

The book cover features a dark, moody background with several large, dark purple and red flowers. The petals are scattered throughout the scene, some appearing to be falling, creating a sense of movement and drama. The overall aesthetic is gothic and mysterious.

MARIE R. J.

DEFINITION
OF A
PSYCHOPATH

DANGEROUS PSYCHOS SERIES
BOOK ONE



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Cover created by Artscandare

Definition of a Psychopath

Dangerous Psychos

Book One

Marie R. J.

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Trigger warnings:

Bullying (outside of harem)

Sexual assault

Rape

Thoughts of suicide

Unaliving

Dedication

To my loving and supportive baby daddy who agreed to let me quit my job in order for me to pursue a writing career.

To my alpha readers who stuck around even though I left them hanging more times than I can count.

Summary

Ariella went from prized christian virgin to psycho pariah in less than a day, and not to any fault of her own. Her father, the Pastor of Bethany's only church, snaps and mass murders a group of it's members. She's the one to catch him red handed, literally.

Instead of offering support, the town turns her and her grandmother into outcasts, with a target pinned to their backs. Struggling to cope, Ariella makes unlikely friends with the town's delinquents, but it comes with a serious price.

Her sanity.

They say psychopathy is hereditary. Stone, Haeden, and Kingston just want to see if it's true.

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Chapter 1

ARIELLA

Define '*psychopath*'.

I frown. The word '*psychopath*' is written in red, bold letters. It jumps out at me like a sore thumb, throbbing and painful. I slump back in my seat, knowing it's too much of a coincidence to not be a set up.

I capture the attention of my desk mate, Emma. The girl with mousy brown hair cropped to her chin, and thick rimmed glasses peers over to read what my slip says. I sat next to her last semester, and I've never met anyone as nosy as her- that's a lie, though. The entire town of Bethany is nosy. Especially when it comes to me, the daughter of the infamous '*preaching murderer*'.

Glaring, I pull it away from her view, nearly crushing it between my fingers. Her gaze raises to look at me, eyes widening into brown saucers before returning to her own slip of paper.

"God damn, nosy bitch," I whisper, lips pursing in distaste. She squeaks, shifting further away from me.

That's right, move away, I think, ignoring the small pinch in my chest. I wasn't always like this, a girl who was fond of cursing. I wasn't the mean girl, or the badass, or even the Queen-Bee. I was just a regular, old me; normal. However, the

world is adamant about showing me that I can't stay in my comfort zone forever. God forbid I ever do that.

Staring down at the word once more, I somehow find myself blaming it. After all, it's the entire reason my world is turning upside down. I lift my head, eyes drifting to the blonde, Barbie doll named Kensey, sitting across the opposite wall of me, and I'm surprised to find her ocean blue eyes glued to me. The tilt of a smirk forms on her plump, filler lips, and she raises the red sharpie she holds between her slim fingers.

My eyes narrow, because of course it would be her to put me in such a position. It isn't a wonder that someone picked this specifically for me. I'd be stupid if I thought this is a coincidence. The blonde witch will thrive, seeing me humiliated. She doesn't have to gain anything from it, just as long as the daughter of a murderer suffers, everything will be peachy.

She turns away, and I follow her gaze to find Lucas Melfick staring at me. He sneers, brown eyes burning holes into my head and lips pursed in disgust. My grip tightens around my pencil, slippery from how clammy my hand is. His thick brows narrow at me, and I can't hide the way I shrink back in my seat. At that, he smiles, a dark quirk of his lips that promises pain and humiliation.

Tearing my gaze away from him, I unfold my slip of paper.

The correct definition of a psychopath -according to google- is a person suffering from chronic mental disorder with abnormal or violent behavior. But I know that our English teacher, Mr. Williams, wouldn't accept that answer. He wants us to define it based on our personal experience.

Everyone in the class thinks I have plenty of experience.

I glance around, no one else seems to be focused on me. They are either scribbling their answer to their own question or trying to come up with one. I stare back down at the single strip of paper and the pencil between my fingers as I tap the eraser against my chin.

In my own experience, the word psychopath means I'm cursed. One that has no escape. When I first saw the word, my thoughts immediately went to my father. A man who mastered the art of disguise, becoming a wolf in sheep's clothing. Tears prick at my eyes, and I quickly blink them away.

I can't show weakness; not here, not now. It will only fuel them more.

Mr. Williams sits at his desk, typing away on his laptop. There's just over thirty students in this class, what are the odds he'll want every single one to stand and answer? Will he go by last name? Or will he pick and choose at random? I stare down at my wooden desk, debating if I should smack my head against it. What are the chances that I can knock myself out doing that?

I sigh.

"Alright, time is up. Pencils down." Mr. Williams gets up from his desk and walks to stand in front of it. He crosses his arms over his olive green dress shirt before leaning back and saying, "Ariella, why don't you go first."

He hates me. I know he does, and it's confirmed by the way he narrows his eyes at me. He knows I'm ripe for the picking. I mean what teacher doesn't think; Hey, this girl is going through some major fucking trauma, let's put her on the spot with a question that will completely ruin her further?

I suck in a deep breath, my chest suddenly tight. My hands begin to shake, and I hide them behind my back.

"What was your word?" Mr. Williams presses.

Kensey starts to giggle, blue eyes glued to my red face. My mouth opens but nothing comes out. Clearing my throat, I force it out.

"Psychopath," I answer.

He raises an eyebrow, and my fingers twitch. Oh, cut the innocent bullshit out. You know damn well you gave that to me on purpose. His raised brow is an indication to speak and not just stand there like an idiot.

"Well," I breathe out. "You won't let us use google, so..." I shrug.

"It would be boring if you used it." He smiles back.

"Psychopath is... always there, but not to the visible eye." I think about my father's kind smile before it morphs into something much more sinister.

“It definitely passed yours.” I recognize the hateful voice that belongs to Henry Brackintaw. I glance to the left, clashing with his emerald green gaze. The whites of his eyes are red, and his lids are dark with circles. Blond strands of hair fall onto his forehead, shaded by the hood he has pulled up. I couldn’t guess what drug he’s on today; weed, xanax, aderalle. You name it, he’s on it.

It doesn’t matter that he’s on the football team or that Coach Merlin doesn’t allow his players to use any drugs. For a fraction of a moment, I want to threaten him by telling his coach that maybe, just maybe, he should drug test him. The want doesn’t last very long, despite being a Christian town, like everywhere else, snitches get stitches.

With a stiff neck, I turn away. I focus on the dumbass ABC’s strip that lines the top of the wall. I know we have some special students, but does Mr. Williams really think it’s necessary? Then again, here I am talking about psychopaths.

Of course he thinks we’re stupid enough not to know the alphabet without having to sing the song.

“It’s a mental illness that not only affects the host, but also the people around them. They become victims to the rotten thoughts that plague the psycho’s mind, driving them to do insane things,” I force myself to continue.

“I read that being a psychopath is hereditary,” Kensey says while raising her hand. Her wide innocent eyes turn to me, and she smiles. Why the hell is everyone smiling?

Maybe because their parent isn't a serial killer?

“What are the chances that you're a crazy murderer too?” she asks.

The image of walking into my father's office after hours comes to mind. He was late to dinner, and I was worried he would overwork himself along with the other church members. Every Wednesday some of them would gather to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for the homeless.

What I walked into was far from that.

“Kensey, that was very insensitive.” Mr. Williams clears his throat. Of course he couldn't directly let me get bullied in front of an entire class. What kind of role model would that make him?

“Apologize to Ariella.” He nods his head. “Now, please.”

She heaves a dramatic sigh and flips her too perfect hair over her shoulder. “Sorry, Ari.”

I cringe at the shortening of my name. Dad used to call me that.

No longer wanting to speak, I sit back down. If he expects a longer and more personal definition, then he'll just have to kiss my ass. I already have the idea to march down to the principal's office and demand she change my class because Mr. Williams doesn't seem to understand the major line he's crossing.

‘But the slips were random, I had no idea she’d get it.’ I can already hear the excuse leaving his slimy mouth.

“Thank you, Ariella.” He smiles, and it’s a slick, annoying curve of lips. He moves on to his next victim, and maybe I’m being dramatic, but I swear he glances back at me.

I tune out for the rest of the class, head bent down as I scribble stupid doodles into my notebook.

As soon as the bell rings, I’m shoving everything into my bag in a rush to get out of here.

“Ariella, would you mind waiting? I have something I’d like to discuss with you.” Mr. Williams stops me when I stand from my seat. My breath leaves me, and I fall back into the chair, glaring down at my desk.

Great.

When it’s just us two in the classroom, he beckons me to his desk. My chest tightens the closer I get to him, and I curl my fingers around the straps of my bag.

He clears his throat, “If I had known what question I gave you, I wouldn’t have given it to you at all.”

Liar.

I’m so close to rolling my eyes. The bullshit spilling out of his mouth lands at my feet, piling up high.

“It’s whatever.” I force out, holding in the profanities that want to fall from my lips.

Fucking enforcer.

Lying piece of shit.

It’s crazy how my father turns out to be a psycho, and I developed a love for cuss words.

I shift on my feet when I notice his eyes stuck on my legs.

Pedophilic asshole.

I’m just full of them today.

“Mrs. Rivers also reached out to me today.” He turns away from me and picks up a paper from his desk. When he holds it out to me, I take it, reading what was typed on it. “She set up a session for you two to meet after school every Friday.”

I cringe, eyes not once leaving the paper. Of course the school therapist wants to see me. I’m sure if she had to, she’d send me to a personal therapist. Lord knows I need it.

“It’s mandatory, so I’m afraid you don’t have a choice.”

The paper wrinkles as my grip tightens on it. I remember how the school’s board members came together and petitioned

against me. Either I talk to the school's shrink or I don't go to school in Bethany. Then that would've meant I'd have to go to school in Redwoods. I didn't think they were serious. I mean it's ridiculous.

Rich people love controlling those they think are beneath their status, and Bethany happens to be full of them.

I stomp out of the room without a goodbye, shoving the offending summons into my backpack.

A fucking therapist, won't that be fun?

I push the thought of seeing Mrs. Rivers away and march to the cafeteria. Maybe I can sneak my lunch tray away and sit in the library. The prying eyes are starting to get on my nerves.

My idea burns to embers as I step past the double doors that lead to the cafeteria. Lucas and Henry stand in front of me, hands gripping buckets. I'm taking a step back when they pour the contents over my head. Red covers my vision as wet and sticky liquid drips down my body. A screech escapes me, a chemically, foul taste coating my tongue. I spit on the ground, desperate to get rid of whatever it is. My clothes stick to my skin, the thick liquid seeping through the layers quickly.

Laughter echoes around me, and I quickly wipe my eyes, but it doesn't make the burning sensation go away. My sight blurs from the impending tears, and I blink rapidly, trying to focus on Lucas and Henry. Their now empty buckets drip with the remnants of red paint.

"You look just like him now." Lucas smirks, a dark mirth swimming behind his brown eyes.

“You might want to wash that out quickly.” Henry cackles, and it’s an ugly sound that grates my ears. “I hear this paint stains.”

I glance down at myself, no part of me is left uncovered. The red, gloopy paint drips onto the tile floor, and my vision begins to swim. I’m taken back to the moment when I saw who my father really was.

I pull open the church’s door, and cringe. The main lights were turned off, leaving only the dimmed bulbs on the walls. I always thought the place looked creepy with the lights turned off. Like a haunting waiting to happen. I make my way to the kitchen in the back, reserved for the Sunday bread splitting and the holiday potlucks. I’m surprised to find the lights on, but the room is abandoned. Butter knives were left on the counters, and some sandwiches left unmade.

With a sigh, I walk over and put the lids back on the peanut butter and jelly. I guess they just forgot to clean up after themselves. Mrs. Nolt has Alzheimer’s, yet despite that she still helps out every Wednesday. When the room was back in order, I make my way back to the main hall. I know no one has left yet because their cars were still in the car park when I arrived, so they have to be around somewhere.

Maybe Dad convinced them to stay for some other task, it wouldn’t have surprised me if he did. Assuming they were probably in dad’s office, I make my way there. His workspace is on the other side of the building, behind the sermon room. I push open the doors, huffing as one of the wall lights flickered.

“So creepy, we really need to get them fixed,” I murmur to myself. As I walk down the many pews, I smile when I see the volunteer church members sitting in the front rows. So dad really did rope them into a preaching. They face the stage, although the podium where my father gives his sermons is empty.

“Did Pastor David rope you all in for his preaching?” I laugh, head shaking. “You don’t have to stay, you’re free to go home. I’ll remind him that his sermons should be saved for Sundays.”

They don’t reply, and as I got closer, the smile falls from my face.

“Mr. Kingle?” I ask. I put my hand on his shoulder, intending to get the older man’s attention. However, when he doesn’t move, I shift to stand in front of him. “I said-” My words are cut off as a cry escapes my throat.

Mr. Kingle stares ahead at the stage, his blue eyes cold and distant. The slit across his throat gives way to reveal the white bone beneath, and blood drenches the front of his clothes. The thick fluid drips from the pew and soaks the blue carpet. Shaking, I stumble back, only to bump into the person who sat in the pew in front of him.

A ragged breath escapes me when I find myself back in the school’s cafeteria.

With wide eyes, I take in the entire room full of taunting gazes, hateful glares, and mean laughter. A majority of them have their phones out, cameras aimed at me. No one steps up to defend me. Not one person looks guilty. They revel in my pain. They don't care that I didn't commit the crimes. As far as they know, I'm just as guilty, solely from association.

When I meet the stare of my best friend, -I mean, my ex-best friend- she averts her eyes, hiding behind her curtain of red hair. She's sitting with May and her friends. I wonder when they even started talking.

After she abandoned me.

With burning and teary eyes, I turn to run away from the monstrous leers that stare back at me, but I lose my footing. My feet slip on the paint, and I fly backwards, head cracking against the tile floor. Pain erupts, a pounding now accompanying the painful chemicals in my eyes.

“Oh fuck,” is followed by even more laughter.

Desperate to hold in my whimpers of pain, I bite my bottom lip. However, the nauseating taste of the paint makes me try and spit it out again. A sob escapes me, and I carefully crawl back to my feet, hands incessantly wiping at my eyes as I high tail it out of there. This time, I'm careful to watch my steps.

As I walk down the hall, the paint drips a path behind me. Everything about it reminds me of that night. Of the hollow corpses my father left behind in what was supposed to be a sacred place.

I reach the door to the girls bathroom, and the sound of giggles reach my ears. I pause, my hand freezing halfway to the door. I look back down at myself, eyes blurring with both pain and helplessness. I can't go in there if there are already girls inside. I can already hear their laughter and taunting words the moment they see me. Not to mention, I don't have an extra pair of clothes. I always take my gym clothes home with me.

Turning around, I make my way to the school's back exit. I'll just skip the rest of the day. I have decent enough grades to do it. Plus, I can always ask the teachers for the notes of the last class and study them in the library.

Pushing open the door, I wipe away the tears that won't stop. A mix of pain from both the pain and my ruined life makes it difficult to stop crying. I think it's crazy just how fast everything can be turned upside down. And I can only thank my deranged father for it.

I heard being psychotic can be hereditary, Kensey's voice echoes through my head. Is she right?

As soon as I step out into the open air, I freeze in place. Standing in the back parking lot, crowded around a rusty, black truck, are the four people I wanted to avoid the most. The delinquents of the entire student body with the reputation of bullying worse than any cheerleader or jock could ever live up to.

Stone leans back against the trunk, one tattooed arm crossed over his chest while the other brings the cigarette to his lips. That boy is Satan's spawn with a mouth of broken glass that spit words meant to make people bleed. Being his neighbor doesn't stop me from being intimidated. Hearing him yell at

his father, the crash of glass breaking... it only solidifies just how toxic he is. His dark, blue-tinted hair is shaved on the sides, leaving a messy tuft on top. Strands fall into his dark, onyx eyes. They pierce into me, sharp and unyielding. Before I was at the bottom of the food chain, I once witnessed him cutting a boy's cheek with the pocket knife he always has on him. I later found out he did it all because he was bored, and the boy was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Swallowing thickly, my gaze moves to the guy standing next to him, Haeden. Although mellow compared to Stone, he is just as scary. He glares at me with hooded, red strained eyes. His blue irises glow in the sunlight, and if he had been any other person, I would think they looked beautiful. His blonde hair ruffles in the wind, revealing the scar along his left eyebrow. With one hand shoved into his grey hoodie, the other holds a rolled and lit joint. He is where Henry gets his drugs from. From shitty reggie to cocaine. I can only guess how a highschooler can get his hands on such hardcore drugs.

Tearing my gaze away from the bad boy, my eyes land on the least scary person out of all of them, Kingston. In my eyes, he isn't as volatile. Though, I suppose I'm biased. Seeing him at church, -that is when I used to go- made him seem less bully-like and more relatable. That doesn't stop him from getting into fights, though. As far as I know, I've only seen him in two this school year. His brown hair is longer, pulled back into a small bun on the back of his head. His green eyes glimmer with the mischief that I often see in them. His lips quirk up, white teeth shining bright. Sometimes I think out of the three guys, he's the only one who smiles... and means it.

Finally, I take in the last figure there, Ivy. Although beautiful, she doesn't act like the pompous cheerleaders I'm used to. Her personality is darker and much more twisted. Her tan skin and dark hair rivals that of Kenseys pale and blonder self. She's

intimidating, to say the least. She scowls at everyone and everything, adorning a leather jacket and tight jeans. For some reason, I find myself admiring her, whether it's because of her no-care attitude or because she doesn't take shit from anyone.

I wish I could throw up walls and be unaffected. Yet here I stand, with watery eyes and red paint dripping into my underwear.

Please don't attack me, I repeat in my head. I force myself to walk past them and towards the school's open gates. My body is stiff, hands shaking as I grip the backpack straps around my shoulders.

I can handle Kensey's taunts. I can handle Lucas' and Henry's grand display of humiliation in the form of paint. I don't think I can handle Stone's mean words and sharp blade, Haeden's drug induced temper, Kingston's slick smile that only promises illusions, -because surely my biased opinion of him is way off course- or Ivy's fists that always find their targets.

"I don't think you're supposed to wear your period!" Haeden shouts from behind me. There's a yelp of pain, and I shrink into myself, walking faster. Crap, crap, crap!

"That's not funny, dumbass," Ivy snaps back at him.

"I wasn't trying to be funny, bitch," he sneers at her.

I bite my bottom lip, and suck in a breath. Just keep going. I'm almost there.

“You smoke too much,” Kingston chuckles. “You’re a straight up fucking idiot if you think all that’s period blood.”

“Wait, isn’t that the mass-murder-church girl?” Haeden asks, completely ignoring the way his friends called him stupid. I’m positive that if it were anyone else, he’d instantly hand their ass to them.

I tense up even further and walk faster.

“Fucking christ!” That comes from Stone, his deep voice is unforgettable and has me yelping in response. I can feel their collective stares on my back as I walk away, paint leading a trail behind me. I can only properly breathe again once I’ve made it outside the gates.

Chapter 2

ARIELLA

“You don’t have a boyfriend yet?” Mrs. Nolt sounds appalled.

I smooth over some peanut butter on a slice of bread and glance up at her. Her pure white hair is pulled up into a messy bun at the back of her head, a few loose strands framing her aging face.

I chuckle at her, and shake my head. “Nope,” I pop out. “Dad is strict when it comes to boys. He says when I turn eighteen he’ll consider letting me get one, but I’m sure he’ll forget he said that as soon as my birthday comes around, though.”

“Eighteen?” The older woman scoffs. “When I was your age, I had boys lining up for dates. It’s always fun to go on them. It’s good to tease. But never give in.” She laughs.

I laugh with her as I put two slices of peanut butter and jelly together. “I don’t think he’d like our topic of conversation.”

She waves her hand at me while saying, “And who says he has to know.”

I start a new sandwich after bagging the other. “Well, whether or not he forgets on my birthday, I’ll still try to find one,” I say. Dad was strict, but I couldn’t go my entire life obeying his word. Seeing girls at school kissing and hugging their boyfriends... it’s not something I’ve ever experienced. Being the daughter of the pastor in our small town didn’t stop anyone from approaching me, but I kept my promise to him. I didn’t

let it go anywhere, but I was more than happy to be friends.
No boy ever took me up on my offer.

“Find what, dear?” Mrs. Nolt asks.

I glance up at her, frowning at the glazed look in her eyes. It’s nice to have a conversation with her while it lasts. She’s a sweet old lady with Alzheimer’s, and I’m sad to see another conversation between us lost due to the horrible disease. I turn back to my sandwich as I think about some of the boys at school. Staying away may have made me a little boy crazy, but I’d be foolish to let it control me. It doesn’t stop me from being excited though. I think about Kingston, and the way he smiled at me when we lit the stage candles together last Sunday.

“Do you know-” I tilt my head up to look at her, but my voice gets caught in my throat, and a sob escapes me. Mrs. Nolt stands there, dead eyes glaring at me as if the deep cut in her throat is all my fault. Thick, dark blood oozes from her wound, staining her flower dress and blue coat. I turn around to run away, to stop looking at the grotesque image, but my feet are glued to the floor. My legs won’t move.

“It had to be done.” Dad’s haunting voice reaches my ears. His leather shoes come into view, and his figure escapes from the shadows as if he were once a part of it. I cry out when I see the knife in his hands, blood dripping from the sharp blade. Then he raises it and aims it at me. “Don’t be a sinner, Ariella,” he says before he lunges.

A scream tears from my throat, and I shoot up into a sitting position. The air is cold against my sweaty skin, and I

frantically search my surroundings. My chest heaves as I struggle to control my breathing. It was just a nightmare, one that will plague my mind forever. I cry, the image of Mrs. Nolt imprinted into my brain. Her corpse sitting peacefully on the church pew. I run my hand through my brown hair, pulling at it as tears stream down my face.

Around this time, grandma would have come in with some chamomile tea and a piece of chocolate. She's not here this time, having gone out with a friend to the casino in the city.

It was just a nightmare. However, the thought doesn't calm my racing heart and shaking hands. I flip on the light switch, chasing away the dark shadows that taunt me, but it doesn't do anything about the ones inside my head. I sit back down on my bed and force myself to take a deep breath.

One.

Two.

Three.

I count all the way to ten until I hear loud banging coming from downstairs. My heart picks up speed again, and the image of my dad with a knife in his hand haunts me. No, I clutch my nightshirt; a thin, spaghetti strap tank top. It isn't him, he's in police custody. He's locked up behind bars until his trial, there's no way that's him at the door.

What if...?

The thought lingers. The knocking gets louder, and I scramble up to race down stairs. I run into the kitchen and grab a knife

to protect myself. When I walk into the living room, the sound of the banging gets louder. I glance at the clock, five fifteen am.

I suck in a breath, hands shaking against the doorknob. All I can picture is him on the other side, dried blood on his skin, and his white button up shirt stained with the life of his victims. His innocent victims.

I crack the door open, holding the knife behind my back, ready to strike if I need to. My eyes widen when I see a scowling and sleep deprived Stone on the other side. He's shirtless, the tattoos on his toned skin are on full display. Both his muscled arms have sleeves, stretching out over his collar bones and hard pecs. His grey sweatpants ride low, and I swallow thickly at the sight of his v-line.

"Stop the fuckin' screamin'. Your neighbors are trying to sleep," he growls out at me, voice thick after having just woken up, thanks to me. My head snaps up to his face, mouth opening, but only a small squeak escapes. His eyes are narrowed on me, dark circles visible. How long have I been screaming?

I close my mouth and nod once. "S-sorry," I mutter. At least he isn't here to douse me in red paint. He scoffs at me, hands clenching at his sides, and I wonder if he wants to yell at me some more.

Please don't.

He glares at me, then turns and marches his way back to his house. I close the door and lean against it, dropping the knife

onto the floor like it'll burn me. It makes me feel like him, and I tell myself that I'm not.

That I only grabbed the knife because I might have needed to defend myself. I swallow and slide to the floor. Tears run down my cheeks, and I hold my head in my hands as ruthless images haunt me.

Why did grandma have to leave? She's not here to hold me and wipe away my sorrows. I'll always have this heavy darkness in my heart, and it will eat away everything I have in me.

Henry was right about the paint staining. My face, neck, and hands are still tinted red. I take another shower, scrubbing and scrubbing at my skin, hoping it'll go away. By the time I step out, my skin is raw and sore. However, the red tint didn't fade, not even a little bit.

Even my full coverage foundation doesn't cover it up. It looks like a horrendous and permanent blush. I debate skipping today, just staying in and continuing to wallow in my self pity, but then would grandma get mad if I skip? I've never done it before.

I pull on a hoodie, I would rather be hot and sweaty than feel so exposed with my red tinted skin. With a deep breath, I step

out of the front door, feigning whatever bravery I think I have left.

After locking the door I walk over to my car, keys in hand. Like Stone's rusty truck, my car doesn't fare any better. The rust stained, green dune buggy sticks out with grandma's house behind it. Maybe if I had taken it yesterday, I never would've ran into Stone, Haeden, Kingston, and Ivy at the back of the school.

My face burns at the memory. Sure the whole school witnessed it happen, but I don't care about the whole school. The whole school didn't make me feel weird.

A screech down the street reaches my ears, and I look over. A black jeep rolls down the street, windows rolled down. I cringe when I see Kensey and her posse, Maribel, Stacy, and Lupe laughing inside. Lupe sticks her head out, black shiny hair pulled back into a ponytail. I'm guessing so the wind won't mess it up too much.

My eyes widen when she launches something at me. I scream as eggs splatter against me, my car, and the driveway. Yolk gets into my hair, staining my clothes and dripping into my shoes.

"Die, bitch!" Maribel shouts, as they speed off. I stare after them, eyes wide in surprise and the taste of raw egg in my mouth. A snort comes from next door, and I turn to see Stone standing on his front porch, eyes glued to my body.

Oh god, was he there the entire time? He definitely saw the entire thing. First I wake him up with my nightmare screams,

and now he witnesses this.

My tears spill over. With shaking hands I turn back towards the door and attempt to open it. The keys fall, and I quickly drop down to grab them. The key keeps missing the hole, and I know now that if my skin wasn't already stained red, it would be flushing with embarrassment.

A sob escapes me.

Why does this have to happen to me? Why couldn't my dad be normal?

When I get inside I slam the door and slide down against it. The only bright side I can see is that grandma isn't here to see me. To see how pathetic I am.

I wipe my tears and trudge up the stairs. I can't go to school like this. I take another shower, not in the least caring that I'll be late or that the school will send an automatic voicemail to grandma. I can afford one late pass.

After redressing in some jeans and a long sleeve blue shirt, I leave the house.

I'm relieved that the halls are empty. After getting my late pass from the secretary in the front office, I make my way to my locker. I slow when I see the red spray paint. Stopping in front of it, I glare at the word written across the space of my locker.

Merderer.

I've never killed anyone. The only crime I've made related to taking someone's life was against mosquitoes, flies, and spiders. But just by association, by being his daughter, I'm unfairly marked. His crime becomes mine.

"At least fucking spell it right," I grumble under my breath as I try to wipe the first 'E' away. Part of it smudges, but the letter remains. "Damn idiots." I push away the urge to cry. No more tears, not today. I've done enough of that this morning.

I remember Stone staring at my egged figure and cringe. I'll never be able to look at him again. Never be able to make eye contact. Never be able to be in the same room.

I twist the number lock and open my locker up. I pull out the text book for my class, any worry of being late is long gone. It's not even noon and I'm emotionally drained. I want to go home and hide under my blanket.

Students flood out of the classrooms, and flinch, dropping my notebook. In I was hoping to avoid this. I squat down and pick up the book when a note flutters out. Great, as if the word murderer spray painted on my locker wasn't enough. And really, a bully note is just soft. Why go from drenching me in

paint and eggs to a harmless note. I crumble the paper in my hand and throw it back into my locker. I'd rather not read it.

As I gather the stuff for my next class, I can feel the stares burning into the back of my head. Just ignore me... please ignore me. I close my locker, and when I turn around to walk to class, I stop where I'm standing. Melanie stands in front of me with her new friend May standing on her right and another girl I can't remember the name of on her left. Melanie frowns at me, as if my very presence unnerves her.

"I'm surprised you came today," she says. "Especially looking like that." She flips her hair over her shoulder. I frown back at her.

"I'm surprised you're talking to me," I reply back, "You wouldn't want to associate with, you know, a psycho." I shrug my shoulders, acting like I'm not affected by her, by any of them.

Dad was good at acting.

She sneers at me, lips pulling back with a glare, because how dare I say something like that.

"I don't," she hisses back at me. "I'm just saying that you look pathetic. If I were you, I would've just dropped out."

"Are you a masochist? Do you like all this attention on you?" One of her new friends asks, and I gape at her. Is she really upset that I have attention? Not positive, but negative? Is even

the slightest recognition from Lucas and Henry enough to set her off? I glare back at her.

“Yes,” my voice drips with sarcasm, “I’m just beaming at all this recognition.”

Before she can reply back, Kensey walks towards us. “Oh no, what happened to all that egg you were dressed in earlier?” she smirks. Melanie glances at her, then at me and smiles. Except this isn’t the one I’m used to. This one is full of malice.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, voice stiff.

“Really?” Kensey asks with a chuckle, she glances at someone behind me, and her smile grows even bigger. The sharp curve of her lips promises that there’s more to come.

“It’s a good thing I have more than one witness. Hey, Stone,” she practically purrs. I pale, back straightening, and muscles tensing. Please no, please don’t be behind me. I frown when I see that not only is he standing behind me, but he also isn’t alone. At his side Kingston stands, sparkling emerald eyes taking in my red tinted face. Loose strands of his brown hair frame his chiseled face.

Great.

Why does he have to look so good?

“Don’t you think Ari looks better with eggs in her hair?” Kensey pulls out her phone and turns it to him. On it is a picture of me, body slouching and arms held out as egg drips

down my clothes and hair. I spare a look at him, teeth nipping at my bottom lip. I'm sure my face is red, and not just with the tint from the paint.

“God damn.” Kingston chuckles at the sight, and I quickly tear my gaze away from them. I stare at my shoes, scuffing them on the floor. It would be great if a sinkhole popped up and swallowed me.

“You should perfect your aim. An egg hit my mom’s rose bush,” Stone says. His deep voice sharp and clear. Like steel. It isn’t as gravely as it was when he banged on my door and yelled at me to shut up.

I miss it.

Kensey shrugs and laughs. “You can blame Lupe for that.”

I glance up, and cringe when I find Stone glaring down at me. Staring into his dark eyes, I shiver with how intense his gaze is. Just him in general is intense. His long sleeve shirt covers his tattoos, and I suddenly hate the school’s dress code, with it’s requirement to have all tattoos covered by clothing or bandages.

“She got anymore eggs on her?” he asks, and I flinch. Now he wants to egg me, great.

Kensey smiles brightly. “She does actually. I’ll give them to you at lunch.”

“H-hey Kingston,” Melanie pipes up from in front of me. I glance at her, completely forgetting that she was there. Her and her friends went silent as soon as Kensey entered the conversation.

She stares at Kingston with flushed cheeks, and I roll my eyes. She’s had a crush on him for years, and only after making friends with the others did she grow the vagina to talk to him. I don’t say balls because facts are, vaginas push out babies. Balls cry at the flick of a finger.

An image of Mrs. Nolt kicking my dad in the nuts before his murder weapon could reach her comes to mind. Who knows if she actually attempted it, but I tell myself she did. I tell myself that she fought for her life because she wanted to live. Right? Who wants to die?

Kingston gives her a casual nod, eyes taking in her figure.

No longer seeing the point in being here, because clearly they’re done harassing me, I side step them.

“As fun as this has been, I’m gonna go,” I mutter.

“See ya later, Psycho!” Kensey calls after me.

Crumpled balls of paper were thrown at the back of my head all throughout the next two classes. And despite the number of them piling up on the ground, the teachers said nothing to the students throwing them.

I opened a few of the first ones thrown, finding demeaning words written on them. After the fifth one, I stopped reading them and just ignored them all together.

The moment the bell rings for the current class, I shove everything in my backpack and high tail it out of the room.

I avoid the hall that leads to the cafeteria. I can't handle another repeat of yesterday. All that red covering me, the floors... I don't want another flashback.

Plus, Stone asked Kensey for the rest of her eggs. No doubt to join in on the fun. Surely Haeden and Kingston will join him, and I'll avoid them for as long as I can. I'll probably have a mental breakdown if I see them. So instead, I walk towards the library on the other side of the school.

When I walk in, the tables are mostly empty save for the few students who actually come here to study. I walk between the book shelves and make my way to the back. When I turn around the last shelf, I stop in my tracks.

Haeden has a girl, I think her name is Nadia, pressed against the wall. Her head is tilted to the side while his face buried into her neck. His hand is on her thigh, rising higher the longer he kisses her skin. She mewls, hands tightening on the back of his shirt.

I wrinkle my nose in distaste. She sounds like a fucking cat. If I dump a bucket of cold water on her, will it stop the heat she seems to be going through? I mean seriously, I get public sex is risky and thrilling, not that I would know, but in the library?

Despite how disgusted I tell myself to be, I can't tear my eyes away. His pale arms flex, veins shifting under his skin as his hand disappears under her skirt. His long sleeves are rolled up, displaying the few tattoos scattered up his forearm and bicep. His hair is messed up, and I wish he would turn around so I can see the look on his face. Is he high? Will his ice blue eyes be red and pupils dilated?

Does he like it?

“Oh my god, you're a fucking pervert too.”

I shocked out of my thoughts as if cold water was just poured over me. My eyes widen when I make eye contact with Nadia as she stares at me from over his shoulder. Haeden slowly pulls away from her, strong hand slipping away from her thigh. His arm remains resting on the wall, and he turns to look at me.

His eyes are red, and a smirk makes its way to his lips.

Oh god.

“I didn't...” I try to say, but my voice is hoarse. My hands grip the straps of my backpack like a life line, heart thudding in my ears. I clear my throat.

“Did you plan to watch the whole thing, you psycho?” Nadia continues to snap at me.

I frown and tear my gaze away from Haeden. Just how long was I watching them? My gaze shifts back to him, taking in his red rimmed eyes and lazy smile. He has to be on something.

I have a sudden vision of a game show just for him. “Guess!” I imagine the game show’s audience shouting with the host, “That, Drug!”

I shake my head.

“You’re the ones doing it where anyone can find you.” I reply back to her like she’s stupid. “If anyone’s a pervert, it’s you. What’s it called... voyeurism?”

Haeden laughs, the sound surprising me while Nadia glares. “Nah, that’s the wrong one,” Haeden states as his tongue slips out, drawing my attention like a moth to a flame. “The one you’re thinking about is exhibition. Though I’m curious as to how a supposed ‘church girl’ would know something like that.” He reaches down and adjusts his hard on, the silver ring on his hand glistening in the light.

I swallow and press my thighs together, gaze lingering.

“Get the fuck out of here, you freak,” Nadia hisses at me, hands clutching onto Haeden’s shirt. My gaze snaps back up, my breath coming out in quick gasps.

“Hold on,” Haeden licks his lips while he eyes me. I’m not wearing a pretty skirt or a shirt that shows cleavage, just a long sleeve shirt and a skirt that reaches down to my ankles. “I’m guessing you’ve been watching for a while. Do you wanna join?”

My jaw drops.

“Haeden!” Nadia slaps his arm.

“What?” He shrugs and smirks at me. “Who knows, maybe she’s hot under all that.”

“And that’s my cue to leave,” I mumble under my breath, cheeks burning so bright that I feel like I can rival the red nose reindeer. I turn and walk away with Haeden chuckling behind me.

No longer wanting to stay in the library, I leave. The only other place I can think of where I can be alone is the football field. I make my way to the bleachers and walk under them. I lay down my sweater and sit on it.

I can’t believe Haeden asked me to join. He knows I’m a social pariah, the daughter of a psychopath. Then again he slept with Lacey Parks, even after she got caught getting gang banged by half the football team. He’d fuck anything as long as it had a pussy.

With a sigh I lay back and stare up at the bottom of the bleachers. The sight of gum stuck from years ago makes me gag. Not a pretty sight.

A yawn escapes me, I'll just take a nap and catch up on the sleep I missed.

I sit up from my desk and put away my homework. My back is stiff, butt numb from sitting on it for an hour and a half. I turn around and freeze in my spot. Dad is there, his button up shirt and black slacks are stained a dark red. The smell of iron fills my nose, and blood drips from his collar.

"Dad?" I ask, voice trembling. I glance down at the knife held tightly in his hand. It's sharp, and the blade glistens like liquid rubies. "Dad, what did you do?" My voice is barely above a whisper. I drag my eyes up, scared to look into his eyes and what I'll see there, but I have to.

His pupils are normal. He looks like he normally would, and I just wish he had taken something. Anything to make him not-in-his-right-mind, to alter his mental state.

"I had to," he says, voice strong with conviction. I take a step backwards. "He told me to, the big man above." His free hand points up at the ceiling.

"The big man?" I whisper, brows furrowing. My eyes shoot to my bedroom door behind him. I take in the distance between him and me, and the space between him and the wall. What were the chances of me getting through? Was I fast enough to evade his reach? "God?" I ask. No. I'm not.

He nods his head, a proud smile breaking onto his face. And suddenly he's back to being my dad, not whoever this is. "You understand." Except it isn't him.

I quickly shake my head as a whimper escapes me. "I-I don't, what did you do?" I ask again. My gaze shifts to the window on the right. The one with the blinds open and the glass pulled up to let in some fresh air. If I run I can definitely make it in time. I'm on the second floor, though. How high up am I from the ground? Would I be able to stick a landing? No. Tuck and roll. If I get hurt, that's okay. At least I'll be alive.

He stops smiling and frowns. "You will understand, Ariella. You have too."

Then he jumps at me.

I wake up with a startle, and I stare at the black boots in front of me. I let out a harsh breath, heart beating against my rib cage. It was just another nightmare. I didn't scream this time, right?

I trail up the legs the boots are attached to and make eye contact with Kingston. He stares down at me, a frown marring his face.

"About time you woke up," he mumbles.

I scramble up onto my knees and stuff my sweater into my backpack.

“S-sorry,” I say, the word rushing out of my mouth. “Thanks for waking me. I would’ve been late to class.” I feel pathetic saying it.

He frowns down at me and pulls out a blunt from his pocket. He leans back against a bleacher pole and flicks a lighter. I watch as he sparks the nicotine wrapper, the smell of marijuana assaulting my nose.

“Classes are over. I guess you slept through ‘em all.’ He shrugs, exhaling a puff of smoke.

“Great.” I slouch with a frown. I might as well have stayed home today. I only attended two of my classes, and grandma will not be happy when she gets home.

Kingston’s cheeks hollow as he takes a pull from his blunt, further defining his cheekbones and square jaw.

Does he come out here often to smoke? I’m surprised he’s not with Stone, Haeden, or Ivy.

“You want some?” he asks. He holds out his blunt, the stick sitting between two thick fingers. I stare at the tattoos on his wrist, the dark ink trailing up into his sleeve. I clear my throat and look away, nose wrinkling.

“No. Thanks, though.”

He shrugs. “Your call. If I were you I’d be drowning in the stuff. But then again, you were the preacher’s daughter.”

My head snaps back to glare at him. He’s smirking at me, almost tauntingly. He said ‘were the preacher’s daughter’.

As if it’s relevant anymore.

“I’m..” I pause, watching as the smoke is exhaled through his nose. “Gonna go. Thanks for waking me.” I grab the straps of my backpack and head towards the school doors.

“Yo, Psycho!” Kingston calls from behind me. I freeze at the name, hands curling around my backpack straps. I turn around to face him. “Next time you decide to come back out here, don’t fall asleep,” he says, nodding his head to the side.

I shift my gaze to where he suggested and find a small flock of freshmen girls. Four of them huddled together on the other side of the field, eyes darting over to where we’re at as they whisper angrily to each other.

Great, even those younger than I am want a taste in my torture. I sigh and turn back to him, finding him already watching me.

“Thanks again.” I force a smile and wave.

The first time I talked to Kingston Acheves, I was nine and at church. He wore a black button up shirt with matching black slacks. And as he stood next to his father, I couldn't help but notice how pretty this boy was.

I stood there, next to my father, the Pastor, as he talked with his dad. I swished my blue summer dress around my thighs, suddenly desperate to get this pretty boy's attention.

"Are you always this pretty?" The question is out of my lips, my impulse control severely lacking.

"Ariella," I struggle to tear my gaze away from Kingston, the boy who now glowers at me like I said something wrong. But how could I be wrong? Being pretty wasn't a bad thing, it was a good thing. Dad didn't seem to get that though.

"Ariella, apologize please. That was very rude." My father tugged my hand, forcing my attention to him, and my brows furrow. I wasn't trying to be rude though.

"But mommy always said it was nice to give a compliment," I defend myself.

Mr. Acheves chuckled. "It's alright, Pastor. Kingston doesn't mind, do you?"

Except he did mind, and he made sure I knew it when he tugged my hair every Sunday after that.

When I make it back to my locker, I let out an annoyed sigh. Now I'll have to catch up on the classes I missed, including homework. In the morning I'll come early to get the notes from the teachers. I put the homework I did have for the two classes I went to, in my bag and zip it closed. Before I can shut the door to the locker, I see the crumbled note from this morning.

