



BURN

Burn

The title "BURN" is displayed in large, bold, white letters. Below it, the word "Burn" is written in a smaller, cursive, white script font.

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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BURNOUT

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To Kaydence Snow. Thank you for listening to me ramble about this idea as we sat on the beach in Australia. You named Decker, so I figured it was fair I dedicate this to you. Love you.

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1

Blakely

EVERYTHING I OWNED WAS on my back: three outfits, a cellphone with a cracked screen, and a folded up photo of Mama I couldn't look at because it hurt too fucking much. I stood on the sidewalk, staring up at the red brick building in front of me.

I was avoiding eye contact with the balding homeless man three steps to my left. He was playing his scratched up and out-of-tune guitar while singing off-key for tips. From the looks of it, he wasn't making much. If I had money to spare, I'd drop a nickel in his jar out of pity.

The humid air smelled like charred BBQ and grime. A steady summer breeze kissed the beads of sweat dripping down my face, effectively melting the cheap makeup I'd capriciously painted on to hide the dark circles under my eyes. It was sweltering hot, the air so humid it felt like I was walking around in a cloud of morning breath.

What the actual fuck was I thinking?

I'd asked myself that question numerous times on the drive from Lucas, Texas, to here. It had been a long trip. Not because the distance itself was necessarily daunting, but because I stopped every thirty minutes to park and convince myself to turn back. I could run away. I could escape this, if I really wanted.

So why didn't I want to?

My older brother's loft in Memphis was in the South Main Arts District. It looked nice on the outside and had that hipster vibe I loved, with traditional

architecture to compliment the design. Patches of manicured grass littered the walk up, making it look homey. It seemed nice enough, but I learned a long time ago that just because something—or someone—looked pretty on the outside, didn't mean they'd be just as beautiful within.

I'd been standing outside for a while now, like a statue on the concrete. Drunks and tourists walked by with beer bottles in their hand, straight from their boozy brunches. My car was parked precisely two blocks away. I could run to it, get inside, and use the last thirty dollars my brother sent me to fill up the tank and get the fuck out of here.

“You gonna stand out here all day?” a voice asked. The smooth, Southern drawl was laced with skepticism. My hard stare flickered to the doorman of the building, and I had to cup my palm over my eyes to shade my light-sensitive gaze from the beaming rays of sunshine over us. I'd caught the older, slender man staring at me multiple times, trying to gauge if I was trouble or not. I guess I did look suspicious, standing out here while deciding what I wanted to do with my life.

Mama always said I was too much of a thinker, was too stuck in my own head to make a decision and commit to it. I guess I got that from her. She never stuck with anything. My, she'd be shocked to hear I managed to drive all the way here. Too bad I couldn't rub it in her pretty little face.

“I'm trying to decide if I want to go inside,” I offered back with an honest shrug. Maybe if this man called the cops on me, I'd have another day to process everything before meeting Lance. I'd been trying to give myself excuses for the last three weeks: I didn't have enough money, my '97 Corolla wasn't able to make the drive, my heart wasn't able to handle the rejection. What if Lance didn't like me? What if he kicked me out? It wouldn't be the first time someone charitable turned out to be a snake. Mama was always the one that let others fix her problems, not me. And yet, here I stood.

The doorman was wearing a black suit and a striped red tie with a name tag perched on his chest. Cornelius was his name. It suited him, I decided. He had a proper air about him, and stern eyes with a kind, wrinkled smile. Something about his stance told me that he took his job as a doorman very seriously. “You know someone in the building?” he asked while nodding toward the glass door.

What a fucking loaded question. Did I know Lance? No. No, I didn't. I didn't even know he existed until Mama informed me on her deathbed. One minute, I was holding her hand, forcing tears to fall from my eyes while the

nurses looked on with pity. The next, I was being told about a half brother she put up for adoption at sixteen. Luckily for me, she'd found him just in time, but was too ashamed to reach out until it was too late.

I wasn't sure if it was pride or cancer that killed her in the end.

"My...br-brother lives here," I answered with a stutter before adjusting my backpack strap on my shoulder and eyeing the third floor of the building. I was trying to count the number of windows there. It was weird using the term "brother" to describe what Lance was to me. He didn't feel like a brother. I didn't even know if I had a right to call him that.

Mama didn't have a will. Those things were meant for people that actually had shit to pass down or plans for their legacy once they were gone. Instead, she left me her beat-up Toyota, a phone number, and a name: Lance.

"Who's your brother?" the Doorman asked as I tore my eyes from the building to stare back at him. He was clutching a water bottle, squeezing the plastic in his fist.

Well, wasn't that a good question? Who was my brother? "Lance Trask," I replied with a frown.

The man's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Mr. Trask is your brother?"

"That's what I'm told. I don't really know him though." Why I was admitting this to a complete stranger was beside me. I watched the doorman grow uncomfortable at my honesty.

Lately, I tended to have that effect on people. Like when our landlord reclaimed Mama's trailer. I'd told him that he was a piece of shit for not giving me a week to bury my mother. People took one look at my face and assumed that a pretty girl like myself should smile and be complacent, like somehow bright green eyes and blonde hair suddenly made me incapable of rage.

Deciding I couldn't wait much longer, I walked up to the door, nodding when he opened it. "Good luck," he said, like he didn't know what else to say.

Luck was a cruel, petty bitch that didn't visit me often. Karma, though? She and I were best friends. She spoke with my depression and knew all my dirty little secrets; she knew I bred skepticism in my mind and taunted me with the idea that I didn't deserve happiness.

The inside of the building was beautiful. In one of our brief phone calls, Lance explained that he was an architect and designed the place. I wondered what about this place made him decide to set up roots here.

The traditional arches were broad and gave unobstructed views of the hallway leading to the apartments. It felt open but mysterious as well. It seemed like there were secrets hidden around every corner. The warm tones of the design looked welcoming and masculine. It had a contemporary edge but a timeless quality about it that I could appreciate.

I took the stairs instead of the elevator to prolong the inevitable. With my backpack weighing me down, I trudged the three flights with unease.

I could do this, right? I could face him. Introduce myself. I didn't have any grand ideas about living with Lance. Even though he'd offered, I made a backup plan to camp out in my car until I could find a job and get a hotel room. It wouldn't be the first time I'd slept in Mama's old Corolla. I guess I just wanted to know him. I wanted to figure out who the fuck he was and maybe even find pieces of the person my mama pretended to be in him.

Something she told me stuck like a pin needle in my chest. Not big enough of a cut to do any lasting damage, but small enough to feel annoying, something that pricked at me every damn time I took a breath. I still remembered her last day, asking why she gave him up, why she didn't keep him.

"I loved him too much. I wanted to give him the kind of life he deserved," she answered with simplicity, like it was this grand sacrifice.

So why the fuck did she keep me?

This was all so ridiculous. One death. One phone call. One offer to move here and start over. I didn't know Lance, but he was like every other man that swooped in and tried to save my mother and me. He made grand gestures, offered to let me live with him until I got on my feet. Even helped pay for the funeral bills when I realized how fucking expensive caskets were.

I'd never even seen his face aside from the photo he sent me of him in Cozumel. I spent many nights staring at that photo of him. I guess I was trying to find hints that we were cut from the same cloth. He had blond hair and bright blue eyes. His skin was tanned, and the boyish, carefree grin on his face hinted at the burdenless life he'd had.

Oh, but Lance knew all about me. He spoke with my social worker, called my school, and paid for repairs on my car so I could drive out to Memphis. Lance did his homework the moment he found out he had a sister and decided right then and there he wanted to save me.

With my eighteenth birthday just last week, the state kept an eye on me, then eagerly signed me off as a legal adult. I was one less temporary problem

to solve, one less kid on the streets. He said he would have come to pick me up himself but a busy project at work was keeping him here.

I walked down the long hallway, dread filling me with every step. Reading the numbers as I passed each door, I noted a man leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, glaring at my back as I passed.

He was hot, despite the furious expression on his face. He had a mess of black waves touching the tips of his ears. His eyes were dark and demanding, framed by long lashes and thick eyebrows that were perfectly shaped but also masculine. His nose was rounded at the tip, and a demanding frown kissed his lips, which were plump and addictive.

I couldn't help but feel like he was watching me. He looked poised and ready for action, and the swirling intuition in my gut made me question if he was waiting for me. I knew he wasn't Lance. My brother had blond hair and blue eyes according to the photo he'd sent me. This man was dark and dangerous. A shiver traveled up my spine, telling me to run.

Once I made it to the right door, I lifted my hand to knock and hovered it over the wood. I debated on scrapping this entire trip and running back with my tail between my legs to Texas. What's the worst Lance would do? Come and get me?

"Who are you?" the strange man with a deep voice asked behind me. I turned to stare at him as he smoothed his jacket with his right hand. He was wearing a navy suit that was fashionable and cut to mold his tapered silhouette.

"I'm Blakely. My brother lives here. The doorman let me in," I hesitated, not sure who this hot, pissed-off dude was and why he was talking to me. He pushed himself off the wall and stalked toward me. It made my pulse rush. Sweeping his eyes up and down my body, his gaze lingered on the spot where my white summer dress hit mid-thigh.

I felt silly, then, for dressing up to meet my brother for the first time. For some reason, I had wanted to make a good first impression. This was, after all, a fresh start for me. No one knew me as the daughter of a poor, single mom. I figured I could be anything I wanted to be, and I wanted to be happy.

"So you're the girl that's moving in to mooch off Lance?" he sneered. It felt like someone had stepped on my heart with stilettos.

My mother was a mooch. She always latched onto people and held on for dear life. She would bleed them dry if given half the chance. It was why I was so prideful, why I took care of myself and struggled so much with

coming here. Lance didn't seem bothered, so who the fuck was this guy, and why was he saying this?

"I'm here to meet him, yes," I choked out, feeling unsure how to proceed. It was bad enough that I had to meet my brother for the first time, I didn't need this. "Who are you?"

How did he know Lance? Was this his boyfriend? His boss? The landlord? Feeling like I needed to salvage this unexpected greeting, I forced a smile on my face. He reached out his hand to shake mine almost reluctantly. I took it as he introduced himself in a deep tone that I could practically feel in my bones. "I'm Decker Harris, Lance's best friend and temporary roommate."

Roommate? He hadn't said anything about a roommate. It was bad enough I had to navigate learning how to live with one virtual stranger. Now I had to worry about two? The hallway ambush didn't make sense. If we were supposed to live together, why the hostility?

"Oh, I see. So you're the current mooch, worried I'm coming in on your turf, yeah? Don't you worry, I have no plans to stay long," I said with a little bite to my tone while fumbling to shake his hand. I could only manage one confident gesture at a time, and my shaking fingers betrayed the fierceness of my words with their clumsiness.

He lingered in the touch for a moment, and it wasn't until a good few exhales had escaped my trembling lips that I realized he was still holding me, pressing his index finger into my wrist, as if he was testing my erratic pulse. He looked pissed as hell.

"Were you waiting for me?" I asked while snapping my hand back. I rubbed where our skin touched, not sure if I should run or punch him in the dick.

"Maybe. Come inside so we can talk," the dangerous looking man demanded while glancing down. "Is the rest of your stuff in your car?"

I tucked a blonde strand of hair behind my ear before responding. "This is it," I barked. At my words, my feet started bouncing in embarrassment.

It wasn't my fault I didn't have anything. Money was tight. I was all about surviving. There was nothing left in that trailer home I wanted anyway. It all reminded me of her. The only reason I saved her photo was for Lance.

"Fine. Come in." He looked me up and down quizzically, then walked past me to unlock the door. I got a whiff of his scent and breathed it in.

He smelled like soap, leather, and expensive single malt scotch. I knew

that drink. One of Mama's boyfriends, Colby, always came over smelling like it. He had a wife and kids and a big house in the suburbs. Colby liked to come over when his life was feeling stagnant. He used to tell my mama that the cure for boredom was getting his dick wet. I learned long ago that you could tell a lot about a man by the way he smelled. And Decker smelled like trouble.

"I figured you'd be here yesterday. I was worried I'd miss you before Lance got here. I want to talk," he said while setting his keys on a table by the door and walking inside.

"Is this the part where you try and scare me away? Warn me that if I fuck with your boyfriend, you'll kick my ass?" I asked, forcing my tone to sound polite, despite the anger swirling in my gut. I didn't want to bullshit my way through a conversation about why I was here.

That was another reason I didn't want to come. I knew Lance would have questions. He'd want to know about the woman that gave him away. I just wasn't sure he could handle the truth. People liked to think highly of those that died. It's why the preacher called my mother a saint at our quaint burial service. And it seemed like Decker had already made up his mind about me. He lumped me in with my deadbeat mother, and it pissed me off.

"You're perceptive," Decker replied, interrupting my thoughts.

"I know an asshole when I see one," I replied while staring at his back. He set down his leather messenger bag on the coffee table in their living room as I stepped through the threshold. Decker spun around to face me again, and the moment his dark eyes met mine, I started looking around the apartment to avoid his gaze. His eyes were too cruel, too inquisitive. I wasn't sure what to make of it.

The loft was nice. Clean. Had modern furniture and an open concept living area. I loved the dark wood floors and abstract art on the walls. It seemed like every damn part of this apartment was selected by someone with an eye for design.

"This place is really nice." I swallowed before taking another step forward. If I was going to live with this guy, I should probably rein in my temperamental tongue. I didn't know these people, didn't know if Lance would kick me out for insulting his best friend. I took another step. It seemed like every shuffle of my feet brought me closer to the reality of my situation. "So you're Lance's roommate?" I asked while clutching the straps of my backpack. I wasn't ready to part with it. Setting my belongings down would

mean that I was here to stay, and I wasn't wholly committed to that idea, especially since Decker's welcoming was cold as ice.

"*Temporary* roommate. I bought a fixer-upper outside of town with some land. It needs massive renovations, so I'm staying here for six months while it gets put together. Lance and I grew up together, and he's always been the type to take in anyone that needs help." His dark eyes stared openly at me, disdain evident in his expression.

I wasn't sure how that made me feel. On the one hand, I felt like another problem someone got off on fixing. I wasn't special; it was just in my brother's charitable nature. But I was still thankful for a roof over my head.

"So where is Lance?" I asked. It seemed weird that he wasn't even here to greet me. I pulled the cheap gas station phone out of my backpack to see if I had any missed calls or texts from him. I filled up my minutes with some of the money he sent me so we could keep in touch for reasons like this. I was used to flighty behavior, but I'd been hoping he hadn't inherited that trait from my—our—mother.

"He got stuck in a meeting with a client. He's designing a new hotel, and the owner is being a pain in the ass," Decker replied while staring at me. I wasn't sure what it was about this guy, but it was as if I could feel his gaze. It wasn't like a caress or heated look. Just an all-knowing assumption that hit me in the gut with its penetrating punch. "Why don't you have a seat?" he offered while gesturing to the rustic leather couch beside him. I nodded and reluctantly shuffled over to him, every nerve in my body on high alert with this strange place and this strange man.

I took off my backpack and clutched it to my chest, not willing to let it go. It seemed silly to hold on to a bunch of meaningless belongings, but they were all I had.

Once I lowered myself to the couch, he sat beside me. Our legs brushed, and he let out a quick exhale as he shifted to increase the distance between us. It was the first sign of uncertainty I'd seen in his confident demeanor since meeting. I wasn't necessarily one to enjoy the reactions guys got from looking at me. Boasting about beauty was one of my mama's vices. But for some fucked up reason, I liked knowing that simple touch affected him.

"I'll cut to the chase. I did my homework, saw your mom's rap sheet. I don't know you, but I do know that Lance has worked fucking hard to get to where he's at. If I think—for even a second—that you're here to cause trouble? I'll have you gone like that," he said while snapping his fingers to

accentuate his point.

I should have been pissed. But for some reason, all I could feel was an odd sense of jealousy. What would it feel like to have someone so devoted? What would it be like to have someone that had my back? I didn't like Decker's assumptions about me, but I liked that he was fiercely protective of my brother. It must be nice. "Understood," I gritted.

"Good," he replied with a wide smile. "Lance tells me you'll be a senior this year?"

I frowned. "I'm not exactly committed to the idea of finishing school. I'm looking at getting my GED so I can get on my feet faster. I guess we're both temporary roommates," I replied with a grimace. Decker's face dropped for a moment as if he was surprised by my answer, but he recovered quickly.

"Temporary is good. You're a National Merit Scholar, yeah?"

Of course he knew about my grades. Lance seemed like an open book, telling you his life story the moment he got you in his grasp. It figured he'd tell his roommate all about me. I just wished he'd told me about his angry roommate.

The truth was that I loved school. I loved learning new things bigger than my shitty life and shitty situation. My grades had slipped a little while taking care of Mama. Between working nights as a custodian at the local power plant and making sure her quality of life was decent, I didn't really have time for homework.

"Yeah, I was," I replied, wanting to change the subject. I didn't want to get my GED. I didn't want to work in some crappy job with crappy pay. I'd had plans, once. "I think right now I'm just taking things a day at a time. I want to meet Lance and see if this is going to be a good fit for me. I have three weeks until school starts. If I think I can put some roots down here, I will. I'm not committing to anything yet, regardless of what you think."

"Fair enough," Decker replied speculatively before twisting his body to look at me. His white shirt strained against his muscular body, and sitting this close, I could see the hint of a tattoo peeking up his neck. "I teach biology at a magnet school," he explained. "If you want to make something of yourself, let me know. I'd be happy to help you get enrolled. If you think you'll just be sitting here on your ass, you're dead wrong."

I stared back at him, shock scattering across my face like spiders. "I have no intention of sitting here on my ass," I replied in a mocking tone.

I twisted to stare at the front door, not sure if I wanted Lance to show up

and end this awkward interrogation. I was pretty sure it would just elevate the strange situation to an entirely new level of uncomfortable. “I just want to make sure you aren’t another person capitalizing on Lance’s generosity. I am sorry about your mom though,” Decker finally said after a long lull.

I kept my eyes trained on the front door, willing my brother to show up and drag me away from the polite “thank you” I’d have to purge from my system. I felt terrible because there was a deep part of me, a piece I didn’t want to acknowledge or admit was there, that was happy to see her gone. Not because she was a terrible mother. Not because she brought boyfriends home that touched me and pushed me around. Not because we were poor and lonely.

I was glad Mama died because I was finally free. I didn’t want to be chained to a selfish woman’s suffering when I knew she ultimately wouldn’t provide me with the same courtesy. “Thanks,” I replied in a dull tone, my bland gratitude seeping from my pores with every syllable. “So I’m guessing Lance does this often? Takes in strays?” I asked.

“All the fucking time. Lance would give the shirt off his back to a murderer if given the chance,” Decker replied while rubbing his temples.

“Well, I’m not a murderer,” I replied with a smile, hoping to salvage the situation.

“That’s exactly the sort of thing a murderer would say,” he deadpanned.

I rolled my eyes before shifting on the couch, brushing my thigh against his in the process. “Did Lance have a good life?” I asked, not sure why I wanted to know. “I mean, what are his adoptive parents like?”

Thankfully, Decker picked up on my change of direction in the conversation and rolled with it. “Mr. and Mrs. Trask are outstanding people. I’m sure you have lots of questions, and Lance would be much better at answering them for you. But we grew up together, and for the most part, I think he’s had a very fulfilling life.”

I dug my fingers into my backpack, my nails bending backwards as I pressed. “I’m glad Lance had a good home. When I found out I had a brother that was put up for adoption, I didn’t know what to think. Did he know he was adopted? Or was this all a shock?”

“Mr. and Mrs. Trask have always been upfront about his adoption. He’s always craved a relationship with your mom though. He’s taking the death kind of hard.”

Well, that made one of us.

"Even though I'm not happy about you being here, I think it could be good for him to grieve with someone, you know? Maybe you could tell him about her?"

I'm not sure how the combination of words escaped my lips, but before I could stop them from pouring out my mouth, there they were. "He'd be happier not knowing," I said in a voice so low that I hoped Decker didn't hear.

"I see," Decker replied, thankfully not commenting on it.

We were both left suspended in tension for a moment longer before the knob to the front door twisted and in walked a tall, blond man with striking eyes and a fist full of flowers. He was wearing jeans and a tight black shirt. His fingers had ink stains blotting them, and his left shoe was untied. He looked casually careless and put together all at once.

"Blakely?" he asked, his eyes widening to a broad grin. "Oh gosh, it's so good to meet you finally!"

Setting my backpack to the side, I stood up and smoothed out my dress, not knowing if I should shake his hand or hug him. What did people usually do in these situations? "Gosh, we look alike," he said before stalking over, holding a bouquet out to me. I guess he was right. We had the same bright eyes. The same shade of hair. He was taller than me, naturally. And his skin was tanned like he'd just gotten back from the beach. Although his nose was sharper, we still shared a lot of features. It was jarring. "I, uh, got you these. Would you believe I googled 'what to get your long lost sister'?"

I laughed. Lance was quirky and warm, like sunshine. Once he was in front of me, he seemed to mirror the same indecision as I, but ultimately decided a side hug would do. When his arm circled my shoulder, I half expected to breathe in the smell of our mama. She always smelled like cigarette smoke and roses. But instead, he smelled like paint and warm paper.

When he pulled away, I tucked my blonde hair behind my ear nervously before looking back at Decker, my breath stalling when I noticed how his eyes were on mine, inquisitive and firm. He made me feel like a question he wanted the answer to.

Decker ran his hands down his thighs before standing up too. For some reason, I found myself wanting to keep staring at him. That thought had me tearing my eyes back to Lance, who was taking in the sight of me. "It's nice to meet you, Blakely," Lance said with a genuine smile.

"It's nice to meet you, too."

Blakely

LANCE and I spent thirty minutes dancing around our awkwardness with clumsy questions about the humidity and our favorite meals. I decided right away that he was naturally charismatic. Even though he sensed my unease, he navigated my short answers with simple questions, foregoing the hard topics in the process. I appreciated that about him. It almost reminded me of Mama. She was good at working a crowd and had that natural beauty about her that just drew people near. Too bad she often attracted the wrong kind of people.

While Lance and I spoke, Decker stared at us with his dark eyes in contemplative silence, following our back and forth with a tilt of his head. He only acknowledged our conversation with an occasional nod or to interrupt with a curt question. My eyes kept drifting back to him against my better judgment.

“How was the drive?” Lance asked. “I thought for sure you’d be here yesterday.” I blushed, too embarrassed to admit that my nerves had gotten the best of me. My slow drive had nothing to do with my old, beat-down car and everything to do with the fact that I was scared to come here. But neither he nor Decker needed to know that.

“I had a little trouble in Oklahoma. My car overheated so I had to take it easy,” I lied before forcing a light chuckle. “Ol’ Roxy needs a little TLC from time to time.”

“Roxy?” Decker asked with an eye roll, pretentious disapproval dripping from every syllable. “You named your car after a stripper?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to explain that Mama named our car after her best friend—who just so happened to be a stripper on the weekends. I hadn't seen Roxy's namesake since she stole four hundred dollars from our hidden cookie jar in the kitchen, but her name stuck. Maybe that's why the car was cursed. The rotten piece of machinery wouldn't die but kept breaking down.

