping in my seat. “What the hell is going on?”

“They have to let other riders off and on,” he explained, lounging back in his seat without a care in the world as we swayed.

“Ooooo, I don’t like this. I *really* don’t like this...” I moaned, clutching my stuffy hard when we jolted up again, stopping once again, which made us rock even more.

Hayden's hand slid around my back and clutched at my shoulder, pulling me in close to his side. "Do you think I'd let anything happen to you?"

"No, but—"

"Do you think I'd steer you into danger?"

"No, *but*—"

"Relax, Maddy. This thing is checked over multiple times a day. They take safety seriously during this festival. I promise you, nothing bad will happen."

We moved again, rolling upwards close to the top before stopping again. I closed my eyes, practically trying to crawl into Hayden's side like a tick, giving him a little slap when he chuckled at my reaction. The sensation of suddenly rising higher, cresting at the top before stopping again, nearly had my stomach rolling, threatening to pull a James and empty my stomach.

"Open your eyes, Maddy," Hayden murmured to me.

Slowly, I did, first peeking through my lashes before I could take in the scenery before me. We were sitting at the very top, spoiled with a perfect 360-degree view of the grounds. The sky was completely black, but the lights from below were bright and colourful, reflecting off the river, the sounds of laughter and music filling the air. It was such a postcard shot, a scene so content that it didn't seem real.

"What do you think now?" he asked, and I could practically *hear* his cocky, beautiful smirk.

"It looks pretty amazing, I gotta say..." My voice trailed off as I stared at the scene below, my heart not racing as much as before. "Hey, I see your family!" I pointed at a group that had gathered outside a structure called a "Fun House." The adults were all mingling on the grass out front, and I could only guess all the kids were running around inside.

As we watched, another couple slowly approached, and both Hayden and I watched with curiosity at the newcomers.

As far as I knew, we were only expecting to be joined by his aunt and uncles. Who were these people?

Even from here, I could make out the beautiful woman, who looked like Robby in terms of her complexion. Her gorgeous hair sat about her head in voluminous natural loose waves, her body lean and tall. But the man at her side was something else altogether. I thought Lee was big, but this guy was freaking huge. His greying hair was long, resting down his back and around his shoulders, his heavily tattooed arms visible from the black dago tee he wore. They had what appeared to be twin girls with them, both wearing pink and purple princess dresses, clinging to the huge man. The third girl, who looked a little older, walked at her mother's side, her head held high as they approached Hayden's family.

I noticed how he leaned forward a little in our bucket, his focus lasered in on the new arrivals. Our bucket drifted down again at this point, but we could still see.

Upon spotting the newcomers, Casey let out a high-pitched shriek and ran forward, throwing her arms around the tall, beautiful woman. Both were practically spinning on the spot as they embraced each other. The rest of the family, however...

Hayden's uncles all looked extremely wary as they took in the sight of the man. They all lingered close to their kids and the women, while Keenan stepped forward, hand held out, greeting him like he would anyone else. Although I did note even he seemed a little strained. And James?

James had disappeared entirely.

I swore he had been there before, but he was mysteriously absent at this moment. Where did he go? Perhaps he had to return to the MC tent and relieve his stand-in? Before I could dwell on it much longer, however, we dropped again, only this time, we kept going.

We dropped all the way down now, only to swing up the backside of the wheel. I squealed and hugged Hayden around

the middle, my stuffed plushie squashed between us, and he just laughed.

“Keep your eyes open, or you’ll miss everything,” he told me.

“I’m good. I saw. I conquered. Now I’ll remain blind, thank you,” I muttered to him.

Hayden chuckled again, and the feeling of my stomach rising a little as we dropped made me hope that this one rotation was all I had to deal with. Unfortunately, it kept going.

“Maddy? Maddy...” He gave my shoulder a little shake. “Maddy!”

“*What?*” I snapped.

“Look...”

I opened my eyes, wondering what the heck he wanted me to see this time, only to find his face close to mine, the lights reflecting off his mirrored eyes, his intention perfectly clear. The hand on my shoulder rose to cup the back of my neck, and before I could breathe, he ducked his head to kiss me, making my toes curl. It was soft at first, his mouth pressing to mine once, twice... before he opened it, encouraging me to do the same. Our lips moved with each other, his tongue reaching out to glide over my bottom lip before languorously dancing against my own.

Holy shit... Hayden could kiss!

I reached up, one of my hands grasping the soft leather lapel of his Black Spades jacket, my heart fluttering in my chest as his kissing reminded me of what we’d done in the clearing the day before. God, what I wouldn’t give to feel that again with him right now.

Hayden’s fingers twisted in my hair, grasping a handful before he gently tugged my head back, leaning over me to deepen our kiss. That, and the combination of the rise and fall of the ride, made me truly feel like I was floating on a cloud.

“Maddy...” he breathed against my lips, “I want you.”

“You have me,” I whispered, pulling him back to me so I could keep kissing him. When I bit his bottom lip between my teeth, he groaned, his other hand sliding slowly down my back. I thought he’d keep going over my jeans, but instead, his fingers slid beneath the material, teasing the flesh there for a moment before inching their way down more to cup my ass. He ducked his head to kiss the length of my throat, sucking, even biting my skin before the ride began to slow.

“Fuck!” he hissed between his teeth as he removed his hand from my pants, pulling away from me. The silver in his eyes was nearly gone as his pupils were so blown, and his lips looked as swollen as mine felt. I let out a long, shaky breath, suddenly wishing the ride could have kept going. He seized my chin then, leaning in to give me one last lingering kiss before we came to a stop at the ground.

“Okay, lovebirds, out you get!” the carny sniggered, winking at us cheekily as he opened the little paddock door to let us out. My face burned when I realized that he’d seen everything, and I wanted to smack myself in the head for forgetting just how public we were in our little steel basket. Judging by some of the knowing looks of a few people in the lineup, they’d seen, too.

Hayden was completely unbothered, as usual. He truly didn’t care what others thought of him. He just grinned right back, wrapped his arm around my neck to bring me in so he could kiss the top of my head, and marched us away.

In the distance, we spotted his family all gathered at a bull-riding machine, the men all taking turns. I watched as Lee was thrown spectacularly to the side while everyone else cheered. The newcomers were still with them, though I noticed that the giant, tattooed beast of a man seemed to hang back, seated on a bench nearby, his twin daughters clambering all over him while the third stood by her mother, eating an ice cream. His wife and Casey stood side by side, heads close together, looking like they were chatting non-stop.

“Do you know who that is?” I asked Hayden.

He was studying them, too, his stare narrowed as he watched the man in particular. Hayden’s expression changed from one of curiosity to a strange sort of quiet, simmering displeasure. His jaw clenched, nostrils flared, and he seemed to be teetering on the edge of going over there and saying something or remaining here with me. His gaze kept darting from the man to his mother, and back again.

“Hayden?” I asked, trying to get his attention.

He jumped, looking like I just gave him a small electric jolt, and he blinked several times, looking down at me like he was snapping out of a trance. I reached up with my spare hand, the elephant tucked under my other arm, and cupped his cheek, “Are you okay?”

He hesitated like he wasn’t even sure.

“Hey, hey, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

Blinking hard, he glanced again at the man and shook his head, “I just... I think maybe he’s...”

I waited, wondering what on earth had him looking so... unsettled. Whoever that man was, his presence was clearly some sort of a trigger to Hayden. Wordlessly, I took his hand and forced him to turn away.

“What?” he asked.

“Come on, let’s go into the Fun House,” I told him. When he tried to look over his shoulder, however, I gave his hand another tug until he looked at me and me alone. “Your family is safe. Do you think your dad or your uncles would let anything happen?”

That seemed to soothe him a little, because the tension in his body loosened just a little, his shoulders relaxing a bit. “No...”

“No. Exactly. They wouldn’t. Come on, now. I’ve never been in a Fun House, so I’m curious.” I led the way to the short lineup and people, as a huge crowd had already gone in

ahead of us. We waited patiently for the people ahead of us to get some headway before the carny took the two toonies Hayden passed him and allowed us through.

Chapter eighteen



Hayden - Present Day

THAT HAD TO BE HIM. The man who was responsible for... for...

Uncle Storm, Gavin... Cartier... Shay O'Hare, my father.

I couldn't forget the fight I'd walked in on between my mother and Gramps. Between them, and everything Dad had told me, I'd pieced together enough on my own to realize that this guy, the one sitting with three little girls and allowing them to braid his own hair while he watched his woman talk with my aunt, he was the reason behind so much of the bullshit in the past that has haunted our family.

I know what he would have done to me to get to Shay.

I had to live under that man's control for months! That psychotic monster...

He killed everyone else! Your youngest boy is named after his other grandfather! And he ain't here anymore! Why is that? Who killed Maverick, Mina?

I saw that man kill off the entire Black Spades MC. And you know what? He was laughing while he did it.

My mother and Grandpa J's words echoed in my head again and again. This was the man who my mother had to run from, who others spoke of with fear and rage. My birth father might have been the right-hand man for a short time, but this guy was *the* one at Cartier's side for the time that my whole

family fell apart. I watched as his wife and my Aunt Casey strolled over to where he was sitting, like they were checking on him and the twins. The fact that this guy had a family was disturbing as hell. Did his wife really feel safe? I watched as she bent over to plant a kiss on him and shook my head, wondering what the hell had happened to make her believe he was someone who could be so trusted that she'd willingly have children with him.

Maddy pulling on my hand distracted me from my spiraling thoughts, and I tried to focus on the present. She'd never been in a Fun House before, and I wanted her to enjoy the experience, even if we were a little old. When I turned to peer back over my shoulder, however, the man was staring in my direction. His dark eyes were practically hidden beneath his narrowed brows, like he was squinting to get a better look at me. I was about to flip him off when a group about ten feet from him stepped out of the Haunted Mansion ride, the blue hair of Theo Hebert standing out above all else, and I was immediately distracted.

Theo, Spencer, Jace, and all those assholes were laughing, shoving each other, their words too far for me to hear over the music of the grounds. I noted that none of the four bitches from the attack in the washroom were with them, but all their loyal followers were. The girls were taking advantage of their leader's absence, rallying for attention from the guys now that they had no one forcing them to heel.

Sheep.

Theo's gaze caught mine then, both of us now completely aware of each other, everyone else fading into the background. I could read all the hatred, the fury, the bloodlust on his face as he took me in. The feeling was mutual, but I wasn't the one that started our rivalry. Everything he had gotten was justice for all the years of torment I'd suffered at his hands. All for no reason I could think of. So his need to "get back" at me for my retaliation was nonsensical, stupid...

I flipped him off when he didn't look away, and turned back to Maddy, but not before I saw him quickly turn to Spencer and the others to whisper poison in their ears. I paid the carny and followed Maddy inside, turning back once to see the guys all talking together, the girls having wandered nearby to check out some fishing game. That beast of a man was sitting alone now, Aunt Casey and her friend having taken the girls to try some of the other games, but his dark glare had shifted from me to the Asshole Squad, like he could hear everything they were saying.

Whatever they said, regardless of whether he agreed or not, or cared, he just shifted in his seat, tucking that grey streaked, long hair of his behind his ear, turning to watch his family instead.

“Hayden? Hayden!”

That's right. Maddy. I needed to focus. I tore my eyes away from Theo to find my girl grinning up at me as she pointed us to face our first obstacle of the house... a spinning cylinder we had to walk through. Maddy giggled as she stumbled along, trying hard to maintain her balance, and I couldn't help but let go of that resentment that had spurred in my chest at the sight of Theo, and laugh as she fell over, the cylinder carrying her up a bit before her weight made her slide back down, only to be carried up again.

I haven't heard Maddy laugh as much as she had tonight. Seeing her relax and slowly let go of her reservations around my family made me feel hopeful. To see her push herself past her boundaries inspired me, and I wanted to do better, too. I admired her strength as she interacted with my cousins, watched my uncles, and warmed up more to my parents. It was like they were a cure. They were helping her heal, like they made her see what *could* be.

I had always loved my family, but my isolation had taken a toll. Though I still talked to them, it wasn't like before when I let my walls down and willingly spent time with them. Tonight, Maddy made me realize how much I missed them,

how much I needed them. It made me hopeful for *our* future. We didn't have to be what outsiders expected us to be. My aunt and uncles, my mother and her life, they were all examples of what living your life to your own expectations could be. Maddy and I would do the same.

Laughing, I stepped in and helped her up from her tumbling trap, guiding her out of the cylinder so we could try the next obstacle in our way. A glass maze. I knew to take it slow, or else you could end up cracking your nose into a panel, but apparently, Maddy had no notion of what exactly this was, because she just strolled forward, thinking it was a straight path, and biffed it hard.

“Maddy!” I rushed in as she keeled over, holding her face and groaning. “Are you okay?”

“Holy hell!” She groaned, “What the in fuck was that?”

“It's a maze... you need to put your hands up and feel your way through,” I explained.

Again, she groaned and lifted her head, her eyes filled with tears, but she wasn't crying. Her nose was red but thankfully, there was no blood. I gave it a gentle squeeze to make sure it wasn't broken, and though she winced a little, it wasn't as bad as I'd thought. I breathed a sigh of relief and pulled her in, squeezing hard as I hugged her. Behind us, a group of little kids came tumbling out of the cylinder, all giggling madly as they darted around us, easily making their way through the maze. I could see them weaving through, getting far ahead. Though they hit a few dead ends, none of them made the mistake my girl did.

“You good to go?” I asked her.

She nodded, smiling as she wiped her eyes. “Yeah, but you're going first.”

“Fair enough,” I agreed and guided us in, leading the way with one hand extended in front of me. She held onto the back of my jacket, carefully using me as a block as we moved forward. Luckily, at this point, enough kids had come through

that the glass sections had smeared handprints on most of them, but near the end, it was a little more difficult as the glass shifted to mirrors.

“I feel like I’ve shrunk and fallen into a bottle,” Maddy said, looking around us, daring to let go of me to try a new path once we hit another dead end. Somewhere ahead of us, beyond the maze, I could hear the distant laughter of the other kids. We even ran into a few others in the mirrored section, greeting them with a little smile and head nod, before we split off, trying different ways to get out. If I focused enough, I bet I could easily get us out of here in a couple of seconds, but I wanted Maddy to get the experience, so I deliberately took us a few alternate ways.

“Hey, handsome!”

I turned to see her grinning at me from behind one of the few remaining glass sections, her hands pressed up against the transparent surface, and she crossed her eyes, sticking out her tongue.

I laughed at the sight and gave the glass a little bump with my fist, to which she just stepped back, looking around for another path to take. I stepped around, but found my way blocked, wondering how the hell she got over there.

“Uh, Hayden?”

Maddy’s back was to me, pressed against the glass, but over her head, down a narrow hall of mirrors, looked like about fifty clones of Theo and Spencer. It seemed they had joined us, standing together, smiling like psychopaths.

Immediately, I felt like my blood had turned to ice in my veins, the lightness in my chest that I felt when I was with Maddy evaporating only to be replaced with a suffocating, burning rock.

“The fuck you guys doing here?” I called, stepping the other way to get around the barrier between Maddy and me, but it was another dead end. Seriously, how the fuck did she get over there?

“Just enjoying the festival like the two of you,” Theo said, his pale eyes drifting between her and I. I didn’t like the way he was looking at her, the way his scarred mouth twisted into some demented form of a grin. “I saw your sisters, Mathers,” he said, moving slowly forward with Spencer behind.

Fuck... fuck, fuck, fuck! “Maddy, get back to me,” I hissed through the glass so the others couldn’t hear.

“Emily, in particular,” Theo went on, “was on her own, no one watching, playing with that stupid chick plushie. I was so close that I could have just reached out and...” he snatched at the air, that smile twisting wider on his face, screwed and cruel. Maddy turned from him, feeling around the walls she had backed herself into and began to move to my left, following a short path that took her partially away from me, a little closer to *them*.

“Don’t you fucking touch my sisters!” I snarled, punching the glass as I felt my way around, desperately trying to close that gap separating me from Maddy.

“I could have, but I didn’t. You know why, Hayden? Because I’m a *nice guy*. I don’t want to hurt a little girl.” Theo scoffed, his attention turning to Maddy, who picked a winding route that took her even farther from me. Looking as panicked as I felt, she spun around and hurried back, though it meant bringing her closer to the three guys slowly moving in on us. I reached into my pocket, grabbing my phone, but Theo held up a hand.

“Ah-ah! You try to call someone and...” over his shoulder, Spencer held up a phone of his own, a message already texted out and ready to send, “... Jace grabs your sister.”

“What the fuck do you want?” I snapped and punched the glass again, turning to try another route, but in my rising frenzy, I wasn’t as focused as I was before and ended up surrounded by mirrors. Quickly backtracking, I found Maddy now on the opposite side of the maze from me, sliding along the solid wall at the edge, keeping as much distance between

her and the guys as possible. “Maddy! Get the fuck out of here!”

“I just want to talk with you two,” Theo said, loving the sight of us separated and panicked. “You see, Hayden, you owe me—”

“I owe you shit!” I shouted, punching the glass again, wishing it would fucking break. “You came at me first, Theo! You came at me for fucking years, and I’ve had enough! Are you so fucking stupid that you can’t see that?”

“I could give a shit about you. You scarred my fucking face!”

“You made me wish I was dead!”

“Then why didn’t you fucking do it, then?”

“Why did you want me to?” When Spencer sidestepped him, angling himself in front of the pathway leading to Maddy, I screamed, “Don’t you dare fucking touch her!”

“It’s her or your sister, Hayden.” Theo’s smile vanished as his focus turned entirely on me, knowing Spencer had his back. They had us completely separated, with no way to get to each other without crossing them. I gripped my phone tight, desperately wanting to call my dad, my gramps, or any of my uncles... “Don’t do it,” he said, knowing exactly where my thoughts were. “You do, and Emily will vanish like so many other little girls before her.”

“Why, Theo?” I punched the glass as hard as I could, furious that it didn’t even crack. “What the fuck is wrong with you? *Why?*”

“Why? Do I *need* a reason?”

“Yes, you fucking do! Because no one does what you have for nothing!”

Theo said nothing for ten unnerving seconds, staring at me like what I said was as interesting or eye-opening as describing how he got the mud on his shoe. “Spencer,” he

called over his shoulder, without taking his eyes from mine, “Now.”

“NO! No! Fucking stop! STOP!” I screamed and ran, pushing against the walls blocking me until I found myself separated by just one panel from Theo. Behind him, Maddy had sprinted away, but Spencer was close behind, watching every turn she took until he had her cornered. “Don’t you fucking touch her!” I threw my body against the glass again and again, trying to break my way through. Maddy cried out as Spencer hauled her up, crushing her back against his chest and he easily carried her back to Theo, one of his hands practically smothering her as he slapped it over her face.

“Do I really need a fucking reason, Hayden?!” Theo screamed, all amusement gone as he glared at me through the glass. “You’re the one who took things too fucking far!”

“What about everything you did to me?” I asked in disbelief, “What about all the times you made me want to fucking die? To disappear because just stepping into school every day made me feel like I was fucking drowning? What about all of that?”

“That was less than nothing to me! You fucked me up forever!” He pointed at his jaw, the scars more obscene from the strange lighting in this enclosed space.

“I have scars no one can fucking see!” I threw myself against the glass. “And I’ll carry them with me for the rest of my fucking life! Let her go! Let her go *now!*”

“Go, Spencer.”

Howling, I threw myself against the glass again before desperately running from one side to the other, searching for a break in the partition. Spencer was heading back, taking her with him. The entire time, Maddy fought him, kicking against the walls to unbalance him, reaching back to try to claw at his face with her nails, anything she could do to stop him.

But her struggles were nothing to him. Spencer quickly gained ground between us, and as though realizing her fight

was doing nothing, she changed tactics. Maddy suddenly went deadweight in his clutches and lifted her arms straight up, sliding through his hold, catching him off guard. It was then that I found an opening, way off to the side hidden behind a mirror, and I darted through it, running straight at Theo who was blocking my way.

We collided with a heavy crack, my weight throwing him off as he fell back against one of the clear walls, hitting his head hard. Pushing off of him, I ran after Spencer, only to have Theo seize one of my ankles, knocking me off balance so that I fell to the ground with a breathless thump.

“Maddy, run!” I shouted just before Theo threw himself on my back, knocking the air out of my lungs. I felt his hands wrap around my throat from behind, squeezing hard. I forced my body to roll, crushing him beneath me as I heard Maddy squeal, the squeak of her sneakers on the ground piercing over the joyful circus music that blared from the speakers. On either end of the maze, lights flared on and off, the orange, red, and yellow flashing like traffic lights as we both struggled to free ourselves.

Beneath me, Theo let go of my throat and I gasped for air, but he flipped me back under him as I fought to breathe. I only managed to turn onto my back before he began to pummel me.

“Fucking... painful... *painful*...” His voice cracked as his fists hit every part of my body he could reach; my arms, my ribs. “So much fucking pain! It hurt to breathe! To eat! It fucking *hurt*! For *years*!”

I shielded my face, every punch managing to hit some part of me only knocked more air from my lungs, but my mind was thinking of only one thing...

Get to Maddy! Manic screamed when I heard a loud thud and scuffle in the distance. *Get to her! Kick this fucker off and save her, Hayden!*

I gritted my teeth and lifted my leg up, sliding my knee beneath Theo's chest, and pushed as hard as I could. I

managed to get enough distance between us to lift my other foot and kick, nailing him in the ribs to send him flying. Flipping onto my stomach, I pushed up off the ground, but the sight before me had me pause in shock.

At the end of the hall, a shadowy figure, a *beast* of a man, was standing there. Spencer was in his grasp, hovering about a foot off the ground.

It was *him*.

Maddy was shaking on the floor, hiding behind his legs, her hair a mess, tears streaming down her face. At the sight of me, she clambered out from behind her spot and hurried toward me, reaching down to help me rise to my feet. I pulled her into my arms, squeezing so tight that I forgot that I was so much larger than her for a moment, and her little squeak of pain had me instantly apologizing and easing my hold. But I didn't let go. I refused. I cupped the back of her head and stared at our savior, the flashing lights now illuminating his face, the beard, the long hair, and the voided dark gaze that was fixed upon Spencer.

“I don't give a shit that you're just some teenage punk,” the man rumbled, his arms bulging as he held the biggest kid in our school in the air like a doll. “You chose the wrong crowd to fuck with, kid. And if I was anyone else, I'd take you outside so you could face charges and own up to your shit.” He grinned then; the sight more disturbing than anything else I'd seen tonight from Theo. He brought Spencer closer to his face, looking very much like a lunatic, while Spencer sputtered and clung to the man's hands, trying to pry his fingers loose. “But I'm not anyone else,” he whispered. “I'm the fucking monster this place has whispered about for years.”

Suddenly, in a whirl of colour and movement, Spencer's body smashed through the partition, the wall breaking apart as he flew through and landed in a heap on the ground. The beast turned to us then, strolling forward, and for just a second, I thought he was going to attack us, too. Only he walked straight past without glancing at us, heading straight for Theo.

Having seen what this guy did to his friend, Theo began to beg, crying as he scrambled back on his hands and knees only to hit a mirror, as trapped as Maddy and I had been.

The man just reached down, seizing him by his throat, the gurgling and spitting so loud and disgusting that I pressed Maddy's ear to my chest, covering the other with my hand.

"I've met little dipshits like you before," the guy said in that same deep growl. "And you know what I used to do with them? I liked to play. One game was using a saw to cut bits and pieces away, to see how long it would take before they'd bleed out. I liked to count how many times they passed out from the shock, but I was always ready to wake them up so I could start again. I loved hearing them cry, seeing them piss themselves as I played—"

Speaking of piss...

The front of Theo's pants darkened, the trail leaking down the cuff of his leg until a small puddle began to form on the floor. At the sight, the man laughed, though it sounded off, like it was practiced, fake.

He let go suddenly, and Theo fell to the wet floor in a sniveling mess while the man lit up a cigarette. "But you're not even worth it. I'd get bored. Move along, boy, and stop with the bullshit." Without another look at either of the guys, he turned back to us, coming closer until we were lost in his shadow. I held Maddy a little tighter, staring up at him in shock.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone about this, kid," he said to me, blowing the smoke out of the corner of his mouth. "Tell 'em whatever story you want, 'cause these two shits won't say anything, I promise you that. Just don't mention me. Don't want to get in trouble with my woman, you see."

Numbly, I nodded, now seriously confused. He was worried about getting into trouble with his *wife*? Was he

serious? After everything he just did, and he was scared of facing *her*?

He took another long drag of his cigarette, his eyes moving around my face like he was studying me as much as I was studying him. This close, I could make out the pink nail polish this monster was sporting, evidence from his little girls. He lifted the hand holding his drag, poking my shoulder with it and said, “You look a lot like your old man.”

I furrowed my brow in confusion; my father’s blond hair and blue eyes were nothing like mine. But then it hit me...

“You mean Shay?”

Maddy peeked up at us then, saying nothing except listening to every word we said.

The man nodded. “Never met him personally but saw him in a picture once. You’re the spitting image.” He glanced over my shoulder and sighed, like he was suddenly extremely tired, the crow’s feet around his eyes more prominent when he frowned deeper. I swear, he was probably as old as my grandpa. “I paid off the carny at the front to keep the kids out while I checked on things in here. We’ll have to leave so they can send in some people to clean this shit up,” he said, indicating the now stirring, moaning lumps that were Spencer and Theo.

“Yeah, yeah I guess...” I said, still rattled from everything that had just happened.

“What’s your name?” Maddy asked suddenly, and we both peered down at her, him looking like he just realized she was there.

“Jeremy,” he rumbled, zero emotion on his face.

“Jeremy,” she breathed a sigh of relief, “Thank you for saving me.”

He nodded, taking another drag of his cigarette and blowing it out towards the ceiling. He looked like he didn’t

care about any of it. Like saving us was just a side effect of him looking for something to do.

“Why?” I asked him, my voice cracking. If this was Jeremy, the one everyone was so terrified of, why did he save us?

He glanced at me again with those emotionless, lifeless, dark eyes, and I knew I *should* be afraid. This man was the root of everything, having been involved in so much fighting and despair. And yet, to me, he looked like an old man, tired and just done with the bullshit.

“Let’s just say it’s personal. A debt...”

“For who?”

He stared straight at me, and for the briefest moment, just for a split second, I thought I saw something there in his eyes. Something more than just a dark void. “For Storm...” he put the cigarette to his mouth and pulled his lighter out again, the silver glinting in the flashing lights, and lit it, moving away from the maze to a detector hanging near the sidewall, holding the flame to it. “You two better go,” he said.

“Come on.” I took Maddy’s hand and led her off to the side where a railing separated the rotating cylinder and the outside of the Fun House. I picked her up, lowering her over the edge until her feet hit the grass. I glanced back once, but Jeremy was gone, disappearing like a demon in the night. I climbed out after her just as the fire alarm went off. Grabbing Maddy’s hand, I hurried us away as the carny’s moved in, carrying fire extinguishers, while the kids standing in line screamed excitedly at the pandemonium. Park security came running, along with a few volunteers and MC members who were dedicating their time to running the event, and soon the Fun House was swarmed as we made our breakaway.

For Uncle Storm? Gavin? What did that mean?

I couldn’t dwell on these thoughts, as Maddy was shaking at my side. I needed to get her safe first and foremost, so I

guided us along towards the Drop of Doom just as an ambulance and fire truck pulled up at the festival entrance.

Chapter nineteen



MADDY - PRESENT DAY

LYING IN BED, I waited with bated breath for Miss Ross to finish her rounds. Right on time, she poked her head into the room I shared with the other older girls, and I feigned sleep, curled up under my blankets, hoping my lousy acting skills would pay off. They did.

The door closed with a snap, the nightlight casting a gentle glow about the space, and I threw my covers back. I was wearing an oversized pair of sweats, and a zip-up hoodie, then grabbed my backpack that I'd already prepared with what I needed. I knew the other girls were aware I was up, and they were probably watching me from their bunks, curious. I'd never snuck out of Phoenix House before.

As I tip-toed across the room to the doorway, I felt my skin crawl as I pushed myself to walk past the shadows along the walls.

They aren't your monsters... they aren't your monsters... I chanted, again and again, in my head.

Pressing my ear to the wooden door, I listened as Miss Ross headed down the hallway to the little girl's room. The moment I heard the door squeak as she opened it, and the dulling of her footsteps, I opened mine and lightly stepped out into the hallway, knowing to avoid that creaky floorboard just at the top of the stair, before I carefully shut the door behind myself.

I'd seen Sawyer do this before. Some nights, she disappeared, always following the same pattern, and I never saw her again until breakfast the next morning. The moment I got home tonight, I asked her about it.