Do I really want to read it? Curiosity gets the better of me and I open it up.

Dear Ariella,

Look at me being formal. I've been wanting to write to you for a while, but never had the courage. With your father being a Pastor turned murderer, I figured this was the perfect opportunity. I feel like God heard my prayers and made all this happen just for me. Just for this moment. After the story of him went up in wild flames around town, I couldn't help but grow admiration for him. Tell me, did he ever show symptoms before he finally snapped?

My breath catches in my throat as I read it again... and again. What the fuck? My entire body prickles with awareness as if the anonymous person was watching me read it. I glance down the hall. This was from this morning. Some creep put this in

my locker this morning. Admiration? Symptoms? Is he supposed to be a fan?

With my heart pounding against my ribs, I crush the paper between my fingers. My hands are shaking, and I count to ten in my head.

When I'm done, I turn and walk to the trash can, but then pause.

Should I throw it away? If this person admired my father for murdering innocent church members of the community, then there must be something wrong with them. I swallow, the sound audible to my ears. Just in case, I put it in my pocket. If they keep harassing me I'll go to the police and show them this along with any future notes as evidence.

With a firm nod, I walk away.

Chapter 3

ARIELLA

“What is this?” It’s the first thing out of grandma’s mouth when she comes home from her casino trip and sees me. She wears a green dress with white daisies printed on it. It’s long, brushing against the hardwood floor, and for a moment, it looks like she’s floating.

Then I remember that my skin is fucking red because of Henry and Lucas.

“A tan gone wrong.” I chuckle softly. Can she tell that it’s forced? And so what if I’m gaining the habit of lying. What she doesn’t know won’t hurt her. And a tan is believable.

She’s quiet as she bends over to set down her suitcase. When she straightens, she turns her heavy, blue gaze to me, really taking me in.

I swallow, the sound loud.

“A tan?” she asks, eyes not moving from my face. My hands curl into fists as tears fill my eyes.

“No,” I force out, my voice thick with the emotions I feel. “It’s not a tan. It’s paint.” I laugh, but it’s dry of any humor. I throw my hands in the air only to drop them, and my tears quickly follow.

“My verdict is guilty by association, and some of the jocks thought it would be nice to punish me by dumping red paint on

me,” my voice cracks. A sob escapes me as I collapse onto the sofa.

My blurry gaze shifts to her, and I give a pathetic smile.

“Did you know that psychopathy is hereditary?” I remember Kensey’s question from class. It’s been on my mind ever since. “I didn’t.” I shrug and wipe my nose with the sleeve of my sweater. “I can be the next murderer after him. Or I can just be normal. Who the fuck knows, and who the fuck wants to take that chance?” I don’t care if I’m cursing in front of her. “But that doesn’t matter because to the rest of them-” I point out at the walls, where outside, our small and judgmental town talks about me, the latest gossip, “I’m already a killer.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” She sits next to me, hand curling over mine, holding it tight. “I don’t have the power to stop everyone from thinking bad about you. But I do have the power to help you.” Her voice shakes, almost like she’s close to crying too.

“You need to get over the things you can’t control, and focus on the things you can,” she murmurs to me. “You can’t stop them from talking or bullying you. But you can control how you react.”

The next few days grow repetitive.

I’ll wake up screaming in the middle of the night from nightmares, and I wonder if I ever woke Stone up again. I

pinned a thick blanket over my window, hoping it'll muffle the sound.

After the first night, he doesn't come, banging on my door to scold me for it. So, I think it's a good thing.

Grandma made a habit of slipping lavender oils in my room, both of us hoping it'll soothe me enough to keep them away, but that hasn't been the case.

The day I'm dreading most is finally here; Friday. The day I have to see Mrs. Rivers, the school therapist.

After pulling the blanket down from the window, -grandma didn't like it hanging there- I pause. Across from my window, the window in the house next door is open. In the few weeks I've been living with grandma, I've never seen it like that.

Curious, I peer closer. It's dark, the atmosphere inside seems almost wicked. The walls are painted a charcoal grey. Posters of Nickelback and Metallica are taped to the walls. A messy bed with black sheets and comforter is on the left. On the right is a desk, papers strewn about it.

I bite my bottom lip, brows furrowing. Is this Stone's room? Is his room adjacent to mine? Is that why he can hear my screams? My lips turn down as I continue to take in the room. It's a good thing I hung up that blanket.

The door in his room opens, and my eyes widen when he walks out of what I guess is his bathroom. A towel is wrapped around his waist, his chest bare and his hair wet. Drops of

water glide down his body, making the dark ink glisten. I'm frozen, taking in the sight. Black angel wings spread across his pecs, and between them is what looks like a cocoon. Covering his entire left arm is a half dead tree. Leaves fall from the winding branches, falling to a barren ground. On his right arm, is a sleeve of butterflies and flowers, a complete opposite from his gloomy left arm. Then I'm looking at his face. Clouded with shadows as his dark eyes glare back at me.

"Fuck," I whisper. With shaking hands, I pull my curtains closed and stare at them. I was just caught staring at him like a pervert. Why do I keep embarrassing myself in front of him?

Him and his friends.

When I get downstairs, grandma is sitting at the table with a cup of coffee. She's reading the newspaper, grey hair tied into a messy bun. Her blue robe is tied around her, and she smiles when she notices me.

"Good morning. I didn't make you a cup. I wasn't sure if you'd have time before you had to leave," she says.

"I definitely need one." I sigh as I make myself a cup. Sleep hasn't been my friend. And I need something to keep me awake and focused during the day.

"The school called me yesterday."

Her words make me pause, the spoon of sugar hovering over the cup. When she didn't mention anything about it earlier, I was sure I was in the clear. Dang it, did she avoid bringing it up because she knows I'm being bullied? I look over my shoulders and meet her eyes, taking in the way she observes me. She takes in every twitch and side glance I make. With how sharp and observant she is, she can definitely tell when I'm lying.

I always hate how perceptive she is.

"What did they say?" I ask, resuming what I'm doing, the metal spoon clinks against the glass.

"Mr. Williams mentioned you were struggling a little in school," she says. "And that you have a session today with the school therapist."

I cringe and turn around. After drinking some coffee, I nod my head. "Uh, yeah. I'm working on my studies." Liar. "As for Mrs. Rivers, I don't really have a choice in the matter."

"If you need to talk about anything, I'm right here." She frowns at me. "You don't have to have a breakdown in order for you to talk to me. I know that sometimes the people in this town can get harsh, damn heavily religious, they are. It's difficult for some people to open up their minds to different things."

"It's not like I'm a lesbian." I roll my eyes. "My dad just happened to be a murderer."

After that, I drink the rest of my coffee and put the mug in the sink.

I hesitate to step outside. Kensey hasn't driven by since that day, but I'm always cautious now. Grandma is here, they wouldn't stain her door with eggs while she's here, right?

I shake my head and walk out. I glance down the road, eyes searching for her familiar jeep. My shoulders relax when it's nowhere in sight.

The door next door opens, and I see Stone come out. His right hand is curled around the strap of his backpack, and I tear my eyes away from him when he glances at me. My face flushes, and I duck my head, using my hair as a curtain to block him out. I can't believe he caught me peeping into his room. It's not like I did it to catch him partially naked. His curtains just happened to be open. I rush to my car and pretend he isn't staring holes into my head as I pull out of the driveway.

I ignore the usual sneers that now accompany me in the school's halls and make it to my locker. I notice the note taped to the metal of the door. A frown reaches my face as I remember the last one. The paper this time is different.

Can it be the same person? I glance around but no one looks suspicious.

I rip it off the locker and stare at it. The edges are ragged, like someone ripped it off from a larger page of paper.

Should I read it? What if it says something horrible about praising my father again?

Curiosity wins me over, and I hold my breath as I open it up.

You didn't respond back, my heart is wounded. I couldn't find those that ruined your locker. Don't worry, Ariella. I won't give up so easily. They'll end up just like those your father ended. We have plenty of time to play.

My chest starts to ache. I close my eyes and breath deeply through my nose. The memories threaten to return, and bile rises in my throat. I don't recognize the bell going off as I slam the locker shut. I draw attention from those nearby, and they whisper among themselves. I run to the bathroom, the door slamming against the wall. The girls inside that are checking their makeup jump, and glare when they see it's me.

"You don't look so good, Psycho." A girl with brunette hair smirks at me. I ignore her and close the door to the open stall.

The coffee I drank this morning spews into the bowl, the sound of my retching echoing in the bathroom.

"Ew, she's throwing up," another voice says.

They'll end up just like those your father ended.

Whether they were bullies or not, no one deserves to die like that. At the hands of someone who took matters into their own hands, literally. Those church victims didn't deserve it, and

neither do a few troubled teens. They are just upset and they're just taking it out on the next person they can blame.

"Oh my god, do you think she's pregnant?" another girl asks. I tense up, heart throbbing at the start of another nasty rumor.

"Who do you think the father is?" Their conversation bounces back and forth as if I'm not even there.

"Mr. Williams held her after class one time." A nasal voice speaks up from the other side of the door.

Someone gasps.

The toilet bowl begins to blur as water gathers in my eyes. I fight back the images that threaten to over take me.

The other girls leave the room, the sound of their footsteps disappear when the door closes. When I'm sure I'm alone, I wipe my mouth and exit the stall.

I take myself in through the mirror. My skin is pale and darkness circles my eyes. My brown hair is limp on my shoulders, frizzy from running to the bathroom. With a sniff, I rinse the sour taste of stomach acid out of my mouth. In my rush to the bathroom, I can't remember where I put the note. I pat my pockets down and curse when I can't find it.

Did I drop it in my rush to the girls room? I put my palm against my forehead. "It's fine. It's not that big a deal. It's just one little piece of paper," I murmur to myself.

Mr. Williams takes one look at me when I enter the class late and sighs. “Do you have a pass? I can’t keep letting this slide, Ariella,” he says. It may not be my first time late to his class. When my dad was first arrested, I was late to school every day for two weeks. The vice principal, Mr. Young, called grandma and said, although he understood my situation, it couldn’t continue or I’d fail the class.

I didn’t take it seriously, and Mr. Williams kept the tardies to himself.

I shake my head. “I’m sorry. I got sick in the bathroom.”

“You pregnant, Psycho? We’re gonna have another one on our hands now?” Kensey asks from her desk. The class erupts into snickers, and I pull my sleeves over my hands.

“I’m not pregnant,” I say, but the attempt to defend myself is pathetic.

“Do you need to go to the nurse?” Mr. Williams glares at Kensey as he asks.

“No, I’m fine,” I say, and walk to my seat. On my way past her, she grabs my arm.

“Sticking your fingers down your throat won’t take away all the sick inside of you, murderer,” she hisses at me, her

manicured nails digging into my skin. The sting runs up my arm.

I rip my limb away from her with a glare, hands clenched into fists.

“It also won’t make you any skinnier,” I hiss back. I walk away before slumping in my seat.

“Now that everyone is here, I can talk about the group project.” Mr. Williams smiles. The groans of each student fills the room, including mine. A group project will not work for me, doesn’t he realize that no one in this class, the entire school, will work with me? It will be a miracle if anyone isn’t forced to.

“There will be three stages to it. One is research. After picking one of the topics I provide to you, three of you will research it. Afterwards, you’ll each surmise a three page essay, before converting it into a power point presentation,” Mr. Williams explains.

“That’s so much work though,” someone says from behind me.

Mr. Williams ignores him. “When I call your names, go ahead and group up. Today will start you off, and then you’ll have to work on it outside of class. Due date is the last Friday of the month,” he announces.

Students complain, and I place my forehead against the desk.

I’m screwed. Completely and utterly screwed.

He begins to name off the groups, and those who were called group up with their partners.

“Ariella,” I lift my head, shoulders tensing as I wait to hear who I’ll be partnered with. “Mason and Lucas.”

I slam my head back down and groan. Is he serious? How can he just pair me with one of my tormentors? And Mr. Williams knows this, he listens to Lucas, Henry, and Kensey pick on me during the entire class period most days.

Mason must have raised his hand because Mr. Williams calls on him.

“Can we switch groups?”

I don’t bother to perk up. I’m not lucky enough to have a group change that will fix everything. Plus, I don’t know if he asks because Lucas is on the team, since Lucas isn’t a team player unless it’s football, or because of me, the social pariah.

“No,” is his unwavering answer. “I placed people at random so friends wouldn’t be paired. The arrangements are final.”

I resist the urge to scoff. What are the chances that he randomly assigns me the word psychopath, and then randomly pairs me with Lucas? No chances. I don’t believe him.

I lift my head and glance around the room. Lucas and Mason are already sitting together, and when I see Lucas glaring at

me, a vicious smirk on his face, a sudden wave of defeat fills me. I'm never going to survive this. Not if it's him.

"Today, Ariella." Mr. Williams snaps at me when I don't get up from my seat. I sigh and heave myself up. I reluctantly walk over and slump in the seat left open for me, twisting around to face them.

Mason isn't really a menace on my radar. He's never talked to me, before or after the mass murder. At least, there's that. But then, who knows if he'll end up joining Lucas in my torment.

"Where should we work on the project?" I ask, my voice small.

The two boys sneer at me, and I flinch.

"I'm not going to your place to work on this shit. I don't wanna die," Mason spits, hand scratching at the desk. He flicks his red hair out of his eyes and glares.

Wow, he doesn't like me. Surprise, surprise.

I roll my eyes. "Good. Wouldn't wanna soil my good carpet with your diseased blood." I snap back, remembering the rumor of him having HIV last year... as a sophomore.

Mason glowers at me, freckled face turning beet red. I straighten up a little, a small surge of adrenaline rushing through me, and for a moment I feel satisfied.

“Careful, Ari, is that a confession? Whose blood would we find on your carpet?” Lucas asks, leaning forward.

My lips curl inward, and I duck my head, the high feeling quickly leaving me. It’s a good question, in all honesty. If we got the carpet from the house I lived in with dad, would they find traces of other people’s blood? As far as everyone knows, this is his first time killing.

My head pounds as I think, has he always had the crazy gleam in his eyes and we’ve all been ignorant? Or did this recently develop?

I wince and rub my temples.

“Probably an animal. Everyone knows murderers start out small,” Mason snickers. “My neighbor’s cat went missing yesterday, you wouldn’t have anything to do with that would you?”

Lucas laughs, hand smacking his desk.

I glare at both of them, nails digging into my palm. “I don’t want to be paired with you guys either, so can we just get this over with.”

“We should probably do as she says, we wouldn’t want to trigger her,” Lucas chuckles.

The rest of the period goes by excruciatingly slow. The topic they choose to write about is the prevention of animal extinction. It didn’t bother me that they didn’t let me have a

say. Just as long as we only talked about the assignment, they could ignore me all they liked. Then we agreed to meet at Lucas' house, who happens to be right in the middle, between where Mason and I live.

When the bell rings, I gather my stuff and walk to Mr. Williams desk.

“What can I help you with Ariella?” He asks, eyes cast down to the paper that he's writing on.

“Sir, as you know I'm not very liked among the student population,” I start off. “I think the two boys you paired me with are uncomfortable around me.”

More like, they hate my fucking guts.

“Are they? Or is it you that's uncomfortable around them?” He raises an eyebrow at me.

My eyes narrow, of course I'm uncomfortable, these people bully me. One dumped red paint on me, and the other one obviously doesn't like me.

“Either way, the entire situation is tense, and I'd rather change groups. Maybe one less hostile,” I mumble the last part.

“As I said to Mason during class, the groups are permanent. I'm sorry.” He shrugs, and it's half hearted.

“What if I did the assignment solo? It would be more work on my end, but I don’t mind it.” I try again.

Mr. Williams sighs and stops sorting through his papers.

“No, Ariella. I’m not changing my mind. If I do this for you, then I’ll have to do it with everyone. And I don’t think that’s fair.”

I clench my jaw and nod my head. What was I thinking? He wouldn’t do it. He’s the one that wants to see me tortured.

After school, I make my way to the front office. Today I have to see Mrs. Rivers. The only bright side I can think of is that I only need to be here once a week. The cons more than outweigh that one pro. It’s a school therapist, is she even licensed for this? I don’t want to talk about my father or what he’s done. I think about it enough as it is, which is all the time. I don’t want to talk about my feelings, or how I’m being bullied. Or that sometimes I just want to disappear from the world.

I sit down on a chair in the waiting area because the sign on her door says she’s with a student already. Maybe if I leave she’ll forget all about our meeting today. Staff are busy with the students in school all the time, surely one can go unaccounted for.

Just as I stand up to make my escape, the door opens. My jaw drops when I see Haeden walk out. His brows are narrowed, jaw clenched, and shoulders tense. Well, someone is unhappy to be there just as much as I am.

I swallow, my throat tight, when he sees me. His eyes are red and hooded, but I doubt it was because he cried. I'm more than positive it's because he has some type of drug in his sweater pocket.

When he's an arm length away from me, I get a whiff of marijuana, so faint I almost don't catch it.

"Good luck." His deep voice reaches my ears as he passes by. My eyes are glued to him, and only when he's gone do I realize I'm staring.

"Ariella, you can come in now." Mrs. Rivers waves to me from the door.

She's a shorter woman with a long black skirt and white button up shirt, kind of like mine, except she wears it better. Her glasses sit on the top of her head, and she smiles at me. It's different from all the sneers, smirks, and condescending looks I get.

With heavy feet, I walk into her office.

The environment is warm. Images of the forest, beach, and a sunset are framed on the wall. Along with a kitten and puppy. The walls are painted a soft cream color, and the brown couch matches her oak wood desk.

I take a seat on the couch while she sits at her desk. My hands fall onto the pleather of the sofa, and I wonder which side Haeden sat on. It's cold, not at all warm like seats usually are after they've been occupied. Did he sit at all?

I can imagine him pacing the floor in front of me, walking from one side of the room to the other like a caged animal.

And why does he even see the school therapist? Probably for his drug addiction.

"I'm happy you came," Mrs. Rivers says, drawing my attention to her. She has a notebook open on her desk, a pink pen besides it. I eye it, is that where she'll be writing her notes about me? "I was wondering if you would show up. I would have had to assign you a detention if you didn't."

I frown. "So, if I didn't come I'd get detention?" I asked. That's a little unfair.

She nods. "Since these visits are mandatory, yes."

I remember the letter that was sent a couple days after the incident, demanding I take counseling or get expelled. The next option for me was Redwoods high, which is in the next town over. Grandma and I both did not want to drive an hour and half twice a day to get there and back.

She laughs at me, but it doesn't sound patronizing, "It's only mandatory to those who are struggling in school, whether it be grades or socially."

I tilt my head but don't say anything more. She's lying, and we both know it, although, I don't call her out on it.

"I know this is something you probably don't want to do, but I promise we'll start off easy. I won't pressure you to tell me something you don't want too. I'm here so you can talk to me about anything you'd like. It can be what your favorite hobbies are, or what subjects you're struggle with. Today will just be us getting to know each other so you're more comfortable around me," she explains.

I shift on the couch, my shoulders tense. I really don't want to do this.

"I'm going to ask a few questions. If you don't want to answer, you don't have too. But I would prefer if you did as it would help both of us," she says with a small smile. She doesn't say anything else, so I nod my head in acknowledgement.

"Okay. How are your grades?" she asks. I raise an eyebrow.

I'm sure she has my file pulled out, which includes my grades from kindergarten to now.

"They're fine." I answer with a shrug. Which they are.

She scribbles something down on her notebook.

“Can you be a little more specific? For example, what’s your favorite subject and which is your least?”

I sigh and slump in the couch, already bored. How is this supposed to help me?

“My grades are good. I’m passing all my classes, as far as I know. They have probably slipped since-” I clear my throat. They have slipped a lot. Before, when my father was normal, I thrived to get nothing but A’s. But after, I slipped into a dark place, and so have my grades. But I have no F’s, and I guess that’s all that matters. “They’re alright,” I mutter. She continues to write. “My favorite subject is Art. I’m not good at it, but it’s nice to just paint whatever.” It’s the only class where Lucas, Henry, and Kensey aren’t there to harass me. The art class is full of relatively quiet students who don’t bother me, but I’m still an outcast there. I’d rather be ignored than harassed. “My least favorite is English, my homeroom,” I state.

“Is there a reason why it’s your least favorite?” Mrs. Rivers asks, eyeing me. Sure, let’s focus on the negative.

Yes. My teacher hates me. He grouped me with my bully and won’t let me just do the stupid project by myself. I don’t say that though.

“I’m not very good with essay’s and finding literary devices.” I shrug. She frowns, looking at a piece of paper before writing some more.

“Okay. And how is school in general, not including the grades?” she questions.

I frown. "School is school. I don't know. I study when I can in the library."

She nods her head. "Do you have any friends in school?"

I glance away and stare at the kitten frame hanging behind her head. "I used to. Not anymore. She found a better group to hang out with."

Mrs. Rivers frowns as she writes her notes.

"Have you tried making other friends?"

I shrug again. "It's kind of hard to find someone willing to be around the town's outcast," I mutter.

"Okay. Mr. Williams tells me that you get bullied by the other students. Can you elaborate on that?"

Mr. Williams, that snitch.

"Everyone gets bullied in school." I answer back, sitting straight on the couch.

"From what he's told me, the things that have happened are pretty harsh," she points out. "If it continues on, it would be best if you contacted a staff member for help. The principal is trying to turn this into a no tolerance school for bullies."

I resist the urge to scoff. If I went to a teacher for help, not only would I be labeled a snitch, but it would get even worse. And with how Kensey, Lucas, and Henry are going about it now, I can see it getting worse. Much worse. And knowing them, they'll come up with even more creative ideas to make me suffer.

“Right.” I nod my head.

The rest of the session goes on like that. She asks me relative questions about my life, and I'll answer half heartedly. Throughout it all, she writes down whatever it is she thinks is wrong with me.

By the end, I can't wait to leave her office.

“I'll see you at the same time next Friday.” She smiles at me before shutting the door.

When I reach my locker, I'm immediately reminded of the note from this morning. When I open it I search through it but frown when it's nowhere inside. I must have dropped it on the floor when I ran to the bathroom then. Anyone could have found it and picked it up. I slump my head against the locker and close my eyes.

Great.

Chapter 4

ARIELLA

I slip my backpack on and make my way to the school entrance.

The moment I step outside, I notice Henry and Kensey sitting on the steps. When they see me, they stand up and face me.

My instinct is to take a step back. What do they want from me now? And what exactly do they have planned? I glance around, my hands growing clammy. I have to escape.

“Took you long enough.” Kensey smiles. “How was therapy?” Her approach is casual, like we’ve been friends for years.

I look them both up and down, noticing their lack of eggs or paint. My shoulders start to relax. Okay, so far I’m okay.

“I don’t think you care,” I answer.

“You’re right, we don’t,” Henry snarls. He brings his thumb and pointer finger to his lips and whistles. The pitch is loud, and for a second makes my ears ring.

Lucas appears from behind a black 1987 Mercedes, a giant duffle bag thrown over his shoulder. He walks over, and I continue to stand there like a fucking dumbass. Why the hell couldn’t I move? Is it paint again? I don’t want to be stained even further, the color is just starting to fade!

Lucas drops the duffel on the floor in front of them and bends over to unzip it.

I lean forward, curiosity getting the better of me and find water balloons inside.

“I’m getting the feeling puberty never hit you,” I murmur. And although I mean to say it quietly enough that only I can hear it, I’m guessing I don’t with the way Lucas’ glare intensifies.

I scream when the water balloon breaks against my stomach. But instead of water, a reddish pink, foul smelling liquid, stains my shirt. They throw one after the other at me, and I raise my arms to block my face as much as I can. The rotten smell of meat surrounds me, it drenches my hair and slides down the side of my face. I cry when I realize that it’s blood.

Is it human?

“I didn’t think the paint did you any justice,” Henry says, and I lower my hands when they finally run out of balloons. “But this pig’s blood sure fixes that.” He cackles. My body shakes, on the verge of breaking. I close my eyes because I don’t want a repeat of a flashback. That’s what I tell myself. I don’t want to be sucked into that dark place.

“Let’s go. I can’t stand the stench of her.” Kensey wrinkles her nose at me with a laugh.

“Don’t go killing anyone, Psycho!” Lucas shouts as they walk away towards their cars. When they’re finally out of the parking lot, I move again. I scan the school’s front yard.

Luckily not a lot of students hung back, but that doesn't matter. If Kensey recorded it, it will be on everyone's phones by the end of the night.

I cringe when I see Ivy, Haeden, Stone, and Kingston standing in the parking lot next to Stone's big, red truck.

Instead of just seeing the aftermath, they get the whole show now. I hate my life. I fucking hate it.

I walk to my car as fast as I can, desperate to get away from their prying eyes. However as soon as I take in my cracked windshield, my steps slow down. The entire glass pane is shattered, making it so I'm unable to drive unless I want to crash. Written on the side of my car are words that dig deep into my heart.

Kill Yourself.

I fall to my knees, and don't feel the gravel digging into my skin. A sob escapes me, this is it. The final punch to cause my break down. I thought I could handle it, but I can only handle public humiliation for so long. It chips away at every part of my being. Why is this happening to me? Why did I have to be related to a sick murderer? Why did I have to be treated as if I committed the crime?

A hand lands on my shoulder, and I scream.

"Don't touch me!" I screech out. I lurch back, and my head hits the asphalt ground. A groan escapes me, the back of my skull pounding. I glare up at whoever wants to torture me next.

My eyes widen in surprise to see Ivy standing above me, hand falling back to her side.

"I'm already at my lowest, whatever you're going to do or say won't hurt me any worse!" I force myself to stand back up, ignoring the way the ground wobbles, and then it's back to normal. But when I take in the way she glowers back at me, I shrink back little. I turn away from her. "Just leave me alone," I murmur. Her punching me in the face will only make me feel worse.

"If you're done shouting at me," she starts with a smile, but it seems forced, like she's keeping herself from smacking me upside the head. "I'm not going to hurt you. Or throw blood balloons at you." She holds her hands up, showing that she doesn't have any ulterior motive.

I turn around, the frown glued to my face. She takes in the state of me and wrinkles her nose.

"Honestly, the smell of it is sickening." She gags.

My gaze moves to Stone, Kingston, and Haeden still standing at the truck. They talk to themselves, gazes glued to me and their friend.

"Why else would you approach me, then?" I ask, blinking back the rest of my tears. I sniff, and I'm about to wipe my nose when I see my sleeve drenched in pig blood.

She lets out a sigh. "Do you want to take a shower in the locker room?" She asks, voice softening. She doesn't answer

my question, and a part of me is glad. “Everyone should have left by now, so I’m sure it’s empty.”

I shake my head and let out a pathetic laugh. “I have no clothes.” Tears form in my eyes again, and I don’t bother trying to hide them.

“You can wear my gym clothes,” she offers. She steps forward, and I flinch.

Maybe she changed her mind, and wants to hurt me anyways. The only time I’ve seen Ivy is when she’s throwing her fists into someone’s face. That and every time someone touches me it’s to throw stuff and dump whatever they can on me.

She wraps an arm around me, and I’m about to protest because she’ll get the pig blood on her, but then I tighten my lips. She knows already, and she doesn’t seem to care about it.

“Yo, Kingston!” She shouts over her shoulder, “Bring my gym clothes to the girls locker room. And the shirt in the trunk.” She calls back behind us as she walks me to the school doors again.

I glance behind me, hair falling into my face, and I make eye contact with Stone. His frown hasn’t moved, and he leans into Haeden to say something.

“Anything for you, Ivy!” Kingston smiles when I look at him.

I don't waste time jumping into the shower. I make sure the curtain is pulled shut, yet I can't shake off my anxiety. What if she just wants me to get naked so she can steal my clothes and leave me here? She's done it before.

What if she pulls the curtain open and snaps pictures of me to spread around? What if she just wants to beat my bare body to a bloody pulp and kill me before dumping my unrecognizable body in the woods.

Murder seems pretty popular these days. And if the rumors about her and the guys are true, it wouldn't be the first time, either.

I'm back in a corner the entire time, expecting the curtain to be ripped away. After a while, though, I'm able to relax and enjoy the hot water sprouting from the shower head above me.

I scrub the blood off until my skin is raw. I turn the water off, and jump when her hand sticks out through the curtain, a towel clutched in her hand. I stare at the black nail polish on her finger nails.

"Thanks," I murmur.

"No problem," she responds.

"Damn, I was hoping to catch some skin." His voice is full of humor, and from how clear I can hear him, there's no doubt he's right on the other side of the curtain. I tense at the

thought. All I would have to do is slide the fabric to the side, and he would see all of me.

“Shut up, dickhead,” Ivy snaps at him. I hear rustling, and I’m hoping it’s the clothes she asked him to grab. “Read the fucking atmosphere,” she tells him when he doesn’t immediately leave.

“I did, and its depressing as fuck.” He snorts, the noise echoing in the shower room. “Besides, can you blame me? You’re lucky it’s just me and not Haeden. Stone had to punch him in the gut to keep him out.” Kingston laughs.

I dry myself as I listen, more than content with keeping quiet.

“Get the fuck out already,” Ivy hisses.

There’s a moment of silence before I ask, “Is it safe to come out now?”

“Yeah.”

I wrap the towel around me and pull the curtain back, eyes glued to the floor as embarrassment consumes me. I can’t look her in the eyes. The town’s delinquent is helping me. Never in my lifetime did I ever see this happening.

“Here are my gym clothes. They might be a little tight on you, but it’s better than blood stained clothes.” She forces a bundle into my hands. She’s already changed, the clothes that got blood on them from her wrapping her arm around me are replaced by a black fitted shirt.

“Thanks,” I say, forcing a smile onto my face.

“I’ll be outside when you’re ready.”

She moves to turn around, and I reach out to grab her arm.

“W-wait.” I bite my lip.

She looks down at my hand with a frown, and I quickly drop it. I hope I didn’t offend her.

“Why are you helping me?” I can’t help but ask. She didn’t do what I expected her to do the entire time I was rinsing off. She didn’t snap naked pictures or steal my clothes and run away. She really did just help me.

“Honestly?” She asks, taking in my form wrapped in the towel. “You looked pathetic.” She shrugs, as if it’s as simple as that.

Is it?

I can’t help but let out a small laugh.

“Understatement of the year,” I mumble.

“It’s not my place to say, but I’m gonna fucking say it anyway,” Ivy starts. She cocks her hip out and crosses her arms over her chest. “It’s really hard to just watch it all from

the sidelines. Stone had to hold me back from marching over to kick that plastic Barbie's ass," she mutters in the end.

She shakes her head and meets my eyes.

"You have to start standing up for yourself. I get that you were some good little girl who got stuck with the shitty end of the stick, but you can't just lay back and take whatever they throw at you."

I nibble on the inside of my cheek as I stare down at the floor. It's like being with Mrs. Rivers all over again.

"I can't," I reply. "If I fight back, or stand up for myself, it will only get worse. You don't think I've thought about it? About shoving Kensey's bitch-ass face into the floor or kicking Lucas and Henry in the balls?" I scoff, tears forming in my eyes again. "Imagine what they'll do if I do that?" my voice cracks.

I jump when Ivy laughs out loud. "You're more fuckin' stupid than I thought if you think that."

I glance up and flinch when she glares at me.

"It's going to get worse whether you do something or not. When they see you take it without fighting back, they think they can do whatever they want to you, and each time you'll only be a scared little girl," she hisses at me. "If you stand up for yourself, you'll be a fighter. At least then you won't feel like you've given up."

She turns around again, black hair whipping through the air and walks to the door. Before she can leave, I speak up.

“It sounds like you’re talking from experience,” I guess softly, curiosity eating away at me from her words.

She doesn’t move, silence hanging between us. Then she glances at me from over her shoulder, a sad smile on her lips.

“Maybe I am.” And then the door closes behind her.

Ivy isn’t lying when she said her gym clothes will be tight on me. Having a slightly thicker build than she does, her clothes hug me tight. Her gym shorts stop above mid thigh and I’m surprised I don’t have a camel toe. The white t-shirt is skin tight, making my breasts look bigger than they are.

I almost ask her if she has a sweater to hide my figure, but I think she’s helped out enough. I don’t want to seem ungrateful.

Working up the courage, I step out of the girls’ locker room. I find her leaning against the wall, phone in her hands. Seeing me she pushes off it and takes me in with a smirk.

“It’s not too tight is it?” she asks, an eyebrow raising.

“Umm, it’s better than pig blood drenched clothes.” I smile sheepishly, shoulders shrugging.

She sighs, “True. Come on. I’ll take you home.” She turns and leads the way with me following behind her.

It’s quiet as we walk, and I don’t mind as I think about the previous events. By tomorrow everyone in school will have that video of me being humiliated. The only bright side I can think of, is that it wouldn’t be the first time. At least this time it wasn’t in person for everyone to witness.

Can I really go on like this? Playing the victim to those who think they have the right to punish me for something I didn’t do?

I glance up to look at Ivy’s back. She said whether I stand up for myself or not, things will get worse for me. And did I really want to be seen as the girl who just takes it and throws nothing back? To be seen as the girl who has no backbone? Who’s to say that it will only stop at Lucas, Kensey, and Henry? What if everyone in the school decides that I need to be punished?

I bite my lip, a foreign resolve I’ve never felt before settling in my heart.

I don’t want to be that girl. I want to fight back. I want to stand up for myself. But where do I even begin?

I’m tired of being the pathetic girl who lets everyone walk all over her. Maybe if I emerge from this gilded cage I seem to be stuck in, Ivy will consider me a true friend. And then maybe Stone, Haeden, and Kingston wouldn’t mind having me around.

I purse my lips and stare at the ground.

We reach the red pickup truck with Stone in the driver's seat, tattooed arm resting outside the open window. Kingston sits in the passenger seat, typing away on his phone, and Haeden is sitting in the back, body slumped against the wall of the car with his eyes closed.

Before Ivy opens the back door, Kingston glances up, hearing us approach. He elbows Stone in the ribs to get his attention.

"I fucking told you." He chuckles, his eyes roaming my full figure that's on display through Ivy's tight clothes. My face heats at his gaze, and I shuffle awkwardly behind Ivy. My hands curl over each other in front of me.

Stone tears his eyes away from the windshield and turns to look at me as Ivy climbs in the back seat. He takes me in, eyes lingering on my chest and thighs. Then he redirects his gaze, facial expression not once changing. I bite my bottom lip.

"Told him what?" Ivy asks as she climbs in next to Haeden.

Staring at where I'm stepping, I climb into the back next to Ivy who stuck in between Haeden and me. I notice he's awake now, red eyes staring at me.

"Nothing." Haeden answers her as I tear my gaze away from him and to the back of Kingston's seat. "Just made a bet, that's all." He chuckles, voice deep and thick with tiredness.

Ivy eyes all three of them before rolling her eyes. Clearly with me here, she wasn't going to get her answers.

"We're dropping her off at her house," Ivy leans forward to tell Stone.

"Says who?" He asks back, his hand resting on his thigh and not making a move to start the truck. I meet his eyes in the rear view mirror and shrink back. He doesn't want me here.

"Says me, asshole." Ivy glares back at him.

"So, because you picked up the charity case, we gotta take the time out of our day to take her home?" Haeden chuckles from next to her, he clicks his tongue against his teeth.

I bite my lip trying to hide my frown.

"It's okay, I can wa-" I shift in the seat, about to open the door.

"No, you stay." Ivy grabs my arm to keep me in place. She whips her head back to Stone, "Stop being dicks and just do it," she insists.

I meet his gaze again, and he rips it away to stare ahead of him.

"Fuck," he grumbles before starting the car.

“Just ignore them. They’ve had dildos up their asses all fucking day,” Ivy tells me, and I can’t help the laugh that escapes me. My face turns red at the mention of silicone cocks.

“You’d know all about that, wouldn’t you Ivy?” Kingston turns to smirk back at her, eyes darting to me and lingering. I press my lips together.

“Of course I do, not everyone is skilled enough for me,” she snidely replies back to him.

“Knock it off,” Stone says, pulling out of the parking lot.

And they do.

“Did you find out if your parents are leaving tomorrow or not?” Haeden asks as he shifts, back straightening from his slouched position.

“Yeah, they leave at noon.” Stone answers him, hand flexing around the steering wheel. He stares into the rear view mirror, and for a moment we make eye contact.

The image of him naked with only a towel around his waist invades my head, and I’m ripping my eyes away from his. I just stared at him. And here I am, in the back of his truck.

He definitely hates me.

“Fuck, yeah! My brother’s buying us a keg and a bunch of other liquor,” Kingston says, not looking up from his phone as he types away.

“Thank god, I hate that keg beer shit,” Ivy mutters.

“Are you throwing a party?” I ask, eyes darting from one to the other.

Haeden leans forward to look at me on the other side of Ivy, a lazy smile on his face.

“Yeah. Why don’t you come? Seeing as you live right next door to Stone.” He smirks, a mischievous twinkle in his blue eyes. Warning bells sound in my ears, and I glance at the others.

Kingston still types away at his phone, Stone continues to sneak glances at me from the rear view mirror, and Ivy looks excited at the idea of having me there.

I shake my head. “I don’t think I should. I’ve never been to one of Stone’s parties. I heard they get wild.” I smile with tight lips, eyes glancing at the guy mentioned.

“Come on, you have to come,” Ivy pleads, bottom lip jutting out. My eyebrows raise in surprise.

I’m about to protest again when we pull up to grandma’s house.

“You owe me for helping you,” Ivy barter, her hand grabbing my arm. “This can be your payment back.”

I bite my lip, suddenly suspicious of their intentions.

Ivy never helped me until now. Even after seeing me walk home with paint dripping off my clothes, she didn't do anything.

Why did she decide to help me now? Of all times? And why does she want me to go to the party? We weren't friends, and her helping me doesn't make us friends.

They have something planned to humiliate me.

They don't humiliate though, they completely destroy.

Glancing from her to Haeden, the intensity in his eyes has a chill going down my spine.

“Y-yeah. Sure.” I swallow the lump in my throat.

“Great!” She smiles.

I open the door and slam it closed behind me. As I'm running up to the door, Kingston catches my attention.

“Hey!” he shouts.

I turn around and see his upper body hanging out of the window of the truck. Behind him, Stone watches.

“Wear something tight.” Kingston smirks. “It’d be a shame if you kept hiding those curves.”

My face flushes red, eyes darting down to the too short shorts. I glance up, gaze landing on Haeden. His eyes aren’t on my face, but my hips.

Overwhelmed and suddenly hot, I turn around and run inside, Kingston laughing behind me.

Chapter 5

ARIELLA

I wake up before grandma this time. The nightmare last night had me up at five this morning, and I wasn't able, or even willing, to try to go back to sleep.

I make us a pot of coffee along with scrambled eggs and bacon with a side of toast.

"How long have you been up?" Grandma asks when she comes in. Her navy blue robe matches her fluffy slippers, and her glasses sit on the tip of her nose.

I'm sitting at the table, mug in hand as I mindlessly scroll through my phone. I glance up and force a smile, noticing she looks just as tired as I do. I check the time on my phone. "An hour and a half," I answer.

She makes herself a cup of coffee and turns to frown at me.

"This is affecting you more than you want to admit." She sighs, pushing her glasses up. It's a pointless action, the frames slide back down. "And don't even try to deny it. It isn't healthy."

I frown and take a drink. It doesn't matter if I say I'm okay. Just as long as I don't think about it, I'll be perfectly fine.

Plus, it doesn't matter if it's affecting me. No one in town cares, dad doesn't care about what he did. And it's not like we have the money for me to see a doctor.

I have Mrs. Rivers.

Fuck Mrs. Rivers.

I shrug. “I’m already seeing the school therapist.”

She scoffs and takes a seat from across me. “What the fuck is a school counselor gonna do to help?”

I crack a smile. “That’s what I asked.”

“I’m serious, Ariella,” Grandma says softly. “It affects me too. He’s my son. The only thing is I wasn’t there to catch him in the act.”

My temples throb, and I push away the onslaught of memories.

“Grandma please,” I murmur. “Who knows, maybe the school therapist will help.” I know my statement is a lie, just as much as she does.

“You can’t even talk to me about it.” She frowns. “What makes you think you can talk to a stranger?”

Her question is valid. But the way I see it, for both of us, it’s a sensitive topic. I’m too worried about what I’m feeling, that if I talked with her, I’d be split in half trying to comfort her instead of myself.

And I'm sure she needs it, and maybe that makes me selfish for thinking of myself, but I can't help it.

If I talked to a stranger about it, I'd just have to worry about me and no one else. And that's even if I decide to talk about it. Going over it with the cops was plenty enough.

"It happened a couple months ago. It's still fresh," I mumble as I stand up. I'm done with the conversation. I know she'll push if I stay. "I'm gonna see if I can get an extra couple hours of sleep in."

I'm lying, and she knows it, but she doesn't say anything as I go upstairs.

I don't know how much time passes as I stare up at my ceiling. The knock on my bedroom door shakes me from the numb trance I fell into.

"Come in," I call out.

Grandma steps in, an envelope in her hand, and a frown marring her face. She isn't in her robe anymore, now in a purple blouse and jeans. She looks conflicted, eyes darting from it to my face.