"She has stage presence," I replied instead. It was much easier to joke.

Lance then proceeded to make an offhand comment about finding me a more suitable form of transportation, which made Decker bristle. It was a generous offer, but I ignored it and changed the subject to something that didn't make my stomach twist. I didn't like it when people made empty promises. My distrust was one of the perks of having a dysfunctional childhood.

"So how long have you known each other?" I asked. My eyes went back to Decker, who had taken off his suit jacket and rolled up his shirt sleeves, showing off his muscular, tanned forearms and expensive watch. What kind of teacher could afford a Rolex?

"We've been neighbors all our lives. We went to the same college, even. When I moved to Memphis, Decker got a teaching job here a year later," Lance explained.

"So y'all are essentially in a committed bromance?" I joked, making Decker roll his eyes again.

"Mrs. Trask says that all the time. We just get along. Mostly, I keep him out of trouble," Decker said before giving me a pointed look. What the hell was that supposed to mean? "I would rather have one consistent friend than a million flakes," he added before leaning back on the couch, making his tight shirt cling to his abs in the process. My eyes raked up and down his chest before drifting back to Lance.

I could respect Decker's views on friendships. I couldn't even blame him for being an asshole earlier. I'd always been the type to keep to myself. I had a bunch of acquaintances, but when Mama was diagnosed, anyone who claimed to give a fuck disappeared.

"Can I show you your room?" Lance finally asked. I guess he was just as tired as I was of all this small talk. It was time to face the music and dive into the reality that I'd be staying here for a little while, at least until he let me down. "I've been working on it a lot. I hope you like it," he added.

I was surprised to hear that he'd been working on it. I wasn't really used

to people investing time and consideration in me. Lance seemed eager and excited to have me here, and I wasn't sure what to make of it. "Sure!" I replied with enthusiasm, though admittedly I wasn't expecting much. I was an unplanned visitor and hadn't really intended for him to go out of his way. I spent the last few weeks telling myself that this was only for a little while and that I'd be out of here as quickly as I could. Not once had it occurred to me that there was some permanence to this arrangement.

Lance eagerly led me down the hallway toward my bedroom. "The bathroom is here," he began while gesturing to a door on the side. "Decker's room is here," he added while pointing at another closed door. "And your room is across the hall from his. Mine is on the other side of the loft."

I stared at Decker's door for a second longer than necessary before listening to Lance ramble some more. "I called a friend of mine to decorate. I know you're really into science, so I focused on geometric patterns as the main theme," he said excitedly, the pitch of his voice rising with every syllable. I didn't have the heart to tell him that I wasn't necessarily really into science. Science just came easily to me. It made more sense than people most of the time. "I really hope you like it, but if anything isn't to your taste, I have a staging warehouse full of furniture. Just say the word, okay? I know how important a space is, and I want you to feel at home here."

He wanted me to feel at home? When was the last time anyone cared enough for me to feel comfortable? I pushed that thought away and swallowed. Lance then twisted the doorknob and opened the door before stepping to the side so I could see. The moment I saw the bright, airy room, my breath caught in my chest, like a balloon inflated so much that it was about to pop. The space was beautiful. Stunning, even. Based on his job, I knew Lance was into design, but I wasn't prepared for this.

The first thing I noticed was that it had a big window facing the street, giving me a clear view of the people walking by below. Now to some, that might not seem like a big ordeal. Windows were common enough. Bright rooms were a small luxury that many didn't realize they were privileged to enjoy. But back in our trailer, three years ago, a massive hail storm destroyed our roof and all of our windows. Mama had to spend most of our grocery money on plywood, and we sealed the trailer shut as much as we could. It took almost two full days of hard work to patch the roof. The makeshift repairs ended up blanketing our small home in darkness.

People didn't realize what small, dark places could do to a person's

mood. My home became a tomb I couldn't escape.

The bed in my new room was easily king-sized, much bigger than the twin cot I slept on back home. Deep purple bedding littered with gold, geometrical lines covered the plush mattress, making it look cozy. White nightstands were posted at both ends of the massive bed, with bright lamps perched on top of them. By the window was a cozy leather loveseat with purple throw pillows tossed decoratively along it. A desk with a brand new MacBook sat in the corner, the screen saver already boasting my name. The artwork on the walls was thoughtfully laid out, with more geometric patterns scattered tastefully around the space. I never really gave much thought to the type of bedroom I wanted, but if I had to imagine a perfect place, this would be it.

"This is for me?" I asked in shock while walking inside. My mouth dropped open as I gaped at the room. I wasn't sure what I was expecting when I agreed to move here, maybe a futon in a spare bedroom or an air mattress. But never this. Decker followed after me, clutching my worn backpack to his chest as Lance stood in the doorway, arms crossed with a pleased look on his face.

"Do you like it?" my brother asked.

"It's incredible. You didn't have to do all of this," I replied before pausing at one of the pieces of art above my new desk. The canvas was black and had gold lines formed into a pyramid in the center.

"It's important to me that you're comfortable here," Lance replied in a calm tone. I tried not to get too excited by his thoughtful gesture. If there was anything life had taught me, it was not to let kindness blur your realities. Maybe it was ridiculous to let a jaded past haunt a potentially good future, but I couldn't just let go of my incessant need to overthink things. My entire life was spent looking over my shoulder or waiting for the bomb to drop. I was conditioned to look for the worst case scenario, because it was easier than getting my hopes up and then being let down.

Decker moved over to my bed with stoic strides, keeping his eyes on me as I took in the room. I was about to ask him if he helped with the design when he intrusively unzipped my backpack and dumped everything I owned on the mattress. He didn't even give me time to stop him.

"Oh, I can unpack!" I rushed over to him. "You don't have to help me." I brushed his arm as I tried to shove everything back into my bag. He grabbed my wrist for a split second, and we both paused to stare at one another. "If

you wanted to check for contraband, Mr. Harris, you could have just asked,” I replied in a curt tone before snapping my hand back.

Lance clapped his hands and laughed like I was being funny, but I wasn’t trying to be.

“I was just trying to help,” he replied, though I saw his eyes take in all my belongings. We had a slight standoff before he finally opened the bag back up for me. Shoving my clothes back inside of it, I felt my cheeks fume as I silently thanked whatever god was up there that I hadn’t packed tampons or anything embarrassing.

A hush fell over the room as I took the backpack from Decker’s hands and zipped it shut. They saw the depressing truth: I didn’t really have much. I was pissed that he took my pathetic possessions and put them on display. Something told me Decker purposely emptied my bag, and once again I felt like a question he needed answered. Despite just meeting, he seemed determined to do whatever it took to figure me out, privacy be damned.

“Is that all you brought?” Lance asked as my fingers grazed over a photo of Mama that I purposely left out of my bag. I nodded in answer, then quickly flipped the worn picture over so I wouldn’t have to see her smiling face beaming up at me. I’d only looked at the photo a handful of times. It hurt too much to really sink into the image, so I kept it folded and hidden away.

“I travel light,” I replied with a wink, determined to change the subject once again with lightheartedness. Decker just stood there with his arms crossed over his chest in deep disapproval. I could practically see more of his questions forming at the tip of his tongue. “I brought this for you, actually,” I added before picking up the photo and walking it over to Lance. It was one of the last things Mama gave me. Seemed fitting her last gift would benefit someone else and not the daughter that took care of her. Mama was always chasing other opportunities, other endings. It was easier than facing the reality of her situation, I supposed. In another reality, she had a son she loved. In this photo, she was a selfless mother, doing right by her kid.

The picture was of her at sixteen, in a hospital gown with a proud smile on her face, like she was the fucking Virgin Mary. She was cradling a newborn baby wrapped up in a blue hospital blanket, with her sweaty hair pulled back. I remember feeling confused for a moment when she’d shown it to me. The picture was worn and creased like she spent a lot of time looking at it. There were even lipstick stains on the back as if she’d used it as a napkin at one point. It wasn’t until she whispered Lance’s name that it

clicked. Of course it was him. We didn't really have photos of the two of us. Hell, I honestly had never seen a baby photo of myself. And yet she held on to this little piece of Lance. Maybe it made her feel good.

I handed it to him before wrapping my arms around myself, not really knowing what to say or do. This was uncharted territory, and after being on my own for so long, it felt weird to share a piece of my mother that seemed foreign to me. She wasn't the doting mother. Wasn't the maternal sort. She just was.

My large bedroom started to feel small with Decker and Lance staring at me like they were waiting for me to say something. I stumbled through my words as I explained. "She kept a photo of the two of you. I figured you'd want to have it." The moment it left my fingers, it was like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I was free of the photo. Free of her.

When Lance flipped the glossy, stained picture over, his eyes turned misty with an emotion I wish I could experience. "This is of us?" he choked out while stroking the edge of it with his thumb, awe flooding his expression.

"Yes," I whispered.

"I don't even know what to say. Thank you, Blakely. This is the best... I'm just speechless."

"It's the least I could do. You really helped a lot with the funeral and fixing my car. And now you're letting me stay here until I get on my feet," I replied with a sigh. "I wanted to talk to you about that actually. I'm going to start job hunting soon, so I won't be here for too long." My bedroom was incredible, but I still didn't feel right about staying. Decker's cruel greeting was still ringing clearly in my mind. I didn't want to be accused of abusing the privilege of Lance's kindness. Maybe it was because I was so desperate to be everything Mama wasn't. My jaded past clouded my judgement

"You're leaving?" Lance stuttered before dropping his hands to his side, the photo was quickly forgotten. "I thought you'd at least stay for your senior year. Is there something wrong with the room? We can change anything to fit your liking. Hell, I can take you right now to pick out furniture and new bedding. Shit, I knew I should have waited to ask what you wanted."

He was rambling now and using his free hand to run his fingers through his blond hair. Decker saw his opportunity and immediately spoke up. "She told me before you got here that she's not planning on attending school. Was going to get her GED and go straight to work," Decker scoffed. I could hear the disbelief in his tone, and I wanted to whirl around and punch his sexy self

in the fucking jaw.

"Is that true?" Lance asked in a small voice. He looked unsure as his eyes peered at the ground, and surprisingly, I could feel his hurt. His fear of abandonment. "I'd hate for you to give up school. You're so smart. I saw your transcripts from before she got sick. You can't give that up now. You're welcome here for as long as you'd like. If you're uncomfortable with me, I can even start scouting out your own apartment in the building. I want to help you."

"No, it's not that," I quickly amended. "I'm really thankful that you've been so receptive to me reaching out and letting me stay here. I just...I'm not sure where home is right now? I'm not sure what I'm doing. And I don't want you to feel obligated to take care of me if this doesn't work out."

Lance took a moment to take in my words, chewing on his tongue as he did. Decker sat on the bed and trailed his finger over the edge of my backpack, watching our interaction with interest. I had a feeling he'd be doing that a lot—watching and observing.

I turned my attention back to Lance. "I don't feel obligated in the slightest. I want to know you. I want to know my birth mom. I want a relationship with you. What can I do to make this feel less like a charitable exchange? I can work with pride. I can't work with losing you before we even get the chance to know one another."

I wanted to scream from the rooftops that my problem had nothing to do with pride. I wasn't the type to think myself above getting help. I'd just been burned so many times I didn't believe there was any good left in people. But I didn't say that. "How about I pay rent?" I offered. "I could easily find a job. And if we get along, I'll happily pay to live here."

"You couldn't afford the rent," Decker coughed under his breath, but Lance ignored him.

"I don't need the money, Blakely," he replied instantly. "How about this, every day you stay, just tell me something new about our mother? Just one little fact. Doesn't have to be crazy. I'm just..." he began, pausing as he searched for the right words to say. "Struggling to cope with the idea that I'll never get to know her. And I also want to know you."

I mulled over his words for a moment before turning to look at Decker, who was staring right back at me. My earlier words held like an anvil over us. The truth would devastate Lance. I wasn't even sure I could handle being the one to burst his bubble. It was a fair trade, I supposed. Painful honesty in

exchange for survival. Turning back to Lance, I spoke.

“Okay. I can do that. For now. What do you want to know?”

“Anything. I want to know about Sharron—our mother.”

I ran through a list of things I knew about my mother, trying to sift around the toxic memories to find something that would be good enough for him. With a sigh, I finally decided on something surface level. “She loved pancakes. We once had them every night for dinner for an entire week. She’d drown hers in syrup until it was more like soup than anything else,” I offered with a shrug. And damn, Lance’s entire face lit up like I’d given him a gold mine. It kind of made me feel good, despite the half-truth rolling around in my chest, begging to break free.

“I love pancakes, too! My parents used to make fun of me for putting so much syrup on them.” His face took on a dream-like quality for a moment before he snapped his fingers. “We should all go out for an early dinner. I know this place down the street that sells the best pancakes. You’ll love it. I’ll go get my wallet.”

Spinning around, he left without another word, excited to memorialize Mama’s habits with the little bit of information I gave him. Squeezing my eyes shut, I forced myself to calm the raging storm in my mind and convince myself that I could spin little half-truths into a pretty portrait of Mama. I could give Lance the optimistic version of my childhood and hold the ugly inside. I’d have to think of more positives though.

I’d almost forgotten that Decker was still there. It wasn’t until he stood up and moved to the spot right behind me that I sucked in a breath of air at his close proximity. I could practically feel his heat at my back, his all-knowing presence. In my short time here, I got the impression that where Lance was lighthearted and hopeful, Decker saw right through the haze. Right through me. I wasn’t sure I could handle navigating Lance’s hopes with Decker’s reality.

“Now tell the truth,” he whispered, so low that I almost didn’t hear. I kept my eyes trained ahead, too nervous to turn around and reveal the tears threatening to spill over.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I replied hoarsely. I figured it was easier to lie. I didn’t know this man, didn’t owe him anything.

“You tell him the sugar-coated fluff, but give me your honesty. You’ll feel better if you do. His part of the deal will keep a roof over your head, but if you tell me the truth, then I won’t bug you for the rest of the night.”

“You don’t even know me,” I replied, though I contemplated his offer. I wanted to avoid the high school chat with Lance and Decker until I felt more settled. Our temporary truce might last for the day, but I didn’t know what would happen next. And despite all this, the truth was still bubbling within me like molten lava, threatening to spill over and destroy everything in its path. “Just for the night?” I asked, giving in with a grimace.

“For the next twenty-four hours,” he negotiated, and his hot air feathered down my neck as he spoke. I wasn’t sure why he cared so much or why I felt the need to give in to this complete stranger.

“Fine,” I began with a slow and steady exhale. “She liked pancakes because they were cheap and easy to make. That week, when we ate nothing but pancakes? It wasn’t because she loved breakfast food and syrup. It was because we had fourteen dollars in the bank and she needed a new dress for her date with a local hotshot lawyer. If I never eat another pancake in my life, it’ll be too soon,” I admitted.

Decker leaned closer; I could feel his stubble on my cheek. A shiver traveled up my spine, and I felt my bones grow weak. My reaction to him confused me. “Good girl,” he whispered before snapping back and walking out of the room. I watched Decker’s back as he walked, my mouth gaping open at the complete twist in our dynamic. One second he was pulling at my truth like it was a rotten tooth, the next he was strolling out of my new bedroom as if nothing had happened.

But my mind was still lingering on his whispered praise. “Good girl,” he’d said.

For some fucked up reason, I wanted to hear him say it again.

Blakely

THE NEXT FEW days all started the same. I woke up in a plush bed, wondering where the hell I was and why I felt...safe. It always took a few moments to remember that I moved to Memphis. Every morning, I was greeted with the smell of butter, sugar, and syrup. I hated it. I hated that I couldn't tell him how much I loathed pancakes. I hated that we had such vastly different childhoods that he didn't share the same experience as I did.

But despite these differences, there were some similarities too. Lance liked to hum while he cooked, just like Mama. He drowned his pancakes in syrup like her too. He also clutched his napkin in his fist as he ate just like her.

It was weird to have a routine of sorts. Ever since Mama died, my life had been a sequence of upheavals. It was nice to wake up and know what to expect.

Lance cooking for me was a thoughtful gesture. I half expected him to give up by day three, but he was persistent. I knew that he was clinging to what little information I shared, and somehow, pancakes had become our metaphorical olive branch as we learned about one another. Even though I hated the flapjacks and everything they represented, I found myself choking them down while giving him little pieces of Mama's story. There was something about Lance that made me want to make him smile, and despite my better judgment, I was starting to trust that his actions and words were genuine.

He also stayed true to his word on asking for details about Mama. He'd hand me a breakfast plate and sit there expectantly, waiting like an eager child for candy. I liked that there was some trade-off for our living situation. I would have felt awful to stay in his apartment, eat his food, and enjoy his comforting easiness if I didn't feel like I was giving him anything in return. It was one of those fears I had, worrying I'd end up as selfish and greedy as she was. These little snippets of her life were like a rare form of currency, and I was quickly running out of spending money. I didn't have a lot of good memories to share, and what little I did have, I had to tweak to fit the narrative Lance craved. He knew my past, had spoken with my social worker, but he wanted to see the good in people—in Mama.

Monday, I told him that Mama liked to go to the local carnival every summer. If I closed my eyes real tight, I could still smell the funnel cakes she'd bring home. He admitted to never actually going to one. Both his adoptive parents were high-profile surgeons and took precautions with Lance's safety, which surprised me. He seemed so...free-spirited. He proceeded to research all the carnivals around Memphis and made plans for us to go to a couple. His enthusiasm and excitement were infectious. Lance was like a golden retriever, eager to please.

Tuesday, I told him Mama smelled like roses. Naturally, Lance went to the store and bought dozens of them and placed the bouquets around the apartment. Now their stench filled my every inhale. It was like everywhere I went, I was breathing in her memory. It felt like their thorned stems were growing up my throat, making it difficult to breathe. But Lance seemed happy, and for some reason I didn't question, that was enough for me.

Wednesday, I told him that Mama had a few jobs but wanted to be a makeup artist. Thankfully, he didn't insist that I go to cosmetology school, though he asked about her other jobs. I didn't go too much into detail. I didn't think he'd want to know that a majority of her income came from whatever wealthy, married man she was fucking that month. Mama used to talk down about women that were prostitutes, but she wasn't any better.

For the rest of the week, that's how it went. I'd say something about Mama, and he'd do everything in his power to bring her back to life. I didn't have the heart to tell him that I was struggling to keep her dead in the ground. Every half-truth I spoke made her harder to avoid. It was like she was breathing down my neck.

When she was alive, Mama made everything about her. Every

conversation was about who she was dating, what she was wearing, or what yoga pose she'd just mastered. It was like I was her personal sounding board to boost her superiority complex. She didn't care about what was going on in my life, only that I fulfilled my duty as the supporting actress in her starring role. It was exhausting, and even now, with her gone, I was still in her shadow. Part of me wanted to build a relationship with Lance, but he was so focused on her, he barely knew me. Not that I was going out of my way to correct him. I held my own truths tightly to my chest, too scared to trust anyone to part with them.

This morning, when I walked into the kitchen, I was surprised to find Decker at the stovetop instead of Lance. He'd been mostly absent all week, gearing up for the new school year with meetings and training seminars. I told myself that I was only learning his habits and routine to be a courteous roommate, but that was a bold-faced lie. If he was in the room, my eyes were on him. I just couldn't figure out why. At least he hadn't given me any more talks about how I wasn't welcome.

"Where's Lance?" I asked before sitting down at the kitchen island and grabbing a crunchy piece of bacon. I moaned once the taste hit my tongue, thankful that I wouldn't have to choke down anymore pancakes swimming in syrup. Part of me wondered if Decker remembered how much pancakes reminded me of Mama, but I extinguished that thought quickly.

"The hotel's construction crew hit a snag yesterday, and now the structural integrity is compromised. Lance was called in early this morning to reevaluate the design and asked me to keep you company this morning." He cracked an egg and poured the yolk into a frying pan as I mulled over his words. *Keep me company* sounded more like babysitting. Lance took all week off from work, saying he wanted to help me transition here, but something told me he was scared I'd bolt. The fact that he asked Decker to spend the day with me supported that hypothesis. Though I had a feeling that Decker had no problem keeping an eye on me. He probably wanted to make sure I didn't steal the flat screen in the living room and pawn it off.

Decker spun around from the stove top to face me, and my breath nearly caught at the sight of him. He was fully dressed for the day. With dark jeans and a blue t-shirt, he looked handsome. His dark, wavy hair was still wet from his shower this morning, and I found myself wanting to run my fingers through it, which was absofuckinglutely ridiculous.

I was still in my pajamas, which consisted of an oversized t-shirt and

short shorts. Lance kept telling me to make myself at home, so I didn't bother changing. If I had known it would be Decker waking me up with breakfast, though, I might have been a little more attentive to my appearance. "Oh," I began. "Well, you don't have to keep me company. I was going to apply for jobs at a few local restaurants. Lance has been keeping me so busy all week I haven't had the time."

Lance filled up every minute of my day. He took me shopping, showed me around town, and even took me to look at a new car he was thinking about buying me. I managed to convince him not to, saying that Mama's car had sentimental value. He was going out of his way to make me feel at home, and I had to choke back my prejudice about charitable men at every turn. He was my brother, I should be excited to have a family member that wanted to help me, but something kept pulling me back. It was probably his asshole best friend making me feel like shit for even breathing the same air as Lance.

Decker grabbed a frying pan full of scrambled eggs and set it in front of me on a hot pad before migrating over to the stool beside mine. "I have a better idea, actually. You game?"

"That depends on what the idea is," I replied. Decker's voice sounded sleepy in a sexy sort of way, and I noticed some scruff on his angular jaw. Scooping a spoon full of eggs onto my plate, I noted that he'd sprinkled some cheese on them. Two days ago, I'd made an offhand comment that I preferred my eggs that way, and I was surprised that he remembered.

Decker reached up to grab a slice of toast, brushing his arm along mine. I turned to casually stare at him as he buttered his bread, noticing how his eyes kept drifting to my legs. "How about this," he began. "I'll tell you where we're going if you give me five truths."

"Five truths?" I questioned.

"For every lie you've told Lance this week about your mother, I want you to tell me the truth."

I swallowed. No. No way in hell. I didn't want to risk him telling Lance. "No, thank you. I'm fine with surprises," I replied with an eye roll before shoveling a spoonful of food in my mouth.

"Fair enough. Tell me three truths, then, and I'll get you a job at my friend's restaurant. She's always looking for servers."

I swallowed my mouthful of food. Taking a gulp of steaming hot coffee, I took my time mulling over his proposition before sputtering my response. "Really? You'd do that?" I asked.

Decker leaned in closer with a smile, then lifted his thumb up. I stared at him in confusion before he swiped at my bottom lip, tugging the skin with the padding of his finger. My mouth parted in shock as a gasp escaped my chest. “You had some food there,” he rasped before pulling away. Heat flooded my skin, and I squeezed my thighs together before shifting in my seat. His eyes lingered on my mouth where his finger just was, like he was searching for another excuse to touch me. I bit down on my bottom lip, making him let out a subtle gasp.

Coughing, Decker shook his head before answering my question. “I think a job could be good for you. It’ll help you get on your feet faster. I’ve always had a job, even when my parents insisted on paying for everything. The owner is nice, and they’d work around your school schedule.”