I had to take advantage of the fact that the younger girls often occupied Miss Ross for an extra five minutes at bedtime, some asking for extra glasses of water or even a story. It was then that I could slip down the stairs and out the front door before she armed the house, which was always the last thing she did each night. In the morning, she turned off the security system right at 7:30 a.m., at which time I could slink back in, hurry upstairs and change, and then come down and join everyone for breakfast. Seeing as tomorrow was Sunday, I wouldn't be expected to show up right away.

Avoiding the last creaky step, I quickly hurried to the front door, checked over my shoulder to see no one watching, and I slipped outside.

Running away from the soft glow of the house and into the dark went against all my instincts, my shoulders going tight, hands gripping my bag like I might tear into the material, and heart beating like a rabbit's, I pushed myself to sprint to the forest and out of view of the windows. Once lost in the night, I let myself breathe a sigh of relief that I'd gotten away with it, but then had to face the trek through the forest.

Hayden... Pressing my lips together, I pushed forward, eager to reach him.

When Spencer had dragged me away, the flashing lights outside of the maze seemed to spark the fight in me, and I forced myself to take action, to refuse to become the victim again. However, given his size, it wasn't much of a fight. That is, not until that man, Jeremy, came along and found Spencer trying to pull me up by a fistful of my hair. Even though I came out of the altercation in one piece, the whole ordeal had seriously triggered me, and for the rest of the outing, my whole body trembled against my will and I kept zoning out of the moment.

We had managed to rejoin his family in time for the fireworks, but I hardly enjoyed them. Even the sight of Spencer being wheeled away in a gurney and Theo limping along behind him, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders as he talked with paramedics and security officials, couldn't reassure me. What would they say happened? Would Hayden and I face more trouble in the morning?

We hadn't said a word to his parents when we rejoined them, and when Jeremy had shown up a few minutes after us, he simply stood off to the side as his little girls ran over gleefully at the sight of him. He was as cool as a cucumber, undisturbed by the events. As far as he was concerned, it had never happened. Lucky for us, the other adults were so distracted by the hyped-up younger kids that they didn't notice the change in our behavior. Even Hayden was tense about it. His jaw was locked, his face flushed, and he moved with a sort of quiet rigidity like he was turning to stone.

Keenan drove me back to Phoenix House once the fireworks were over. The kids were all passed out in the backseat, while he and Mina held hands up front. I stayed squashed to Hayden's side, but the shock hadn't really worn off yet. His words, whatever he was saying to try to comfort me, didn't make any sense. Not when I was battling the sounds of childish cries in my head as memories of foster homes and mean boyfriends my mother had brought home, haunted me. It wasn't until he held his phone out, a message written down for me to read, that I snapped out of my trance.

Want to come over tonight?

Yes. Fucking yes. I met his earnest stare and silently nodded. If there was one thing I was certain of, it was that tonight, I needed Hayden. I needed to be close and remind myself that all was well and that we were both okay. When Jeremy had grabbed me, I'd been in a state, fighting between my past and the current nightmares. But when I snapped to for a minute and saw Theo and Hayden struggling together, I was on the verge of losing it altogether. Before I could react, Hayden had gained the upper hand and got away, but fuck... if

Theo had done something to him, if he'd succeeded... I would have killed him myself. I needed to be near him tonight, to reassure myself that he was okay, that we both were. I knew I'd lie awake all night, my triggered mind replaying the events of old and new on repeat. I didn't want to spiral.

So discreetly, he wrote out the plan on his phone, since I didn't have one, and we silently agreed just as we pulled up to Phoenix House. I thanked his parents for their hospitality as Miss Ross greeted our arrival and went inside on the pretense of getting ready for bed.

Now, here I was, moving through the woods in the dead of night, pushing myself further into dark shadows, pushing myself beyond my limits because I wanted Hayden. I stepped into the clearing, relieved I managed to find it with just the moonlight guiding me through small sections that managed to shine through the leafy canopy overhead.

“Maddy?”

His voice was like what I imagined the angels of heaven sounded like as they sang. All I felt was comfort, my heart beating lighter, soothing my nerves. Brightening at the sight of him stepping into the clearing, I raced forward, reaching for him, and he took me into his arms, holding me where I belonged.

“Let's go,” he murmured softly, tucking me close to his side as he turned us to head the other way, a route I'd never taken before. However, I trusted him more than anyone else in the world, and he didn't fail to lead me carefully through the trees without getting caught in shrubs or tripping on fallen limbs. It took longer to get to Hayden's house than I expected, but the moment we broke from the treeline and onto the large expanse of green grass of their property, the warm glow of several downstairs lights filled me with a feeling of such contentment it brought tears to my eyes. I felt safe. Not that Phoenix House made me feel otherwise, but I could never fully shake the feeling of being on guard, watching for a potential threat. I never managed to fully shed the sense of

insecurity and angst that ate away at me at night, or how I felt more like a guest than anything.

At Hayden's, I was still a guest, and up until this moment, I hadn't expected anything else. But, something about being embraced by his family today and the feeling of being protected by them changed everything and how I felt. It felt more like home than any place I've ever been.

"Come on," he whispered, leading me to the back door.

"Are your parents up?" I asked softly as we dodged the beams of light that illuminated the grass.

"When I left, they were trying to get Maverick to stop bouncing off the walls from his sugar high. He got a second wind when we made it home and Dad was trying to get him to stop climbing the bannister to the stairs."

Hayden opened the back door slowly, peeking in and listening, but all was quiet. He indicated that I should follow, and together, we moved stealthily through his house, climbing the stairs as silently and briskly as possible, listening for some sign of his parents. As we passed one of the bedrooms, I could hear Keenan's deep murmur, followed by a tearful Maverick as he begged for a third story. Taking advantage of the distraction, I followed Hayden up the steps to his attic bedroom, placing my bag next to his by his desk as he shut the door and locked it behind himself.

I removed my baggy sweater at this point, keeping on my sweats and old AC/DC t-shirt that had belonged to my father once upon a time. When I was a kid, I had taken it from his dresser, a shirt I always linked to him. Though I couldn't remember much of anything else about him, I could never forget him wearing this.

Hayden's eyes flickered over the shirt and back to my face again as I climbed into his bed, snuggling up against the side against the wall, loving how his covers smelled like him, how soft they were. Wordlessly, he walked over to the side of his bed, removing his shirt and throwing it aside before removing

those dog tags he wore everywhere and placing them carefully on his bedside table. But holy shit... a shirtless Hayden was a thing to behold.

He wasn't huge like Spencer by any means, although his leaner body was muscled and toned in a way that suited him more. Every line on his stomach flexed as he moved, the veins on his arms standing out as he emptied his pockets of his keys and cell phone. I didn't realize I was ogling him until he unzipped his jeans, the sound so loud I jumped a little and quickly averted my gaze, suddenly shy. Despite our little escapade in the woods and the kisses we shared, I could feel my cheeks burn as he slid under the covers beside me and turned out the light.

Even though I felt my nerves getting a little amped up, when his bare arms wrapped around me to pull me in against his chest, I couldn't help but snuggle in, breathing a sigh of relief as I rested my cheek over his heart, the soft thudding a comforting rhythm that had any tension I'd been carrying around with me to vanish. When he threw a leg over both of mine, I could feel the boxer briefs he was still wearing as I wrapped my arms around his waist to hug him. Closing my eyes, I could feel the monsters that lurked in the shadows retreat, the room quiet, except for the sounds of distant frogs and crickets chirping through the open window. Overhead, the skylight revealed a sky blanketed with stars that sparkled down on us.

"When we make our van, we need a skylight," I mumbled against his chest.

"Oh yeah?" He chuckled, giving me a squeeze. "What else does our van need?"

I thought for a moment, before blurting out, "A big bed. One that is always out so we can lie on it whenever we want... just like this."

I felt his lips in my hair as he kissed me in response. "Whatever you wish," he said, his fingers playing with a lock as he twisted it around and around.

“And cool vintage and antique things we can find. I don’t like the modern-looking stuff. It’s sterile, like a doctor’s office.”

“Agreed. Anything else?”

“A bathroom. I don’t want to have to pee on the side of the road in the middle of winter.”

He chuckled at that, “Quint, we’re gonna need a bigger bus.”

I opened my eyes and peered up at him curiously, my eyes adjusting quickly as I sought him out in the dark. “Quint?”

“Have you not seen the movie “Jaws”?”

I shook my head. “Never even heard of it. Is it about a dentist or something?”

He burst out laughing then and quickly let me go to smother himself with his hands so as to not disturb anyone downstairs. After a minute of gaining some control, he shook his head and reached out to cradle my chin between his thumb and forefinger. “No, cutie. It’s about a shark. A *big* shark.”

I crinkled my nose and shrugged.

“We’ll watch it sometime.”

“Is it new or something?”

“Noooooo. It came out back in the 1970’s.”

My brows shot up at that, “Don’t think I’ve seen anything from back then.”

Hayden groaned like what I’d said offended him and pulled me back down to the bed to snuggle up. “Then I’m adding a television to our bus and a movie library so I can educate you on the cinematic masterpieces you’ve been so deprived of.”

“Very eloquently spoken. I’m in!”

Hayden lifted my face so I was looking back up at him then, his lips spreading into a wide smile on his beautiful face.

“What else does my girl want?”

I felt butterflies fluttering around in my stomach at his words, and I grinned up at him as I fell back into the daydream of a possible future. “I waaaaaant lots of colours. I want plants and a wall for stickers or magnets that we collect from the places we visit.” Hayden kept smiling at me, looking like he was making a mental checklist of everything I listed.

He leaned in as I spoke, giving the corner of my mouth the softest, lightest little brush of a kiss. “What else?” he breathed.

I closed my eyes as his mouth drifted over mine, kissing the other side as I whispered, “I want a spot for us to sit on the roof of the bus so we can have a drink together while we watch sunsets.”

“Mm-hmm... and?” His lips trailed along my jaw, giving me goosebumps when he reached the spot by my ear, letting the tip of his tongue snake over my skin.

“And... and...” And what? What were we talking about? It was getting harder to focus as one of Hayden’s hands moved down my back to rest on my hip, squeezing, as the other gently moved my chin up as he ducked his head to kiss along the lines of my throat.

“And?” He breathed against my skin.

“And... a kitchen, with a spot nearby so you can work on your photos...” my fingers slid up his arms, tangling into his hair as he kissed along my collarbone, making me shiver.

“Of course, we can’t be far away from each other, right?” he whispered, kissing the spot at the hollow of my neck.

“Right...”

“Because we’re never going to be apart, right?”

“Right.” I sighed as the hand on my hip glided across my stomach as he continued to press sweet, tender kisses over my body. But then, he changed his tune when his other hand reached down to pull the collar of my shirt aside so he could

lick the swell of the top of my breast, causing my breath to catch in my throat.

“Anything else?” he murmured, the fingers tracing around my stomach now drifting down, fingering the waist of my sweatpants, lightly running back and forth across the top, like he was testing to see if it was okay.

“Uh, just... just...” I wracked my brain, trying to think of what I wanted most in my future. What else could I possibly want? Hayden’s tongue slid up my throat then, his lips hovering over mine, his hand pausing where it was as he waited for me. Opening my eyes to find his shining silver ones burning down at me, his breathing as shaky as mine, I got my answer. “Just you. I want you.”

“Whatever you wish,” he kissed me then, his mouth taking mine. His hand finally slid beneath my pants, moving down over the rise of my pubis toward my pussy. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I greedily kissed him back, opening my mouth as I wordlessly demanded more. When I felt his fingers trace lightly over my clit, I sighed into his mouth, languorously running my tongue over his. Hayden delicately let his fingers tease my clit, his touch playful, feather-light, before he pressed his palm down against my pussy lips, rubbing a little before guiding it up over the bundle of nerves.

“Mmmmm,” I moaned into his mouth as he took my bottom lip between his teeth. Hayden took his time, changing the pressure, the speed... building the sensation only to tease by stopping and doing something else to distract me. When he left me hanging for the third time, I let out a little huff of impatience. Not on purpose, I just reacted, and ended up giving his shoulder a little slap, which only made him chuckle.

“My girl wants more?” He breathed against the column of my neck, making me shiver again before he kissed the skin there sweetly.

“Mm-hmm...” my hips lifted up, seeking more, but he’d pulled his hand away. “Hayden... I-I...”

“I know, cutie. I got you.” Suddenly, he pulled my shirt up, revealing the curve of my breasts and he latched on to my left nipple, sucking greedily as he massaged the other. The sudden assault had me gasping sharply in surprise, but the feeling left me arching as I sought more.

“Oh God...” I whispered, my voice breathless and quiet in the room. Hayden released my nipple with a pop and moved on to the other, his motions becoming a little more assertive as he pinned me down to the bed. The thought of having a man holding me down on a bed in the dark would have sent me into a panic, but it was *Hayden*. It was completely different with him, and I found myself wishing he’d do more, that I could wrap my arms around him and hold him to me and never let go. I needed to feel him, to have him take control, and I’d give it willingly. Because I trusted him like no other. I wanted him like no other...

“Maddy, you’re delicious,” he groaned, his lips letting go before kissing the swell of my flesh, moving down the long, flat plane of my stomach. “Do you want more?”

“Yesssss...” I hissed, watching as he grinned like a cocky bastard against my skin, pressing another kiss to my naval before teasing the lines of my hips.

“Like this?”

I shook my head, my teeth clicking together with impatience.

“Or this?” The tip of his tongue began slowly descending down the edge of my abdomen, creeping towards my pussy. I didn’t dare move as I watched him, hoping that by keeping quiet he’d keep going. But the prick stopped *just* above the spot that was begging for his fucking attention and I squirmed beneath him. His hands immediately seized my hips, holding me in place as his silver stare peered up at me, his slow, crooked grin making me want to smack him upside the side of his head. He knew exactly what he was doing! I’d make him pay for it... later.

“Hayden!” I begged, my voice breaking as I pleaded.
“Please!”

“Please, what?”

“Just... just... do it!”

“Tell me something first...”

“Ugh! *What?*”

“Tell me you’re mine.”

“Wh-what?” I was completely exasperated and confused.

“Tell me you’re mine,” he repeated, sliding one hand up my middle until his palm was resting between my breasts over my racing heart. “Tell me that you’re mine and no one else’s.” His face changed, that playfulness shifting to something darker, fiercer, as he scowled in the dark. “That if someone were to fucking touch you again, I’d have every fucking right to destroy them. Whether it’s Spencer, or any prick who has hurt you in the past, or anyone who tries in the future... They touch you? I lose my fucking mind. Because I won’t allow you to be hurt again. And today, I failed.” His voice deepened as he spoke, the fingers on my waist drifting to my pussy lips, gliding between them as they rubbed, again, teasing my clit with each pass. I moaned and closed my eyes, letting my head fall back. Holy *fuck!*

“Maddy?”

“Wh-what?”

“I need you to tell me you’re mine!” he growled, the fierceness in his tone building, but it didn’t scare me. I knew where his thoughts were. They were back in the Fun House with Theo and Spencer. “Say it!”

“I’m-I’m yours! And you’re mine!” I breathed, smiling as I said it.

“Fucking right!” His mouth latched onto my clit then, and I cried out as that sensation he’d been working me up for crashed, making me lose all feeling and comprehension. That

build rocked to the forefront of my awareness, nothing else mattering at this moment but that familiar, tingling rush that he was demanding from my body. It felt like it had in the clearing, only stronger, and honestly, I didn't think my heart could take it. He swirled his tongue around, his fingers dipping inside, rubbing against my inner walls as he switched between sucking, licking, and humming against me.

“Ohhhh, oh oh fuck! Hayden, I-I...” I gasped, writhing beneath him, but he kept his other palm flat on my heart still, demanding I stay in place, and used his body to keep my legs apart as I reflexively attempted to close them. Why I did, I have no idea. It was like I was unconsciously fighting this feeling, unsure of whether it would drive me to insane pleasure or it would kill me.

He hummed again, the vibration mixed with his sucking, causing that rising pulsing sensation in my lower belly to strengthen, the feeling becoming more and more a cross between gratification and destruction. His fingers started to move faster, the sound of my wetness loud in my ears, like all my senses had suddenly heightened in the last minute or so. Unknowingly, I began to press back against his mouth, and he just increased his torturous motions.

That was when the fucknut pulled back.

“Hayden!” I hissed with a little cry, a mix of being distraught and fucking livid that he'd suddenly stopped, but he flipped us then, laying on his back, and seized the small of my waist and pulled me up, setting me on his chest.

“Ride my face...”

“Wh-what?”

“I said, *ride my fucking face!*” He was giving me control, and honestly, I wasn't sure I wanted it. Self-consciously, I moved closer to his mouth, but my uncertainty held me back. “Sit.”

I'd never been the one in control in a situation like this. As though sensing the warring thoughts in my head, he grabbed

my ass, lifting me up and pulling me in, only to drop me down over his mouth. I tried squirming away to lift myself up, but he practically snarled at me.

“I didn’t say hover... I said fucking sit!”

“H-Hayden, I-”

He pulled me down, forcing my weight to rest, and began to eat me out with such desperate intensity I felt that wave come crashing up to the surface again, as strong as ever.

“Holy f-fuck!” I moaned as I squeezed my eyes shut and began to grind down on his mouth. He groaned loudly, his arms hooked around my thighs, urging me to rock. I could feel the muscles in his arms bulge and strain around my legs as he encouraged me to move. So, taking a hold of the headboard, I did as he asked and began to move. Controlling the intensity and pressure made that flexing, pulsing sensation lurch, rising to the brink of ruin, of ecstasy. “H-holy... fucking... shit!” I cried, as Hayden then latched on and suckled so hard I felt myself break.

I felt like I completely broke down as a wave of that tingling, electrifying rush burst free and shot out through my system, like all my nerves had sparked to life in a whole new way. This was like it had been in the clearing, but much, much stronger. Gasping for air, I felt my body turn to pudding as he suddenly flipped me over onto my back. I was still rocking from my orgasm, watching as he slid out of his boxer briefs to show off the enormous hard-on he was sporting. Sitting on his knees over my trembling figure, he fisted himself, watching me shake like a leaf beneath him.

I watched as he began to tug on his cock, squeezing the flesh until the little light shining from overhead glistened off the precum that leaked from the tip. Leaning over to the side drawer of his bedside table, he pulled out a small, square foil packet and hesitated upon opening it, his shimmering gaze focused on me, “Maddy,” he panted, looking like he was on the verge of losing himself like I just had. “If you tell me no, I’ll stop. Just say it, and I will.”

Oh, hell no, I thought. There was no way I was stopping now. “Don’t you fucking dare stop, Hayden Mathers,” I told him, reaching up with my fingers to feel the flexing muscles of his stomach. I needed him. *All* of him. I’ve never wanted anybody like I’ve wanted him. I didn’t think it was possible. Not after all the bullshit I’ve been through. I thought I’d been ruined, that any hope of a normal life or relationship was impossible. And then Hayden came along and crashed through that thought like a wrecking ball, and I’m so grateful for it.

Ripping open the foil packet, he pulled out the condom and, with hands that shook as much as my body was, he slid it into place, holding the small section at the end. Holding my gaze, Hayden draped himself over me, nudging my legs apart with his knees so he could settle between them. Holding his upper body up on his elbows, he rested his hands on either side of my face, his lips soft and gentle against mine, a sharp contrast to when he’d been so focused and determined. Now, he held me in his hands like I was a delicate flower, and as he kissed me so sweetly, I could taste myself on his mouth.

I could feel his hard length at my entrance, but he didn’t push it. Instead, Hayden somehow managed to hold back, taking his time as he kissed me, his thumbs softly running back and forth along my cheeks.

“Are you okay?” he whispered, touching the tips of our noses together before reaching down to guide his cock along my slit.

“I’m okay,” I nodded, wrapping my arms around his neck and holding his gaze as he pressed forward, slowly inching his way inside. I let out a shuddering breath at the pressure, surprised by how much it actually hurt despite the trauma I’d suffered in the past. Maybe I thought it’d be easier, less painful, or more invasive. But it wasn’t. I felt like I was whole again, on the verge of breaking again.

“Maddy?” He asked, pausing when he saw the distress on his face.

“It’s okay, Hayden. I’m okay, I promise. I want this with you. I swear it.” I reached up to give him a little kiss, meaning every word that I said. I didn’t want to associate something that should be so meaningful and personal with trauma and horror. I wanted to replace it with what I always wanted. I wanted to force it out of my head and not let it control me anymore. I wanted to think of Hayden whenever I thought of this...

He kissed me back, our eyes still locked, and slowly inched forward again. Every gasp, every whimper I made seemed to go straight to his heart, because he’d whisper his apologies, cradling my face, kissing the few tears away, all while I clung to him, needing him, *wanting* him.

“Oh fuck...” he groaned when finally, his pelvis met mine, flush together, as he completely filled me. I gasped at the pressure, noting that as time passed, it wasn’t as painful as before. It felt... satisfying. The idea of Hayden and I being so joined together this way comforted my mind, and I only wanted more. “I’m going to start moving now,” he whispered, and I nodded eagerly, letting one of my legs wrap up around his waist.

Hayden pulled back a bit, only to push forward again, the movements short, like he was testing the waters. Eventually, he managed to pull out entirely before sliding in deliciously once more and I smiled against his lips.

“That okay?” he asked.

“Mm-hmm...” I teased his bottom lip with my tongue, and finally, he began to move with more rhythm, his hips moving at a slower but steady pace.

He let out a shuddering, shaking breath as his eyes rolled back, shutting them as I met his thrusts, pushing back into him. At my enthusiasm, he began to move faster, holding a comfortable pace that had me biting my lip and grinning as I arched into him.

“You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” he whispered, kissing me deeply. “I’ve wanted you since I first saw you, Maddy... I fucking wanted you.” Hayden’s hands glided down to cup my ass, tilting my hips upward as he began to drive into me a little harder, making my toes curl. “I wanted every part of you. I wanted your smile, your soul, your body. I want all of you.”

“You have me,” I sighed into his mouth as his hips began to pump a little faster, still holding my bottom up as I lay back amongst his pillows. I hugged him close as he buried his face into my neck, kissing and sucking as he fucked me in a way that was both dominating and intoxicating. This was unlike anything I’d ever experienced before. It was like each thrust into my body pulled me further away from the darkness, and I was wandering onto a new path, one filled with hope, light, love...

Hayden began to curl his hips, each pump of his pelvis brushing against my clit with a hard, steady smack, and soon, that sensation from before, one I thought would kill me, started to build again. Only this time, it felt even stronger, and I reflexively squeezed around him.

“Fuck, Maddy!” He gasped, his hands squeezing my ass harder as he picked up the pace. God, yes... yes, I wanted this. I *needed* this. I needed him to fight off the monsters, the nightmares. I needed to put it behind me so I could move on to my forever... with him.

I ran my hands down his back, letting my nails trail along his skin, which only seemed to spur him on as he continued to fuck me like a man possessed, as I finally gripped his ass, pulling him into me. Hayden ground against me furiously, teetering together, gasping, moaning, and struggling with our own demons as we sank into each other.

Again, that rise, that build, the electrifying pulse started to grow. “Oh my God, Hayden,” I breathed, my voice breaking upon his name. He sat up, then, bringing my hips up with him so that my shoulders remained on the pillows of the bed, and

he used my body how he wanted, driving into me as he clenched his jaw. I reached up to grasp the blankets around me, my legs tightening around his waist like I feared he'd pull away when I just needed him closer.

Do it! Do it! Do it! Do it! The mantra chanting over and over in my head, begging, pleading for just one more...

“Ohhh sh-sh-shiiiiit!” I grabbed the pillow and ripped it out from beneath my head, smothering myself with it and cried out, my orgasm finally snapping, bursting free. My legs shook uncontrollably, the rush sending small jolts throughout my body that had me fighting to drown out my wailing. *Holy fucking hell!*

“Oh... my... God!” I could hear Hayden moan as his fucking picked up to a frantic pace, the motion only prolonging the feeling that was rocking me senseless, before he finally gave several final, hard thrusts and stilled with a deep groan. I don't know how long passed before he collapsed on top of me. Though most of his weight was resting on his forearms, he didn't pull out just yet. Instead, we lay there together, holding each other tightly in the other's arms, eyes closed, our breathing slowing. Hayden's head rested on my chest, right over my heart, while I held him in place, my fingers playing lightly with his dark waves, a small smile curling up on my lips.

“I didn't hurt you, did I?” He asked at last.

I shook my head, despite knowing he couldn't see, and mumbled, “Far from it.”

Hayden turned his head to kiss my skin, moving up along my throat, chin, and mouth. “My girl,” he whispered with a smile in his voice.

“My guy,” I grinned as I kissed him back.

By the time he got up and cleaned up, I felt like I was ready to pass out. Thankfully, he felt the same way, as he curled up at my side, throwing up the comforter so that it spanned out as it fell over our cooling bodies. Without another

word, Hayden pulled me into his arms, kissing my temple, forehead, and hair repeatedly. Never did I think I would be lucky enough to experience this feeling here with him. As much as I wanted to savour it, with his warmth around me, how safe I felt, I couldn't help but give in to the happiest dreams I've ever had.

Chapter twenty

Hayden - Present Day

EITHER DAD DIDN'T CARE enough to argue, or he was buying my story. Mom, on the other hand, was another thing altogether. I could tell by the way she narrowed her eyes at me when Maddy and I appeared for breakfast, that our story about her coming over early to join us, she knew was complete bullshit. Dad, however, greeted her with a loud, jubilant 'Morning, precious!' before he enveloped her into one of his trademark hugs he usually reserved for my sisters, brother, and I. I could tell that him crossing that physical boundary caught her off guard and for a moment, I felt a sense of panic as my eyes widened and I automatically reached out, like I'd pry him off of her. But to my relief, she laughed, albeit a little uncertainly, and gave his back a little pat in return. When he let her go to help Mom with breakfast, Maddy just turned to me, cheeks flushed, but otherwise okay.

"If you aren't okay with it, just say so. I think he just forgot himself," I explained under my breath as Dad flipped a pancake before it had a chance to burn.

"It's okay, really," she reassured me as we headed into the kitchen, "I think it just surprised me, is all. But I'm fine. Promise."

I watched her doubtfully, wondering if she was just trying to placate me, but when Maddy turned to give my mom a similar greeting, I relaxed. Maybe last night, there was a breakthrough between her and my crazy family?

Mom beamed widely and enveloped my girl into the kind of hug only a mother can give, her arms wrapped securely around her like a protective barrier, the little side-to-side sway similar to that of being rocked, like a baby. Mom truly had a gift for making others feel so... *loved*.

But the moment she released her and encouraged Maddy to help herself to breakfast, she turned her sharp, green gaze to me, a single brow arched high on her forehead, and said under her breath, "Came over early, hm?"

I turned away, grabbing two glasses to fill with some orange juice, avoiding my mother's penetrating stare. "Mh-hm!"

"Yeah? That so?"

"Yep!"

"I don't recall hearing the doorbell ring or a knock?"

"I let her in while you were getting Maverick up."

"That right?"

God, this woman was relentless as she watched me, shadowing my steps as I set our glasses in the same seats we'd had the last two dinners, then moved back to get us some plates. "Yep!" I said again.

"So if I called Miss Ross and asked her if she saw Maddy get up this morning, she'd confirm?"

"Dunno what happened on her end, but I guess so."

"I see."

Mom watched as I helped wash off the fresh berries she'd brought home from the farmer's market. I combined a mix of blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, and strawberries into one bowl, adding a serving spoon before setting the bowl on the table for everyone to help themselves to. When I turned around to find another task to occupy myself with, I found Mom standing directly behind me, hands on her hips, her face similar to what she'd worn in the principal's office. I found

myself quaking a bit at the sight, but stood my ground. If Maddy wanted to be here, then I'd have her. If I could have it my way, she'd move in right away, especially after last night, but I knew that wasn't possible. "What?" I asked.

My Dad was showing Maddy how to properly prepare pancakes, even adding chocolate chips to a select few, and started showing off by flipping them effortlessly like a trained chef. Maddy watched attentively, holding Maverick on her hip, like she was actually enjoying this. Meanwhile, my sisters came trudging down the stairs, rubbing their eyes like they didn't get nearly enough sleep last night. Sugar hangovers, for sure. Mom took a step closer, lowering her voice so that whatever she was about to say to me, it would remain between the two of us.

"Don't lie to me, Hayden. If there's one thing I ask of you, it's not to lie. If you want Maddy over, you just have to ask, but don't sneak around. And for the love of God, if you two do... well, *anything*, please be responsible—"

"Oh my God, Mom!" I covered my face with my hands as I cringed at her words. "Please stop!"

"If you can't talk about it, then you shouldn't be doing it."

"I disagree. I can talk about it, just not with my mother!"