"You probably don't want this..." she shakes the envelope in the air, "But I didn't feel right not telling you about it."

I sit up with furrowed brows. "What is it?" I ask.

She holds it out to me, and I take it, reading the sender address. A cold chill runs through me.

Mavison Welding Penitentiary for the Criminally Insane.

It's a letter from dad. After a month of being locked away in an asylum, why did he decide to write to me now? It's like God wants to see me crumble. He continues to put jagged rocks and high cliffs in the path of a good person.

I am good. I followed the rules, always did my best, and yet one bad thing after another happens to me. And yet my father, a bad man, is alive while nearly half a dozen people lay six feet beneath the earth for being good.

How does this make any sense? How is this God's will? Why does God punish the good?

Fuck God's will. Fuck God in general.

Didn't I make it clear that I don't want to hear from him anymore? That I want nothing to do with him, or anything remotely related to him?

"What are you going to do with it?" Grandma asks softly. She leans against my dresser, chewing on her inner cheek.

"I don't know," my voice cracks. I tilt my head back to look at her. "Did he send you one too?"

Her lips pinch together with a shake of her head.

After she leaves, I end up staring at it longer than I wanted to. I curse when a tear falls down my cheek. I hastily wipe it away and scoff. Out of everyone, he doesn't deserve any tears.

Yet despite my thoughts, they continue to fall.

I open my side drawer and toss it in before slamming it shut.

The letter takes up my thoughts for the rest of the day, until I hear the booming music coming from Stone's house next door.

I almost forgot about his party, with my mind stuck on what could be written in the letter. Am I really going to go? The only parties I was allowed to go to were dinner parties and holidays at the church. Dad never allowed me to go to high school parties.

I finally have a chance now.

Don't chicken out.

I hold up a yellow flower dress against my body, checking myself out in the mirror. With a wrinkle of my nose, I shake my head. The yellow is too bright, too much of an eyesore that screams attention. Definitely not this one. With a sigh I hang the dress back in my closet and pull out another one.

This one is blue, so dark I almost think it's black. Black lace lines the hem, stopping just mid thigh. It's long sleeved, with

the top half of the back cut out, leaving my shoulders bare.

I tilt my head, turning every angle to look at it. This one is better.

I pull it over my head and adjust it so it's on properly. It feels light and airy, pinching at the waist. I smooth down the wrinkles and twirl in front of my mirror.

It's not so bad. Unlike the yellow dress, the dark color compliments my pale skin.

I rummage through my closet once more and pull out black flats to go with it. The noise next door only grows louder the longer I get ready, the party reaching its full swing.

Once I'm ready, my eyes glue themselves to my reflection. I feel out of place, like a person in someone else's skin. It doesn't feel real. Doesn't feel like me. When was the last time I put effort into how I looked?

When was the last time I cared?

The urge to rip everything off is strong. What right do I have to worry about looks and parties when people are dead and buried six feet under because of my dad?

I shake my head, no. I have to do this. I just have to act normal for one night, even if I don't feel like it.

When I get downstairs, grandma is sitting on the couch watching a woman's talk show.

"Girl, if you don't get your shit together, something real bad is gonna happen." She smacks her lips at the screen, a bowl of fruit in her hands. When she hears the creak of the last step as I enter, she looks up and raises a brow at me.

"I think you forgot to mention you were going somewhere," she says when she sees the dress I'm wearing.

I cringe, guilty that I did forget to bring it up.

"Uh," I shuffle. "I made some friends." I chuckle, and it's pathetic because I'm lying. We're not friends. I'm just the stray Ivy picked up this week. Who knows how long she'll be entertained with me.

Grandma narrows her eyes but nods, "I always hated how he never let you have a normal teen's life. You never got to hang out with boys, did you?" she asks.

I shake my head, boys were a strict no.

She sighs and waves her hand at me, eyes trailing back to the TV. "Get out of my sight. I never saw a thing."

A rush of excitement bolts through me, and my breath escapes me. I'm really doing this.

I'm not doing this.

Stone's dad is out, his usual sleek, black Chevrolet is missing from the driveway. The front door is open, flooded with people going in and out. The lawn is full of people talking and laughing. I recognize some of them from class, and when they see me, they point me out to their friends. For a moment I slow down, doubt overtaking me.

Why am I even doing this?

I want to be normal.

I hold my head up higher and continue to the front door. Poltergeist by Corpse blares from the speakers inside, the music grating against my ear drums. And I stand on his front lawn, taking it all in with wide eyes, like I'm some stupid pre-pubescent freshman.

Here goes my high school party cherry. Pop.

I'm jolted back into reality when a girl stumbles past me, shoulder clipping mine. I take a few steps back, careful not to lose my balance as she rushes by.

"Little-church-girl really came to the party." Haeden steps out of the doorway, a glass of beer in his left hand. His grip looks tight, like he's afraid he'll drop it. He wears a plain black shirt and jeans, his belt doing nothing to keep them firmly around his hips.

His boxers have unicorns on them.

I lick my lips, hands gripping the hem of my dress.

His lips tilt up into a sneer, blue eyes narrowing as he takes in my summer dress. “You disappoint me, Ariella.” He tuts at me like I’m in trouble. “What happened to wearing something tight? Kingston will not be pleased.”

I flush red, shifting to put most of my weight on my left leg as I pop my hip out. “I don’t have anything tight.” I shrug, eyes darting to the party happening behind him.

He nods and shrugs. “Looks like I owe Ivy ten bucks.”

I frown at him, taking in the way his messy blond hair looks perfect, “Are you guys betting against me?”

“Would you get mad if I said yes?” He steps off the front porch and walks towards me. When he’s standing in front of me, I tilt my head back so I can look at him.

He’s so fucking tall. My gaze drifts to his biceps, then his chest. If I spilled a drink on him, would he take it off?

My breath hitches, skin lighting up when he curls a strand of my hair around his index finger. He gives it a firm tug, causing a dull ache when he pulls it harder.

“I’ve seen you happy,” he says, head tilting so he can look down at me. I remember my life before it flipped upside down.

Back then, I thought I was happy. But as I stand here now, I realize that wasn't happiness. That was me going with the flow because that was what everyone expected of a pastor's daughter. "I've seen you at your lowest," he continues. Then I remember the pigs blood, my destroyed car. Which I still have to get towed. "But I've never seen you lose yourself over anger." He leans down, and I'm frozen as his lips brush my neck. "Or how blissed-out you'd look getting freshly fucked," he whispers.

It's hot all of a sudden, the dress feeling too tight. I lick my lips, fingers twitching.

"I wouldn't be mad," I answer truthfully. I force myself to back up, holding my hands behind my back because I don't trust myself not to reach out and touch. And there's so much to touch.

I forget what we're talking about, feeling light headed. It was about money, I think. Betting, right?.

Focus, Ariella.

Compared to the other things done against me, betting money isn't so bad.

"Are you going to let me in or are we just going to stand out here?" The words escape me when I see a glimpse of Kingston. My head tilts, eyes following after him because- is that a dildo?

My brows furrow.

Haeden chuckles and steps aside. He holds his arm out, gesturing for me to come in.

It's cramped inside, the living room floor full of teenagers drinking and dancing. I first notice Stone sitting on the couch, his black shirt tight against his chest. Next to him is a girl with dyed green hair. I know her from one of my classes. His hand is on her thigh, fingers inches away from where her legs meet.

She's so lucky.

"Drinks are in the kitchen," Haeden whispers in my ear. I almost jump, but the hand he puts on my shoulder is heavy and keeps me in place. Although the music is loud, with him being so close, I can hear him clearly.

Stone sees me, gaze meeting mine, and I stiffen in front of Haeden when he presses his front against my back. Why does the house feel so small, now?

"Upstairs is a room for the drugs. Pot and coke. Unfortunately that's all I had tonight. Not that I think you'll do it." He chuckles, breath fanning across my skin. "Let's not forget the other rooms are meant for fucking." He lists off their entertainment for his guests tonight.

Blood rushes to my face, and I pull away, but the moment his heat is gone, I miss him. Would it be weird if I put myself back in the previous position?

“Where’s Kingston?” I ask, remembering the big, fake cock he carried in his hands.

Haeden shrugs. “Fuck if I know,” he says as he backs away. “Why don’t you go look for him?” He asks with a wink. “Have fun, Psycho.” He disappears into the crowd.

I stand where I am, taking in the drunken grinding and laughing as my peers indulge and dance. It’s no wonder dad never let me come to these things.

My eyes drift back to Stone, and my hands curl as I watch him kiss the girl’s neck. For the life of me, I can’t remember her name.

It’s a party, just a party, I tell myself. People party all the time. This is their normal. I can do this. I just have to relax.

Doing one more sweep of the room, I finally find Ivy. She’s in the middle of the makeshift dance floor, a beer in her hand as she grinds back on the girl behind her.

I decide against saying hi to her. She looks like she’s in a whole other world. I’ll see her when she isn’t so glued against her dance partner.

To avoid colliding with anyone, I walk along the wall to the kitchen. I ignore the glances and people chatting as I grab a coke from the fridge.

“Is that all you’re going to drink?”

I spin around, soda splashing over the rim of the can. “Shit.” I quickly back up, as if that’s going to help.

“Slow down,” Kingston laughs, taking away my drink. Soda drips down the container, and he must not care about the ring he’ll leave behind because he sets it down on the counter. I notice his empty hands and raise a brow.

Where did his dildo go?

“I’m sorry, you scared me.” I wipe my wet and sticky hand with a hand towel. “I don’t think I can drink without making a complete fool of myself. Plus, it’s not like I can drink.” Although, it doesn’t stop anyone else.

“You don’t think you can drink?” Kingston asks. He raises a brow at me and I look away.

Will it be weird if I ask him about it? Why does he have one? Is he gay? My eyes widen, and I examine him. He doesn’t give off that vibe, but then again, not every homosexual guy is expressive.

“Well, I’m not twenty-one yet,” I murmur with a shrug. I feel foolish saying it. He laughs out loud, and I shrink into myself. He definitely thinks I’m being stupid.

That’s when I see a guy with blonde hair walk past. And normally I wouldn’t look twice, however, the answer to my question from earlier is with him. Stuck to his forehead, like a magical unicorn horn, is the dildo.

“No one here is twenty one. Loosen up, killer.” Kingston laughs. The name doesn’t sound like an insult coming from him, but it sends a shiver down my spine nonetheless.

When he sees my expression, he looks over his shoulder and chuckles. “We were playing a game of dare,” he explains. “He lost.”

“How about a game?” He asks when I don’t say anything, eyes still glued to the dildo wearing unicorn. Only when he’s out of sight do I turn my attention back to Kingston.

“Huh?”

“Wanna play a game?” He chuckles, hand reaching up to tuck a strand of brown hair behind my ear. I suck in a breath when his warm fingers graze my cheek.

“I don’t want to end up with a dildo on my forehead.” I giggle with a shake of my head.

His green eyes light up at the idea. Fuck, he’s so beautiful, it’s unfair. “As entertaining as that sounds, we don’t have to play dare.”

“No?” I ask with furrowed brows. “What kind of game then?” I force myself to look away. I find myself staring at two guys making out on the other side of the room. My eyebrows raise in surprise. Being part of the LGBTQ+ community is a huge no-no in Bethany. My eyes dart to Kingston in question. When he sees what I was staring at, he laughs.

“Never seen two dudes make out before?” He asks, voice curious. I shake my head, eyes darting back to the daring couple. Either no one else around them notices, or everyone doesn’t care.

“Sure, sober, some of these fuck holes are wound up tight.” He snorts, then he raises a red solo cup and smirks. “But get a little liquid courage in them, and they turn into horny rabbits.”

I squeak, eyes widening when the bigger guy slips his hand into the back of the other guys jeans.

Kingston laughs at me. “How about beer pong?” He gestures to the occupied dining table full of red solo cups. I watch as two players throw ping pong balls at them, aiming to get inside the cup full of beer.

“I’ve never played, so I won’t be any good.” I chuckle as I watch one of the players chug a cup.

“It’s fine, I’ll go easy on you.” He winks. His hand finds its way to my lower back and he steers me forward. The place his hand touches heats up, and I wonder if he feels this hot all the time, or if the alcohol and buzz of the night has him extra heated.

“Game over.” Kingston cuts off the ongoing game and shoves the guy whose about to throw his ball. The boy in black jeans and grey shirt starts to curse, his group of friends watching. I’m sure the guy is about to throw a fist until he realizes who it is.

“Fuckin’ dick,” he grumbles anyway as he trudges to the backyard.

His group of friends stay, one stepping forward and greeting Kingston with a clap on the back.

“You playing?” He asks with a wide grin on his face.

“Yeah, set up the other side for her.” Kingston nods at me behind him. The guy who greeted him peers over Kingston’s shoulder to look at me. His eyebrows raise, and he turns back to him.

“You sure?” his voice drips with skepticism.

Kingston narrows his eyes. “You forget the rules, Winston?”

The guy, Winston, glares back at him before directing it to me. “No. Doesn’t mean I can’t question you for bein’ a dumbass,” he answers. He turns away and starts to refill the cups on the other side of the table.

“If you couldn’t tell before,” Kingston says as he rearranges the cups on his end, “The game is simple. You throw a ball into one of the cups on my end, and I have to drink. Vice versa.”

“That sounds simple enough.” I nod. I walk around and stand at the other end. I take in the space between me and his cups. I can manage a few tosses.

A guy from my left speaks up. “Kingston is a beast at beer pong. You’re fucking screwed.”

I squeak, eyes darting to my said opponent. On the other side of the table, Kingston has a satisfied smirk on his face, hand clutching a ping pong ball.

“I’ll let you go first,” he offers, tossing the ball to me. I catch it with fumbling fingers.

Sucking in a deep breath, I give a firm nod. It’s okay, I can do this. How hard can it be? I close one of my eyes, attempting to better my aim, and I throw it. The ball bounces off of a cup and lands in another.

“I did it!” I shout, a smile spreading across my face.

“A lucky shot, that’s all.” Kingston smirks. He lifts the cup and chugs the drink in seconds. With a hiss he drops it and grabs a ball. “I’m going to get you plastered, Psycho.”

We continue on like that, him entertaining the crowd with his skills and me getting my fill of alcohol. I struggle half the time to drink the beer, but I tell myself I won’t have the full party experience if I chicken out now.

Chapter 6

ARIELLA

I can't breathe, and I struggle to take in air. My head shakes, the move frantic. I groan when the world spins. I shouldn't have done that. After beer pong, we migrate towards a corner to talk, and maybe I'm just a little tipsy, but he is so funny.

"No more, I can't breathe," I hiss out. My cheeks hurt from smiling and laughing. I can't remember feeling so happy before. It's been so long since I didn't have bad thoughts filling my head every minute of every day.

"Okay, I'll stop fucking around." He smirks. "Don't think Stone will like you pissing on his floor."

I burst out laughing again, imagining his face if that happened. He would definitely hate me after that if he doesn't already.

"Why don't you go dance?" Kingston asks, bringing his cup to his lips.

"Can't dance." I giggle. "S'like watchin' a worm wiggle on the ground." I move my body like a worm and laugh.

Are my words slurring?

Kingston raises a brow. "That sounds like a great dance though." He bites back his smile.

I see him in a new light, giddiness over taking me. “You know what? You’re right.” I poke his chest. Then I poke him again, this time letting my finger stay on his pec. It’s so hard... and muscular. “These people deserve to see a real dance.”

And then I’m running into the living room, smiling when I hear him laugh behind me.

I stop at the edge of the crowd, eyes searching for a girl with black hair. I find her against the wall, talking to a guy. I rush to her and drag her away, ignoring her protests.

I stop in the middle of the floor, surrounded by all the other bodies. I turn to face her with an excited smile on my face, and I start to dance.

I don’t ever get to do this. I don’t go to parties and drink. I don’t dance. And I’m forever regretful for not going sooner.

I wave my hands in the air, fingers wiggling.

I have amazing spirit fingers.

“Are you drunk?” Ivy laughs. She starts to sway her hips, her arms raising, and she looks sensual. The twinkle in her eyes is mesmerizing, and she seems so different from her usual self. More lively.

Her allure is instant, and it’s no wonder she went from dancing with a female to talking to a male.

“Yes! I played beer pong with King!” I shout. I turn around and start to grind my hips into hers, just as I saw her doing with the other girl earlier. Ivy’s hands find their way to my hips, grip tight as we dance together.

“No wonder you’re like this.” She laughs at me, her breasts brushing against my back.

“Have you felt his pecs?” I ask her, my eyes wide with wonder as I remember the way Kingston felt when I touched him. “He’s so strong.” I sigh, eyes drifting close as I think about him.

“Yeah?” Ivy chuckles. She smirks at whatever she sees behind me. “What else do you like about him?” She grabs my arms and wraps them around her neck.

I hold her, teeth biting into my lip as my hips sway to the rhythm of the song. I can feel her thigh against my center as we dance, and a part of me wonders if she cares.

“His hair. I love his hair,” I answer. “Sometimes I imagine what it’s like to run my hand through it.” I bet it’s soft. Soft like a feather stuffed pillow.

Our conversation dies as we let ourselves get lost in dancing and belting out the lyrics to the songs that play.

“Do you want to see something?” Ivy leans in and asks, her lips brushing my ear, breaking our streak of singing song after song.

I nod my head, body vibrating with adrenaline. Ivy turns me around, pulling me back so my ass rubs against her front. She reaches up and grabs me by the back of my hair, turning my head.

That's when I see them. Stone and Kingston are sitting on the couch, eyes glued to my figure as we dance. Stone leans in towards his friend, and my breath hitches when he murmurs something to him, his eyes never once moving from my swaying body. Kingston smirks, and it's not the same one he gave me earlier today. It's darker, a promise of sin.

A shiver racks through me, a flare of heat filling my lower stomach.

“What do you see, Ariella?” she asks, her voice a soft murmur in my ear. And with her lips so close, it's easy to hear her over the loud music.

I make eye contact with Stone, his eyes dark from the shadows that cover his face. He doesn't look away, he holds me there, and I can't help but be his willing captive.

“Do you know how often they stare at you?” Ivy asks, her voice an octave lower. She slides a hand down my waist, and my breath comes in quicker pants. Stone's gaze lowers, and he watches the way she touches me. She grazes my thigh, her hand teasing at the edge of my pelvis.

A whimper escapes me.

My gaze drifts to Kingston's. He's leaning back against the couch, his legs spread wide, and a rolled joint held between two thick fingers. He brings it to his lips, eyes on my hips. When he brings the lighter up, the fire burning, his gaze snaps up. He nods his head, and his lips open to say something to his friend.

Heat surges through me, and suddenly it's all too much.

"I'm hot," I lean back and talk into Ivy's ear so she can hear me over the music. "I'm gonna step outside for a bit."

I pull away from her, body tense because I can still feel them staring at me. I walk towards the back door and find myself in the backyard. It's just as crowded out here, although a little more spread out as there's more room. The pool is lively with those who are swimming in it. They're loud with their splashes and chicken fight competitions.

The air is cooler out here, the gentle breeze refreshing against my damp, sweaty skin. I notice a stone bench towards the left of the yard, and make my way towards it. The carved rock is cold against my thighs, and I shiver as goosebumps rise on my skin.

The next thing I know, a rough hand covers my mouth, muffling my cry of surprise when I'm pushed against the fence that separates Stone's yard from grandma's. A muscular thigh pushes between my legs, and I stare at a red eyed Haeden. His pupils are blown, tinted dark in the shadows.

"Haeden?" It comes out on a heavy exhale, heart beating fast because for a moment, I thought I was in trouble. He could've

been anyone, and if it had been someone that really hates my guts because of what my dad did, then who knows what would have happened to me. “You scared me.”

His pupils dilate, and I squirm against him as he presses even closer.

“Fuck,” he mutters, a blonde strand of hair falls into his eyes. He roughly tangles his fingers into my hair. His tight grip yanking against my scalp, and I cry out in pain. He tilts my head back at an awkward angle, not once loosening his hold on me. Haeden leans in and forces his tongue down my throat.

I gasp, eyebrows raising. Instinctively, my body relaxes, my chest falling into him. He produces a low sound, a deep groan that vibrates through me. I whimper when he bites my bottom lip a little too hard, heat blooming inside me at the slight taste of pennies. He tilts my head further and licks a trail up the length of my neck.

“Haeden,” I whisper, my voice thick with a need I never felt before. He finds my pulse and sucks, teeth grazing along my tendons.

“Did you have fun?” he asks.

I whimper, hands grabbing at his shoulders to keep myself up right. “What do you mean?” I ask. My thoughts are scattered, my senses too focused on him. Everything’s too sensitive.

“Do you know how much I hate you?” he hisses into my ear, like it suddenly pains him to touch me. “Yet here I am, going

crazy after seeing you dance with Ivy like that.” His voice is husky, a low rasp that does something to my insides. I gasp when he bites me, the points of his teeth digging into my skin. It stings, yet the pain makes my stomach blossom with heat.

“We were just dancing,” I whisper, eyes drifting to those in the pool. What if someone sees us?

He scoffs and presses his knee tighter against me. “You’re fucking adorable, but you must be a naive little bitch if you think that didn’t affect me, Stone, or Kingston,” he growls into my ear. His hands wind tightly around my waist, forcing my hips to grind on his thigh.

I remember the way Kingston stared at Ivy and me, the dark look in Stone’s eyes.

“Wha-” my sentence is cut off with a moan.

“Such a pretty sound from even prettier lips,” Haeden murmurs. He bites and sucks on my neck some more, the assault sending shivers of pleasure through me.

“What’s happening?” I gasp out, my head tilting back against the fence.

“You shouldn’t have come to this party, Ariella. I’m going to devour you.” A shiver runs down my spine at the darkness that drips from his tone.

Before I can open my mouth, maybe say something to embarrass myself, we hear a crash and a shout sounds from

inside Stone's house.

"God damn it," he grumbles, pulling away. He grabs my hand and drags me behind him back towards the party. "Come on."

Dazed and breathless, I follow him.

When we're inside, there's a circle that's formed in the living room.

"Get off me you crazy bitch!" A girl screeches from within.

"How many times do I have to tell your skanky ass?" I gasp at Ivy's familiar voice. Haeden pushes his way through the crowd, and we come to a stop as I take in the scene.

Ivy is pulling a brunette haired girl off of Kingston's lap. The girl's incredibly short skirt rides up, revealing a black thong that has the crowd going crazy. Kingston remains relaxed on the couch, a smile on his face as he watches his friend pull the girl off of him. He doesn't seem bothered in the slightest. Stone is chuckling next to him, and I have to take a moment to watch him. I haven't seen him smile at all until this point.

"They don't belong to you!" The brunette shouts back, scratching at Ivy's arm to get her to let go of her hair. "I can make out with him if I want. It's a fucking party!"

"One you have no business being at," Ivy snaps back, and she pulls harder. When the girl manages to draw blood, Ivy hisses and yanks her arm back, "I know damn well, your bitch ass wasn't invited."

I don't recognize the girl she's arguing with, her face coming up blank in my mind.

It's scary watching Ivy. I've seen her fight before, but never so up close. I glance around, no one seems like they want to stop them. Some even look excited at the idea of a girl on girl fight.

"What's happening?" I ask, eyes darting from Ivy to the other girl.

Haeden glances down at me, a mischievous smirk stretching across on his face. "That's Theresa. She's a girl we've passed around before. Ivy hates her."

"Passed around?" I ask, my brows furrowing. "And why does she hate her?"

Haeden chuckles. "Let's go sit down and watch the show." He pulls me towards the couch where Kingston and Stone are sitting. They take notice of us immediately, Kingston's smile widening when he takes us in. My face flushes, remembering what Haeden was doing to me moments ago. My hand flies to my neck, slapping the skin there. I hope he didn't leave any marks.

Stone doesn't look happy to see me, especially when I'm forced to sit next to him with Haeden on the other side of me. Stone's jaw clenches, and I swallow the nervous lump in my throat.

“Stop being a fucking priss, Ivy. They want to have fun, so what if they want to have it with me?” The brunette Haeden dubbed as Theresa pushes Ivy back.

And realisation dawns on me. “I think I understand what you mean when you say passed around.”

Haeden chuckles at me and squeezes my hand.

Did they really sleep with her? All three of them? I swallow, did they all do it at the same time? Was Ivy there too?

The image is seared into my head, and I shift.

“Do they look like they want to have fun with you? It seems they’ve already moved on and found a new toy to play with.” She gestures towards me, and I jump when Stone’s hand rests on my thigh. His grip is firm, thumb brushing along my skin.

“What is she doing?” I squeak with wide eyes.

Theresa turns around, and her eyes blaze with fury when she sees Haeden still holding my hand and Stone’s on my thigh. I squirm between them, breath hitching when Stone leans down to whisper in my ear.

“Don’t look so scared.”

I almost whimper. Easy for him to say. He’s not about to join the cat fight.

“So what? They sleep with anyone that has a pussy and a pretty face. They’ll come back to me, they always do,” she hisses at me, making my eyebrows raise. It’s amazing how gullible some people are. Then again, who am I to talk?

I raise my hand, “Uhm, we’re not-”

Ivy groans, completely cutting me off.

“Why don’t you get it?” Ivy laughs without humor. “And I thought Ariella was supposed to be the psycho,” she scoffs. “No offence,” she says to me, hand waving it off. Speechless, I shrug.

“You plan on tossing her out any time soon?” Kingston drawls out, almost like he’s bored of the entire thing.

“You can’t be serious?” Theresa screeches as she shifts herself to stare at him. Her body and head twist at an awkward angle with Ivy still holding her arms behind her back. It’s a funny sight.

He shrugs. “It was entertaining at first, but now I’m just over it.”

Ivy laughs and drags the girl to the door, the audience is quick to part for her.

“W-wait!” Theresa shouts, but she’s thrown out the door and it’s slammed in her face. Right then the music starts back up

and everyone is partying again, almost like the entire thing didn't happen.

"What were you thinking, letting her in here?" Ivy glares at Kingston, her hand gesturing wildly at the door.

He smirks and shrugs. Then he runs a hand through his long curly brown hair. "I got bored." He laughs. My eyes track the movement, his muscles shifting with the motion.

"King." She pinches the bridge of her nose.

I stand up, pushing Stone's hand off my thigh and letting go of Haeden's hand.

"I think I need a drink to relax," I mumble.

Haeden laughs as I walk away towards the kitchen.

Chapter 7

STONE

Watching Ariella walk into my house wearing a summer dress that barely reaches her knees almost makes me bust a nut. I forget all about the girl sitting next to me, my eyes glued to her milky thighs hidden behind that swishing skirt. She always knew how to pull off the teasing-daughter-of-a-pastor look.

Imagine my fucking surprise when he turns out to have a thirst for taking away a life.

I didn't know anyone personally that was murdered. My family never went to church. Sure, my dad is religious, but his self-absorbed ass is too busy to attend a weekly gathering of the community to praise the god he worships.

While I wasn't directly affected by the incident, Haeden was. An old family friend of his was among the people her father killed. The confusion he's feeling now - whether he still wants her or hates her entire existence solely for being related to the man who caused his pain - is eating away at him. Either way he's still obsessed, and one is more dangerous than the other.

Although, Kingston and I aren't much better.

I'm just glad she didn't take Kingston's advice and wear something tight. I really would have nudded seeing all her curves.

Ariella Mackensie, daughter of a murdering pastor. Before all that, she was the sweet and untouchable girl that everyone

knew and loved. She's more reserved now, more quiet. And a hell of a lot more noticeable.

I have no empathy for her when everyone turns against her, blaming her for her father's crimes.

A part of me lives for it. To watch the pretty church girl get humiliated. To see her soft smile turn upside down. I especially love seeing the throne she sits on ripped out right from under her. I love watching reality dawn on her.

Life isn't always flowers and sunshine, sweetheart, and it's a kink I love on her.

I can only think, when will it be my turn to have her on her knees, crying for me instead of her busted up car?

I can't lie, I'm jealous that Lucas and Henry got her to do it first. But that's okay, I'll be taking a lot of her firsts.

Kingston manages to loosen her up, and I can't take my eyes off her when she grinds back against Ivy. The sweet and innocent girl gone wild makes my dick hard. My eyes shift to my best friend, a girl I grew up with since middle school. I'm not gonna lie, Ivy has an amazing body with curves in all the right places, but the girl is like my sister. The thought of unbalancing the dynamic of our group, and losing the only people I can rely on causes a wave of anger within me that I don't care to analyze.

When we hit fourteen, Haeden, Kingston, and I made a pact that Ivy will forever and always be off limits. And since then,

as far as I know, not one of us has touched her. Sometimes I wonder if Ivy feels anything towards us. As far as I know she doesn't. She's never hinted or shown any interest, and that's part of the reason why she's friends with us. Every other girl wants in someone's pants, if not all three of ours. And that doesn't work with friendship.

Despite that, we're still protective of her. My eyes drift towards the back of the room where Louis Masanove drinks a beer, his eyes stuck on Ivy. My eyes narrow... this fucking prick. He doesn't think I've noticed, but I have. I see the way he's been sniffing around her like a bitch in heat. I stay where I am, though. He hasn't done anything so far, so I'll continue to sit and watch.

"I don't see why we can't," Kingston argues from beside me as he watches her hips sway. The skirt of her dress swishes and raises as she dances. Curious, I glance around the room, finding more than one gaze on her. She may be labeled the town's next psycho, but that doesn't stop her from being any less attractive.

My gaze finds its way back to her, always drawn like a magnet.

I bet she can ride dick so well, like the good little girl she is.

My mind struggles to stay with the conversation, wild images of what I want to do to her distracting me further. What are we talking about?

Right, making her ours.

“Not yet,” I say back, eyes glued to the curve of her waist. “I want to watch her beg for it.”

It’s a valid reason, I think.

My mind drifts to Lucas and Henry, remembering the way she came out of the school with paint, her vandalized lockers, the pig blood... fuck that was brilliant.

I can’t lie, those two can fuck a person up.

The school may call her psycho just to tear her down, but when I look at her and see the innocent gaze on her face, the same one her father wore, I know it’s only a matter of time before she snaps too.

Let the others ruin her. I want to watch that shell around her crack apart until she breaks. I rub my jaw, hiding the dark smile that splits across my face.

I wonder which one of them will be her first victim?

“You’re even more sadistic than Ivy.” Kingston chuckles.

After the scene Ivy created, I watch Ariella walk back into the kitchen, dress skirt fluttering against her thighs. The hand that touched her clenches, and I tear my gaze away.

I definitely need to fuck tonight.

My eyes search around, trying to find someone with similar hair and build. I spot a girl dancing, her skin tight dress is more risky, slutty.

I can imagine it's Ariella instead of who it actually is. Images of my sweet psycho in lacey garments and crop tops fill my head.

I stand up and grab the girl who looks like her by the hand. She doesn't protest when I pull her up the stairs and into my dad's room. I never fuck in mine. That's my space, and I don't need easy fucks tainting it.

I'm quick to pull off her clothes, and when I lay back, she climbs on top of me.

It's easy picturing the small, innocent, church girl riding my cock. And she's who I imagine as the girl above me.

The image of Ariella coming up from behind Haeden, her pale face flushed, dress ruffled, and neck red with his obvious bites have me thrusting up into this forgettable one-nighter. I have to ask him how she tastes, that fucking bastard.

The sound of the door opening breaks my fantasy, and when the person doesn't leave right away, I groan.

“You just gonna fucking stand there and watch, or are you going to join? If not, then fuck off.” I lift my head to glare at whoever it is, and I nearly cum.

She’s standing there, my sweet killer, eyes wide and face red as she watches me fuck up into the girl who looks a lot like her. Can she figure out what I’m doing? That it’s her I see when I fuck this whore’s used cunt?

I grunt, trying to hold off on busting right there. Her eyes make it to my face, and she squeals before slamming the door shut as she runs away.

Little girl, just wait until I get my fucking hands on you.

Ariella

I’ve heard hangovers are the worst aftermath of a night of drinking. I’ve especially heard of the strange concoctions people swear by to get rid of it.

Waking up to a door rattling as the person behind it pounds their fist into it while having my first hangover just makes the entire situation worse. It sounds like the banging is in tune with pounding in my head. The sound and feeling so in sync that it’s driving me crazy. I grab the nearest thing to me, a pillow, and hold it over my ears

“Get the fuck up!” The angry voice shouts on the other side. It’s a familiar deep tone that has my brows furrowing. With a

groan, I press a hand against my temple and roll over.

“It must’ve been a good lay,” someone else chuckles from outside the room.

“Shut the fuck up!” the first one snaps back.

Once the voices register in my head, my body jumps up out of instinct, eyes wide. I’m full of instant regret as the ache in my temple worsens. I recognize both of those voices. Stone is probably angry that one of the rooms is still occupied, and Haeden sounds amused.

What time is it? Glancing out the window, I notice the sun is high in the sky. I see my phone on the nightstand and grab it.

It’s almost noon.

Stone slams his fist against the door once more. “Wake the fuck up, and get out of my house!”

I scramble to my feet, hissing as the cold floor touches my bare feet. When did I take my shoes off? After finding them scattered on the floor, I quickly put them on. Then I unlock the door, my other hand flying to my head in an attempt to ease the pain.

Stone’s glare doesn’t waver when he sees me on the other side, and Haeden laughs out loud when he takes in the state I’m in.

“Did the pretty little church girl lose her virginity last night?” Haeden asks, eyebrows raising high. The smirk on his face contradicts the dark look in his eyes, the blue as dark as the deep ocean. A cold shiver goes through me. The memory of him pressing against me, his lips on my skin, hits me like a freight train.

Fuck.

My eyes flick back to Stone, and images of him and a girl flash through my mind. I remember her on top of him. His feet planted firmly on the bed as he fucks up into her.

Oh god, I saw his balls! The way they swung up and down between his muscular thighs.

He’s so damn strong.

Blood rushes to my face, not helping my hangover.

“N-no!” I shout, unable to look either of them in the eyes any longer. Stone definitely remembers me barging into the room. And I’m sure Haeden remembers too.

My eyes narrow. Unless he was so drugged up that he couldn’t remember. I shake my head, it doesn’t matter.

“I’m just gonna go home now,” I murmur in embarrassment. I push between them, hands shaking as my arms brush against them. I half expect them to stop me. Why, though? I don’t know. Whenever it comes to them, I’m always compelled to do things I shouldn’t. Feel things I normally wouldn’t.

I can feel their eyes on the back of my head as I rush out of there, and I can't do it fast enough.

Chapter 8

ARIELLA

When I get home, grandma raises a brow at the state of my wrinkled dress and messy brown hair pulled into a bun on the top of my head. I clear my throat and shuffle on my feet, hands wringing behind my back.

“You know where the painkillers are.” She chuckles softly. But before I can trudge my heavy body upstairs, she calls me back. “I’m glad you’re making friends,” she hesitates, “Just make sure they are the kind you actually want around. And don’t think you’re not in trouble. We’ll talk after you rest. And then tonight you’ll be writing some scripture as a suiting punishment.”

I frown at what she says.

That is a punishment dad came up with when I was ten. I can’t even remember the last time I wrote from the bible. I’ve been good for years.

My mind drifts back to the concept of friends again. Are they my friends? They helped me when no one else did, at least Ivy did at the end. And they invited me over to their party, despite Stone not wanting me there. And Haeden-

My hand slaps against my neck, eyes widening as grandma chuckles at me.

Did he leave a mark on me?

“I-” A frustrated noise escapes me, and I run upstairs.

After my hangover has passed, I head downstairs to explain to grandma what happened last night. I apologized for not coming back home, even though it would’ve taken me two minutes flat just to walk next door. Then when she asks about my car, I cringe. I was wondering when she was going to ask.

As I tell her, I leave out the part where Kensey and Henry douse me with pig’s blood. Learning that they wrecked my car is devastating enough for her.

“Oh dear,” she murmurs. “I’d rather it be your car than you. I’m glad you’re safe.” She hugs me, and I feel guilty for hiding the full truth from her. But what she doesn’t know won’t hurt her.

“We don’t have the money to salvage it,” I say. I clear my throat, and shift to face her. “So I’ll just call a tow truck and have them take it to a junkyard,” I say with bitterness. I don’t like this plan, I’ve tried to avoid it at all costs, but I’d rather face reality sooner than later.

My car isn’t brand new, it’s rusty and old, but it was still reliable. It saddens me to have to see it go.

We go back to the school in her car, and I frown when I see it parked in the same spot as before. She takes in the cracked windshield and broken side view mirrors. There are dents all over it, and the tires are popped. The graffiti is still there too, fuck. I scratch the back of my head, I hate that she has to see this.

She sighs but calls a tow. We stand around it waiting, and I find it hard to part with it. Who knows when I'll have enough money to get a new one. For now I'll be walking to school; now an easier target among the other students who walk the same way.

Grandma wraps an arm around my waist as we watch the tow truck take it away.

"I'm sorry, Ariella," she murmurs, and we go home.

On Monday, I wait for Stone to leave first. I can't run into him after seeing what I did. How can I face him after that? Would we just ignore it and never bring it up? I would, but I don't know if he'll want to talk about it. Accuse me of being a pervert for just standing there, watching. Just like the girl in the library when I found her with Haeden.

I liked watching.

I shake my head and peek through the window once more, stiffening when I see him walk out.

Once his car is out of sight, I begin my walk to school.

I never realized how many students walk the same path I do, but now that they all throw different things at me, rocks or

rolled up paper, it becomes clear that quite a few people walk to school.

It's hard to ignore them when we're walking to the same place, but when I don't react, eventually most of them get bored and stop.

Luckily I don't see Haeden, Kingston, Ivy, or Stone. I may not have seen Kingston or Ivy when I left yesterday morning, but I'm sure they were brought into the know about Stone kicking me out.

I ignore the other students, ignore the new and hideous words written on my locker and gather what I need before heading to first period.

With my head down, I pass the time by doodling in my notebook.

By the end of the day, I'm a numb flesh bag.

Just as I'm about to head home, maybe lock myself in my room and wallow in self pity, a navy blue car pulls to a screeching stop in front of me.

"Where the fuck are you going?" Lucas rolls the window down and glares at me. I stare at him with furrowed brows. Why is Lucas talking to me and not throwing eggs at me? That and red seems to be a theme.

“Home?” My instincts force me back a step, preparing myself to make a run for it if I need too. A scoff escapes me because my instincts never helped me before. Why would they start now?

“You forget we got a project?” he asks, and for a moment, he sounds incredulous.

My brain is slow to process his words, and then I remember the essay we’re all supposed to be writing, along with a presentation for the class.

“Fuck,” I stomp my foot, unable to really express my true feelings. Why did we all agree to meet at Lucas’ house? We could’ve just gone to a park for fuck’s sake. Who the hell hates parks?

A part of me is tempted to say ‘fuck the project, fuck Mr. Williams, and fuck school’ and run away; just jump on a train and never look back.

But this is reality, and in reality I’m a little bitch.

I grumble how unhappy I am as I climb into his car, tugging too harshly on the seat belt.

“I was hoping you would’ve just walked away.” Lucas glares at me when he starts down the road. “I was dreaming about you being hit by a bus. Or I don’t know, being murdered by your father.” He shrugs, the words sound casual coming from him, like he isn’t purposely trying to hurt me.

My heart twists in my chest, and I try not to look affected by his words.

“Please refrain from dreaming about me in the future,” I mumble, “Even if it is about my death.”

“I can’t help it. I want justice served for our town,” Lucas hisses back.

Justice? I scoff. It’s not justice if I didn’t commit the crime. Besides that, a trial date hasn’t been made yet. Sure, it’s been almost two months, but evidence has to be gathered. Families need to be questioned. Witnesses need to be met. In other words, me. Besides that one time when I first caught him, I haven’t been questioned again.

“Wait for the fucking trial, just like everyone else in this damn town,” I murmur. Half of me regrets agreeing to see Mrs. Rivers rather than getting expelled and going to Redwoods, the town fifteen miles down the road. And that says a lot about how much I despise living in Bethany. I’ve never been to Redwoods, never left Bethany besides that one time dad took me and mom on a small road trip for a church retreat to Strawberry Bay City. But from what I’ve heard of town gossip, Redwoods is haunted.

And I’d choose dead spirits over live ones any day now.

Satisfied with his silence, I stare out the window.

When we reach his house, a black jeep is sitting in front. I can see Mason in the driver's seat, head tilted down as he types away on his phone. Thank fuck, at least I won't be alone with Lucas. I can handle him with Mason here.

Nothing will happen to me with him present. And yet the thought still scares me more than it should, because what if something does happen?

When we're inside Lucas' house, he takes us to a large room with a dining table. Lined on the left wall is the kitchen, and a bowl of chocolate calls to me. With fast hands, I grab a hand full and shove them into my jacket pocket. He's lucky I don't take the whole thing just to spite his hateful ass.

Mason snorts from my left, and I duck my head to hide my face. I like chocolate, so what?

"Everybody do research on their part?" I ask, setting my backpack on the table and sitting down. The other two sit on the other side, and we all pull out our notebooks.

"I just need a few more facts, and I'll be good," Mason answers.