“I told you. I’m not sure I want to go to school. I can still get my GED and be done with this. Faster I graduate, the faster I can work full time.”

“That’s a piss poor plan. Why not have both?” Decker asked. “I’ve seen your grades. With a little effort, you could easily get a scholarship. Or are you too lazy to work for it?” His voice was like a sneer, dripping with attitude. So we were back to thinking I was the mooch, yeah?

I shoved my plate away, no longer hungry. He was pissing me off. Lazy? I was the girl that cared for her dying mother and kept a 4.0 GPA. I was the girl that worked a night shift at the plant so we could afford her hospital bills and keep the trailer. I was the girl that gave up a social life while her mother lived it up. I avoided relationships because I had already been in an abusive one that broke me down.

I could feel all my doubts spilling from my lips like venom. Scholarships were for other kids. Kids that didn’t smile when their mamas died. Kids that didn’t feel obligated to save their parents and relieved when they failed. “What if it doesn’t work out? What if Lance decides he’s done playing the doting brother and wants nothing to do with me? I need to protect myself,” I said through gritted teeth, maintaining eye contact with Decker as I spoke. It felt invigorating and intimidating to spit out the fears that had been swirling around my head for the last few weeks.

Decker placed his hand on my knee, drawing my attention back to him. “I’ve known Lance my whole life. I might be wary of having you here, but he won’t abandon you once the newness wears off. He’s fiercely loyal and well-meaning. Protect yourself by accepting help.”

“Why do you want me to accept help?” I asked. “Last we talked, you

were threatening to kick me out.”

“I think you could be good for Lance,” Decker replied cryptically.

I swallowed. I hated that I was so distrusting, years of failed promises and let downs were like bricks lined along my back. It was hard to think of anything else with those experiences weighing me down. “I’ll think about it,” I replied. “And I’ll take your offer on the job.”

“Great!” he said before pulling his hand back while snapping his fingers. “Three truths. Go.” He then leaned forward, bracing his fist under his chin like I was the most exciting thing in the room. Like he wanted to study me. His dark eyes were assessing and tempting. I wanted to run my hand through his dark, disheveled hair.

I let out a slow exhale before beginning. “My mama liked carnivals. Would go every weekend if she could. She only actually took me once, though, and it was so I could drive her home. She’d always go with her friends or with whatever dick she was sucking. Never with me,” I answered with a sigh. Decker remained utterly silent, his only confirmation that he’d heard me was a nod to continue. I searched his face for pity, expecting a sympathetic smile or even disgust. But all that greeted me was understanding and the courage to continue.

“I told Lance that she smelled like roses, but it wasn’t the full truth. She liked to smoke cigarettes and would spray herself down with cheap rose water to try and cover the scent of tar.” I hated that smell, it was always on my clothes, my skin, my hair, my soul.

“And the last one?” Decker encouraged while leaning in even closer. I could have brushed our noses together if I wanted—and I wanted to for some fucked up reason.

“My Mama loved makeup,” I choked out. “She had many faces—many masks. Everyone she ever met got to see a new one. I was the only person that saw her stripped bare. I never much liked the stuff, but she’d always tried to cake it on me.”

Decker observed me. His eyes swept over my lips, dipped along the curve of my neck before landing at my cleavage. I sucked in a breath of air, making his hooded eyes travel back up to meet my gaze. Time seemed to slow. It contradicted my racing pulse. It felt like an invisible tether was pulling us together, an unavoidable force that gave his gaze the power to cause goosebumps to travel across my heated skin.

He leaned in closer. “You don’t need it,” Decker whispered before

straightening and taking a bite of toast. I watched his slow chews for a moment and followed the bob of his throat as he swallowed. He stared at his plate before speaking again. “I already got you the job, by the way.”

My mouth dropped open in shock. “What?” I asked incredulously as sour frustration crashed into me. “If you already got me the job, why’d you make me tell you all of that?”

“I can’t protect Lance unless I have a clear understanding of you, Blakely.” His statement made me both angry and heated. I liked to hold my secrets close to my chest. I wasn’t some map to figure out. I didn’t want to be manipulated into sharing my pain. It was mine. Mine to hold. Mine to bare. Mine to navigate.

“There’s not much to understand,” I replied with steel.

He turned from the sink and rolled his eyes. Walking over to me, he placed his fingers under my chin and tilted my head up to look at him. I felt my cheeks heat at the contact. “I thought we were telling the truth, huh? You’re like a puzzle, and you know it.”

“Why do you care so much? You don’t know me,” I whispered. Maybe that was the crux of things. No one had ever bothered to figure me out before, so why now?

“Maybe we have more in common than you think, Blakely,” he whispered, and I could smell the coffee on his breath. We were locked in a standoff I didn’t want to end. “Go get dressed. You’ll need to leave in an hour.” He pulled away and started picking up my breakfast plates.

“Where are we going?” I asked, feeling like I was losing at a weird, emotional tug of war.

“I’m not going anywhere. Your shift starts in an hour,” Decker replied with a smile.

Blakely

THE RESTAURANT WAS a block away from Lance's loft, which was good considering Decker only gave me an hour's notice to get there. I liked that I could easily walk to work and save money on gas. There was also the added benefit that this area of town wasn't too bad to travel alone at night. If I had the late shift, I wouldn't have to worry about walking home. My old Corolla, Roxy, probably wouldn't last much longer. It seemed like she was done hanging on to her last transmission now that Mama was dead. I honestly couldn't wait to be rid of the old car with its stained seats and cracked windshield.

Decker told me to call him when my shift was done so he could pick me up, but I had no plans to do that. I already felt like I owed him for getting me the job, and I didn't want to feel even more indebted. In my experience, people rarely gave anything without expecting something in return, and at the rate I was going, I'd be paying him and Lance back for the rest of my life. That thought didn't sit well with me.

Memphis day drinkers were out in full swing despite the early hour. They clutched beer bottles in their fists as they walked the streets and chatted. It was like the party never stopped here. Sports fans crowded around bars, overflowing onto the sidewalk as they watched a pre-season football game on a flat screen while knocking back beer. I didn't actually know what team was playing, but everyone seemed to cheer them on.

Street performers sang bluesy tunes, hoping for tips as an artist drew a

mural with chalk on the ground. I liked Memphis. People marched to the beat of their own drums. It had that deeply Southern form of hospitality that reminded me of Texas, and yet boomed with an invigorating vibrancy that danced at a faster pace than my old town. When I first learned that Lance moved here from Chicago, it surprised me. But even after just a few days in Memphis, I understood the appeal.

I passed a pink and blue mural painted on white brick, with a pair of wings spanning the entire building. I paused to stare at it, thinking about how the beautiful portrait fit my mood. Memphis felt like freedom, and I decided that if and when things didn't work out with Lance and me, I'd probably stay.

I was surprised that Lance agreed to me getting a job. All week, he'd been entirely against me working, making me so busy with his sibling bonding agenda that I didn't even have time to fill out applications. I worried that his determination to keep me at home was some sort of power play. Some men didn't like an independent woman, they wanted the people in their lives to rely so heavily on them that they didn't have a choice but to stay. I didn't want to believe that about Lance, but the thought still crossed my mind any chance it got.

I couldn't help but wonder if Decker was the one to convince Lance to let me work. Although he was an asshole, he understood my thought processes. Decker might have called me lazy at breakfast, but something told me he was just saying that to press the wound in my chest. Decker wanted to make it bleed so he could examine it, not to actually inflict any damage. I also got the sense that he understood my need for independence—my need to not rely on anyone else—and I liked that.

There was something about Decker Harris that got under my skin. He was persistent and observant. I didn't understand if it was out of some duty to his best friend or if he took on projects like me regularly. Regardless, my life leading up to this point made me chronically suspicious. It would take more than a handsome face and a job before I trusted him. He might have been determined to figure me out, but I was just as determined to shy away. I rarely trusted people, and I had no intention of putting my faith in him until I figured out his intentions.

The restaurant looked more like a bar than a barbecue place. When I walked up to the front door, loud music was reverberating from the inside, making the windows shake. It was only noon on a Saturday, but already the career alcoholics lined the bar, joking and watching the flat screens.

The name Huck-a-poos BBQ in bold red letters was painted on the brick near the front entrance. I took a moment to stare through the window, noting the short shorts and tight tank tops that the waitresses wore. Looking down at my own outfit, I realized that this place wasn't exactly what I was expecting. Did Decker regularly go here? Did he know what I'd be wearing? A couple of guys speaking loudly and patting each other on the back shoved past me before opening the door to go inside. I decided to swallow my reservations and follow behind them.

The location was ideal, and waitressing jobs typically had good tips. Not to mention the place was busy, which meant lots of opportunity for work.

Clasping my fingers in front of me, I walked up to the hostess station where a blonde with smeared black eyeliner was standing. She was beautiful. Her tight tank top, which boasted the restaurant's name, looked stretched thin across her large breasts. Smacking her gum, she looked me up and down before speaking. "Table for one?" she asked, albeit condescendingly. "We also have open seating at the bar, though I'll need to see your ID."

I started fishing around my pockets, trying to find the scrap of paper with the woman's name that Decker said would give me the job. Pulling it out, I read the scrawled script, then spoke. "I'm here to see Rose?" I hated how uncertain I sounded. Usually, any jobs I got were based on my own merits. I never had anyone else do the initial leg work for me. "A friend of mine said she had a job for me?"

The girl looked me up and down once more, her eyes lingering on my breasts and face. "I'll take you back to see Rose. But you should probably put on some makeup first. Pretty girls get pretty good tips if you know what I'm saying." She accentuated her point with a wink before nodding at someone else to take over the hostess stand. "Follow me," she added before walking down the hall.

Rows of tables with tourists lined either side as a football game played on the flat screens lining the wall. The lunch crowd was cheering for their favorite teams while waitresses sauntered around them. The decor of the place was rustic and warm, with oxidized signs filling every wall, carved initials in the tables, and spilled beer on the floor. The place was loud, and waitresses carrying large trays hustled past with sweat dripping down their necks.

"I'm Monica, by the way," the blonde hostess said to me from over her shoulder while diving around a tipsy man looking for the bathroom. She

paused to spin him in the right direction before continuing. “I’m glad Rose is finally hiring more people. We’ve been short-staffed for a few weeks, and although the extra shifts are nice, it might be good to have a break every now and then,” she said. Monica had a Southern accent that was both sweet and sassy.

“Are the hours good?” I asked while dodging another waitress. A few women in the corner were sipping on wine and laughing loudly. The shouting people, flat screens, and music made it hard to hear.

Monica spun around once we hit the back door leading to the kitchens before speaking again. “Honey, if you want work, there’s plenty around here to do. Do you have any waitressing experience?”

I had worked at a couple diners here and there before getting hired on at the power plant. Back when I thought college was an option, I figured even if I were just a custodian, it would look good on a resume. But now, I would take work pretty much anywhere. “I’ve worked at a few restaurants,” I replied.

“Good enough for me,” Monica replied. “I’m a shift manager, which means I’ll probably be responsible for training you. I hope you learn fast, because tonight a local band is playing, and it’ll be all hands on deck.”

Monica opened the door with her back, and I was led inside to a frantic kitchen. Men in white aprons were yelling at one another, flinging plates as they went. The energy seemed high and stressful. I kind of liked it. Monica ignored a tall man with bulging muscles that tried speaking to her, his sultry eyes looking her up and down as she directed me toward the back office. She didn’t even seem to notice him.

“Good luck. Rose is a little...different. This restaurant is her baby though.”

“I like different. Thanks for the tour,” I replied.

With a single nod, Monica knocked on the door and left me standing there. She walked back through the chaotic kitchen and into the central part of the restaurant.

“Come in,” a voice on the other side of the door called. Surprisingly, I detected a hint of a British accent. Twisting the doorknob, I opened the door and slipped inside the stark, clean office. Compared to the rustic vibe of the restaurant, this office was spotless. I doubted it ever saw a speck of dust. Crisp, white walls filled four corners, and her white desk stood in the middle on marble tile. It felt like I was walking into an entirely different building.

“You Blake?” a voice drenched in a posh accent asked. I turned my gaze to the woman sitting at the desk. She had long, dark hair with wiry curls. Her white, button-up shirt was unbuttoned, revealing a nude bra underneath. Her dark skin was smooth and silky, and her eyes were a bright shade of brown that looked both stoic and disarming. I found myself thinking how beautiful she was as she stared expectantly at me. It wasn’t until she coughed that I realized that she had asked me a question.

“Oh, yes. I’m Blakely. Decker’s...friend?” Was that what we were? Saying he was my long lost brother’s sexy best friend slash roommate felt like an overshare.

“I don’t like Blakely. Kind of a mouthful, yeah? Blake it is,” she replied before grabbing a coffee mug that said Head Bitch In Charge and taking a sip.

“Works for me,” I replied with a shrug.

Rose slammed her coffee mug down and stood up, placing her hands on her hips. “Girl. Within five seconds of meeting you, I changed your goddamn name. Have some self-respect!” I was so thrown off by her outburst that I could only stand there and gape at her.

“Okay. The name is Blakely, not Blake. Though if I’m being honest, I always wanted to go by my middle name, Winter. My last name is Stewart...”

“Now that’s just too much information. I don’t want your life story, Blake. I want you to stand up for yourself, okay? Let’s try this again. I’m going to insult you by calling you Blake, and you’re going to professionally correct me in a way that creates a clear boundary while being polite. Okay?”

What the fuck kind of job did I get myself into? “Okay?” I replied, not sure of what she wanted.

Rose lifted up her hands and rubbed her temples for a moment before fixing her expression. “And scene,” she replied while shaking her shoulders and rolling her neck. “Your new name is Blake. Blakely is a mouthful, yeah?”

“I prefer to go by Blakely, ma’am,” I replied with a smile, hoping the blatant confusion I felt wasn’t evident on my face.

“That was seriously terrible, Blakely. But I suppose that’ll do for now. Decker was right, you’re going to need a lot of help,” she said while scribbling on her notepad.

“I’m sorry, what?” I asked before sitting down in a white plastic chair

that squeaked the moment my ass landed in it. “I thought I was coming here for a job?”

“Did Decker tell you how we know each other?” she asked with a flirty smile, and against my better judgment, my mind went back to how damn beautiful Rose was. The moment those words left her lips, I imagined them fucking in my brand new bedroom. Oh God, make it stop.

“N-no, he didn’t,” I replied before twisting my fingers in my lap.

“Stop fidgeting, Blake.”

“It’s Blakely,” I replied before quickly adding, “ma’am.”

“Good girl. You’re teachable. I can work with this,” she mumbled, mostly to herself before scratching more notes on her notebook. I watched in curiosity as she began doodling a penis on the edge of the paper. “I’m Decker’s life coach. He mentioned you in our weekly session, and I suggested you start working here,” she replied.

“You’re a life coach and run a bar?” I asked. I felt my brows furrow.

“I’m also a dog walker on Tuesdays.”

“I think I’m just going to...” my voice trailed off as I stood up, trying to make a quick escape. This lady was insane.

“Sit back down, Blakely,” Rose’s voice ordered. It was powerful yet polite. Something told me this woman always got what she wanted. I stayed hovering over my plastic seat for a moment longer in indecision before finally planting my ass down once more on the squeaky chair.

“Decker just said you could use my help and a job. I run a damn good establishment with a side of mentorship. I make all my employees go through my life course, and you’ll be no different. It’s not for everyone, but I think you might actually like it. Plus, I have an ice cream machine, and you get one free cone a day. I mean, I’m basically serving happiness up on a silver platter here, girl!”

My mouth dropped open. “I mean, ice cream is great and all, but I just want a job,” I replied.

“Why do you want a job?” she snarked back, leaning forward over her desk with her breasts hanging out as she tilted her head to the side to stare at me. I breathed in, noting that her office smelled like the worst combination of incense on the planet. It was like a hippie threw up in here during an orgy.

“I don’t know. For independence. So I can save up and take care of myself.” If this was a job interview, it was officially the weirdest one I’d ever had.

“How remarkably boring,” Rose replied while shaking her head. “You’re young! You worry too much.” Worrying was in my blood. I was conditioned to care, trained to obsess over where my next meal would come from or what asshole Mama was bringing home that night.

I gritted my teeth. Who the hell was this bitch? She didn’t know me, didn’t know my fucking life. She took one look at me, heard what Decker had to say, and created her own narrative. I was getting really tired of people and their assumptions. “I had to grow up at a young age,” I seethed.

“That’s not an excuse to be so serious,” she replied with a wave of her hand.

“It’s not an excuse, it’s my fucking life. For most teenagers, a job might just be something for extra spending money, but for me? It’s survival. So if you think you can hire me on and feel good about yourself for teaching me some bullshit, free-spirited lesson on going with the flow, you’re going to be sorely disappointed.”

I clasped my hand over my lips when I realized the toxic words had left my mouth. I stared at Rose as her smile grew wider. She clutched her heart for a beat before yanking open one of her desk drawers. Pulling out a tanktop, she tossed it to me before speaking. “Monica will give you your schedule. I think this was a beautiful breakthrough, Blakely. Thanks for sharing your higher self’s journey with me.” She then had the fucking audacity to bow with her hands clasped at her chest in a prayer pose. “I’ll see you Saturday for our next session. Your task for the week is to tell me what job you actually want. If you come back with nothing to say, don’t bother coming back to work at all. See you then!”

I grabbed the shirt and stood up. I was going to kill Decker for getting me this job. I already knew that he definitely couldn’t be trusted, but this solidified that. I didn’t need a damn life coach. I just needed cash. I needed out of Lance’s loft. I needed...

Maybe I didn’t know what I needed anymore. Whatever it was, I doubted I would find it here.

Blakely

WHEN I GOT HOME after my eight hour shift, I was a sweaty mess, my tight, white tank stuck to my body like a second skin and showing off a good portion of my stomach. Work was a beating. Monica trained me well, but the second the dinner rush arrived, I was on my own.

For the most part, it was a fast-paced but easy job. Only a handful of customers leered. I quickly realized that the tank top was less for show and more to keep cool. The barbecue pits outside were hot as hell, and after my fourth trip to get food, I found myself hiding in the walk-in freezer with a few of the other servers for a ten minute break.

Lance texted me two hours ago, telling me to call him when I got off so he could walk me home, but I pretended not to see it. I was still mad at Decker for setting me up with his fucking life coach, and I didn't trust myself not to tell Lance that his best friend was an asshole. It wouldn't be worth it, and besides, something told me Lance already knew.

When I opened the door, I was surprised to see Lance and Decker sitting shirtless in the living room and screaming at the television, Xbox controls in their hands. They didn't notice me at first, so I took a casual opportunity to stare at Decker. His sweatpants hung low on his hips, showing off a delicious set of six pack abs and tanned skin. I almost had to remind myself that I was pissed at him.

“You’re home!” Lance yelled in greeting while holding his controller up. He was hitting every damn button on the thing. My brother didn’t dare pull

his eyes from the screen, too engrossed in whatever game they were playing. It looked like the typical guys' night. A couple of empty beer bottles and snacks littered the coffee table, and I saw an empty pizza box in the kitchen. It was the messiest this place had ever been.

I learned really quickly that Lance and Decker were chronically tidy. Not a single dish was ever left in the sink. Not an article of clothing left on the floor. Seeing them now, in their natural element, had me wondering if they kept things clean because they wanted me to feel comfortable. If I was ever okay with mentioning how fucked up my prior living situation had been, I'd let them know that they had nothing to worry about. I couldn't tell you how many times I found used condom wrappers on the floor at the old trailer.

"Video game night?" I asked. "Should I leave?" For some reason, this felt like I was encroaching on a ritual of sorts.

"No, we're almost done!" Lance yelled before blowing up a car on the video game. He did a quick fist pump to the ceiling before attacking his controller again, never once tearing his eyes from the screen. I laughed.

Unlike Lance, Decker glanced at me with disinterest, then quickly did a double take. His mouth dropped open in shock when he saw what I was wearing. It's like I could *feel* his heady gaze, trailing up and down my body. It was hot. It was wrong. His distraction led to his demise though. Lance killed him in whatever shooting game they were playing, making my brother scream and dance in his spot on the couch while Decker cursed.

"What the fuck are you wearing?" Decker asked as Lance reached forward to grab his beer on the coffee table and take a swig.

"You should know! You're the one that got me the job. It's my uniform," I replied with an eye roll before doing a little spin, showing off the disgusting trail of sweat down my spine in the process. I was walking over to the couch when he grunted and bit his lip. A part of me wanted to dance at the idea of catching him off guard, but I knew the subtle shock was short lived. I wasn't in the mood to chit chat but figured I should catch up with Lance, so I made my way over to the couch.

"Please tell me you didn't get my sister a job at a strip club," Lance replied while looking me up and down with a disgusted scowl, his eyebrows dipped in disapproval.

Scooting over for me to sit, Lance shook his head before setting down his controller. I settled between them before reaching for the open bag of chips. Grabbing a handful, I stuffed them in my mouth with a satisfied moan that

made Decker sit up straighter. The bar was so busy I didn't have time for a lunch break, not that I would have taken it. I was avoiding Rose at all costs.

The one time she did find me, she said, "Slouching is for people that want to hide, Blake. Roll them shoulders back. You are a fearless woman. Roar, damnit!" Then she danced away to chat with Monica.

"I've never actually been there. Rose and I meet at the park for our sessions," Decker said on a swallow, his eyes lingering on the straps of my black bra. He shook his head and started staring at the TV like it had offended him. "But maybe this was a bad idea."

"Bad idea? You think? About that," I said while turning to face him, trying to ignore his rippled abs fully on display. I was so close I could lick them if I wanted to. But I totally didn't. Random licking would go against the grieving daughter vibes I'd been sulking in all week. It wasn't fair, really. The man had more muscle than my ex-boyfriend's classic car. "I don't appreciate being blind-sided by Rose. I wanted a job, not a fucking life coach. Why do you even have a life coach?" I asked.

Decker smiled, and damn if I didn't notice the dimple on his cheek and the strong lines of his face. I hated how sexy he looked. "Rose saw me sitting alone in a coffee shop one day and sat down with me. Within an hour, she *told* me that she was my new life coach and that I needed her help. Her methods are weird, but I've gotten some good stories out of it. I told her about you, and she said she'd take you under her wing. I don't see the problem."

"The *problem*," I began, "is that she's bat shit crazy."

"She's not crazy. She's eccentric."

"Says the man sipping the Kool-Aid," I snapped back with a grin.

Beside me, Lance chuckled before taking another sip of his beer. I was feeling bold, so I grabbed Decker's half-full bottle and lifted it up to my lips, prepared to take a swig. Naturally, the asshole swiped it from me with a frown before chugging it.

"No underaged drinking, punk," he replied with a hiss once his bottle was empty. I watched him wipe his lips with the back of his hand and found myself licking my own. His eyes zeroed in on the movement, and a smirk erupted on his face. Asshole. I needed to somehow figure out how to control my body's response to this guy.

"My mama used to send *me* to the liquor store to buy her shit. Got me a fake ID for the sole purpose of sending me on beer runs when she had friends

over. I think I can handle a swig of your piss warm drink,” I replied with a roll of my eyes, then nearly slapped myself when I heard Lance’s shocked gasp.