"Then if you want to stop discussing it, you won't lie. If you want her over, you need to ask, and I need to discuss it with Phoenix House. She's more than welcome to be here, but remember that there are different rules in place for her, Hayden. I can't cross those, or we can get into trouble. Do you understand?"

I let my hands fall, forcing myself to look at her. Yeah, unfortunately, I got it. My mother didn't know why Maddy had come over last night, that we'd had to fight off Theo and Spencer, almost losing each other, before that Jeremy guy stepped in to save the day. We needed each other. I hadn't expected what happened in bed last night to... well, happen. *Hoped*, yes. I won't lie. But I would have stopped if she asked

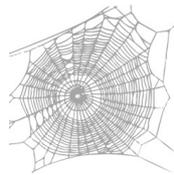
me. Mostly, I just needed her with me, so I could reassure myself that she was safe. And I knew she needed the same.

But Mom was in the dark, and that's where she'd stay. While I would agree to let her know about Maddy coming by, because I did understand that kids in the foster system had a different set of rules that they had to abide by, I wouldn't tell her about yet another altercation between myself and Theo. She'd probably have a fit, or think I was doing this on purpose. And if she believed me, what if she insisted on trying to go after him again? His father had shut down all bullying allegations when I'd been going through the worst of it. No matter how many times she marched into that school to fight for me, it fell on deaf ears. Why should it be any different now?

"I'm sorry, Mom. I promise I'll let you know from now on."

She pressed her lips together, nodding with relief, but added, "I need to let Miss Ross know that she's here now. I'll tell her that bullshit you told me, but not again, Hayden."

"I got it."



THEO WAS FUCKING UNHINGED. That was the only way to explain his attempt to attack Maddy and I at the festival. Everything he said, how close he got to actually seriously hurting one of us, it disturbed me enough that I debated all Sunday on what the fuck I should do. His resentment and anger from what had happened between us was burning as fresh as if it had just happened yesterday. I mean, I got it. I fucked him up. But it wouldn't have happened if he hadn't pushed me. He didn't see it that way. As much as I wanted to just bury my head in the sand and not deal with it, the memory of Spencer carrying Maddy away burned in my mind. Not to

mention, they'd had someone watching Emily. What if I stayed quiet and they made a move a few weeks from now?

At the end of the day, as much as I wanted to keep quiet, I knew the smartest thing would be to tell my dad and Gramps. I'd say not a word to my mother, as the memory of the disappointment I'd caused the last time I had an altercation with Theo, made my stomach roll with shame. I never wanted to see that look on her face again.

“What the fuck are those?”

Dad and I were in the garage while Mom was inside, getting ready to start the bedtime routine for Maverick. When I looked up from the engine he and I were working on for one of his clients, I caught his sharp, blue gaze fixated on my neck, and I knew he'd spotted the bruises. I had been wearing a collared flannel shirt, not my usual style, but I borrowed it from Dad's closet, hoping the high collar would hide the dark marks that had appeared, darkening throughout the day.

“I know they sure as shit aren't hickeys. I *know* what hickeys look like. So what's going on?” He pushed the subject in my silence.

Pressing my lips together, I avoided his gaze as I shone the light for him from beneath the hood of an old PT Cruiser. How the thing was still running was beyond me, and the problem lay deep within the engine, which was going to be a bitch to get to, but Dad was determined to help the owner out. “There was an incident last night—”

“What the fuck does that mean? What ‘incident’?” he snapped, straightening up, hands on his hips, his usual light-hearted tone quickly shifting.

Sighing heavily, I straightened, too, setting the light down to face him. “Just so you know, I didn't start it, okay?”

“Start what, exactly?” he asked. Though he was calm on the outside, I could make out the shadow around his eyes as he stared harder at the bruises on my throat. “What the fuck happened, Hayden? Who did that to you?”

“It was Theo Hebert.”

I could see how the name clicked in his head and the flat line of his mouth pursed, cheeks reddening slightly as he fought to maintain that cool control he was infamous for. “Go on,” he said, crossing his arms, waiting for the story.

So I told him. I explained about him and Spencer cornering Maddy and I in the maze, how they claimed to have someone watching Emily on the outside, everything Theo had said to me as he attempted to strangle me on the floor. I told him all of it... except for Jeremy. I’d promised him I would say nothing about his involvement, and I owed him, so I made it sound like Maddy and I had managed to fight back and free ourselves.

By the time I finished, Dad’s face was so red, so twisted with rage, it was unlike any expression I’d ever seen on him before, and I ended up taking a step back. My dad never got mad like this, never expressed this sort of fury, and seeing it now, it was actually a little scary.

Reaching out, he gently cupped the back of my neck and pulled me in, tilting my head to the side and tugged the collar back so he could get a better look at the bruises. Though he was furious, his nostrils flaring as he took in the sight, he was careful in how he held me. Glancing towards the house, we could make out Mom and my sisters through the kitchen windows, looking like they were all having a fun conversation about God knows what. Probably one of their favourite trash TV shows or something. But the sight of them happy and safe, contrasted sharply with the threat Theo and his friends had given, and it spurred a protective impulse within me. I could only imagine how Dad was feeling.

“So that’s why you had Maddy stay the night?”

I blanched. “You know about that?”

He raised his brows, an almost pitiful smile replacing his scowl, and he looked at me like I was completely dense. “Your mom and I don’t have secrets between each other, son, especially when it comes to our kids.”

“You aren’t going to tell her about this, are you?”

He went quiet then, and I could see the deliberation in his eyes as he released me, thinking it over. “I think information is key to survival. How can we be prepared for anything if our heads are buried in the sand? I’ll tell her, but I want to talk to your gramps about these little thugs first.” He spat the last few words, disgust evident at the mention of Theo and Spencer. “As for you, I want you to get some ice packs on your neck. It’ll help with the swelling. Did he do anything else?”

“Nothing I can’t walk off.”

“Is Maddy okay?”

I nodded, knowing that if she had suffered any injury I wouldn’t be walking free right now. I would have been arrested last night for killing Spencer with my bare hands.

“Okay, well, like your mom said, she is welcome here anytime. Your gramps and I are gonna have to figure out how to deal with this little shit and his dad. I have a feeling reporting it to the police won’t help. Daniel Hebert has friends in the department, unfortunately...” His voice trailed off as he got lost in thought, deliberating on the best course of action.

Theo’s dad being of higher standing in Ashland was the biggest problem. He was the main reason why Theo never really got into any trouble for all the bullshit he put me through. He had hands in many pockets, dirt on a lot of people, and though The Lost Souls had given Ashland a new sense of life and security outside the world of organized crime, there would always be scumbags lurking in the shadows. Theo’s father, Daniel Hebert, was one of them.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” I said after a minute of silence. He’d been staring off at nothing, lost in thought, and I felt that same guilt and shame start to burn alive again.

His focus flitted back to me, a single brow raised, looking confused. “What the hell for?”

“For... all of this. For bringing this bullshit back into our lives—”

“No, kid. No! This is *not* your fault. I’ve met punks like this Hebert fucker. It always starts off small, standard bullying and the like. But as time goes by, it can build and build until it becomes dangerous as they fall deeper into the shit pit of their minds.” He sounded stressed as he said it, torn and tired as he grabbed a torque wrench and turned back to the cruiser’s engine. “If you don’t step up, sooner or later, they’ll do something that they won’t be able to come back from, and all they’ll do is leave a wake of destruction behind. The last thing I want is for anyone in our family to get caught in the crossfire. That includes your Maddy.” He nodded at me to pick up the light again.

Feeling like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders, I obliged, temporarily putting aside my feelings about the situation. Having my father, and soon my grandfather, on my side made me feel less alone, braver, about possibly facing off with Theo again.

Hopefully, it wouldn’t come to that.



THE TWO DAYS that Maddy was suspended were essentially treated as study days for the senior class, so I wasn’t expected to be in school at all. We were given the time to prepare for finals, and Monday and Tuesday morning, I picked up Maddy at Phoenix House and brought her to mine where we’d spend the day at the kitchen table, getting ready for the first of our exams. I would have preferred for us to study in my room, but my mom immediately put her foot down, muttering under her breath about not wanting to be a grandmother at her age.

Honestly, after having Maddy once, the *need* to have her again was driving me crazy. It was all I could think about. I thought that the craving would subside after the first time, but I was dead wrong. As we sat at the kitchen table, bent over our

books, every move she made was distracting and captivating. Whenever she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, or shifted in her seat, I immediately looked her way and would get lost for a few minutes as I watched her. Only when she caught me staring and she'd giggle or reach out to tap the end of my nose, would I snap out of it and remember that I had an exam to worry about.

Mom served us lunch or snacks to keep us motivated, and when we took a break in the afternoon, she and Maddy would linger together in the kitchen, sipping tea. Both days Mom even taught her how to bake some things. Oatmeal chocolate chip muffins one day, and s'mores cookies the other. Maddy took to it well, actually smiling and listening as my mother gave her little tips and tricks she'd learned over the years. Seeing her bond with my mom actually made me happier than I thought it would. I thought about the little bits and pieces Maddy had told me about her actual mother, and I put together a lot on my end about her childhood. It sounded like it hadn't been much of one. If she wanted a family, I was more than happy to have her be a part of mine.

But despite this seemingly peaceful couple of days, at the back of my mind, I kept thinking about Theo and his need for revenge. Dad had hopped on his bike first thing Monday morning, giving Mom a kiss as he said something about needing to visit The Lost Souls clubhouse for a bit. Though Mom had looked confused about it, she didn't pepper him with questions. That probably came later at night when he came back and they could talk in private, but I have no idea. I wasn't even sure if he'd told her about what had happened at the festival. She gave nothing away.

I did my own digging, browsing around social media trying to see if I could find out what Theo and Spencer were saying about Saturday night. Queen Bitch of the Universe, Ayla, was trying to sap up sympathy for what I did to her face, posting selfies that I could tell were carefully edited to show off the bruises and marks while the rest of her face was airbrushed and made up to high hell. There were dozens of

comments and likes, all praying for her recovery, blah blah blah... but she didn't say a word about Theo or Spencer.

The guys, on the other hand, were completely silent. No one was saying a word. It was like no one even knew about it, and maybe that was true. I wondered if their ego was so bruised they couldn't even stick to some made-up sap story about how they got fucked up. But no one mentioned Maddy or I, not even a whisper. And as far as Daniel Hebert stepping in and putting blame on me for his son's beating, there was nothing. No cops showed up at our door and there was zero evidence of anything online.

I had no choice but to keep my head down, study, and hope that my dad and Gramps were putting a plan in place. Now all I really had to worry about was keeping my dick in my pants, because every move Maddy was making was driving me fucking crazy. Every night all I could do was fist myself and jerk off with desperation as I relived our night together over and over in my mind.

I needed to feel her, to taste her again, and have her squeeze around me as she moaned in my ear in that sexy way that sent me into a fucking state of madness. I could tell that she was getting frustrated, too, as I studied her closely for cues. Her cheeks would flush if I touched her, or she'd lick her lips, her legs squeezing together under the kitchen table as we tried to focus. But Mom was having none of it, and any attempt at heading upstairs for a little privacy was quickly interrupted by her. When Maddy and I made it about halfway up the steps, Mom came back in from outside and would call me down to watch Maverick or to do some chores for her. Or, once, she even asked Maddy to watch the cookies they'd been making for her so she could get some gardening done. It was all innocent requests, things she might have asked for anyways, but I knew my mother, and she was being conniving and seriously cockblocking me.

So when Wednesday came, the first day of finals, I felt like I was ready to crawl out of my skin, grab Maddy, and make a mad dash for it so I could disappear inside of her again. I even

deliberated stopping on the way to school as I drove us through the streets on my bike, stopping to disappear into the tree line and just fuck each other like rabbits real quick. But I'd gotten a late start that morning, having had a bad sleep as I tossed and turned daydreaming of Maddy's perfect body, and our teachers had said that no one would be allowed into the gymnasium after the exam had started.

The gym was set up with hundreds of single desks, all arranged in vertical lines across the floor, our names written on strips of paper which were taped to the corner signaling where we were to sit. We had to show our student ID number as we entered, so we could be checked in as well as surrender our calculators to be cleared. Today was our science exam, and though Maddy and I hadn't been in the same class, all seniors had to take the test on the same day. So both classes were mixed together, arranged alphabetically throughout the space, which meant Maddy was one row over and a couple closer to the front from me, so I had the perfect view of the back of her head.

I looked around for Spencer, knowing that he was in Maddy's class, along with that Jace Fogerty dick. Theo had been in mine, and sure enough, I spotted his blue hair near the left side of the gym, along with Spencer and Jace, a little too close to Maddy for my comfort.

Theo and Spencer looked like shit. They moved gingerly, like they were in serious pain, and I noted a few scrapes on the side of Spencer's face from when he'd been thrown through the glass. A few people approached them before the exam started, asking questions, but they were waved away, though I could see them glaring in my direction from time to time. These idiots were blaming me for their current circumstance, and it was honestly laughable. Fuck these assholes. So when I caught them looking my way again, without glancing in their direction, I flipped them off and refocused on Maddy, who was twisting her hands anxiously in her lap.

"Alright, alright, everyone take your seats, please! We're starting in a minute here. Sit down!" One of the science

teachers called from the front of the room, while mine circled one side, the vice principal on the other. They had a whiteboard set up with a list of rules, which she quickly went over.

“You are to turn off your cellular devices now,” she called, her voice echoing loudly throughout the space, “if anyone is seen with their phone out, they will be removed from the gym and forced to surrender their exam as is. Turn off your phone and put it in your bag.” I, along with practically every other kid in the room, went along with it, though Maddy was one of the few who didn’t. She didn’t have a phone. I made a note to fix that.

“No talking at all while in the gymnasium. If anyone is seen talking, they will be removed from the gym and forced to surrender their exam as is,” she said, repeating the previous threat verbatim. “You are allowed five minutes maximum for washroom breaks. You will be timed. If anyone is caught talking outside of the gymnasium during a break, they will not be allowed to re-enter to finish their exam. When you have completed your paper, you are to turn it face down upon your desk and leave without talking and distracting other students,” she said, eyeing a few individuals in particular, three of them being the pricks at the far end. “You have two hours. For individuals needing extra time, you will be granted an additional hour. Good luck!”

The exam itself was easy enough. It was a 60-question multiple choice response test, with an official selection sheet to use, and a paper for a long answer at the end. Because we’d all taken general science, there was a mix of physics, chemistry, and biology questions that we had prepared for, and I breezed through it easily enough. In the end, it only took me about 45 minutes to complete, including my long answer, but before I turned my paper over, I pretended to go over my answers for a third time as I glanced again and again at Maddy.

She was smart, I knew. And when we had gone over everything together the past few days, I could see that she

knew enough to get by, but she had no idea *how* to study. As a result, she often teared up at the table, working herself into a state before excusing herself to go to the washroom and would return with her eyes dry, but red from crying. Once I got her to relax, she was fine, and we continued to work our way through the papers and text. The years of moving home to home, of an unbalanced life, she never got the attention she needed to figure out how to prepare herself for this moment, and I spent the better part of Monday and Tuesday prepping her. I wanted her to get by and be proud of herself. I wanted her to know she *was* smart enough to do this. It wasn't her fault that the system had pushed her through unprepared, that her home life had been so fucked that no one had cared to help her figure out what she needed. I had faith she could do this, but I could see the anxiety eating away at her.

And now?

I could tell she was about halfway through, but her heel was bouncing at a rapid pace, her hand clenching her pencil tight as she read over a question again and again. She was uptight, nervous, no doubt, and I could see, even from back here, how red her cheeks were. She was working herself up into panic mode. She needed to calm down.

As I expected, she raised her hand to excuse herself for the washroom, and the teacher at the front nodded to her, holding up a timer, and watched as Maddy hurried away. I saw the tears in her eyes as she went to rush past me. Her clear, hazel gaze flicked my way, but she shook her head, her lips pressed tight, and I felt my heart wrench.

Fuck this.

I flipped my exam over and got to my feet, signaling I was done. Gathering my bag, I turned and walked out, noting that a few other kids were ready to do the same. But I wasn't thinking about them. I needed to help my girl.

I headed out into the hall, the entrance to the gym in the basement of the school. You wouldn't know it, though. The only sign that we were underground was the fact that there

were no windows. I headed down the corridor into the direction of the girls' changing rooms, knowing that I was going to look like a major perv, but I didn't care. I needed to calm Maddy down so she could focus and finish her exam. She still had lots of time, so she could take advantage of that and slowly make her way through without feeling too flustered. But she needed to relax first in order to do that.

Sure enough, the moment she emerged from the girl's changeroom, her eyes were red and she looked like she was about to have a breakdown. Her eyes widened in surprise to see me standing there, but she didn't get a chance to say a word before I grabbed her by her upper arm and pulled her sideways towards the janitor's closet, closing it behind us.

"H-Hay--"

"Sh! No talking. You're still on exam time. We have about four minutes, so I wanna do this quickly so you can get back in there and finish. And you *can* finish it, Maddy. You just need to calm down."

"I--"

"No speaking! I'm done with the exam so I'm exempt, but in case anyone catches us and tries to accuse us of any bullshit..." I fumbled with my jeans, unbuttoning them one-handed while I cupped her with the other between her legs, causing her to gasp in shock. I placed an arm over her head, backing her against the wall, ignoring the hint of the lemon fresh scent, something they used to clean the floors in this place, and kept my focus wholly on her. When I began to rub a little harder, I could make out the hiss of breath between her teeth, her hands grasping my biceps through my jacket as I began to kiss her throat, wishing I had more time.

"H-Hayden..." she whispered, her fingers clenching the leather of my jacket, pressing back against my hand.

"Shhh..." I hushed her, sucking on the skin by her ear, my breath loud in the small space. "No talking, sweetheart. You don't wanna break the rules, do you?"

She sighed as I unzipped her pants, turning her around to press against the wall while I pulled her jeans down to expose her beautiful ass. Though there were no lights on in here, the crack beneath the door let in enough that I could make out the smallest details, enough that I could marvel at what little I could see of her. Mostly, I had to go based on touch, on listening to the way her breath caught as I began to finger her, my arm curled around her hip to cup her pussy as I ground my hard-on into her backside. Maddy rested her cheek against the wall, the smallest of moans escaping her lips, driving me fucking crazy.

“You just gotta relax, Maddy... relax, and you’ll be fine,” I whispered, pulling my hand free to lick her juices. I pulled my cock free through my briefs, as hard as fucking rock as I rolled a condom on that I’d had in my pocket. I’d make the time up to her later. “No talking, alright?”

She nodded, pressed her sweet little ass back against me and I lost my shit.

Lining myself up with her pussy, I snapped my hips and pushed in as deep as I could fucking go, all while holding her hips tight to keep her in place. Maddy moaned loudly, pressing one of her own hands over her mouth to keep quiet as I started moving. I was so fucking desperate to have her, to feel her again. And we only had about three and a half minutes to do this before she needed to get back in there. And I needed her to calm down so she could focus. Call me selfish, but she was like a fucking drug to me.

I pressed my whole body against her back, sucking on her throat, forcing her to turn her head my way so I could delve my tongue between her lips, all while I fucked her mercilessly against the wall. The smack of our bodies joining, the little cries and muffled gasps, was all music to my ears. She still smelt of the cinnamon buns she’d eaten for breakfast that morning, and that sweet scent of hers that was just... her. It made my head spin, and I curled my hips as I changed the angle a bit, demanding an orgasm from her, and fast. When a pair of footsteps echoed down the hall, heading our way, I

quickly wrapped an arm over her chest, my other hand coming up to clamp down over her mouth, as I continued to thrust as quietly as possible, rotating my hips as I ground against her.

The change only made her moan into my hand more, pressing eagerly back against me as I tried to keep our transgression as quiet as possible. The student passed us without pause, the door to the girls' room opening and closing. I took advantage of this brief moment of privacy to fuck her like a goddamn maniac.

Seizing a hold of her hips, I began to pump into her as hard and as fast as I fucking could. In response, Maddy pressed her hands against the wall, pushing right back to meet every thrust. The long, jolted moan she hummed was the sexiest fucking sound I had ever heard in my life. My head hung back as I squeezed my eyes shut, holding her so tight it was a wonder she didn't tell me to let her fucking go or slap me. But even then, it wasn't enough. I needed to be closer. I slid an arm under her lower abdomen, pulling her ass up into the air so she was practically hovering in the air on her toes, and slid my fingers down to rigorously play with her clit. At that, I felt her squeeze around my cock, and she bit the corner of her gorgeous pink lip to keep from screaming.

"Quiet, Maddy," I whispered in warning, panting hard as I kept the momentum going, feeling the tension building in her as her body seemed to seize up, clenching around me. "Remember, keep quiet. No talking. Don't break the rules..."

"Ugggh!" She squeezed her eyes shut, her hands turning to fists against the wall, her body curling in on itself. *So close.* I pressed harder against her clit, now frantically swiping my hand against it, demanding her pleasure.

"C'mon, sweetheart. Give it to me," I murmured, my breath tickling her ear. The moment I did, her body spasmed, her pussy binding around my cock, and her legs began to shake uncontrollably. I held her up, my arm still wrapped around her, and when she began to cry out, I covered her mouth again with my other hand, muffling the sound. I thrust

several more times before I felt it, that addicting fucking snap and rush that felt like a blast of euphoria, the tingling making my knees shake. I sagged against the wall with her in my arms, panting hard as I fought to regain control of the feeling in my legs. The sound of the door to the changeroom opened and closed again, the footsteps now leading away. That's right, Maddy needed to get back.

"If they ask, tell them you were sick, alright? Nerves," I murmured in her ear, giving the curved shell of it a featherlight kiss. "You can do this, okay? I promise you you can."

She nodded, though swayed on her feet, so I took the initiative to pull her pants up and set them in place, straightening her shirt for her. I turned her around and brushed my fingers through her hair before I cupped her face in my hands and kissed her deeply, feeling like the remaining time she would be in that gymnasium would feel like a lifetime. She grasped my wrists, holding onto me as much as I was her, both of us completely lost in each other.

"You can do it, Maddy," I whispered again to her, giving her jaw a kiss. When she didn't move, I smacked her ass, spurring her out of it as she jumped and yelped. "Go finish up, and I'll be waiting for you."

Wordlessly, she turned and reached up, her fingers twisting about in my hair before she tugged me down to meet her, crushing her mouth to mine. I could feel her lips part, the little tease of her tongue, before she let go and opened the door, peeking out before she hurried off. I stayed where I was for a few more minutes, catching my breath as I fought for control. Holy hell that was fucking hot. All of it. I only wished it could have lasted.

It was another hour before Maddy came out, beaming from ear to ear, looking much more confident than before. I'd been lounging in the hall, trying to peek inside to check on her, but the vice principal shooed me away, so I lingered nearby, relieved at the sight of her looking so proud. I held my arms open, to which she skipped forward. I had expected a hug, but

instead, she just wound her arm up high over her head, and swung it down and around, nailing me right on the ass with a loud slap.

“What the hell?” I jumped in surprise, staring at her like she’d lost her mind.

But my beautiful girl just grinned up at me like an adorable nymph, and murmured, “Payback for the closet.” Referring to when I’d smacked her butt to get her moving. Laughing, I tried to look like her smack didn’t sting as much as it actually had, and I slipped my arm around her shoulders as I guided us up the stairs to where my bike was waiting. I’d bring her home for a couple of hours before I’d be forced to return her to Phoenix House. The very idea of having to bring her back there made me nervous, like her not being under my watch at all times was the very opening Theo and his asshole friends needed to make a move. But judging by how they were limping around today, I guessed they were in no position to do so. So for now, I’d have to follow the rules set for Maddy by the foster system here.

Hopefully, once school was over, I could find a way to get her out of there so she could stay with me permanently, where she belonged.

Chapter twenty-one



MADDY - PRESENT DAY

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MADDY!”

I opened my eyes to see a single cupcake sitting on the table before me, the pink frosting decorated with rainbow sprinkles, a single candle alight and flickering as my mother clapped her hands together. She remembered. I didn't think she would, but when I came home from school, she had excitedly taken me by the hand and guided me to our patio set that acted as our kitchen table, the plastic rickety and cracked.

“Close your eyes!” she whispered and I obliged, wondering, hoping that maybe, this year, I wasn't going to be disappointed again.

Seeing that little cupcake, knowing that she remembered, it was all I wanted. A smile broke out on my face as I watched the flickering flame for another moment before I shut my eyes.

“Make a wish, honey!” Mom said, crouching at my side.

A wish. That was easy. Despite the fact that it hadn't come true from previous birthdays, from the shooting stars I saw, or the few pennies I'd thrown into fountains, the one wish I always asked for never came true. At nine, you'd think I'd have learned by now. Wishing doesn't bring you happiness. And yet...

I peeked sideways through my lashes at my mother, who in the last two months has been trying so hard to be a better person, and hoped that maybe this time, all of our hardship

was behind us at last. I didn't want to go back to a foster home, especially after what happened last time. And Mom hadn't brought around a new boyfriend at all since she got me back. Maybe this birthday was the start of something new. A better future for us.

As my mother's similar hazel gaze flickered back at mine, the light of the candle shining in her eyes, I felt that immediate sense of love warm my heart, and forgiveness soon followed. I always forgave her, because deep down, I knew my mother wasn't a bad person. I knew she loved me. I just hoped that this time, her love for me, for herself, was enough to keep her away from all that crap, all the bad people she usually ended up befriending. I reached out and wrapped my arms around her neck, squeezing hard, loving her despite all the failures.

She hugged me back, her embrace making me feel safe and loved, despite how rail thin she was, despite the past, all of it. "I love you," I told her, fighting back the tears that stung my eyes, my chin wobbling as I fought for composure.

"I love you, too, Maddy." She squeezed me, rocking us slowly side to side where I sat. "Now make your wish, sweetie."

Reluctantly, I let her go, and turned back to my birthday treat. This time, I hoped beyond hope that at last, this wish would stick.

I wish for my family, I thought before I took a breath and easily blew out that single flame. The smoke drifted upwards in a fancy, distorted line as my mother rose to her feet and clapped wildly, cheering as suddenly, sparks flew out from my cupcake. I stared in wonder as the sparkling light grew brighter, and brighter. In the background, my mother faded away into nothing, until I was sitting alone at the table, the apartment completely empty, freshly painted white, looking like it had been recently renovated.

What the hell?

I was no longer a child. Instead, I sat as I was now, a seventeen-year-old girl, the child that I was gone forever, fading like the flame of the candle. Before me, the cupcake was gone, and the smoke that had risen from the extinguished flame began to whirl, expanding and growing high overhead, taking up almost all the space in this little apartment. Finally, it slowed, the churning and power behind it drifting to a stop, like a thick dark grey cloud overhead.

“Wish... granted...” the voice, a deep, tenor unmatching to anyone I knew, purred the words, like I didn’t need to be afraid. And I wasn’t. I was finally getting my wish!

But...

This wasn’t right. If I got my wish, then where did my mom go? She’d completely vanished. I spun about in my chair, searching the empty space for some sign of her, but it was nothing but white walls and polished grey floors.

“Where’s my mother?” I asked, turning back to the smoke.

Silence.

“Where’s my mom? Where’d she go?” I felt my chest squeeze uncomfortably as the wordless billow of thick fog remained silent. “Where is she?!”

“Maddy...” it whispered at last.

“Tell me. Where?”

“Maddy—”

“No, don’t ‘Maddy’ me! Where is my mother?!”

“Maddy!”

“MADDY! MADDY, WAKE UP!”

I felt my body jolt and my eyes snapped open, blinded by the light that was streaming through a crack in the curtain. I was in my bunk at Phoenix House, my quilt a mess around my legs, like I’d been kicking or something. The elephant Hayden

had won for me was on the floor, and it looked like Fuzzy had been haphazardly thrown to the end of the bed. Crouched at my side, Andrea was watching me, concern in her eyes as she removed her hand from my arm.

“Wha-the-fu?” I mumbled, rubbing my eyes hard as I tried to come to.

“You were having a nightmare,” she explained, “kicking and muttering in your sleep. You sounded like you were in pain.” She rose to her feet, still in her pajamas. The shorts and t-shirt she wore to bed was the only time that I could see any part of her body, and that was how I’d learned about the heavy scarring on her arms and legs.

Her Dad... the stove...

I never let my eyes linger, knowing how self-conscious she was, wanting her to feel comfortable enough, at least in this room, that she could bare herself a little and be worry-free of any judgment.

Groggily, I sat up, yawning hugely as she sat on the edge of her bunk, pulling her bag out from underneath her bed to go through her clothes. Though it was Thursday, a school day, seniors were still given time off to study for our next exam, which would take place on Monday.