"I'm done with my essay outline. I'll begin working on the first draft now," I say as I organize my notes.

I'm surprised that we focus so well on our assignment. Lucas doesn't mention me being a psycho, and Mason doesn't say much if it doesn't have to do with the project. I'm a little

happy to say that evening is as peaceful as it's going to get for me.

The next day when lunch comes around, I'm relieved. I don't give myself a chance to go to the cafeteria, the image of red paint making me avoid it all together, even during breakfast. I'll have to remember to pack myself lunches from now on. At least until all this nonsense around me dies down... if it ever does. Knowing the people in this town, I doubt that will ever happen.

Head down and hands holding onto the straps of my bag, I make my way to the doors that lead outside. I avoid going to the back side, knowing that Stone and his friends like to hang out there to smoke while avoiding the teachers. I remember how they were all leaning against Stone's truck when I came out covered in paint.

Besides the encounter with Kingston when he woke me up after I fell asleep under the bleachers, I think it's a good place to get away.

Seeing the courts empty, I smile. It brings a little peace knowing I'll be alone. And if not that, there's not enough people to drive me away.

I walk under the bleachers, avoiding the mass collection of gum in one particular spot, and take off my sweater. I lay it on

the ground, tossing my bag to the side and sitting down. Taking my phone out of my pocket, I set an alarm twenty minutes from now just in case I fall asleep again.

I take out the project I worked on at Lucas' yesterday and continue on with my essay. We agreed to work on the presentation together once all our essays are finished. The more I do as soon as I can, the less time I have to spend with Lucas. Especially at his house.

Loud laughter pulls my attention from the paper on my lap, and I cringe. Damn it, so much for being by myself. I glance up, squinting as the sun glares at me from above.

My heart picks up pace when I see Stone, Ivy, Haeden, and Kingston making their way to the other bleachers across from me.

"Please don't see me," I murmur as I scoot closer to the bottom of the stairs. I don't notice the spider webs, too desperate to be invisible and not embarrass myself further after what happened at the party. I watch them in silence, teeth nipping my bottom lip as Haeden lets out a laugh and punches Kingston on the arm. The latter shouts and aims back for him, but Haeden runs away, giving way for a chase. I smile, remembering when I was that care free with Melanie. The thought of her makes my heart ache, and I'm quick to push it away.

Just when I think I'll go unnoticed, Ivy sees me. Her eyes narrow, and she puts a hand above her eyes, as if blocking the sun would make her see better. My eyes widen, realizing that she caught me staring at them from between the steps, hiding like a fucking stalker.

Crap, crap, crap.

My face burns red when the others turn to look at me. Ivy waves her hand, and I reluctantly step into full view. They already know I'm there, I might as well get over my shame. I offer an awkward smile and wave back.

They don't acknowledge me after that, and I sigh in relief. I make my way back and sit down on my sweater, working once again on my project.

I just start writing down notes when I hear aggressive shouting.

I glance up and see a guy with blonde hair marching over to them. Behind him a girl with brown hair hurries to keep up and is followed by two other guys. She reaches the guy in front and grabs his hand, trying to pull him away.

Stone chuckles when he sees them, and says something to Ivy, too low for me to hear.

The blond guy shoves the girl away, and she stumbles on her ass. I can't help the snort that escapes me.

I watch with keen interest when the guy finally reaches them. He stands in front of Stone who still sits on the bleachers. Haeden, Kingston, and Ivy are seated on either side of him. Stone leans forward, elbows resting on his knees as he raises a brow.

“You fucked my girlfriend!” The blond guy accuses. His two friends flank him from behind, showing that he has back up. The girl, I assume his girlfriend, stands to the side, biting on her nails as she watches. Her eyes shift from the blond guy to Stone.

This is a common confrontation. Being friends with a gossip used to get me daily doses of interesting rumors. And if Melanie ever had anything to say when we hung out, it was mostly about the group of delinquents.

“You’ll have to be a little more specific,” Kingston smirks, “He fucks a lot of girlfriends.”

Ivy snickers on his right, and I smile with her. It isn’t a secret that he sleeps around.

Memories of me walking in on him with the girl from the party enters my head. I gasp, cheeks flaring, is this her? The girl from the party? Her hair looks similar, and she looks the same from behind.

“You fuck nut, I’m not playing around. Keep your filthy, STD infested self away from her.” The girl’s boyfriend steps forward, the act meant to be threatening, but Stone doesn’t look the least bit worried.

Instead, he shrugs. “Keep your loose cunt on a tighter leash. I doubt I was the only one she fucked last night, either.” He glances back at Haeden, a smirk on his cruel lips when his friend chuckles and leans back on the step behind him.

My eyes widen when I glance at the girl, her face burning red. She fucked Haeden after she finished with Stone?

My body heats, and I tell myself that it's just hot outside.

“Only thing I can guarantee, is that I definitely fucked her first that night. I don't like used pussy,” Stone continues.

My mouth drops open, and my eyes dart to the girl who lets out a hysterical screech. Face scrunched up, she runs back towards the school.

My eyebrows raise, did she think he was going to stand up for her? I shake my head, the poor girl, she should know better. Then again, I don't blame her. Stone is hot, and I'm sure he leaves a lot of girls wanting more than just one night in bed. Some girls know not to give him their hearts, but some girls wear them on their sleeves and hope otherwise, despite knowing his reputation.

If Stone ever flirted with me or wanted in my pants, I'd be quick to give in. And I know damn well, he'd take my heart with him.

“Let the bitch run.” The blond guy snaps when one of his friends turns to go after her. He turns back to Stone and glares. “Keep your dick away from the next one.”

“Maybe you should find one he already fucked,” Ivy pipes up, looking down at her hands. “He doesn't ever go back for seconds.” She snorts.

Haeden chuckles as he watches the guys walk away.

I drift back and catch Kingston looking at me. I freeze, is he upset at me for witnessing that? Is he going to come over here and demand that I mind my own business?

However, he doesn't move. He smiles, except it isn't a nice smile. It sends shivers down my spine.

Chapter 9

ARIELLA

“Ariella.”

I stop walking down the hall, my shoulders slumping because... fuck, I'm just a few steps away from my locker when Mr. Williams calls from behind me. I hold in my groan and turn around, a fake smile lighting my face.

“Yeah?” I ask, glancing back at my locker. He can take a hint right?

“Step into my classroom for a minute.” He nods to his open door, strands of his brown hair falling into his face. And no, of course he can't take a hint, who am I kidding? This is the guy who gave me the word psychopath to define in front of the whole class.

His glasses sit high on his face, and I tense. Looking around me, I hesitantly step inside. He doesn't close the door all the way, much to my relief.

“I wanted to ask how your session with Mrs. Rivers went.” His concerning tone grates on my nerves. Why is he feigning so much interest?

I'm the prime source of gossip. My lips pull tight, he's the teacher of the psycho's daughter. He gets to witness the drama around me first hand, and I bet the other residents of Bethany are eating out of his palm. I bet he fucking loves it

I narrow my eyes, no longer willing to hide my annoyance. “It went well, I guess.”

“I understand it’s difficult to open up to a stranger about personal things.” He smiles softly and shifts from one foot to the other. “It’s her job to approach difficult topics. Was there anything she asked that made you uncomfortable?” He almost looks like he actually cares.

I clear my throat, the entire situation is uncomfortable, but it’s not like I can say no to going. He did say it was mandatory after all.

“With all due respect, Mr. Williams, I believe these sessions are private,” I say, my voice hardening.

Mr. Williams chuckles. “Of course. I’m sorry if I’m coming off as too nosy. I worry about all my students.” He spreads his arms wide as if to gesture to the amount of desks and chairs he has in his room.

I nod my head, bored with this pointless conversation, and glance at the door. “If that’s all?” I take a step towards it.

“It is. You can go.” He nods at the door, eyes not leaving me.

I’m stiff as I walk out, risking a glance over my shoulder at him. He’s still staring at me, and a shiver runs down my spine.

He’s definitely a pervert. I bet the only reason Kensey is passing is because she’s sleeping with him.

Instead of going to my locker, like I was going to do before he interrupted me, I make my way to the bathroom. I glance at the stalls, relieved to find them empty.

My brain hurts, and my body feels exhausted, even though I didn't do anything physical today. Tossing my bag on the counter, I lean over it to stare at my reflection. The bags under my eyes aren't getting better. Maybe I should start skipping lunch all together and go nap in the library.

I shake my head, remembering having a nightmare when I fell asleep under the bleachers. That's definitely out of the question.

The bathroom door opens and laughter rushes in. My body tenses when Kensey, Lupe, and Maribel enter. Their laughter dies when they see me at the sink, eyes narrowing on the 'easy prey'.

"I was wondering when I could get you alone." Kensey smiles at me through the mirror. Except it doesn't put me at ease. The curl of her lips is sharp rather than soft. A threat.

I suck in a breath, my heart picking up pace in my chest. I'm all alone with them. There won't be a crowd to witness what they do to me here.

"I'm sorry to say, but I don't swing that way." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

Maribel snorts, her hand raising to her mouth as she tries to hide it. Kensey's smile drops, and she scowls at me. With a wave of her pink manicured hand, Lupe and Maribel grab my arms and spin me around so I'm facing her. My back presses against the top of the counter, and I wince as it digs into my waist.

"You think your tough shit now, huh?" Kensey hisses as she gets into my face. My nose wrinkles as I take in the caked on layer of foundation she has on her skin. Holy fuck, her pores are huge. Is that a zit on her eyebrow or a mole? I squint my eyes to see it better, and I have my answer when I see a white head. "You attend one of Stone's parties, and you think just because he defends you, you're not on anyone's shit list anymore?"

"I don't think anything." I glare at her, as I try to get her friends to release me, but they only dig their nails into my skin.

"His parties are neutral territory," Kensey continues, "Which means it's all about having fun. Any hard feelings are left at the door. But there is no way Ivy would defend you." She smacks my chest, and my left tit jiggles.

"My money don't jiggle jiggle, it folds," I whisper the song lyrics under my breath, twisting my body left and right in an attempt to dance. "I'd like to see you wiggle wiggle, for sure."

"What the fuck are you doing?" Lupe glowers at me. She shakes me, and I stop my little wiggle dance.

“Sorry,” I clear my throat. “I think I’m malfunctioning or something. I’ll go back to playing your little victim.” I nod my head and gesture for them to continue. “And... action!”

Kensey shakes her head. “I knew you were crazy. It’s funny. Did you threaten to kill her? Did you threaten to kill them?” She taunts me, pushing me back with each question despite me having nowhere else to go. So she just ends up really close again.

“Are we gonna kiss?” I whisper, because her lips are the only thing I can find myself focusing on rather than what she’s saying. I try not to show her how bad it hurts me. “I ask because I think I remember mentioning before that uh, you’re not really my type.” I focus on her over glossed lips.

Before she can answer, the bell rings for the last period. I begin to sag in relief, thinking they’ll walk away. However, they aren’t moving.

Lupe and Maribel don’t let me go, and they stay exactly where they are. If anything, their grip on me tightens.

Kensey smirks. “Psycho or not, even you can’t overpower them. They are them, and you are...” She pauses and gives me a once over. “Well you’re you.” Her nose scrunches up in disgust. “Are you, perhaps, offering yourself up to them? Did you suck their dicks in exchange for one night of protection? To get away from your shitty life? Honestly, I’m just trying to understand because it doesn’t make any sense.”

My face burns, from both embarrassment and anger. She doesn’t know anything. She doesn’t know that Ivy came to me

and offered her help. She doesn't know that the guys want nothing to do with me. The image of me and Haeden kissing comes to mind, but it quickly burns away.

If anything, he was playing with me. Why not mess with the vulnerable girl who's desperate for positive attention again?

"It's not like that," I attempt to say, but pain explodes in my left cheek. My head whips to the side, and my eyes start to water.

"A psycho and a liar," Kensey hisses at me as she shakes her hand out. I struggle to get out of Lupe and Maribels hold when she lands another blow to my other cheek..

"Stop! Let me go!" I shout. Multiple hands pull at my hair and scratch my face. My temple begins to pound when someone shoves my head back against the mirror. Wetness drips down my lip, no doubt blood as pain erupts from the area.

I kick out, small satisfaction making me smile when Maribel lets out a yelp.

"Fucking bitch," she growls before every bit of air inside me leaves my body. I hunch over when her fist repeatedly hits my stomach.

They let me go, and I fall like a sack of potatoes. My head explodes with pain when it's slammed one last time against the tile floor. The world spins around me, and they quickly shuffle out of the bathroom as laughter echoes back to me.

I don't know how long I lay there trying to gain my bearings. Everything hurts.

When I'm finally able to breathe normally, I grab the edge of the counter and pull myself up. I whimper, seeing the sight of my face. My bottom lip is split, and there's blood smeared down my chin. My cheeks are scratched up, and one of my eyes is red and puffy. I can already see the discoloration of bruising happening.

I let out a sob and stand on shaky legs. I splash water on my face, washing the blood off my chin through blurry eyes as I cry. I dab a wet paper towel on my lip and wince at the sting.

What have I ever done to deserve this? I was a good girl. I went to church, did what I was told, got good grades. I was never bad.

Yet why am I here, suffering for my crazy father's crimes?

I sniff and blow my nose. There's no way I'm going to class now. No way I can face the rest of the population.

I pick up my backpack that fell to the floor during the scuffle. Reaching the door I lean my ear against it. It doesn't sound like anyone is out in the hall, everyone is in class. With a pounding heart and a throbbing body, I step out. I duck from the classroom door windows, not wanting to get called out by a teacher.

Reaching the back door of the school, I walk outside.

My eyes blur again when I realize I have to walk home too, because they destroyed my car. Damn it, why couldn't one thing go okay?

I just want to go a day where I'm left alone. I think back to before my dad snapped. I had friends, Melanie and I were nearly sisters. But apparently that friendship only went so far. Thinking about her makes my heart ache along with everything else.

I wipe my tears and step forward only to freeze. I'm struck with déjà vu, and my entire body heats with embarrassment. My life is full of common themes. Just like the first time I walked out this door from being bullied, Stone leans against his truck, a smoke in his hand. Beside him, Haeden looks at me over his shoulder, blond hair falling into his red eyes.

They both watch me, taking in my busted lip and scratched face. My back is stiff, heart picking up speed because, out of all people, it had to be them I run into. There must be an evil spirit cursing me because it feels like everytime something bad happens to me, these guys and their other two friends are always there to see my humiliation at the end.

"Looks like fighting seems to be on everyone's agenda today," he says, voice just loud enough for me to hear. He stretches out his hand, and I can see the black and purple bruises lining his knuckles. That's not the only thing I notice either, his veins are prominent, and his fingers are long and thick.

Haeden snorts. He turns to fully face me and pulls a rolled joint from his hoodie's front pocket. My eyes immediately dart to his hands, curiosity taking over me. Are his fingers just as long? Just as thick?

Stone clears his throat, and my gaze snaps to him.

Fuck. Right.

I clear my throat. It would have been a fight if Maribel and Lupe didn't hold me down. If they even gave me a chance to defend myself. What happened to me wasn't a fight, it was a jumping. They cornered me in the girls bathroom for what? Because Ivy and the guys defended me? Because I wanted to get away from glaring eyes and mean words for one night?

Because she's jealous.

My heart palpitates, and I duck my head, hoping my hair covers my face. I turn away from them and quickly walk towards the gate. I don't get very far, flinching when a firm, warm hand grabs my wrist. I flinch, remembering how they held me down, and I try to rip my hand out of his grasp.

Haeden doesn't let go though. His grip tightens, and he forces me to turn around.

"Look at me," he growls, voice low and threatening. I cringe, but lift my gaze to his, my hair falling back to reveal my beaten face. He stares into my eyes for a moment, before his gaze drifts over my injuries. His thumb rubs over the quick pulse in my wrist.

He nods back to Stone's truck, "Get in."

I don't move, just stare at him. If Kensey hated me because these delinquents defended me, what would she do if she knew Haeden was offering me a ride?

He tugs me, and when I start to follow, he drops my wrist.

I jump in the back seat of the truck while Stone gets in the driver's seat and Haeden in the passenger. The leather on the seats are still intact, and the fabric for the roof is ripped off, revealing the metal ceiling.

"Is there a reason why you both are skipping too?" I ask, eyes stuck to the way Stone's bruised knuckles tighten on the steering wheel.

I bet they would look so pretty around my throat.

He pulls out of the school's parking lot, taking a left instead of a right, in the direction of our houses.

"Does it fucking matter?" Stone asks with a shrug.

"I guess not." I frown, looking out the window. I debate whether or not to bring up that he's going the wrong way, but he knows that. "What about Kingston and Ivy?" I ask, noticing their absence.

"Kingston can't ditch as much as we can. His dad won't let him." Haeden chuckles, but it lacks any humor. He kicks his feet up on the dashboard and sparks up another rolled joint. "Fuck knows why Ivy stayed."

“Saw that prick, Louis, talking to her again today.” Stone grunts out as he takes another turn. I glance between them, trying to figure out which Louis they were talking about.

“Football player Louis?” I ask. “Or chess player Louis?”

“Football. Son of a fucking whore is chatting up Daisy on the side, and trying to pick up Ivy at the same time.” Stone laughs out loud.

My brows raise. Ivy doesn't seem like Louis' type. Like Stone said, he usually goes for girls more like Daisy- reserved and quiet. Not outspoken and intimidating like Ivy. Either way, he isn't good enough for either of them.

“I don't like him,” I say with a frown.

“Join the damn club, sweetheart.” Haeden looks back at me from the front seat. He stares at my busted lip, and I wonder if it's still bleeding.

“Does Ivy like him?” I ask. Haeden turns to face forward again, his hands clenching at his sides.

“She won't say. She hasn't mentioned talking to Louis, we only know because we saw them a few days ago,” Stone says.

“Oh.” I nod my head. Louis doesn't seem like Ivy's type either. “Where are we going?” I ask, taking in the edge of

town. There are fewer buildings here, and fields become frequent in passing.

“We’re almost there,” Stone answers.

When the truck slows to a stop, we’re parking in front of what looks like an abandoned house. The windows are boarded up, and the walls are spray painted with profanity and dicks.

“Is this what a crack house looks like?” I ask, genuine curiosity in my voice. A shiver goes through me because the whole area gives me creepy vibes. It’s different from feeling like I’m on display all the time, being watched to see if I’ll snap at any moment too. It’s a nice feeling.

Haeden laughs. “What the fuck did this bitch just say?” He directs at Stone who smiles. He starts walking towards the house.

“I thought it was a good question.” I shrug and follow after him. “Do either of you happen to have pain relievers? Those bitches have heavy hands. Which is funny considering they’re all weightless,” I mutter the last part.

“No painkillers, just booze,” Stone says back to me. He pulls out his keys and unlocks the boarded up house.

I’m surprised to find that the inside isn’t dirty at all like I expected it to be. The house is empty, save for the brown stained couch in the middle of the room. A red cooler sits next to it, along with a boombox stereo and a small table that wobbles. Pushed against the far wall is a TV and dresser. A

video game console and remote controllers for it are on top of a cardboard box.

“Will alcohol really make my face stop hurting?” I ask skeptically. “You’re not just saying that to get me drunk are you? Are you secretly trying to get into my pants?”

Stone smirks and steps up to me. His hand brushes against my waist, his fingers hot as it presses into my shirt.

“Babygirl,” he murmurs, his voice an octave lower than usual. Goosebumps raise on my skin as he continues. “I don’t need booze to get you naked, do I?” It doesn’t sound like a question though. More of an observation, a fact.

I breathe in deeply, the smell of his cologne intoxicating. Like a dewy winter morning.

“No,” I murmur, my eyes flashing up to his. Unable to hold his gaze, I quickly turn away and shake my head. “Just, get me a shot then. My head hurts too much.”

“Come here.” Haeden grabs my hand and drags me to the couch. He pulls me onto his lap, ignoring my strangled noise of protest. Next to him, he digs through a first aid kit.

“Where’d that come from?” I ask curiously.

“You forget we fight often?” he asks. He dabs my split lip with a cotton ball soaked in disinfectant. It stings, and I pull away.

“Keep still,” he mutters, hand grabbing my chin to keep it in place.

I don't reply as I sit there, struggling not to shift in his lap. His thighs are warm under mine, and are so strong. I stare at his biceps, the shadows defining his strength makes my mouth water. He could definitely pick me up with no problem.

“You gonna tell us who did this to you?” Haeden murmurs as he applies an ointment to my lip. I take in his hooded blue eyes, and notice the whites are red.

“Why do you visit Mrs. Rivers?” The question is out of my mouth before I realize it. My eyes dart to him, noticing the way his lips tilt downward.

Is it because of the drugs? Is it because of his grades? Are his visits mandatory too?

“Because I need help,” he mumbles, and it's so soft I almost don't hear him. I don't reply right away, mulling over his statement. He needs help.

Stone is quiet when he walks over to us. He stands behind my left shoulder, holding two shot glasses in his hands. He hands one to me.

“Help for what?” I ask when he doesn't elaborate. I stare down at the brown liquid, watching as it sloshes against the wall of the glass. The smell is strong, and makes my mouth water in anticipation of the burn. The only time I ever drank was when I accidentally took a sip from dad's flask when I was eleven.

Behind me, Stone tilts his head back and downs the alcohol. He hisses, eyes squeezing shut, and he walks over to the stereo.

Haeden pokes a little at my eye, the swelling having gotten worse. “There doesn’t happen to be any ice in the chest, is there?”

He shakes his head. He lays his hands on my thighs, his touch burning my skin despite the layer between them. Behind me, the artist Jelly Roll begins to play.

“I’m a fucked up person, Ella.” He shakes his head, a sigh escaping him. He lifts a hand from my thigh and runs it through his hair.

“You’re never sober,” I point out.

“No fucking shit.” He laughs, like him altering his state of mind isn’t a problem.

“You’re addicted,” I point out once more because he needs to realize this is serious. “Maybe you should have an intervention.”

“What the fuck, dude?” Haeden hisses. He pushes me off of his lap, and I land on the floor with a yelp. I groan, my tailbone throbbing from the unexpected landing. “We didn’t come here to dissect my life. We came here to relax.”

I bite my lip when he walks away from me, not bothering to help me up when he was the one who threw me down. When my vision begins to blur, I duck my head and push myself up. I clear my throat, feeling Stone's heated gaze.

"I should probably head home," I shuffle on my feet. "The school most likely called my grandma." I clear my throat when my voice cracks.

"You gonna cry now, psycho?" Stone asks. He walks over to me and bends down so he's at my height. His brown eyes are dark. "Gonna go home and wallow in your self pity?" He sneers at me. "You need to get over yourself. The only reason we did this is because Ivy would've gotten angry if we didn't help you."

My eyes narrow back at him. Of course, he did this for her. She's the one that got me involved with them when she helped me to the locker room to wash off all the pig blood.

"As desperate as I am to have friends, it's not enough to let my pride go and be belittled by you," I say. "You tell Ivy I said thank you, but her help isn't needed or wanted anymore." I clench my jaw. With that I turn away and march out of the house. However, when I remember that it's miles out of town, I halt.

Fuck me. Fuck you. Fuck everything.

I turn back around and march right back in.

"Drive me home, damn it."

Chapter 10

ARIELLA

“The nerve of that teenage, little b-” Grandma cuts herself off and lets out a huff, “witch.” She finishes under her breath. She’s reasonably upset after I explained to her why I resembled butchered meat. She leans into me and wraps her arms around my waist, pulling me into a hug. The scratchy fabric of her sequin blouse rubs against my skin. “We have to report this. It’s getting out of hand.”

I pull away, my hands tight on her shoulders as I hold her at arm’s length. “No, if we press charges, things will only escalate.”

“It’s already escalating, Ariella, look at you.” She waves a hand up and down my beaten figure. “When is this going to stop?” Grandma asks me, her thin brows furrowing.

I hate that she has to see me like this. Torn down and broken. I remember my conversation with Ivy in the school’s locker room the day my car got wrecked.

It’s going to get worse whether you do something or not. If you stand up for yourself, you’ll be a fighter. At least then you won’t feel like you’ve given up.

I remember how confident Ivy was at the party, how she didn’t care what she looked like in front of others.

“It’s going to stop now,” I say, my voice firm. A new resolve building inside of me, determined to stop being the doormat everyone walks on.

The only way I convince my grandma not to press charges is by agreeing that if it happens again, there would be no stopping her when she calls the police.

Staring into the mirror, I poke my left eye and hiss. The swelling has gone down, leaving behind a nasty red and purple bruise that reaches towards the bridge of my nose. It matches the ones on the other parts of my body.

Kensey and her friends may worry about breaking nails and how they present themselves, but they are far from the daintiness they display. The makeup I put on does nothing to hide the bruise, which doesn't surprise me after the red paint fiasco. I really need to look into a better brand of foundation.

I turn the other way to look at it from a different angle. If I were Ivy, how would I go about this?

She'd own it.

I bite my lip, knowing that Ivy wouldn't let bruises stop her from being a badass. Hell, it probably made her look more like one.

Okay, I can do that. I can use this to my advantage.

I change into jean shorts that I cut from a pair of jeans and a black t-shirt that shows a sliver of my stomach, then I pull on

my shoes. It's different from my skirts and dresses. My mouth twists as I second guess myself. I look weird... awkward.

No, I shake my head and narrow my eyes. I won't let myself back down. I have to do this.

"Okay, Ariella." I puff out my cheeks as the air is exhaled from my lungs. "Starting from now, this is a new you!" The words lack the conviction I wish I had.

Just as I'm about to give up once again and change back into what I wore before, grandma calls me from downstairs.

"Coming!" I shout. I take one last look in the mirror and shrug, it's the best I can do. I grab my backpack and head downstairs.

"- down soon. Can I get you anything to drink?" Grandma's voice reaches me when I'm halfway down. Standing on the other side, away from me in the living room is a woman with her blonde hair pulled back into a sophisticated bun. A few loose strands lay against her neck, grazing the gray blazer she wears. Under her grey slacks are a pair of black leather shoes with a skinny heel.

"I'm fine. Thank you," she answers back. Grandma gestures for her to sit, and after a small hesitation, she does.

"Grams?" I ask, confused by the guest.

At the sound of my voice, the woman snaps her gaze to me. The intensity in her green eyes has me taking a step back.

“This is detective Shae. She’s working on your father’s case.”
Grandma’s eyes are slightly wide, and I don’t blame her.

“Detective?” I ask with furrowed brows. Why would a detective be working on his case? Sure, he’s going on trial, but that’s mostly for formalities, everyone knows he’s guilty.

“I was hoping I can ask a few questions?” she asks. She stands back up and pulls a small note pad from her blazer pocket.

“I’m sorry, I’m confused. Why are you working on his case?”
I ask.

Shae turns to my grandma, and then back at me, eyebrows raising. “They haven’t told you yet?” she questions in return. “Fucking dicks. They had one job.” She pinches the bridge of her nose. When she drops her hand, she continues.

“We’ve come across some new evidence that changes the entire case.” She glances back to Grandma before her gaze returns to me. “It’s an open investigation, now. We believe he wasn’t working alone.”

I find myself back in the church. The edges of my vision blurry as I watch my father. He sits at his desk, a bright smile on his face as he talks with the person in front of him. Blood stains his shirt, his hands, his face. I take in the back of the person’s head, and recognize the short red hair.

Oliver Pence.

When he doesn't turn around, I know he's dead too. But dad doesn't care as he continues to have a one sided conversation.

"Daddy?" my voice shakes. "What did you do?"

His brown eyes snap to mine, his pupils blown wide, and I stumble back. Who is this man? Where did my real father go?

Squeezing my eyes, I take a few deep breaths as I force myself back to the here and now before focusing my attention on the detective. "What did you find that suggests he wasn't working alone?" I whisper, clearing my throat when my voice cracks. Surely, I would've found that person with him. But he was by himself. There was no one else there.

He did it all by himself.

But what if he didn't?

"We found a second murder weapon," Shae announces. "I think you should sit down, Miss Mackensie. You don't look too well."

No fucking shit, you just said my dad wasn't working alone when he was cutting into innocent people's throats.

I stumble to the couch and drop down, still trying to process. Were they still there? Were they still at the church when I got there? Were they watching me when I confronted my father?

Shivers wrack through me. I can't believe it.

“What do you need me for?” I ask, voice cracking again. “I already answered the police’s questions.”

Shae glances at Grandma, and then back to me. “Do you know of anyone that could’ve helped him? Anyone at all?”

“Are you fucking stupid?” I hiss out and jump to my feet, my chest tightening with an emotion I can’t identify. “He was a god damn pastor! No, I don’t know anyone that could’ve helped him. I didn’t even know this was something he was capable of!” I laugh, but it’s hollow and empty.

“Calm down, Ariella.” Grandma’s voice is stern. She glares at me, and I shake my head.

“I can’t calm down,” I hiss back at her. I don’t mean to. I don’t want to lash out, but there’s only so much a person can take. “I found him like that, Grams! Me! And I get blamed for it too. And now this woman comes here and tells me that he wasn’t killing alone. He had some sick partner helping him cut into the throats of our neighbors.”

I didn’t catch the second murderer. That person is still out there, unidentified, and could kill again at any moment.

It is my fault.

“Perhaps I should come again another time,” Shae says, standing up. She gives my shoulder an awkward pat before turning to my grandma.

“Call me when she’s calm enough to talk again.” Shae hands grandma a card. She gives me one last, lingering look before she leaves.

“I can’t believe it.” I pace the living room.

He wasn’t working alone. But who was his partner? Someone from out of town? Someone who’s lived here their entire lives? My mind drifts to the notes I’ve been receiving, are they connected in some way?

“Ariella,” Grandma grabs me by the shoulders and looks into my eyes. “Go to school. Don’t overthink it, okay?”

Easy for her to say.

When I step outside of the house, there’s no sign of Detective Shae ever being here. My eyes are drawn to Stone’s house, and I find him in his car, eyes locked on me.

He raises his hand, beckoning me to him. Biting my lip, I make my way over.

“Are you waiting for me?” I ask.

Stone smirks, “Maybe.” Then he frowns. “Who was that lady? She looked all formal and shit.”

“Well, if you haven’t heard yet, then you will soon,” I mutter as I glance down at the gravel path way. “She’s a detective working my dad’s case.”

“Detective?” Stone asks, eyes narrowing.

“Yeah, apparently he wasn’t working alone,” I mumble. Shuffling my feet, my eyes stay glued to the rocks as I get lost in my thoughts again.

I just don’t understand. All the victims died the same way, with their throats cut open. And besides the murder victims, my dad, and me, there was no one there. They must have left before I arrived then.

Or they were hiding. Watching.

The thought sends shivers down my spine.

What if they kill again?

It’ll be all my fault. I didn’t catch them like I should’ve.

“Hey,” Stone snaps his fingers in front of my face. I blink and lift my eyes to him. He stares at me, taking in my frown and dull eyes. “Get in. I’m taking you to school.” He nods his head towards the passenger seat.

My feet move on automatic, and then I’m in his truck.

It’s silent for a while, and I wonder if he’s thinking about the second murderer too.

When he makes a right instead of a left, I lean forward.
“That’s not the direction to school.”

“No shit,” he mutters, “We’re picking up the others too.”

It doesn’t take long to get them; Haeden, Kingston, and Ivy settled in the back seat. When we pull up to the school, Stone parks near the school entrance. When I climb out of the truck, I notice that the students who stand about the front courtyard are staring. My hands clench into fists, and I suck in a breath. I can’t let them get to me.

“Thanks for the ride.” I turn to Stone who slams his door shut. I take a step back towards the front doors, but Ivy grabs my wrist.

“Who said you could leave?” she asks with a smirk. She drags me to the back of the truck where Haeden is leaning against it, arms crossed over his chest. His green long sleeves cover his arms, hiding his tattoos. Stone and Kingston are dressed similarly, also to hide the tattoos that are permanently etched into their skin.

“We’re not done with you yet.” Kingston smiles, the sharp curve of his lips almost makes me swoon.

“Are you trying to seduce her?” Ivy glares at him. “And you...” She steps away to give me some space, “We’re not going to hurt you so stop acting like it.”

I bite my lip and nod.

“Good.” She steps towards me and gently grazes the side of my face, where my bruise is. My gaze immediately snaps to Stone, noticing that he’s already watching us. “Dumb blonde bitch can’t fight one on one,” she murmurs. Her hand drops, and I notice she’s clenching her fist.

“How did you know it was her?” I whisper, eyes glancing between the four of them. I don’t remember telling Stone or Haeden anything last night.

“No one is stupid enough to touch you but her and her monkey crew,” she sneers. “Although that’s besides the point, you’re with us now,” she states.

My brows furrow, and I tilt my head. “With you?”

“Yeah.” Ivy nods her head, eyes narrowing as she glances at the guys behind her. “Does anyone have a problem with that?” Her eyes dart to Haeden, who pulls a lighter from his jeans front pocket. He flicks it, the flame dancing at his fingertips. He stares at it for a moment before his gaze flicks to me.

He’s probably still upset with me. All I did was ask a question yesterday. He didn’t have to get so pissy about it.

Haeden glares at Ivy, his jaw clenching, and he gives a subtle shake of his head.

Ivy turns back to me. “Someone fucks with you, tell us. We’ll deal with them.”

Is this it? Are we all officially friends? A small smile graces my face.

They don't know that the only reason Kensey jumped me is because of them. But it doesn't matter.

I'm surprised when Haeden speaks up.

"We come with a price though."

"Oh?" I squeak out, my throat that's quickly drying up. Of course, they'll want something in return, how silly of me. I bite my lip, trying to hide my disappointment. My eyes dart to Stone, not once has he taken his eyes off of me. His dark eyes are always calculating, searching, but who knows for what. I shift to look at Kingston, and the filthy smirk on his face makes my lower stomach clench. Finally, I turn to Ivy. She doesn't protest, leaning back as she waits for Haeden to elaborate.

However, when he doesn't continue, I ask, "What's the price?"

"We do this, then you belong to us," Haeden says, tilting his gaze away from the sky. His dark eyes gleam, a darkness I don't like burning inside them.

"I'm so fucking down for that." Kingston smiles. He shifts on his feet, taking a step closer, and I suck in a breath at all the possible things they could want me for.

"Can you elaborate, please?" I whisper, eyes darting back to Haeden.

He smirks at me, blue eyes twinkling. “It’s exactly as I said, Ariella.” He steps towards me, and I gasp when he grabs the hair at the back of my neck. He pulls, tilting my head back, and I whimper at the sting it brings. “You will belong to us. You’ll be mine to do with as I please.” He nods back to Stone before saying, “You’ll be his to do with as he pleases. Same for Kingston... and Ivy.”

My eyes dart to the black haired girl who sighs and then shrugs. “Is that something you can deal with?”

Is it?

I shake my head. “No, it’s not.”

Haeden scoffs, but before I can let anyone talk, I continue.

“I don’t want your protection.” My eyes stay locked on Haeden. He glares at me, and I wonder why he’s always so hot and cold with me. He kisses me at the party; then he’s rude the next day. I get hurt, and he treats my injuries; yet once again, he’s back to being indifferent with me. I reach up and force Haeden to let go of me. When he does, I step back and take in a breath that isn’t infused with his scent. “I want your help, instead.”

“Help?” Stone asks, drawing my attention to him.

I nod, forcing myself to continue because I can’t let myself back out of this now. I have to be committed. “I’m sick and tired of being a pushover. I’m not going to let Kensey and her

friends get away with what they did to me. Instead of your protection, I want your help getting revenge. I want to make her suffer.”

“Just her?” Kingston smiles and tilts his head to the side. Lucas and Henry’s faces flash in my head.

“No, not just her,” I say, voice hard. “I want revenge on them all.”

Chapter 11

HAEDEN

I have to hate her. I need to hate her.

Any feelings I had for her before can't exist. I won't allow it. It doesn't matter if I wonder whether or not her brown hair is as soft as it looks. Doesn't matter if I hate the numbed look on her face. I should want to see her suffer.

That's why I say it.

She has to be ours, has to be mine, in order for me to get over this crushing hatred, and go back to the guy obsessed with a church girl.

I'll take every bit of my anger out on her until there's none left. And if she lets me hold her after, then I'll take that too.

What I don't expect is for her to deny our protection. Ariella Mackensie doesn't desire us to protect her against her bullies, she wants help getting back at them. What she asks for is the sweet taste of revenge.

Good, little, church girls don't want payback. They let karma deal with it. But then, Ariella isn't a good little church girl anymore. She's the daughter of a psycho killer. I bite the inside of my cheek to suppress a grin.

"Make a list." Stone pushes himself away from his truck and steps up to her. The moment his finger twirls a strand of her

hair, I know that everything is set. The deal is made; Ariella Mackensie belongs to us.

She's mine.

“Make a list of everyone you want to get vengeance from, and tonight we'll go to the shack,” Stone continues. He tugs on her hair, and she drags her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Oh, no,” Ivy mutters with a huff. I shoot a glance at her and smirk. “This poor girl,” she sighs.

“You can't be upset. She did this to herself,” I reply.

For years Stone, Kingston, and I have watched Ariella from afar. We were only admirers in her light. Her being forbidden, tempting fruit, and we being the sinners who craved her. She was- is pure. Ignorant and innocent. The temptation to ruin her was so strong yet we held off. And maybe Ariella should thank Ivy for that. Our best friend kept us in our place. Told us that if we waited for the right moment, she'd be ours.

And here we are. With her in the palm of our hands, and all we have to do is make the people who hurt her suffer.

And she wants it.

But I hate her. I need to. Because of her father, my great aunt is gone. Abigail Nolt, although only a friend, was more like family. She changed my diapers when I was a baby, and I grew fond of the old raisin.

She didn't deserve to get murdered in the house of her faith by a man she trusted.

My hands clench at my sides as I watch her. I remember the way she sat on my lap as I treated her wounds.

Kensey did that.

I may want her to hurt, for her to pay for her father's sins, but I also want to be the one to do it. I don't want her to hurt because some petty ass bitch wants our dick.

Now, I can finally make her bleed without remorse. I can make all this pain in my chest go away, and all because she agreed to belong to me. It will still take time though.

Good things come to those who wait. Ivy's words ringing in my head has me smirking.

The bell sounds, and I watch Stone take a step back. His clenched fists give away just how hard it is for him to do that. To have something in your grasp, yet you still can't take it. Not yet.

"Go to class." Stone nods his head towards the school. I shift my gaze, noticing that nearly everyone in the courtyard is watching us.

Ariella bites her lip, gaze shifting to look over Stone's shoulder at us. When she meets my gaze, I give her a sharp

smile, my mind racing with everything I'm going to do to her.

She tears her eyes away from me and walks towards the front doors while we all watch her.

"I fear for her safety, you know?" Ivy speaks up as everyone else in the yard slowly makes their way inside.

"Why's that?" Kingston smiles at her.

"Because you're all staring at her like you're going to rip her apart." She laughs. "That poor girl."

"I know I am." I smirk. "Gonna make her fuckin' scream." First in pain, then in pleasure.

"A detective came to her house this morning." Stone pulls out a cigarette and lights it. My eyes snap back to him, eyes narrowing.

He turns to Kingston, "You know about this?"

I glance between them, why the fuck would a detective visit her?

Kingston rubs that back of his neck. "I suspected, yeah," he says. "Dad isn't big on the details, but I overheard one of his phone calls. New shit popped up. Apparently he wasn't killin' on his own."

“Shit!” I growl, hands twitching. I reach out and steal Stone’s cigarette. I take a long puff, exhaling slowly, and my nerves settle once more.

“Someone else was working with him?” Ivy asks. “Who the fuck comes together to kill a bunch of Christian people?” she mutters.

“Whatever, it’s not like it changes shit,” I say, mostly to myself.

“Dumbass, it changes everything. It means a killer is still out there,” Ivy hisses.

“They could come after her. She’s the snitch, and they could want pay back.” Kingston crosses his arms over his chest. His brows narrow as he glances between us.

My face pales, and I glance down at my shoes. Okay, maybe it changes some things.

The second bell rings, and the students that were lagging behind make their way to the doors.

“I gotta go. We can finish talking after school.” Kingston glances at the double doors.

Ivy shakes her head. “I got something after. Just keep me updated.” She makes her way towards the school.

“Hey, what’s keeping you here?” I shout at her retreating figure, but she doesn’t turn back around. I glance at Stone, asking, “Did she join a club or something?”

“Fuck if I know,” he mutters before following the direction she went.

Chapter 12

ARIELLA

It happened, yet my head still can't fully wrap around the idea of it. I belong to them now. How did Haeden put it, 'to do with as they please'? My face burns, and I press a hand to my cheek to cool it down. Then I take a deep breath, slowly letting it out. I can do this.

What could they possibly want anyway?

I think back to the party, remember Haeden's kiss, and the way both Stone and Kingston stared at me when I danced with Ivy.

They could want a lot.

Images of me kissing Kingston and Stone come to mind.

I shake my head. Nah, they wouldn't want that. Besides, I shouldn't be thinking about that.

If I'm being realistic, they'll probably make me do their homework.

I asked them to help me with my revenge instead of the protection they originally offered. Why the fuck did I do that? What kind of crazy person gets revenge. It's just bullying, it'll stop eventually.

Will it though?