“Wait, what?” Lance asked before grabbing my wrist, forcing me to turn and face him fully. His blue eyes were laced with concern, and I watched all playfulness flee his body in one fell swoop.

I felt Decker go still in anticipation. Fuck. I was supposed to be telling the pretty little lies that made Mama sound like the good, wholesome woman Lance wanted her to be. The magic illusion I’d been weaving all week was fading, leaving a man with nothing but a dead rabbit in his hat behind.

“Kidding,” I replied with a forced grin, hating myself a little bit for letting the truth slip out so fast. Keeping the reality of Mama’s life from Lance was proving to be harder than I’d originally expected. I quickly tried to salvage the situation. “She didn’t do that.” I was rushing my words out like an idiot.

Lance stared at me for a moment, his blue eyes assessing me. It was the first time I truly felt he was seeing *me* and not the woman that made us both. “Right,” he whispered, his voice hoarse as he shook his head. “You owe me a story.”

I nodded, wracking my brain for what else I could tell him. “Oh, umm,” I began. I was so caught off guard that I didn’t know what to say. It suddenly felt like I had the world on my shoulders. Painting the pleasant picture for Lance was weighing me down, and I didn’t like it.

I felt a hand brush against my back. Decker. For some reason, that little touch bolstered me enough to come up with what I knew Lance needed to hear. “Mama liked to go line dancing. She was always learning new steps. Her boots had holes in them from all her spinning on the dance floor. She had a shrine to George Strait and would kiss his photo every night before bed.”

Lance softened, his earlier reservations gone. “We should go dancing some time,” he said in a soft voice, full of hope and kindness.

“I’d love that,” I lied. I never wanted to step foot in a dance club again. Last time I went, one of Mama’s men felt me up. It made me sick to think of it.

“Okay, well, I’m going to sleep. Y’all don’t stay up too late killing one another and drinking cheap beer. Rose wants me to come in an hour early tomorrow for tabletop meditation. That can’t be sanitary, right? Sitting on the tables at her restaurant while moaning ommmm?” I turned to look at Decker, expecting him to have a satisfied smirk on his face, but instead, he looked

conflicted.

“Definitely not sanitary. I want to meet this woman,” Lance said with a chuckle. I took his lightheartedness and ran with it.

Standing up, I brushed the leftover Cheeto dust on my legs, watching the orange powder cling to the sweat there. “Careful what you wish for. She’ll appoint herself as your life coach, too,” I said. “Good night.”

“Sounds like fun. Good night!” Lance called before tossing me a genuine smile, all worry from my minor slip up seemingly forgotten.

“Night,” I replied with a small smile, feeling bad for lying to him but also thankful I managed to salvage the conversation.

I walked to my room, the weight of my day making my feet feel like lead. And the moment my fingers touched my door knob, I felt a heated presence at my back.

Decker.

It figured he’d follow after me. I didn’t bother to spin around. I couldn’t trust myself to keep up my angry attitude toward him while he was shirtless. Instead, I opened the door and walked inside, not caring whether he followed me or not.

“Can I help you?” I asked when I heard my door click shut. I stood at my dresser and took my hair down from its tight bun while staring at my reflection. I could see him behind me, appraising me with an expression I couldn’t quite understand.

“You weren’t lying, were you,” he stated. It didn’t feel like a question. He dropped honesty at my feet like a lead balloon.

“Nope.”

“Why do you lie to Lance?”

I spun around, my hair a wild mess around my face. I stared at Decker for a beat longer than what was appropriate. His chest moved up and down methodically with each breath, and my eyes once again traveled to the way his sweats hung low on his body. Decker Harris was distracting as hell.

“You know what my mama told me when I asked why she gave him up?” I asked. “She said she wanted him to have a better life. She said he deserved more than what she could offer. I guess even now I’m doing her bidding. He wants to know that version of her, and I don’t want to ruin the illusion. Mama wasn’t a doting mother. She was selfish and self-absorbed and cruel. But...”

“But what?” Decker asked while taking a step closer to me. I could feel the heat radiating off his body. Another step and we’d be touching.

“But Lance doesn’t need to know that. Maybe if I lie enough, I can start to forget how terrible she was.”

Decker lifted his hand up like he was going to brush a strand of my hair out of my wild eyes. He stopped himself though, and I wasn’t sure if I cared or not. He still looked angry and determined to figure me out, but there was something else there, too. “Give me a truth,” he whispered instead.

“I hate dancing,” I whispered, surprised that he didn’t even have to bribe me for this little bit of honesty this time.

“Why?”

“Because last time she dragged me to a dance hall to be her designated driver, her date felt me up,” I replied, making Decker’s gaze turn into a blazing inferno of protective fury. It felt hollow though. Men were painfully generic when it came to caring about accosted women after the fact. Too bad no one was there when I needed them most.

“He what?” Decker asked, taking another step closer. His chest brushed against mine, and I could feel a steady heat rise up my body.

“Don’t make me repeat it. And don’t act like you care. The second I knocked on the door, you had me all figured out. This is temporary, remember? I’ll give Lance the narrative he wants, then be out of his hair. Just don’t pretend like a sad story makes you give a shit.”

Decker looked down at me, his slowly traveling eyes taking me in. I felt breathless and on edge. “When’s your next day off?” he asked, surprising me. I’d expected him to lash out, prove me wrong, or tear me apart.

“Tuesday,” I replied.

“Good. Don’t make any plans. I’m taking you somewhere,” he replied before biting his lip and pulling away, taking his heat with him. It felt like I could actually breathe again.

“I’m not sure I want to go anywhere with you,” I replied before crossing my arms at my chest and inadvertently pushing my breasts up. His eyes traveled down to my cleavage, then snapped back up to me.

“Too bad,” he replied with a smirk before leaving my bedroom, taking his confusing personality with him.

Too bad? Too fucking bad? Decker Harris was one confusingly sexy jerk, and I didn’t like how much I was starting to like it.

Decker

I WASN'T UP EARLY to see her.

Nope. Not me.

I normally woke up at fucking six a.m. on a Sunday. I normally went for a run to get rid of the tension in my chest. I normally sat at the kitchen table, staring down the hall like some goddamn creep.

I knew the moment she woke up. I could hear her alarm going off through the thin walls of Lance's loft. I lifted a strategic yet casual glance in her direction as she left her bedroom and strolled into the bathroom across the hall with a yawn.

I was so totally, utterly fucked. Her age was already an issue, but that, combined with the fact that she was Lance's little sister, made her completely off limits. Besides, I wasn't even sure if I liked her or not. I was a man of science—double majored at fucking Princeton in Chemistry and Biology. I liked to solve things, rip molecules apart just to figure them out. And Blakely? She was a conundrum of contradictions, an experiment I couldn't get a hold on, and I wasn't sure I wanted to.

I could hear the water running in the bathroom, and my mind wondered how she looked in the damn shower, droplets of water flowing over her perky tits. Nope. Not going there. Not even for a goddamn minute. *Get your shit together, Decker.*

When Blakely first showed up, I had her right under my thumb. Some long lost sister appeared out of the blue and wanted to set up in Lance's

house? I'd decided: Fuck that.

People like Lance and me had had wagon hitchers breaking down our doors since the day we were born. I might have been a damn teacher, but my trust fund was worth a couple hundred years of my cushy private school salary—and then some.

We were simple guys with simple lives, avoiding the money and bragging rights our parents gave us. But that didn't mean we were able to go blindly into any friendship, any relationship. When we moved to Memphis, we ran away from that all, but of course Blakely had to show up and tilt our world on its axis.

The bathroom door opened, releasing a plume of steam. And God dammit. She walked out clutching a towel around her curvy frame and quickly disappeared into her bedroom. I gripped the table so hard my knuckles turned white. What the fuck was wrong with me? I needed to do something. Get the hell out of this house, maybe go to a hotel or something.

No. That wouldn't do. Lance was like a brother to me, and I needed to keep an eye on her.

Or at least that's what I was telling myself. I couldn't figure out what it was about Blakely. Every time I expected her to do one thing, she did the complete opposite. I was ripping apart her truth, and every damned layer brought me to a new understanding of the tortured girl walking around our apartment. But that wasn't even the part that had me transfixed. It was that she claimed she wanted to protect Lance from their deceased mother in her own strange way. I wasn't sure if I believed it or not, but I wanted to know more.

“Good morning,” she said in a sleepy voice while towel drying her hair and walking barefoot toward me. She didn't bother to put on any makeup, not that she needed it. It was strangely intimate. I lived with a complete stranger, but she didn't even bother trying to impress either of us. She always walked around in her damn pajamas, swaying her hips as she hummed to herself, and it was driving me fucking nuts. This morning it was her work uniform. Had I known Rose owned a bar where Blakely would be wearing *that*, I would have never gotten her the job, not in a million years. She needed to work at a nunnery.

“Morning,” I grumbled back, pissed that the thought of seeing her was making me wake up at the ass crack of dawn just to gawk. Shit, was I really admitting this to myself now? I was fucked with a capital *F*.

"You're up early for a Sunday," she said before pouring herself a cup of coffee.

"I like to start my day with a run," I lied. I actually liked to start my day with a blow job, but that wasn't happening.

"So you're one of those people," she replied with mischief before opening the fridge and bending over to grab some creamer. Her ass was perched high up in the air, and I wanted to burn my eyes with acid to stop them from wandering in her direction.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"I don't trust people that run for fun. Masochists, all of you," she replied with a lazy wave of her hand before methodically pouring creamer into her cup and mixing it with a spoon.

"There's nothing wrong with being healthy," I said. I didn't necessarily like to work out, but having a healthy lifestyle was ingrained in me at a young age. My dad played pro ball for most of my youth, and even though I didn't follow in his footsteps, working out was one of the few things we bonded over.

I watched her as she leaned against the countertop, sipping her coffee as she took in my basketball shorts and tank. I wasn't blind. I knew the effect I had on most of the female population. I'd gotten enough anonymous love notes from my students to prove it, not that I'd ever entertained that. I wasn't some fucking creep. I usually went for older women—women that were sure of themselves in and out of the bedroom. It would be unethical to even think about it, and yet here I was, imagining what Blakely would look like with her lips wrapped around my co—

"So where are you taking me Tuesday?" she asked while rolling her neck. My eyes traveled the defined lines of her collarbone and dipped down to her cleavage. I snapped my eyes back up, realizing she'd asked me a question.

"Huh?" I asked, sounding lame even to my ears.

"I said," she began while pushing herself away from the counter and sauntering over to the kitchen table. She sat down before continuing. "Where are you taking me Tuesday?"

Ah. And there it was, just the opening I needed.

"I'll tell you if you tell me another truth," I replied with a smirk. I don't know what it was, but hearing her past was like a fucking drug, and I just wanted another hit. I was addicted to her story, addicted to learning what made her tick. In the beginning, I told myself that it was because I wanted to

protect Lance, but now I wasn't so sure.

"You and these truths. Haven't you had enough?" she asked in a coy voice I could practically feel in my chest.

"No. Tell me," I demanded, hoping she couldn't hear the tension in my voice or how tempted I was to plead for more. I was worse than Lance's ex-girlfriend, the meth addict that stole thousands from him.

"How about this," she began while tracing the rim of her coffee cup with her finger. "You tell me one truth of yours, and I'll tell you one of mine." My first reaction was to tell her to fuck off, but I stopped myself before I could let the knee-jerk response come tumbling out of my mouth.

"Any truth?"

"Any. But I'd really like to know more about your friendship with my brother. You're so...protective. That has to come from somewhere. Either you have a massive crush on your best friend, or you have history. Which is it?"

Of all the things she could have asked, she wanted to know about Lance. Another brick in the wall I'd built up around her turned to dust.

"Lance and I grew up in a wealthy neighborhood. We never wanted for anything. Never really had to try hard to succeed. We had life handed to us on a silver platter—literally. But it wasn't all easy," I offered with a shrug.

"Why not?"

"Because when you have the world, everyone wants to take it from you," I replied before cracking my knuckles. "Your turn."

She sat there for a moment, marinating in my honesty. Based on the sour expression on her face, she didn't like what I had to tell. That was a first. Usually, when everyone heard that we came from money, it made them want to latch on for dear life. That, coupled with my father's career, usually ended with girls that had diamond rings in their eyes.

I expected her to share about her shitty childhood, compare and contrast what was different about my privilege and her suffering, but she didn't. "I once wanted to be a scientist when I grew up."

"What kind?"

"The kind that discovered shit. Maybe work for a pharmaceutical company. After Mama's treatments, I learned real quick that they make good money. I could cure cancer or something," she said offhandedly with a wave of her hand. That didn't sound very convincing.

"And now? What do you want to do now?"

"Tell me another truth, and I'll answer that."

Oh, so she was bargaining now? I felt my chest heat at the challenge. “My dad played professional football.”

“Never really liked the sport. Now tell me something about you, something that isn’t laced with your ego or other people’s achievements.”

“You think I have an ego?” I asked while leaning forward. She matched my stance, propping her tits up on the table as she stared at me for a long while. I had to force myself not to stare down her shirt. I took a sip of my coffee while she mulled over her response.

She then rasped, “I think your ego’s so big it drags on the floor when you walk. Must be hard carrying around all that self-importance on your back.” I spit my coffee out into my palm in shock, looking like a damn idiot in the process. What the fuck had she said? My dick was proudly growing hard at the reference to my ego, but *said ego* was bruised as hell by what she thought of me.

“I’ve always wanted to be a teacher. Your turn,” I sputtered, trying to gain control of the conversation.

“I’ve always wanted to get the fuck out of Texas.”

“That’s not a job,” I quipped.

“That’s not a legit truth. Tell me something juicy, and I’ll spill all my deepest, darkest secrets, Mr. Harris,” she replied in a sultry tone, or at least it sounded sultry and hot to me. My dick stirred in my pants, and I had to resist the urge to tell him to calm the fuck down. Maybe this was just her sleepy voice. Maybe she didn’t feel the same pull as I did.

“Fine,” I gritted. “Lance saved my life in ninth grade. One of Dad’s super fans broke into our house with a gun. Lance was spending the night and tackled the bitch before she could shoot my mom and me.” Flashbacks. Gunshots. Screams. Terror. It all hit me like a punch to the gut. I squeezed my eyes shut, still remembering the sound of her arm cracking when Lance landed on her. What I didn’t mention was that Dad had been sleeping with her. She was a one-night stand that wouldn’t quit. I felt my body grow clammy with sweat. The reminders of everything else that happened afterward broke through me like a freight train. Mom’s addiction to booze. Dad’s yelling. He could deflect with the best of them.

“Decker,” a voice said softly. “Decker!” it screamed. I blinked. Blinked again. Blinked a third time before digging my nails into the table once more. My eyes went back to Blakely, who looked as terrified as I felt. “I want to be a doctor.”

The smoke cleared. The screams faded. “A doctor, huh?” I choked out.

“Don’t think too highly of me. It’s not because some doctor changed my life while Mama was in the hospital. I just think it’s the only profession that’ll fit with my terrible handwriting.”

“Wait, what? You’re picking a dream job based on the fact that your handwriting is bad?” I asked while shaking my head, all previous thoughts fading from existence.

“That’s why it’s a dream job, Decker,” she said before standing and putting her coffee mug in the sink. She didn’t ask about my parents. She didn’t ask about what happened or where my mind went just now. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say she was distracting me. Why the fuck was that? “It’s a dream. I can do whatever I want. Reality, though? I’ll be lucky to keep this job with Rose.”

Yeah. We’d see about that. Suddenly, I started racing through my knowledge of the admission process for the school I worked at. Something about her answer and nonchalance made me determined.

“We still on for Tuesday?” I asked as she walked down the hall, away from me. I didn’t like that she was leaving so soon.

“Yeah, I suppose,” she called back. And when I heard the door to her bedroom shut, it was like all those bad memories came flooding back.

Yep. I was definitely fucked.

Blakely

“*THIS IS* where you wanted to take me?” I asked as Decker’s classic car, an ostentatious man-machine with black paint and shiny chrome, pulled up to a large, modern school. The manicured lawns and white concrete exterior made the building look polished and welcoming, but I was intimidated all the same. A crest hung over the front door boasting its name: Memphis Academy for Math and Sciences, or MAMS for short.

Decker rolled his eyes while he put the car in park before twisting in his seat to stare at me. “I have to get the labs ready for school. I figured I could give you a quick tour of the place, and you can help me get everything set up.”

I felt myself growing angry at another unexpected twist. First, it was the sneaky bribe to get me to tell my secrets. Now, he was taking me to school even though I hadn’t made any decisions yet. Decker bit his lip as he openly observed me, a small smirk kissing his features. He knew exactly what he was doing, and it was pissing me off.

“Who says I even want to help you? Besides, wouldn’t it be weird for a teacher to be spending his Saturday with a prospective student alone on campus?” I taunted. His easy-going expression slipped a fraction, and I watched in amusement as doubt flickered across his dark eyes. Got him.

He pulled his keys from the ignition before opening the door with a confident shove. “Are you insinuating there’s something inappropriate going on?” he asked in a deep voice that I felt in my core. “Because I was just

planning on showing my best friend's baby sister around. I'd hate for you to get any ideas about this." He stood up and slammed the car door shut as I sputtered in disbelief. That *asshole*.

I opened my door and got out with a huff, hating the way light chuckles escaped his lips as I fumbled to stalk over to him.

Once we were both standing in the concrete parking lot, I crossed my arms over my chest in annoyance before addressing him. "I don't have ideas about *this*," I replied in a whisper before gesturing between us. "I was just looking out for you. I don't usually go for older guys, anyway," I added while looking him up and down with scrutiny. Even though I tried to appear nonchalant, my eyes still lingered on his broad shoulders and long, muscular legs.

"Older, huh?" he asked with another chuckle. I hated how self-assured he sounded. Decker looked around the empty parking lot before taking a step closer to me. "I'm twenty-four, by the way. I'm not some old creep preying on high school girls. Besides, regardless of whether I am your teacher or not, nothing would ever happen between us."

I tilted my head to the side while taking another step closer, my breasts brushing against his chest as I invaded his space. "And why is that?" I asked in a husky voice before quickly adding, "Not that I care." I hadn't even realized how turned on I was until my traitorous voice turned sultry and needy. Every inhale had me brushing against him. I could smell his masculine cologne. He was under my skin, and I wasn't sure how that made me feel.

"Nothing would ever happen between us because you're Lance's sister. End of story. Now get your ass inside so we can wash beakers." Decker then spun around and started walking up the steps toward the main entrance. Gaping, I stood there for a little longer to process his words before following after him. Once at the main door, he pulled a key from his pocket and unlocked it before letting us both inside.

The main hallway had burgundy tile and crisp white walls. It opened up into a large cafeteria where a mural of their mascot, a pirate, was painted on the right side. Large, expansive windows covered the hallways, immersing the entire building with light. I could hear in the distance that a vacuum was running, likely the janitorial staff gearing up for the new school year.

Decker started walking toward the left, checking on classrooms and speaking as he went. "This is one of the top rated STEM schools in the

country. All applicants have to take their ACT to be considered for admission. It's a private school, but forty percent of our students are here on scholarship, thanks to some generous donations from elite colleges looking to find their next freshman class. I took the liberty of checking your scores, with Lance's permission of course. You'd be automatically accepted, for sure. We only house grades eleven and twelve, which means this is more of a college preparatory than a full-blown high school. We offer a ton of college courses, and most students graduate with at least sixteen freshmen credits under their belt. Most of our students go on to places like MIT or Caltech."

I'd admit it, the school was top notch. Every classroom had MacBooks on the desks, and high-tech screens in front of the room where whiteboards would've been.

"You looked at my ACT scores?" I asked. Of everything he had said, that little fact was lingering at the front of my mind.

Decker chuckled. I was starting to hate his laughter. Not because it was necessarily an annoying sound. If anything, he sounded downright sexy every time his lips parted and a laugh escaped. I was just tired of him thinking he'd figured me out. Especially since now all I could think about was figuring *him* out. That truth he'd tossed into my lap like a grenade on Sunday had been haunting me ever since. I had questions burning inside of me, but I refused to give in and ask them. It seemed like he was expecting me to bring it up, and for some reason, with Decker, I preferred to do the unexpected.

"Yeah. I looked at them. I also turned them into our admissions department a week before you got here. They were very impressed."

I still remember the day I took my ACT. I had to be up at four in the morning to drive Mama to one of her chemo treatments. I dropped her off at the hospital then raced to the school to take my exam. I ended up being thirty minutes late to pick her up, and she sobbed in my lap, telling me how I was selfish and didn't care about my dying mother.

"I could've done better. I was distracted that day," I said with confidence. I didn't necessarily want to brag, but for some reason it was important to me that Decker knew I was smart.

Decker stopped in front of the classroom door and proceeded to flip through his large ring of keys before stopping at one and sliding it into the lock. "This is the chemistry lab. Since you're a merit scholar, I'm assuming this is where you'll want to spend most of your elective classes. We hire some nearby professors to come in and lead lectures on occasion. We also

have partnerships with local labs that have internship programs.”

He opened the door and stepped inside, but I kept my feet firmly planted in the hallway. “Can you please stop talking like this is a done deal?” I asked before taking a step inside. I was so busy staring at him that I didn’t fully take in the room.

“Can you stop pretending like you’re not going to give in?” Decker whispered as I paused right in front of him. My shoulder tapped his chest, and he leaned over before brushing a long, pale strand of hair behind my shoulder. “I think you’d really like it here if you gave it a chance,” he added.

His lips were so close to my ear that a shudder traveled down my spine at his whispered words. I wanted to believe him. I really did. I was a sane, rational person. I could look an opportunity in the face and know if it was good for me. I hated my self-destructive nature in that moment. It reminded me too much of Mama.

Tearing my eyes from the floor, I twisted to stare at him, praying that my eyes didn’t look as heated as my entire body felt.

“Only if you stop pretending like you know me,” I replied, feeling proud of myself for my confident clap back. When his mouth dropped open in shock, I took that as my cue to enter the lab and start looking around.

It was nice. Every bit of technology occupying the lab tables was highly advanced. It looked more like an expensive pharmaceutical lab than a high school chemistry classroom. Every square inch of this room was filled to the brim with the highest quality testing equipment. And even though I was ashamed to admit it, it really was nice. I would’ve never had an opportunity to even look at some of this stuff back in Texas, let alone work with it.

“Holy shit,” I said before running over to a centrifuge to stare at it. I’d never seen one up close! Right next to it was a fume hood and one of the most expensive microscopes on the market. “And students get to use this?” I asked.

“Under supervision, yes,” Decker replied with a smile.

“You don’t play fair, Mr. Harris,” I replied with a sigh while running my hand over the microscope.

“I know I was kind of an ass when you first got here...”

“Kind of?” I scoffed.

“Don’t make me regret this, punk. This is a good opportunity, Blakely. But don’t get confused; I’m doing this for Lance.” *Yeah. Sure you are, asshole.* There was more between us. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it, but

we were like a chemical reaction boiling over in one of these beakers. I felt hot whenever Decker was near, as well as intrigued by him. Maybe the allure was because he was forbidden, but there was something definitely there.