“You heading over to Hayden’s again?” Andrea asked as I let my legs dangle over the side of my bed, stretching as I forced myself to wake up. I tried to remember my dream, but you know how it is. When you wake up, it begins to fade away into the back of your mind, like a pile of sand trickling through your fingers until nothing of it remains.

“Yep,” I yawned. It wasn’t even a question. I’d spent practically all available free time with him. Yesterday came flooding back to me, how anxious I’d been taking that exam, the feeling rising with each passing second until I excused myself to the washroom. But then, Hayden... the closet.

My cheeks flushed at the memory, and I fought back a guilty smile. That had seriously worked like a charm. When I

made it back to my seat, just as the timer went off, I was as relaxed as a sloth, which helped me focus, though a few times my mind did wander, daydreaming about the encounter and wanting so badly to relive it again. When we'd left school, we went back to his house, and though I could tell he very much wanted to re-enact it, his mother came home just in time to stop anything from happening, much to my disappointment. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't love spending time with his family... especially his mother and baby brother. His mom had a way of making me feel like one of her daughters, the way she spoke, how casually she hugged me or taught me things I'd always hoped my own mother would have shown me.

Mom...

I felt something stir in my head. My dream. She'd been there, but what had happened? The harder I struggled to remember, the faster the dream seemed to disappear.

Andrea started talking about the exam she had tomorrow. Math. Blech! I was glad I had that behind me from my last semester, which had been in British Columbia at the beginning of senior year. I'd already taken the final and just *barely* passed by the skin of my teeth. Andrea, however, seemed more confident than I did when it came to numbers. I watched as she gathered her outfit for the day and headed out into the hall to change in the washroom. Despite the fact that she showed Sawyer and I her arms and legs in our room, every other part was out of bounds. My heart went out to her at the thought of what other horrors her father had inflicted on her, how bad it must be for her to want to hide it.

Sawyer meanwhile...

She stepped into the room, having vacated the washroom, wrapped in her towel, and flung it aside, totally comfortable with her body and unafraid of me seeing her naked. Whether I wanted to or not, she didn't care.

I looked away and pulled the garbage bag of my things out from the end of my bed and rifled through it, searching for something light to wear. The weather had been warming

drastically over the past week and a half, but most of my clothes were made for coverage in mind. I think I reuse the same three t-shirts again and again. Two of them were so faded and used up that the hems were run, and there was a hole under the armpit of another. I chose the less rundown of the three, a deep blue baseball t-shirt with white striping on the arms, and a pair of lightweight leggings. I ran a brush through my long hair, tying it up with a simple ponytail, and made my bed, passing the time 'till I could use the washroom to brush my teeth and wash my face. Luckily, Andrea didn't take long and I quickly grabbed it while it was free. If there was one thing Phoenix House needed, it was another bathroom... ASAP!

I practically skipped down the steps to the main floor, humming under my breath. I felt lighter, the thought of seeing Hayden again today like a balm to my wounds. All I wanted was to be with him, as unhealthy as that thought was, I didn't care. As far as I was concerned, there was nothing wrong with finding someone who made you happy, who made you feel loved, especially after being deprived practically my whole life.

Mom...

I halted in my steps as my heart twisted painfully. Mom... my mother who was taken away on a gurney, ranting and raving about faceless men, my father, us being chased. I couldn't see her still, but maybe soon. I hoped she was making progress at the hospital they'd taken her to.

But I wasn't going to rely on her for my happiness. Not anymore.

Stepping into the kitchen, I found Miss Ross seated with Carol-Ann, the little girl with the scar down her face who had been so terrified of her father. Apparently, their visit had gone well, and she was scheduled to see him again this weekend, under supervision, of course. The little girl was yammering away to Miss Ross about something her dad had told her, a

movie about a unicorn. Mrs. Li was serving the other little girls their breakfast, and she smiled as I stepped into the room.

“Breakfast, Maddy?” She asked, holding up the frying pan which was filled with cheesy scrambled eggs. Yesterday, when Mina had brought me back here, she’d brought over the chocolate chip oatmeal muffins we’d made the other day, all wrapped nicely, to give to the house. The plate of muffins was sitting in the middle of the table, and the girls were motoring through them. As much as I wanted to go to Hayden’s for breakfast, as I had for most of this week, Miss Ross had told us when we arrived last night that I had a meeting scheduled with Saanvi today, so I needed to hang around this morning. I took one of Mina’s muffins, glad to at least have this one piece of the family I was becoming so attached to.

“Yes, please, Mrs. Li,” I said, just as Sawyer and Andrea strolled in. Andrea quickly took the seat on my other side, as far from the stove as possible as per usual. I always made sure to take the chair situated between her and the large kitchen appliance, knowing it gave her a sense of safety. How I wished I could find her father and stick his head against a burner.

Whoa, Maddy... chill, my brain said at the dark thought.

“Andrea, Maddy, we gotta get shopping soon for the senior dance,” Sawyer said as she took a seat across from me.

I stared, my fork held halfway up to my mouth of Mrs. Li’s delicious cheesy eggs. “Huh?”

Sawyer looked at me, chuckling a little. “The dance? The senior’s grad? There’s a dance at the end of June. Didn’t Hayden ask you to go?”

I was surprised that she just automatically assumed Hayden and I would go together. Not that I would plan to go with anyone else, but just the fact that people would link us as one meant people paid more attention to us than I realized. “We haven’t talked about it,” I admitted.

She furrowed her brow. “That’s weird. I would have assumed that he would have asked you to go already.”

“I guess we just haven’t really gotten around to discussing it. I didn’t even know there was a dance.” I shrugged. When Hayden and I talked about anything to do with the future, it was stuff that had nothing to do with high school. As soon as this chapter was behind us, that’s where it would remain. We didn’t want to think about it any more than we had to. We had more promising ideas in mind.

“Well, either way, we all gotta make a day trip out to get some dresses for the dance. I was thinking maybe next weekend, when exams are behind us.” Sawyer grabbed one of Mina’s muffins, too, and bit into it, moaning as her eyes rolled upwards like it was the best thing she’d ever tasted.

I glanced at Andrea, who was as quiet as ever, but she nodded, which surprised me. The thought of going shopping for a fancy dress was not something I had ever considered, not when my own day clothes were falling apart. I felt my throat go dry as the state of my mother’s bank account burned in my mind. We’d been crashing at a hotel in Ashland when I found a statement tossed carelessly aside after she’d attempted to withdraw some cash. Negative. She had negative dollars. We couldn’t even afford the \$38.95 for another night. I had zero money saved up. How the hell was I going to get a dress?

“The Lost Souls established a ‘Prom Program’, Maddy,” Miss Ross said, watching me carefully. “They provide funds for kids who need clothes, shoes, and arrange safe rides for them to get to and from the dance.”

James. That man and his club were seriously angels on this earth. Despite how awkward I felt about accepting favours from others, this program made it feel less personal, and therefore easier to accept the help.

“We’ll arrange a day while the little ones are at school and take a trip out for you girls to get what you need,” Mrs. Li said as she began to clean up.

“Thank you,” my voice was hushed as I said it, but I genuinely meant it. I’d never experienced kindness like this in the foster system in other places.

“Of course. You girls do have a budget, obviously, no thousand-dollar ball gowns or anything,” Miss Ross stared pointedly at Sawyer, who gave her a crooked, mischievous little smile from behind the mouthful she had.

“Who, me?” her voice was distorted as she tried to speak around her muffin. When one of the little girls laughed, Sawyer crossed her eyes at her and kept going, “Who, me? Who, me?”

“You sound like an owl,” Carol-Ann laughed, watching Sawyer with glee, the scar on the side of her face reminding me of the one Keenan sported.

“Who? Who! *Who!*”

“Okay, enough! You’re spilling crumbs everywhere.” Miss Ross rolled her eyes and got to her feet, helping by clearing some of the finished dishes. I followed suit by quickly shoveling the rest of my breakfast into my mouth and cleared my plate, helping by washing up the dishes until Andrea joined me to dry and put away.

The moment we finished, and she disappeared up the stairs to study for her final tomorrow, Miss Ross called for me, “Maddy? Saanvi is here. Come on down to my office, please.”

Social services check-ins. They were boring, but usually got over with quickly. Most likely we’d spend most of our time discussing what had happened between Ayla and the other girls from last week. I was grateful that Saanvi had been on my side, then, but I couldn’t help but feel a *little* nervous. I didn’t want to give her a reason to think I was as unstable as my mother. Despite how much I loved my mom, I didn’t want to be like her.

I meandered down the hall toward the back of the house, passing those same photos I’d seen on my first day here, only now I recognized James amongst the bikers in the group, even spotting Casey and her three guys in another, like she had a big part to play in this place. I smiled at the sight but turned away to knock on the office door.

“Come in.”

I opened it, stepping inside to see Miss Ross sitting behind her desk, Saanvi seated in one of the chairs across from her. Both women smiled at me, like they were actually happy to see me and not trying to put on a front.

“Hey,” I said, plonking myself down in one of the extra chairs. “So let’s do this. Anything of concern you want to talk about, Saanvi?” I asked, thinking of Ayla again. I was going to stick to my story about being the one who fought her off, rather than Hayden. NO fucking way was I going to let him take the fall when he saved me.

I should have clued in sooner. Should have recognized the strain at the corners of their eyes the moment I stepped in here, but I was probably sitting on such a happy little cloud from the direction my life had been taking me, that I missed it. That is, until the silence following my statement seemed to flex like a poisonous cloud in the room, pulsing dangerously. I caught the look on Miss Ross’s face as her eyes flicked in Saanvi’s direction from behind her glasses, her smile waning as she pressed her lips tightly together, her hands clasped so tight on the desk they were turning white. I looked at Saanvi, dread pooling in my stomach, all my instincts screaming at me that this wasn’t good. Whatever she had to say, it wasn’t fucking good.

Brace yourself, Maddy...

“What?” I whispered, staring hard at her as she shifted in her chair to face me better. For a moment, she looked like she was going to reach out to put a hand on my knee, but thought better of it at the last minute and instead clutched at the folder in her hands.

“Maddy... I’m sorry, honey...”

“What is it? What?”

“Your mother passed away yesterday.”

Ring. I could feel it in my ears before it changed to a strange sort of numbing vacuum, like I was submerged. I was

deep underwater, with nothing around me, no air, no sound. Just the pressure pushing in from all sides. “Wh-what?” I think that was what I said. I was vaguely aware that I had spoken, but I honestly can’t remember.

“Your mother had an accident at the hospital,” Saanvi explained, her tone heavy, mournful, like telling me this was truly painful for her. “They found her in her room.”

Your mother passed away... an accident... found in her room...

“An accident?” I confirmed, my voice breaking on the word. “What does that mean?”

Saanvi licked her lips, looking like she was deliberating as she hesitated before continuing, “It’s believed she took her own life.”

Numb.

Fucking numb.

I shook my head, ignoring the way my ears were pounding from some unknown pressure that was clutching at my skull, threatening to break. “No, that’s impossible. If she was in a facility for people... people like *her*... then there would be *no way* she could have done—” I stopped, unable to say it. “She couldn’t have.”

Saanvi leaned a little closer towards me, like she desperately wanted to say the right thing so that I wouldn’t fall off the deep end. “She had a pen...”

“How did she get a pen?”

When Saanvi shook her head, I got angry and jumped to my feet. “No. No excuses. Just tell me. How the fuck did she get a pen? How? Are you saying my mother is dead because someone else was being negligent?”

“Maddy—”

“No, tell me! I want to know the truth! Because I don’t believe for one second that my mother hurt herself! There’s no

fucking way! Through the worst of it she has never tried to take her life! Not ever!”

“Maddy, sometimes people just—”

“No! No, she couldn’t have...”

“I’m so sorry, Maddy,”

I sucked in breath after breath, wishing I could just get the fuck out of here. This room was too small. Way too small. I could hear Miss Ross say something about calling someone, calling Mrs. Mathers or something, I think, but it sounded very far away.

An accident... a pen... found in her room... took her own life... I’m so sorry, Maddy... I’m so sorry, Maddy... I’m so sorry, Maddy...

“I gotta go!” My voice broke on the words, and I didn’t even wait for them to say anything further. I just tore open the door and fled, running up the stairs where I gathered my things together. The other girls weren’t here, most likely lounging out back as they studied, so I had no one bombarding me with questions that I didn’t want to answer. I stuffed all my clothes back into the garbage bag, along with Fuzzy and my elephant, grabbed my backpack, and thudded quickly back down the stairs.

“Maddy! Where are you going?” Miss Ross’s tear-filled voice called from down the hall.

“I’m just... going! I’m going!” I shouted, tearing through the front door.

“Maddy, stop!” Saanvi’s voice was the last thing I heard before I slammed it behind me and ran.



I WAS LYING in the clearing, my things at my side, when the sound of footsteps snapped me out of my trance. I don't know how long I had been here before I was found. For what felt like only a couple of minutes was probably hours, judging by the sun, which had since disappeared behind some clouds, reflecting my mood. Silent tears were streaming from my eyes, back along my temples and into my hair as I stared skyward, thinking over and over again about what they'd said about my mother.

Mom was gone, and something in me was burning so strongly, I couldn't ignore it.

I know all about you. I know that your mom is in an asylum right now and she's probably not going to get out for a long time. It would be a shame if something happened to your mother... It's amazing what people will do for money. My father could just ask for a favour, so to speak, and then... poof!

Theo's words. I guess I hadn't actually expected him to do something like this. Then again, the attack at the festival had been completely off the rails. At his failed attempt for vengeance, did he really have his father send someone after my mother?

Yes, a voice whispered at the back of my mind. If there was one thing I'd learned in my short life, it was that there *are* bad people in this world. Twisted ones. And they don't give a shit about anyone else but themselves. They're capable of the cruelest, darkest, most fucked-up things you couldn't even imagine. Theo was one of them. To him, my mother was a faceless pawn. She mattered as much to him as the lint on his shirt. I couldn't shake the thought that he did something. That he'd had his father do something. They were involved; deep down, I knew it.

“Maddy?”

Hayden. Hayden's voice. The sound of it penetrating the silent clearing had my breath catch in my throat, and I closed my eyes. Of course he found me, and I think that deep down, I was hoping he would. Most likely Miss Ross had called his

mom and she alerted him to the situation. I could only imagine what they knew.

When the light trail of fingertips touched the sides of my jaw, I opened my eyes to see Hayden staring upside down at me, his face as solemn and serious as ever. His thumbs wiped away the tears, and he said nothing more as I continued to lay where I was, hands clasped over my stomach, silently staring up at him. I had nothing to say. What was there? My mother was gone, and I never got to say so many things to her.

I love you... I forgive you... I love you... I forgive you...

Hayden let me stay, curling up at my head, lifting it a little so that it rested on his lap, and just brushed the occasional tear away. In the distance, I could hear a pair of robins singing to each other, the sun occasionally breaking through the cloudy sky, the smell of flowers and fresh forest filling my senses. It was such a beautiful day, and my mother wasn't alive to see it.

She'd failed me so many times. But even though I had doubts, deep down I knew she loved me. Her addiction took control over her life, and seeing her fall into it only encouraged me to be nothing like that, to push away anything that could turn me into the sad, lonely person she'd become.

"Will you come with me?" Hayden whispered after several minutes of silence.

Yes, I wanted that very much. I just wanted him, nothing more. Nodding, I took the hand he offered as he helped me to my feet. Before I could collect my things, he had already gathered them and carried them through the woods, leading the way to his house. I followed, familiar with the path now, glad that he was quiet as we walked, rather than peppering me with questions. I just wanted the silence now. My thoughts of my mother were swaying back and forth between mournful and rage. Love and resentment. It was confusing and overwhelming.

The moment we broke through the tree line of his yard, the backdoor flung open and his mother was standing there,

yelling something to us, but her words were indiscernible to me as my mind was still in a fog. The moment we made it to the door, I found myself jostled and I snapped out of it as Mina took me into her arms, hugging me closely, but gently, swaying us both very slowly from side to side... a mother's hug. My eyes welled with tears and, despite the fact I more or less have been able to hold it together since Saanvi broke the news, I couldn't any longer.

Tears began to fall and before I knew it, I was sobbing in her arms, holding her tightly as I allowed myself to be vulnerable.

“Shhh, I'm so sorry, sweetie. I'm so sorry. It's okay. We got you.”

I could hear footsteps moving around us, the shrill little voice of Maverick loud as he asked questions like, “Why are Mommy and Maddy crying? What's wrong? Is Maddy hurt?”

Keenan's soft rumble followed, along with Hayden's voice, and I opened my eyes to seek him out. The moment he saw me searching for him, he rose from where he was crouched by his little brother and came right over. His mother let go, only to pass me over to him, and he took me carefully in his arms.

“Why don't you take her to lie down for a bit? I'll check in in a little while,” his mom whispered. That was how I found myself lying in Hayden's bed on my side, staring blankly at the wall as I sobbed, while he held me in his arms, like he was afraid I might bolt. But he didn't have to worry. I was right where I needed to be. Where I wanted to be.

It was here that I felt safe enough to let go and allow myself to mourn.

I don't know how long I lay there, but eventually, I felt like I cried myself to sleep, because one moment I was on my side, sobbing, with Hayden wrapped around me, and the next, I was opening my eyes, on my back, being gently woken by Saanvi.

She was here, in Hayden's room, her expression torn and clearly upset as she pursed her lips, moving carefully at the side of the bed. Beside me, Hayden was passed out, sleeping soundly as Saanvi retracted her arm to keep herself from hovering over him to reach me.

"Maddy... I've spoken with Mrs. Mathers, and she agreed that you could spend a couple of days here," she explained in a hushed voice. "If you are comfortable with it, I'll make a note in your file and grant you a temporary leave from Phoenix House, but I need your consent."

I felt as if a weight had been lifted from my chest. Phoenix House was *not* a bad place by any means, but right now, I *needed* to be here. I didn't want to go back to that room, huddled alone in my bunk, lost in deep, dark thoughts about my mom. "Yes, please," I whispered to her, rubbing my eyes, which felt so sore and swollen it was hard to see.

"Okay, hon. I'll keep in contact with you through here, but on Monday after your next exam, you need to return to Phoenix House, alright?"

It wasn't nearly enough time, but I was grateful that she approved this much, at least, so I nodded in agreement, comforted by the soft breathing coming from Hayden. But at the mention of my next final, I felt like another weight had been added to my already overburdened shoulders.

"I know there are strict rules in place about finals, but if you need a few extra days, I can put in an extension request with the province."

I was about to accept, but something stopped me. I would like the extra time, so I could grieve, but I also wanted to just get it over with, to put high school behind me so I could focus ahead. Even though it would just be a couple of days, I still wanted to close this chapter behind me so I could keep all my attention on healing. "It's okay, Saanvi. I'll be ready."

Her dark brows shot up in surprise, clearly having not expected this response from me. Glancing at Hayden's

sleeping figure, she whispered urgently, “Are you sure? Because I can get you that extension—”

“It’ll be fine. I just want to get it over with.”

I could tell she thought I was making a mistake as she straightened and pressed her lips together so tight, they disappeared. “Well, if you’re absolutely certain—”

“I am.”

She paused for a moment, watching me carefully, before simply nodding and stepping back. “Okay, then, Maddy. Miss Ross will expect you back Monday night, alright? I’ll call tomorrow and Sunday night to check in with you. I gave my number to Mina in case you need me for anything, alright?”

“Thank you, Saanvi. It’ll be fine.”

She nodded, hanging her head a little, like she wanted to say so much more but was fighting to maintain a professional air about the situation. Finally, she whispered, “I’m so sorry, Maddy.”

I could say nothing in response to this. I felt like a stone instantly lodged into my throat at her words, knowing she was referring to my mother. So I just nodded and curled up on my side, snuggling close to Hayden as she turned and left us.

Chapter twenty-two



Hayden - Present Day

IT WAS THEO. I had no doubt in my mind. Theo had gone to his father and that fucking asshole piece of shit did something to Maddy's mother. For all of Friday and most of Saturday, I spent my time checking on her, holding her, bringing her meals that Mom prepared, and doing my best to distract her from her grief. We watched movies, one being the infamous *Jaws* she hadn't heard of, which she now declared had given her a most unrealistic fear of any deep water, claiming that she'd never set foot in the deep end of a swimming pool, let alone the ocean.

I also helped her study for her final on Monday. Because she had English and I had Social Studies, we wouldn't be taking our exams on the same day. Mine would be Wednesday, so I focused more on what she would need to pass. It was a written exam, an essay, and the topic would be one that they'd spring on students the moment they walked into the gym. But lucky for us, our teachers usually prepared us with at least three options of possible choices for the topic that we could prepare for. That's what happened to me in the winter when I took mine, and hers had done the same. So I checked over the options, and we went to work.

I think it was a good distraction for her, and I could see how motivated she was to get this behind her, that she pushed her grief aside, albeit for temporary intervals, but summoned

the strength I knew she had in her to work through it so she could get this done.

My mom had prepped the only guest room we had for Maddy, which was on the main floor, and though she used it to change in, or on the pretense of going to sleep, I always snuck downstairs in the middle of the night to join her. I'd slide into bed under the covers, wrap my arms around her middle, and pull her into me, hugging her as she'd reach up to give my neck or collarbone, whatever part she could reach, a little kiss, breaking my fucking heart in the process, before falling back asleep.

I wanted to protect her, and I feel like I failed.

All I wanted was to find Theo and fucking kill him.

"You gotta keep calm, kid," Dad said as I raged in the garage. Maddy was inside, taking a nap in my room after a strenuous couple of hours practicing for her essay and bouts of inconsolable crying. Every tear she shed, every sob, went straight to my fucking heart and I just wanted justice. I wanted to find Theo and make him confess...

My mind wandered to darker territory as flashes of make-believe images of what I'd do to him flickered like an old movie in my head. All the blood, the screaming, the pain... I thought it would soothe me to think of all the things I'd do, but instead, it only made my rage burn all the more.

"I *know* he had his dad arrange something. He's threatened her mother before! It's the only thing that makes sense."

"Accidents *do* happen," my dad said from the stool he was sitting on, looking as tired as I felt. Grandpa J was at his side, sipping on a beer, looking lost in thought as he listened to everything I had to say about Theo and what happened with Maddy's mom. "There's no proof that anyone did anything—"

"He fucking *did*, Dad! I know he fucking did!" I raked my hands through my hair, frustrated beyond all belief. I wanted to jump on my bike right now and go on a manhunt, track Theo down, and fucking *burn* him!

“What do you think, James?” Dad turned to Gramps, who had barely moved this entire time we’d been sitting out here in the garage talking. “Any possibility of flexing some power to look at security footage?”

But Grandpa J was shaking his head even before Dad had finished talking. “Unfortunately, I don’t have the authority to demand something like that. I mean, I could go old school, but we all know that The Lost Souls turning in such a way would only cause problems.”

“No one has to know,” I said desperately, wishing my grandpa would just turn into that old badass he used to be in his youth just this once.

His dark gaze flashed to mine, like what I’d said upset him greatly. “I refuse to go back to that life, Hayden. Not even for this. I’m sorry, kiddo.”

I wanted to shake him, my grandfather who I loved so fucking much, I found myself wanting to hit him in my frustration.

“Listen, Hayden,” he rumbled in that raspy way of his, “I *am* sorry for what happened to your girl and her mother. It’s fucking awful and I absolutely want to help, but I won’t take that route. I’ve worked hard to be a lawful person because I’ve got a lot of shit to make amends for,” his voice cracked a little at that, his greying, whiskered chin shaking ever so slightly. Dad reached over and grasped his shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “I cannot, kid. Please don’t ask that of me,” he said at last, sounding as tired as we all did.

I felt like a shit for it, even though I still wished he would reconsider. Seeing Gramps like this, he looked like he was carrying such a heavy burden upon his shoulders, like a constant reminder of his mistakes. And I was asking him to rip open that baggage and pull it out again.

I sucked in a deep breath through my nose, biting my lip as I forced myself to calm down and see reason. I was angry right now. Upset. I wanted justice for my girl, and the quickest way

I felt was through Grandpa J. But he was right. What I was asking wasn't fair, or moral.

Shuffling over to where he sat, I reached out and rested my arm over his other shoulder, murmuring close to his ear, "I'm sorry, Gramps."

He brought up an old hand, patted my arm, and gave me a shaky smile. "It's fine, Hayden. I get it, trust me, I do. But it's not the way."

That's right, we were taking the high ground, and it was making me bitter. "So what do we do now?" I asked, looking from him to my dad and back again.

"I think," Dad said slowly, his sharp, crystal blue gaze staring off at nothing in particular, "that you need to keep a distance from Theo and his friends. That's a no-brainer. Luckily, school is practically over, save for a few more finals, right?"

"Yeah, my last one is Wednesday."

"Then it's your birthday on Saturday. After that, you have graduation after the second week of June, right after your photography project for the school play. Then you're done." Dad glanced at Gramps, who was still looking more and more perturbed about everything as we talked. "So it's just a short amount of time while you are forced to be close to him. In the meantime, can The Lost Souls talk to the local police about some security?"

Gramps nodded, although it was half-hearted. He looked like he was ready to sleep, too. "I've already spoken to them about some concerns I have for my family. I've ordered your security system here to be upgraded, FYI. So if a bunch of randoms in work suits show up this week, don't scare 'em off. They got a job to do."

Dad chuckled a little at that. "Appreciate it. But what about you?"

"What about me?"

“What measures are you taking for protection?”

The look on Grandpa J’s face was almost comical. I’ve never seen him look so offended in my life. “Do you really think I’m afraid of some teenage wannabe gangster? The little punkass can *try* to fuck with me, but the moment he does, I’ll have all the rights to act as a real MC prez and destroy the shit.”

Even though Dad was laughing, he still leaned in, forcing Gramps to face him. “You know very well that I’m not talking about the kids. If anyone is behind this, it’s Daniel Hebert. That being the case, the bastard is becoming as unhinged on power as his son. He’s going to need to be dealt with just like we did to Cartier.”

Gramps sighed heavily, his dark stare turning skyward to the ceiling, like this was not what he wanted to hear. “I know it. I swear to fuck, I’ve dealt with enough power-tripping hotheads in my lifetime I think I just wanna quit.”

This surprised me. His whole life seemed to be centered around two things. Our family, and the club. The thought of my grandpa not being a part of The Lost Souls MC was hard to imagine, and I think he’d regret leaving. He was a biker, through and through, and Grandpa J never gave up so easily. He’d done so much for Ashland and the surrounding towns and cities, lost so many good people along the way, all of it a sacrifice for the greater good. He never gave in. He worked past it all, becoming an admired figurehead here. And now, he looked like all he wanted was to curl up and go away. What was going on?

“Gramps,” I whispered, “You gotta let that shit go.” His face snapped to mine at that, grey-tinted brows raised high in surprise. I went on, “I know you’ve done some pretty shitty stuff. I know... but I know that you aren’t that person anymore.” I thought about what Mom had said to him, about him not being a monster. “You have to forgive yourself at some point here.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling you, James,” Dad said. “You’ve done more than enough—”

“No. I haven’t paid for what—”

“I don’t know what else you could do. We’ve forgiven you. *She’s* forgiven you.”

“But *I* haven’t forgiven me, yet.” Grandpa shook his head and rose to his feet, our hands sliding away from his leather cut as he set his beer down and stepped out the open garage door onto the grass. It was twilight, the sky slowly turning from pinks and oranges to purples and dark blues. Fireflies drifted through the shrubs around the yard, and in the distance of the woods, I could hear an owl call. “I’ll try to think of what else I can do to help with Maddy’s mother, but my mind’s a mess right now.”

“You aren’t going to stay for dinner?” Dad asked, his brows pulled together in concern.

“Naw. Gonna head home for the night. I’ll see you all later.” He turned, heading down the rocky drive to where his big, black Harley was sitting, jumped on, and disappeared into the gathering darkness.

“What’s up with him?” I asked.

Dad just shook his head. “He’s always been hard on himself for the past. Some people struggle letting go, and he wears his guilt like a noose around his neck, lugging the weight of it around with him. He’s always been pretty good about hiding it around you kids, but you’re getting older, Hayden, and I think he just worries.”

“Worries about what?”

Dad hesitated, thinking it over as he lounged back against the wood countertop, his stool tilting on its feet precariously. “He’s seen what you’ve gone through the past couple of years. The bullying, the solitude. I think it scares him.”

Manic... the man who was Shay O’Hare was very predominant in my mind at that thought. How much have I

been scaring my family over the years without even realizing it?

I suppose the guilt was reading on my face, because Dad interjected quickly, “It’s nothing you’ve done, kiddo. Just know that. It’s all on him. He worries you’re headed down a path like your father. But I keep telling him you aren’t the same person he was. You’re your own.” He reached out and gave my shoulder a squeeze, just like he had done to Gramps. “I don’t want to lie to you, Hayden. I won’t. We all carry something with us, and the responsibility of how we deal with it rests entirely on our shoulders, so don’t you worry about Grandpa. He knows you aren’t him, you got me?”