The thought lingers. It hasn't stopped yet, and its been two months. It's gotten worse if anything, my bruised face is evidence enough of that.

I glance around the library spotting the blonde barbie I've grown to hate these last couple months. The bitch who did this to me.

She's already looking in my direction, glowering at me, then she flips me off. My eyebrows raise and I smile in disbelief. No doubt she saw me exiting Stone's car this morning. I'm sure that's what she's so angry about. She warned me away from them, the beating in the bathroom shows just how far she's willing to go. Yet, I completely ignored her.

She can stick her fucking warnings up her flat ass.

Kensey's glare turns into a smirk, and she gestures to her eye, indicating the bruise she gave me. My hands clench around my pencil as I scowl. Petty bitch, she couldn't even do it one on one. She had to have me held down to get me.

I wonder if she could hold her own without her friends to help. I tear my eyes away from her and glance down at my notebook, Stone said to make a list. I tap my pencil against the library table. It's short, only containing three names.

Kensey, obviously, then Lucas and Henry.

After counting the many things they've done to me in the last two weeks, they have to be on the top of my list. The petty part of me wants to write down my dad's name too. All of this

is happening because he went on a murdering spree. But then, we're just juniors in high school. What are we going to do to get revenge on a locked up psychopath?

The thought alone is ridiculous.

I reach up, lightly touching the edge of my eye and wince when it throbs. My eyes drift back to Kensey. She's leaning over Maribel's side, smiling. What would she look like with a busted lip? I stare at her too perfect nose. I bet she'd be super pissed if it broke. The thought makes me smile.

I tilt my head. Am I really thinking about this? Do I really want to fight Kensey?

Yes. The thought is immediate, no hesitation.

I really want to bust her pretty fucking face. Make her bitch-ass look ugly, just like her shitty personality.

I bet she looks better when she bleeds.

The bell rings, and I blink.

I look away from her and start to pack my stuff. Just before I close the notebook, I tear out my list of names, folding and stuffing it into my pocket.

“Ariella, can I speak with you please?”

I hold in a groan, and instead heave out a sigh. I walk to Mr. Williams’ desk as the other students file out of the classroom. I can feel the gazes of some of the girls as they exit, no doubt adding fire to the rumor of me being pregnant. I throw up one time, and suddenly I’m not only a psychopath, but I’m also a soon-to-be teen mom.

I can’t help my snort. As if.

“Is something funny?” Mr. Williams raises an eyebrow at me, like the condescending dick he is. With linked fingers, he leans on his desk as he looks at me.

“Nope.” I pop out with a shake of my head. My lips curl inward to contain my grin. “What did you want to see me about?”

“I know you’re working with Lucas on the project I assigned. I wanted to make sure everything is going okay. I understand he doesn’t exactly see eye to eye with you.”

My finger twitches, and I resist reaching out to slap him.

My goodness, I’m violent today.

“It’s going fine. He’s been keeping to himself.” We only met up at his house once, and that time he did leave me alone, only focusing on his work.

“That’s good to hear.” He gets up from his chair and circles around. He stands in front of me, and I frown as I look up at him.

Why the fuck is he so close? Just as I’m about to knee him in the balls, a knock comes from the door.

“Mr. Williams?” I’m surprised to see Ivy walk in. My English teacher immediately takes a step back, but Ivy’s eyes narrow on the small bit of space that’s now between us.

Okay cool, I wasn’t flipping my shit, he really was unnecessarily close. Her gaze meets mine, and I hope she sees the pleading look on my face.

Get me away from this fucking pedophile!

“I had a few questions about the project syllabus,” Ivy says, eyes darting back to the Mr. Williams.

“Right.” He nods his head. “You’re free to go, Ariella. I’m sorry to have kept you.”

I don’t think twice and head for the door. I mouth Ivy a ‘be careful’ as she steps in.

“The guys are out waiting for you. Go ahead and leave without me, I have stuff to do after this,” she tells me.

“Sure.” I nod. I leave the classroom door open as I exit. No way am I going to close the door, I’m sure he wouldn’t hesitate to take advantage of that.

I shuffle on my feet, hands tight around my backpack straps. Standing in front of me, like a formidable wall are Stone, Haeden, and Kingston. Standing in the middle, Stone has his arms crossed over his chest, face unreadable as his dark eyes stare down at me. His sleeves are rolled up, with it being after school hours he’s free to show his tattoos now. On his left, Haeden has his hands stuffed in his hoodie pockets. His red eyes indicating he’s high on something. He’s stuck on me though, and it feels like he hates me at this moment. But then I can’t remember doing anything to make him mad. On Stone’s right, Kingston is typing away on his phone.

“My cousin got arrested,” he snickers. He looks up at the other two. “He got caught fucking the vice principal at his school.”

Haeden chuckles. “Cole is my fucking god.”

I stand there, my face red because who the hell fucks a teenager? It seems pedophilia is in season. I’m suddenly reminded of Mr. Williams, and I shudder.

“Where’s Ivy?” Stone asks, and I turn to see he’s looking at me.

“She said she had something to do, remember?” Kingston answers.

“Let’s go then.” Stone nods to the truck. “You’re sitting up front,” he tells me. His eyes drift lower, taking in my black shirt and cutoff jean shorts. His eyes flick back to mine, and I try not to squirm. Why is he so intense all the time?

Kingston opens the passenger door for me and winks when I hop into the truck. Once everyone is inside, Stone drives us to the abandoned house they took me to last time.

When I walk inside the shack they hang out at, I notice the new bean bag chair that wasn’t there the last time.

Kingston dashes for it and plops down with a content sigh, “Best seat in the house.”

“That’s debatable,” Stone says. He walks over to the cooler and pulls out a beer. Then he makes his way to the run down couch and sits down, Haeden sitting down next to him. The can opens with a crack, and he takes a long swig. When he catches me staring, my face turns red.

“Come here,” he demands. Stone pats his thigh, and I hold in the girlish squeal that almost escapes. He wants me to sit on his lap!

Should I though?

I really want to.

“If your tight ass isn’t sitting on my lap in the next five seconds, I’m going to bend you over and spank you, Ariella.” Stone’s voice is gravelly, causing heat to pull in my belly.

I did not expect him to say that.

You’re ours to do with as we please.

I agreed to this. I can’t back out just when it’s starting.

“One,” Stone begins.

Oh my god, he’s actually fucking counting. I look away only to lock gazes with Haeden. He bites his lip, and almost as if he’s debating with himself, gives a nod like he knows what’s going on in my head.

Stone will actually go through with it.

“Three. I don’t like to fucking count, Ella. Get your ass over here.”

What the hell happened to two? Not wanting to risk getting spanked, especially with an audience, I hurry to Stone. I stand awkwardly for half a second before strong hands grip my hips and yank me down.

I yelp when I fall onto his lap, and Kingston chuckles.

“Was that so damn hard?” Stone growls into my ear. I take in a sharp inhale, feeling his warm breath fanning against my neck. I almost moan when his lips brush against the spot behind my ear.

Is he trying to turn me on?

“No, I guess it wasn’t,” I answer.

“Let’s see your list.” Kingston leans his head back and eyes me. I bite my lip and shift on Stone’s lap. Although, he stiffens beneath me, and his arms tighten around my waist, I dig in my pocket for the paper. When I pull it out, I hand it to Kingston.

“Kensey,” he reads out loud. “That’s a fucking given,” he mutters to himself before continuing, “Lucas and Henry.” He looks up at me and frowns. “Thats it?”

I lean forward, ignoring Stone who curses behind me, and yank the paper back. “What do you mean? They’re the most cruel to me.”

When I lean back, I gasp at the feeling of a hardness pressing against me. He’s hard. I am sitting on Stone’s lap, and his dick is as hard as a rock. I turn my head to peek at him through my lashes.

“What did you expect. You’re in fucking booty shorts, and you just leaned forward, flashing me your perky, little ass. I’m gonna get hard,” he whispers in my ear.

My pussy clenches at his dirty mouth. Never in my life would I have known that Stone has such a way with words.

“Knock it off,” Haeden growls from next to us. I glance at him and notice him adjusting himself in his shorts. “What?” he hisses out at me, and I quickly look away.

“What about Melanie?” Kingston asks, bringing us back to the original topic.

I bite my lip. “I’m not going to add her just because she stopped being my friend.”

Kingston glances over at the other two.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Haeden laughs. “You don’t know, do you?” He leans towards me, so close I can feel the heat radiating off of him. “You’re little friend isn’t just standing by and watching. She’s participating in making your life a living nightmare. She helped Kensey trash your car.”

She did? I try to remember, and I think I can remember her standing in the background when it happened.

Haeden leans forward, his lips brushing my cheek while one of Stone’s hands drift above my waist. “She’s the reason everyone calls you a psychopath,” he whispers.

I go rigid. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

It was Henry who started it. He's the first one to call me a psycho, and then it caught on. Melanie couldn't have done that.

I also thought she wouldn't abandon me.

"She told everyone that you always forced her to watch horror movies, and then locked her in the bathroom all night. She said you killed your pet dog when you were ten," Haeden starts to list off all her wrong doings, his hot breath brushing my skin. I shudder, resisting the urge to lean into him.

That's when I feel Stone's fingers brushing the underside of my boob. I shift, feeling the cock beneath me pulse as I grind against it.

"Stay still," he grunts from beneath me.

Haeden pulls my attention back to him, distracting me from the way Stone's hand squeezes my boob.

"She told Kensey it was you who found him."

This is what convinces me. The detail about me finding the murder scene was supposed to be confidential, but in my unstable state, I told her. Desperate to talk to someone, I needed my best friend.

I always wondered how everyone ended up knowing. I just figured they ended up announcing it on the news.

“Can someone get me a pen, please?” my voice is polite but firm.

Kingston holds one out to me, a smirk on his face. I take it, my grip tight on the pen because I can't do it to Melanie's neck right now. Then I write her name.

“Do you know who you want to cross off first?” Stone asks from behind me.

“Hmm,” I bite my lip and stare at my list of names. I stare at Kensey's name written at the top. I would love to fight her, but right now, I don't think I'd win. I'll have to wait until I can hold my own. My gaze drifts down to Melanie's, and rage surges through me.

I trusted her. She was supposed to be on my side like a true best friend would've been, yet she didn't hesitate to throw me under the bus.

“Melanie,” I answer. I will make her pay for ruining my life. For turning everyone against me. For betraying me.

Haeden's hand squeezes my thigh. “Do you have anything in mind?”

I do. If Melanie wants to break my trust and throw our friendship away, then I'll do the same. I know a lot of secrets that she would hate if they got out.

After dropping me off at home, it doesn't take long until I hear his dad shouting at him. I just threw my backpack on the floor when his voice reached me.

“Where the hell have you been, Stone?” it's a deep voice, one that shakes with rage.

“None of your damn business, old man!” Stone yells back at him.

I look at my window, noticing the curtains are drawn open. Across from it, I can see straight into Stone's bedroom.

He opened his curtains again. This is the second time, what a record.

“We had plans today,” Mr. Carter shouts back at him. “I know you didn't forget, I reminded you three times this morning.”

Did he ditch his dad to hang out with us?

“You had plans. I never fucking agreed to it,” Stone growls back.

“Do not walk away from me when I'm talking to you!” I hear stomping as he probably goes after his son.

Suddenly, Stone's door flies open, and he's marching through it before slamming it shut. Immediately, his dad begins to slam

his fist against it.

“Open the door, I’m not done with you!” he shouts.

Stone ignores him. His shoulders raising and falling with deep breaths. Then he kicks the side of his dresser.

“Fuck!” he growls. After a moment, his dad gives up. Stone hunches over and hops on one foot as he cradles the other. When he turns around and sees me staring at him, he freezes.

Ah, shit. I got caught staring... again. damn it!

He limps over to his desk. After a moment he lifts up a notebook and holds it to his window.

Sorry.

It’s written in black marker. His handwriting is messy, a quick scrawl across the paper.

I glance at him, noticing the furrow in his brows and his turned down lips.

I shrug my shoulders because it doesn’t matter. I may have gotten along well with my dad when he was sane, but we still argued. Albeit, not like that. I turn away and gather my clothes to sleep in tonight. I’m about to go to the bathroom when tapping comes from my window.

Stone stares at me as he crouches on the roof outside my room. With wide eyes, I rush to it and open it.

“Are you crazy?” I hiss at him. I grab his arm, which is bare other than his tattoos. He’s so warm too. I pull him inside, and he jumps in with a grunt. “You could’ve fell and broken something!”

“I’m fine.” He rolls his eyes. He frowns as he looks down at me, and I realize I’m still touching him. My hand drops to my side.

“You hear our arguments, don’t you?” he asks with a nibble on his lower lip. His dark eyes scan my room, but I don’t think he’s really looking. His mind seems elsewhere, stuck in his thoughts.

“Not all the time,” I try to reassure him, but then I shake my head. “Yeah, I hear them all.” I scratch my head.

“Shit,” he murmurs. “Whatever.” He turns his gaze back to me, a strand of his black hair falling between his eyes.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

He simply shrugs. “I didn’t want to be at home.” He turns and plops down onto my bed. “Can I stay the night?” He stares up at my ceiling as he asks.

Stay the night? If I asked grandma she definitely wouldn’t allow it. I look at my bedroom door, contemplating. I already

told her goodnight when I came in, and she never checks on me during the night. Not like dad did.

But this is Stone. I take in his ripped jeans and t-shirt. This boy is sin on legs. And he wants to sleep in my room. Would he sleep on my bed with me, or would he rather sleep on the floor?

“Stop over thinking it, and just say yes,” he sighs.

“Okay, yes.”

Chapter 13

ARIELLA

I'm staring. It's rude, I know that, but anyone in my position wouldn't not stare.

Stone stands at the foot of my bed, shirt half way up his chest.

He's taking his clothes off. Stone is in my room, and he's taking his clothes off!

I take in the visible V line of his hips, followed by lean muscle that flexes with every move. His pecs are well defined, the tattoos on his skin call for me to trace them. Maybe if I wake up early enough in the morning, I can take the time to admire them.

Am I really letting him stay the night? If it were back then, if dad didn't do what he did, would he even be here right now?

No. We lived in different worlds, he and I.

My fingers tighten around the clothes in my hand, suddenly very aware that I'm about to change into short shorts and a tank top.

"You just gonna stand there and stare at me?" Stone asks. His lips turn upwards when my eyes widen.

First off, serious Stone made a joke. Not only is he staying the night but he's joking with me.

“I think the world is coming to an end.” The words escape me on impulse. My face heats up, and I hope I don’t ruin the strange mood he’s in.

“I’m gonna-” I point to the door, and then hold up my clothes. I should really change into ugly pants and a grandma dress. My eyes drift to his taut stomach.

Nah.

When I’m in the safety of my bathroom, I lean my head against the door and sigh. In front of me, I stare back at my reflection. My face is red, brown hair pulled into a high ponytail. It’s so obvious what’s on my mind.

I shake my head. If I let myself think about it anymore, I’ll just drown in embarrassment. I quickly change and get ready for bed. I don’t hear much on the other side. Is he asleep already? What if he’s in my bed?

Am I really gonna make him sleep on the floor?

I bite my lip. That’d be so fucked up.

When I walk out, I find Stone under the covers already, a blanket coming to a stop at his hips as he leans back against the headboard. His head is tilted downward, focused on his interlocked fingers.

Not brave enough to look him in the eyes yet, I glance away and dump my dirty clothes in the hamper. Then I turn the light off. It makes it easier to walk to the bed, knowing he can only see my silhouette.

I can't believe this is actually happening.

I pull the covers back, swallowing thickly when I notice he's just in his boxers. I climb in, making sure there is space between us.

"I'm not going to bite you, Ariella," Stone murmurs into the darkness. He shifts, and then his arm presses against me. His body heat is quick to warm me under the blanket. "Not until you ask," he says it so quietly that I almost don't hear him.

Not saying anything back, I can't help but be completely aware of his every move. I count his breaths, notice the way his finger twitches when it touches mine.

For a while, we lay like this. Both of us side by side, staring into the darkness. And I know he's awake because his pinky keeps curling around mine, despite how many times I pull away.

"Do you miss him?" Stone whispers.

The question is simple enough, and maybe if I wasn't in this situation, it wouldn't have hit me as hard as it did. Except, I am in this situation, and the question isn't as simple as answering yes or no.

The 'him' in his question is obvious. He's talking about my dad. Do I miss my dad?

Yes.

My nose crinkles as I get lost in my thoughts, but it's true. I do miss my father. Despite the last few months, before all that... he was normal.

He was the dad who portrayed himself as the man who would always be there for me. I don't think him playing father was an act. I believe deep down, he was a caring man who loved his daughter. He cared about my studies, he cared about reputation, about family time. He cared about me.

Does he now?

The question stings, creating a deeper crack in my heart than the one that appeared the moment I found the bodies on the altar. Now that he's out of his mind, does he still care about me?

Subconsciously, my eyes drift to my bedside table on my left side. Inside the top drawer, is a letter from my dad, along with the notes that keep appearing in my locker. It's been a while since I've received another one, but I don't think whoever is sending them has given up.

I haven't read the letter yet. I can't brave opening it and reading whatever nonsense he wrote down. Is it an apology, because he's realizing what he did is horrible? Did he write down his remorse and beg for forgiveness?

Or is it something much more sinister?

“Come back to reality, Ella.” Stone tugs a lock of my brown hair, drawing my attention back to him.

Even in the dark, being so close to him, I can make out the basic features of his face. His lips are turned down, thick brows furrowed. He looks so... sad.

“Sorry.” My voice is soft in the quiet room. “Honestly, I do,” I answer him. I turn back to look at the ceiling. Memories of tea parties and pot lucks threaten to bring tears to my eyes, so I push them away. “I miss the man he was, at least.” I sigh, “I don’t really want to talk about him.”

Stone grunts out in reply. And then we’re back to silence. I thought I would feel awkward, laying side by side with a boy and saying nothing. Yet, I feel content.

My brows furrow, what I didn’t account for are my nightmares. I turn to look at him.

He knows about them, though. Last time he was so bothered that he banged on my door to scold me.

“What?” His voice is soft, and for a moment I’m trapped in just how unbothered he looks at the moment.

“What did you and your dad argue about?” I ask into the quiet night. His hand curls into a fist, and I resist the urge to scoot

away.

“Some business dinner with his colleague,” he mutters, the bitterness in his tone is obvious.

“Sounds important,” I whisper, keeping cautious. If this conversation drives him away, back to his house, I’ll be upset with myself. Sure, it’s strange to have him here, but for once, it feels nice to not be alone with my inner thoughts.

“It was.” He turns his gaze to me, and I almost fall off the bed. His hand shoots out and wraps around my waist, keeping me from toppling over.

“Maybe you should’ve gone?” I shrug. My fingers twitch as I resist the urge to put my hand on his bare chest.

Why does he have to be so tempting?

“And miss out on helping you?” He snorts, as if the idea is preposterous. He squeezes my hip before letting go. He leaves behind a warmth on my skin; a tingling that vibrates through me. “Never, Ella, Never.”

We lapse into silence again. I get lost in my thoughts, this time instead of thinking about dad, all my mind is focused on is the guy in my bed.

Will we end up cuddling in the middle of the night? What about when he wakes up with morning wood?

I force the thought away. If I continue to think like this, I'm afraid I'll embarrass myself and jump on him.

I take a peek at him. His eyes are closed, his breathing even. After living with grandma these last couple months, I've come to the conclusion that Stone and his dad see things differently. The man sounds like he's all business. But then, I've only seen him a handful of times. Is he home often, or is he stuck in his work? Is that why they argue a lot?

"Are you okay?" The question is barely audible when I finally ask.

It falls onto deaf ears, Stone is already asleep. It doesn't keep me from wondering, though.

And just when I'm drifting to sleep, I hear his faint answer.

"No. I'm not."

Warm hands stir me from my peaceful slumber. That alone is a wake up call. I haven't had a peaceful night's sleep for months. Yet, last night, my mind was a blank space. Void of the monster that haunts me.

It was nice.

A firm grip lands on my bare hip, and something tickles my inner thigh. I let out a content sigh, and the grip tightens,

rough fingers digging into my soft skin. I whimper, the noise loud as I puff out the air in my lungs.

Then a tongue slides against my inner thigh.

I suck in a breath, eyes shooting open because... why is there a mouth on my fucking thigh?

My head snaps up, and I glance down to meet Stone's gaze, but he doesn't stop what he's doing.

With another long stroke of his tongue, he licks a path further up, closer to the edge of my shorts. My skin alights with goosebumps, a strange sensation running through me.

"What..." I try to get the words out, struggling to focus on the sentence in my head. "What are you doing?"

A chuckle escapes him, the vibrations tickling me. He doesn't answer me, instead, he tightens his hold on my knees and spreads them further apart.

"What are you doing?" My voice raises an octave higher as my back tenses despite laying down. My hand grips his black hair, tugging when his tongue presses against my center through my flimsy, cotton shorts.

So glad I didn't change into baggy pants.

"I want my taste, Ariella." His voice is gravelly, hoarse from sleep.

Taste? He wants his taste?

“What do you mean?” My voice comes out breathless, and a bundle of nerves lodging into my stomach when he bites my inner thigh.

“I want to lick you.” His lips press against my center, sending a jolt through me. “Right here.” Then he presses his tongue, flat against my shorts and licks up to my pelvis. “Preferably without the layers of clothes between us.”

A shiver wracks through me, legs twitching, and I expect myself to close them, yet they spread even wider.

“You want to taste me there?” My question is no more than a squeak of nerves. He chuckles, a deep, warm sound that vibrates against my calves.

“You’re going to let me.” He shifts, pressing his face closer to my still clothed pussy and takes a deep breath.

Oh my god is he smelling me?

“Aren’t you, Ella?”

Wait, what? I can’t focus. How can he expect me to focus when his face is squished against my vagina? What is he asking? Am I going to let him taste me? Down there?

I bite my lip, do I want him to? My eyes drift to his lips. I think they would look so good with my juices on them.

I nod my head. Yes, I would let him taste me. I will let him taste me.

“Words, Ella. Use your words.” He bites the skin above my knee, and I whimper.

“Yes,” I gasp out.

He stretches above me, drawing closer so that his face hovers above mine. I frown up at him, brows furrowing because why isn't he doing it?

“What-” I start to ask, maybe even demand he go back down there and do what he said he was going to do.

He smirks down at me, dark eyes sparkling in the early morning.

“If I do this though, you have to suck me off at the same time.” He chuckles. His breath fanning against my neck, and my eyes widened .

He wants me to suck on him? My face bursts into flames, and I quickly shake my head. Oh no. I've never done that! I've never thought about doing that! I've never even seen one!

Well, I watched porn one time, and it was weird, so I turned that shit off fast.

He thumbs my bottom lip, saying “I’m not surprised you’ve never sucked cock before.” His dark eyes connect with mine. “It’s a damn shame, though. I bet your wet mouth feels heavenly.”

My breath grows heavy as he talks. The roughness of his voice carries tingles down to my belly, and it’s suddenly so hot in the room.

“I think about you on your knees way too often,” he whispers. He slips his thumb past my lips and settles the pad on my tongue. “Fuck.”

Daring to push further, I lightly bite the tip of his thumb, watching in delight as a shiver runs through his body.

“You’re a bad influence on me,” I murmur into the air.

“If you don’t want me ripping these shorts off, I suggest you get up.” His voice hardens, any playfulness now gone. “Now.”

I want it though.

I shake my head, even if I do, I can’t do anything like that. It’s so dirty.

I tell myself I don’t want it, even though the pulse between my legs says otherwise, and crawl out of bed, yelping when he smacks my ass.

I am so not ready for Stone. I should count myself lucky he isn't seducing me into doing it. I know that once his mouth is back on me, I'll be trapped in his lust again.

"Don't think about it too much." He gets out of bed and puts on his clothes that he left on his side. He glances over his shoulder as he buttons up his pants, catching my stare on his butt. He chuckles. "I lied. Think about it. I like knowing you have my dick on your mind."

With that final sentence, he's outside of my window, going back into his room.

Chapter 14

ARIELLA

Today is such a weird day.

The thought seems to be embedded into my brain as one strange occurrence after another happens.

Stone spends the night in my bed. Stone almost goes down on me. And Kingston brings me breakfast at school, a delicious banana nut muffin. Not that I'm complaining.

After months of negative attention, it feels out of place that all these pleasant things are happening to me. Is this karma repaying me for all the bullshit that happened?

I bite my lip as I shift on my feet, glancing to Haeden on my right. He's leaning back against the lockers, his foot propped up as he stares at the opposite wall. His eyes are tinted red, the result of him smoking a joint in the parking lot ten minutes ago. Next to him, Kingston digs through his locker, brows furrowed.

"I swear I left it here," he mutters to himself.

I'm not really paying attention, stuck inside my own head. All I know is that he's looking for something he was holding for the guys and Ivy.

Stone stands on the left side of Kingston, his arms crossed over his chest as he frowns. Next to me, Ivy doesn't look so happy either as she taps her boot against the tiled floor.

When these delinquents came into my life, everything seemed to pause. The bullying stopped... well, mostly. Kensey, Lucas, and Henry are still bothersome. However, despite it stopping, the tension is still there. The air feels heavier when I'm without the group.

I know everyone still hates me. Becoming their friend isn't going to make all those negative feelings vanish.

So, I wait. I wait for the other shoe to drop. Because right now just feels like I'm in limbo.

"Are you sure you left it here?" Ivy asks.

"Yes," Kingston almost snaps the word at her. She glares at him, and he sighs. "Sorry," he mutters. He slams his locker shut and leans his forehead against it. "I put it here this morning. Haeden was with me, he saw me do it."

We all turn our gaze to him, and he nods in confirmation.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Nothing, don't worry about it." Ivy glares at me, and I can't help but shrink back.

Ivy has been nothing but nice to me. Sure, she can be brutally honest, but she never outright snapped at me.

I bite my lip and nod. I shouldn't take it to heart, they snap at each other all the time.

"Sorry," she huffs out, letting her arms fall to her sides. "This just really complicates things for me." She turns her glare back to Kingston. "I can't fucking believe you screwed this up!"

With her hands clenching at her sides, Ivy turns and marches away.

Confused and feeling left out, I stare after her.

"Is she going to be okay?" I ask with a frown. Whatever it is that Kingston lost seems to be important to her.

Kingston growls and then goes after her, leaving Stone, Haeden, and I behind.

"It'll work out," Stone murmurs as he too watches them. When they're out of sight, the haunting look in his eyes lightens. "Don't worry about it. Worry about yourself."

A shiver runs down my spine as a shaky smile stretches over my face. I shift on my feet, remembering earlier this morning that I explained what I wanted to happen with Melanie.

When the guys had taken me to their hideout, and Haeden told me about Melanie's partaking in my bullying. It's been on my mind a lot lately.

A long time ago, I thought I knew her. She was nice and kind, sometimes she had her selfish moments. But when everything hit the fan, she became a stranger to me. She started and spread the rumor of me being like my father. She told lies about me.

There were moments when I thought of my revenge, whether or not if I really wanted to do this to her. But then, I would remember everything she did. And that this is my idea. Not anyone else's. I need to go through with this. If just to make myself feel better.

It's too late to back out now. I won't let myself.

"You look excited." Haeden lazily smiles at me. He grabs my hand and pulls me towards him.

"I am," I confirm, cheeks flushing red when I'm pressed against him. I glance around the hallway, noticing that there are too many eyes on us. Watching how we stand so close together.

His hands rest on my hips, and I curl my fingers into the sides of his shirt. I turn my head to Stone, expecting to see anger or maybe jealousy, any kind of wishful thinking that showed he liked me, but he just scrolls through his phone. Is it not weird for him to have his friend be so handsy with me after we had a moment the other night?

"Hey." Haeden rests his finger beneath my chin and turns my head so I can look at him again. His green eyes shine at me. "Maybe we all should have a talk later, hmm?"

I frown, my brows furrowed. “What about?”

“I don’t think you understand what we mean when we say you belong to us,” he says, fingers flexing on my hips. His eyes drift over my shoulder to look at his friend.

I look back. Stone’s dark eyes are on my butt, drifting over Haedens hands on me. His eyelids drop, and he licks his bottom lip. Heat pools in my belly at the sight.

“Jesus fuck, you realize you’re in school, right?” The familiar voice is like a bucket of cold water pouring over me. “It’s amazing how one can go from church girl, to murderer, to fucking slut so quickly.”

I try to step away from Haeden, however he only pulls me back to him.

“Melanie, jealousy is an ugly color.” Stone tisks at her like he’s disappointed. His phone is back in his pocket, amusement shining in his eyes.

“I’m not jealous.” She glares at him, her cheeks reddening. More students in the hallway begin to look our way, and I shift against Haeden.

“What do you want?” I glare at her. “If you didn’t notice, I’m busy.” I nod my head towards Haeden as an indication. I glance back at him, hoping what I said is okay. The smirk on his painfully pretty face says it is.

Melanie clenches her jaw, eyeing the little space between us. She turns away from me, and fully faces Stone.

“I’m having a birthday party next Saturday.” She pulls a pink envelope from her backpack and holds it out to him. I frown at the back of her head. “This is an invitation, I want you to come.”

What?

I try to hide my smile. I think this revenge thing is going to be easy. At least regarding Melanie. She just gave us the perfect opportunity to enact it, and she doesn’t have a fucking clue.

Was this how she felt when she betrayed me? Did she see me as the stupid, gullible girl who knew nothing and laughed? Sometimes I still can’t believe how quick she was to turn her back on me when I needed her the most.

I turn my gaze to Stone, and find him already staring at me. I give him a small nod, ignoring the small bit of jealousy that weeds its way into my heart.

I need to let him do this.

Stone reaches forward and takes the envelope from her hand.

“Sure.” His smile is sharp, anything but nice, although Melanie must not see it.

She turns to me with a satisfied smirk, like the cat who got the cream.

“Don’t forget to bring a present, yeah? It can be anything. I’m not picky.” She flips her black hair over her shoulder and winks. Then she twists around, her skirt fluttering as she walks away. She struts her hips, so much that her ass swings from left to right.

“She’s going to have some major back problems,” I comment.

Haeden snorts.

My day is going well, Haeden and Stone are handsy whenever I’m near. I haven’t seen Kingston or Ivy since earlier, and I hope they are both working out whatever it is Kingston lost. However, the day gets even weirder.

Lucas stands in front of me, cutting me off from entering my last class of the day. Everyone else seems to be in there, minus the teacher.

“Um?” Is my smart greeting, laced with a dash of attitude. I would really hate to have my good day ruined by him. I’m also half tempted to run the other way, but I remind myself that I’m not that girl anymore. I’m the girl who sold herself out to get revenge on him, and a few others. I should own it.

I attempt to look intimidating, narrow my eyes like I think Ivy would if she were being bothered.

“You’re in my way.” I state when he doesn’t say anything right away and just stares at me like he’s brain dead.

If only.

Lucas chuckles, and the sound is not full of hatred, which makes me even more confused. I look him over and shift on my feet. Where is his venomous glare? The hatred and contempt is missing from his expression.

“I want to remind you we’re going to my place again,” he tells me.

My brows furrow, “What are you talking about?”

“The project.” He chuckles, “Surely, you of all people didn’t forget?”

I bristle in annoyance, straightening my back so I stand a little taller. “Of course I didn’t forget.” Except, I fucking did. I’ve been so focused on planning my revenge plots, that the project Mr. Williams assigned us completely slipped my mind.

“Then you remember that it’s due this Monday?”

Shit, shit, fucking shit!

He can probably see the panic on my face as I try to reason with myself. Last time I worked on it was under the bleachers.

If I remember correctly, I was nearly finished with my essay.

What about the powerpoint presentation? I haven't started it, did Lucas and Mason?

Before I can ask, he gives me the answer I was looking for.

“Mason started the powerpoint. He says we can finish it together at my house on Friday. Since you don't seem to have your car anymore, you can ride with me.”

“Right,” I groan out. “If that's all.” I push him out of the way and walk into the classroom.

After school, I open my locker and go through it. When I find my essay inside, I sigh in relief. After the class ended, I searched through my bag and couldn't find it. I was about to flip my shit if it wasn't in the locker.

I grab it and put it into my bag, but frown when I see the yellow sticky note stuck to the back of the locker.

Another note? My brows furrow, fingers twitching as I glance down the hallway, eyes darting from one face to another as I try to guess who was giving them to me.

Except no one is looking at me right now. No one gives a hint that it could be them.

I bite the inside of my cheek and turn back to it. With a shaking hand, I reach inside and pull the sticky note out.

I see you've made some friends. I'm not sure if your father would approve of you interacting with sinners. I'm disappointed, Ariella.

My breath quickens, as I reread it over and over. Sinners?

Don't be a sinner, Ariella.

My dad's voice whispers in my head.

"Hey, gorgeous."

I jump, crushing the sticky note in my hand. I spin around to face Kingston, his hair pulled back into a bun.

"Hi." I'm struck breathless between the note and his sudden appearance.

"What's that?" He nods to my hand. I glance down and tighten my grip on the yellow paper.

"Nothing, just a book one of my teachers suggested I read." The lie easily falls out of my mouth. I immediately drop it into my backpack and slam my locker shut. "Where are the others?" I look around him but can't see them anywhere.

Kingston frowns as he scratches the back of his neck, his forearms flexing at the movement. Gosh, he's so well built. "They have to help Ivy with something."

I bite my lip, remembering that he lost something. Was he left behind because of it?

"Do you want to come to my place?" He asks me before I can think better of it.

I should say no. I have to finish my essay and do the other homework that's been assigned, but I haven't spent much time with him. Sure, we hung out at the party, but that seems like such a long time ago. And I was drunk, that shouldn't count.

"Yes." I nod my head and smile up at him. He flashes white teeth, his smile lighting up his face.

When he leads me to his car, I nearly moan at the sight of it. I'm not a car girl. I don't know the types or what's under the hood. However, when he stops by the black, sleek vehicle, I can't help but admire it for a moment.

"That shit looks expensive," I mutter. I can just imagine the horror if he crashed or it got vandalized.

I'm reminded of my own car and pout.

"It was." I jump when I feel his warm breath on the back of my neck. His chest flushes against me from behind, and I lean back against him.

“How come we don’t take your car to school?” I ask.

He shifts behind me and I turn around. He looks uncomfortable.

“Ah, sorry-” Maybe I sounded like a gold digger.

“Nah, it’s okay.” He grabs my hand and leads me to the passenger seat. I watch with amusement as he opens the door for me and gestures for me to climb in. I smile at him in thanks.

“I don’t like bringing my car often. Girls like to crowd around it. It’s fuckin’ annoying.” He nods his head back towards the school. I look through the windshield and spot the small group of girls huddling together as they stare at us.

Yeah, that would be fucking annoying.

Chapter 15

ARIELLA

Kingston's house is in the upper part of Bethany, where the rich belong. He lives in a gated community, where the lawns are lush and green, the houses unnecessarily extravagant. I try not to show my awe, or gape at how luxurious everything is.

Grandma isn't poor or struggling. She's living comfortably, with a warm and cozy home. She worked her ass off to be able to retire at her age. However, this is something else entirely. While grandma worked to live comfortably, Kingston's parents worked to live lavishly.

It makes sense that they named him Kingston.

He slows down and parks outside of the equivalent of a mansion. Perfectly trimmed bushes with rounded tops litter the large yard. On the left side a fountain spurts water over the head of a beautiful angel, making it look like she's crying.

"This is so..." I trail off, taking in the entire thing. A large porch with white marble steps leads up to the wooden double doors. I scratch the back of my neck, it all seems like overkill. We get it, you have money that the rest of us don't.

I glance at Kingston, take in his gold ring and silver earring that glistens in the sun. He has it all; money, looks, a dashing personality. He could be a jock, he has the build of a football player, he could be spending time with people like him, people that have money.

People like Kensey.

My lip curls at the thought. Just thinking about her draping herself all over him annoys me.

Kensey doesn't deserve him.

But you do?

I shake my head.

“Unnecessarily fuckin’ extra?” Kingston scoffs. “I know. My moms a fuckin’ nut. Beware when you meet her.”

My back straightens and I turn to him with wide eyes. “Please tell me I’m not meeting your parents!?” I beg him.

Kingston chuckles and pats my thigh. “No, they’re both out working. Mom’s in the city, and dad will be stuck in his office all day.”

“Oh, good.” My shoulders instantly relax. “What do they do?” I ask.

“Ah...” He scratches his neck again, drawing my attention to it. Is that a nervous tick of his? He glances out the window to look at his house, saying “Mom’s a surgeon, dad’s a lawyer.”

“Oh cool.” I nod my head. When it grows quiet, I chuckle. “What are we waiting for? Give me the tour of your oh-so-very-extravagant castle.”

“Castle?” His nose wrinkles as he exits the car. I quickly follow him out, and he meets me on my side.

“You can’t even deny it.” I point out the high arches on the roof, similar to medieval castles.

He snorts, “Guess not.” He grabs my hand, his palm warm against mine. I watch him as he leads the way, I’m so small compared to him.

I’m surprised that once we’re inside and the doors are closed behind us, a man in a penguin tux greets him.

Is he a fucking butler?

A fucking butler. His coattail flutters behind him as he walks with elegant grace.

I peek up at Kingston, is this guy a freaking prince or what?

“Good evening Sir King.” The man is posh, with his nose turned up and his arm tucked to his torso like he’s in a place of royalty. His jet black hair is slicked back, shiny with product. “Sir King’s guest.” He nods at me, takes in my cut off jean shorts and black T-shirt before looking away with a wrinkle in his nose.

Judgemental much? It’s like a complete turn from the judgemental eyes at school. They disliked me for my dresses and collared shirts. And now I’m being judged for wearing shorts and a T-shirt.

I can't please everyone.

"Armin, this is Ariella." Kingston introduces me. "Ariella, this is Armin."

I give a wave and he simply nods at me without sparing me another glance.

"Can you have Betha make us some sandwiches?" Kingston asks. He tightens his hold on my hand and leads me to the stairs. "Thanks!" He shouts behind him.

"Thank you!" I call back, not wanting to make my first impression any worse. I glance back to see Armin watching us with narrowed eyes.

Well, someone really doesn't like me. If the butler doesn't, I'm sure his parents would be even worse. Why does that thought bother me so much?

I follow him down a long hallway, where it opens up into a large foyer. It steps down, the couch sunk into the floor. Across from it a pool table resides, the sticks lining the wall behind it. Different types of arcade games line the opposite wall, along with a large tv hung over them, playing a sports channel.

This is definitely a man cave. I can imagine Kingston, Stone, Haeden and Ivy messing around in here, with rock music blaring loudly in the background.

“Woah,” I whisper as I continue to take it all in.

“Cool, huh?” He asks with a smirk. He avoids my gaze, and I start to suspect that he’s embarrassed.

“You’re parents are amazing for letting you have all this.” I say in awe.

Kingston snorts, “Sure.” Then he grabs my hand once more and leads me to the only couch in the room.

Before I can sit down next to him, he pulls me into his lap and curls his arms around my waist. My back flushes against his chest, and I can’t help but notice how warm he is.

I shift awkwardly, I’ve never spent time with Kingston alone.

“Sometimes,” He says from behind me, resting his forehead against my shoulder blade, “I don’t want to come home alone. It’s a big house.”

I don’t reply right away as I toss his words around in my head. Is this the typical rich family where the parents are never home, and he was raised by his nanny? When I first entered, it did feel cold and empty, even with the butler greeting us. I trail my hand along his arm before curling my fingers into his.

“Is that why you brought me?” I ask softly, I twist so I sit sideways on him, my legs dangling over his, “So this wasn’t so-”

Before I can finish, his lips press against my cheek.

“It doesn’t matter why I brought you. Contrary to what you might think, Ariella, we don’t just want sex from you.” He says matter of factly.

I snort, finding it hard to believe, “You’re three hormonal teenagers. Of course you do.”

Kingston laughs, his body vibrating beneath me, “Well, yeah. But I said not just that. You’re a calm presence among us. It’s different.”

I hum in response and lean against him. My head ends up on his shoulder and I sigh at how comfortable this all is.

“How long have you been friends with them?” I ask, my curiosity getting the better of me in the silent atmosphere.

He shrugs, reaches for the remote on the side table and surfs through the channels. “It’s been years. I think in middle school?”

I nod, that’s a pretty long while. After a while of him going through channel after the other, I shift.

“Can I see your room?” I ask.

“Uhm, I don’t think so.” His voice is pitched higher, drawing my gaze away from the flat screen taking up an entire wall.

My eyebrows raise at his red face, which makes me curious as to what he has in his room.

“Please! I just wanna look that’s all.” I beg. I stick my bottom lip out in a pout.

“That’s the problem.” He mutters, raising a hand to scratch his head.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He pats my thigh and I stand up. “This way.” He grabs my hand again, and I don’t mind it. Kingston isn’t as touchy when the others are around, I noticed.

He leads me down a hallway I haven’t noticed before, passing door after door. I wonder what’s behind them all. What they’re used for. Are they just guest rooms?

He stops in front of a black door, standing out amongst the light brown doors. He spins on his heel and points a finger at me.