I took another moment to look around. This really was a phenomenal school. And with the money I'd save by living with Lance, and a potential scholarship, I might actually be able to go to college, maybe even graduate from my undergrad early with a few credits from here. The idea of trusting Lance was starting to sound better and better. So what was holding me back?

"You know I've always loved school. It was my first escape from Mama. The only break I got was in the classroom," I said mostly to myself before spinning around to face him fully. Decker was looking at me with quiet heat, his dark eyes hooded and mouth parted in that sexy way I'd been dreaming about since I met him. What I wouldn't give to know what he was thinking.

"I know the feeling," Decker murmured before letting out an uncomfortable cough. "We can cater your electives to fit pre-med if you are genuinely interested in that," Decker added before biting his lip. "You could also sign up for the kinesiology course, too. We don't have any teams here, but we partner with another high school and attend their football games as a sports medicine elective. Would look good on a college application. I can take you to the department head right now if you'd like? They started a week ago, but they'd be happy to have you."

"Wouldn't I have to be a student to sign up?" I asked, already knowing where this was headed.

"You've been signed up since yesterday, Blakely."

I let out a frustrated exhale, though I wasn't truly mad, not after seeing how kickass this school was. I was tired of getting in my own way. Excuses and stubbornness were Mama's forte, not mine.

"The only reason I'm not pissed at you is because this lab has an RB50 Fluorescence Microscope," I replied with a laugh, and I realized then that it was the first time I'd truly felt excited about the future since before Mama was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer.

"Well let's go talk to Doctor Lucas. We can get you into the sports medicine club."

"Okay," I replied with a wide smile before looking around the room a couple more times. "Thank you," I whispered, too embarrassed to say it any louder and let him hear that I was thankful for his persistence.

Decker strolled over to me with a humble grin. He didn't bask in the fact

that he was right, which surprised me. Most men Mama brought home liked to brag that they knew what was best for us. They'd tell me what to do and get off on thinking they were smarter than me. But not Decker.

"You've been through a lot. You thought you had to do it all on your own because you've never had people to lean on," he whispered. His voice held a tender quality that was both unexpected and invigorating, and oh, how he was right. It was always up to me to keep a roof over our heads and Mama's treatments in check. I'd been taking care of myself for so long that I didn't know any better. "But a part of growing up means seeing the bigger picture. Why just survive, when you can thrive?" The moment was too heavy. His body too close. My breathing too shallow. We were in dangerous waters, and I needed to swim my way out.

"Why does that sound like a cheesy marketing slogan?" I asked, trying to lighten the mood. We were driving toward serious conversation territory, and I wasn't ready to part with more of my honesty.

"Because it is one. I like to save my original genius for the classroom."

We both laughed, and it felt like a weight had been lifted from my chest. Maybe I could take my future by the balls. Maybe I could be more than a waitress or Sharron's daughter. Maybe one day, I could have a lab coat and my own stethoscope. I just hoped I could handle sitting in Decker's classroom without drooling.

Blakely

MY FEET WERE THROBBING. It felt like a thousand bees had stung my heel, making each step burn with pain. I was no stranger to hard work. I could keep up with the best of them with a thankful smile on my face. But Friday nights at Huck-a-poos were fucking killer. It didn't help that my shoes were so worn that I was one rough patch of concrete away from a massive hole. But Lance had been so kind, I didn't want to ask him for new shoes, especially since he'd just bought me a few summer dresses and my new uniform for school. I figured a few more busy nights like this, and I'd have extra to spare for a good pair of shoes.

Besides, Rose kept slipping bags of clothes in my arms after my shift. The latest collection of clothes had a couple pairs of stilettos. Maybe soon she'd get sensible and add a pair of sneakers to the pile.

"You look exhausted, B!" Monica yelled over the live band while shaking her hips. She was carrying a large tray of drinks and smirking at anyone willing to give her a second look. Rose kept me mostly on food orders and left the bartending to people twenty-one and over, which meant I missed out on drunk tips, but the pay was still good—way better than what I made as a custodian. At this rate, I'd save up more than enough over the next year to get out on my own.

"I'm fine," I chided, hating that she was bringing attention to how tired I looked. It wasn't my fault I wasn't getting much sleep lately. I wasn't sure if it was anxiety over starting at a new school, the extended hours at Huck-a-

poos, or the fact that across the hall, a man that had me confused as hell was sleeping. *Off limits. Off limits. Off limits!*

“Well, two tall drinks of water just asked to sit in your section. If you’re too tired to finish out your shift, I’d be more than happy to take them off your hands,” she replied in a sickly sweet tone with a chuckle.

Ignoring her, I turned around to search for who she was referencing, then went tense when my eyes landed on Lance and Decker. Rose was leaning over their table and chatting up my brother, a smirk on her face. I stood there frozen for a moment, praying the world would open up and swallow me whole. Rose must have said something funny about me, because they all laughed, chins tipped back in amusement, then turned their gazes in my direction. Fuck.

Rose lifted her hand and waved me over. Aside from a painfully awkward meditation, I’d managed to avoid my eccentric boss for the most part, and it seemed my luck had finally run out.

I cringed as I walked, dodging bussers and patrons with chagrin. Decker looked sinfully good. His hair was a mess, like he’d been running his hands through it all day. Those thick lashes of his framed dark eyes that left sweltering heat up and down my spine. He had dressed casually in a black shirt that hugged the tight muscles in his chest and those broad shoulders. I practically had to tear my eyes away.

“Blakely, dear, how are you today? Your aura is all over the place; is that a hint of sexual prowess I see? Someone got your eye?” Rose said with a kind smile before patting me on the back.

I wanted to run away and hide in the walk-in freezer until my body turned to ice. I could feel the blush rushing up my skin and turning me hot. “A couple of guys by the bar asked for my number. One of them was kind of cute.” I wasn’t necessarily lying. A hot blond *did* ask me for my number. But the tan line from where his wedding ring used to be was a big turn off.

“What?” Lance asked. I could practically see the invisible forcefield of overprotectiveness washing over him. Fuck. I saw the hint of his bright teeth as they gnawed on his lower lip in irritation.

“It was nothing,” I said with a wave of my hand. The only person I was even remotely interested in right now was completely off limits. Besides, I had more baggage than any man needed. You can’t love others if you don’t love yourself first, and lately I was even struggling to like myself.

“You didn’t tell me Blakely would be wearing *that* when you offered to

hire her,” Decker finally spoke up.

“Are you sexually objectifying one of my employees, Decker? For your next session, I’m taking you to a nudist colony,” Rose said with a *tsk*, making Lance nearly spit out his beer in laughter.

“N-No. I’m not!” Decker stuttered, and to my enjoyment, his entire body went stiff. “I’m just saying, it’s a little revealing.”

“Are you saying this because you’re concerned for her innocence? Cause Blakely is a grown woman—I bet she’s not even a virgin,” Rose added. “Not that there’s anything wrong with that. Besides, she’s eighteen. I support safe sexual exploration. It’s natural.”

“Can we stop talking about my baby sister’s sex life please?” Lance choked out. He was still sputtering on his beer and had to wipe his chin.

Rose scowled in response. “I hate double standards. Men get to act like pigs, but the second a woman spreads her legs, she’s a whore. Blakely, I always keep condoms in my desk, and the back room is open if you need them. Just not on the clock, okay? Oh, and the flavored condoms are in the right drawer.”

My mouth dropped open in shock. Did she seriously just say that to me? I didn’t know how to respond. “Thanks, Rose?” I glanced at Decker and noticed that he looked pissed, and I kind of wanted to piss him off more. “And in my experience, the flavored condoms never really taste as good as they claim,” I added just for fun. He turned the brightest shade of red I’d ever seen.

“I know, right? So misleading.”

And then I couldn’t stop. I just wanted to keep going, keep pissing off Decker. “I had an ex that wanted me to put the condom on with my mouth. I didn’t know they put spermicide on the inside, and I ended up choking on the taste. Worst decision ever. I nearly puked on his dick.” Maybe not the best story to share, considering I didn’t want Decker to think of sex with me and puking went hand in hand, but the words fell out of my rambling mouth before I could stop them.

Rose cocked her head back and laughed until tears were streaming down her cheeks. She kept wiping them away while Lance shook his head. Decker, on the other hand, just stared at me. His dark eyes were assessing as they swept up and down my body. “Oh God, Blakely. That’s priceless.” Rose patted my back.

“So, uh, anyways,” I began while shuffling on my feet. “What can I get

y'all?" I clicked my pen and tapped it against my notepad, wanting nothing more than to disappear.

"Actually, we came here to pick you up. I have a surprise for you!" Lance said excitedly, all previous disgust gone from his face. I hated how my heart fell.

Most of Lance's surprises thus far had been in memory of Mama, and I didn't want another night where I'd have to straddle the line between happiness and reality for his sake. But because I'm a masochist, I plastered a smile on my face and tried to look excited. My false enthusiasm didn't escape Decker though. I glanced at his scowl and could practically hear his whispered demands for truth.

"Oh?" I asked.

Rose interrupted, giving me more time to perfect my pretend happy face. She was weird but helpful at times. "It's true. I'm giving you the rest of the night off. Go. Have fun. And your homework is to do something that scares you tonight. All of you," she said before looking around the table. "I expect a full report in the morning!" And with that, she disappeared down the aisle of busy tables and waitresses, dancing on her feet as she went.

"Something that scares me, huh?" Lance asked as he stared at Rose's ass disappearing down the restaurant. "I think where we're going will be perfect for that."

"A CARNIVAL?" I asked, as Lance maneuvered his Land Rover through a crowded parking lot. In the distance, I could see the bright lights illuminating the sky, I could also hear muffled screams inside the car. I was right in thinking that Lance would want to do something in honor of Mama, and even though I didn't want to think about her, I couldn't help but feel like she would enjoy this.

Mama always loved a good thrill; she did most anything for the adrenaline rush. There was something about rickety thrill rides haphazardly put together and taken apart night after night that got her going. Every time she came home from a carnival, it was like the entire world was lifted off her shoulders. I just wished that it was something she and I could have shared together, but Mama didn't really like being a mother. She didn't enjoy

spending time with me outside of what was obligated.

“Are you excited?” Lance asked while looking at me through the rearview mirror. I was sitting in the backseat and quickly fixed my expression into one of joy. Hopefully, he believed it.

“Oh my gosh,” I began, forcing excitement to bleed through my teeth. “This is awesome! I didn’t even know the carnival was in town.”

“It’s the last night. Figured we should celebrate since school starts on Monday. One last hurrah,” Lance answered while parking. He turned off the car and quickly got out of the driver side, but Decker and I lingered for a moment longer. I was reaching for the door handle, trying—and failing—to feel excited about something that *should* be exciting. Decker’s voice stopped me in my tracks.

“You okay?” he asked. His voice was so low I almost didn’t hear it.

“Yeah,” I choked out, knowing that he could sense the lie in my tone. Decker Harris could read me like a fucking book. I wasn’t sure how he figured me out so quickly, maybe it was the scientist in him, picking apart hypotheses and testing them until they yielded the result he wanted. I wasn’t an experiment; I was a broken soul with half a mind to run.

Pulling on the door handle, I got out without another word, not wanting to sit there and admit that this was hard for me. I struggled with Lance’s obsession with Mama but understood it, too. I just needed to separate my tarnished emotions from the equation so that I could support him.

Once in the parking lot, I looked over at Lance, who was bouncing on the balls of his feet, a wide grin taking over his face as he observed the scene before him. Teenagers were squealing and holding hands beside us. A mom had picked up her sleepy toddler and was carrying her back to a white minivan. A couple of drunk guys ahead were tossing beer bottles on the concrete, the glass shattering on impact.

All I could think about was how much I’d rather be at home in the silence. Despite my job at the bar, I never really liked crowds. I never really understood the appeal of places that buzzed with energy, either. It was another way Mama and I were vastly different. There was nothing but energy crawling all over this parking lot, and it made me want to go home and sleep.

“Let’s go,” Decker said with a sigh. His voice didn’t have nearly the amount of enthusiasm as my brother’s. It seemed he, too, felt uncomfortable.

“Come on, Decker. At least pretend to have some fun. I know if you had your way, you’d spend every night in my loft, but it’s good for you to get

out.” Lance placed a hand on Decker’s shoulder and gave him a meaningful look.

Decker was wearing some form-fitting jeans and a black t-shirt that clung to his body. I hadn’t had time to change out of my work uniform, so I looked a little too underdressed. I guess it didn’t really matter. I agreed with Rose; nobody should be ashamed of showing skin.

“Whatever, Lance,” Decker said with a laugh, though his light chuckles held no humor. “I just don’t want to run into any of my students.”

That statement intrigued me. I wouldn’t want to run into any of his students either. I was dreading the awkward introductions that were certain to come on Monday. At least at my old school, I faded into the background.

Here, I was nervous that I would stand out. Not only was I a brand new student at an elite, yet small, high school. I was also living with quite possibly the hottest biology teacher I’d ever laid eyes on. There would probably be rumors. Teasing. I really needed to talk to Decker about how he wanted to proceed. If we could keep our living arrangements a secret, that would be best.

Lance started fast walking up to the ticket counter and slapped his wallet down. Decker and I lazily followed after him, each of us exchanging conspiratorial glances that said we were both humoring my brother with a thirst for life. Once Decker and I were at Lance’s back, we listened as he proudly ordered three adult tickets. Money was exchanged, and the ticket lady popped her gum, eyeing my brother with interest, but he didn’t notice.

We then went inside the temporary metal gates, and I was assaulted with sensory overload. Loud music from all the machines overlapped one another, combined with screams and laughter. Bright lights filled every inch of space. There wasn’t a single part of this carnival that was sitting still; there were so many moving parts. It was like looking at the embodiment of my mama. Wild, crazy, and loud.

“What should we do first?” Lance asked while rubbing his palms together. He was staring directly at me, waiting for me to make my decision. He had the impression that Mama and I used to attend every carnival together, but that simply wasn’t the case. I didn’t know what to do. Luckily, Decker spoke up, saving me from having to admit I didn’t really know what one did at these sorts of events.

“I say we get a funnel cake,” he began. “We left that restaurant before I got anything to eat, and I’m starving.” I let out a sigh of relief. Funnel cakes I

could do.

We spent a good thirty minutes standing in line to get our food, and once each of us had the deep-fried, sugary concoction in our hands, we devoured them. I guess carnivals weren't all bad. I wouldn't mind braving the crowds if this was the reward.

Decker got powdered sugar on his lips and Lance playfully tossed a napkin at him before pretending to lick his thumb and wipe it clean. They wrestled for a bit and I watched in amusement, enjoying the way they interacted.

Once our stomachs were full, Lance started leading us to the various rides, talking about the thrill of it all. "Let's do this one!" he said before nudging my shoulder and pointing at a monster of a machine that spun its victims around with a vengeance.

"That one?" I asked with a gulp before turning my gaze to Decker, who was eyeing me with mischief. I saw the challenge in his stare before the taunt even escaped his lips.

"What, you scared, punk?" Decker asked, knowing full well that I was prideful and would have to take him up on his challenge,

"Nope. Let's go, brother dear. No puking on my uniform, okay?" I grabbed Lance's wrist and hauled him toward the line, leaving Decker behind. A balding man opened the gate and let us in, and we sat on something that looked like it was held together with duct tape.

"Oh God, this was a bad idea," I mumbled as Lance buckled me in with a chuckle.

"You'll be fine," he said before letting out a yelp.

The monster started. My heart pounded. Round and around we went. The carnival was a blur of colors, and thirty seconds in, I was about ready to throw up the funnel cake I had just eaten.

Safely on the ground, Decker watched and laughed at us. I was certain that my face was turning green. The asshole had the audacity to get out his phone and take a recording just as I was placing a hand over my mouth to hold back the bile rising up. Yeah, I definitely didn't like carnivals.

Round.

Around.

Spinning.

Crying.

Stopping.

The ride halted, but my brain was still swimming in movement, my eyes struggling to focus on one particular thing.

“Oh my gosh, that’s the most fun I’ve ever had. Can we do it again?” Lance asked. I turned to look at him, my brow scrunched in confusion.

“Did you not see me almost puke all over us?” I asked with a light chuckle. His joy was almost infectious, and somewhere between nearly throwing up and screaming my head off, I stopped thinking of carnivals as Mama’s thing and started thinking of them as Lance’s.

“Oh, you survived,” Lance replied playfully before shoving my shoulder. We got off the ride and walked over to meet Decker, who was barely containing his laughter. I wanted to punch him in the dick.

“You alright there, Blakely?” Decker asked, his eyes looking me up and down as I tried to regain control of my equilibrium. I wasn’t sure if my brain was spinning from the ride or the heated stare Decker was giving me. I looked down and realized my collar had slipped during the voracious spinning, showing off the edge of my lace bra. I pulled it back up before answering him.

“Never been better,” I said in a singsong voice. I knew that he wouldn’t have to ask me for my truth. It was written all over my green face.

“I want to do another ride!” Lance said while looking around for his next thrill. I really wanted to please him. Not just because he was letting me live in his house rent free, but because he was genuinely a nice person, and I liked his childlike view of the world. Everything was an adventure. Against my better judgment, I was starting to really like my brother.

“How about we do something a little less... intense?” I offered with a shrug. “There’s a Ferris wheel over there, that looks like fun.” *And less deadly.*

The look on Lance’s face made my heart mend just a little bit more. It was like he was superglue, trying to bring the traitorous broken thing in my chest back together. “Yes!” he exclaimed. “I’ve always wanted to ride a Ferris wheel.”

Decker rolled his eyes, apparently too cool for the hallmark of all carnival rides. “You too, Mr. Grumpy Pants. If I have to get up on a Ferris wheel, so do you,” I said to him.

Walking over to the Ferris wheel, we started chatting with one another then got in line. Decker only provided one word responses and had his arms crossed over his chest. I didn’t really understand why he was being so

difficult. Usually, Decker went along with pretty much anything Lance said. And even though he was particularly broody, he was never down right disagreeable. No, that was a lie. He had been disagreeable when I first showed up in Memphis. Something was up with him, and I wanted to know what.

We had just gotten to the front of the line when Lance let out a curse. “Fuck. My wallet’s not in my pocket. It must’ve fallen out of the last ride.” I winced. That was part of the collateral damage when it came to carnivals. One of the things I didn’t tell Decker—and definitely didn’t tell Lance—was that Mama liked to pickpocket at carnivals. People lost their stuff on the crazy rides all the time.

“Y’all go ahead. I’m gonna see if I can find my wallet,” he said before rushing off. Decker tried to stop him, but the ride attendant for the Ferris wheel opened up the gate and practically shoved us through to our carriage. The metal seat looked more like a cage, with rusted bars closing us in. I could see why couples liked this ride; it gave a semblance of privacy, perfect for a romantic tongue tango while the world passed by below.

But it was definitely not something I wanted to do with Decker Harris. Based on his expression, he was having the same thoughts as me. Neither of us wanted to spend ten minutes on a Ferris wheel together, but it seemed like fate had other opinions.

“Excuse me sir,” Decker began while pulling at the cage door, which was locked. The attendant completely ignored us and grumbled annoyingly before going over to his station.

Trying to lighten the awkward tension, I overcompensated with teasing and humor. “What’s wrong, Decker?” I asked. “Are you afraid of heights?” Decker turned in his seat to stare at me, a scowl perched on his lips as he looked me up and down. The attendant turned on the machine, and we started ascending. And then, something strange happened. Decker’s face drained of blood, turning his skin as white as the sheets on my bed. I watched in fascination as he dug his nails into his thighs. Up, up, up. Sweat broke out on his brow, and he squeezed his eyes shut. When Rose challenged us earlier, I had no idea that this would be the fear he’d face. Part of me wanted to tease him like he’d done to me, but this seemed more than just an aversion to spinning around. He looked scared to death.

I could’ve easily made fun of him. I could’ve easily dangled his fears in front of his face, but for some reason, I didn’t want to.

"I'll tell you a truth if you look at me," I bartered. I knew fears pretty well. Sometimes you just needed to focus on something else until the pain passed. I once knew a guy that told me the only way to get through something scary was to think of something even scarier.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Decker opened his eyes and pivoted his head to look at me. Deep pools of black velvet stared back at me, his face twisted in a grimace. His chest was heaving up and down as he tried to breathe in the air. The fear was clearly evident on his face, and for some reason, I reached out to grab his hand, not realizing where it was placed. The edge of my pinky finger grazed against his crotch, but I decided to ignore my fumble.

"Well," he began.

Letting out a slow sigh, I leaned closer so that all he could see was my face. "When I was a little girl, I used to steal candy from the local convenience store. Not often, but once every couple of months. I felt like such a little thief and was even proud of myself for getting away with it. Last year, I spoke with the owner, and she told me she knew all along. I was so embarrassed."

Decker reached up to tuck a blonde strand behind my ear. His hand lingered on my neck, cupping my face in his palm. "I've been afraid of heights my entire life," he whispered. The cage we were in came to a sudden stop, forcing us to rock back and forth. He squeezed his eyes shut once more, and I sensed that he was about to start hyperventilating.

"Look at me, and I'll tell you another truth," I promised him in a soft voice. He leaned even closer to me, his movements so slow that I almost didn't notice it. In a flash, his eyes opened, and he stared at me. Our noses brushed. Our breath mixed.

"My first kiss was when I was twelve. He walked me home, and it started to rain. We hid under an oak tree, and he clumsily pressed his lips to mine," I whispered, not sure why I was talking about kisses when Decker was so close. He moved even closer. There was almost nothing between us now.

I felt consumed by his presence, and if I were being honest, it scared me. My skin was buzzing, and I wasn't sure if the flopping in my stomach was from the ride or him. I turned my head to escape his orbit and stare below. The lights were blurred flashes of yellows, blues, and pinks. People, like ants, traveled along the sidewalk, oblivious to how the world was at a standstill here on the Ferris wheel.

"Tell me a truth," I asked while turning back to face him. I was pleading

with my expression, pleading with my voice. I squeezed his hand on his lap as he cupped my cheek.

“I’m terrified of heights, but I’m not even thinking about that right now.” Decker’s voice was like warm chocolate melting on my skin. My question was on the tip of my tongue, but he answered before I even had a chance to ask. “Right now, all I can think about is tasting you.” The Ferris wheel jolted, or maybe it was my heart. I couldn’t know for sure.

Something told me that Decker wasn’t the kind to act on impulse. I knew that he would happily sit here with centimeters between our mouths as he told me his desires. But I wanted this. I really, really wanted this. I’d always been a woman of action, so I leaned in and pressed my lips against his.

Fireworks. Fucking fireworks.

He groaned before wrapping his fingers in my hair and tugging at my scalp. I had expected to give him just a taste, but he was determined to feast on me. His lips moved, his tongue invaded my mouth. His teeth nipped at my lips, tugging and pulling as we rocked in our cage.

My hand gripped his upper thigh, digging my fingers in as if testing if this was real, if he was actually tongue fucking me three hundred feet up in the air. A moan escaped my lips. A hand palmed my breast. We rocked back and forth. I scooted closer, and he gripped my hips, pulling me into his lap. *Fuck.*

“We should stop,” I said breathlessly between kisses.