I nodded, trying not to feel bad about my actions, how I walked around like a miniature Manic for so many years. I had to remind myself that he kept me safe for so long. That he was the reason I made it this far. I was letting go of it now, moving on differently into this new phase in my life, and I knew my family could see it. “I got you,” I finally said, just as the light in my room shone out the circular window onto the grass.

“Looks like Maddy’s awake. How about you go check on her while I help your mom finish with dinner, yeah?”

When I found her, Maddy was sitting on the edge of my bed, looking tired, her eyes a little puffy, still, but she wasn’t crying, at least. I wouldn’t blame her if she was. If someone told me that my mom was found the way hers had been, well... I don’t think I’d be able to deal with it as Maddy has. She was pushing herself to prepare for finals, repeating over and over again to herself that she needed to do this, that she wanted this behind her so she could focus on her future. *Our* future. So I was doing all I could to help her with that.

The only thing I wished she’d do more was eat.

My mother brought up lunch and supper yesterday, which went untouched, and breakfast this morning was ignored. At lunch, Maddy nibbled a little at the sandwich, but ignored the chips and cut up strawberries. Now, I could smell spaghetti and meatballs all the way from downstairs, and I knew she

noticed it, too, because her stomach grumbled as she sucked in a long, deep breath.

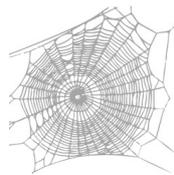
“Why don’t we go down?” I asked her, crouching on my haunches before her.

“I don’t know...” she murmured, sounding lost. Unable to stop myself, I wrapped my arms around her waist and pressed my face into her stomach, holding her, wishing I could make it better. But I couldn’t. And it was tearing me apart inside. I felt her little fingers run through my hair, like *she* was comforting *me*.

“C’mon, Maddy. I think you need to move a little. And Mom’s pasta and garlic toast is amazing.”

“I’m not really hungry...”

“You need to eat something. If you don’t come downstairs, I’ll bring something up for you, but either way, you’re having some food, you understand?” I didn’t mean to come off so domineering, but I wasn’t going to let her starve herself. If I had to lay down the law, become firm with her, then I would. To my relief, as I pulled back a bit to see her face, she nodded in defeat, but remained where she was. “I’ll go get something to bring up here,” I promised. “Be right back.”



MADDY HAD EATEN the food I’d brought her last night, and after some persuasion, joined my family downstairs to watch a movie. I pulled her into my lap on one of the lounge chairs, covering us in a blanket as my sisters got a big quilt and pillows to make a sort of comfy nest on the floor before the television. Maverick was already in bed by the time Mom and Dad settled on the couch, having passed around some snacks for everyone, and starting the movie. It had been a long time since I joined them for an evening like this, and I think I

needed it. I could tell by the way Maddy's muscles eased against me, curled up as she rested her head on my chest, that she needed it, too. For the next hour and a bit, she was able to rest her mind, distracted by the story onscreen, enjoying a bit of reprieve from her grief.

I'd never lost someone the way she just had. Everyone I loved was still very much alive. In fact, my sisters and I were spared from this sort of thing. Both my parents suffered from a loss in their childhood. My dad's mother had died from an overdose. He'd stumbled into the room she'd O.D. in and remained stuck alone with her for hours before his father finally came home. Years later, Maverick Mathers Sr. had been killed at the *November Dockside Massacre*, in an attempt to save young girls who had been captured for trafficking, alongside Aunt Casey and my uncles. My mother had lost her father at a young age, too, and Grandma Emily... well, all I was told was that she'd been attacked and killed in her home, a result of the power Elias Cartier had held over the Celtic Beasts, my father, and grandfather.

Maddy was like them. She'd suffered so much loss at such a young age, and yet here she was, curled up in my arms sipping her hot chocolate and marshmallows, enjoying the moment. When the movie ended and I escorted her to her room on the pretense of saying goodnight—*I was going to sneak in here once everyone else in the house settled*—I couldn't help but admire her strength.

“What are you looking at?” she asked, moving over to the bed where my mom had left her a spare hairbrush and ran it through her long locks. I guess I'd been kinda staring, but... how could I not?

“I should think it was obvious,” I told her, moving into the room as overhead, the soft footsteps of my sisters moving around thudded along the hallway, to and from the washroom.

Maddy made a face, strained and sad, like she was worried. “I'm sorry, Hayden.”

The fuck? “For *what?*” I asked, completely bewildered.

Maddy tucked her hair behind her ears, setting the brush down, and moved over to me, taking both my hands in hers. “I’m sorry that I’ve been, well, a burden.”

Uh, come again? I thought. But I was so shocked at her thinking that she was anything of the sort that I was literally speechless.

“You’ve been so amazing helping me these past few days, and I’m so sorry for—”

“Maddy, Maddy, Maddy...” I waved my hand, shaking my head when I realized what she was saying. No way, fuck that. “Maddy, you are *anything* but a burden.”

“But, I—”

“No. Stop it. Just stop. I want you to take that thought that’s telling you that you don’t deserve to be taken care of, that you aren’t worth it, and tell it to shut the fuck up. You got me?”

“I just—”

“*No*, Maddy! Look.” I released her hands so I could grasp her shoulders, wanting her to hear me. “You don’t ever apologize for hurting. You never apologize for needing me. This?” I said, giving her a small shake. “Between you and me? This is what you do for your person, for the one you love. Some days you put more into it than the other does because they need you. And one day I’m sure I’ll need you just as much. That’s just how it is. And what really gets me in all of this, is that you think your grief is something to be *sorry* for. You have *nothing* to be fucking sorry for. Nothing. Understand?”

Maddy’s bright grey-green gaze was practically sparkling in the lamplight, her lips trembling as I spoke, like she didn’t dare believe it. I wasn’t going to allow her to think anything else.

“You, Madeline King, are unbelievably strong, and all I’ve felt is nothing but admiration of you. Because you have been dealt a bad hand again and again, and you’re still standing

here, like a fucking warrior. How could I feel anything but pride and love for someone like that?"

"You love me?" she whispered, incredulously.

I smirked at the doubt in her voice. Reaching for the metal at my neck, the smooth surface of the dog tags warm from the heat of my body, I pulled it free over my head. She continued to stare, mouth slightly open, as I carefully hooked the tags around her neck, lifting her hair up so that the chain could rest against her skin. She fingered the metal, the name, *Shay O'Hare, 03.26.1997*, followed by a set of coordinates just visible in the warm light. The second set of tags bore my mother's name, her birthday and the same coordinates. She studied them closely before lifting her shimmering, stunning gaze to mine.

"I've worn those for years," I told her. "They belonged to my birth father. He wore them till the day he died."

"Hayden..." she whispered, staring up at me with concern. When she moved like she was about to remove them, I stopped her, taking her hands once more.

"Maddy, I'm giving those to you because I want you to remember that you fucking matter. You matter to *me*. Don't listen to those voices in your head that tell you otherwise. I know you've been hurt so many times before by those who were supposed to love and protect you above all else. They let you down, but *I* wouldn't do that. I will *never* do that."

For a long minute, she just stared, and I worried that perhaps I'd scared her off. The longer she went without saying a word, the more anxious I became, but like my dad always said, *patience is key*.

"You love me?" she asked again, like she was still having a hard time wrapping her mind around the idea.

I cupped her cheek in my hand, smiling down at her as my heart thudded against my chest. "How could I not? I mean... wasn't it obvious?" A small tear slid from the corner of her eye, sliding down to my palm. This girl killed me.

“Sometimes, it’s not about knowing someone, but feeling it... feeling that connection that something, whatever we feel between us, it’s right. I feel it, and I think you do, too. You’re my person, Madeline King.”

A slow smile broke out on her beautiful mouth, her pink lips spreading wide at my words, like I’d just sparked some fire back into her. “And you’re mine, Hayden Mathers.”

Chapter twenty-three



MADDY - PRESENT DAY

YOU'RE MY PERSON, Madeline King...

Hayden's words echoed in my mind like a hauntingly beautiful bell, a sound I'd never heard before, but was everything I wished I'd known. Just to hear it, I felt so undeserving. But I knew that was because of a lifetime of bullshit I'd suffered from. The tips of my fingers reached up to touch the cool metal of the tags around my neck, forcing myself to silence that evil voice in my head that was trying to destroy any hope that flickered to life.

I deserved to be happy.

I deserved to be loved.

I deserved to *live*.

So when I marched into school on Monday to take my final exam, I buried all my feelings about my mother, all my doubts concerning Hayden's declaration, any thirst for vengeance, for justice, all hatred of Theo, Spencer, and Ayla, locking it deep down, and focused on my exam. If I wanted to move on with my life, if I wanted to live, to be happy, and make what I wanted of it, I needed to get this behind me so I could move forward.

Easier said than done.

The moment I walked into that gym, I spotted Ayla on the far side, watching me as I headed towards the desk with my

name on it. When I caught her smirking like she knew something, something she had no right knowing, it took everything I had not to walk right up to her and slap that ugly look off her face. I wanted to throw up. I wanted to scream. And when she leaned in to whisper to one of her friends nearby, who also looked my way and cast a nasty grin, I had to remind myself what was at stake here. My life.

The bitch knew. She fucking knew what happened to your mother. She knew...

I found my desk and took a seat, closing my eyes as I listened to the chatter around me, the time ticking down to the start of the exam. I needed to focus. Focus and get this behind me.

“... a pen!” A voice called from across the way, breaking through the white noise of conversation.

“Seriously? Gross! What a psycho...”

Ignore it. Ignore it. Ignore it... I chanted over and over, concentrating on my breathing. My hands clenched into fists as I crossed my arms over my chest, keeping my eyes closed while I kept my breathing as slow and steady as possible.

“Right? Dug right into her veins...”

“... the wrist?”

“Ewwwww!”

Don't, Maddy. Don't let them get to you... that's what they want. They want you to react. They want you to lose it, to fail, to suffer... that's what they want. They want to see you fall.

“Students! Two minutes. Take your seats. No looking at your papers!” One of the English teachers called from the front. There was a scramble as everyone rushed over to their chairs, the few last-minute stragglers rushing into the gym to find their places. I kept my eyes closed, trying to drown it all out, the poisonous words, Ayla's shrill laugh, the vile look on the face I once thought to be pretty, but now held nothing but cruelty, a mask hiding the ugliness within her.

You're my person, Madeline King... The corner of my mouth lifted as Hayden's voice tore through the swirling, dark thoughts, calming everything, like a blanket covering all the painful sores, hiding them from view. *You're my person.*

“No talking until after you have turned in your paper and left the gym. All cell phones to be put away and turned off. No exceptions. You have three hours. Begin!”

My eyes snapped open and I flipped over the paper, ready to take this on. Ayla may have tried to shake me up just now, but like before, when she had cornered me in the washroom, she'd fail. I wouldn't allow her to dictate my future. With one hand gripping the metal of the dog tags Hayden had given me, the other picked up my pencil and I began.

When I ran out of the gym to see him waiting for me, leaning against his bike in his grey leather jacket, the wind playing with the strands of his dark, wavy hair, that crooked smile of his taking my breath away, I couldn't help but smile as I ran at him, jumping into his arms as I wrapped my legs around his waist. He caught me easily, holding me up in the air as he squeezed me tight.

“You did it!” He crowed, sounding like he was as proud of me as I felt. I finished my exam. All the prep we'd done had been so helpful that without it, I feel like I would have simply floundered, unsure and distracted with thoughts of my mother, of Theo, of Ayla... but Hayden had made sure that none of that would affect me today, and we succeeded. I felt good about it, and with this exam behind me, I could now focus ahead and take some time to grieve. Even though I had to return to Phoenix House now, having Hayden waiting for me was everything I needed.

When I left the gym, Ayla was still in there, and so I felt freer, leaving knowing that she wasn't waiting to sabotage my brief moment of happiness and triumph. If you had asked me several months ago if I felt like I would graduate with good grades, or even on time, I would have admitted that I didn't

know. But not now. I knew I was going somewhere, and I'd have Hayden at my side.

When he set me on my feet, I reached up to hold his face close to mine and I surged up on my tiptoes and kissed him. I think I caught him off guard, because he stilled for just a moment before he hummed against my mouth and kissed me back, rocking us in his arms side to side.

"I wish I didn't have to go back," I whispered when I finally pulled back, still feeling those butterflies in my stomach just by looking at him.

"I wish you didn't, either." He let his forehead touch mine, his pupils so blown out, his eyes looked almost black.

"I'm sure you'll appreciate a bit of a break, though, hey?" I don't know why I said that. Maybe it was my old insecurity spurring to life. That was going to take time, to break that old habit of uncertainty and self-deprecation.

Hayden narrowed his gaze and shook his head. "If I could gorilla glue you to my side without causing serious health issues, I would."

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. "You're nuts."

Again, that uneven smile of his made my knees quake together. "Gorilla glue you and carry you around with me everywhere. Even to pee."

I burst out laughing at the ridiculous picture he painted and hugged him tight. With his arms looped around my waist, he lifted me off the ground and turned us to set me on the seat of his bike. As careful as ever, he placed the helmet over my head, even adjusting the straps to my chin to keep it in place before he wrapped his jacket around my shoulders.

It was then that the side doors opened and several other students filed out, having finished with their exams as well, one of them being Ayla. Hayden ignored her as she watched us, while I couldn't take my eyes off her from behind the visor. She looked so calculated, furious, like the sight of us together bothered her more than it should. I didn't understand why she

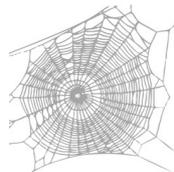
was so angry, so bitter towards us. Why did she have such a fixation on me?

Then again... maybe it wasn't really about *me*.

Ayla was starved for attention. Particularly from the guys. When I first met her, she had been gossiping on and on about the boys. Theo, mostly. His dismissal of her, only to be used again, then cast aside what was clearly causing a lot of insecurity. And judging from what she'd said about Hayden and his rejection, that had stung her particularly hard. I could tell Ayla was angry and hurting, and that was what was driving her to lash out. Girls like her would seek out those they perceived as weaker, or ones they saw as a rival. What she saw me as, I wasn't sure, but she'd zeroed in on me from day one, by first trying to draw me into her inner circle, before then deciding to fight against me. It was nothing *I'd* personally done. All of this was derived from her own issues.

A pen... Dug right into her veins... her words painted a hideous, cruel picture. Its intention nothing except to hurt me.

As such, when I caught her watching Hayden and I as we prepared to drive away, I flipped her off before I wrapped my arms around his waist, holding on as he took off, turning onto the street before picking up speed so that we raced away, leaving her and her toxicity behind us.



OUR BREATH WAS SHARED between us, our faces so close that our noses, our lips, brushed against each other, the sound of our panting and the clink of the dog tags around my neck filling the clearing alongside the sounds of birds singing and the flutter of the leaves as a breeze swept past. Our naked bodies were pressed close, the cool air a godsend as we continued to fuck. I was riding Hayden hard, our clothes discarded around us, lost amongst the ferns and white flowers.

It's been several days since Saanvi allowed me some time alone, and the moment I was cleared to spend a day outside of Phoenix House, we met here, and immediately fell into each other.

Hayden gripped my hips, guiding me as I rocked back and forth on his lap, my arms locked around his neck as we lost ourselves in each other's gaze.

"Fuck, you feel so fucking good," he moaned as he reached out to bite my bottom lip, dragging it out between his teeth. "I've missed you, baby."

"I missed you... fuck, I missed you so much!" I took his mouth, sliding my tongue between his teeth to languidly glide over his own, picking up the pace as I continued to fuck him how I wanted, how I needed. With each pass I made, I rubbed my clit against his pelvis, stirring that addicting sensation, making it come alive as I continued my movements, and he only encouraged it, smiling at me like a satisfied house cat, deepening the motion to meet me each time.

Hayden lay back, stretching out in the sun, his hands clenching his hair like he was fighting to hold himself back, and I began to bounce on him, my hands clawing at the muscles of his stomach and his chest. He was glorious. When I leaned backwards, my chest arching up to the sky, he moaned loudly, his hands suddenly reaching out to squeeze my breasts before sliding down to my hips to force me to rock faster on him. God, that felt good... how I could grind my pelvis to his, how full I felt with his cock in me, the sound of our heavy panting, all of it turned me on so much that I found a side of myself coming alive that I hadn't even known had been there. It reminded me of how Hayden had made me feel in that closet at school, a side to me that was a little naughty, a little sexy, that those assholes in my past hadn't managed to completely fuck up.

"You wanna come, baby?" Hayden was breathing so hard, his chest heaving, and when I placed my hand over his heart, I could feel it pounding against my palm. I smiled, licking my

lips as I moved faster now, exaggerating the motions. I liked how he was looking at me, like I was truly the sexiest, most beautiful woman in the world. Like I was something to be worshiped, cherished. And when he sat up again to kiss me, I felt all of that through his mouth. “Come for me,” he moaned, shifting one of his hands between us to start playing with my clit. “Come on, be a good girl and come for me.”

Ooooooh, I was surprised how much I liked that. Gripping a handful of his hair at the back of his head, I worked harder, seeking out my pleasure, loving how much I could read his own on his face before he ducked his head to run his tongue up my throat, groaning like I was the most delicious thing. He pressed a little harder against my clit, lightening the pressure just a little after a few seconds, before doing it all over again. He was teasing me. When he sucked on the spot beneath my ear, I felt a shiver race through me, and I eagerly pressed back against his hand.

“That’s a good girl...” he rasped, playfully, and began to press a little harder, moving his hand faster as he began to thrust up into me, his motions as desperate as I felt. “Fuck, Maddy, I’m getting close.”

“Me, too,” I whispered, my voice hoarse as I could feel that rise. That lovely, tingling, building pressure that flexed outward, like a stick of dynamite that needed a match.

A small hiss escaped his lips as he pulled back to stare into my eyes, his jaw clenched while he wrapped an arm behind me, helping my movements, the other working my clit.

“Shit, Hayden... oh my God... *oh my God!*” I gasped, now moving so fast I felt like my heart would burst and my lungs would explode.

“That’s it,” he grunted as my body squeezed around him, like I needed him to stop while also begging for him to keep going. “That’s it!”

How he knew, I don’t know, but a second later I felt it. I came apart, crying out in the clearing as my body began to

shake and squeeze and curl in around him, as if he was keeping me from completely falling apart. Hayden held me, still pumping upwards until he groaned loudly, falling soon after me. We both sat there, with me still straddling him, my arms around his neck, my face buried into his shoulder, his arms now hugging me so close I was crushed to the hard planes of his body. I could feel our heartbeats knocking against each other, our panting starting to slow, but it was still loud in my ears.

I don't know how long we sat there, holding each other, until another light breeze caused me to shiver, our bodies starting to cool. When I did, he quickly reached out for his shirt and wrapped it around my shoulders, refusing to let go. I didn't want him to.

"I missed you," I whispered, eyes closed as I nestled into his arms.

"I missed *you*," he said, still gasping a little. "I've been worried about you."

Saanvi was adamant that I spend time at Phoenix House and even arranged for me to do an on-call appointment with a grief counselor, although there was nothing that anyone could say that could make me feel better or change anything. My mother was gone, in the most brutal way, and because she had no money, nor did I, she would be buried under the province's pauper's burial program set by a funeral home to help cover the costs. She'll be cremated and buried with a simple marker in the graveyard in Ashland, and as there was nothing to her name, I had nothing else waiting for me. That was it. Despite how hard Saanvi tried to get me to open up about it, there was nothing I wanted to say about my mother. I loved her, I truly did. She was my mom, after all. And even though she suffered from her addiction and delusions, I forgave her for it all.

She'd apologized to me countless times in the past, only to let me down again. Each time, I'd accepted her apology, forgiving her so easily because I was so young and so desperate for her love. But sure enough, she'd eventually fall

off the deep end and disappoint me all over again, slowly numbing my heart to her. I didn't hate her. I just knew I couldn't count on her. It made losing her just a little easier.

And, as I sat there in Hayden's hold, the metal of the dog tags he'd given me pressed between our bodies, I reminded myself that I would be okay. *He* reminded me that I'd be okay. Just being here with him made me feel less alone in this world. I belonged somewhere. I belonged with him.

And that feeling, that sense of belonging, the feeling of absolute peace and joy that brought my heart to life each time I was with him, was something I never wanted to let go of. I've never known this before. I think maybe when I was really young, I had a sense of security for a brief period in my life, but I've never felt *this*, what I feel each time Hayden looks at me, when he plays with my hair, holds my hand, kisses me. This was something more. Something so pure and precious I wanted to keep it safe forever. Being here with him now, I realized what it was. It was something I thought I'd never have, that I didn't deserve. It wasn't just teenage lust. What he and I have been through has made us see the world differently. We've learned to appreciate moments like this, to cherish the good, and know what it was we wanted... what we *needed*... from others.

With a little smile on my lips, I closed my eyes and breathed, "I love you." Then rested my cheek on his muscular shoulder. His arms flexed around me, squeezing me to him, like simply being flush against one another was not enough.

"I love *you*, Maddy... you have no fucking idea," he murmured, his lips brushing against the shell of my ear. He lay back then, taking me with him, the coolness of the leaves touching our heated skin making me jump a little, until he readjusted the shirt just a bit more, sheltering me. I snuggled into his chest, eyes closed, a feeling of absolute peace like I've never known settling around us. Our own little bubble. Our own little world. It was all I needed, all I wanted.

It was a few more minutes of this, the comfortable silence between us only disturbed by the sounds of nature in that special clearing, before Hayden spoke again.

“Are you okay?” He whispered as the robins around us sang back and forth.

I thought about his question, about all the feelings I’ve had over the last few weeks, especially over the last couple of days. *Was I okay?*

“Yes. I am,” I said, finally, the tips of my fingers running over the curve of the muscles on his arms.

Hayden pulled back just the slightest so he could peer down at me, almost disbelieving, as he searched my face for some sign that I was hiding my true feelings. “*How?*” He asked, seeing nothing.

I bit the corner of my bottom lip, trying to sort out my thoughts so I could explain it to him. Finally, I lifted myself up on one elbow, so I could be at level with him as I spoke as honestly as I could.

“Losing my mother, *how* I lost her, it hurts. It does. But what my mother and I had versus what you and your mother have is completely different. I think it’s easier for me to let go of that hurt because I’ve been burned by her so many times in the past. I’ve had to learn to deal with that disappointment, that pain, and I’ve learned how to refocus so that I don’t get lost in it. If I let my past continue to affect me, I’ll drown. And I think that’s a damned waste. We deserve to *live*, Hayden.”

His brow furrowed, like he couldn’t wrap his mind around it. “How do you stop it from hurting?”

I pondered that for a minute, trying to find the right words to explain it. “You don’t. The past will always hurt, because the memory of it echoes in our minds. The first strike is harsh, the loudest and most shrill, but will reverberate over and over again. As time passes, it fades, not disappearing completely, but the impact hurts less and less until one day, you won’t

notice it at all. Those days will happen more often, where you won't think about it."

"But you won't forget..."

"No. You won't. But you'll think of it less. And when that happens, it won't hurt as much as before. You have to decide for yourself that you won't let it impact you and your life moving forward." I cupped Hayden's face, seeing the conflict in his silver eyes. He was struggling with his own demons. I'd known that from the very moment we met. The darkness that followed him everywhere, the hurt from his past, had been so clear to me. But it has faded lately. The more time I spent with him, the more I saw him. Just Hayden. And not this cloak he'd hidden behind.

His silver stare sparkled a little at my words, like everything I had said had resonated with him, and I could see the hope there. "It's not easy."

I nodded, leaning forward to rest my forehead to his. "No, it's not. And some days are going to be easier than others. We'll have hard days, still. But as long as we're living, as long as we're trying, we're not failing."

Hayden pressed his arm against my back, pulling me in to close that small space between our lips, and he kissed me so tenderly, the soft touch of them warming me all the way to the tips of my toes, the love I felt from him so addicting, I couldn't help but forget everything else in that moment, and just kiss him back.



AS WE SAT in the living room of his house while his family milled around, Keenan chasing Maverick who had stolen his watch and was threatening to flush it down the toilet. His sisters both milling around Mina as she prepped supper, we

both decided we didn't want to go to our graduation dance. Hayden and I had discussed the idea, but honestly, it wasn't really something I was thinking about, looking forward to, or had even hoped to attend.

That's when his mother stepped in, clearly having overheard our discussion, and put her foot down. "Don't be ridiculous, you two! You are *going* to your grad dance!"

"We don't care about that, Mom," Hayden bemoaned from where he was stretched out on the couch, with me sitting leaning back against his stomach. "I'd be more than happy to treat Maddy to a night out somewhere—"

"You'll regret not going in the future," she said, glancing over her shoulder as she scooped up a spoonful of some delicious-smelling sauce she'd been prepping, giving it to Charlotte to taste-test. "Trust me."

Hayden shook his head and rolled his eyes like his mother was being unreasonable. "We aren't the 'dancing types'."

"Oh, Mr. Too-Cool-To-Wear-A-Suit now?" Charlotte said, flipping her pretty blonde hair as she narrowed her eyes at her brother. "This isn't about *you*, Hayden. It's about Maddy. She should get a night to wear a pretty dress and dance and feel like a princess."

"It's about *both* of them, Charlotte," Mina said, taking the spoon back. "This is something they've both been working hard towards their entire school career. It's a night of celebration."

"But we don't like anyone in that school," he said, voicing my thoughts exactly.

"Well, you aren't being forced to date *them*," Charlotte snapped. I couldn't help but smirk at her and her brother's back-and-forth bickering. Out of both his sisters, he and Char definitely headbutted the most. Maybe because she was a preteen, so she was being combative intentionally? I couldn't tell for sure. I never had siblings.

“Hayden, I bought tickets for you months ago. You’re going,” his mom said, turning her back to him like the discussion was over.

“Maddy doesn’t have a dress,” he said suddenly, like this was the perfect excuse. He wasn’t wrong. I know Miss Ross had said there was a program in place for the girls at Phoenix House, but clearly he was hoping that Mina had forgotten that tidbit of info.

“*We’re* going to buy Maddy’s dress,” Keenan said, walking into the room with Maverick tossed haphazardly over his shoulder, watch recovered.

At that, I blanched, eyes wide as his words permeated in my head. “I’m sorry?” I asked, my voice breaking a little. I could feel the blood flooding my cheeks.

“We’re going to buy your dress, sweetheart,” he said, settling Maverick into his booster chair before moving to the cupboard to grab him some crackers. “Mina will take you next weekend, as we have this idiot’s birthday on Saturday, which you’re coming to, right?” he said, casting that sharp blue gaze of his over his shoulder at us at the mention of Hayden’s birthday.

“Uh, I don’t... know? I—” I was thinking so many things at once. The thought of them spending money on me made me squirm in my seat, uncomfortably. And the invite to Hayden’s birthday, to a family event, made me feel like I was seriously intruding.

“Of course she’s coming,” Hayden said, his arms wrapping around my stomach.

“Thought so. So, with this weekend being busy, we’ll be able to get you something nice in time for the dance.” Mina hadn’t budged from her spot, nor did she look surprised by his words. Clearly, they’d already discussed this.

“You-you guys really don’t have to get me a dress...” I said, my fingers twisting in my lap. “Phoenix House has a...”

“Oh yes, I know all about that program. It’s wonderful.” Mina smiled my way as she poured the sauce all over a roast she’d been working on. “But I’d love to treat you. And Charlotte and Emily want to come along and see. We can help you pick out the perfect dress!”

She sounded so excited at the prospect, like it was genuinely something she was looking forward to, that I pushed my insecurity aside, reminding myself of what I’d told Hayden in the clearing yesterday, of not letting the past control my future. So, I just nodded. “That would be really nice. Thank you so much.”

“It’s not a problem, dear! We’re going to have so much fun. Girl’s Day!” Mina cheered as Charlotte beamed, like the prospect of dress shopping was going to be the highlight of her week. “And Keenan will take Hayden to get fitted for a suit.”

“Sure am. You’re gonna look slick, Slick!” he winked at us as he began setting the table.

The next day, however, I found myself in one of the few shops in town, looking for graduation dresses. Or rather, Sawyer and Andrea were looking for graduation dresses. I was along for the ride, since Miss Ross insisted I should get out and about. I know she was worried about how I was dealing with my mother’s passing, and her concern was touching, but I was handling it on my own. I’ll admit that last night as I laid in bed, holding Fuzzy and my new elephant at my side, I began to weep as I fought hard to keep from thinking about my mother and the confusing, fucked up way that she left this world behind.