“You’re sworn to secrecy, okay?” He waggles his finger, “If this reaches anyone, I’ll know it was you who said it.” He glares at me, and I almost shift back at how intense he is now.

“I promise I won’t tell a soul.” I hold up my pinky for him and he stares at it in disbelief. When I wiggle it for him, he looks at me and smiles. Then he hooks his pinky with mine.

“Good.” He chuckles. Then he turns to the door. As if he’s building his courage, he pauses. Then he opens it with a huff. “Can’t believe I’m showing you.” He mutters to himself. He pushes the door open, the room casted in shadows as light peeks in from his curtained window.

I cautiously step in, half expecting a sex dungeon with whips and chains. A shiver wracks through me, okay maybe a sex dungeon wouldn’t be so bad.

I’m halfway into the room when he flips the light switch. My breath escapes me as I stare wide eyed at the amount of posters on the wall. Instead of half naked girls and cars, what I see is so much better.

Anime posters cover every inch of wall he has available. Images of popular anime stare back at me. Some of them look familiar from ads, and I see a few I’ve never heard of, but the image of super powers reels me in.

“What’s this one?” I ask him as I stand in front of it.

“My hero academia,” He answers, “Do you watch any?”

I shrug, “Not really. Dad never really let me watch much TV.”

“You don’t talk about him much.” He says from behind me. I can feel his heat on my back and shuffle on my feet.

“Yeah.” I murmur as I take in huge green hair. “He’s not my favorite topic right now.” I shrug. I walk along the walls, looking from one poster to another.

“I’m surprised.” I laugh, “This wasn’t what I expected. I figured you were more of a sexy model guy.”

Kingston chuckles, “Don’t get me wrong, I am. But I can look at a woman’s body anytime I want too.” He shrugs.

I frown, can’t get myself to turn around and face him. Of course Kingston can look at a woman’s body anytime he wants. Anyone with eyes would jump at the chance to be with him. I’m sure his phone is full of lady’s numbers.

There’s a knock on the door, pulling me away from my bitter thoughts. Armin comes in with a platter full of finger sandwiches.

“Couldn’t she have made just regular ones?” Kingston frowns as he sets it on his desk.

“I refuse to tell her to remake them. Shall you?” Armin raises a thick eyebrow.

Kingston pales and shakes his head, “I don’t have a death wish.”

“Smart boy.” Armin replies before leaving.

“He’s very posh.” I giggle. “Is the cook, uh, Bertha?” He nods his head, “She sounds scary.”

Kingston shudders, “Oh she is.”

His hand is on my hip and he guides me to his bed. After I sit down, he grabs the platter and sets it on his bed side table so I can reach them.

“Are you and Ivy okay?” I ask him, eyeing the snack. I reach out and grab one.

“Yeah. Just on rocky terms right now.” He mutters. He grabs a few finger sandwiches and shoves them in his mouth, causing his cheeks to puff out. He sits down next to me, so close our shoulders and legs touch.

I lean into his warmth and hum.

“Is it because of the thing you lost?” I ask, curiosity getting the better of me.

“Yeah. But I don’t want to talk about Ivy.” He swallows and dumps himself on his bed. “Come here.” He pats his leg. I bite my lip and glance at the closed door.

With flushed cheeks I climb over him and sit.

His arm wraps around my waist, his other hand resting on my upper thigh. He squeezes the bare flesh there, fingers grazing the edge of my shorts.

“You look very nice today.” He murmurs against my temple, his lips brushing against me.

I relax into his warm hold, hum at the vibrations in his chest.

“Thank you. You do too.” I smile.

His head dips into my neck and he kisses the spot behind my ear.

“That tickles.” I laugh, squirming in his hold.

He doesn't reply, continues to kiss the length of my neck. His teeth scrapes against my pulse, and I whimper. The attention on my neck distracts me as his fingers skim higher. He unbuttons my shorts, the hand on my waist trails up and he squeezes my boob.

“Fuck,” His breath is warm against me, and I arch against him, “You're so damn soft.” He squeezes harder this time.

His other hand drifts away from my shorts and he grips my chin to turn my head so I look at him.

“You say thank you, when I compliment you.” His voice is firm. Darkness swirls in his eyes, this Kingston is so much different from the one at the party.

I shiver, warmth spreading through me.

“Thank you,” I whisper, my eyes glued to his blue ones.

“Much better.” He replies. His hand grips the back of my neck and pulls me down for a kiss.

It’s soft at first, a brush across and then a firm press. His other hand trails down my back and then he grabs my ass. With a firm squeeze, he licks my lower lip and I open for him. His tongue against mine sends volts of shivers through me. My hand tangles in his hair, my mouth feverish for more.

The hand squeezing my butt is gone, then he’s pushing it down the back of my shorts. He grabs at my bare flesh and groans.

I gasp, hips jerking forward as I grind down on him. His mouth trails over my cheeks before his tongue licks my neck.

“Oh my god,” I moan, I can feel the hard length of his cock rubbing against me, the pressure just right on my clit.

More.

Then his finger is gliding against my wet entrance, the tip pushing in. Subconsciously, I rock back against it, trying to get more.

“Did you ever lose your virginity at the party?” The question is hazy, at first I don’t understand what he asked. Then the words register in my head.

I freeze. Did I ever lose what at the party?

I scramble off of his lap, lips red and swollen. I glare at him, “What the fuck did you just say?”

Kingston frowns up at me, his hands at his side. One of his fingers glistens with my wetness. When he sees me looking, he raises it to his mouth and sucks on it.

Don't get distracted. Don't get -

“Stone said you left the party looking wrecked.” He shrugs, shrugs like what he's saying is any of his business. “I was just curious if it was true that you fucked someone.”

My lips purse in distaste, “First of all, I don't think that's any of your business. And second of all, even if I did or didn't, why would you care?”

Kingston stands up, the easy going expression on his face turning into something hard. Something mean. He steps towards me, crowds into my space, “In case you fucking forgot, psycho, you belong to us now. You belong to me.” His hands slip up the front of my shirt and he rests his palm against my belly. I shiver, goosebumps lining my arms. “Therefore,” He whispers, “It is my fucking business.”

My hands clench into fists as I glare up at him. This isn't what I agreed to. I didn't agree to handing over my privacy. “So that means I have no say in anything?”

“If I don't allow it, no.” He snaps at me. He grabs my hand and rests it on his chest, “You signed up for this.”

“Well you weren’t specific on the details.” I snatch my hand back. “And honestly, how dare you even ask that? To answer your damn question, no I didn’t screw anyone. All I did was sleep in that room.”

I step away from him, “Until you all tell me exactly what it is we’re doing, don’t touch me.”

Kingston growls and wraps his arms around me. He pulls me into his chest, ignoring the way I push and fight against him.

“Let me go!” I shout.

“No. You’re not allowed to back out.” He snaps back at me. He grabs my ass again, this time harder. I wince as his fingers dig into me. “It’s already too late.”

I don’t say anything, continuing to push and punch at his shoulders. After a moment, I stop struggling and slump against him.

This so isn’t fair.

“Are you done?” He asks, his voice harsh against my ear. I nod my head. “Good,” he releases me and I scramble away from him. He watches with a frown.

“Take me home. I don’t want to be here anymore.” Then I turn and walk out the door. I struggle to hold my head up, but it’s hard.

“God damn it.” I hear him curse quietly behind me.

The drive to my house is quiet. I glare out the window with my arms crossed, and Kingston doesn't try to talk to me. Which is fine by me. There's so much shit I want to say to him, but I keep my mouth shut.

He pulls up to the side of the road when we reach grandma's house.

“When the others are back with us, we can clear up exactly what it means when we say you belong to us.” Kingston tells me, his hands tight on the wheel. There's no apology for asking a question that is beyond personal. There's no apology for holding me against him even though I fought it.

With a huff and a roll of my eyes I leave the car and slam the door shut. I don't care if it's the most expensive car that I've ever seen. I hope I chipped something.

He doesn't leave until I'm inside, I can hear the screeching tires through the closed door as he takes off down the road.

“Stupid jerk,” I mutter.

“Ariella, is that you?” Grandma's voice is firm. I hold in my groan, and walk into the living room. She sits on the sofa, a yellow sun dress on. “Where have you been, I've been trying to call you?”

I pull off my backpack and dig in it for my phone, “I'm sorry grandma. I guess I forgot to turn on my ringer.”

“Where were you?” Her voice is stern.

“I was with a friend.” I frown. “Is everything okay?”

“No, everything is not okay.” She stands up, and that’s when I see the paper in her hand.

“I think it’s great that your making friends after what happened, but I still expect you to follow simple rules. Telling me where you’re going is one of them.” She scolds me. “And besides that,” She holds out the paper to me, and I take it. “Your father’s court date has been set.”

I frown as I read the letter, “Isn’t this a good thing?” However, as I reach the end of the letter, I realize that it kind of isn’t. Because I’m requested at the witness stand.

Chapter 16

ARIELLA

I don't want to see him. I never want to see him again yet here is the letter that requests I do.

"You don't have to go." Grandma says. She wraps her arms around me and I am quick to hug her back. "They can't force you to be there."

I don't say anything at first, just hold her as the onslaught of memories overwhelms me.

Don't be a sinner, Ariella.

His voice is clear in my head, and I squeeze my eyes shut as a tremble wracks through me.

"What," My voice cracks, and I clear it. I let go of her and take a step back, "What about his accomplice? Aren't they going to wait to figure out who it is?"

Grandma nods, as if she already expected me to ask, "I already called detective Shae." She grabs my hand and leads me to the couch. I follow her, not really noticing, I'm too stuck on probably seeing him again. "She says they have enough evidence against him to put him on trial. She's already interrogated him and he said nothing. If they need him in the future, they can always visit him in the psych ward."

This is a good thing. He'll finally get his punishment, and he'll be locked away forever. So then why don't I feel relieved? Is it

because I know his partner is still out there? My chest begins to ache, and I press the heel of my palm against my breast bone.

They're still out there, and the thought that they could be anywhere, anyone, makes me unsettled. "What will happen if I don't go?" I ask, my brows furrowed.

"Nothing, probably." She puts a reassuring hand on my shoulder, but it doesn't help much. "Your written statement should be enough."

I chew on my inner cheek as I stare down at the paper. His court date is set a month from now. I haven't seen him since that day at church. And I would like it to stay that way.

"I don't think I can do it." I whisper, eyes glued to the tiled floor. My vision blurs as tears fill my eyes.

Fuck, I'm so tired of crying. Crying isn't going to solve anything. Crying isn't going to make me feel better?

Then what will?

An image of my father with a knife lodged in his chest comes to my head. Blood drips down his crisp white collared shirt. His face contorted in pain.

I shake my head and ignore the pounding in my head.

“That’s okay baby. Write down your testimony and we’ll tell Detective Shae when it’s done.” She clasps my hands and squeezes.

I can do that.

“Do you have her number?” I ask, vaguely remembering her giving us her card when she first visited.

After grandma gives me her number, I head to my room.

I don’t know how long I lay in my bed staring at the ceiling. I end up going over how I caught my dad. How Mrs. Nolt and the other church members were close to being headless. How they sat perfectly, facing the altar where dad stands to preach. I never wondered why he did that. Why didn’t he just leave their bodies on the floor, why did he sit them in the pews? All proper as if they weren’t just a lifeless corpse. Fuck, why did he even murder them at all?

Don’t be a sinner, Ariella.

He said he was doing god’s will. What, did he think god was talking to him? Did god tell him to do that?

More like the fucking devil.

Who in their right mind would think that?

Except he’s not in his right mind.

I sniff, how did he end up like this? He was all smiles and caring. When did he start to spiral, and how did I fail to notice it?

Was it mom's death?

I sniff and wipe at my eyes, but I can't stop crying despite how much I want to. I haven't thought about her for so long. It still hurts too much to picture her face.

Am I cursed? Am I meant to live a shitty life that I have no control over? There has to be some witch out there who cursed me with shit luck. A dead mom, a murderous father, and a town who hates me for it.

I glance at my bedside drawer and frown. Not to mention a stalker.

I dig into my shorts pocket and pull out the note. Whoever is writing these to me, is watching me. They know who I'm friends with, they knew my locker was vandalized. I bite my lip with furrowed brows as I go over everything I know.

I wipe at my tears, all my woes replaced by suspicion. I grab a notebook and pen and begin to write down all I know about the notes.

They are always left at school, in my locker. I haven't found them anywhere else.

Everything about this stalker is led by the school. Then whoever is giving them to me must go to school there too.

But it still doesn't make sense.

Why are they sending me these notes? Because they're fans of my dad? Because they want to scare me? Or is this just all some stupid prank? So someone can get their kicks out of making me paranoid?

I tap my pen, which is it?

Finding myself going no where, I grab all the notes from the drawer, completely ignoring my dad's letter. I lay them out on my bed, side by side and evaluate them. The hand writing is all the same, so I know it's all from the same person.

I go through everyone who hates me, and list them down as potential suspects. Starting with the same people on my revenge list; Kensey, Lucas, Henry and Melanie.

I think twice, about to scratch out Henry's name because I don't think he's literate enough to write me notes, but then another thought hits me.

What if the three of them were working together on this? They partnered up in the cafeteria to throw paint on me. And again to trash my car. It wouldn't be so crazy that they're doing it again.

I groan and let my head drop on the bed. There are just too many possibilities and not enough information.

What can I do?

I glance from my notebook to the notes. There's not much I can do right now except to memorize the handwriting and see if I find anyone who matches it.

I nod my head, that sounds like a decent start.

Now, to start on my statement. Great.

When Friday comes around, I don't hear or see much of Kingston or the others. They don't even show up at school. When I call them, they don't answer, so I start to wonder if everything that happened had been a lie.

Maybe they gave up on me, and thought that being friends with the daughter of a murdering pastor was too much?

I scoff, that didn't make sense to me, nothing seems to ever be too much for them.

I sigh and force myself not to think about it right now as I finish my essay.

And then I remember my session with Mrs. River. Groaning, I smack my head against the library table.

“What?” Mason snaps from across me.

“I have a counseling session after school. Do you think that will be a problem?” I tilt my head.

Mason lets out a huff and glares at me, “It means it’ll take longer now. Fuck, why the hell can’t you be some normal fuckwat?” He grumbles the last part under his breath.

I clench my hands and take a deep breath, “I ask myself the same fucking question everyday.”

I shift on the couch, hands gripping the edge of the cushion because this is taking even longer than last time. I’ve been here ten minutes, and Mrs. Rivers has yet to acknowledge me. I glare at her as she scribbles in her notebook.

I let out a frustrated sigh, Mason and Lucas are going to give me so much fucking shit for this.

“Sorry about that. Now we can start.” She finally glances up at me and smiles. “Tell me about your week.”

I resist the urge to snap at her and storm out.

“The bullying stopped.” I shrug. “It’s been toned down to glares and whispering.”

She smiles, “I assume you have Ivy, Stone, Haeden, and Kingston to thank for that?”

I nod, “Yeah. They’ve been really helpful.”

“Good, is there anything else?” She jots down on the paper.

I hum, “My dad’s court date is set.” I avoid her gaze, not wanting to show just how much it affects me.

I don’t know why I told her. I didn’t want to tell anyone, fearing there would be backlash aimed at me. Whenever news about him becomes public, the bullying flares up. And his court date will definitely cause a flare. Hell, I even expect half the town to show up at his hearing to watch him get his sentence.

“Is that so?” She glances up at me, ” And how does that make you feel?”

Her question grates on my nerves, and for some reason I think she’s taunting me.

“I don’t know.” I shrug, the deep frown on my face saying that I do know how I feel. That I hate I even got the news because a part of me is tempted to go down there and look him in the face as he talks about the innocent people he killed. To see if he feels any remorse at all. “I’m requested to testify against him.”

Her eyebrows raise, “Really? Against your own father?”

I scoff, “The system doesn’t care. I shouldn’t care.”

I don’t care.

“But he’s still your father, you’ll always love him.” She points out as she writes something down.

She’s writing an awful lot today.

I want to tell her she can stick her thoughts up her flat ass, but a part of me knows she’s right. And I fucking hate it.

I bite my lip and nod my head, “I can’t just ignore the years he spent caring for me.” I pause, glance at the mallard duck statue on her desk and then at the picture frame facing away from me, “Am I crazy for still loving him?”

I don’t mean to ask out loud, I hate that it slipped from my mouth.

“Of course not. Your feelings can’t just disappear.” She says, her voice full of sadness.

“No, they don’t. But now there’s this big black stain that comes with it.” I murmur.

I hate myself for still caring about him. For denying it for so long, I can’t keep lying to myself. I haven’t read his letter

because I hate him, but because I still love him, and whatever he wrote on that paper will only hurt me further.

I shut down after that, no longer in the mood to talk - with the stalker, dad, and the others on my mind. Not to mention that after this I have to deal with Lucas and Mason.

I just need a break. I just want to get away from it all.

When the session is over, I only find Lucas waiting for me. He leans against his car, scrolling through his phone. He pockets it when he sees me coming to him.

“Where’s-” I begin to ask.

“He bailed. He said he did his part, he shouldn’t have to wait for us to do ours.” He shrugs.

I groan, resisting the urge to slam my head in the concrete ground. Fucking great, now I’m stuck with him.

“Alright, lets go.” I grumble out, hands tightening around my backpack straps.

The drive to his house is short, however every once in a while, I feel his gaze on me. It’s unnerving. Usually he’s spewing hateful words to make me feel like shit.

“What? If you have something to say, fucking say it.” I eventually snap at him. Lucas isn’t one to hold back, he isn’t

afraid to speak his mind. So what the fuck has got him so silent.

He chuckles, the sound foreign to my ears, “Relax, shit. I was just gonna say you look like your in a ‘fuck it all’ mood.”

I snort.

“How’d you guess?” I droll out, turning to glare out the window. What I would give to be anywhere but here.

I wonder what Ivy is doing? She’s probably with the guys. I wonder if the missing item has anything to do with why they’re not around.

“Your shit attitude.” Lucas snorts back, bringing me from my thoughts.

He pulls up into his driveway and turns off the engine.

“Let’s just hurry up, I need to get home after this.” I slam his car door shut and follow him inside.

“You want anything to drink?” He calls out to me as he walks into his kitchen. I follow him, setting my bag on the island counter.

“What are you doing?” I ask with a frown.

He turns back to me and drinks from his glass of water, “What do you mean?” He shrugs, like everything is normal.

Everything is most certainly not fucking normal.

I glare at him, arms crossing over my chest, “You’re being,” My nose wrinkles, “nice.”

Lucas is never nice to me. Not even before the incident with my dad. Lucas just wasn’t a nice person in general.

“I’m offended, I can be nice. Even to you,” he winks at me. I notice his eyes traveling down, and suppress a shiver.

Nope. Fucking nope.

“God damn creep. Let’s just do this, yeah?” I plop down on a high stool at the island and pull out the computer I borrowed from school for the presentation.

I open the link Mason sent me and open it up.

“Wow, he did really well,” I say as I go through his slides. When I reach the end, I add a slide and begin to recite my research.

Lucas scoots his chair closer to me, and I don’t say anything because he does need to be able to see it as well.

I just hate being so close to the fucker.

Throughout the study session, I notice Lucas doesn't avoid my hand when he needs to type something. And when I shift away from him, he somehow manages to get closer.

Just when I'm about to burst and demand what sick game he's playing with me, he announces it's finished.

"Let me see." I go through a test run of the power point, and nod my head. "It's pretty good."

When we first started this, I expected to have been doing it alone, but I'm surprised they both worked on it. I'm glad they did too, it really would've been too much work for me. Good thing Mr. Williams denied me on working on it by myself.

"Alright." I say as I begin to pack my things.

"Hey, hold up," Lucas puts his hand over mine to stop me from putting my notebook into my bag.

I frown at him and pull my hand away, "What?"

He steps towards me, "Stay for a snack or something. I bet your hungry." Then he grabs my hand and pulls me towards his fridge.

"What? No. Lucas!" I protest as I try to tug my hand back, however it's futile. His fingers tighten to the point my hand aches.

He ignores me, ignores the way I whimper and tug against him, and then he pushes me against the fridge. He traps me between his arms, his head tilting down so his lips hover over mine.

Oh god, what the fuck is happening?

“Lucas-” I glare at him, but he cuts me off.

“Stop being a fucking prude, Ari.” He rolls his eyes, “I know you’re fucking Stone, Haeden and Kingston. It’s obvious to everyone at school.” He laughs.

“What the fuck?” I hiss at him. Before I can say more, his hand covers my mouth and my eyes go wide.

“Swear, you bitches always talk too damn much.” He looks down at the floor, as if he’s disappointed. He turns his gaze back to me, “Look, just let me get a sample of some psycho pussy, and we’ll be good, okay?”

My blood turns cold at his words, my eyes widening even further.

My head shakes and I shove his hand off my mouth, “You’re fucking crazy if you think I’d let that happen!” I shout at him, not caring at all when spit flies from my mouth and lands on him. “Get off of me, pervert!”

He doesn’t budge an inch and shoves me back by the shoulders. I wince as the fridge’s handle digs into my side.

“I’m fucking crazy?” He scoffs at me, “You’re out there spreading your whore legs to three fucking druggies and I’m crazy for wanting to try too? Who the fuck do you think you are?” His hand locks around my neck, and I freeze.

Oh my god, stop please.

He pins me to the surface with ease as his other hand trails up my leg.

I curse myself for wearing shorts today, pants would’ve made it so much harder for him.

“You always thought you were a hot piece of ass when you were little miss church girl, now you can prove it to me, hm?” He trails his nose along my cheek and then he’s kissing my neck. His hand pushes past the seam of my shorts and his fingers meet my underwear.

I struggle in his arms, “Let me go, Lucas!” I shout, but whimper when he squeezes my neck tighter, cutting off my air flow.

“Shut up!” He glares at me, “Fuck, you’re making this so much harder than it needs to be. Just keep still. I’ll make you feel good.”

No, no, no!

I gasp for air, my hands clawing at his neck.

“I’m going to ease off, okay?” He stares at me, his eyes dark. “If you scream again, I’ll just knock you out and take you that way.”

He must see the horror on my face because he smiles. “You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

I shake my head, a sob escaping me. I don’t want him touching me at all, but the thought of him doing that to me, limp and unconscious, sends cold ice through me.

“Good.” His hand slowly releases my neck, as if testing to see if I would scream again. Satisfied with my silence, he lets go fully and trails his hand over my chest.

“God damn rats, can’t believe you let them defile you.” He shakes his head at me like he’s disappointed. His nose is on my neck again, his hands trailing over my waist and hips. With shaky breaths, I slowly lift my hand and reach into my back pocket.

I tense when his hand trails lower, praying he doesn’t find my phone in my hand. I cringe when the hand trails back up and snaps at my bra through my shirt. I whimper when the clasp comes undone. I press my finger to the biometric sensor and can see the faint glow as it unlocks. I carefully bring it behind him, pretending to put my hands on him like I’m starting to enjoy it.

His hand pushes my underwear to the side. And I cry when he touches my clit. My skin tingles, my fingers shaking with how bad I hate this.

I don't want him touching me, he doesn't deserve too.

I hate him.

"I fucking knew you wanted me." He growls into my ear as I trail my free hand up his stomach. My insides churn, and I fight the urge to throw up. I lean into him, shudder at the groan he lets out as his other hand digs into my ass.

With shaking fingers, I call the first person on my call log.

I whimper, try to make it sound pleasurable so he doesn't hear the ringing. Please let this work. Please, answer the phone.

The moment I see the call start, I scream.

"Lucas, let me go!" I quickly shove him off, and slip my phone back in my pocket.

I worry he caught me when his hand snatches my wrist.

"No, stop!" I sob as I try to wrench myself away from him, "Don't do this."

"Fucking bitch," He growls at me. My face explodes as it snaps to the right, my ear ringing as the world tilts. "I should've known."

“N-no,” I manage to gurgle out as I stumble on my feet. My head pounds as I try to stand up straight, but he slaps me again.

This time my head smacks against the refrigerator handle and I fall to the floor.

My vision blurs, and I blink to focus but everything is so dizzy. I can't, I have to stay awake. I have to or he'll do whatever he wants to me.

“Help,” I barely get the word out before darkness greets me.

Chapter 17

ARIELLA

“When do you think she’ll wake up?” The voice is soft, familiar when it reaches my ears.

The dull ache along my thighs spreads upwards, turning into something raw and sore. There’s a dull ache in my chest, and my head feels like it’s been stabbed. Why do I hurt so much?

“The doctor said sometime soon.” Another voice answers, except this one is deep. Doctor? What? Where am I? The last thing I remember-

My chest squeezes with a different type of pain. My stomach tightens as tears prick at my closed eyes.

I remember everything up until the point I was knocked out. It explains my pounding head, how I hit it against the fridge.

But it doesn’t explain why the rest of me is sore. It doesn’t explain why my boobs feel like they’ve been used as a punching bag, why I’m sore between my thighs.

But I do know the explanation to that, and it fills me with horror and disgust. He raped me. Lucas must have, there’s no other way my body could feel like this.

A sob escapes me.

“Ariella?” Grandma rushes towards me, and I blink up at her through the tears. “Oh baby, I’m so sorry.” She grabs my hand and cries with me. I don’t say anything, don’t think I can get a syllable past my lips because he really did it while I was unconscious. I pull my hand away from her and hold it to my chest. He did it when I didn’t want it.

My eyes shoot open and I lean over the bed. Vomit spews from my mouth and all over the white tiled floor.

“Get the doctor.” A deep voice reaches me, just as another sob tears out of my throat. I taste the acid of my stomach, the food I had for lunch earlier that day.

I know who the voice belongs to, a small rush of relief breaks through the devastation but it only lasts a second. They came for me, they came just like I knew they would, but they didn’t reach me in time.

“Is it okay if I touch you?” A new voice, Ivy.

I frantically shake my head and push myself back against the hospital bed.

No, I don’t want anyone to touch me.

Don’t touch me. Don’t touch me. Don’t touch me.

I struggle to take in breaths, my lungs feel like they’re collapsing. I grab onto the sheets below me, cling to them like my life depends on it. I’m going to die. I got raped and now I’m going to die because I can’t fucking breathe.

“Shit, she’s having a panic attack.” Another voice says.

Everything is just words, I lose my grasp on reality, I can only feel and see Lucas. Can only focus on the pain I feel.

“Take a deep breath.” He’s right there, right by my ear, forcing me to listen. To focus. “Take a deep breath, Ariella.”

I don’t want too, I just want-

“Either you calm down, or I’ll give you something to put you to sleep.” A different female voice. One I don’t recognize.

Suddenly I’m taking a deep breath. I can’t go back to sleep, I can’t let him touch me again. I won’t let him touch me again.

“There we go. Now let it out slowly.”

It’s hard. I want to just push it all out but I force myself to slow down.

After a while, my sobs turn into hiccups. I wipe at my bleary eyes and sniff. I take the time to look around the room, notice Ivy and Kingston standing a few feet away from my bed. Grandma sits on the chair on my right side, hands clasped tight in her lap. On the other side is a woman in a white coat.

The monitor beeps beside me, filling the silence.

When Ivy meets my eyes, she gives me a watery smile. She came for me. I remember dialing the first number on my call log, her name flashing in my memory.

“Thank you.” I burst into tears again. Grandma reaches to hold my hand, but pulls away when she sees me flinch.

“Don’t.” Ivy says, her voice hoarse as if she’s been crying for a while too. She looks away from me, “We didn’t make it in time.”

I break down again, knowing it couldn’t have been avoided. All Lucas had to do was get me unconscious. He didn’t need me awake to rape me. He just needed a limp body to do what he wanted. And he did.

The pain between my thighs is a throbbing reminder that I didn’t get away.

A shiver wracks through me as I try to relax.

I’m not a virgin any more. I squeeze my eyes shut, hating everything. Why is everything out of my control? Why is God throwing everything he can at me?

I’m not a sinner! I did everything I was told, I was a good girl so why am I being punished?

Lucas’s devilish blue eyes sear through me every time I blink.

“Ariella, I’m doctor Martinez. How are you feeling?” The doctor finally speaks, bringing my attention back to her.

“Like shit.” I can’t help but snap back at her. How the hell did she think I was doing? I doubt people who were sexually assaulted were feeling good after.

It was a dumbass question, and based on her furrowed brows and frown, she knew it too. But maybe she asked because she had to, being a doctor and all.

“Ariella!” Grandma gasps at me, “I apologize, she’s not usually-”

My hands clench.

“It’s okay.” Doctor Martinez cuts her off, “I understand.” She smiles softly and looks over her chart. “I’m going to set you up with some pain meds now that you’re awake.”

I nod, a numbness slowly takes over after she messes with my IV bag.

“You seem to have a lot of people caring for you. There’s two more waiting outside.” She smiles.

I glance at Kingston, my shoulders relaxing because Stone and Haeden are here too. They all came to make sure I’m okay.

I turn to Ivy, giving her my attempt at a genuine smile, “Thank you.” I say again. She looks away with a frown, teeth digging

into her bottom lip.

“There’s a police officer out in the hall. Whenever you’re ready, he’d like to come in to ask you some questions.” Doc Martinez continues to say.

The doctor leaves, and grandma continues to swarm around me without touching, but it’s all background noise, too busy stuck in my own head, my own nightmare to really care.

Lucas raped me. He knocked me unconscious and used my body like it was his to use. And I don’t even remember a thing, yet I’m stuck with the pain of the aftermath.

“I’m coming in.” The door pushes open, and a man in uniform steps in. His brown hair is turning grey in the front, his blue eyes cold and calculating.

“The doctor said when she was ready.” Kingston says, his voice hard with annoyance. He steps in front of the police, blocking me from his view. “She’s not fucking ready.”

“Get out of the way kid, I’m just doing my job. Besides I can’t wait any longer, I’ve got other cases to get to.” He grumbles and shoves past him to reach the foot of the bed. “Now if you can just step out.” He looks between grandma, Kingston, and Ivy before gesturing to the door.

Kingston begins to protest but I speak up.

“I want him to stay.” I say, my voice firm. I don’t think I can be alone with anyone right now, especially a man.

The officer clenches his jaw, clearly not happy about what I said, but nods. The door closes behind grandma and Ivy after they leave.

The officer takes me in and then grunts before pulling out a note pad. “I’m officer Jones. I need your statement. Tell me exactly what happened.”

When I don’t say anything, he lifts an eyebrow at me.

I clear my throat, finding it dry and scratchy now that I have to go over everything out loud, and explain what happened. He writes it all down, nodding his head to show he’s listening.

As I tell my story, Kingston paces back and forth, his hands clenching and unclenching. I think if Officer Jones wasn’t here, he would’ve punched something by now.

When I’m finished, he snaps his notepad shut and stuffs it back in his pocket.

“I hope you understand that you’re accusing the son of a fellow police officer.” Mr. Jones says, eyebrows raising.

My eyes narrow, heart squeezing, “I’m not accusing him. It actually happened.” But is Lucas really the son of a policeman? Will that change things? I know there are crooked cops out in the world, is Jones suggesting that Lucas’ dad is one of them?

“Right, thank you, I’m sure that was hard for you to recall.” He says in a monotone voice. “Since it was just you two, and there were no witnesses to the account, it’ll be difficult for you.”

Lucas is the son of a policeman, Officer Jones said that. We both know that will be the real reason it’ll be difficult.

“No witnesses?” Kingston nearly shouts. He stops pacing, his shoulders taut and a vein protrudes from his neck. When he glances at me, he cringes back and lowers his voice, “Ivy walked in on him doing-” he cuts himself off and gags. “She saw him do it.” He says firmly.

The officer raises an eyebrow but ignores him. “My partner is already getting her version. He’ll be under house arrest until the court date.”

My stomach drops, “Court date?”

“Yes, this incident is under investigation. We need to make sure you’re not lying, and that this was truly nonconsensual.” He goes on to explain.

I let out a pathetic laugh, my eyes full of tears again, “You don’t believe me? Why would I lie about this?”

“Who knows why women do a lot of things.” He shrugs, and it makes my blood boil. “This is my number,” He hands me his card, “Call me if you happen to remember anything else.” Then he leaves the room without a glance back.

“He doesn’t believe me,” I whisper, voice hoarse.

“They never do, killer.” Kingston mutters. “We’ll do everything we can to make sure he doesn’t get away with this.”

After another day of staying in the hospital, the doctor got a sample from my coochie for ‘evidence’, I’m allowed to go back home. Grandma treats me like I’m fragile glass. She opens doors for me and hovers over me like a pesky bee.

I don’t say anything, I find it gives us both comfort. She leads me to my room and stands near the doorway.

“Get some rest and tonight we can have popcorn chicken bowls.” She says, and the thought of my favorite comfort food has my mouth watering. I don’t tell her that I think I rested enough at the hospital, but I keep it to myself.

When she does finally leave me alone, I let out a sigh. I sit on the edge of my bed, going through everything that happened.

Lucas really did it, tears prick at my eyes. What happened to him hating my guts? What happened to me being a crazy psycho that he wouldn’t touch with a ten foot pole?

Shivers wrack through me as I whimper. I drag myself to the bathroom and turn on the hot water. I can feel his phantom

touches still on me. Can feel his creepy eyes on me. I step under the water and look down at my figure. Bruises line my hips and the top of my chest. Scratches cover my thighs and calves. But most of all, my insides ache.

I reach for the loofah and get a large amount of body wash on it, then I scrub and scrub and scrub. I don't stop when I turn red, needing to scrape my skin raw. Until I can't feel him, but it's no use. I still feel dirty, I still feel used.

I clench my eyes shut and sit on the shower floor. I press my forehead to my knees, needing a way to shut everything away. I don't know how long I sit there and cry, but it's enough for my tears to run dry.

With a pathetic sniffle I get out. The steam fogs the mirror and I use my towel to wipe it off. I stand there and stare at myself, at my tainted figure.

Why did this happen? Everything was starting to turn around, I made friends, I was starting to live life like a normal teenage girl should and then-

And then everything falls to shit again. I get used and abused, I got my choices taken from me. With a scream I punch the mirror. I hiss when the glass shatters, pieces digging into my skin. Blood drips down onto the sink and floor, but I can't find it in myself to care.

“Ariella?” Grandma’s soft voice comes from the other side of the bathroom door. When I don’t reply, just stand there and huff at myself in the mirror, she speaks again. “I’m coming in, sweet heart.”

The door opens and I can't will myself to look at her. My knees buckle, but before I can fall onto the glass, grandma catches me.

"My sweet baby," She whispers into my ear as she holds me to her chest. I cry onto her shoulder, wetting her blouse with my tears.

"It's not fair," I hiccup into her neck. "Why me?"

She pulls me from the bathroom, careful to avoid the glass, and leads me back inside my room.

"I'm so sorry, baby," Her voice cracks as she begins to cry with me.

And she holds me and rocks me until my tears run out and I pass out from exhaustion.

"Psycho," Stone's voice is soft. I shift on the lumpy couch, avoiding leaning right so I don't touch Ivy. It's Tuesday, and after school, him, Haeden, Kingston and Ivy picked me up and brought me to their hangout spot.

I was surprised when the tension in my muscles eased the moment I entered the run down house.

“Can you tell me what happened?” I swallow and blink back my tears, “When you found me.”

I’ve debated asking this question the last few days, knowing it would be hell to hear everything they say. But I have to know. I need to know.

Ivy swallows, the noise audible in the room. She glances up to look at Stone. When he gives her a nod, she bites her lip, her own eyes watering.

“Fuck, I’m so sorry Ariella.” She whispers. She leans in, arms raising like she’s about to hug me but then thinks better of it and pulls back. “Are you sure you’re ready?” She whispers.

“I need to know.” I say, giving a firm nod. It’s killing me not knowing exactly what happened to me when they arrived.

She pulls back and nods, “Alright then.” She sucks in a breath, “When I got your call, I thought you butt dialed me. I heard voices but it was all muffled.”

Haeden shifts to sit down on the bean bag chair, his hands curling into fists repeatedly as if he’s holding in his anger.

“But then, before I could hang up, I heard you screaming.” She whispers. She clears her throat, and this time her voice comes out clear. “When I heard you say Lucas’s name, I guessed that you were over at his house. I vaguely remember you mentioning the project with Mr. Williams.”

“Why the fuck were you at his house?” Stone snaps at me from where he leans against the opposite wall. “You could have worked anywhere for the project, why his damn house? What part of you belong to us do you not fucking understand, Ella?” His jaw clenches.

I flinch back, not ready or prepared for being berated right now.

“Shut up, Stone.” Ivy snaps at him. “Now is not the damn time.”

Stone grumbles but doesn't continue.

“Fucking dick.” Ivy mutters before she continues. “Stone and Kingston were with me, and we drove over. I kept the phone on the whole time.” She lets out a whimper and she grabs my hand. I resist the urge to pull away, tell myself she won't hurt me. She squeezes it as we hold each other, both breaking down into tears. “I'm so sorry.” She whispers.

“Keep going.” I force the words out of my lips.

“You kept screaming, and Stone was driving as fast as he could. He went over the speed limit, we were so desperate to get to you. But after another minute, you stopped screaming.”

Haeden suddenly jumps to his feet, his knuckles white from how hard he clenches them. He doesn't look at anyone as he storms off, the hide out door slamming behind him.

Kingston is about to go after him, but he must think twice about it because he stays where he is.

“When the phone went quiet, I was so scared you died.” She whispers, her voice hoarse. “And then,” She breaks into a sob, “I’m sorry, I can’t go through it again.” She stands up and leaves too.

“Ivy,” My voice cracks as I watch her go. I turn to Stone and Kingston, “I need to know.” I whisper, eyes red and puffy.

“God damn it.” Kingston mutters. He steps forward and then stops himself from getting any closer. I can’t thank him enough for that, don’t know if I can handle a guy touching me. It doesn’t matter that they did nothing wrong. I just find myself cowering away. “We heard him. He started saying awful things about you, about your body. I don’t really remember what it was he said, but they were vile.”

“I stepped so hard on my gas pedal, Ella. You have to believe me.” Stone whispers, his voice hoarse. I stare at his red rimmed eyes, noticing the first time that he’s crying.

“I believe you.” I force a smile, his face blurring as I cry.

“I called the police on my phone. When we got there, the door was locked. Stone started banging on the door, yelling at the top of his lungs for Lucas to open up.” Kingston continues. “Ivy broke the front window and unlocked the door. When we got inside the backdoor was open. The little bitch ran away.” He growls out the last part.

“I went after him.” Stone says. He lifts up one of his hands, and that’s when I notice the bruises and cuts. His middle finger is wrapped in a splint. “Punched the piece of shit so hard I broke a finger.”

“You-” Kingston chokes and wipes his eyes. “You were on his kitchen floor. There was blood coming from your head, and,” He sucks in a breath, “You were naked and there was blood on your thighs.” He whispers.

I slouch forward and cry into my hands.

“Stone caught him just as the cops arrived. I covered you with my shirt, and you know everything after that.” He trails off and clears his throat.

“Thank you.” I murmur softly.

A while later Haeden and Ivy come back in. Ivy sits next to me and holds me. The guys offer silent comfort. Just their presence puts me a little at ease.

Chapter 18

HAEDEN

When Ivy received the call from Ariella, she was sitting in the front passenger seat of Stone's rusty truck. The latter drove, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. Kingston and I sat in the back. The air in the car was thick with an electric tension, the aftermath of what we just did still coursing through our veins. Kingston held a blunt between his fingers, his head leaned back as he stared up at the ceiling. He always zoned out at times like that, while I reveled in the excitement still buzzing within me.

"Hey, Ariella. What's up?" Ivy had held the phone to her ear. After a moment she pulled her phone away and stared at it, "I think she butt dialed me." She had said. I stared at the side of her face, a sudden rage rolling through me. Except it wasn't really sudden because it had been the only thing I felt for months. It wasn't a rage towards her, but for her. Because Ivy shouldn't have gone through what she did.

I turned my gaze to the rest of my friends, a calm settling over the hurricane inside me. We took care of her problem, and she was safe.

Ivy was about to hit the end button when a loud shout left her cell phone.

"Lucas, let me go!"

Kingston straightened in his seat, his green eyes darting to mine. I stared back at him, eyebrow raising as I nodded my head. Lucas was finally doing it. And it was about fucking

time. I was beginning to wonder when that stupid fuck was going to step up.

Something to knock around her head and hopefully, tip right over the edge and into a little insanity.

My eyes darted back to Ivy, her brows furrowed as she stared at the phone. I glanced at Stone, saw him already staring at me and I smirked. Everything was going to plan. Or so, I had thought.

When Ariella grew eerily quiet over the phone, my hands clenched. Something didn't feel right, didn't settle well with me. After me and the guys talked, we agreed to test the limits. To see if the apple falls far from the tree. So we agreed to get Lucas to mess around with her. Decidedly, we left Ivy out of our plans, knowing she was too stuck in her own head. In her own problems. She didn't need Ariella's on top of it.

The plan was simple. Lucas would scare her, and we would see how far she could be pushed. However when we arrived at Lucas' house, my blood boiled beneath my skin.

Lucas didn't scare her, like we talked about. He had raped her. He stole what was ours right from under our noses. Took her untouched pussy like it was his to claim.

I expected to find her roughed up, maybe bleeding a little because Lucas wasn't a gentle boy.