In answer, Decker grabbed my hair and bared my neck to him before licking my salty skin. “This is the only time I’ll ever kiss you, Blakely. You better make it worth it,” he promised. I had a split second of realization. The magic of this moment would crash and burn the moment our feet hit the pavement. So I did what he said. I made the most of our kiss, grinding against his hard cock. I yanked his chin up, drawing his mouth away from my neck as I sank my teeth into his bottom lip. He moved his hands up my shirt until the tips of his fingers were dancing along the edge of my bra. Shivers of pleasure traveled up and down my spine as I writhed on his lap.

“You feel so fucking good,” he growled.

“You’re not too bad yourself,” I replied. That was a lie, he was magnificent.

It was so dark up above, a single light in the cage cast shadows on our moving bodies. I trailed my fingers up his chest before grasping the soft fabric of his shirt, yanking him closer. I wanted more.

The carriage started to move. My heart started to pang. I shifted off his

lap but didn't break our kiss. I could feel with each inch of our descent that our time was almost up. Our frantic kisses turned tender and soft, slow and sweet, and then they fizzled out until they were nothing at all.

The attendant unlocked the cage behind ours. We would be next. The ride was over. "Wanna go again?" Decker asked in a voice so low I almost didn't hear it over the chaos of the carnival. A flurry of doubts and questions hit me full force. Did he like the kiss? Would we do it again?

A kiss like that deserved to be repeated.

"I thought you were afraid of heights," I rasped. The attendant moved to unlock our cage, and Decker gripped my hand before whispering in my ear.

"I think I like Ferris wheels now." His face was soft and tender as he stared at me adoringly, all the hardness of our interactions leading up to this point seemed to fade away. He'd been vulnerable with me. He'd been honest and intimate. I realized that this version of Decker was someone I could easily fall for—and that terrified me.

"Hey, guys! Found my wallet!" Lance yelled from the crowd while waving at us. I pulled away, shame filling my chest.

"No more Ferris wheels," I replied before giving my brother a choreographed smile. No matter the attraction between Decker and me, I wasn't willing to ruin my relationship with Lance or compromise my living situation. And if the bewildered yet tortured look on Decker's face was anything to go by, he felt the same way. It was a thrilling sort of devastation. We both wanted to explore this more but knew we couldn't.

We didn't ride it again.

I think I finally understood Mama's love of carnivals though.

Decker

IT TOOK hours to fall asleep last night. My dick was hard as steel all fucking night, and I refused to jack off while thinking about *her*, so I lay in bed, tortured about all the fucked up things I wanted, knowing I couldn't act on them.

I'd fucked up. Majorly. I should have pulled away the moment she touched her lips to mine, but the fear and honesty of the moment rubbed me raw in a way I still didn't understand.

Blakely was an enigma, a beautiful brightness shrouded with her past. Seeing her up there in the dim lights was something close to perfection, and I hadn't wanted it to stop. So I kissed her. I mean *really* kissed her. She tasted like the funnel cake we'd eaten earlier and hope. It was one of those messy kisses with clashing bodies and roaming limbs, and it chewed me up then spit me out.

And yet, there was a careless danger lurking around every corner. Of all the women in all the world, why her? Was it because she was forbidden that had my dick all worked up? I'd met women I couldn't have in the past, so that wasn't it. Maybe it was my hero complex. Rose had kept harping on that with me in our sessions. She said I needed to feel like I could save myself, so I saved others.

Lance gave till he bled; I liked to jump in front of moving trains. Neither was productive. Blakely was a train derailing my life, and I didn't understand why I was so determined to stand there and let her.

“Hey man, wake up,” a gruff voice said while shoving my shoulder. My eyes opened up, and I jolted when I saw a concerned Lance hovering over me. Shit. Shit. Shit. Shit.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, my voice laced with sleepiness and an edge I couldn’t hold back. I checked my alarm clock on the nightstand and winced when I saw that it was four a.m. My first thought was, *he knew*. That’s why he was here. He saw us, or he noticed the way Blakely and I clammed up the rest of the night. He saw the light bruise on her neck from my teeth or the way my hair was ruffled from her digging, demanding fingers. I’d ruined the best friendship I’d ever had for someone I hardly knew.

“What’s up?” I choked out, my voice gruff from emotion and the lack of sleep.

“It’s Blakely,” he began. My heart hit a brick wall. “I thought I heard the door open, so I went to go check. She’s not in her room. I’ve called her about a thousand times, and she’s not answering. I have the building security searching for her, but she’s not here.”

Shit. Lance looked distraught, and I knew it was my fault. I probably spooked her. I got out of bed, tossing my comforter to the side before grabbing my sweats and putting them on. I was still sleepy, a deep yawn escaping my lips and contradicting the racing in the broken cage of my chest. “Did anything happen last night while I was searching for my wallet? She was quiet when we got home. Why would she leave? Should I call the police?” Lance’s words were racing out of his mouth. His blond hair was standing straight up, likely from sleep and running his hands maniacally through it.

Lance was rambling. He did this when he was freaked out. I watched as he paced the floors, clenching and unclenching his fist as he tried to make sense of it all. I’d seen him do this a number of times. When his parents got in the car accident. When his dog went missing and got hit by a car. When the woman held me at gunpoint. I should have told him, admitted to what happened on the Ferris wheel, but I was a proud bastard and too ashamed to let the truth fall from my lips. *Did she run away because of me?*

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” I lied, not willing to admit what had happened just yet. I wanted to hold on to my best friend just a little longer. Call me a coward, but I needed the facts first. Maybe Blakely just went for a drive. “Let’s call Rose and drive around. I’m sure we’ll find her. Is her car still parked?”

“No. Her car is gone. Shit, Decker, what if I fucked this all up? I can’t lose her...”

“Stop. We’ll find her, okay?” I walked over to brace my hands on my best friend’s shoulders, forcing him to stand still for a moment and look me in the eye. “We will find her and drag her back kicking and screaming if we have to,” I promised. I wasn’t sure if my steel determination was because I wanted to be a supportive friend or because I’d developed my own infatuation with Blakely. It was probably both. Fuck.

I felt like the worst person ever. This was so wrong. One life-altering kiss, and I’d ruined everything. I knew I would never be the same after her pink lips touched mine, but I hadn’t expected my life to crash and burn so quickly.

I laced up my tennis shoes and put on a shirt before jogging after Lance to the parking garage for his Land Rover. If she was in her car, we would need to cover more ground. “Should we take two cars?” Lance asked. We probably should, but I knew how Lance got when he was stressed. His entire body would shake, and he couldn’t focus on one thing long enough to handle his business. It’s why we worked so well together.

He was vibrant and erratic in chaos, like the ocean. I was the mountain. Tall, proud, and unmovable. When he’d saved my life, he jumped on impulse. I was busy trying to calculate the odds of our survival.

“No. Let’s ride together. It might take both of us to bring her back,” I replied.

“Right. Right. Okay, cool, cool, cool,” Lance said, his fingers shaking as he started the car.

I dialed Rose’s number, but it went straight to voicemail. “Hey, Rose, Blakely ran off. If you see her, can you call me please? Thanks.”

“Why do you think she left?” Lance asked as I hung up the phone. We drove slowly down the nearly empty street, eyeing every late-night pedestrian and homeless person sleeping on the street with unease. “I am totally putting a tracker on her phone after this.” It’s like he was reading my mind. It didn’t seem like enough, though. Maybe we should put a video camera by the door, too. Motion sensors. A guard dog. I gritted my teeth. How could she just leave? Why?

“It could be nothing. Maybe she was craving ice cream or something. Girls are weird,” I lied. Lance could always tell when I was lying. He knew all my secrets. All my shame. All my regrets. It’s why I felt so conflicted

about keeping my kiss with Blakely from him. What the fuck was wrong with me? A lifetime of friendship for one girl I didn't even know? My cock and I needed to have a serious conversation about keeping shit in check.

"Don't say shit just to placate me. Think."

"I-I don't know," I lied again. He eyed me.

"Did she say anything at the carnival? She seemed like she was having fun." My best friend looked on the edge of a breakdown. I watched him grip the steering wheel, his eyes wild and frantic as he looked back and forth on the dark Memphis streets. I debated offering to drive, but he would have taken it personally. Lance needed to feel like he was doing something. He was a fixer.

"Look, I need to tell you something," I whispered before settling in my seat. Blakely might kill me, but Lance deserved the truth—or at least the amount of truth I was willing to give him.

"Blakely's mom wasn't very good to her. She tells you the fluffy shit because she wants you to have something good to hold onto, but man, she's been through some fucked up stuff." We both let my statement permeate the air for a moment, weighing us both down. I breathed in once. Twice. Blakely didn't want Lance knowing just how bad it was, but maybe it wasn't her call to make.

"I got that impression," Lance gritted before turning right on a street and parking. Leaning forward, he braced his head against his hands, and I watched him take in deep breaths before speaking again. Was this how he was when he saved my life? Shaky but determined? Did he expand his chest with oxygen, then take the leap? I was such a shitty friend. I needed to breathe, not fuck up his rocky relationship with Blakely. "I'm not an idiot. I spoke with her social worker. I know she's bullshitting me."

Well, that surprised me. Lance was a hopeless optimistic. It's why people took advantage of him so easily. "You knew?" I asked.

"I'm more surprised you knew," Lance replied. "You've been against her being here since day one. And I get it. Some wayward sister comes out of the woodwork, and you want to protect me. This isn't some survivor's guilt bullshit. I genuinely want a relationship with my sister. Anyone that can put up with what she's endured is someone I want in my life. Not once has she asked for anything. I practically had to beg her to trust me. And now I can't help but feel like I'm doing everything wrong."

I wanted to tell him that it was me doing everything wrong, but the words

were lodged in my throat. I refused to let them break free. “So if you knew her ma was a piece of shit, why try to bring that bitch back to life with all these gestures?”

Lance let out a sigh. “I’m not trying to bring her back. I have an amazing mom. Maybe it’s wrong, but I didn’t feel anything when I heard my birth mother was dead. I don’t have grief for a woman I never knew. She gave me a better life by giving me up. I’m sad at the time I missed with Blakely. I’m sad she didn’t have the life I did. Getting her to talk about herself was like pulling at splinters. She seemed to want to give me something in return for staying here rent free, so when she gave me that photo, all I saw was a way in. I was hoping we could recreate all the bad shit in her life and make it something positive and...ours.”

It all suddenly made sense. The roses. The truth. The carnival and photo. It was never about Blakely’s mom. I was so busy peeling back Blakely’s layers that I didn’t stop to check in with Lance. He was obviously scrambling to make this work. He’s been doing everything he could, and I was too busy focusing on myself to realize what was going on. It was a misguided approach, but it made me feel proud.

“Why not instead of trying to change past hurts, you create new memories? Take her to work. Ask about *her*. You’re bonding over something she wants to forget. The only way to start something new is to stop reliving the past. I get that you were grasping for straws in the beginning, but she’s opening up, or at least I thought she was.”

I was pissed that she left. Not for the same reasons as Lance, obviously. But I didn’t like how she ran mere hours after something so...so...so...

Intense. Her kiss had awakened something within me outside of the wrongness of what we did. I’d never felt so alive. It was one of those kisses you could feel everywhere. And even if it couldn’t happen again, I was still moved by it.

Lance nodded. “You’re right. And I fully plan on doing that. How do you know about this?” he asked, and I knew I’d have to tread carefully. He was eyeing me with that look, the one that could read between the lines.

“We talk sometimes. I pull the information out of her. Don’t take her to a dance hall,” I blurted out, wanting to change the subject with something that would shock Lance so he’d stop prodding me. I was such a major disappointment. I needed to own up like a man and not cheapen my obsession with smoke and mirrors; I just didn’t know how.

“Why?”

“Last time her mom took her to one, she got felt up. She hates it.”

Lance gritted his teeth in rage. “And carnivals?”

I let out a shaky breath. “Not really a fan of those either, though she really seemed to have a good time last night.” I swallowed. Well, I hoped she’d enjoyed last night. No. No, no, no.

No.

“Fuck.” Lance flexed his muscles before picking up his phone and calling her again. It went straight to voicemail. “Look, I appreciate you trying to help with Blakely, but I’ve got this. I want her to feel safe opening up to me. We’ve had each other’s backs my entire life, but I want you to take a step back. You seem too invested.”

The lines were blurred, and his words were seemingly innocent, but I heard the underlying interpretation: Stay away from Blakely. He placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed while peering intently in my eyes. Could he see the secrets in my gaze?

“You’ve always had my back, Decker Harris. Lord knows you’ve scared off enough of my shitty partners to create an army of exes. But this time, I’ve got it. I don’t need saving from my sister. I want you to keep your distance.”

“Why?” I blurted out, kicking myself the second that single syllable word escaped my lips.

“Because I’m a selfish asshole that wants to be the person she runs to. Our relationship is rocky, and I don’t want to feel like I’m competing for attention with you. She’s young, and I’m not stupid. I’ve seen the way she looks at you. It’s probably a crush that has her opening up.” I could feel the blood draining from my face. “I know you’d never do anything, but sometimes you don’t realize how much girls drool over you.” He chuckled.

I could feel every cell in my body screaming.

“*I am* hard to resist,” I replied with a playful laugh, trying to hide the panic in my chest. “And with school starting soon, it’s probably better. I don’t want any rumors starting. You’re right. She’s been through a lot and might misinterpret my kindness for something else.”

Lance placed a hand on my shoulder, and I turned to look at him. “I know you were getting close to her to help me, but I’ve got it. We can’t always fight each other’s battles for one another. Thank you, but tonight has brought me some clarity. I’ll do better about connecting with her and not using you as a buffer.”

I glanced out the window, staring at the night sky and trying to think of where she could have gone, guilt barreling through me once again. I was running through options when I spotted a white Toyota parked at a twenty-four hour diner nearby. “Wait, is that her car?” I asked while nudging Lance.

He leaned over me to get a better look, and I watched as his eyes widened. “Yes! That’s it. I’m going to park behind it so she can’t run. Let’s go drag her back to the apartment.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Blakely

FRANK STEWART LOOKED GOOD. Prison life suited him, I suppose. He had a few more tattoos, a few less pounds, and a ton more wrinkles. Bald and intimidating, Dad looked every bit the hardened criminal that he was.

I had my fingers wrapped around a hot coffee mug while I stared at him. I didn't even know he was getting out, let alone driving all the way to Tennessee to see me.

I liked Dad. He'd made bad choices, but he wasn't all bad.

"Thanks for meeting with me. I know it's early, but my buddy got me a job at a shipping yard nearby, and I have to be there in two hours. I wanted to see you." His voice was rough and sounded like he smoked a pack of cigarettes a day.

"Of course. I wish you would have told me you were coming sooner."

"I wasn't sure I could make it work. Had to coordinate with my parole officer. I figured you've had enough hope and disappointment to last you a lifetime." I went silent, spinning my spoon in my cup. Unable to sleep, I'd spent all night tossing and turning; Dad's call didn't even wake me up. I was happy he was here, but I didn't know what this meant for me—for us.

"You got out early," I observed before smiling at him. "I'm proud of you. And you came here? Got a job? Found me, too."

I reached out to grab his hand, squeezing a bit with sincerity. The world saw anger and a dark past when they looked in his eyes, but I saw a man that made one fatal mistake and had to pay ten years for it. I didn't get to see him

as often as I would have liked, but he wrote me emails and called when he could. We didn't know much about one another, but we weren't strangers either. We were just a couple of people bonded by blood and a mutual hatred for the woman that put him behind bars.

"I heard about Sharron. Sorry, kid. I'm sure that was hard for you to deal with on your own," he murmured before shoveling eggs into his mouth. I knew there was no sadness in his words for Mama. His only grief was for what I had to go through. It made me feel better.

"I'm better now," I replied.

"I see that. Living with your...brother? I didn't even know that Sharron had another kid, but then again, I was in and out of her life. She was like a roach I couldn't kill."

"Is it possible he's yours?" I asked. The thought hadn't occurred to me. Lance had never asked who his father was, and it hadn't come up in conversation.

"I didn't meet your mom until three years before you were born. He seems like a good guy for taking you in, but no, he's not mine. Probably for the best. I can barely take care of one kid." His head bowed in shame, and I wanted to give him a big hug of reassurance.

"You're here. We'll figure out this whole father-daughter shit on the way. I'm stronger than I look, old man. I get that from you."

"Stop, you'll make me cry. And I'm not old. I'm refined, like good whiskey. I'm off the bottle, by the way. Guess prison helped get me clean, but I don't touch the shit now that I'm out."

"That's awesome, Dad," I replied with warmth.

"So tell me about you, and Lance, is it?"

"He lives near here, and I have a nice bedroom at his loft. It's the first time I've felt safe in a while. It's also nice to not worry about bills or chemo. I'm starting at this really cool magnet school for geniuses."

"No shit? That's awesome, kid. You were always too smart for your own good. There were days I wasn't sure if you'd lead the country or a gang in prison."

"Why not both?" I replied with a wink.

Dad tilted his head back and laughed so loud the entire diner turned to stare at us. "Well, let me know if you have science fairs or whatever it is geniuses do. I'll come, okay? And if you need to leave Lance's house for whatever reason, I don't have much, but I do have a futon and some good

opportunities on the horizon. I'm man enough to admit that you'd probably be happier with your brother, but the offer stands. Day or night, okay?"

"Okay, Dad."

We continued to eat, joking and catching up while veering the conversation away from Mama or the time lost. I was really glad that Dad followed me out here. He seemed to have his life back on track. Maybe Lance would like to meet him.

The hour passed quickly, and too soon it was time to say goodbye. I paid the bill, purposely ignoring the brief flash of shame crossing Dad's features. I knew there would be a day when he could pick up the tab, but I was happy to do it now. We both got up, and Dad wrapped me up in a giant hug, emotion bubbling up in his chest and flowing out through his gruff, choked words. "Thanks for seeing me, kid. I'm here for the long haul, okay? I appreciate the chance to be in your life. I don't..." His words broke off, his emotions too strong. I watched as my badass, larger-than-life father wiped a stray tear from his eye before crashing me to his chest once again. "I don't know what I did to deserve your forgiveness and kindness, but I'm so damn thankful. I won't let you down again."

I was just about to pull away and offer him a drive to work when a hard, unrelenting voice stopped me in my tracks.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Decker asked. Dad gripped me tighter before glowering at Lance and Decker. Pulling away, I turned to face the two, broody men. They looked like they'd just rolled out of bed. Lance's eyes were wired as he looked at my dad, confusion and disappointment on his face.

"What am I doing? What are *you* doing here?" I asked before crossing my arms over my chest. Lance at least had the decency to seem confused by my change in direction, but Decker held still, looking at my father up and down like a predator.

"You disappeared at four in the morning. We thought you ran away or were abducted. You can't just leave without letting us know," Lance said, and I felt my father relax beside me.

My heart softened a bit, but the tender moment disappeared the moment Decker's voice broke through. "Didn't realize you were meeting a fuck buddy," he growled. Dad squared up, fists flexed like he was about to land himself back in prison. I placed a hand on his chest before turning my attention back to Decker.

“Decker, meet my dad, Frank Stewart. Dad, meet asshole and my brother, Lance.”

Simultaneously, Lance relaxed and Decker paled, realizing his disgusting mistake. “Shit, I’m sorry, Blakely. We were just so worried. It’s nice to meet you, sir,” Lance said in a cautionary tone, giving Decker the side-eye before walking forward and stretching his hand out for a handshake. He searched Dad’s expression like he was looking for something, and it confused me until my father responded.

“Nice to meet you, Lance. I’m not your father, by the way. Met Sharron three years before Blakely was born,” Dad replied lamely while shaking Lance’s hand.

“Oh, yes, of course,” Lance replied, a blush on his face. “Are you h-here to take Blakely?” I stared at my brother, completely and utterly shocked at the anxiety pouring from his pores. His eyes were wild, his head pelted with sweat.

“Nah. I’m still getting on my feet. Just got out of prison for killing a man.” My father gave Decker a pointed stare, likely trying to scare him.

“Shut up, you robbed a store,” I replied with an eye roll. Apparently, this wasn’t nearly as calming on Lance’s nerves because he gulped.

“Well, you should come over for dinner sometime.”

Dad dragged his eyes back from Decker to stare at my brother again. “Sounds like a plan.” Dad then turned to wrap me up in one more hug. “See ya, kid. Love you. Give the geniuses hell,” he whispered into my hair before turning away and walking out of the restaurant.

Once Dad was fully out of sight, I turned a snarl at Decker and Lance. “Why are y’all here?” I asked in a huff before walking past them and out of the restaurant. People were watching, and I wanted to go home to get a couple hours of sleep until my shift at Huck-a-poos.

Decker and Lance followed after me, all the way to my car. When they didn’t answer my question, I spun around to face them. “Do you need a ride or something?”

“You can’t just leave without telling us,” Decker gritted before cracking his knuckles in aggravation. It made my eye twitch.

“Sure I can. You never set rules about where and when I could go,” I countered.

“Well, maybe we should,” Lance piped up, his voice cautious but...sad. “Look, I just want to be informed of stuff like this. I know you aren’t used to

telling someone what you're up to, but I was worried sick.”

For the first time tonight, I actually felt bad. He wasn't wrong. I never had anyone to care about me, let alone anyone that cared enough to want to know what I was up to. My eyes slid over to Decker, and I was met with sharp, dark eyes. What the fuck was his problem? It was an honest mistake.

“I'm sorry. He called out of the blue. I'm as shocked as you are that he's here. But I haven't seen him in years. I didn't want to wake you up or bother you.”

“We thought you'd run away, Blakely,” Lance whispered. “I want to know what's going on in your life. I want to support you. I don't care what time it is, just let me know first, okay?”

I let out a shaky exhale before responding. Decker took a couple of steps forward until he was standing shoulder to shoulder with Lance, looking like an imposing bodyguard. “I like it here, okay? I was hesitant at first, but I don't have plans to leave soon. I want to go to school. I want to get on my feet the right way and...I want to get to know you better, Lance.”

“And I want to know you!” he rushed out. “Look, I know you've been telling me a lot about our mother, and I really appreciate it. But from now on, I want to know about you, and I want to include you more in my life, too.”

His confession shocked the hell out of me. All this time, I thought the only reason Lance was keeping me around was because of some deep-seated need to understand the mother that gave him up. I knew he was kind and compassionate—maybe even too much. But I thought all I had to offer was lies about Mama. What would he do if he learned about me and found out I wasn't someone worth keeping around?

“Don't look so scared. You're my sister,” he began before placing a hand on my shoulder. “I missed out on knowing you, too. But the truth is, she's dead and you're not. So let's try and make new memories now. Trust me, and in turn I'll trust you. If everything weren't so new, I probably wouldn't have jumped to such scary conclusions tonight. I think the more we get comfortable with one another, the better off we'll be.”

I nodded. “Fair enough.”