“Stay close, girls,” Miss Ross called as the other two scattered, searching for something. Her voice brought me back to where we were, standing in a shop, milling around. I kept my eyes open for possibilities for when I’d go next week with Mina, but I felt distracted. I wandered with my hands on the dog tags at my neck, stroking them as I thought about the fact that high school was almost officially done. I’d be free. The more that realization began to settle in, the more I thought

about the future Hayden and I had painted together, and the more I thought about our plans, work, where we'd go and all the things we were going to do. I found myself smiling as I idly touched the beaded fabric and tulle of the gowns that were hanging on stands, while Sawyer and Andrea carried armfuls to the dressing rooms.

Miss Ross was standing nearby to give input and fetch sizes, while I lingered to give my support. Andrea came out in a floor-length, long-sleeved beaded dress in emerald green, which I thought looked gorgeous with her curly red hair. Sawyer went for black, sleek and sexy, to which Miss Ross pursed her lips and urged her to rethink her choice, but Sawyer stood firm in her decision. Plus, the dress was cheaper than most of the others. Maybe because there was so little fabric? I don't know.

"What are you going to get, Maddy?" Sawyer asked after they changed back into their street clothes. Miss Ross had taken their selections to the counter to pay and be wrapped up while we waited. Now that they had their gowns, we needed shoes and accessories to match which we'd find elsewhere.

"No idea." I shrugged, not feeling really focused.

"I think a deep purple would look amazing on you. Your eyes would look almost green!" she said, indicating a satin, one-shoulder gown off to the side. It looked like it was meant for a ball and not a mere high school dance.

"I'll keep that in mind when I look next week," I said, tearing my eyes away. Wearing any sort of fancy dress like this was going to be out of my comfort zone, regardless, so I decided I'd just put my faith in Mina and her daughters to pick something. I glanced at Andrea, who looked lost in her own world. "I love the one you picked. You look beautiful in it," I told her. There had been so much fuss from Miss Ross over the lack of material for Sawyer's dress I felt like Andrea had been overlooked.

She looked at me, brows high on her forehead, but smiled a little in response, like she actually appreciated my words.

“Thanks, Maddy.”

“Seriously, you looked like a little sexpot,” Sawyer said in approval. “You better volume the shit out of your hair with it.”

Andrea shrugged her shoulders, her cheeks turning a little pink at the compliments. “Yeah, maybe. We’ll see.”

“We can look for ideas later tonight on the community computer at Phoenix House,” I said, thinking of the desktop that sat in the sitting room. We had to book time to use it, but everyone was pretty good about sharing.

“Mine’s gonna be sleek,” Sawyer said, obviously in her element at the idea of dressing up for a dance, and took the bag holding her dress from Miss Ross. “Thank you, ma’am!” She added, ignoring the tight way our guardian was pressing her lips together, clearly still disapproving of her choice.

“Thank you,” Andrea said softly, taking her own bag with a shy smile.

We stepped outside into the setting sun. The town had come alive over the past week, with tulips and flowers bursting in bloom in public boxes along the main street. People were walking about in shorts and t-shirts, ready for summer. It was a beautiful place, full of charm, but it wasn’t enough to make me want to stay forever. At least, not now.

We’d come out in the late afternoon for our excursion, as Miss Ross had promised to take us to get some pizza for supper. As Hayden was spending today studying for his final tomorrow, we made plans for him to meet me at Phoenix House later so we could spend a little time before the night was over.

The sky was a myriad of pinks, purples, and gold, the air still warm from the heat of the day. I followed our little group down the block towards another boutique, though this one looked like it was primarily selling shoes and accessories, which was exactly what we needed. The girls raced inside, while I stayed out in the sun, sitting on one of the nearby benches, promising Miss Ross I wouldn’t wander anywhere. I

wanted to soak in the beautiful canvas overhead in silence for a bit. I was rarely left on my own anymore, not in a house full of girls. And any other time I had I was with Hayden. Right now, however, I just wanted peace so I could let my mind rest.

A crow swooped down, landing carefully on the tree across the way, cawing angrily at a squirrel who rebuked back, shaking its tail in frustration at having its space invaded.

“Bad crow,” I smirked, thinking of Hayden and his family and their silly little tradition. For some reason, that triggered a memory locked deep in the vault of my mind, and I found myself remembering one of the last memories I had with *both* my parents and in it, a tradition we carried year after year.

Chocolate chip waffles.

It was Christmas morning, and we celebrated like all others. When we woke up, Mom put chocolate chip waffles into the toaster, a special breakfast, and I reached into my sock for the assortment of dollar store toys that had been stuffed inside. But even before I knew what they were, I loved them. I was the sort of kid that, if you gave me a bouncy ball, I’d enjoy it for hours, tossing it around, throwing it in the air and catching it, seeing how many times I could in a row. Or a pack of cards, where I’d flip them over, scramble them up, and play Go Fish. They were simple gifts, but I’d never known anything else, so I loved them. Even though I couldn’t recall my father’s face, I do remember his presence, sitting on a couch smoking a cigarette, watching as I sat on the floor, making something out of the Play-doh I’d gotten.

We ate breakfast there in the living room, staying warm with electric blankets while I watched Frosty on the old TV. Because my dad had passed away when I was so young, I had very few memories of him. One day he was there, and the next, he was gone, and Mom was telling me we had to run for it. She rambled on and on about how he’d been an idiot and lost us everything. She muttered under her breath about drugs, faceless men, and money as she shoved items into duffle bags.

After that, we hopped on a bus and left Ashland behind, heading west to the coast of British Columbia.

The crow cawed again, bringing me back to the present, and took off, flying away down the side street. I watched it as it disappeared, swooping low over a small, lonely tattoo shop that looked to be boarded up, the sign broken and dirty, forgotten. It was one of the few buildings in this town that looked to be completely ignored and left to rot. I wondered why.

“What are *you* doing here?”

That voice sent a shiver down my spine, immediately causing all the hairs on my arms and back of my neck to stand on end, and I whipped around where I sat to find myself staring up into Ayla Savard’s bruised face. She was accompanied by Nova and another girl who I recognized from the festival, her face unmarred, though she looked as miserable as the others did. I guess that saying *is* true... misery does love company.

“I’m out with the girls from Phoenix House,” I said, unsure of why I was explaining anything to her. Maybe because I wanted her to know I wasn’t alone, therefore she needed to back the fuck up.

She peered up and down the street skeptically.

“They’re getting shoes,” I said, indicating the store behind her.

“Oh? And you aren’t? Are you not going to the dance?” She asked, unable to hide the joy that the prospect of me missing that event brought her.

She doesn’t need to know anything, Maddy, I told myself. So I just shrugged and crossed my arms, turning myself a little more in my seat so that I could face her straight on. “Dances have never been high on my ‘to-do’ list,” I said honestly. Just because I never anticipated going, doesn’t mean I wasn’t going to skip it. But she didn’t need to know that.

She smirked at my words, like they pleased her immensely. She was such a fucking snake. “That’s a shame that you’ll miss it. Though, I suppose, it’s for the best anyhow...” her voice trailed off, but her tone was clearly implying something that I was missing.

Don’t rise to her bait. Rolling my eyes, I shook my head at her. “Bye, Ayla,” I said simply, wanting to end the conversation now.

“I mean,” she ignored my dismissal and leaned down, resting her arms over the back of the bench, “even if you went, you’d be alone, anyhow.”

Again, her tone was heavy with meaning, like I was ignorant of some inside joke. Ignoring her, I dared to turn my back, looking across the street to focus on the leaves that danced in the warm breeze.

“Because, after all, it’s not like you’d have a date, right?”

Nova walked around the bench then, arms crossed, catching my attention as she stood before me. Her injuries weren’t as obvious as Ayla’s, but I did get some satisfaction when I noticed the yellowing purple bruise at her temple. Bitch.

“Even if I didn’t have a date, I’d just go with my friends...”

“*What* friends, Maddy?” Ayla laughed, the sound as sharp as a knife, taunting and cruel. “The Phoenix Girls?” Her friends giggled at this, like it was some big joke. “Please... you aren’t friends. You’re all just damaged girls with ‘daddy issues’ or some shit. Or in your case, ‘dead mommy issues’. I heard.”

“Bully for you,” I said between clenched teeth. My heart was racing as I sat there, fists clenched under my crossed arms, forcing myself not to rise to her obvious baiting. So as much as I wanted to punch her in her fucking face, I reminded myself to be patient. If an opportunity came later, I’d take it, but I couldn’t risk it now on an open public street with

witnesses. I realized then that I was channeling Hayden, remembering how he spoke to me after Lucas had groped me in the hall.

“I can see you now... poor little orphan Maddy... alone at a dance in some second-hand dress... no friends... no *boyfriend*...”

Hayden.

I looked up as she sauntered around to stand beside Nova, both towering over me as I stared up at them, confused. The longer I watched them, the more numbness seemed to spread over me, and the more my heart raced. “What do you mean by that?” I asked her, my voice coming out in a broken whisper. When she remained silent, for once, smirking broadly at the confusion on my face, I jumped to my feet, daring to get as close to her as I could. “What the fuck does that mean, *no boyfriend*?”

“Hayden is a lot like you, Maddy,” she said slowly, her eyes lit up as she fell deeper into her cruel malice. “Both of you come from shit. I mean, you’re obvious, but Hayden... well, his dad was a murdering psycho who fucked his own sister. It’s only a matter of time before Hayden gets locked away—”

“Shut your fucking mouth, you bitch!” I snarled, unable to stop myself from snatching at the front of her shirt. That ugly smirk only broadened as I felt the hands of her friends grab me to pull me back.

“Hayden’s dad may have been all those things, but you know... he was weak. I mean, the guy shot his fucking brains out. And what for? Why? Because he was *scared*?”

“You have *no* idea what you’re talking about!”

“Weakness is like a genetic disease that spreads to offspring,” she continued, ignoring me as I struggled to throw her friends off of me. “Hayden made enemies with the wrong people, Maddy. Just like his daddy. They’ll come for him, and because he’s his father’s son, he’ll probably end it just the way

he did... and you'll be dancing on your own." she sang the last part, surprisingly in tune, but the prettiness of it was all the more unnerving.

My hands were still shaking. My rage was unlike anything I'd ever felt before, the protectiveness I felt over Hayden was overwhelming and overpowering all else.

Be patient...

I couldn't take a swing at her, not with her friends holding me back, so I just leaned in a little, holding her blue stare, and hissed, "Why don't you fucking walk away and forget all about me and Hayden? Go be the little bitch that you are and heel to your master... Theo, right? He sent you to get me mad? To get me riled up so I'd try to hit you or something? Why? Because you want an excuse to get me into trouble?" I shook my head when she said nothing, though her smile had disappeared. "You think *I* live a sad life? You really have no idea how sad of a life *you* really live, do you, Ayla? Always second best, always at the beck and call to someone who could care less for you. I wouldn't change places with you for all the money in the world." I roughly pulled my arms then, breaking free from the girls' hold, and stepped away, breathing hard, my hands shaking as I fought to control myself. "I feel sad for *you*."

I turned then, heading into the boutique where I found Andrea waiting patiently at the cash register while Sawyer sat happily chatting away to the salesclerk as they brought out a pile of shoes for her to try. I smirked at the way Miss Ross was yawning hugely, clearly done with this outing. I peered over my shoulder, staring out of the front windows of the shop, but Ayla and the others were gone.

My heart was still thudding hard against my chest, and I felt lightheaded from the confrontation. I found a seat by one of the racks and shakily sat down in it, letting my head fall forward as I sucked in a long, deep breath of air.

These assholes weren't going to let us go... not until we left this place behind us forever. The way she painted Hayden

had hurt me more than any of the words she slung my way. I was used to that. But her trying to break Hayden's character down, his past, and say he was something that he wasn't made my blood boil in my veins. She was lucky that she had her two cronies holding me back. I could have ripped her hair from her scalp and ran my nails over her face... it would have been the very definition of a 'Cat Fight', only I imagined it being a lot bloodier. I'd have made sure of it.

"Maddy?"

I snapped my head up to see Miss Ross staring at me in concern, her eyes wide behind her spectacles.

"Are you alright, dear?"

"Yeah, sorry... I think it's just too much sun, or something."

She glanced outside, the colours of the sunset darkening, becoming more vivid, but she didn't question my obvious lie. She must have assumed I was using it as a front for grief for my mother, and not anything else, because she dropped it, giving me space instead.

I'd go with them to get pizza, but then after, I said I'd wait for Hayden to pick me up. I needed to see him, to tell him what Ayla had said. I had a feeling that Theo was planning something again, and we needed to watch our backs.



IT WAS NEAR TWILIGHT. The fireflies drifted in and out of the shrubs lining the property to Phoenix House. The first stars were coming out, Venus the brightest of them all. I waited for Hayden on the porch out front, sitting on the step, listening for the sound of his bike. But it was quiet, save for the crickets and occasional frog from a nearby pond. The lights from inside the house cast rectangular beams of light across the

lawn; the sounds of the little girls laughing while they played was a comfort to me. I peered over my shoulder to see Carol-Ann, the one who was so scared to see her father again, smiling in the window as she and another played with their Barbies. She'd been doing better lately. I suppose that meant that her visits were going well. That was hopeful. But that sad scar along the side of her face would always be a heavy reminder of her past.

And yet she smiled.

I found the corner of my mouth lifting at the thought. Healing was a long, arduous, never-ending journey, it seemed. At times it felt almost impossible. Somehow, though, small signs began to emerge, the tiniest bits of hope shining through. And those little moments, those seemingly insignificant changes, almost seemed to go unnoticed, unappreciated. But their presence were signs of strength, that we hadn't given up. And Carol-Ann's smile was just that.

I turned to continue waiting, knowing full well we had agreed to 7pm, and yet, Hayden was nowhere to be seen. I'd come out here five-to, and though my fingers twisted from where they sat hanging off my knees, I told myself to wait a little longer. Most likely he was on the road, and any moment now, I'd hear the roar of his engine as he came round the bend of the drive. Time just felt like it was passing impossibly slow. He was never late, so I was just being impatient, I told myself. But the longer I sat there, the silence stretching on with no sign of him, I couldn't help the anxiety that started to twist in my chest.

What if he was stuck in traffic? Or worse, what if he was in an accident? Or... what if he forgot about me? What if he was at home with his family and he didn't care about—

Shut up, Maddy! I rose to my feet, shoving that thought right down the steps before me. I wouldn't let that dark voice try to tell me I was worthless again.

Paranoid Maddy.

Scared Maddy.

Lonely Mad—

NO!

I turned and headed inside, letting the screen door bang shut behind me. Miss Ross, who was sitting on an armchair in the living room while she worked on a cross stitch as she supervised the younger girls, shot me a disapproving look. She hated it when we let the screen door slam. I cast her a guilty, apologetic sort of look and hurried into the kitchen where a house phone was hooked up. Being without a cell phone was definitely not something most people were used to, but I'd never known anything different. I had an easy time memorizing phone numbers and knew Hayden's by heart. So I quickly dialed his, waiting as it rang, and rang... and rang.

He'd never hooked up a voicemail to his, and after it continued to call over and over with no answer, I eventually had to hang up. He could just be driving, unable to answer as that was impossible on a bike. But something was nagging at the back of my head. Something felt off.

Just as fast, I picked up the phone again and dialed Mina's. She'd given me her number the other week, and I'd seen it numerous times before as it was posted on the refrigerator here. She was one of Phoenix House's main supporters, and her number had been there since I arrived. I knew it as well as I did Hayden's.

To my relief, she answered on the second ring.

"Hello? Miss Ross?" Her voice floated through the other end, clearly not expecting me at all.

"No, sorry, it's Maddy."

"Maddy! How are you, hun? You and Hayden having a good time?"

... *what?*

I felt my heart stop at her words, my whole body going rigid as if I'd turned to stone, but I quickly brushed it aside as I

reassured myself aloud, “Oh no, sorry, I guess that means Hayden *is* on his way. I was wondering where he was. He said he’d be here at seven and it’s almost a quarter past—”

“Wait, what do you mean? Leave from where?”

Again, I felt my blood turn to ice. The confusion between us made me feel like weights were being added to my chest. “From your house. He told he’d pick me up after dinner,” I said, stating it like it was obvious.

“What? No. He hasn’t been home since he left this morning to run an errand for Keenan. I assumed he got sidetracked and was with you this whole time, studying for his exam tomorrow.” Mina’s voice had gone flat, rising just at the end, like she was hoping her words were true. Like I was just playing with her and Hayden *was* with me. Except... he wasn’t.

“No, I haven’t seen him all day. I went out with the girls dress shopping for the dance and after we had pizza we came back here. Hayden told me last night he’d pick me up at seven...” my voice trailed off as I fought hard to remember our conversation. I was positive that that was what we had agreed to.

Mina was silent on the other end for two seconds before she suddenly yelled, “KEY!”

“Wait, what’s happening? Have you really not seen him?” I asked, gripping the phone hard in my hands.

“Have you?”

“No, I...”

... *and you’ll be dancing on your own...* Ayla’s words came back like a haunting song, and I stilled as everything she said earlier came back to me.

“I’ll be right over!” I hung up without waiting for her to respond and took off, throwing the screen door open and letting it bang shut behind me, followed by Miss Ross’s angry call. But I ignored her as I took off toward the tree line, the

darkness that would once have stopped me in my tracks blaring and terrifying still, but I pushed on, knowing the path well enough by now, as I tore through the trees heading towards his house. My panic pushed me forward. *Hayden* pushed me. The branches caught my ragged, torn jeans, pulling strands of my hair away from my face as I made my way.

By the time I made it, falling out of the trees and onto the large, expansive lawn of Keenan and Mina's home, I was immediately met by them both as they came running out the back to meet me. Mina had the phone to her ear, like she was calling around, trying to find her son, but Keenan ran straight at me, helping me stagger to the house.

"... is on his way..." He was staying as we stepped inside, but I was breathing too hard, holding the stitch in my side, my mind a whirling hurricane of chaos.

"Huh? Who?"

"James. He's coming over," Keenan repeated while Mina rushed over to the sink, holding her cell against her shoulder and cheek, talking to someone on the other end as she got me a large glass of water, which I inhaled. "Now, Maddy, I need you to think hard... when did you last speak with Hayden?"

"Last night," I gasped as I set the glass down on the table. I sank into one of the chairs while he took the one beside me, turning it so he could look at me straight on. "We made plans to-to meet tonight. At seven." I panted, trying to focus hard as I went over our conversation again and again.

"Did he mention anything about where he'd be today?"

"Just that he would have dinner with you guys before-before coming to pick me up," I said, getting better control over my breathing. "His last exam is tomorrow, so as far as I know he had no business at school or anything like that. He was supposed to be studying all day. Did he say anything about it?"

Keenan shook his head as Mina hung up and quickly called someone else, pacing the kitchen back and forth. She spoke in rapid succession before she turned back to us and said, “His bike is still at Joe’s Hardware store, Key.”

Keenan’s jaw clenched over and over again. “So he made it there, at least. But that’s where the trail ends. I figured he didn’t come home with the part because he’d gotten sidetracked with you, hon,” he said to me, running a hand over his face, the crow’s-feet at the corners of his eyes deepening as he got lost in thought. The scar along the side of his face tugged at the corner of one.

“What are we thinking here?” I asked. The way they were acting was only adding to my panicked thoughts.

“Theo Hebert.” Was all Keenan said when Maverick bounced in, holding a toy airplane in his hands as he pretended to fly it around the room. Key got up and gently took his little boy by the hand and guided him upstairs, while Mina continued to hang up, make a call, before hanging up to call someone else. Her green eyes were bright, wild, the look of absolute fear written all over her face. I’ve never seen her as anything but calm and collected, save that one time in the office when she looked ready to pounce on Mr. Price, so seeing her like this was disturbing.

Keenan came back down the stairs then, murmuring to Mina in passing that Charlotte was watching their youngest, and took the seat beside me again. “Maddy, think hard. Have you heard anything today that might give us some idea as to where he has gone? Any little thing that—”

“Ayla,” I said at once, the conversation from only a couple of hours ago came crashing forward.

“Ayla?” Mina asked, pulling the phone away from her mouth as she glanced over. “Who is that?”

“Ayla Savard, she’s friends with Theo Hebert.”

At once, she hung up the phone and rushed over, arms crossed over her chest as she stared down at me, brow

furrowed with worry. “What about her? What happened?”

I closed my eyes, trying hard to remember exactly what she had said, going back to the beginning of the conversation again as I tried to relive it in every detail. “She asked me if I was going to the graduation dance. I tried just ignoring her, since it was none of her business, but then she said...”

Even if you went, you'd be alone, anyhow, she'd told me. I can see you now... poor little orphan Maddy... alone at a dance in some second-hand dress... no friends... no boyfriend...

“She tried baiting me,” I told them. “Like, it was obvious she wanted me to get mad. I figured she wanted me to attack her so I'd get into trouble or something stupid like that. I held it together until she mentioned his birth father...”

Both of you come from shit. I mean, you're obvious, but Hayden... well, his dad was a murdering psycho who fucked his own sister. It's only a matter of time before Hayden gets locked away...

“She mentioned Shay?” Mina asked in a quiet voice. I opened my eyes to see her standing at my side, looking like she'd just gotten punched in the stomach, pain screaming from the depths of her eyes.

I nodded, reaching out to take her hand. “I tried to take a swing at her, but her friends grabbed me then, and-and...” I stopped then, realization suddenly hitting me like I'd been slapped in the face. My other hand flew to my chest, only... the metal of the dog tags was gone. The thing he'd cherished so much that he had given to me, was missing from my neck and memory of the baiting to get me to pounce, all for Nova and her friend to get their hands on me to hold me back... they'd taken the dog tags.

“They took them...” I whispered, horrified as I fought to understand *why*.

“Took what?” Keenan asked, confused by the look on my face.

I turned to him, feeling like I had a mouthful of sand. “The girls. The dog tags. Hayden had given me his dog tags, and they took them. Ayla mentioned Hayden being just like his dad, and she’d gone on about him ending up like him. That’s when I had lost it and tried hitting her, only her friends grabbed me then. That’s when they did it. They took them.”

Hayden’s dad may have been all those things, but you know... he was weak. I mean, the guy shot his fucking brains out. And what for? Why? Because he was scared?

“Hayden made enemies with the wrong people, Maddy. Just like his daddy. They’ll come for him’,” I said aloud, quoting Ayla’s words from earlier just as the front door burst open. Keenan and Mina both looked like they’d been carved out of ice by the way they froze at the words I repeated, so when James hurried into the kitchen to see the three of us there, staring at each other in horror, he lost his shit.

“What in the fuck is going on? Where’s Hayden? What do you mean he’s missing?” he yelled, stomping forward. From upstairs, a door slammed, like one of the sisters had been listening in on us, only to then decide to hide due to their grandpa’s rage. I couldn’t blame them. For the first time since I met him, James looked like a real biker. Dangerous. I think it *would* have scared me, had I just met him now, but seeing him like this, ready to run to the rescue for Hayden, only made me hopeful.

“Theo Hebert has done something; I have no doubt in my mind.” Keenan rose to his feet, pulling Mina into his arms and squeezing her tight, murmuring so softly in her ear that I couldn’t hear. She simply nodded along to whatever he was saying, though tears were running down her cheeks like a heavy flowing faucet. Keenan pressed a kiss to her forehead, very much like how Hayden would for me, which tore my heart apart to see, and whispered to her, “I’ll get our boy back, I promise.”

Chapter twenty-four



Hayden - Present Day

THE HELL?

I blinked, but something sticky was keeping my right eye closed, like it had been glued shut. That was weird. My head was hurting in the *worst* way, like a headache that threatened to rip my skull apart. When I tried to reach up to feel it, my arm caught, as if it was tied down, like someone had bound it around my back. I was tied up? The fuck?

I don't know what the hell had happened. I remember going to the hardware store to get some motor oil for Dad. I'd picked up several containers, paid, stuffed them into my backpack and wandered outside to where I'd parked my bike by the side of the building. Then...

I was grabbed.

Behind me, when my back was turned to the dumpster and small parking lot shrouded by overgrown trees, I was suddenly struck at the back of my head. I didn't pass out, but I remember stumbling hard, falling forward over my bike, the pain that seared my brain making me feel sick like I might pass out. I stumbled up, turning to defend myself, but my vision was blurred, like my eyes were still rattling around in my skull. I was hit again, only from the side this time.

I fell to the ground, spitting up and retching like I would actually vomit. I could hear voices overhead, felt my bag ripped off my back before someone grabbed the back of my

jacket and dragged me along. I blinked hard, trying to see *something*, but all I remember was white, the sound of a door sliding on its rail, then the vibration beneath my body before I succumbed to the overwhelming drowsiness that took over.

Now, as I felt myself coming to, I realized it was because that overwhelming sickness was rising fast, and I quickly turned my head sideways as I retched, emptying my stomach.

“Good, he’s awake,” the voice sounded like it was riding a wave, floating in and out as I shook myself, trying to snap the fuck out of it. “Sit him up.”

A pair of hands grabbed the back of my jacket and pulled me upwards. I reeled, the dizziness making me feel like the world was tilting on its side, before I found myself forced to my knees. The ground was cold, but soft, and I realized I was kneeling on grass.

“Haaaaaay-dennnnn...” someone sang, someone whose voice I knew *very* well, and I sneered. The son of a bitch. Of course, it was him.

I blinked again, my vision clearing more and more as time ticked by, and I peered up to see Theo standing a few feet before me, grinning like all of his dreams were about to come true.

We were... *wait, where the fuck were we?*

I looked away from him, trying to understand my situation despite the fact that I felt like I was on the verge of death already. I think my head was about to explode.

It was dark. Night. Huh, last I remembered it was early afternoon. Had I really been out for that long? Holy fuck... I grimaced as I shifted, trying to make sense of my situation. It was night. We were in a... a park. Yes, I could see trees around us. There was a pathway lining the field we were in, a playground off to one side with several benches angled towards it. One of the swings lightly shifted in the breeze, the chain clinking together like music.

I coughed hard, spitting again to the ground as I fought back another wave of nausea.

“Theo,” I said finally, my voice raspy as I fought to speak around the sore, raw feeling in my throat. “What’s up?”

The smile wavered for just a second at my casual greeting, like he had hoped I’d start sniveling and begging right off the bat.

Sorry fuckface. I know how you operate by now. You like it when I cry.

I glanced up at the others, noticing Spencer at once, who stood at my side, the one who had been moving me around like a limp noodle. Jace was here, too, standing off to the side with two others, though they didn’t look as confident as their leader and his number one guy. Hmm... interesting. Maybe they finally realized that this was going too far? The only reason I wasn’t freaking the fuck out right now was because as far as I could see, I was the only one here at their mercy.

Maddy is safe.

That thought in itself was enough to give me reassurance and strength, and I breathed a long, deep sigh of relief.

“Hayden.” Theo steadied himself as he stared down at me, like I was worse than the mud on his shoe. I was worse than dog shit. “We have something to settle.”

“Oh yeah?” I raised my brows, trying to see past the mess of tangled hair in my eyes. It was still hard to see past my right one, but I now realized that it was dried blood that was caking it semi-closed. “If you wanted to sign my yearbook, you just had to ask.”

“Stop acting like you aren’t afraid, you fuck. You *know* why you’re here.”

I glanced around us once more, not recognizing this place at all, and shrugged. “And where, exactly, is here?”

It’s like this was exactly what he wanted me to ask, because the smile stretched across his face, twisted from his

scars, and he waved his arm behind him, gesturing to the playground. “Don’t you know, Hayden?”

I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, before I squinted harder, struggling to understand, but *fuck*... my head. I felt like I couldn’t think clearly at all. Everything kept coming in and out like a dream.

“We’re by Sherwood,” he said at last, when it looked like I couldn’t come up with an answer. “I guess that whore mother of yours didn’t ever bring you here, hm? I suppose because they never removed *that*?” He pointed to a bench near the playground that sat beneath a large maple, looking sad and desolate in the dark with no signs of life around it.

The bench...

MC Gang Member Found Dead by Sherwood.

A stillness settled around my shoulders like a dark cloak, and I felt sicker the longer I stared at the seemingly harmless object, just a seat carved from wood, the iron rails curving prettily. The air squeezed out of my lungs, a small, strange sound escaping my mouth, like a tired whistle, a cross between a wheeze and a cry.

“That’s right, Hayden.” Theo took a step closer, smug satisfaction radiating from him like the sun. “You see, I’ve been thinking about this moment for a long time. I assumed you had come here once or twice... pay your respects to your psycho dead father, but I guess I was wrong. That’s okay. That makes it so much better for me, that I get to be here for your first time. And your last.”

Huh, so that was it this whole time.