When we entered the house, Lucas was hovering over her naked body. I almost lost it. My hand immediately went for

my pocket knife, the weapon still covered in blood from our previous project. However, when Ivy laid her hand on my shoulder, her grip firm and her eyes clouded, I paused.

“What the fuck do you think your doing?” She hissed, her voice croaky. I had no doubt she was being plagued by her own memories. She had let Stone walk forward, both of us knowing he wouldn’t lose it like I would’ve done. Stone was always the level headed one in our group, the one to push past his raging emotions and see it from a logical standpoint.

My fingers flexed around my knife, the urge to stab burning into my nerves because this wasn’t the plan.

Stone shoved Lucas off, and Ivy whimpered at the sight of blood between Ariella’s thighs.

She really was a virgin.

Not anymore.

My jaw clenched so hard my teeth ached.

When Lucas saw Ivy, his eyes widened in panic. When his eyes drifted over Kingston and then me, his hands began to shake.

He knew he fucked up.

“Shit,” He scrambled to his feet, his junk hard and swinging. There was no remorse on his face. No sign of regret. Well,

probably regret for getting caught.

And then he ran. The mother fucker ran like he thought he could get away with it.

While Ariella ended up in the hospital with an officer full of skepticism to take her statement, Lucas only got an ankle bracelet slapped on him.

It wasn't fair.

So now here I am, crouched behind some fucking bushes so I can make it fair. So I can show him just how fucking bad he fucked up.

I let out a breath of excitement when Lucas' dad finally exits the house. The police uniform on him is nothing but a joke. This man doesn't protect the innocent. He doesn't serve justice.

When he drives away, I clutch my duffle bag and make a beeline for the house.

I toss the bag in through an open window and climb in, scoffing because the cop's a dumbass on top of being crooked. I ignore the tasteless furniture and go upstairs. I check the rooms, looking for a particular rapist. I reach the last door and lick my teeth. The mother fucker has to be in here.

I open and then close the door behind me. The big lump on the bed tells me I found him.

With a clenched jaw, I drop my duffle and walk over to him. I stare down at a peaceful Lucas, sleeping like he didn't fuck a girl bloody. Sleeping like he didn't commit a heinous crime.

I curl my fingers and punch him in the gut, satisfaction filling me as he jolts awake with a loud wheeze. I don't give him a second before I kick him off his bed. He lands with a loud oof.

"What the fuck?" Lucas scrambles up, his dark hair in disarray and eyes wide. "Oh it's just you." His shoulders relax, as if he doesn't see me as a threat.

"What the fuck did you do?" I hiss at him. I jump on his bed, wipe my dirty shoes across his sheets as I walk towards the other side jump down in front of him. He walks backwards.

"I did what you told me to do." He says, and then has the nerve to glare at me. "What the hell is your problem?"

I toss my head back and laugh, then I lick my teeth. When Lucas starts to laugh with me, I stop so fucking quick. I step into his space and punch him. My knuckles ache and I shake my hand out. Blood spurts from his nose, coating his thin, ugly lips.

"Fuck." Lucas cries, cradling his face in his hands "God damn it, what the fuck, Haeden?!"

"My fucking problem is you can't follow simple directions, Lucas." I snap at him. I slam my palm against his forehead and

his head slaps on the wall. I kick Lucas' thigh and he falls to his knees in front of me.

“What did I tell you Lucas?” My voice is eerily calm, which I'm proud of because I don't do calm. I rage and destroy. And I'll get there, just not yet.

“You said to make that bitch pay.” Lucas grunts back at me, “I fucking did.”

I sigh, my insides clenching in disgust, “Wrong, Lucas. Absolutely fucking wrong.” I crouch down so we're face to face. “I said, shake her up a little. Maybe a bit of assault, something to bring her pain. And what do you go and do? Hm?” When Lucas doesn't answer, I slap him, his head whipping to the side.

“I asked you a damn question. Answer me.” I growl.

“I brought that fucking slut pain.” He smirks despite his shaking, blood staining his teeth.

My hand shoots out and I grab him by the neck. I bare my teeth at him like an animal, “No!” I roar into his face. “You took what was mine!” I scream. “You touched my precious killer.” I end in a whisper, my eyes wide with fucking rage.

Lucas cowers back, “I only did what you asked.” He cries, his hand clawing at my wrist when my hand tightens on his neck.

“No, Lucas. Did I ask you to rape her unconscious body?” I shake him, his head slamming against the wall. “Did I?!”

“N-no.” Lucas whispers.

I let him go and stand up. “Tell me, was she really a virgin?” I ask, an eyebrow raising.

Except I already know the answer. I saw her bloody thighs, so unless he decided to stab her fuckin’ pussy, or his dick was just that big - I laugh, yeah fucking right - then she was definitely a virgin.

Lucas stares up at me, unsure if he should answer or stay quiet. It’s the smartest thing he’s done so far. Maybe I don’t look like I’m in the right mind.

“Don’t make me ask again.” I glare at him, for some reason desperate to hear it from the crooks lips himself.

Lucas nods, “Y-yeah.”

“Fuck.” I grumble. I shake my head and walk over to the door where I left my black duffle bag. I grab the rope from inside and walk back to Lucas. I grab him by the back of his shirt and drag him to the bed.

“What - what are you doing?” Lucas eyes the rope, his nose still dripping red down his neck and shirt.

I push him onto his bed. I grab his wrists and start to tie them together.

“Do you want a truthful answer?” I smirk down at him, “I’m gonna rape you Lucas. Just like you raped my killer.” Except I’m gonna do him so much worse.

Lucas pales, “B-but -”

I cut him off with a laugh, “I’d knock you out too, like you did her, but where would be the fun in that, yeah?”

“You’re fucking crazy! You’re a goddamn psychopath.” Lucas whispers. He tries to get away, his legs flailing to kick at me. I’m faster than he is though. I take his kicks to the hips and waist, and punch him in the throat.

He wheezes out, tries to pull his hand to cover his neck but he’s already tied up.

This would be so much easier if Stone and Kingston had come with me, but Stone needed to stay with Ariella, which I didn’t fight. My little killer needs someone with her right now. She’s too fragile, too broken. And it’s all Lucas’ fault. Meanwhile, Kingston is out with Ivy, taking care of her own business.

So it’s all on me to take care of this loose end. This dumb fuck who can’t follow basic directions. The dumb fuck who screwed everything up.

I bite my lip, I can’t say it out loud, but maybe this is going to be her breaking point. Maybe this is going to be what makes her snap. And fuck I’m going to hell because that makes me happy.

I smile, “I just hate that it had to happen that way.” I murmur.

“What?” Lucas croaks out. I ignore him and tie his ankles together. I shove Lucas on his back and crack my neck. Then I step back and smirk, “There. So much better.”

“Let me go you fucking nut case!” Lucas wiggles on his bed like the little worm he is.

My smirk falls, and I glance around the room. I spot a basket full of clothes and dig through it. I pull out a pair of dirty boxers and walk back. “You better hope you don’t leave shit stains behind.” Then I ball it up and shove it far into Lucas’ big mouth.

“Now that’s better.” I nod my head.

Lucas says something, his words muffled and garbled through the fabric.

“I hope you can taste your nasty ass cock.” I sneer at him. I pull a pocket knife from my jeans and flick it open.

Lucas starts to cry, the sound is music to my ears.

With a sinister grin, I grab one of his ankles and slice his pant leg open. I do the same to the other one. The fabric falls, revealing plaid boxers. I cut those off too.

“Now, I’m not gay in the least, but you have an ass that could make any girl jealous.” I laugh, “You do squats, bro? Never

skip leg day, huh?”

Lucas whimpers.

I dig through the duffle once more and pull out a long, thick, black dildo. At the sight of it, Lucas struggles harder.

“Hey, don’t look so fuckin’ scared. I brought lube for you.” I laugh. I rummage through the bag, then I pout, “Well, shit. I thought I brought lube.” I scratch my head with the tip of the dildo. A smile spreads across my face, “Whoops?”

Lucas shakes his head, tears staining his red face.

“Let’s begin, shall we?” I step forward and toss the dildo on the bed. Then I flip Lucas over so his face is pressed into the mattress and his ass is in the air. I ignore his loud and angry sob and push his legs apart so his hairy asshole is on display.

“Stay just like this. If you move, you won’t like what I do. I mean, shit, you won’t like what I’m doing now, so what I mean is,” I walk around the bed to look him in the face, “I’ll cut off your fucking dick.” Right now. Is what I really mean to say. I’m still cutting it off, I just won’t do it right now. I smile. “You understand? Nod your fucking head.”

Lucas nods his head.

“That’s a good little bitch.” I slap his cheek.

I walk back around and rub my hands together in anticipation. My fingers twitch, the urge to smoke a joint while I work overcomes me and I pull one out of my pants pocket. It's a little crushed, but not enough to make it unsmokable. I light it and take a deep puff.

“Oh yeah.” My shoulders relax. After a few more hits, I put it out on Lucas' ass. I ignore his muffled scream and grab the dildo.

“Ya know,” I murmur as I rub the head of the dildo against Lucas' rim, “I was fucking livid when we found out you raped her. The others would kill to be here, to watch you impaled by this monster.” I shove the tip in, reveling in his whimpers. “Stone would love to be here, to be the one doing this to you. But Ariella is more important.” I shrug, “Which I completely agree with. And while I'd love to be with her in her bed, comforting her with Stone,” I shove in two more inches. Luca's rim begins to tear, blood dripping down the black cock. “Doing this is soooo much more satisfying.”

Lucas screams into his dirty boxers.

“You better shut your fucking mouth. Ariella didn't scream, because your bitch ass knocked her out.” I growl, shoving another few inches in. “God damn it, Lucas! You fucking ruined everything.” Grabbing the balls at the bottom of the dildo, I adjust my position and roughly push the rest of the dildo into him.

I step back to admire my handy work.

“Her virginity was mine. I fucking thought about it all the god damn time.” I groan, “I had it perfectly planned out. How my cock was going to fuck her tight pussy.” I sigh and reach down to readjust my dick.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m still gonna fuck her. I’m still gonna love her, but her virginity was going to be my present.” I pout. I step back to admire his blood dripping down his crack, to his taint and balls.

“God damn, I can make some fucking art.” I laugh, “and I’m not creative in the least.”

Lucas cries and whimpers, I’m positive his comforter is soaked in his tears.

“How do you feel?” I raise my foot and kick against the dildo, “Huh? Taken against your fuckin’ will?” I grab the dildo by the balls, “Now the real fun begins.” With a firm grip, I pull the cock out, watching in wonder as blood coats it. When it’s half way out, I thrust it back in, loving the sound of his pain.

Chapter 19

ARIELLA

I curl my fingers around Stone's, finding comfort in his warmth - although a part of me wants to lurch back and get rid of his touch, I force myself not to.

He is not Lucas. He will not hurt me.

"You don't have to stay." I murmur, eyes glued to the ceiling above us.

After I got ready for bed, I found Stone crouching on the roof outside my window. Now he lays in my bed in the dark, our shoulders and arms pressed together.

I hold in my struggle, resist the urge to press myself against the wall, because this is Stone, and although he doesn't talk much, he hasn't done anything to hurt me.

"I want to stay." He replies, his voice deep and loud in the quiet room. My eyes blurr with unwanted tears, and I quickly blink them away. "Plus, if I'm here with you, I'm not at home listening to my dad bitch like there's no tomorrow."

I let out a soft laugh, sniffing. "Yeah, we both won't have to hear that."

Stone curses, "I forget that you can hear us fight."

I shrug, "It's fine." It's a small glimpse into his life. I feel like he, Kingston and Haeden are mysteries to me. The most I know about them is, Stone and his father don't get along. Kingston has money in his pockets for days and lives in a bloody mansion with a fucking butler, not to mention he loves anime. And Haeden - Well I knew almost next to nothing about him, other than he smokes too much and visits Mrs. River like I do. Yet they already know so much about me.

"Kingston and Ivy," I bite my lip as I bring them up, "They seem to be spending a lot of time together. Is she okay?"

Stone chuckles, "Careful, Ella. You sound jealous."

I turn my head so I can stare at him. When he does the same, the tips of our noses brush together. Do I sound jealous? I don't mean to, I am only curious because she hasn't been around much lately. And when I do see her, she's in a bad mood and doesn't talk to me a lot.

"No, just," I search his dark eyes, can see the way his black hair sweeps back past his forehead. "She helped me alot." I admit, "She's the reason why we're even talking." I chuckle. "And now, it seems like she can't stand to be around me."

Stone sighs, and tightens his hold on my hand, "It's not you, I promise. She's fighting her own battles right now."

I turn to stare at the ceiling once more, remembering the way she ran out before she could finish explaining what happened with me and Lucas.

“She’s been raped before, hasn’t she?” I ask in a broken whisper. Stone doesn’t say anything, doesn’t offer an answer, but his silence is enough.

“It’s not fair.” My voice cracks as my throat swells with emotion, “It’s not fucking fair.” This time my words are thick with anger.

“I know, Ella, I know.” Stone presses his lips against my hair as he says it. He lets go of my hand and wraps his arms around me, pulling me into his chest. I grab the front of his shirt and hold onto it as if it were my life line. For once I’m not focused on staying calm at his touch. I take his comfort, grasp it tight in my hands because I don’t want to be like this forever, afraid of skin to skin contact.

I can’t let Lucas win.

After a moment I force myself to relax. When I am, I pull away.

“I don’t want to wait anymore.” I whisper, settling my palm against his torso. His muscles flex, I can feel the way they tense beneath me. “I don’t want to wait to make Melanie suffer.” My voice hardens, a darkness seeping into me, “I want to do it quickly, so I can get to the rest of them. I’m tired of letting them think they’re getting away with how they treat me. Especially fucking Lucas.” I nearly spit out his name.

“Easy, babygirl.” Stone chuckles, his free hand wrapping around my wrist. That’s when I realize that the hand I laid on his stomach is clawing at him, and I realize I want someone else to feel pain. To feel my pain. To feel my torture.

“Sorry.” I withdraw my hand, but he grips it and brings it to his lips. I’m surprised to feel the gentle kiss he places on my knuckles.

I’ve never known Stone to be soft or affectionate. He always had hard surfaces and sharp edges. Both him and Haeden. They’re like two peas in a pod.

“What’s going on with Melanie?” I ask. I’ve been so stuck on dad’s court date, and Lucas, that she’s completely slipped my mind.

Stone grunts out, “I’ve never met a bitch so fucking annoying.”

I manage a weak giggle, “She was very eccentric when we were friends.”

“I gave her my number, and she hasn’t stopped texting me once.” He continues to mutter.

“But did she give you what I wanted?” I ask, frowning into the dark room.

He squeezes my hand again, “Not yet.”

My eyes narrow, “She’s not going to make the first move, you’ll have to do it first.” I tell him. “Melanie is easy, she’s been craving attention from you for years. She’ll put out soon.”

“I’ll let you know when I have them.” Stone replies.

I nod my head once, mind drifting to what we had planned. Originally, I wanted it to happen at her birthday party, the one she invited Stone to. But with things escalating as they are, I can’t wait anymore. I want her dealt with so I can move on to the next one.

I stare down at the pink dress, the white flower pattern lines, the hem and tight waist. The fluttering skirt reaches the top of my knees, skimming my thighs. The sleeves are long, reaching my wrist. I turn to the side as I lift my gaze to the mirror.

Would he like this dress? I bite my lip in thought. Honestly, it’s hard to tell what Kingston likes in a girl.

“You look beautiful,” The rich voice comes from behind me. I smile at the compliment, my confidence boosting. I find her staring at me from behind, her reflection in the mirror is adoring and proud.

She’s a beautiful woman, with long blonde hair and green eyes. All the time, I wish I had gotten her good looks, but all my traits are from dad. My brown hair, and matching eyes. Sometimes I wonder, if I had siblings, would they look like her?

“Do you think so?” I ask, genuinely concerned by her opinion. She runs her palm down the length of her pink tight dress. It

hugs her curves in all the right places, the formal collar doing nothing to put off her beauty.

“I know so, Ariella.” She beams at me. She walks up behind me and puts her hands on my shoulders. “You always look beautiful.”

My heart warms and I glance down to hide my blush. If my beautiful mother thinks I’m pretty, then maybe I really am? I bite my lip, it’s hard to feel confident when dad is always so strict with boys.

“Do you think Kingston will-” I glance back up as I ask, except she’s not standing behind me anymore.

With furrowed brows, I turn around, she’s not in the room at all. Where did she go?

“Mom?” I ask, but I’m only met with silence. Suddenly, my world twists and morphs. I struggle to keep on my feet, my eyes widening as I suddenly find myself in a cemetery.

In front of me is a head stone. Marilla Mackensie. Devoted mother and loving wife. Below that is the year she was born and the year she died.

Legs weak, I fall to my knees.

“What?” I whisper, eyes filling with tears. “No, no, no! How did this happen? You were just here!” I scream.

I claw at the grass, desperate to dig her out because she doesn't belong down there. She belongs with me, with the living.

A dark laugh comes from behind me and I jump. I whirl around, quick to wipe away my tears. Dad stands there, a knife in his hand. Blood drips from the blade and coats his white button up shirt.

"What did you do?" I whisper in horror.

I wake with a fright, my shaking hands clutching at fabric.

"No, no, no," I cry.

"Ella?" Stone's voice is groggy. I sniff, turn and curl into him. He wraps his arms around my waist and holds me to him.

"Did you have a nightmare?" He asks, his voice rough and thick with sleep. I don't say anything, can only nod my head as an answer. He tightens his hold around me, "It's okay. I'm right here."

I don't know how long he holds me, how long he endures my sobs as I think about her and my father. What I do know is that he's here for me.

And I can never thank him enough, for deep down, a part of me fears that if he weren't here, I would've drowned in the darkness that has bloomed inside me.

Chapter 20

ARIELLA

When morning hits, Stone leaves to get ready for school.

I'm still laying in bed, everything numb. I think about my life before all this. When all I worried about were my grades and if boys found me attractive. And now I have too many problems on my plate. My dad is a murderer. I lost my best friend. I'm being stalked. I'm being bullied. I have to see the school therapist. I made new friends. I was - I suck in a breath, eyes watering as I think the word. I can't say it.

I whimper when I feel a throb between my legs. A phantom pain.

I don't want to go to school today. I want to stay and lay in bed and wallow in my self pity. The dream I had last night isn't helping either. It's putting thoughts in my head that I don't want to think about.

Thoughts like: Did my father kill my mother? Or is it just my imagination?

I scoff, mom died in a car accident. There's no way he killed her. My brows furrow, did he end up like this because of her death? Did her missing presence drive him insane?

There's a knock on the door and then it's opening. "Are you up, honey?" Grandma asks as she steps in.

When she sees that I'm awake but still in bed, she frowns.
"You look sick. Are you feeling unwell?"

I almost jump at the opportunity, desperate for an excuse to not go to school. But I've missed so much already. And if I want to pass my classes I have to go. Before I can answer, my phone chimes. Biting my lip, I check the message Stone sent me, and my heart begins to race.

"No, I'm okay." I answer as I look up from the nude he sent me. Suddenly, I'm doing more than okay. An energy buzzes beneath my skin, "I'll get ready now."

I jump to my feet to do just that. With a frown and furrowed brows, grandma nods.

"If you're sure." She says, eyeing me from where she stands. After a moment she steps out and closes the door.

After changing, I glance at the picture again. I don't know how he worked so fast, but Stone did it. Melanie sent him nudes, and she was dumb enough to capture her face in them. Has no one told her that's a huge no no? Even I know that, and I've never even sent one before.

She's standing in front of a body length mirror, her camera pointed at her reflection. She's smiling, her make up perfect and her eyes flirty. She wears a neon pink thong and no bra. Her perky breasts are visible, no doubt she wanted the main focus there.

Shes too easy. Too eager.

My phone buzzes again and another image comes through.

This time she's on her knees, her butt resting on her heels with her legs spread. Her thong is riding up her pussy lips, nearly exposing everything except her clit.

Okay, I admit the girl has sex appeal. Does Stone like her pictures? My hands clench around the phone at the thought that he does.

I shake my head, I can't focus on that. This is about me, about getting my revenge.

I can't believe Melanie actually sent them. When we were friends, I knew her as a prude, like me. She was shy, and smart.

But now she's out there, spreading rumors and sending sexy pictures to Stone. And I'm sure he's not the only one getting them.

I can't believe how much she's changed. How much we've both changed.

I smile as I download the pictures. I close down the messaging app and open a new one.

I can already taste the sweetness of my payback.

Watch out Melanie, because I'm going to fucking ruin you.

It's hard to hide my smile when I walk into the halls. I notice a group of girls whispering to each other, crowding around the one who has her phone out.

Across from them, leaning against some lockers, a couple guys smirk down at their phones.

No one seems to notice me, no one glares my way or sneers insults at me. I suddenly feel invisible, and it's a nice feeling. I'd rather be that than have all the negativity thrown at me again. However I know it will only be a short reprieve. They'll quickly forget about Melanie in her little pink thong, and will focus back on me. But right now, I can't find it in myself to care.

I'll just enjoy it while I can.

I love not being the focus of their conversations. For now. With an extra bounce in my step, I make my way towards my locker. I have a good feeling that today will be a great day.

When I open my locker a sticky note flutters out. My smile is replaced with a frown as I just stare down at it. Another one?

I glance around the hall, try to find anyone who isn't focused on Melanie's nudes. I don't find anyone. Biting my lip I bend down to pick it up.

I know something you don't. (:

My brows furrow. What? And what the fuck is up with the smiley face?

Clenching my jaw I shove the sticky note into my backpack. Whatever, it's just another clue. I'll add it to my pile of evidence.

I snort. All I have is their handwriting to go on. In a school full of hundreds of students, it feels almost impossible to find them.

“Hey, Killer.”

I glance behind me and find Haeden with a large smile on his face. His eyes are tinged red, lids droopy as he licks his lips. Next to him Ivy smirks, despite how tired she looks.

I smile back at them, “Hi.”

“Can't believe you actually did it,” Ivy laughs. She glances around, taking in the gossiping students. “You're finally growing that backbone.”

My smile widens, “I'm taking the advice you gave me. It's about time I start standing up for myself, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Ivy nods, beaming at me.

“Fuck, do you hear what they’re saying?” Kingston walks towards us, Stone a step behind him.

I shake my head, “And what are they saying?”

“All kinds of nasty shit,” Stone snickers. He leans his shoulder on the locker next to mine, his hand reaching out to twist a lock of my dark hair before dropping it.

“Like? Come on, don’t skimp on the details.” I say.

“She’s an attention whore.” Haeden shrugs, shoving his hands into his cargo pants pockets. “They think Stone humped and dumped because of how loose her pussy was.”

Stone snickers.

“You didn’t really hump, did you?” Ivy’s nose wrinkles as she turns her gaze to him. I look at him, bite my lip because, sure he may have said she was annoying, but she’s still a warm body with a pussy.

“I wouldn’t touch that bitch even with a fuckin’ condom on.” Stone grumbles, he reaches down to cup his dick through his jeans, “I treat my boy better than that.”

Haeden snorts and Kingston laughs.

“Good. We all know better than to touch stank ass bitches.”
Ivy snickers.

“How’d you get her to send them so quickly?” I ask him.

Stone shrugs, “I sent a pic of my hard on.”

My eyebrows raise.

“Then a few dirty words and she was sending them with no hesitation. I’ve never met an easier bitch.” He continues.

The sound of crying reaches my ears, and I turn to find Melanie at the end of the hall. She’s crying on her friend May’s shoulder. The sight makes me smirk. Oh this is just too perfect.

“She’s fucking pathetic.” Haeden chuckles.

“She invited me to her party. Think I should go?” Stone asks, eyes glued to the crying girl.

“Sure, if you want to torment her.” Ivy smiled.

“She would be so distraught to see you there.” Kingston nods his agreement.

I tune them out, so focused on the way Melanie clings to May as if she could make everything better. Her face is red and splotchy, eyes puffy from crying.

It's such a beautiful sight.

I need a picture.

Without thinking, I pull out my phone and walk up to her.

"Ariella?" Ivy asks, but I wave my hand.

"Hold on, I want to get something." I say to her over my shoulder.

I need a picture.

She doesn't see me coming at first, head stuck on Mays shoulder. When May sees me, she narrows her eyes.

"Now is not the time Psychopath," She snaps at me, venom lacing her words. I smile back at her, because as far as I'm concerned, her entire existence is irrelevant.

I tap Melanie's shoulder.

She snuffles, pulls away from her friend and wipes at her eyes. I frown, no, keep the tears. Keep crying.

I smile when she does. She turns around to look at me and I smile wider. Fuck, she's so damn ugly when she cries.

“What the hell do you want?” She hisses at me, hiccuping at the end. I bite my lip and glance behind me. Stone, Kingston, Haeden, and Ivy stare at me with curious eyes. I turn back, find that Melanie followed where I was looking. When she sees Stone standing there, the smirk on his face, her eyes widen.

“You,” She says in a whisper. Her eyes snap to me, then she’s glancing between us as things suddenly click in her head, “You did this to me, didn’t you?” She hisses at me. Her face is red, her jaw clenched so tight I hope she breaks a tooth.

I raise my phone and snap a picture of her. The way she’s crying, the heat of her glare, the ugly scowl on her face. It is all too perfect.

“So what if I did?” I shrug, lowering my phone. I turn it off and pocket it.

“You fucking bitch!” She screeches like a banshee, the noise so loud my ears begin to ring.

My eyes widen when she lunges for me. I yelp when one of her hands digs into my scalp. The moment she pulls my hair, I don’t see Melanie. I see Lucas. I remember the way he held me against his fridge, and remember the feeling of being trapped. And then it’s gone, and I’m staring back at her crazed eyes.

“Oh shit, cat fight!” A voice that sounds suspiciously like Haeden shouts into the halls.

“I saw that coming.” Ivy laughs.

“Of course she goes for her fuckin’ hair,” Kingston scoffs.

Back to the present, I shake off the fear Lucas instilled into me, and I clutch Melanie’s wrist. I push my thumb into her veins as hard as I can. I don’t expect it to work, but her grip loosens. I snatch her hand away and slap her, feeling the wetness of her tears.

“Fuck, I never knew I needed this,” Someone says from the crowd.

“Fuck that bitch up!”

I can’t tell who they are cheering for, but I also can’t find it in me to care. Melanie helped ruin my life after years of friendship. She threw me away the moment she found out about my father, and she spread awful rumors about me. So I did her worse. I humiliated her, made her bitch ass vulnerable.

And she’s mad about that? A laugh escapes me as I curl my hand and punch her. Good, let her be fucking mad. It’s such a great look for her.

Melanie grabs me by the front of my shirt and slaps me back. The sting makes my eyes blur but I quickly blink the tears away. Using all of my weight, I push her to the floor. I fall on top of her, and I quickly scramble to straddle her waist.

I pin her arms to the ground and glare down at her, “You did this to your fucking self, Mel.” I hiss at her, her old nickname

slipping through. “You sold me out because of what?” I bite out at her, “What the hell happened to us?” I hate that the hurt can be heard from my voice. Hate that I still miss my best friend.

“You fucking happened, you damn psycho!” She screams at me. She tries to rip her arms away from where I’ve pinned them down above her head.

I barely manage to keep her there.

“What the fuck did I ever do to you, huh?!” I scream. “I fucking needed you and you left me!”

She clears her throat, eyes narrowing, and then she spits on my face.

I stare down at her, my hands tightening around her wrists, the ache in my chest easing. This isn’t my best friend. This isn’t the Melanie I knew.

The Melanie that slept over at my house is dead.

Her eyes widen, I don’t know why, and I don’t care.

“You should never work as a wrestler. Have you ever thought about joining the porn industry? I’m sure loads of people would pay to watch you get pinned like this.” I taunt her. I lean down and whisper in her ear, “I already gave you a head start. Ya know, the nudes that I’ve sent to everyones phone?”

She screams, her face red, and then she flounders on the floor like a fish, trying to get me off of her.

“I’ll kill you!” She shouts.

My smile drops and I drop down to whisper in her ear, “Are you sure you want to threaten the daughter of a psycho killer?” I whisper. I pull back to look into her eyes.

If they all want to treat me like one, call me one, then why not start acting like one?

She stills beneath me before lashing out once more. Her left hand slips free and she scratches my cheek.

“Fuck, the principal is coming.” Ivy hisses.

Muscular arms slide around my waist and hauls me off of Melanie.

“Alright, you had enough fun,” Haeden chuckles, his chest vibrating against me. “Lets go before you get dragged to the office.”

I continue to glare at Melanie as he leads me away and towards the back doors.

When we’re outside I take in a deep breath of fresh air and let it out slowly.

“I can’t believe I did that,” I whisper. I glance back and see that the others followed.

“Well believe it,” Kingston laughs, “It was hilarious. The look on her fuckin’ face, priceless.”

“I’m proud of you,” Ivy smiles at me, shining teeth lined by red stained lips. She reaches out for me, and then hesitates.

Smiling, I step forward and hug her, “Yeah?” I ask, eyes wide as adrenaline still pumps through me.

“Of course, Ella. You’re standing up for yourself.” Stone nods in agreement. He crosses his arms against his chest, a finger tapping out a rhythm on his bicep.

“Do you think I’ll get in trouble?” I ask, biting my lip.

“Oh most definitely. A suspension at the worst. Detention at best.” Kingston says.

I toss my head back and groan. They all laugh at me.

“It’s not funny. Grandma is going to be so pissed.”

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” Stone mutters, “They’ll be looking for you.”

“Yeah, just deal with it tomorrow,” Kingston grabs my hand and tugs towards Stone’s rusty truck.

“You guys are horrible influences on me,” I laugh as I climb onto the backseat bench.

Haeden slides in on my left while Kingston sits on my right.

“Bitch please,” Ivy snorts as she climbs into the passenger seat, “We’re amazing and you know it.”

“Yeah, I can’t deny that.” I can’t stop the wide smile on my face. I feel good. My fingers tap on my knee, the buzz of the after fight adrenaline still thrumming in my veins.

“Are we going to the abandoned house?” I ask.

Ivy turns in her seat and smiles, “They’ve already taken you?”

I nod my head, “Only twice.”

“Well, now that everyone is together, what do we say to a little game off?” She asks, glancing at the others.

“I’m in, it’s been a while since we’ve done one.” Haeden nods. He leans back in his seat and lifts his hips. He digs into the back pocket of his black jeans and pulls out a joint.

“Hate when you fuckin’ sit on them man.” Stone mutters, eyeing him from the rearview mirror.

Haeden just smirks at him. Kingston's hand reaches across from me, a lighter held between his long fingers. The back of his palm brushes against my boob.

Blood rushes to my face at the small pleasure it brings.

Haeden grabs the lighter, his fingers running over the curve of my nipple. I suck in a deep breath, teeth biting onto my lower lip. I glance up, catch Stone watching from the mirror. He lifts his gaze from where they watch my mouth, to my eyes. Something dark clouds them, my stomach clenching with heat.

Smoke fills my nose as Haeden takes a puff, one side of his mouth quirked up as he stares at me.

The moment Stone pulls up to the boarded up house, we all climb out. Before I can take a step, my phone rings. I pull it out to see grandma calling me

“Shit.” I hiss.

“Principal probably called her.” Ivy mutters as she looks over her shoulder at me. Kingston throws his arm around me and leans his head on mine, “You have fun with that, chica.” She steps away and walks inside. Haeden and Kingston follow her.

“Answer it.” Stone leans back against his truck.

“Right.” I clear my throat and answer the call. “Uh, hi.” I squeak into the phone.

“Don’t you hi me, Ariella Isabelle Mackensie. You got into a fight at school, and then ran away?” Grandma screeches. I wince and pull the phone away from my ear

“I-” I attempt to speak.

“No. I am not done speaking with you.” She hisses. I turn away from Stone and kick at a stray rock on the ground. I clench my eyes shut, waiting for her to bring up the worst of it all, sharing a private picture of Melanie to everyone. “What has gotten into you? I understand you’re upset about your father, but this is no way for you to act.”

My eyes snap open and I stare at the dirt ground, “What?”

“You heard me. Where are you Ariella? I’m coming to pick you up.”

“No, repeat what you said.” I raise my head, eyes narrowing despite her not being there. “You think I’m doing this because of him?”

“Why else would you be doing this?” She asks.

I clench my jaw, “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’ve become a total freak. Not just me, the both of us. You think I don’t see how the others treat you? You don’t even go to church anymore grandma.”

There's silence, and I glance at the phone checking to see if she hung up. When I see she's still on, I continue.

"I've been getting bullied."

"I really don't want to talk about this over the phone, Ariella. Just tell me where you are so I can pick you up."

"I'll come home." I say, glancing at Stone over my shoulder. He nods his head at me, "I was just getting some food with my friends."

She pauses, "Okay."

We hang up and I turn around.

"Definitely in trouble." I chuckle.

"Let me tell the others and then me and you can go." He turns and jogs inside. A while later he's coming back out.

As Stone pulls up to the house, I can see grandma standing in front of the door, her arms crossed over her chest. I bite my lip, and glance at him.

"Thanks." I murmur before jumping out of his truck. I trudge my feet as I walk towards her, a pang of guilt hitting my chest.

I always hated getting lectured, it was a reason why I was a good girl. Who likes being yelled at by people they love?

Not me.

“Get inside.” She says, her voice firm as she glares behind me. I glance back, can see the smirk on Stone’s face and sigh.

“Sit down. We need to have a talk.” She uses her no nonsense voice. It’s been a while since I’ve heard it, stuck in my own head to do anything bad, until today. She stands across from me, her red summer dress fluttering from the AC.

“Not only did you get into a fight, but you fought with Melanie?” Her voice is tight, the vein in her neck looks like it’s ready to burst. “She was your best friend, and now you’re fighting with her?” She opens her mouth to continue but then snaps it shut. “And then you have the nerve to run away? Ariella, what in the world has gotten into you?”

I don’t say anything, I can’t find it in myself to defend my actions. As we sit in silence, I squirm on the couch.

“Do you have nothing to say for yourself?” She asks in disbelief.

I bite my lip, because I can’t tell her that petty Melanie was spreading rumors about me. What good will it do? But, I wait for her to rage about the spreading of the girl’s nudes. Because if anything was a reason for her to be mad, it sure as fuck is that one.

“I was happy that you made friends, but since hanging around those heathens, you’ve not been acting yourself. You were raped for Christ’s sake-”

My head snaps up, a hotness filling my chest, “What?” The words escape me in a hiss. “Me getting raped is their fault?” I ask.

Grandma glares at me, “I gave you the chance to talk, you didn’t take it. Now shut your mouth.”

My jaw clenches as I continue to glare at her.

“I didn’t say it was their fault.” She continues in a sharp tone. “In fact I know they saved you. It was that girl that told me about it all. And I will forever be thankful for that. However, this fight you got into-”

“It’s not their fault! Melanie-” I suck in a breath, “I told you we had a falling out. She doesn’t like me anymore. And now it’s mutual.”

She scoffs, “That does not give you a right to bash her face in.”

I bite my lip to hold in a laugh and glance down. She hasn’t mentioned the pictures yet. Did Melanie not tell anyone about them? Or that it was me who did it?

She doesn’t have proof.

“I hope you feel ashamed of yourself. You have a weeks detention, your lucky it was your first offense.” She sighs and sits next to me. “I love that your smiling more, and getting out of your shell, but something like this can’t happen again. Do you understand?”

I nod my head.

Chapter 21

ARIELLA

“She didn’t mention anything about the pictures. Why wouldn’t Melanie say anything?” I ask. Haeden leans against the trunk of the truck, his foot propped on a tire and a joint in his hand. It’s unlit, just dangling between two fingers.

I notice a look shared between Stone and Kingston and straighten my back, my eyes narrowing between them. “Someone knows something. Spill it.”

Ivy sighs from next to me and pats my shoulder, “A minor threat goes a long way.”

My eyebrows raise as I look at all of them, “You threatened her to keep her mouth shut?”

Kingston shrugs, the smirk on his face drawing my attention. He looks good today, they all do. Stone wears a navy blue long sleeve to cover up his tattoos. Haeden wears his signature hoodie, Kingston wears a white button up tucked into his jeans and Ivy wears tight jeans and a black t-shirt.

“What did you tell her?” I ask, my curiosity getting the better of me.

“If she even thinks about ratting you out, I’d tell the entire school she had sex with a teacher.” Stone shrugs. “Which she did. Besides, she doesn’t have proof that it was you.”

I bite my lip as I glance at the rest of them and they all look completely serious.

“Wow, thank you.” I nod my head. I would’ve gotten into so much more trouble. “Grandma thinks you’re bad influences.”

Ivy laughs, “Of fucking course we are. You just got into a fist fight with your ex-bestfriend.”

“She didn’t say it out loud, but I think she wants me to stop hanging around you.”

Haeden chuckles and kicks off of the truck. He stops in front of me, the tips of our shoes touching. He bends down and looks me in the eyes, his shining with mischief.

“A little too late now, isn’t it killer?” His lips turn up, eyes glancing down to look at mine. His tongue licks his bottom lip before he stands up straight. I take in the length of his neck, the way his Adams apple bobs when he swallows.

“He’s right.” Stone says, his dark eyes glued to me. “You made a deal. You’re stuck with us whether you want out or not.”

My eyebrows raise, “I didn’t say I wanted out. I like where I am.” I smile.

The bell rings and Haeden steps back.

“Good.” Kingston smirks.

When I walk into my first period, I'm surprised to see Mr. Williams missing from his desk. Instead an older woman with greying red hair writes on the white board.

Fuck, she must be a substitute. And that means an easy class, and that no one is going to pay attention. I glance towards the student desks and see the seat arrangement out of order. In fact, Kensey is sitting at my desk with her friend Maribel at her side.

Damn it, I really don't want to deal with her nasally voice. Looking around, I spot my desk mate at the back, ignoring everyone around her. Though she's nosy as all hell, I'd rather deal with her snooping than everyone else.

With a frustrated sigh, I walk along the wall, ignoring Henry's hateful glare, and plop down next to her. The only reprieve I have right now, is Lucas being on house arrest.

"Oh," She jumps in surprise as she looks up at me.

"I can move if you want?" She may not have been the most likeable person in class, but then again neither was I. However, she never went out of her way to bully and humiliate me.

"No, it's fine. I just didn't think you liked me." She shrugs, her cheeks flushing red. I have a flash back, when Mr. Williams forced me to define the word Psychopath. I remember how she snuck a peek, and how I snapped back at her.

“I don’t know you,” I shrug, suddenly guilty because other than that one time, she never bothered me again. Maybe she isn’t so bad. “You don’t piss me off or make me cry, so you can’t be that bad, right?” I chuckle.

She smiles back at me, “I can say the same for you.”

I settle in the seat, taking out my things even though I know it’ll be futile. Substitutes never get the chance to actually teach.

The class passes by fast. Besides the heavy glaring from Henry, everyone leaves me alone. I even get to know Emma more. She’s not staying in the school for much longer. Her mom is getting relocated for her job to Redwoods, and all we talk about is how creepy and haunted the town is.

“Who knows, maybe the ghost busters or scooby doo will show up one day.” I laugh. She smiles and shakes her head, but before she can respond the bell rings.

I put my stuff away and tell her goodbye before I’m hurrying out.

As I walk down the hall, I notice Melanie’s name coming up in different conversations, and I can’t help but smile. Sure, the news will die down because lately it seems something new is happening every week, but I’ll enjoy her humiliation while I can. I know people are looking at me too, probably whispering about the fight that happened. I can’t find it in me to care. She got what she deserved.

And the others will too.

I reach the side door that leads outside and found Stone, Haeden, Kingston and Ivy standing around the truck.

“Did you hear the news?” Ivy smiles brightly when she sees me. I can’t help but smile back. The last couple of days, she seemed to be in a better mood. She no longer ignores me, or glares at me when I ask something about her.

“No, what is it?” I ask as I stop besides Kingston. He throws an arm over my shoulder and pulls me into his side, “Melanie is moving. I don’t think she can handle her pictures floating around.”

My eyebrows raise in surprise, “Oh wow.”

“You can’t say you didn’t expect it.” Haeden chuckles, “You ruined her fuckin’ life.”

I scratch the back of my neck, “Yeah, I guess leaked nudes do that.”

In all honesty, I don’t regret it. The past me, the church girl that followed every rule laid out for her, would hate herself for doing it. But this me, the broken me, can’t.

Stone is about to reply when his eyes drift over my shoulder. They harden, and he stands straight as his fists clench at his sides. I glance behind me and am surprised to see Louis Masanove walking our way.

“The fuck do you want?” Haeden steps forward and blocks him from getting any further. He looks familiar, yet I can’t place where I’ve seen him.

“I’m not here for you.” Louis snaps back. He stuffs his hands into his letterman jacket and looks at Ivy.

“Can we talk?” He asks her, his voice softening.

My eyebrows raise and I glance back at my friend.

Ivy curses under her breath and kicks off the truck.

“Ivy, I don’t think-” Kingston starts to say, even steps forward to stop her.

“Don’t.” She glares at him and brushes off the hand he put on her shoulder. She walks past us, “Worst fucking timing, Lou.” She mutters.