Lance let out a sigh of relief, and once again I felt bad for worrying him needlessly. I'd make an effort to remember that someone actually gave a shit in the future. Decker still looked pissed, like he had unresolved anger regarding what happened brimming under the surface. If he had any opinions about my dad and his past, I'd have to set things straight.

"Good, good. How about I go get us some coffee? I know you have to be at work in a couple of hours and must be exhausted. What's your favorite?"

I smiled. He really would be making an effort to know me. "The sweetest, most sugary concoction you can find. I'm talking two thousand calories a sip."

Lance let out a tired laugh. "As you wish."

"I'll ride home with Blakely. I want to get some sleep," Decker replied in a rush. Oh hell no. I was not about to sit in a tiny car with him. Not after what happened at the carnival and certainly not with his sour expression stuck somewhere between kissing and punishing me.

"Did y'all coordinate this ahead of time? Something tells me you want to make sure I actually go home."

Lance bloomed a bright blush, and Decker gave an unforgiving scowl.

I opened my mouth to scold them both, but Lance interrupted me. "Perfect," Lance replied with a clap of his hands, ignoring my question. "I'll meet y'all at the loft." Spinning on his heels, Lance headed toward his Land Rover but paused to give Decker a meaningful look that had my stomach plummeting. Did he know?

Decker nodded, which seemed to be enough for Lance because he smiled at me, then got in his car, which I'd just noticed was parked diagonally behind mine, blocking me in.

"Your idea?" I asked while nodding at the SUV.

"Get in the car, Blakely," he growled. So that's how he wanted to do things? Fine.

I got in Roxy and slammed the door shut. If I had automatic locks, I would have locked Decker out just to fuck with him, but alas, I didn't. He shoved his giant frame into the compact passenger seat without a word as Lance drove off.

"You're not going to leave because of what happened between us, right?" was the first thing that escaped his pursed lips, confusing me.

"That's why you look like you have a stick shoved up your ass?" I asked while putting the key in the ignition and turning on my car. It took two tries but roared to life with a wheeze.

"Answer my question," he gritted. Bossy bastard.

"No. I'm not leaving because we had a lackluster kiss on a deathtrap. It meant nothing, it *means* nothing. You can sleep with a guilt-free conscious, because you aren't the first kiss I've ever had, and you won't be the last." I

backed out of my parking spot and headed back to the loft, feeling like a lying liar pants because it was far from nothing. It was something. It was one of those kisses you'd be thinking about on your deathbed. A magical touch that had me wet and aching whenever I thought about it, but I sure as fuck wouldn't be admitting that to Decker. What was the point? His loyalty was to my brother, and if I wanted to build a relationship with Lance and complete my school year in Memphis, I needed to play the role I was meant to play.

He let out a groan before thrusting his hands through his hair. "That's how you want to play this?" he asked.

"I didn't realize there was any other way. You obviously regret it. You care about Lance. It was nothing, Decker. Absolutely nothing."

"It wasn't nothing, and you know it," he whispered while leaning over the center console to brush his lips against my ear. His touch sent my body into a frenzy, making me worry that I would drive into oncoming traffic.

"What are you doing?" I gritted, breathing in his smell. He placed his hand on my leg, curving his palm against my inner thigh as he spoke again.

"Proving that it wasn't nothing," he rasped.

"Why?" I was squirming in my driver's seat, feeling hot and needy but knowing it couldn't work. This could never work. I barely knew Decker, and what little I did know was that anything between us would make him resent me. I didn't want to tear apart his friendship. I already felt like I was upheaving Lance's life by moving to Memphis; ruining their friendship would be too much. Decker was loyal to a fault to Lance. I refused to be anyone's dirty little secret or regret. I spent my entire life with someone that resented me, and I would rather die than experience that again.

"Because I know you want me, Blakely. It's written all over your face. I can practically feel your heat in my palm."

"So you're good with your hands," I said before removing one of my clenched fists from the steering wheel to shove him away. "But it doesn't mean anything. Are you hot? Sure. I'm wet right now thinking about all the things your talented fingers could do while I drive us home. But I won't be acting on it."

Decker sucked in a gasp before pulling back to his seat. I noticed how he braced his hands under his thighs, as if forcing himself not to touch me. "Good. I was testing you," he choked out. Guess we both were terrible liars.

"Bullshit. You want me, too. But it's not going to happen. You love Lance like a brother. You're about to be my goddamn teacher. If you're

insistent on having the awkward...*talk* about what this means, then you got it. It's nothing. It will be nothing. It'll lead to nothing. I'm not some immature girl you have to worry about developing a crush on you."

I'd hoped that my little speech would make Decker relax, but he was still riled up. "Nothing," he replied.

"Yup."

"Glad we're on the same page."

My heart panged at his easy agreement. Despite it all, I wanted him to fight for me, as selfish as that sounded. I quickly changed the subject so as not to dwell on the pain wracking my chest. "So is this the part where you try to scare my dad off? Say he's some hardened criminal after Lance's money?" I asked.

"No. He proved he didn't give a shit about Lance when he said he wasn't his father. If he wanted his money, he'd have tried to push that. I actually think it's admirable he came here." Well, color me shocked. "Don't look so surprised. If he does anything suspicious, I'll handle it. But for now, he seems like a protective dude."

Decker's earlier words rang in my head. I had to fight back a smile as I spoke. "And for the record, gross about the fuck buddy comment." Decker paled. That's right, asshole. I hadn't forgotten that jealous outburst. "I've dated older men, but he's twice my age. Give me some credit." I shivered for effect.

"You've dated older men? I find that hard to believe. Last we spoke, you said you didn't go for *old guys*, remember?" Decker asked, and it wasn't the question I was expecting.

"I was ruffling your feathers, and obviously it worked. When you're forced to grow up at a young age, the immature bullshit loses its appeal. I prefer a man who knows what he's doing." I pulled into the parking garage at Lance's loft and turned off the car, exiting with that little bit of information ringing in the air between us. Just because there would never be anything between us didn't mean I couldn't fuck with him.

"There's one more thing, then I promise the talk can be over," he choked out as I paused at the elevators.

"What?"

"Lance thinks you might have a crush on me." He looked like he wanted to say more and pursed his lips, like it was the only thing keeping the truth back. I had half a mind to kiss him just to force his mouth open, but decided

against it.

Great. Just fucking great. “And?”

“And he wants me to stay away.”

Well, that was an easy enough fix. “Sounds good to me. No more Ferris wheels. No more lingering stares. No more truths.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, then spoke again, conceding, “No more truths.”

Blakely

MY SCHOOL UNIFORM was typical and unoriginal. I got dressed like the violent skeptic I was, pretending my lip gloss was armor, while hiding a pocket knife in my knee-high leather boots given to me by Rose. The standard uniform consisted of a plaid skirt paired with a button-up shirt that was too tight and clung to my curves.

The strangely sexualized material was too thick for this Memphis weather and scratched my skin, the coarse fibers irritating and claustrophobic. It looked straight out of a depressing school-girl porno. I half expected myself to start begging Decker to spank me as I lay across his desk.

I looked sexy in a creepy sort of way, but it was not my style. I added a little personality to the ensemble with boots that made my legs seem longer. I also made it a point to brush out my hair with cautious strokes and apply mascara.

It was the longest I'd ever taken to get ready.

If I was going to be the new student, I wanted to look beautiful. Might as well roll with the inevitable attention I'd get. Mama and I had moved a couple of times. I knew the drill.

Once, she dated a wealthy judge that lived in the Dallas suburbs. We moved into his house and lasted a total of six weeks before everything went to hell. The students there were terrible, always taunting me and calling Mama and me a two-for-one whore's bargain. I spent most nights crying in my room until one day, I snapped.

I beat up a rich bitch that wouldn't let up. We were kicked out of his house the next day. Judge Gray couldn't handle a stain on his reputation. Apparently, a live-in hooker was fine, but her bratty child was too much. Mama blamed me for ruining the cushiest living situation she'd had in years.

It spoke volumes about her priorities.

After making sure I was ready for battle, I went out into the kitchen for breakfast and saw an omelet waiting on the table for me. "Morning! Happy first day of school!" my brother said, drawing me out of the tornado of self-pity and anxiety I was sucked up in. I felt like a car with its metal frame wrapped around a light pole. I guess in this scenario, he was the rescue team pulling my suit of skin off the pavement.

Lance was dancing around the kitchen, all brightness and energy. He snapped his towel against the wooden cabinets as he moved. "You made me an omelet?" I asked with a small smile, and I could practically feel the chip in my pessimistic armor grow bigger. It was the first morning I hadn't had to choke down pancakes since getting here, aside from the breakfast Decker made me.

"Decker mentioned you might like it," Lance replied cryptically. Oh, did he now? I wondered what else they liked to talk about. I thought Mr. Harris was supposed to keep away from me, not leak my secrets from the bottom of his Styrofoam coffee cup.

"Where is he, by the way?" I asked.

I wanted to see him, but I didn't.

I wanted reassurance about today, but he likely wouldn't give it.

"Probably waiting until the last minute to wake up. Decker is grieving the end of summer."

"That makes two of us," I replied with a chuckle. Grief was such an odd emotion. I could feel sorrow for the end of summer but couldn't bolster enough sadness to cry over Mama.

I gave Lance a brief smile before sitting down at the table and taking a bite of the omelet. It was delicious. He'd even added bell pepper, my favorite.

Lance leaned on the kitchen island, his sleeves rolled up and his hair still a mess from sleep. "You excited?" he asked. I chewed the food in my mouth until it turned to liquid sludge, mulling over my emotions before responding to him.

"Yes. I'm nervous though. It was easy to be the smartest kid in class at my old school—there wasn't much competition. Here? I might not be able to

keep up.” That wasn’t so hard.

Since the night I left to visit my father, Lance had been making more of an effort to ask about me and not Mama. I wasn’t sure what I preferred. In some ways, lying about Mama had kept him at a distance. I’d been crafting verbal shields around myself since I could talk. I was starting to realize that it was another way I tried to distinguish myself from Mama. People paid pennies for her soul. I never wanted to feel cheap.

Lance smiled like he understood my fears. “You’ll do great. And if you need extra help, I can tutor you. Decker can even point you toward student resources,” Lance replied.

“What are you volunteering me for?” a rugged voice asked. I turned to stare at Decker and nearly dropped the steaming cup of coffee in my hands. He looked damn good and was wearing a suit that should be fucking illegal. It was navy and complemented his tan skin and dark, haunted eyes. His hair was still wet from his shower, and he ran a hand through it with a yawn before sitting across from me. Lance set a plate and a cup of coffee in front of him before patting him on the shoulder.

“I was just telling Blakely that you’d help her find a tutor if she feels like she’s falling behind,” Lance said in an overly sweet tone. “’Cause you’re just so helpful and kind, right?”

Decker swallowed. “I can always tutor her. We are living under the same roof, after all.”

Lance’s eyes flickered between us as he coughed. “Right. Well, I’m sure she wants to keep things as separate as possible. Can’t be easy being the new girl when your teacher is your roommate,” my brother replied.

“Right,” Decker replied. “I won’t be your roommate much longer anyways. The house is ahead of schedule.”

“Right,” I echoed.

“Oh! I have something for you,” Lance exclaimed at me before fleeing the room. I heard his bedroom door slam shut and shuffling in his room.

Decker mumbled something resembling, “He’s way too hyper in the mornings,” before taking a sip of his scalding coffee. Steam kissed his skin, where I wished my lips were.

“I hope he hurries. I need to leave soon to stop at the front desk and pick up my schedule,” I said before taking another sip of my brew.

Decker glanced at the clock. “We don’t have to be there for at least thirty minutes, and I haven’t even eaten yet,” he groaned.

“Oh...” I began while standing up to take my plate to the sink. I felt every nerve ending in my body light up with energy, and it wasn’t until I turned back to face the table that I realized Decker was staring at me with his mouth hanging open.

“Is something wrong, Mr. Harris?”

“No. Nothing is wrong. Why are you wearing knee-high stilettos to school? Your feet will be killing you by the end of the day,” he said before sweeping his gaze up and down my legs. Grunting, he turned his eyes to a particularly dull spot on the wall, as if forcing himself to look away.

“I like wearing heels. Gives my power stance that extra oomph. Rose suggested it,” I replied with a wink, though he was so busy staring at the wall that he didn’t see it. I wanted to tell him that these shoes made it easier to hide my knife, but I refrained.

“I bet you one truth that you fall on your face before the end of the day,” Decker challenged.

“I thought we weren’t doing truths anymore,” I whispered back, and the room fell utterly silent at my statement. I couldn’t even hear Decker’s raspy breathing or the traffic outside. Decker’s eyes sliced back at me, and I felt like a giant bubble of gum that had just popped. All the air deflated out of me at the pained look in his eyes.

“Maybe,” he began before looking at Lance’s bedroom door and back at me. “We can keep the truths?” His offer was nothing but a whisper, but I felt the echo of his plea like it was a shout directly in my ear.

“I guess I’ll have to fall, first.”

Decker smiled. “You will. Maybe I should let you walk to school to up my chances, hmm?”

“I’d prefer to drive myself, by the way.”

“In Roxy? I doubt she’ll make the ten-minute drive. Why?” Decker asked.

“Lance has a point. I don’t want other students knowing that we live together. I’m hoping to stay invisible at this school, and arriving with my ultra hot biology teacher is bound to start some rumors.”

“You think I’m *ultra hot?*” His question was paired with a smirk, and I realized my mistake.

“You know you are. This isn’t news, Mr. Harris.”

“Why do you keep calling me that?” he asked.

“Just testing it out, feeling the roll of it on my tongue.” Said tongue rolled

out to taste my bottom lip, earning a nearly inaudible moan from Decker.

Lance's door opened, ending our little battle of banter. I turned my attention to my brother and plastered a smile on my face. "Here you go, Blakely!" he said excitedly before handing me a haphazardly wrapped package. I took it from his outstretched hands and stared at the pink wrapping paper with uncertainty as Lance bounced on the balls of his feet.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's like you've never seen a present before! Open it!" Lance instructed. I knew his words were meant to be teasing, but he had no idea how true it was. Mama didn't get me gifts, didn't think far outside of her own selfish needs. I'd had presents before; I wasn't completely neglected. But it was always last-minute, clearance rack clothes in her size instead of mine.

I tore through the paper and gasped at what I saw inside. It was a brand-new leather messenger bag with a designer label I didn't recognize but knew probably cost a small fortune. "Lance, you didn't have—"

"You needed a bag for all those books you'll be carrying. Figured you should go in style, okay?"

"It's too much."

"It's not."

"You're too nice to me," I choked out, relentless emotions bubbling up within me as I tried to swipe at the moisture brimming in my eyes. I didn't want to sound pathetic, but thoughtful gestures were a foreign concept to me.

Lance walked forward and wrapped me up in an awkward hug, my new bag held between us. "Knock 'em dead today! If anyone gives you trouble, text me or Deck—Mr. Harris, okay?" he said with a laugh.

"Okay," I replied before stepping away. I was about to go to my room and load up my new backpack when I caught Decker's expression looking back at me. It was a mix of protectiveness and awe. I nearly fell over myself at the sight.

"We'll leave in thirty minutes," he choked out once he realized I was staring. Stupid, stupid girl. Lance was standing right there as I ogled Decker. I needed to get this shit locked down. I didn't even have the energy to argue with him anymore; I just needed out of the kitchen.

"Okay," I replied before disappearing into my room. I quickly dumped out my old backpack with patches on the fabric and stains on the straps, wondering how I went from being the girl with all she owned on her back to being this.

DECKER COMPROMISED by dropping me off a block away from MAMS, smirking at my heels as he pulled away. Little did he know, I preferred the stilts. I was my mother's daughter, after all. I had every intention of winning this bet. I had to keep my truths close if I wanted to keep the boundary between us clear.

I walked up to the front steps of the large school as students loitered around the front lawn, catching up and laughing with one another. Everyone seemed sectioned off in groups and oblivious to me. The coiled venom in my chest relaxed a bit when I realized no one was paying the new girl any attention.

Yes. Just how I liked it.

Maybe my past, coupled with every television show or book I'd ever read, had conditioned me to believe that the new girl at a new high school would be the center of attention, but I was surprised that not a single soul noticed me.

The only person to even recognize that I was there was the front desk secretary who handed me my schedule. "Oh, you're the one Mr. Harris kept telling us about," she said with a sad expression while picking through pieces of paper on her desk. "I have your schedule right here, and everyone has high hopes for you."

Something about her statement felt off. Maybe it was the sad look in her eyes or the way she gave me a sympathetic smile. Something told me that she knew more about my life than I wanted her to, and that pissed me off. Determined not to let it ruin my day, I took my schedule with a polite smile and went into the hallway.

I liked that they didn't offer to show me around, nor did they assign a student to teach me the ropes. I guess they operated under the assumption that everyone was smart enough to figure out a map, and I liked it. Decker said that MAMS was more of a college preparatory than anything else, and he was right. In the halls, students looked over their brand new textbooks excitedly while comparing schedules. There was an eagerness in everyone's energy, almost as if they were just as excited to start class as I was.

Even though I joked with Lance about mourning the loss of summer, I was happy to be here. And with each tick of the clock, my new school jitters disappeared. I could do this. I was going to blend in and get my shit done.

My confident stride, bolstered by the invisible shield wrapped around me by the other students' self-absorbtion felt good. My feet burned in a way that made me smile as I found my locker.

Spinning the lock combination, I set my things inside before slamming the door shut. Pulling out my schedule, I checked where my first class was while walking down the hall, feeling invigorated and excited.

But then I had to fuck it up.

In a cliche move, I bumped into a tall hunk of muscle, making the heel of my boot slip on the tile. Strong hands wrapped around my wrists, steadying me before I could fall, and I looked up into the grayest eyes I'd ever seen, coupled with a smirk that could give even Decker a run for his money.

"Whoa, you okay?" his honey-like voice asked, and I feigned disorientation to get a good look at him. He had sweeping chestnut hair and high cheekbones, with a dimpled chin. This guy was classically handsome.

"I-I'm okay, but this has to be a secret," I teased before looking around. A few students were staring, but most of the students were too absorbed in their phones to care.

"A secret, huh? Why's that?" His voice was teasing. I saw the interest brimming in his gray eyes. It wasn't predatory, the way he swept across my appearance like a visual caress, but it made my skin hum all the same.

"I made a bet with someone that I could walk in heels all day. If he finds out I nearly fell on my ass, then I'll lose the bet." Was I flirting? Yes. Yes, I was. Why? I had no idea.

The last year had been spent taking care of Mama and picking up extra shifts, and I hadn't had the time to see farther than the fucked up shit going on in my life. Decker was honestly the first person I'd kissed in months, and I was wondering if this guy could be my second.

"Oh, we definitely can't let him know," the stranger said with a grin. "How about I walk you to class so we can make sure you don't run into any other innocent pedestrians again?" he offered before removing his hands from my wrists. I hadn't even noticed that he was still holding me. "Unless the guy is here and will beat my ass for walking his girl."

I snorted. Decker probably would kick his ass. That is, if he gave a shit about me or if I wasn't his student and his best friend's little sister. "Nah. I'm no one's girl. Too clumsy. Boys these days don't like a damsel in distress," I teased.

"Good thing I'm a man, then, huh?" he replied cheekily before stretching

out his hand to shake in greeting. “I’m Max, by the way.”

“Short for Maximillian?” I asked. He seemed like the type to have a long name too complex for his personality.

“Yep, but I only let pretty, clumsy girls call me that,” he replied with a blush. I’d admit, that line was good, everything about this guy seemed almost too good. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“I’ll tell you if you get me to...” I picked up my schedule once more to check what my first class of the day was. “Calculus with Mr. Torres safely.”

“I’m in that class, too. Senior?”

“Yup,” I replied, popping the last syllable.

“Are you new? I haven’t seen you before,” he noted before dragging his eyes up and down my body again. His eyes lingered on my boots and the thin slice of skin between my plaid skirt and the leather.

“Just moved here from Texas,” I replied with a half-hearted smile. I didn’t want to talk about my past. Today was about starting a new adventure, with new friends and new memories. I wasn’t the sad little trailer trash girl anymore.

“Never been there, but I hear it’s nice,” he replied conversationally. We walked down the hallway, him guiding me through the traffic of students. The further we walked, the more I noticed other students staring at us—well—more importantly, staring at him. Whoever Maximillian was, he was a big deal and completely contradicted my plan to stay under the radar.

“Blakely!” a gruff voice called from down the hall, and my entire spine went rigid. Shit. I thought we had an agreement not to approach each other at school aside from the one class I had with him? Maximillian gave me a curious stare.

Letting out a shaky breath, I turned around to stare down the hallway, where Decker—I mean Mr. Harris—was walking toward me. “First day at school and already pissing off Mr. Harris? That must be some record,” Maximillian joked. Little did he know, I’d pissed him off a good couple of weeks before school even started.

“Yes, Mr. Harris?” I called out through gritted teeth, noting that every girl in the hallway was staring lustfully at him. And who could blame them? That suit should be against the dress code. He was far too distracting.

“You left this in my car. You’ll need it for class, yes?” he asked while giving Maximillian a cold stare that I half expected to turn my new and only friend to ice. Decker then handed me my pencil pouch. It must have fallen

out of my messenger bag.

"Thanks," I whispered before taking it from him, throwing it in my bag as I begged him to leave with my eyes.

"Going to Calculus? You're going to be late," he noted before glancing at his watch.

"We were just headed there," I replied through gritted teeth.

Decker gave Maximillian another look before nodding. "Have fun. I'll see you in class. Oh, and do you mind if we make a pit stop at the office supply store on the way home? I need some more binders."

I could have punched him. I could have raised a fist and hit him right in the jaw and gotten expelled right then and there.

"I was planning on walking," I replied, fuming. The crowded hallways were starting to thin, but a few stayed behind to gawk.

"In those heels? It looks like I'll be winning my bet after all," Decker replied in a softer voice, but Maximillian heard it. Great. Just great.

"We have to go, Mr. Harris. See you in Bio!" Maximillian interrupted before grabbing my arm and tugging me down the hallway. God bless him. If he didn't run for the hills after this little dash of crazy, then I was definitely promoting him to best friend.

We stopped at a classroom door, and my walking companion grinned at me. "Made it here in one piece, Blakely. And with time to spare."

"And you didn't even ask what that was about," I added with an awkward grin. "I'm impressed."

"Not yet," he replied before opening the door, allowing me to enter first. I almost wished he wasn't such a gentleman so I could have hidden behind his towering frame as I found a seat. The classroom erupted in murmurs, and I felt eyes on my back as I found an empty seat in the last row.

So much for being invisible.

"Miss Stewart, can you please come up here?" Mr. Torres asked, making my skin crawl. Was I in the wrong place? Did I mess up already?

Mr. Torres guided me out into the hallway with a kind smile while giving a lingering student outside in the hall the stink eye before drawing his attention to me. Mr. Torres had kind amber eyes and black hair with blond highlights. His smooth brown skin and short stature put us at eye level.

"I just wanted to welcome you to MAMS and let you know that if you need anything—anything at all—the faculty and staff will support you during this transition. I can't imagine the pain of your loss, but we're family here,

and we will help you any way we can, okay?"