For a moment, I stared up at him from where I knelt, the cold ground seeping through my jeans and into my bones, but then I snapped. I burst out laughing, and I couldn’t stop. His words repeated over and over in my head, and I couldn’t help myself. I almost fell over at one point but managed to keep upright as I swayed.

“What the fuck is so funny?” Theo snarled, his pale eyes almost glowing in the dim light of night, and I could see the confusion and... *fear*... there.

“This. This whole... plan of yours. It’s so fucking stupid,” I said, feeling a tear leak from the corner of my eye. “Like, what? You wanted me to see the spot where some guy I never met offed himself? Really? What was that going to do? Hurt me again? Then what? You’re going to kill me as revenge for fucking up your face because I decided I’d had enough of your bullshit? That’s seriously your master plan? Fuck Theo....” I chuckled and shook the hair out of my eyes so I could try to see him more clearly, loving how confused he looked. “You are one stupid motherfucker.”

Spencer kicked at my back and I sprawled forward into the grass, unable to stop myself as the cords they used to tie my arms and hands around my back were unmoveable. My jaw clicked together when I hit the ground, my mirth subsiding a little, but I was still grinning, entertained by it all. Spencer grabbed a clump of hair at the back of my head and pulled. I winced, hissing sharply between my teeth as he forced me back onto my knees, several strands snapping free, the feeling only sharper due to the fact that I’d been sucker punched in the same spot earlier.

“You know, I feel like a dumbass, myself,” I admitted to him, stretching my jaw with a crack before I met his furious gaze again. “I really thought you were going to be more creative. Like what you did with Maddy’s mother? That was fucking beyond anything I could have imagined. But then again, that wasn’t exactly *you*, was it? It had been your dad’s operation. So this one, this stupid, basic plan of yours makes sense. I guess I thought you might have gotten more creative over the years—”

“Shut the fuck up, Mathers,” Theo snapped, his lip curling as my words hit him hard. Huh, he didn’t like his intelligence being questioned. I could only imagine what his home life was like. Daniel Hebert was a hard man, and most likely, the abuse that went on between him and his son was verbal, more than

likely, attacks on his intelligence. Daniel would expect more from his son, but Theo never excelled at school. He was a disappointment. It was obvious now.

“So that’s it, isn’t it? Your dad has been a prick to you your entire life, and you needed to vent your feelings out on me? Jesus, Theo... that’s fucking sad.”

“I said, *shut the fuck up!*” He lifted a fist and the next thing I knew, my head snapped painfully sideways, a sharp kink in my neck searing up to my brain, the burst of pain in my jaw blooming like a flower that burned into my skin. Huh, his punches have gotten better. Even at the Fun House he hadn’t hit this hard, it seemed. I guess I finally struck a nerve.

“All this time... all along... it was because *you* were the one with ‘Daddy Issues’. And yet, you made it seem like I was the one who had been struggling with them all this time. It makes sense now. I never had a problem until you made one. You *made* it a problem for me, made me believe it was something I *had* to struggle with, when all along, it was you.” I slowly turned to peer back at him, making sure to smile wide as I tasted the blood in my mouth, and I hoped he could see it in the moonlight. “Don’t you know, Theo? It was never *our* fault. It was *theirs*.”

“Shut *up!*” He screamed and punched again, this time, hitting the eye that was already obscured by dry blood. I fell sideways to the ground, groaning from the impact on my already aching skull, the world blurring before me. “Shut the fuck *up!*” He jumped on top of me, pounding away at every part he could reach. Unable to defend myself, I had no choice but to lie there as he continued to attack, like he was trying to protect himself from *me*.

“Theo, c’mon, man. Get it together. Remember the plan?” Spencer’s words cut in then, and the punching and cursing stopped, although I could still make out the sound of him panting hard, breathless from his moment of weakness. I’d broken him, for just a minute, and he’d lost his control.

I felt a boot press against my shoulder and shove me, rolling me onto my back before Spencer pulled me up again, positioning me once more to my knees. Theo crouched before me, resting on his haunches as he glared into my face, still breathing hard from his fit, until...

He reached into his pocket, the sound of metal sharp in the quiet night, and he held something out, dangling before my face. I blinked hard several times, clearing my sight again before I could make sense of it.

Dog tags.

I went cold, all feeling vanishing, like a vacuum had just sucked the life out of me at the sight. They swayed a little before my eyes, but even still, even in the dark, I could make out the inscription of the one before my face.

Mina Westburg...

A broad smirk slowly stretched out on Theo's face again, all of his cruel control back in place the longer I stared at the little piece of metal.

"The fuck is this?" I rasped, as a piercing, shrill sound, like when you play music too hard on your earphones, began to drown out all else.

"I think you *know*, Hayden." Theo dropped the tags to the ground where they bounced just once on the grass, right before my feet. "You know whose pretty little neck wore these."

Maddy... Maddy... Maddy...

"Where is she?" I couldn't take my eyes off of them. Surely, they were a copy. That's right. They were a copy. But then, the coordinates. I knew them so well, but there was no way anyone else had ever been close enough to memorize them or the dates and names that were inscribed. "Where *is* she?" I snapped.

Theo's smile deepened as he rose slowly to his feet, reaching behind himself to pull something free, but I wasn't

looking at him. All I could see was the shining metal on the ground.

“In many places by now.”

No... no, that's not true. He's making it up, Hayden. He's fucking lying! My mouth went dry, my body swaying a little at his words. He fucking didn't. Theo was capable of a lot of things, but he wouldn't do that. He couldn't. He was a coward, capable of the most basic of impulses. Punches, name-calling, threats... that was his MO. Not actual murder. That was his father, and even then, his dad hired men to do that sort of dirty work.

“I don't believe you,” I said at last, still unable to look away from the tags.

“No?” I could hear the pure joy in his voice as he spoke. He was fucking enjoying this. “And why is that, Hayden?”

“You are not capable of it,” I said, believing those words.

“Hmmm...” Theo paced very slowly before me, the sound of his feet rustling the grass as he walked was so loud in my ears that I winced. “You know what, Hayden? You're right. I'm not capable of actually *murdering* someone. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm aware that we came close a few times in the past. Am I right, guys?”

Behind me, Spencer chuckled. The brief sniggering from the others were barely audible, like they didn't really find it funny at all. They were just playing along. Chances are, they had no idea Theo was going to take it this far.

“Yeah, I'm not a murderer. But that doesn't mean I won't go as far as I need to to see you suffer, Hayden.”

My eyes flicked up in his direction, and I felt that bubble of panic begin to churn to life in my gut. *No, he didn't. He didn't. He didn't.* I chanted over and over in my head.

“My dad made sure that Mrs. King's life was cut short in the most perfect way, a promise I'd made to Ayla as retribution for what happened to her in the washroom,” Theo grinned,

looking very much like a fucking lunatic. “And when that was done, I just had one more request. I wanted to hurt Hayden Mathers in the worst way possible. You could take a punch, I knew that much. You could stand against the standard bullying of high school. You’d made it to the end, after all. You’re still here despite our best efforts. So, what would hurt you more than anything? What would be fair for what you did to me?” He held up his hand, spreading his index and middle finger wide like a pair of scissors. “To destroy the one thing in your life that you loved above all else... *that...*” he snapped his fingers together, “would be *my* retribution. For the longest time, I thought it would be one of your sisters... after all, I’d mentioned them only once before, and you’d lost your shit, giving me these scars. But then, *she* came around—”

I lunged at him, hoping to headbutt him, to grab some part of his face with my teeth and rip it free, but Spencer’s bulky hands seized my shoulders, holding me back.

“Pretty Madeline King. At first, I just wanted to fuck her. I was going to find a way to get her alone so we could share her, right, Spencer?”

“Still wish I’d had a chance before you sent your dad’s men after her, not gonna lie,” Spencer fucking *laughed* at my back. I tried stumbling to my feet, attempting to twist around so I could attack him, hurt any part of him that I could, but he held me fast, all of them laughing at my predicament.

Theo’s laughter was the loudest of all. “Yeah, I think we would have had fun with her. She was so nervous and shy when she arrived, remember? Like a scared little rabbit. It would have been fun to hear her scream, but...” He shrugged, like it was no big deal. “This works out so much better for me. Because you see, Hayden, I got to do what I’ve been *dying* to do for years. I got to take the most important thing from you, and I get to see your face break as I do it. Maddy is fucking *gone*.”

“You’re lying...” I ignored that horrible, sick feeling in my stomach, concentrating instead on how much I *hated* this guy.

I wanted to kill him with my bare hands. This time, in this place, I would let no one stop me. “You’re fucking lying!”

“Am I, Hayden?” Theo was giddy, like he was ready to unwrap the gift he’d been waiting his whole life for. “Because I can tell you exactly where she was today, what she was doing, what she was wearing, all before they took her. Did she tell you she was going out with the girls from Phoenix House?”

I froze, the sickness in my stomach rising dangerously again.

“She went to one of the dress shops in town here with Miss Ross, Sawyer, and Andrea... she was wearing that torn-up, shitty pair of jeans she has and a black long-sleeve top. She was sitting outside a shop on a bench, all pretty in the sun... no one was watching. You know how easy it was to take *you*? Imagine how easy it had been to take *her*. All they had to do was drive up in the van, slide open the side door, and pull her in.”

“No, they fucking *didn’t!*” I hissed between my clenched teeth, feeling the sting in my eyes at the picture he painted.

“They did. And she was scared, Hayden. So fucking scared. You think you were the only one who realized she didn’t like being touched? Can you imagine the look on her face when these guys took her? As they held her down, ripped her clothes from her body, and—”

“Shut the fuck *up!*” I screamed, the thought of Maddy fighting for her life, of being assaulted that way, the horror of it all.

“They took their time, Hayden.” Theo grinned. “I owed Ayla that much from her. The rest, well, it was for *me*. I want you to know that they made it slow, that while they hurt her, she cried out over and over for you... and you didn’t come to save her. No one did.” He kicked at the dog tags, sending them flying off to the side, disappearing into the grass before he

tossed his head back and laughed. “They told me she wailed like a fucking dog!”

I launched myself at him, driving into his side and knocking him off his feet, catching everyone off guard. Although I was able to make him fall, I couldn’t do much else before Spencer wrapped a thick, muscled arm around my throat and hauled me back, making me choke against his arm. I didn’t fucking care. All I wanted was blood, Theo’s blood. I would kill him right now if I wasn’t tied up. I felt like my chest was ripping apart as I saw Maddy lying on the floor of some van, with masked men surrounding her... the thought of her crying, of calling for me, it felt like someone just stuck a stake into my heart. I felt a bloodlust I’d never known.

Screaming, I kicked my legs, trying to fight against Spencer’s hold, but without my hands, I could do nothing as he crushed me into the ground, the grass tickling my face as I yelled over and over again, “You fucking didn’t! You fucking didn’t!”

Beside us, Theo stumbled to his feet, clearly rocked by my attack, but he was still fucking smiling. I wish I’d killed him long ago. “I did, Hayden. I told you I’d get my revenge, and I gotta say, it’s the sweetest fucking thing.”

I felt like my body was breaking apart, piece by piece, the thought of Maddy actually being gone, the violent description of it, I felt like I couldn’t breathe. I struggled for air, gasping again and again as my body went numb, the feeling spreading over my face, from the tips of my fingers and toes, and throughout. It was like I was constricted by more than just these cords. It was an invisible force that was making my body break in on itself, twisting about and going rigid, so I couldn’t move.

Spencer finally got off, but I couldn’t make it stop. I lay there, feeling like I was dying, tears streaming from my swelling eyes, the blood on my right one still obscuring my vision. But I kept my focus on the glint of silver several feet away, the tags.

At the corner of my eye, Theo finally pulled whatever he'd had in his pocket free, and the moment he did, Jace and the others finally spoke up.

“Whoa, Theo, man. What the fuck?”

“This is going too far, bro. Enough—”

Theo ignored them and whistled, to which Spencer grabbed me by the back of my jacket and began to drag me away. I could see the grass moving beneath me, dragging my frozen feet behind us, until Spencer lifted me just a bit more, and heavily put me down on a hard, flat surface.

The bench...

“She’s gone, Hayden,” Theo’s voice floated into my mind like a horrible off-key note. “They’ll be finding pieces of her for weeks. So here’s the deal. You have two choices.” He crouched before me, staring up where I sat like a zombie, still struggling to breathe, to move my feet, my hands. But I felt like I’d already started dying. “You can go, and watch the aftermath of all of this. Details will come out, and you’ll find out more and more about ‘the horror’ Maddy went through. I won’t be punished you see, because there’s no proof linking me to her death. Your word doesn’t mean shit.”

That was true. I needed evidence to prove such a thing, and Theo’s father had connections. That was how he was able to get away with so much. Like Maddy’s mother...

“So, you think you can handle that? That you can walk around knowing that her last thoughts were of you, and that you failed to save her? Do you think that’s something you can live with, Hayden? There will be *no* justice for you. None. You’ll just wander alone, the one thing you loved gone, and I’ll walk free, because that’s how this is supposed to end. Or...” he brought his hand forward, the object dark, but shiny in the night light, revealing itself to me like a dark promise. “You can join her. You can end it all now, and this between us will be over.”

The dark gun in his hand was like a beacon, glowing in the dark at me, the promise of its purpose blaring like a siren again and again.

“Just take this,” he said softly, his tone gentling like melted butter, like he was being caring in this moment as he held the gun closer to my face. “We’ll untie you, and you can take it, and think of her as you put it to your mouth. It will take all your pain away... I promise.”

“Theo, enough!” One of the other guys called out.

“This isn’t funny anymore—”

“You guys don’t like it, then you can fucking leave! *Leave!*” Spencer shouted in their direction. “And if you say a word to anybody, we’ll come after *you*. Now fuck off!”

I jumped a little at his words, the interference momentarily snapping me out of this strange trance I found myself in.

Theo whispered when I jolted, patting my shoulder like he was trying to console me and bring me back to this dark pit that I was drowning in. “It’s okay, Hayden. Shhhh... I get it. We’ve all been there, haven’t we? We’ve felt this struggle, this pain. And we pushed past it, right? But...” he held the gun up again before my eyes, the black plastic shiny, spotless, the end it promised so final and absolute. “What good did pushing past it all do, really? Remember all the times you felt this way before? And you didn’t go through with it? Was it worth it? You just came right back here to this place where you know you’ll be stuck forever... a loser, a freak, unwanted and alone. Why continue tormenting yourself? Just take it, put it in your mouth, and end it.”

Spencer moved around to my back then, pulling the cords free. Blood rushed through my arms then, the feeling of them waking up hurt more than anything. My hands were still rigid, still twisted, fingers gnarled. I couldn’t do shit with them.

As Theo’s words echoed in my head, I watched as he placed the gun in my hands, arranging my fingers in the right

places to keep it in my grasp, finally sliding one against the trigger before he clicked off the safety.

In the distance, I could hear the sound of tires rolling over the gravel as Jace and the others took off, leaving me alone with these two. But I felt like I was underwater, still... everything moving slowly as I found myself stuck in a strange fog. I had no thought, no feeling. Just numbness as I stared at the gun.

Why continue tormenting yourself?

Just take it, put it in your mouth.

End it.

Tires continued to squeal and roll, the two figures standing over me watching with anticipation as I sat there like I finally understood what dying felt like...

They told me she wailed, like a fucking dog...

They took their time.

They hurt her, she cried out over and over for you...

You didn't save her.

You didn't save her.

You didn't save her...

Theo helped lift my arm, his other hand holding up my wrist to support the weight of the gun as he forced it to turn in my direction, the dark muzzle aiming straight at my face. "It will all end, Hayden. It all ends here." He urged it closer, encouraging me to open my mouth. "Like father, like son..."

Hayden... we are not our parents.

Maddy? I startled, the gun slipping in my clumsy grasp.

We are not our parents, her voice repeated. Everything you told me about him, the good and the bad... they were his choices. His mistakes and his moments of sincerity. What he did has nothing to do with you.

Theo cursed softly under his breath as he helped me readjust my grip.

Theo and his friends? They fucking pushed you. They pushed you to a breaking point and you snapped.

My eyes rolled toward him, my mind clearing a little as I took in the eager way he was guiding me with this task.

Don't be afraid of where you come from, Hayden, her beautiful voice from the memory was like a lifeline being stretched out to me.

We deserve to live, Hayden.

“Open your mouth,” Theo whispered.

Whatever happened to us before, it won't ruin what we have now.

“Open. Your. Mouth!”

I love you, Hayden...

“I said—”

“No!” I screamed, shoving him away. The gun fell from my hand as Theo fell back, and Spencer rushed towards me, but I'll be damned if I was going to let them believe I was done.

Chapter twenty-five



MADDY - PRESENT DAY

IT HAD TAKEN a lot of convincing to get Mina to stay behind. She argued with Keenan all the way out into the garage where his truck was waiting for us. But knowing what we did now, we decided we'd drive around, looking for signs while I struggled to think of places they could be.

"He's my son, Key!" Mina cried, holding onto the back of his shirt.

"He's mine, too."

"I deserve to come," she said, watching as James climbed into the passenger side, reaching back to open the rear for me. I jumped in behind him, buckling up as I watched Keenan turn to hold Mina's face in his hands, talking calmly to her for a moment, before pressing a soft kiss to her lips. She was crying, and he looked like he was on the verge of losing his self-control. But he held it together as he let her go and climbed in behind the wheel, turning the key in the ignition to start it up. Mina stood back, still sobbing, and watched as we tore out of the garage, heading out into the night. Keenan shut the music that had been playing the last time he'd driven his truck, leaving us in silence save for the rumble of his engine.

The only reason I was along for the ride was because I'd been in the middle of all the bullshit with Hayden and Theo. I kept trying to think about what Ayla said, repeating it all to James again and again. Ayla's words had been cruel and

unfair, and when I reluctantly told him everything, I could see how it was like a punch to the gut.

“Where do these little assholes normally hang out, Maddy?” he asked from the front.

I ran my hands through my hair, struggling to think of everything that they’d ever said to me. “I don’t know... they’ve talked about house parties in the past. So maybe one of their homes?”

“Who is in the group?” Keenan asked, one hand on the wheel, as he reached across James to check for something in the glove compartment. Whatever was in there sounded heavy as it fell with the slot that opened. He shut it again and nodded to James, who reached beneath his jacket, like he, too, was checking for something. That was when I realized what they were doing...

Under James’s jacket, the black leather of his Lost Souls cut, was a black leather shoulder holster that held a handgun. My eyes locked onto it in horror, realizing that if these two guys were nervous enough to be armed, then the situation was much worse than I’d thought. What the hell was Theo capable of?

“Um, there’s Theo, obviously... Spencer Carr, Jace Fogerty...” I had my eyes squeezed shut as I tried to remember all the names of the people in their group, but there were so many that were never addressed, or were cared to be mentioned by the main five. “And then Ayla Savard and her friend Nova.”

James pulled out his phone and started typing out a message to someone, but I couldn’t see around his broad shoulder. Keenan flipped on the headlights as the darkness overwhelmed us, and we raced through the streets of our town. I kept my eyes focused out the window, trying to remember what Theo’s and Spencer’s cars looked like, searching for some sign of them or the group itself, wandering the streets.

“Did Ayla mention anything else besides the dance, Maddy?” Keenan asked, turning sharply up a dark side street, craning his neck like he hoped that, as we rounded each bend, we’d see Hayden standing there, miraculously okay. “An event, or a party or something?”

I shook my head. “No. She just kept going on and on about Hayden and I being like our parents, being weak. She said... because he’s his father’s son, he’ll probably end it just the way he did—”

Keenan caught both James and I off guard when he suddenly slammed on the brakes, causing us both to shoot forward in our seats, our seatbelts catching us last second with a hard jolt.

“The fuck, Key?” James grunted, rubbing his shoulder. He reached around and lightly touched my knee. “You okay, Maddy?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I wheezed, rubbing my chest as Keenan shifted into reverse, the truck rolling back so fast that the tires actually squealed. “What’s going on?”

“I know where they fucking are.” Keenan had a hand on the back of James’ seat, halfway turned to look out the rear window, his expression catching me off guard. It was such a vicious mix of emotions; it actually made him a little frightening to look at. It was a combination of terror, ferociousness, rage, and determination.

“Where?” James and I both asked at the same time as the truck roared backwards, the road blissfully clear of traffic, before he spun us out onto the adjoining street, shifted into drive, and took off, taking the first exit out of town.

“The little bitch went on and on talking about Shay, right?” Keenan said as he stepped harder on the gas pedal, going much faster than the speed limit permitted. “Comparing them both? Where the fuck do you think that little asshole would take him?”

James stared at him as we raced along, looking like he was on the verge of crying or screaming... maybe both. "You don't think..." his voice broke.

"Of course, I do. That was the first thing the little shit did when he started on Hayden all those years ago. He mentioned Shay, the park, all of it. He practically shoved it down his throat. Where else would a prick like him decide to take him?"

"Where?" I asked, still in the dark. I leaned forward, desperate to know what was going on. "Where are they?"

"Sherwood," Keenan said as James pulled out his phone to frantically type out another message. "Listen, Maddy... when we get there, I need you to get down to the floor of the cab, you got me? I have no idea how far this kid is willing to take things, and I don't have time to drop you back at Phoenix House."

"Why would I need to get down—"

"Just please, sweetheart. Do it," he said, his piercing blue eyes flicking in my direction in his rearview mirror, pleading with me.

Numbly, I nodded, my knee bouncing as time ticked by, now feeling like he was driving much too slow, despite the fact that I could see the little red needle pass by the 140km mark on the dash. I swear, if Theo *was* doing the worst to him, if he was hurting him, or... I couldn't think of it. I couldn't believe that he was actually competent enough, that his anger was enough, that he'd stoop so low as to-to...

"Keenan, can you drive any faster?" I asked, my own voice now cracking on every other word.

In response, he simply pressed harder, the needle shooting past 180km now, the occasional car heading into town from the opposite direction, the only other sign of life on the road.

"The Lost Souls will meet us there," James said, tucking his phone into his pocket. "They'll be behind us by about fifteen minutes."

Keenan just nodded, his focus wholly on getting us there in one piece.

“You guys don’t think that-that Theo has actually... that he’s really...” Why couldn’t I finish a fucking sentence or a thought? I pulled at my hair again, feeling so anxious that I felt like I might throw up.

“That kid has had a lot of rage building up over the years,” Keenan explained. “I’ve seen his type before. They hold onto the thought of being wronged, and eventually, that drives them in everything that they do. Theo targeted Hayden from the beginning. If Hayden had never fought back, I’m sure eventually Theo would have moved on after high school and forgotten about him altogether. But he targeted the wrong person, because Hayden has never allowed himself to remain a victim.”

That sounded absolutely right to me. Hayden was a fighter. He did what he had to to protect himself. Eventually, that also included protecting me. I thought about Ayla taking the dog tags from me, wondering how Theo was going to use them to get to Hayden? I liked to believe that most people were capable of good, but this guy, he and Ayla, they were both so fucking twisted, so narcissistic, that I don’t think they were capable of much else besides revelling in the pain of others. I understood what Keenan was saying. Theo had delved so deep into his own psychotic feelings that he wasn’t capable of moving on anymore.

Keenan took his foot off the gas, slowing us down as a large, green sign loomed ahead at a turnoff. Sherwood Park. He turned in, the truck veering dangerously as we sharply spun onto the gravel road. My heart was racing as I held onto the backs of the front seats, staring ahead while Keenan guided us down a long, curving road. The trees here were huge, all fanned out like a leafy canopy that shrouded the roadway down the hill. I couldn’t help the frenzy in my mind.

What if they weren’t here? What if they were? What would we see? Would we be too late? Oh God, no. Please no. Don’t

let that be. I was practically bouncing in my seat as we continued down the curving slope.

Just as I was about to tell him to drive faster, a beam of light suddenly appeared from around the bend. “Is that—”

“It’s a car, Key!” James shouted just as Keenan slammed on the brakes. Again, I fell forward as my seatbelt caught me, just as an old Corolla came tearing around the corner. The car shot past us, just barely missing striking our side, and disappeared up the road. I didn’t recognize the car, not even as Theo’s or Spencer’s. Theirs were much nicer than that one, but I still had a horrible feeling at the sight of it seemingly fleeing.

“Go, go!” I cried, hitting the back of his seat. Keenan stepped on the gas again and we tore around the last turn, breaking through the dark leafy tunnel and into a large, empty parking lot. The moon cast a white glow, lighting the area with just enough light for us to see.

We were at a park, the parking lot ending just on the edge of a pathway that would take walkers or bike riders deeper into nature. In the distance, there was a field, around which were several picnic tables and public BBQs for summertime. But it was to the side, by a playground, gathered at a park bench, that had my whole attention.

Three figures were grouped together, two standing over the third, both leaning in on him like they were egging him on. That sad looking, hunched-up person with dark, wavy hair... I knew him so well. And the moment the pale faced, blue-haired boy twisted his hand around, forcing the dark object in his grasp to his mouth, I fucking lost my mind.

I forgot what I’d promised Keenan. I was supposed to stay low, to hide, but seeing Hayden sitting there, looking so defeated. The blood coating the side of his face, and his expression so... so dead... I couldn’t take it.

I unbuckled my seatbelt just as my other hand dove under James’ jacket, snatching the pistol he had stowed away there,

and launched at the passenger door just as Keenan screeched to a stop.

“Maddy, no!” James shouted, but I was already fucking gone.

I jumped out of the vehicle and took off across the grass, my eyes never leaving his face. His beautiful face...

Don't, Hayden! I thought, panting hard as I ran. Behind me, I could hear the others climbing out of the truck, tearing after me, but I already had a good lead.

“Hayden!” I screamed, gripping the gun in my hands tight, watching as suddenly he reared back and shoved, sending Theo sprawling onto the ground. The gun he'd been holding dropped, disappearing into the grass where Theo had fallen, and Spencer rounded the bench, arm flexed back, ready to throw a punch to Hayden's already bloodied face.

“Hayden!” Keenan shouted from somewhere behind me, just as Theo rose to his feet, the gun clenched in his fist. Spencer swung just as Hayden stumbled, falling to the side, still unaware that he was no longer fighting them alone. I wasn't going to let them touch him again!

The force of Spencer's swing caused him to lose his balance, which gave Hayden the upper hand. He brought a fist down, cracking it off the back of his head, just as Theo lifted the gun and pointed it at Hayden's back.

“No! Hayden, look out!” I screeched, stopping in my tracks as I lifted my own weapon, aiming it in Theo's direction. At my call, I had caught the attention of the pale-eyed devil, who spotted me at once. Sneering, his face more demonic than I'd ever seen on a person, he turned toward me, aiming his gun for a second before he pulled the trigger.

I didn't have time to do anything except react. I fired just as something ran into me, hard, sending me sprawling across the grass. I dropped the gun, the air leaving my lungs as I sucked in breath after breath, and rolled onto my side,

wondering what the hell just happened, when I saw James run past with his heavy limp, heading towards the three boys.

That was when I saw him and realized...

Keenan.

He lay on his stomach, motionless, unmoving as more shouting rang out from where the other three were. The longer I stared at him, the more wrong he looked. That's when it hit me... he'd knocked me down when Theo had fired his gun. But I was fine. I-I...

I sucked in another breath, recovering faster than I expected, and crawled over to him. "Keenan?" I whispered, giving him a shake. "Key?"

I pushed against his side, making him roll over from where he lay, and that was when I saw the bloody mess that covered his throat and collarbone, and I froze. Oh my God...

I quickly looked over my shoulder to where James had grabbed Spencer, using the ropes or whatever was there to tie him up with. Theo was on the ground, unmoving, and Hayden was-was...

"Maddy?" he called, staring incredulously in my direction looking like he was about to lose his mind.

"Hayden! James! Please, come here, I—"

"Maddy! You're alive!" Hayden broke into a run, but I couldn't breathe.

"Hayden, please. Get James. You need to call someone—"

But Hayden wasn't listening. He sprinted over and scooped me up into his arms, squeezing me so tight I lost my breath *again*.

"Maddy, oh my fucking *God*, Maddy!" he cried, shaking as he held me, rocking us side to side. "Maddy, I thought I lost you!" He wailed. "I thought you were gone! I thought you were fucking gone!"

"Hayden, please, your dad, I-I..."

“... said you were dead! I didn’t want to believe it, but I fucking lost it. I lost it and I almost let them... I almost...”

“Please, get James!” I held him back, but when I was able to see over his shoulder and caught sight of his grandfather dragging Spencer’s large body behind him, all tied up like a fish in a net. I raised my hand, waving it wildly, “James! James, get over here! It’s Keenan! He’s been shot!”

“Huh, what?” Hayden pulled back a bit, still looking dazed from whatever they did to him. His eyes weren’t focusing, his pupils mismatched as he swayed on his feet. “What about my dad?”