“I think I’m missing something here,” I say as I watch them walk around the building.

“Don’t fuckin’ worry about it,” Haeden snaps back at me, eyes still glued to where they disappeared.

I frown and glare back at him, “No. This is so unfair. You all know everything about me, but I don’t know a single thing

about any of you. She's my friend and I care about her. Why do you all hate him so much?"

"If she wants you to know, she'll tell you." Stone shrugs his shoulders. "Take out that blunt you rolled this morning."

And like that, the subject is changed. I bite my lip and glance back to where I've last seen Ivy. I can't help but think I'm being left out on purpose. Ivy has helped me twice so far, she's inspired me to stop taking things lying down, is it so bad that I want to be there for her too?

I take in the three guys before me, going on as if they weren't just pissed off moments ago. They're protective of her, I can see that as clear as day. Why would she need me when she has them? Maybe she doesn't trust me yet, but no matter the reason, I'll wait. I want her to see me as one of them. They've done so much for me. It's only fair that I want to do the same.

Just as the bell to lunch is about to ring, Ivy returns. Her happy mood seems to have dimmed, but she smiles when she sees me.

"Why do you look so worried? You should be smiling. You can cross her off your list." She says.

Before I can reply, the bell rings. She quickly says her goodbyes, giving the guys a look before heading back inside.

I really hope she's okay.

Ever since the conversation with Stone, I haven't been able to get it out of my head.

"She was raped too, wasn't she?"

He didn't answer me, but his silence had said it all.

We go our separate ways, and I make my trek to my locker. When I open it, a note falls out.

I sigh, no longer surprised to find them. I bend down and pick it up, frowning as I read it.

Meet me at the church tonight. The one where your father murdered people. 9 pm sharp. Don't be late.

They want me to meet them? And why at the church of all places? It's been closed off from the public for a while as the law enforcement gathered evidence and what not. The town of Bethany has resorted to going to the park nearby to continue the sermons and services. I don't even know who the new pastor is.

Don't they have police surveillance the area, just in case dad's partner shows up at the scene of the crime?

My head begins to throb. I shove the note in my backpack, I'll deal with it later.

By the time school is over, I'm trudging over towards the detention room. On the way there, the note is on my mind. My stalker wants to meet me. Tonight. I bite my thumb nail, why all of a sudden? And why at all? I mean, whoever this is, has been watching me, and sends me creepy notes. And for some reason seems to admire my father.

I remember their previous note, I know something you don't know.

What could they possibly know?

I sigh when I reach the room detention is being held in. I've never had one. Why am I so nervous? It's just like having another class, except it's after school. I snort, detention is just the school's punishment club. I pull open the door and walk in.

I stop short when I see all who's attending.

"Oh you've got to be shitting me." I mutter. Sitting in the front row is Kensey and her flock, Maribel, Stacy and Lupe. Sitting behind them is Henry. My eyes drift further back, and I smile in relief knowing I'm not going to be fighting them off alone.

Haeden smirks at me, his hood pulled over his head as he leans forward on his elbows on the desk.

I ignore the glares I get from the girls up front and make my way back to him.

“Slut,” Henry coughs. The room erupts into giggles.

“Can you believe she made up that story about Lucas raping her?” Maribel whispers loudly.

I freeze, just two rows until I reach Haeden and my feet are glued to the floor. I was hoping no one was going to find out. I was hoping Lucas wouldn't have bragged about it. I bet he altered the huge detail of me being unconscious and not wanting it.

“She's the reason he's on house arrest.” Henry continues. The room is quiet, every eye on me. I look to Haeden, hoping he'd say something but, at the steel look in his eyes, I realize he isn't.

I have to stop looking at others to help, that was the reason I started all this, right? To stand up for myself?

To stop letting them get away with it.

“Do you guys really want to keep going?” I ask, dragging my eyes across the five of them. I need to pretend to not be affected. I can't show them how much they hurt me. “I don't mind fighting again,” Liar. I don't know if grandma will forgive me. Besides, Henry looks the type to fight a girl if he has too. Not to mention four against one sounds impossible.

Don't take the bait. Just leave me alone.

Kensley laughs, the melodious sound grating on my nerves, “She fights with someone one time, and she thinks she's tough

shit.”

Except I don't.

Hell, I don't even think I can take Kensey one on one. The only reason I even stood a chance against Melanie is because I know she has noodle arms. Melanie doesn't work out, and the worst she did was pull my hair and scratch me up a little, and I'm sure I did the same to her. Kensey though, she works out. I can see the definition in her arms. It's why she's liked so much, the girl is fit and she knows it.

“Shut the fuck up,” Haeden snaps, his voice thick with annoyance. “We get that you all hate her, and Henry, get rid of the fuckin boner. I know you wanna fuck her too, but she's off limits.”

The tension in my body lessens at the sound of his voice. They look over my shoulder at him, and the girls turn away as they mumble under their breaths. Henry continues though.

“She opened for all three of ya' and then for Lucas. What makes you think she won't open for me.”

I cringe and step back. A shiver runs down my spine as the mental image of us together almost makes me gag.

Haeden gets up so fast his chair tips over and crashes to the floor. He's walking over to Henry his hand reaching into his pocket and pulling something out. Henry scrambles to stand up and freezes when with a click, Haeden has the blade of his pocket knife at his neck.

“I’m sorry, I have wax in my ears,” He says as he digs into it with his pinky. “Can you say that again?”

My eyes widen, what the hell is he doing?

“Y-you won’t hurt me.” Henry stutters.

Haeden tilts his head, “Oh, I won’t?” He must apply more pressure, because a small trail of blood trickles down his neck.

“Alright, fuck.” Henry leans back.

Haeden pulls his knife away and looks at the red on the tip of his blade.

“You don’t got a STD do ya?” He asks with a wrinkle on his nose.

“No, you fuckin’ psycho.” Henry snaps back, his face flushing red.

“I don’t trust you, man. You could be lying,” He reached forward and wiped the blade against Henry’s jacket. “Anybody got a wet wipe or something?”

I watch him in disbelief. When no one answers he tisks and puts his pocket knife away. Then he grabs my hand and pulls me back to sit next to him.

“What the fuck was that?” I whisper to him. “You looked crazy. Do you want to get into trouble?”

Haeden chuckles, “Henry won’t snitch. He knows what’ll come at him if he does. I know how to keep people quiet.” He smiles at me. He leans forward and kisses my cheek.

I can’t help but stare at him. I can’t help but be confused. Before, it seemed like he hated me, but now he’s being, dare I say, sweet?

A memory comes to mind, the way he kissed me outside at Stone’s party. My eyes drift to his lips, would he want to kiss again. I know they said that I’m theirs, but the most they do is show a little affection. Well, except the time Stone almost went down on me. My cheeks flush and I quickly turn away.

Maybe it’s because of what happened to Lucas? I bite my lip, am I even ready to try something remotely sexual? What if it gives me flashbacks? I shake my head, what am I doing? I’m probably going to meet my stalker tonight and I’m over here worried about getting jiggy with Haeden?

Fuck, I need to get my priorities straight.

Chapter 22

ARIELLA

I pace around my room, my hands twisting into the sleeves of my sweater. I can't keep still, not when I'm actually being stupid enough to go meet this person.

The guys and Ivy wanted to hang out tonight, and while I was tempted, I'm more curious about the stalker. I told a lie, that grandma was forcing me to stay so I can study and catch up on the days I missed.

I pace inside my bedroom and bite my thumb nail. The lights have been off for an hour, long enough for grandma to believe I went to bed. I pull out my phone and glance at the clock, eight thirty.

The walk to the church from Grandma's house is fifteen minutes, ten if I walk fast. The note said nine sharp, and to not be late. But what if I'm early? I shake out my hands, no. I'm going to wait.

It kills me to not go now. I can't help but need to know who it is behind those notes. It's been on my mind ever since I started receiving them. And my search for them is going nowhere. Every person whose writing I examined does not match the notes. I just can't find them. Whoever they are must not go to any of my classes.

Time passes slowly until finally it's eight forty. I lift up my window, careful not to make too much noise, and climb out onto the roof. The drop is steep, but the anxious jitters I have are too eager to jump. I spot a ledge a couple feet below and

lower myself to it. I stumble, eyes wide but I manage to catch the ledge of the roof.

I suck in a breath and jump the rest of the way down. My heels throb with pain as I land with a curse. Fuck. Okay, I'm never doing that again.

I make my way out past the side of the house and down the street. I can't believe I'm doing this.

They say curiosity killed the cat. I sure as shit hope it doesn't apply to me.

There's caution tape wrapped around the church. Other than that, I don't see police patrolling the area. I don't see a sign of anyone, actually.

I take a moment to just stare at it.

Remember how I casually walked in, not expecting to see the pews drenched in blood as it drained from the victims neck. A shiver runs down my spine and I wrap my arms around myself.

I'm delusional. Who in their right mind would visit a crazy stalker at a murder site?

Me, apparently. I scoff and force my feet to move forward. I don't see any cars, so I don't think the person drove here. Or

they parked a block away and walked the rest of it. Either way, there's no sign that anyone is here.

When I reach the front double doors that lead to the sermon hall, I pause when I see it's been left ajar. The right door is cracked open, the only sign that someone is here. Whoever has been leaving me notes was just inside. And for some reason wanted to meet me.

I know something you don't.

It's so vague. So taunting. They could know a lot that I don't, lots of people do, but for some reason it bothers me.

I suck in a deep breath and wipe my sweaty palms along my jeans. Here goes nothing. I either end up dying tonight, or learn about something I didn't know before.

I push open the doors and cringe at the eery creak it makes. Well, they know I'm here now.

It's dark inside, but there's a luminous glow coming from the main hall. I take in what's around me, see that nothing has changed from last time. It looks exactly the same.

Suddenly I'm seeing dad again, his shirt coated in blood and the stained knife held loosely in his hand. I suck in a breath and shake my head, the image of him disappearing.

He's not here, he's not. It was just my imagination.

After a few calming breathes, I continue forward. I tip toe, try to make as little noise as I can even though I know I revealed myself the moment I walked inside. It helps ease my nerves though.

I press against the wall and attempt to peer past it, into the room. The pews are still in perfect place, besides the ones that were soaked in blood. Those few pews are missing from the front. Other than that I don't see anyone or anything out of the ordinary.

“Are you hiding from me?”

I freeze, my shoulders tensing up at the familiar voice that came from behind me.

I straighten, can feel my heart threatening to jump out of my throat. No, no, no.

“Come on, Ariella. Turn around.” He's taunting me. He knows exactly what he does to me and he's enjoying it.

My hands clench into fists and I finally turn around to look at him.

Lucas leans against the opposite wall, the smirk lighting up his face. How? How is here? He's supposed to be on house arrest. At the thought, my eyes trail down to his ankle, except the bracelet isn't there.

How did he get it off without anyone noticing?

“You don’t look happy to see me.” He snickers.

“It was you this whole time?” I ask, my voice a broken whisper. “You’re the one who keeps sending me those notes?”

Lucas’ brows furrowed, “The fuck are you on about? I only gave you one, to meet me here. Honestly I’m surprised you did. I was prepared to be disappointed.” He chuckles. The sound makes me shiver, and I can remember the way he held me against his fridge. The back of my head throbs in memory of being slammed against it.

But, he hasn’t been sending the notes? I scrutinize him, try to tell if he’s telling the truth or not. If he is, it means Lucas isn’t my stalker. He’s not the one sending me the creepy notes. Then the stalker didn’t want to meet up, Lucas did.

I think back, and now that I remember, his note was on a different type of paper.

“W-why did you send it to me?” I hate that I stutter, that I’m showing just how uneasy he makes me.

He scoffs and walks forward. I’m quick to step back but he tuts in disappointment. I notice the limp he has, the way he doesn’t put his full weight on his left foot.

Just how did he get the ankle bracelet off?

“Why do you think, Ariella? I didn’t get to finish what I wanted to do to you, those stupid fucking pimps you have around you keep fucking everything up.” He ends in a mutter.

No, no, no. I can’t let him touch me, not again.

I shake my head, and before he can get any closer, I turn around and run.

“I knew you were going to make this hard!” Lucas shouts after me. I hear the heavy stomps of his shoes as he runs after me. “Come back here, Ariella. You’re going to make it worse on yourself!”

I ignore him and run out the front door, except I forget about all the caution tape and get tangled in it.

“Shit, shit shit,” I hiss. I glance back as I try to rip them off me, and he’s right there, barreling towards me. His grin is slick and slimy, and a chill runs through me.

“Gotcha,” He chuckles as he grabs my hair. “Look at you, you got caught like a fly on a web. Fucking adorable.”

I whimper when he tugs my head back.

“Ya know, I was under the impression that you weren’t a virgin, what with you being around those fucking creeps all the time now. Can you imagine my surprise when I find your pussy tight as hell around my cock? I told myself, nah, she’s not a virgin. There is no way. But then I saw the blood and I was just blown away.” He speaks, his eyes sparkling as he

looks at me in awe. “Why would Stone, Haeden, and Kingston leave you untouched?” He whispers.

I struggle in his grip, rip at the caution tape like it’s not too late for me to get away, despite his death grip on my scalp.

“Come on, you’re wasting time. I am on house arrest ya know, I can’t be gone for very long.” Lucas grabs the back of my shirt and hauls me back towards the church.

“No, let me go!” I scream. It’s the wrong thing to do though, he immediately stops and glances down the street.

“You shut your fucking mouth, I’ll knock your ass out like I did the last time. I really don’t want to, but I will if I have too.” He leans forward and runs his nose along the length of my neck. “I want to hear from you this time. You’ll let me hear you, won’t you?”

I’m trembling, my eyes blurring with tears because I’m really about to go through this again. He isn’t afraid of knocking me out. And I don’t want to be, I won’t have a fighting chance if I’m out cold. If I’m awake, I can at least still try.

I let out a sob and nod my head, the motion painful when he holds my hair so tightly.

“There’s a good girl,” Lucas smiles down at me. “Come on now.” He guides me back towards the church.

“I have the next hour planned perfectly. I think you’ll hate me for it,” He chuckles. He closes the double doors with his free

hand and twists the lock. Then he steers me back to the sermon room and forces me to sit on the front pew. I try not to look at anything, avoid the blood soaked carpet at my feet.

“Honestly, I still can’t believe your dad did this. Can you?” He breathes in and chuckles. “Fucking crazy.” He mutters. “I thought it would’ve been fitting for you to be taken here,” He held his hands out, “Where your father committed such a heinous crime.” He nods his head and looks at me, almost as if he expected me to be pleased with his idea.

I glare up at him, try to stop crying but the tears won’t stop falling.

“Why does everyone keep doing that?” I hiss, “Why am I associated with what that monster did?!” I squeeze my eyes shut and struggle against him, but when my scalp feels like its about to be ripped off, I stop. “Did I force him to take the knife? Did I force him to slit those peoples’ throats? Did I do it myself?” I fire off the questions in rapid succession, “No!” I scream.

I’m tired of being the one to blame when I did nothing. I’m tired of being outcasted for something I didn’t do. And most of all, I’m tired of people treating me like I’m nothing.

Lucas laughs, the noise grating against my ear drums, “Fuck, you’re so damn pathetic. Do you think we care that you didn’t do it?” He hisses in my face. “We care that you might end up like him. When I’m done with you, how about you and your stupid little granny pack up and leave, huh?”

His other hand reaches up, squeezes my breast, “It’s too bad you’re so pretty.” He mutters, “The hot ones really do be fucking crazy.” His tongue comes out and he licks my cheek. “Do you want to know what I did to you while you were unconscious? What I did before those back stabbing bitches came and stopped me?”

Back stabbing? The question is gone as fast as it came when his rough hand cups my pussy.

“I tasted every inch of your body.” He leans forward and whispers into my ear. His hot breath feels wet against my skin and I shiver, cold rushing through me

No, I don’t want to hear it. I can’t, yet he continues and I’m dragged back to his house. To the moment he wouldn’t let me go.

“I sucked on your tits, and licked your cunt.” He grinds against me, I can feel the bulge in his pants. He starts pulling me, dragging me up to the stage where dad used to do his preaching. Then, he pushes me down onto the table where bread is broken and the wine is poured.

We’re going to ruin this holy temple. I can’t help but snort, screw the holy fucking temple. There was nothing holy about it since the beginning. And I have to face it, it was ruined a long time ago. It was ruined when my father brought a blade against delicate flesh.

I turn away from facing Lucas, force myself to block out his gravely voice that taunts me. I push and shove at him.

“Let me go, Lucas please.” I cry. He grunts in annoyance and shoves my hands away.

“Unless you want to be tied up too, I suggest you stop.” He hisses at me. With a whimper, I lay my arms down. “I won’t be fooled by you again.” He digs into my back pocket, ripping the phone from it. He tosses it aside and I stare at it in desperation. My only salvation is out of my reach.

His hands run along my waist. I open my eyes and stare at the pews a few feet away. I see the dark stains on the carpet, the blood of poor Mrs. Nolt and Mr. Kingle and the rest of the unfortunate victims of dad’s deliria.

Tears fill my eyes, a ringing overtaking my hearing.

If Lucas kills me after raping me for a second time, it would be ironic. It would be a fitting end for me. Maybe me being gone will help the people in Bethany move on. To let go of the hatred and hurt they feel.

I laugh as the tears fall, maybe I’ll be free of the pain too. I’ll be free of the judging eyes, of the hatred they feel for me. I’ll be free of the stalker and I’ll never have to see dad again either.

Maybe it’s better if I just go with mom.

I whimper as my clothes are ripped off. My eyes stay glued to the blood stained carpet. I won’t look at him. I can’t give him that satisfaction.

“This time you’ll be awake for everything,” His body covers mine, his breath on my exposed chest. His hands are warm against me, but they lack a gentle touch.

They only take, take, and take.

Is it bad if I just give up now?

No, I don’t think so. Not anymore.

“Daddy, can I go to church camp?” I peak through the crack of his office door. My voice is soft, skeptical because for the last two years he always said no. I really hope he says yes this time.

“Ariella?” His voice reaches me. “Come here, honey.”

Smiling, I push the door open and run inside. He pats his thigh and I rush around his desk to climb onto his lap.

“You want to go to camp so badly, don’t you.” He chuckles.

I nod my head so fast I get dizzy. With a laugh, I pause and rest my hand on the surface of his desk. He rests his hand on my hip so I don’t fall over.

“You turn nine this year don’t you?” He asks, his voice teasing. He taps his chin with his free hand, as if he’s thinking.

*My hopes rise, and I can barely contain my excitement.
“Church camp accepts from the age of nine.” He continues.
He looks down at me, and smiles, “I suppose you can go this
year.”*

The flashback shifts, and I find myself standing outside.

*Fire bursts from the grey sedan wrapped around a pole. It
blazes bright in the night, the moon a mockery behind the
scene.*

*The police man that was trying to get my mother jumped back
from the driver’s door. He shouts, but his voice is distorted.
His words a blurr as my focus remains on the lifeless corpse
that is swallowed up by the flames.*

My foot shifts and suddenly I’m pushing forward to get to her.

*“No!” His voice is clear, right behind me. Strong arms wrap
around my waist and holds me back. I struggle against him,
desperate to get to mom. Desperate to save her because she
can’t leave me behind.*

*I manage to slip out of his grip, but just as I’m about to reach
her, the car disappears, mom along with it.*

“No!” I scream.

Then I’m inside his office again.

“Do you care to explain this?” He doesn’t smile anymore. His eyes have bags, and his skin is pale. He doesn’t look okay.

I avoid his gaze, keep my eyes glued to the black slip on shoes I wear.

“Look at me when I’m speaking to you.” He snaps at me, his fist slamming against the desk. I flinch and raise my head. I meet his eyes, try not to flinch at the sight of them.

“I must not be studying hard enough.” The words are quiet when they leave my lips. I eye the report card he holds in his other hand, can feel my heart thump inside of my chest. I’ve never failed a class before.

Then again he’s never hated me before either.

He sighs and sets it down. I wait, because I don’t have any other excuse, and he wouldn’t want them anyway. He’s made it clear again and again that he’s disappointed in me.

“I know you miss her, I do too. But it doesn’t mean you can start slacking.” He says.

I tear my gaze away, what does he know? He hasn’t spent a single day with me since mom’s accident. He drowns himself in his work, he doesn’t care what I need.

He disappears and I find myself outside of his office again. I’m supposed to be asleep, I know I am. The door is cracked, and I peek inside. The light is dim, but I managed to make out dad sitting at his desk. My eyes squint when I spot the second

figure, however they're shrouded in darkness that I can't make out any features.

"It's not time." He says, his voice firm and leaves no room for argument. "She's still just a child."

"That's exactly why we need to do it now."

I find myself back in the present, can feel Lucas' hand between my legs. He groans when a finger slips inside of me. I whimper, eye the bloody carpet, the area of the missing pews that I found the victims sitting so casually on.

Then I see grandma's tear stained face when she finds out her son is a murderer. How she stared at me with sympathy because I found them. I found him. I think about Kensey, how the bitch glares and smiles as if she knows something I don't.

Lucas adds a second finger and brushes my nipple with his other hand.

I see Henry and the absolute hatred he holds for me and my father. I see Melanie and hate how she betrayed me, left me to fend for myself.

My eyes drift and I find a small cheese knife sticking out from a shelf on the table I lay on. How ironic, if it was there the whole time, then those people that dad killed could have defended themselves. Could've fought for their lives. I can't help but giggle, this is what God had planned? To tease with the chance of survival only for them to get a brutal death?

What a load of fucking shit.

But then, if I grab that I can end myself quickly. I won't have to live through this again. I won't have to feel this pain ever again.

Lucas grunts above me as he pushes himself inside. I can feel him, I'm not unconscious to avoid it this time. He continues to touch me, whispering disgusting things I can't hear.

My hand twitches and I reach for it. Yes, I can finally end my suffering.

I manage to grab the handle and it feels so light in my hand. So right.

I suck in a breath, try to reign in the sob that wants to escape but I fail.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. I'm sorry grandma for leaving you behind. Please forgive me.

I clench my eyes shut just as I'm about to stab myself, but a picture in my head stops me.

In the school parking lot, leaning against a rusty old truck, I find Stone staring at me. He has a cigarette between his fingers, everything about him cold except for the warmth in his eyes. Next to him Kingston is smiling down at me, his eyes shining with mischief. On Stone's other side, Haeden's eyes are tinted red, and a lazy smirk graces his face. His hood is pulled up, blocking the sun from his gaze. And standing in

front of them is Ivy. Her smile is bright, her eyes sparkling. Her hand rests on her hip, the other waving at me.

“She was raped too, wasn’t she?”

How can she still smile as if everything is perfect in the world?

Lucas continues to groan and grunt, my body rocking from the force of his thrusts. I blink my eyes rapidly to clear my blurry vision. Once I can see, I turn my head to stare up at him as he leans over me, his hands touching as he takes what he wants from me.

No. What is wrong with me? Why should I be the one to go? To die? I didn’t want to feel this way. I didn’t want him, I didn’t want my father to murder and I didn’t want to be blamed for it.

It’s people like him, that should die.

He doesn’t even see me holding the knife. He’s too consumed in the pleasure he gets from me.

He doesn’t even know.

Do it.

It’s his voice in my head now, my father’s.

And I do want to do it.

I tighten my grip on the blade, and raise my other hand to Lucas's neck. His eyes open and he looks down at me with a filthy smile.

Does he think I'm enjoying it? Does he think I want him now?

I smile back at him, and he pauses. His hips lose his rhythm, as he stares down at me.

“What-”

My hand tightens around his throat and shove the blade into the area where his collar bone meets his neck.

I don't flinch when red spurts from the wound.

“I won't let anyone else hurt me.” I promise myself. I deserve at least that.

He's still inside me. I shudder and stab him again in the cheek.

“Get off me!” I scream. The tears are back, everything flowing into me all at once. The pain, the hatred of this happening to me, of it happening to anyone, the hurt that people feel no remorse for their actions.

“Get off! Get off! Get off!” I scream and scream with every stab to his face and chest. I'm wet, and I can't tell if its my

tears or his blood. I can't tell what is up or down. All I know is that I want him off of me.

Lucas stopped moving a while ago, but I can still feel him touching me. I let my hands fall, the knife thumps against the carpeted floor and I cry with the heavy body on top of me.

I don't know how long I laid there with him. I don't know how long I cry. But finally my tears stop and all I feel is exhaustion.

I struggle against him, and I manage to wedge my hands beneath his wet chest. I push, and I slip against blood that covers us both. I try again, and I strain to roll him off me. His body falls to the floor with a wet splat and I lay back against the table. My naked body is covered in red.

Red red red.

Why always red?

As the numbness fades away, I'm left shaking.

Oh god what did I do?

I get up on shaking legs and as I step down from the stage I fall to my knees.

Why does everything hurt again?

I glance around, find my phone a few feet away from the mess of bodily fluid. I crawl towards it, and pull my phone out of the pocket. It shakes in my grip, and it takes me a few tries to unlock it. All the while I'm sobbing, hating the sight of red on me. My nose is full of the coppery scent and it takes everything in me not to vomit. I hit the call button and put it to my ear.

Please answer, please answer.

"Hey, Psycho." His warm voice fills my ear and I'm crying harder. I miss his voice, can feel the warmth bloom in my chest.

"Hey, are you okay?" His voice immediately takes a dark edge and I can hear the background quiet down.

"I messed up," I whimper. I turn my head so I can stare at Lucas' lifeless body. I fall back when I see him looking at me with cold blue eyes.

"I can't understand you, take a deep breath for me." Kingston says.

"Is that killer?" I can hear Haeden in the background.

"What's wrong?" Ivy's soft voice brings more tears to my eyes.

"Talk to me baby," Kingston says.

"I killed him," I whisper. "H-he raped me and I killed him,"

“Where are you?” He demands.

I tell him that I’m at the church.

“Why the fuck did she go there?” Stone snaps through the phone. It brings more tears to my eyes because it’s such a good question. Why the fuck did I ever come here?

“Don’t go anywhere, we’re on the way okay?” Kingston breathes into his phone.

“You’re not going to call the cops?” My voice cracks.

“Are you?” He asks the question back.

I turn back to Lucas, I shake my head but then remember he can’t see me, “No.”

“There’s your answer. Stay on the phone with Ivy, okay?”

I don’t answer, stuck on the sight in front of me.

I did this.

“Okay, Ariella?” Kingston’s voice is firm, bringing me back to him.

“Y-yeah.” I stutter.

“Ella?” Her soft voice breathes into the receiver. “Can you see him?”

Him? Can I see Lucas?

“Yeah.” I whisper, eyes glued to his corpse.

“Can you go anywhere so you can’t see him?” She asks slowly. Why is she talking so slow?

“Yea-” The room starts to tilt, and then it’s all black.

Chapter 23

KINGSTON

I hate what I see.

If Ariella hadn't already done it, I surely would have. It wouldn't be the first time.

She's laying on the floor, her naked body drenched in blood.

Deja vu hits me like a mother fucker. I've seen this image too many times before. How did it end up like this again?

God, I really hope he didn't have aids, or she'd be shit out of luck. Her phone is on the floor next to her, and lights up when Ivy ends the call. Ariella may not have been awake anymore, but that didn't mean Ivy wouldn't be able to hear her surroundings until we arrived.

I make my way over to her, Ivy following close behind. While Haeden and Stone push past us to go to Lucas

Haeden checks for a pulse and shakes his head when he can't find one.

He and Stone flip him over, the latter gagging.

"Oh my god," Haeden says, his voice full of awe. "She fuckin' disfigured him,"

After making sure Ariella didn't have any major injuries, I walk towards them.

My stomach twists when I see Lucas' mauled face. I can't even tell that it's him anymore. There are tears and holes in his cheeks, revealing his back teeth. His eyes are wide open and his neck and chest are littered with stab wounds.

"She must of got him a hundred times." Stone murmurs.

"She did that?" I ask in disbelief.

"Can you blame her?" Ivy asks softly as she walks over. She isn't wearing her coat anymore, and she waves at us to give her another. I immediately take mine off and hand it to her.

"It wasn't long ago that we did the same thing," she says softly as she walks back towards her friend. "Only, she did this without help."

"We came unprepared." Stone says.

"Did we though?" Haeden chuckles and scratches the back of his neck. "I may have left the shovels in the back of the truck."

"Are you fucking retarded?" Stone smacks the back of his head. "What if we had gotten caught with them? You ever think about that, huh?" Stone glares at him.

"But we didn't." Haeden pointed out.

After covering Ariella up with our jackets, Ivy comes back and stands between the two.

“There’s nothing we can do about it now, so shut it you two.” Ivy glares at them. They grumble but drop it. “My question is, how the hell did all this happen?”

“That’s what I want to know.” I mutter as I stare at the lifeless body.

“It’s my fault.” I turn around at the croaky voice. Ariella struggles to sit up and I hurry to help. I pull her into my lap and hold her against me.

“Tell us what happened.” Ivy crouches in front of her, her voice soft.

“I’ve been receiving notes in my locker.” She starts. My head snaps up with furrowed brows as I glance at the others. Did they know about this? Seeing my look, they each shake their head. Why hasn’t she told anyone? I hold her tighter against me, not caring about the blood on her. I make sure the jackets cover all her private bits. “I got one this afternoon saying we should meet here. Seeing him, I thought Lucas was the one sending them but when I brought them up, he had no clue what I was talking about.” Her voice gets thick with emotion. “And when I tried to get away, he threatened me. And then he told me about all the things he did to me last time, and he,” She breaks into a sob. I squeeze her in my arms, trying to offer any comfort that I can. “I was going to end it,” She sniffs, “I killed him. I couldn’t stop.”

My jaw clenches as I take in the other guys, can see the same hard and guilty look that I'm sure I have on my face.

We just keep failing. Not only did we fail Ivy, but we've failed Ariella too. The two most important girls in our life and we couldn't be there for them when it mattered most.

"Whatever it is you guys are thinking, stop it." Ivy says, her voice thick. She gives a watery smile to Ariella. "We'll take care of it, okay? Can you trust us?"

Ariella glances between us and then nods her head.

"Good. Here is the plan okay? I'm going to bring you over to Haeden's house, and I'll help you get cleaned up and dressed. In the meanwhile, the guys will clean this up. Does that sound good?" Ivy smiles at her gently.

Ariella shivers in my arms but nods.

"O-okay." She whispers.

I help her to her feet, and she leans on Ivy.

"Get this done quickly." Ivy pauses and stares down at the carpet. "That's going to be a problem."

"It's cool, I know a guy." Haeden waves it off. He pulls his phone out as she raises a brow at him. "My cousin knows all about this shit."

“Can we trust him though?” Stone mutters. “Everyone in your family is sketchy as fuck.”

“I trust him with my life.” Haeden smirks. Before he calls he walks over to Ariella and pats her head.

“We got you killer.” He says softly.

Stone nods his head in agreement and I offer a small smile.

She doesn't respond back, eyes glued to the corpse a few feet away.

With that, Ivy steers her to the exit.

Once they're gone, Stone punches the wall beside him.

“Fuck!” He shouts. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

“We should've killed the mother fucker when we had the chance,” Haeden growls. He stomps on Lucas' head and there's a sickening crunch as his cheek bone caves in.

“First Ivy and now this?” I growl. “What the fuck are we doing?”

“Absolute fuck all, apparently.” Stone hisses.

“Come on, lets just clean this up. Who knows when a patrol will come by.” Haeden says.

“I’ll go get the stuff.” Stone mutters. A while later he comes back with a huge plastic bag.

We quickly wrap Lucas’ body up, leaving the fuckers eyes open because he doesn’t deserve peace. After he’s dumped into the truck, Haeden talks to his cousin about what to do with the carpet.

“It’s still wet, so if we hurry and do it right, we can clean it up.”

ARIELLA

Everything happens in a blurr. It's all just one motion and I'm just stuck in my head.

I don't even realize when we get to Haeden's house until Ivy is putting me under hot running water.

"Where are we?" I whisper, taking comfort in the warm water running over me.

Ivy takes off her shirt on the other side of the half open curtain. Then she moves for her plaid skirt.

"Haeden's house. It's the only place where no one can bother us." She answers me.

Haeden's house. I've never been to his house.

In her bra and cotton underwear, Ivy steps into the tub with me.

"What are you doing?" My voice is monotone, eyes glazed over as I watch her.

"I'm helping. I don't think you can function on your own right now." She answers.

I nod my head, right. Function. I don't think I can either.

"Do you want to talk about it?" She asks. She reaches past me for the body wash and lathers her hands.

"Do you want to talk about yours?" I ask back. She freezes for a second, her hands pressed to my shoulders.

"Fair point." She whispers. "I was hoping you wouldn't find out." She starts to wash the rest of the blood that remained off of me. She ignores my breasts, avoiding them and I'm thankful for it.

"We hope for a lot of things." I murmur. She gives me a sad smile and continues to run her soapy hands on me. I stand there, finding comfort in her presence. I think back to the moment I wanted to kill myself. When I wanted it all to end but at my expense.

"Thank you." I whisper, lifting my head enough to look her in the eyes. "If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be here right now." I wouldn't be alive right now.

It was the image of her and the guys that kept me from doing it. It made me go from wanting to hurt myself, to wanting to defend myself. And I don't think she or the guys will ever understand that. But it's okay, because as long as I do, I'll be okay.

By the time Stone, Haeden and Kingston arrive, it's nearly three am. I'm sitting between Ivy's legs as she hums and brushes my hair.

It feels amazing to have her taking care of me.

“Hey, Ella girl.” Stone smiles as he crouches in front of me. I offer a small smile in return.

“What did you do with him?” I ask.

“We took care of him.” Kingston answers as he comes to sit on the couch next to Ivy. Haeden takes her other side.

“I know, but what did you do with him?” I ask again. Kingston glances at Stone.

“We bagged him up and buried him. We cleaned up the mess at the church.” Haeden answers.

I nod my head and Ivy puts the brush down.

“Uhm, the knife I used?” I ask, hands twitching because I wish I still had it.

“I have it.” Haeden pulls out the small cheese knife and it dangles between his fingers. When I reach for it he snatches it back from me. “Nuhuh,” He says. “If you want a knife for protection then we’ll get you a pocket knife. Maybe some brass knuckles if you want to.”

I stare at the knife as he talks. Remembering the way it carved into Lucas’s skin so easily.

If they got me a pocket knife, I'd be able to hide it better. I could carry it on my person all the time.

"That sounds good." I nod my head.

"Ella, can we talk about what happened?" Stone asks. He puts a hand on my knee and squeezes before drawing back.

"I thought we already talked about it?" I lean my head back on Ivy's thigh.

After the shower, we both ended up wearing Haeden's clothes. We both wear matching grey sweatpants and long t-shirts. His smell surrounds me, a mix of weed and cologne.

"Just-" Stone sighs and glances up at Ivy behind me.

"You just killed a person, Ariella." Ivy says softly. "That will get you into deep trouble. And the boys and I just helped you cover it up. That can get us in trouble."

"You think I'll say something?" I ask, glancing behind me.

Ivy smiles down at me and smooths my hair back, "No babygirl. We want you to know that we're all in this together, okay? It means you are one hundred percent ours. We have your back, as long as you have ours."

We're all in this together, okay? We have your back as long as you have ours.

I close my eyes when my vision goes blurry with tears.

They've had my back for a while now, they've helped me grow as a person and now, after killing someone they are still helping me.

"I love you guys," I whisper. I look at each of them, and suddenly I don't feel so alone anymore. They are here to help me get through the hurt.

"We love you too, Psycho." Kingston smiles and ruffles my hair.

"I don't know how long it'll be until Lucas is noticed as missing. Not very long since he was supposed to be on house arrest. If we go about this right, it can be played off as him running away from being accused in court." Stone says. He stands up and sits on the chair across from us. His eyes remain on me, his legs spread and his finger tapping against his knee.

"Until then, we act as if nothing is wrong. We don't know anything. Ariella never went to the church tonight. As far as we, and everyone else is concerned, the five of us were at the abandoned house. Is that clear?" Stone asks.

I give a firm nod.

"Honey," Ivy threads her fingers through my hair, "That means you can't act out of the ordinary."

I nod my head. I have to act normal. I have to act like I didn't get raped a second time. I have to act like I didn't plunge a knife through his face and chest a hundred times.

I can do that. I can act normal.

“Can you use your words for me, sweetheart?” Ivy asks softly.

“Yes.”

“Good girl.” She smiles down at me and I smile back. “Come, you can sleep in Haeden's room.” Kingston holds out his hand to me, and helps me up. I smile at him.

Ivy grabs my hand and tugs me towards a room. She leads me to the bed of black sheets and comforter and watches me climb in. She tucks me in and kisses my forehead.

“We'll be right out there if you need anything okay?” She says. I hum in response, my eyes drifting close as sleep takes me.

I dream of him that night. Of his haunting blue eyes and the way he had touched me. I dream of killing him again. And again. And again. And each time, I grow a little happier, because now I know he can't hurt me anymore. Or anyone else.

“Are you sure I can wear this?” I ask. I look at myself in the long mirror that’s attached to the back of Haeden’s door. I didn’t have any clothes, but Ivy stays the night so often that she has clothes here. So, I’m wearing black shorts and a black Metallica t-shirt. I’ve never listened to the band, only know them by name.

“Of course, you look great.” She says as she rummages in Haeden’s bathroom. “Haed, tell her she looks great.”

“You look great.” Haeden says as he lays back on his bed. He types away on his phone, not even looking at me.

“Now say it like you mean it.” Ivy snaps as she throws a shoe at him.

Haeden sighs and raises his eyes to me. “You look great, Killer. So great, in fact, I’m tempted to shove my hand down those shorts and squeeze that tight ass of yours.”

My face flushes and I turn away.

The goal for today: act normal. Act like I didn’t commit a murder in the same place my father did.

Piece of cake.

“If you ladies are ready, we should get going.” Kingston steps into the room and smiles.

I smile back, because normal me would smile, “Yeah.”

Except when we get to school, everything is not normal.

As we pull into the parking lot, a couple of cop cars are parked at the front entrance. My heart drops into my chest, they already know. They're coming for me.

"What the fuck?" Ivy whispers.

I watch two officers standing at the entrance, and another two talking with the principal.

"Oh god, they know," My voice croaks.

"No." Stone says his voice hard. "We continue like normal. Like we planned."

I scoff, "We're beyond normal at this point."

"Trust us, Psycho," Kingston bumps his shoulder with mine in the back seat. I suck in a breath and nod.

"Okay."

As soon as we get out of the truck, a teacher is rushing towards us. Behind her, the two officers at the door, begin to follow.

"Shit, shit, shit." I chant under my breath.

“Normal, remember?” Ivy smiles as she grabs my hand.

Right. I nod. But the closer the teacher gets, the harder my heart pounds.

“Ivy, you have to come with me.” She rushes out as she glances behind her. She pales as the officers get closer.

“What’s wrong, Mrs. Martinez?” She asks. “Am I in trouble?”

“Ivy please. Just come with me so we can avoid causing a bigger scene.” Mrs. Martinez presses.

Ivy glances at the boys and I see the panic in her eyes.

“Can I-” Before Ivy can finish, the officer with black hair nudges Mrs. Martinez aside and takes her place in front of us.

“Ivy Monroe,” He immediately rips her away and turns her around. He grabs her wrists and forces them behind her back, then he pulls out his cuffs. “You are under arrest for the murder of James Williams.”

To be continued...

Chaotic Criminals

Ivy's story starts in Chaotic Criminals: Baltous Faction Boys, a Dangerous Psychos series.

Summary

So this is how it fucking starts.

With a damn rapist and my stupid inability to ask for help.

He was supposed to be a mentor. He said I had potential and was going to help me get out of this small town, but instead, he took advantage. And was I surprised? Abso-fucking-lutely not, because this is Bethany, and Bethany doesn't care about anyone but themselves.

But it's okay, because he got what he deserved, and I have my best friends to thank for that, not to mention the odd one out, Louis Masanove. The one who wouldn't leave me alone. The one I stupidly let myself fall for.

Except, not everything goes as planned.

I get convicted for the crime, and then I get a second chance.

Baltous Faction is a penitentiary for teen criminals with the potential to return to the outside world. At least, that's what they say. And I'm going to be stuck here until I graduate. If

I'm a good girl, I can go back to my normal life, however if I'm a bad girl, then adult prison here I come.

Why the fuck did I take the blame again?

Right, to protect the dumb fucker who not only saved me, but stole my heart.

Fuck.

Let's not forget to mention that a hot as sin, yet crazy as fuck guy, is out to hurt me. Sure, I want to rip Zeke's clothes off, but not to the point I'll willingly let him cut me.

Then the quiet one, Cole, the one that lurks in the dark and doesn't make a sound when he walks because he's part fucking demon, wants to protect me. Well, needs to protect me is more like it. Bless Haedens cold black heart for asking his cousin to help me.

And then last but not least, Theo, the one who wants to use me. Apparently I'm perfect for whatever he has planned.

Unfortunately for them, I'm sick and tired of being trampled on by guys who think they can control me.

Watch out Baltous Faction, because I will walk out of here in one piece. And if this so-called school is burning to the ground behind me, then so be it.