James ran towards us then, dropping Spencer with a heavy grunt nearby, and fell to his knees at Keenan’s side. That’s when it finally seemed to click in Hayden’s head, and his hands fell limply from me, letting me go, as he then stumbled toward the still figure on the grass. “Dad?” He whispered.

James threw off his jacket, tearing at his shirt before pressing it to the wound, which was actually higher up than I realized, right in his neck, having gone straight through his spider web tattoo.

Hayden collapsed at his side, looking like he’d just gone into shock. I, however, ran over to James just as the roar of what sounded like a hundred motorcycles suddenly filled the space.

“Call an ambulance, Maddy,” James said, pulling his phone free from his pocket with his other hand, looking up as what looked like every Lost Soul biker of Ashland came rolling into the parking lot. “When they pick up, tell them exactly what happened here. That we found these two fuckers holding Hayden hostage, threatening his life. When they saw us arrive, Theo shot Keenan, and I shot him.”

“Yeah, okay, I... wait, *what?*”

“You heard me. *I* shot the kid, you understand? You were running with Keenan, but I was ahead of you. He shot Key, so I pulled out *my* gun and I shot him. You got that? Now call.”

“But, James, I—”

“Don’t argue with me, Maddy! You aren’t going to fuck up your life over this! I’m an old man and I more than deserve some jail time for the shit I’ve pulled. I won’t have you suffer for the fuckery these two kids have pulled. Now fucking call!”

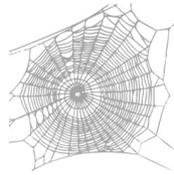
I felt like all the blood drained from my legs and I fell to the ground as I dialed 9-1-1, keeping it on speaker as they instructed us on what to do. Around us, Lost Soul bikers had come running over, some taking over as they tended to Keenan, who was turning white. Hayden had thrown himself over his father, sobbing, begging him to hang on. I sat at his side as I talked with an operator, pleading with them to hurry, to send multiple ambulances. I tried to remain calm, and when they asked me what had happened, James angrily held my stare when I hesitated, glaring until I told them the version he’d constructed. When I did, he nodded in approval, and turned back to Keenan, helping keep the pressure on his wound, while three other guys went over to Spencer to keep an eye on him.

I don’t know how much time passed before the flashing lights of two ambulances and several cop cars pulled into the parking lot. The Lost Souls stepped back then, hands up over their heads, not putting up a fight as the officers shouted instructions to everyone.

Hayden was ripped away from his father as the paramedics surrounded him, tending to the wound and getting a gurney ready. The others raced over to Theo, who lay lifeless by the park bench, his gun still in his hand. I pulled Hayden into my arms, rubbing his back as he cried into my neck, holding onto me like a life preserver. I watched tearfully as James was then put in handcuffs and escorted to one of the cop cars, forced into the backseat. At the same time other officers surrounded Hayden and I, wrapping blankets around our shoulders, before calling Mina.

Everything was such a disorienting mess and swirl of colour, sounds, of being forced to move from one spot to

another, until a third ambulance arrived for Hayden. He had a concussion, that much was clear. And they wanted to bring him in for some more tests and stitches. Numbly, I allowed the police to put me in another car, and we followed the three ambulances to the hospital in Ashland.



MY HANDS WERE COLD, my body trembling, and they said I was in shock. They gave me a heated blanket, brought me some water and crackers, and found a bed for me. Waiting to hear something, any news about any of them, was agonizing. I couldn't sleep, and though I wanted to find the others, it was clear I wouldn't be allowed any time soon. By the time my door opened, signaling the arrival of a visitor, I'd given up on the idea of hearing any updates concerning the others. But to my surprise, rather than Miss Ross or Saanvi standing there, it was Mina.

We both froze for just a second, staring at each other like we were both seeing a ghost, before she cried out and ran over, wrapping her arms around me in that familiar, motherly way.

“Are you alright, hon?” she asked. Seriously, after all of this, after what she's been through, and she's asking *me* how *I* am. This woman really was something else.

“I'm fine,” I said, thinking about how unfair it all was.

“Are you, though? Are you hungry? Can I get you something?” she asked, letting me go only to hold me at arm's length, a worry line etched upon her forehead.

“Seriously, I'm okay,” I told her, wondering how this woman got to be so strong. “How are *you*?”

Her lips pressed together, her eyes instantly filling with tears, but she just shook her head and grabbed the cup at my

bedside. “You need fresh water, and I’m going to get you some soup or something from the cafeteria.”

“I’m really okay—”

“No, I can’t believe they left you in here alone. I know, I’ll ask Casey to bring us something. She’s on her way here now.” She pulled out her phone and quickly typed a message to her sister.

“Please, I’m fine, really—”

“No, you’re not, Maddy!” She cried suddenly, dropping her hands, clutching her phone tight. Her tears fell free then, her face screwed up with pain as she began to sob. “You are not alright. How can you be? You’re only seventeen, for crying out loud! No seventeen-year-old should have to go through what you... what you...” her voice cut off then, her tears and little gasps for air making it impossible for her to finish. I watched as she turned away, snatching at the box of Kleenex so she could dab her eyes as she fought for control. I thought about everything Hayden had told me about her, about everything that *she’d* gone through, and I couldn’t help but feel such admiration for her at that moment. She was grieving, and yet she was here, because once upon a time, she’d been a seventeen-year-old girl, caught up in a dark tangled web that she couldn’t break out of, and when she had... it had ended so violently, so bloody and horrible that it took years for her to recover.

“Soup sounds great,” I said at last, my voice breaking.

Mina let out a great, shuddery gasp but turned back to me, smiling wide as she hiccupped a little, speaking past her tears, “Good. I’ll get Casey to bring us some. And I’ll go get you something cool to drink.”

She waited in my room with me, though I really was fine and had no injury or anything to speak of, I think the staff let us stay here because they felt sorry for Mina Mathers. Her husband and her son were taken into the back, and she needed

something to do while she waited. So doting on me seemed like the best option, I guess.

When Casey showed up, she had a bag full of food. Containers of soup, bags of cookies and chips, some sandwiches, and some apples that she'd cut up. Vail, Lee, and Shaw were watching all the kids at the Mathers household, so we didn't have to worry about them. Outside, the night slowly turned to early morning, the pink on the horizon growing brighter and brighter before a doctor finally showed up to find the three of us sitting on the bed together like we were having a sleepover, albeit a sullen, grief-stricken one.

"Mrs. Mathers? Your son has been moved into a room, if you would like to see him?" he said, eyeing our picnic. We'd barely eaten any of it, to be honest. I couldn't stomach it. Neither could Mina. So Casey had spent most of her time chatting away, trying her best to distract us, munching on cookies.

However the moment it was announced Hayden was in a room, she jumped to her feet as best she could with her growing baby bump, and started packing it all up again. Mina rose, too, tucking her blonde hair behind her ears before she reached for my hand, indicating I was to come along. I took it, glad to be included. I needed to see Hayden, to know for sure that he was truly alright, and that Theo and the others hadn't permanently hurt him in some way.

We were led down the hall to a new wing where, in a private room, Hayden was propped up in bed, wearing a hospital gown, the covers pulled up to tuck him in. His head was wrapped with bandages, his dark hair visible on the top and off one side. The moment we all appeared in the doorway, his silver eyes opened, and Mina burst into tears, running in to wrap her arms around him.

"Mom?" he murmured, sounding sleepy as she kissed his face over and over again.

"Hayden, oh my God! You're okay! Are you okay? Do you feel alright?"

“I’m fine.” He shifted a little in his bed, like he was trying to put more space between them but had no escape. Not when she had her arms wrapped around him so tight. I felt the corners of my mouth tug up a little at that.

“He has a concussion, and needed ten stitches along his temple, and another ten on the back of his head,” the doctor explained. The white material that was wrapped around his skull looked scratchy, but he didn’t seem to care. He looked so out of it, ready to fall asleep, but his mother’s tight embrace was preventing him from succeeding.

“We’d like to keep him for a couple of days for observation. And the police would like to ask him some questions once he feels up for it.”

“May I be present?” She asked. “He’s still seventeen.”

“I’m eighteen in three days, Mom...”

“Well, not now you aren’t!”

The doctor smirked a little, clearly understanding the motherly concern she had. He’d probably seen it countless times in his career, but then almost immediately sombered. “Mrs. Mathers, if I may talk to you outside for a moment, please?” He gestured to the open doorway, to which Mina gave Hayden one last kiss on his cheek and straightened, clutching her purse tight as she followed the doctor out of sight.

“Hey cutie.”

I turned to Hayden, who was smiling weakly up at me from the bed. His eyes were blinking slow and heavy. Oh yeah, he was tired, but still fighting it. I climbed up onto the bed, close to his side and took the IV-free hand of his in both of mine, squeezing it. My throat got tight at the sight of him lying here, tired, hurt... God knows what would have happened if we had gotten there only a minute later. I could have lost him forever.

Behind us, the door clicked shut as Casey left us alone, and only then did I let myself cry.

“Hey, what’s this about?” Hayden reached up and with a gentle swipe of his thumb, wiped a tear away.

“I just... I...” my voice cracked as I stared down at him, wishing that today hadn’t happened at all. “I’m so sorry, Hayden.”

His mouth pressed together tightly, like he knew what I meant, but didn’t say anything.

“If I hadn’t let Ayla get to me, if she hadn’t gotten the dog tags, I—”

“Stop, Maddy. It’s not your fault.”

“But—”

“Sh! No more. It’s no one’s fault but his. Theo wanted to get to me, and he was going to do it one way or another. If today had failed, I’m sure he would have tried again tomorrow, or the next day. He wasn’t going to let it go.”

I sniffled hard, leaning into the touch of his palm, still cradling his other hand close to my heart. “Did they tell you about Theo?” I asked.

He nodded, looking surprisingly remorseful at that, though it was for the briefest of moments.

“And Spencer was arrested.”

Again, he nodded.

I couldn’t bring myself to say it, the elephant that was standing in the room. I could feel the guilt crushing me from all sides. “If I hadn’t... if I’d listened to your dad and stayed in the truck... then he and your grandpa, they wouldn’t be... where they-they wouldn’t—”

“Stop, Maddy. Don’t blame yourself. If you hadn’t run out, it would probably be *me* in the morgue right now. I don’t think there was a way out of this without some blood being spilt.”

I wished it had been mine...

The thought was quiet, but strong. As if he heard it, too, Hayden got suddenly angry as his nostrils flared, and his hand snapped around to the back of my neck, gripping it with surprising strength in his condition. “Don’t. You. Dare. Don’t think it.”

“I can’t help it.”

“Well, try. Because you saved me tonight, Maddy. Not just by running out there, distracting Theo the way you did... you saved me from making a terrible mistake.”

I sniffled hard as I remembered the way he had been sitting there on that bench, almost zombie-like, allowing Theo to guide the gun to his mouth.

“You saved me...” he said again. “Remember what you told me the other day?”

I fought hard to remember, but at the moment, my mind was scrambled eggs. “What? *Harder, Hayden?*” I joked.

He chuckled at that, easing the hold on the nape of my neck. “No, you little freak. What you told me... that we are not our parents. That we shouldn’t be afraid about where we came from. That we deserved to live our own life. For years I struggled, knowing I was the son of a murderer... but, I wasn’t. I was *his*. My real dad. The problems I thought I had all stemmed from Theo. Not from the man in the grave. I had an amazing life, with an amazing family. And over the past few weeks, you’ve made me see that, Maddy. You’ve opened my eyes and shown me how much I really have, and how much I have to look forward to.”

I smiled past my tears, remembering my little speech, but mostly, because it had meant so much more to him than I realized.

“You saved me, Madeline King.”

I shook my head and lay at his side, being as mindful as I could of the wires that were strapped into his hand, and snuggled up to him, allowing myself to get lost in his beautiful, mirrored gaze. “How can you say that when you’ve

saved mine, Hayden Mathers? I didn't know what life could be like until I met you. I was just... existing. I had no idea what it *could* be. I have you to thank for that."

He held my chin between his fingers as he leaned in to give me a soft kiss. I held onto him, kissing him back, so thankful that he had been spared. As the sun rose behind us through the window, the bloody pink of the sky slowly filled the room, the start of a new day, a new life. Hayden and I saved each other, and I was so grateful for that.

Sometimes a happily ever after can happen. It could be what you want it to be, whether that's being a successful entrepreneur, a discoverer of hidden treasures and tokens, or a name to be remembered. But for me, it was far simpler than that. I wanted to *live*. I wanted love. That was enough, and I'd cherish it forever. I'd cherish *him* forever.

Epilogue

Hayden

WE WERE GOING HOME. Well, not our home, but to the place I once called my home. My real home was here, with Maddy, in our little converted camper van. As we raced along the highway, heading northeast, I could hear her moving around behind me, making something in our tiny kitchen. She'd really mastered being able to walk in here while the van was in momentum, and sometimes, just to be cheeky, I'd turn the wheel quickly side to side to knock her off balance, laughing as she cursed me out.

This van had given us so many memories, and it was hard not to think of my Aunt Casey and all my uncles. I did my best to send postcards and updates to them all these years. After all, they'd stepped in to help Maddy and I convert this van into something liveable. Uncle Lee had found it at an auction and got it cheap, while all three showed me how to gut it and step by step, turn it into everything we wanted. I remembered all the things Maddy had told me she had wanted, and made sure that it perfectly represented us.

Over the year we spent getting it ready, we both signed up for classes for website design, a quick financial course, and management. I even worked as an assistant under a photographer in Ashland, learning tips and tricks, helping him with assignments, soaking up all the experience I could. Meanwhile, Maddy spent her extra time with my mom, learning more about baking, which she had developed a love

for. They bonded over that year, becoming as close as my sisters were, and seeing her fit in so effortlessly with my family meant the world to me.

As we explored North America, we always made sure to keep in touch, calling often to check in, sending pictures through messages, all of it. Our adventurous lifestyle was everything we had hoped for, but now we were being called home again.

As we left the highway, I made the turn onto an old, familiar road, finally returning to the town we'd left behind so long ago. It has been years since we'd been back here, the town still very much the same, and in a way, that was comforting. Mom had called us a few weeks ago to invite us home for the big event, so we made sure to navigate our way in this direction, timing it to be here just in time. I was actually excited to see everyone again. I wondered how much Maverick had grown, how Emily was doing now that she was a teenager, and how Charlotte was doing in her senior year of high school.

I guess I was about to find out.

We turned down Maple Drive, passing the entrance to the road that led to Phoenix House, but we didn't need to stop there. The moment we graduated high school, Maddy's home was with me, and that's where we were going. The tree line ended to reveal the same, expansive property, the Tudor styled home surrounded by flowers, the only change being the numerous tables that were set up on the lawn, balloons, a BBQ, and food. Everyone was there, including...

"There he is!" Maddy said excitedly, bouncing to the front of the van to peer out the window.

At the sight of us, the whole family cheered loudly, clapping, waving and calling as we pulled into the driveway and parked. Maddy was out the side door in an instant and ran to Grandpa J, now fresh out of prison, and hugged him close.

“How you doing, sweetheart?” he asked, smiling so wide it showed off the new wrinkles on his face. I stared at him, seeing so much change over the years. He was skinnier, his head entirely silver now, the lines having deepened into his face and new ones revealed. Grandpa J looked more like, well, a grandpa. He’d always been tough, walking around in his leather cut, riding bikes, leading a gang to glory. But now he was just... Gramps. He wore a plaid short-sleeve shirt, jeans, and he moved a little more stiffly. He’d always had a limp, but he used a cane now, which he had dropped to hug my girl.

I reached down to scoop it up just as he let her go, turning to me, his dark eyes practically glowing as he looked me over, and for a moment I thought he was going to cry, before he grabbed me and hugged me tight.

“You okay, Gramps?”

He was quiet for a minute, holding onto me like he was afraid I’d disappear, before he whispered, “You look so much like him...”

At twenty-four, I was the same age *he* had been when he...

I shook that thought away and held my grandpa carefully in my arms, aware that he was very much an old man now. He’d taken the blame for Theo Hebert’s death and got six years for it. His lawyers had claimed it was self-defense, as Theo had fired the first shot, which was confirmed by all witnesses present, including Spencer Carr who was serving a lengthier sentence. But as my grandfather had arrived on scene armed, there was a sense of premeditation. I think the cops wanted him locked away for other reasons, probably because he was a part of an MC, but mostly because of Daniel Hebert leaning on the system, seeking justice for his son’s death. But Gramps took the punishment, stating that he had to atone for his sins as he was a penitent man.

Many thought he was talking about Theo, but I knew better. I remember what he’d said in the garage about being guilty of a lot of shit.

I've worked hard to be a lawful person because I've got a lot of shit to make amends for, he'd once said. I think he truly believed he deserved jail time.

When he finally let me go, I gave his shoulders a squeeze and said, "How does it feel being a free man again?"

He laughed at that and shook his head, taking the cane I passed to him. "Kid, you have *no* idea! It's nice taking a shower without fifty other guys and being able to move around outside a six-by-eight foot space—"

"Not that you can move much beyond that anyways, eh, old man?"

I knew whose whispery, raspy voice that was. Peering over Gramps' shoulder, my dad stood there, hands in his pockets, grinning wide.

"Hey there, kiddo." He winked cheekily at me, and I couldn't help but run to him, knocking into him with such force, we almost fell over. Dad squeezed his arms around me, still as strong as ever, and I couldn't help but feel so grateful that he was here with us still.

We had come so close to losing him back then. He'd flatlined twice and spent weeks in the ICU in an induced coma. Eventually, he woke up, and though he couldn't speak at first, just seeing him alive, breathing, smiling that crooked trademark grin of his, was the biggest miracle we could have asked for. The night he came back to us, Mom refused to leave his side, casting a look that would make any man tremble when they told her visiting hours were over. In the end, we left her with him as she snuggled up at his side on the bed, being careful of all the wires that were connected to him, holding him close.

His lips had moved, his voice gone, but I could tell by the shape they took he was trying to whisper, "My Sunshine..."

For months, he went through physiotherapy, and eventually his vocal cords repaired themselves as best they could, so now he talked in a soft, raspy whisper.

While I spent that year with school and preparing the van, he was recovering, only able to give silent input when I brought him updates on the project. I could tell it was killing him inside not being able to help, but he was on bed rest, and Mom was adamant that he not push himself.

When I finally was able to let him go, I stepped back to take him in, noting that his golden hair was more silver now, and that scar on the side of his neck had mangled his spiderweb tattoo he'd once sported.

“Still better looking than you.” He winked, laughing in a new, croaky sort of way.

“You wish.” I rolled my eyes and patted his back hard. I turned, searching for Maddy, only to realize she was lost amongst the sea of my family. I moved through the crowd, greeting my aunts, uncles, all my little cousins, until I could make out my sisters and brother, all having grown so much it hurt to see.

The BBQ was in full swing, with music playing, Lost Souls members, including the new Prez, having joined us to welcome Grandpa J back into society. He'd hung up his cut, now acting as an honorary member, but he claimed he was too old for that shit now, and just wanted to enjoy retirement. But he was always welcome by the club.

The younger kids were running around while the teenagers all sat together, playing on their phones, showing each other videos or music, while the adults reminisced on old times.

Beer in hand, I excused myself to wander on my own, needing some quiet. I meandered through the house, the familiar smells and photos forcing nostalgia back to me. Maverick had moved up into my old room and looks like his had been converted into a space for Grandpa J, who had evidently moved in. Eventually, I found myself out back, the old garage still in use as Dad's workshop, another garden bed perfectly pruned off to the side, and I took a seat on the edge of the porch, sipping my beer as I remembered what it had

been like as a kid, running out to help him with his projects, or chasing bubbles my mother blew for me across the yard.

“Lost in memories?”

I looked over my shoulder to see my mother standing there, in her flowery sundress, playing with the end of her long braid. I patted the empty spot beside me. “Very lost.”

She joined me, sipping on a glass of lemonade. She’d never been a big drinker. Together, we stared off into the trees at the back of the lawn.

“How are you, Hayden?” She asked me after a minute of listening to the wind and birds.

I didn’t have to hesitate as I told her with absolute honesty, “I’m happy.”

Mom nodded, the smile on her face wide, her expression relieved and satisfied. “Good.” We didn’t speak again for a few minutes as we sat together, enjoying the quiet as the party out front carried on. When she finished her drink, she set the glass down beside her and shifted a little to look at me, her hands clasped in her lap. “I’m proud of you, Hayden.”

Glancing at her, I chuckled and joked it off. “Geez, Mom, you gotta get sentimental all of a sudden?”

“I’m a mother.” She shrugged. “It’s what we do. We worry, we hope, we’re mushy and emotional, and our biggest wish is to know our children are happy.”

Unable to face her, I pressed my lips together, reaching over to give one of her hands a squeeze. I know what she was talking about. For a long time, my future was so uncertain. I was so unhappy. I carried a darkness around with me and closed myself off from the world. Looking back now, I’m sure she was terrified I’d end up, well, like *him*. That the unhappiness I carried day to day would eventually lead me to the same place.

“I’m not him,” I told her, finally.

She nodded, releasing a long, shaking breath. “I know it. You’re... you. But you carry parts of him with you, like his love of music and art. You both love so fiercely, so passionately, it’s almost scary, but to be on the other end of that love is something... special.” Mom squeezed my hand back. “The things you share with him are all good, Hayden. Just like the things you and I have, what you and Keenan have.”

I swallowed hard, feeling like there was a rock in my throat, and quickly wiped my eyes before I could start crying like a little baby.

“When Shay died, it only had to happen once. But for me, he’s died every single day since. Every day, I think about it, and the thought of it happening to you... I wouldn’t have been able to go on,” Mom whispered. “You’re a good person, Hayden. You always have been. I’m just so happy that you found someone that was able to make you see how much you deserve to be loved.”

I was finally able to look at her then, noticing the small tear that slowly trailed down her cheek. But despite that, she was smiling. Mom mourned Shay O’Hare, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t happy with her life. I know she loves Dad more than anything, and she loves all her children. As I looked at her, at this woman in the flowery sundress, tiny and fragile, crying in silence as she stared off at the trees... all I could see was strength.

I reached out and pulled her into my side, hugging her close as we sat together, just us two. “I love you, Mom.”

“And you know I love you, Hayden.”



LEAVING THE FAMILY WAS HARD, but Maddy and I were ready to go back to the life we loved so much. We were explorers, adventurers, our travels taking us to places all over Canada, the United States, and Mexico. We loved waking up in our van in the early morning, sliding open the side door to see the sun rising over the ocean, or peeking through mountains and trees. Like my parents, we'd make our morning coffee and sit together, watching the sky change colours as the day became alive again.

However...

I needed us to make a quick pit stop first.

We left town, heading into Ashland to a special place I hadn't seen in years, up a winding, quiet road that eventually led to an almost completely empty parking lot. Maddy and I climbed out, the bouquet of flowers she had prepared earlier clutched tight in one arm, while I took her other hand in mine, stroking the ring I'd placed on her finger the moment she turned eighteen, and led us through the trees.

We stepped into a beautiful clearing, the circular space descending slightly on a slope to a pond in the middle of the space. It was late afternoon, and the golden light that shone down on us gave everything a sort of ethereal look. The graves all pointed towards the water, some decorated with flowers, while others looked like they'd been left on their own for some time.

Maddy gave my hand a squeeze, her beautiful hazel eyes looking about the space, searching with me, for the new headstone.

"There, sweetheart," I said, stopping us and pointing to the new, white flat rock that stood proudly in the sun. It had been taken care of all this time, cleaned off, the area around it tended to.

Thank you, Mom, I thought. "I'll give you a moment, okay? I'll just be over there at his."

I pointed to one of the upper rows, a section that looked like it was always in shadow, where a lonely grave sat on its own, and she nodded, swallowing hard before she stepped away to approach the white stone. I watched her for a moment, making sure she would be alright, before I walked away, hands in my pockets, heading towards a grave I knew very well.

Daisies were planted all around it, like they'd run wild over the years, hardly needing pruning anymore, and I smiled at the sight. It didn't look so sad anymore. So alone, forgotten. It looked loved.

"Hey Dad," I said, reading the name *Shay O'Hare*, over and over again like I used to. "Sorry that it's been a while." Carefully, I sat on the ground like I used to as a teenager, and said nothing for the longest time. I just enjoyed the silence and stillness of this place. The leaves rustled overhead, the sun warm, and the air smelled of flowers and fresh grass. I glanced over to Maddy to see her now resting the flowers at the foot of her mother's grave. For so long, there had been a simple sign tapped into the ground to signal that someone was laying there, but a few years ago, my mom had sent a photo of the new headstone, something she had saved for, as a surprise for Maddy.

I remembered how my girl had cried, how thankful she was that my mother had given hers a proper place to rest. She didn't seem so forgotten now.

Sighing heavily, I turned back to Shay, thinking about how he'd kept me safe for so many years. Without him, I wouldn't have survived the torment.

And without my *real* dad, I definitely wouldn't be where I was now. I think I would have fallen long ago had he not always been there, watching from the wings, always ready to step in with some advice or guidance. And if he hadn't saved Maddy that night, I wouldn't have the life I lived now. The life I'd always wanted, the one I loved so much.

When I'd asked Maddy to marry me, I remembered how she had asked him to give her away, and seeing the look on his

face, how choked up he got before he enveloped her into a hug, meant so much to me. After he had saved her, they created a special bond, and he became the father she never had. Just like my mom had stepped into the motherly role so effortlessly. We had a backyard wedding, held at the Mathers home, a live video streaming so my grandpa could watch from his cell. But that had been years ago now.

I stared at the grave for another minute, savouring the easy silence between us. I had no more to say to him, nothing that hadn't already been said before. When Maddy approached quietly behind me, the soft, gentle way she called, "Love?" bringing me back to the present, I knew I was ready to leave.

"I'll be seeing you," I said to him and kissed the palm of my hand, pressing it to his name, before I rose to my feet to turn to my wife.

She'd been crying, I could tell. Her eyes were shimmering, a little pink, and I couldn't help but hold her face in my hands and kiss her. "You alright, Love?"

She nodded, running her hands up my arms to cling to me. God, I loved this woman.

"You ready to go?"

Nodding again, she smiled, a real smile. One that I saw more and more of each day. She had been right about healing. It took time, and some days were easier than others. But we leaned on each other, supporting one another through our traumas and triggers, and came out stronger each day that we pushed on.

I took her hand in mine, leading us away, glancing back one last time at the grave. The daisies waved in the breeze, like a goodbye, but it wouldn't be forever. I'd come back again one day. Until then, I would live my life, I would keep trying, keep cherishing those moments that made me happy, no matter how small.

Tearing my eyes away from him, we walked away together, ready to leave for our next adventure.

The End

AFTERWORD

To my readers,

Thank you so much for joining me for my debut series. Ending it is bittersweet, but I hope that Hayden and Maddy's story was a balm to your bleeding heart.

I didn't want Hayden to be a Shay 2.0. He is his own person, with his own mind, and while I understand so many wanted to see Shay again, I couldn't do that to Hayden. He lived a completely different life than his late-father, and Mina and Keenan's influence on him saved him from the darkness that he shared with Shay. But father and son shared more than a dark affliction. There was so much more than just a disturbed mind. There was a person who loved, who had quirks and talents like everyone else, and I hope I was able to show that in Hayden.

I know so many want a Mina and Keenan book, but I cannot see that being something I ever plan to do. Their story doesn't need words. I wanted to paint a picture through the eyes of others as to what they have together, what they've been through, and how far they have come. You see their world through a beautiful window, and I want to leave them in peace together. I hope that you all could appreciate Keenan in this story, too. He didn't have a lot of page time in the Torment duet, because it wasn't his story. It was never supposed to be. But he deserves recognition for everything he has done for Mina and for the family. He's the man I think we should all

love and hope to end up with. And he has made Mina and their children so happy.

James, or Daddy James as some of you have come to call him (sniggers), has hopefully redeemed himself, as well. James is a complicated character, but at the same time, I believe he is so much like many of us. We all make mistakes in life, bad cases of judgement, and some things we can never come back from, and the guilt eats away at us. But James has tried to learn from his mistakes and he applies a lot of that in his confidence with Hayden.

Again, I want to thank you all for reading this series and for the love you have for the characters. It has meant the world to me. I hope I can bring you more life in stories to fall for soon, and hopefully this journey will continue for many years to come.

As always, be kind to yourself and to others.

Much love, Dylan

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And to my Alpha and Beta readers!

You ladies always keep me on my toes! Thank you for pushing
me,

for catching any slips and bips I make (and I mean, there's a
lot of those!)

and for your friendship!

Lastly,

To my two boys.

It's been a tough time, especially in the past year,
but know that my love for you is my biggest drive.

You two own my heart.

I love you.