I swallowed the sand-paper emotions billowing up my chest and rubbing along my throat.

Decker had told them.

I'd wanted to run away from Mama's memory, but it looked like this school wouldn't grant me the fresh start I craved.

But I responded the way I was supposed to, the way everyone expected me to. "Thank you, Mr. Torres," I whispered as emotion threatened to slice through my chest and bleed me out. He smiled, probably assuming that my inability to choke out words had more to do with grief than shame.

We went back into the silent classroom with eyes on my back and a rumor to my name. As I sat down, I envisioned ruining Decker Harris.

How dare he tell my truths.

Decker

FUCKING MAX HEMSWORTH with his fucking smile and his fucking cocky walk. Fuck. He walked her to my class. My fucking class.

I actually liked the kid. He was nice enough, got good grades last year, and even placed second in the annual science fair. But he had officially made my shit list.

“We have assigned seats this year,” I announced lamely as students filtered in. Blakely looked anxious as hell, refusing to meet my eyes as she shuffled into the classroom. I didn’t like that I made her uncomfortable.

I knew that I shouldn’t have stopped her in the hall. Lance and I were supposed to have an understanding. Blakely and I had agreed it would be better. I could have easily dropped off her pencil case with Mr. Torres and been done with it, but I wanted to stop her in the hall. I wanted fucking *Maximillian Fucking Hemsworth* to know that...

What did I want him to know? Fuck. Get your shit together, Decker.

“Assigned seats?” Taylor, a particularly meddlesome student, asked. “We didn’t have them last year.”

“It’s a new year, Taylor. Adapt. Overcome.” The assigned seat decision was last-minute. I decided the exact moment I realized Max and Blakely were in the same class. I’d be damned if I had to teach while watching them sit and stare lovingly into each other’s eyes. I might not have a claim on her, but he sure as hell wouldn’t either. Not if I had any say.

My new seating plan also forced Blakely to sit front and center,

something I wasn't sure my dick liked or not, considering how she filled out her school uniform. It took everyone a minute to find their seats, and I leaned against the wall, arms crossed over my chest as I greeted some of the annoyingly flirtatious girls in my class and nodded at the guys.

Since it was a small school, I taught juniors and seniors, which meant I got to be their teacher both years of their enrollment. Against my better judgment, my eyes went back to Blakely. Something was seriously wrong with her. Her eyes were downcast, her face was pale. Did someone mess with her? If they did, they'd have to answer to me.

The surprising surge of protectiveness that filled my chest made me uneasy. Blakely was right, this had to become nothing, or it would become something I couldn't control. I didn't do chaos.

I'd fought too hard to control my existence to let anyone or anything fuck it up.

So instead of pulling her into the hallway and asking what put the storm in her beautiful green eyes, I conducted class, as usual, making sure not to drag my eyes over the way her long legs crossed beneath her desk. I told myself that I only half-heartedly noticed how she kept running her nimble fingers through her long blonde hair.

I briefly went over the syllabus. One of the perks of working at a school for geniuses was that they were more than capable of reading and taking charge of their education. The first day of school was all about going over the curriculum. Most of the kids in my class probably already studied the syllabus and had read the first five chapters of the textbook.

"Tomorrow starts our first lecture. You need to have chapters one through seven read beforehand." Blakely grimaced. Even though I was trying not to stare at her, the flinch caught my eye. Maybe she was just anxious about school? I was positive that the course load here was much more than she was used to but also understood that she was more than capable of rising to the challenge. Maybe I needed to have a conversation with Rose about her hours. She couldn't be working all night if she had the rigorous schedule we signed her up for.

"Will there be a quiz over the reading?" Taylor asked. She was one of those students that shot her hand up while already asking her question, too impatient and eager to wait for me to call on her. It really pissed me off. Blakely turned to look at Taylor, the wide-eyed stare telling me everything I needed to know. She found the girl just as his annoying as I did.

“As you remember from last year, Taylor, I don’t particularly like to give a warning on whether or not I have a quiz. You’ll just have to come prepared.” I didn’t like giving my students a heads up, not that they actually needed the incentive to do the work—they were generally good students. Either way, I enjoyed keeping them on their toes.

“It says here that we’re going to have a lab? Will we be assigned partners, or will we get to choose them?” Taylor asked, once again not waiting for me to call upon her. I gritted my teeth, imagining Maximillian and Blakely working late hours in the lab.

“This year, I’ll be picking lab partners. You need to learn how to work with anyone. In the professional world, you won’t always get to pick your coworkers, but you always get to pick how you handle working with them. Consider it a life lesson.” I was pulling that reasoning straight out of my ass, but most of my students seem to buy it. Good. I was confident that if they knew my real rationale, they would no longer look at me with respect.

The bell rang, and I resisted the urge to hold Blakely back to ask why she had a frown on her face. She slowly gathered up her belongings, packing her textbook into the messenger bag Lance gave her this morning.

I’d been thinking about her reaction to his gift all day, wondering if she wasn’t used to getting gifts. It almost made me want to give her a present every morning. And no, I didn’t mean that sexually, although my dick had other plans.

Maximillian stopped at her desk, asking if she wanted to go to lunch with him. “You go ahead, I need to ask Mr. Harris something.” I was surprised that she wanted to talk to me at all, considering she hadn’t looked at me once since coming here.

Maximillian was like a puppy dog, eagerly nodding as he responded. “Sure thing, I’ll save you a seat.”

“Thanks,” Blakely replied. Maximillian walked out of the classroom after giving me a knowing look I wanted to punch right off his pretty-boy face. Once he was gone and the door was shut, Blakely stood up and marched over to my desk.

“Did you tell people about my mother?” she asked, her voice somewhere between a growl and a tremble. That question surprised me. Of all the things she was going to say, that was the last I would’ve expected.

“I told the enrollment counselor. I have to be transparent about my living situation, and when I vouched for your entrance here, I told them how I knew

you and how you came to live in Memphis.” Although Blakely was more than qualified to attend school here, I might not have been entirely forthcoming with how she got into MAMS.

“I thought we had an understanding,” she sneered before slamming her palm down on my desk. “I’m not here for three hours, and already the rumors are flying. Why did you approach me in the hallway? Why did you tell everyone I’m some charity case?”

I felt my face sour like bad milk. Blakely wasn’t some damn charity case. She was a survivor. She was intelligent and deserved a spot at the school. I tried to be transparent so that the administrators understood why I wanted her here and my relation to her. However, it didn’t take away from the fact that she had earned a seat at that desk.

“I should’ve told you that the teachers here knew about your situation. But you aren’t the first person to walk through these doors with a peppered past, and you won’t be the last. As far as our living situation? Lance is your guardian and my best friend. Nothing is going on, so I don’t understand why it would bother you so much.”

I watched her beautiful face bloom a vibrant, angry shade of red as she stared at me. The storm in her green eyes had become an inferno that no amount of water could put out. Her anger was intoxicating but beautiful, despite it all.

“It’s nothing? So I suppose it would be fine if I told Lance that you walked up to me and announced to the entire school that we lived together? Especially since I was talking to the first friend I had made.”

Shame and turmoil were raging in my chest. Both emotions fought for dominance. One part of me wanted to call Lance and apologize, and the other part of me wanted to show her that I had every right to stake my claim—even though I knew damn well I didn’t.

“What are you insinuating?”

She tilted her head back and let out a hollow chuckle that echoed with fury. “I’m not insinuating anything, Mr. Harris. I want to have a normal life. I didn’t just run here because I had no other options; I was running away from everything that reminded me of Mama. I can’t do that if everyone in this goddamn school looks at me with pity. I’ve already had a lifetime of sympathy for being Sharron’s daughter. I didn’t want it here.”

I felt like shit. When I had told Blakely that we had a lot in common, I meant it. I could understand wanting to run away from your parents’ toxic

shadow. It's why I was in Memphis instead of Chicago. Yes, I loved the slower pace coupled with a vibrant city, but the best part about being in Memphis was that people didn't care if I was Jack Harris's son. And I knew that she didn't want to be known as the poor girl whose shitty mother died of cancer.

"So what do you suggest?" I asked. "Everyone already knows." It was a dick thing to say, but I couldn't change what people thought or already knew. The only choice now was to move forward. I didn't want her stuck in the victim cycle; I wanted her to overcome it.

She folded her arms around herself and looked at the door. We could both see students eyeing us warily through the small window. "I don't know."

"You could always ignore it. Fuck their narrative. You're here because you're brilliant. Get good grades. Have fun. And don't worry about me. So what if people know our living arrangement? I won't treat you any differently than any of the other students here if you continue to get shit done."

Green eyes looked back at me, and I had to take a steadyng breath to stop myself from leaning over and touching her soft skin. "Okay," she choked out.

I wanted to reach out and squeeze her hand reassuringly or offer her a hug. I knew first hand that this shit wasn't easy. I craved to kiss away the furrow on her brow.

But instead, I nodded toward the door and started rustling through papers on my desk, wordlessly dismissing her because I knew I didn't have the strength to tell her to go. For some fucked up reason, I wanted her near me. It wasn't until the door to my classroom shut that I felt my spine relax and the tension in my body release.

Blakely had to become nothing. So nothing was what she'd get.

Blakely

“BABY GIRL, you look like you need to break something.” Rose stood up from behind her desk and walked over to me. She’d called me into her office after catching me toss a customer one of the biggest fake smiles of my life. I was trying, I really was. But the kindness didn’t meet my eyes, and Rose, being the intuitive annoyance she was, noticed right off the bat.

My first day at school had been hard. Surprise, surprise.

“I had a rough day,” I replied cryptically as she ran her fingers along her white desk.

“I can tell. Your aura is so angry right now,” she murmured while picking up a vase and tossing the wilted flowers housed in it on the floor. “Toss it. It’ll make you feel better,” she added before handing the glass to me.

“I’m not doing that,” I replied with an eye roll. I wasn’t in the mood for my boss’s eccentric personality.

“Throw it on the ground,” she ordered again before taking a step back. I eyed my boss wearily, taking in the tight jeans that hugged her curves and the off the shoulder smock draped across her frame. Her eyes were wild, and her lips were stained a berry color.

“I’m not throwing your vase on the ground,” I affirmed before setting it down on her desk. I almost called in sick to work, my stomach swirling with anxiety. Memphis Academy for Math and Science was intense. I felt incredibly out of my depth with the course load and was embarrassed by all the sympathetic looks my teachers gave me. Word had spread about my

living arrangements, and by the end of the day, I had girls asking if I wanted to work on homework together. Something told me they just wanted an invitation to Mr. Harris's house.

"Why not?" Rose asked while crossing her arms over her chest. Her smile had slipped some as she threw me a sassy look.

"The vase didn't do anything to me. It doesn't deserve to be broken." I took a step back, needing to be away from her demands. However, the back of my sneakers hit a filing cabinet, stopping me short.

"Interesting. Do you feel like a vase, Blakely? Do you feel like you're broken because of other people's whims?" Rose asked as her light brown eyes brightened. I felt like a project.

The worst part about all of it was that she was right. My mother broke me because she hated her life. She tossed me on the floor in some experiment to work through her issues, and there was no one left to pick up the pieces. "I feel like sleeping. I'm tired, Rose."

Rose picked the vase up again and thrust it out toward me, the cold glass colliding with my chest. "Throw it on the ground," she ordered. "Do it, or I'll fire you."

I gritted my teeth, so angry at the world and her that I didn't know what to say. I clutched the glass and lifted it. If she wanted me to throw the damn base, I would do it with vigor.

I slammed it at the earth like shattering it was the only thing keeping me alive. I watched the glass crumble and crunch on impact, slicing across her marble floors and scattering around our feet. Slivers of glass crashed into my ankles as I heaved air in and out of my deflated body.

I didn't enjoy it.

"How did that feel?" Rose asked. She wasn't smiling anymore, and something in me wondered if she was prepared for the level of commitment I exhibited while throwing the vase at the ground.

Some people would've felt satisfaction at breaking something. But I felt indifferent. I felt nothing. The things in my life I wanted to break were unbreakable.

I wanted to break my mother's influence on my new life. I tried to break the hold that Decker Harris had on my mind, body, and soul. He was so strange today, and I didn't understand it. It was like we were back to being strangers meeting in the hall for the first time.

I wanted to break my resistance against building a relationship with

Lance, and I wanted to annihilate my tendency to fuck things up. “I didn’t feel anything,” I replied in a shaky voice before bending over to pick up the pieces.

Rose simply watched me. She didn’t warn me about slicing my finger, nor did she offer to get a broom. I cupped the shards in my palm and thought about my mother. Maybe Rose wanted to make some metaphor comparing the broken vase and my life. But I didn’t feel like the broken glass on the floor. I felt more like the displaced flowers without a home. “Go home, Blakely,” Rose said while crouching down to meet me at eye level.

“I would really like to work tonight, Rose,” I whispered. I didn’t want to go home and talk to Lance about my first day of school. I didn’t want to run into Decker and feel the nothing we both promised each other. I didn’t want to start on all the readings I’d have to catch up on and feel inadequate for this school. I didn’t want to check my phone to see if Maximillian had sent me a text. I wanted to work.

“Go home, hon. I’ll pay you for the day. You need to rest. Cope. You’ve been working your entire life, child. Take a day off. That isn’t a suggestion.”

“I don’t know how to rest,” I admitted before tossing what few shards I had in the trash and sitting down. Rose let out a hefty sigh before sitting on her desk, crossing her legs and resting her chin on her fist.

“Okay. Get it out,” Rose said with an encouraging wave.

“I hate that everyone at this new school knows about my mama. Back home, I was always known as Sharron Ramone’s daughter. The daughter of the woman that slept her way through east Texas. The mama that couldn’t afford food because she was too self-absorbed to remember to save for groceries. I don’t want to associate with that anymore.”

“So don’t be her daughter anymore,” Rose offered.

“How? How can I escape something imbedded in my blood?” I picked at my skin to emphasize the point. “How can I just escape her? She’s dead but still alive and breathing her toxic venom into my new life, and I hate it. I hate Decker for telling everyone my story. It wasn’t his to tell.”

Rose nodded. “Decker likes to focus on other people’s lives because it’s easier than sharing his own,” she explained. “You’re angry that he told the school where you’ve come from, right?” Rose asked, seeking clarity. I hadn’t precisely explained everything and was thankful she didn’t make me spell it out. Rose was more intuitive than I’d initially given her credit for.

“He made me out to be this sob story for the admissions department. One

of my teachers patted my shoulder and said if I needed anything to call her.”

“That doesn’t sound like something Decker would do. That man repels pity like citronella candles fight off mosquitos. He’s potent.”

“So why did he tell them?”

Rose reached out to tuck a blonde strand of hair, the gesture something a mother would have done to comfort her child. Tears welled up in my eyes. “I think you’re letting other people’s assumptions determine what you think happened. Decker was just telling them what is going on. You can’t blame him for the fact that you have a past. You can just prove to them that you’re a fighter. That you’ve overcome the stigma your mother thrust on those proud shoulders of yours.”

“I know. I know,” I groaned.

“You say she’s in your blood, right?” Rose asked before hopping off the desk and bending over to pick up a shard of glass. “Give me your palm,” she demanded while stretching out her hand. I cautiously extended my palm, peering up at her with confusion.

Dragging the sharp glass across my skin, she drew a crimson stain that made me squirm in discomfort. It wasn’t necessarily a painful cut, I just hated seeing the evidence that Mama was very much alive within me. “See this blood? It’s yours,” Rose said before dragging the blade across her own palm. “And this is mine.”

She thrust our hands together, and the cut stung where our blood mixed. “Now you’re my blood. I’ve got some good blood, Blakely. Strong. Cunning. A dash of crazy. It’ll hit your veins and tarnish everything that was her and turn it into something else.”

I stared at our joined hands, feeling like this was some pagan ritual. It was strange and unsanitary, but it felt right. “I’m your blood?” I asked, looking up at Rose with a mixture of awe and amusement.

“Damn right, you are. Now go home and meditate. Tell Lance about your first day of school. He’s got good blood, too.” I stared at my hand for a little longer before pulling away.

“See you tomorrow?” I asked.

“Sure thing. No more fake smiles.”

Outside, the rare summer Memphis breeze licked at my soul. I saw the world in a different light, breathed in the barbecue-tinted air like it was a drug. Maybe Rose’s blood was magical. Perhaps it was a placebo for happiness. Either way, I smiled all the way out of her office and on my walk

home.

“YOU’RE HOME EARLY!” Lance exclaimed while pulling a casserole out of the oven. The moment I stepped foot in the loft, the smell of taco seasoning hit my nostrils full force. I breathed it in.

“It was a slow night. Rose sent me home,” I lied.

Decker was sitting at the kitchen table reading over a stack of papers. No longer sporting his sexy suit but a pair of sweats instead. His eyes snapped to me the moment he heard my voice. We had a silent standoff for a moment, the earlier disappointment fading away like dust in the wind. “Hello, Mr. Harris,” I said with a grin. Lance coughed, drawing my eyes back to him.

“How was your day?” my brother asked.

“Awful. I’m not half as smart as those other kids, and I’m already behind,” I replied with a wince. I already had homework in chemistry thirteen pages long, intended to test my aptitude to see if I can place in the advanced class.

“Do you need help?” Lance offered. “I can google like a champ.” I smiled at his willingness to assist.

“I already looked it over, and I think I’ve got it covered. I’ll just be up all night determining the major organic product of reactions. Where’s the coffee?”

“Atta girl. Working hard already!” Lance got out two plates and coughed again, making Decker stir from his spot.

“Oh. I’ve got plans I just remembered,” Decker jolted lamely, making me roll my eyes. He sauntered off toward his bedroom, giving me a simmering look in the process.

“That was weird,” I mumbled to myself before sitting down at the kitchen table as Lance served dinner. He looked like a domestic goddess, wearing an apron and floral oven mitts.

“In the interest of honesty, I asked him to give us time tonight,” Lance said with a shrug before sitting down and removing the mitts from his hands, plopping them on the table. “Decker is my brother, but I’ve been using him as a buffer between us.”

My eyebrows shot up in surprise at the candidness of Lance’s words.

"I'm not saying he won't be around, but I think it's time you and I actually bonded without me leaning on him. I'm always leaning on him."

"From what he's told me, it sounds like it's the other way around," I said before scooping a portion of the casserole onto my plate.

Lance paused and shot his blue eyes up at me before straightening the fork at his place setting. "He told you that? About the...home invasion?" Lance asked incredulously. "He never tells anyone."

Shit. "I was asking about you. I wanted to know more about your friendship. I kind of pressured him into telling me." It wasn't necessarily a lie but wasn't the full truth either. Lance relaxed.

"See? This is why I wanted to have dinner alone with you. We keep using other people to connect, and it's not working. Decker...our mom..." Lance let the words linger between us before speaking again. "I don't want any more stories about her. I want to know more about you."

"Okay, what would you like to know?" This felt wrong, somehow. Like my truths had only been reserved for Decker. But Lance was right, we'd been using everything we could to hide, and it was time to finally lay it all out.

"Do you like it here?" Lance asked. It wasn't the ice-breaking question I'd expected, but I welcomed the easy topic.

"Yes. It's nice. I feel...safe here. Memphis is beautiful," I admitted before shoving a fork full of steaming food into my mouth. It singed my tongue, and I eagerly took a drink of iced tea Lance pushed in front of me.

"Did you not feel safe back in Texas?" Lance prodded.

"No. Not really." My words turned my tongue to ash.

"I'm sorry, Blakely," Lance murmured.

"It's not your fault," I offered with a shrug. "And you turned up when I needed you most. This is a fresh start for me. Admittedly, I'm relieved that you don't want to know more about Mama. It's hard for me to talk about her, but I'm terrified that if we focus on me, you won't like what you find out."

Lance leaned forward on the table, propping his elbows up as he spoke. "Blakely," he said, and I averted my eyes. I wasn't expecting to have such a hard-hitting conversation right after my episode with Rose. "You're my sister. There's nothing that can change that," Lance said in exasperation.

But didn't he get it? That's not what I wanted. I was chained to my own mother my entire life. I didn't love her. Hell, I think I hated her. I didn't want Lance to feel obligated to build a relationship with me based on blood. Rose's words were still ringing in my mind. This blood was mine.

“I don’t want you to feel chained to me because of a missed opportunity. I don’t want you to feel obligated to bond with me because somehow we share sister sequences of the same DNA. I want us to be close because we like one another. Because we add value to one another’s lives. The shared blood pumping through our veins should only be a tiny percentage of the equation. And I don’t ever want anyone to feel obligated to be in my life because of something they can’t control—and we can’t control that we are related.”

My speech felt stilted and didn’t truly dive into the depths of my feelings about this. Maybe I was projecting my issues about Mama on Lance, but it didn’t change the end result. We were virtual strangers, and just because we found each other didn’t mean we had to stay in each other’s lives. Maybe I was self-destructive, and that’s why it was important to me that I push this truth, lay it out on the table between us like it was a decadent feast. But I did.

“I understand,” Lance replied solemnly. “But you have to understand that as someone who has been denied family, that beautiful and unique sequence of DNA is significant to me. Even if I don’t like you, I want to know you. But if we both find that this sibling relationship isn’t compatible, I’ll happily let you go and live your life. But you have to give me the chance to figure that out on my own.”

He was right. I had a lifetime to decide that I was relieved when Mama died. Family wasn’t as much of a blood connection as it was a decision. My resistance was taking that decision away from Lance. My insecurities were affecting the possibilities of a relationship with my brother. “I promise to give you a chance. A real chance. Not one littered with fake truths about our egg donor. And if you decide this isn’t working, I just want you to be honest with me. I didn’t feel like I could be honest with her. The guilt from her cancer ate me up inside. How can you hate a dying woman?”

“Stop beating yourself up,” Lance offered with a shrug before eating a bite of food, wincing when it scalded his mouth. I watched in amusement as he grabbed his glass of iced water and guzzled it down. “Shit, how can you eat that?”

“I’m starving,” I answered with a wave of my hand. Lance’s eyes flickered to the bandage wrapped around my palm.

“What happened to your hand?”

I glanced at it. “Oh, this? Nothing. Rose decided she wanted to do a blood ritual, so I let her cut me.”

Lance blinked once. Twice. Three times. “Yeah, your boss is insane.”

“You know? I actually am starting to like her. Don’t tell Decker that.”

Lance laughed with an eye roll. “He does always have to be right, yeah? Drives me crazy.”

“It’s worse at school,” I gritted.

Lance took another bite of food, making sure to blow on his fork for a good minute before plopping it into his mouth. And then he spoke with his mouth open, breathing out steam like a fiery dragon. “Guess you weren’t planning on having two brothers when you moved here, huh?” he joked before swallowing his food with a gulp.

My stomach twisted. I *did not* view Decker as a brother. I saw him like this unattainable force that drew me in. Something I knew was terrible for me but couldn’t avoid all the same. But if Lance wanted to establish the boundary and make it clear that the only affection between us should be brotherly, then I’d roll with the punches. “Yeah. I went from having no one to two overprotective brothers. I can’t wait to bring a guy home. He’s going to shit his pants.”

Lance had a twinkle in his eyes like I’d said exactly what he wanted to hear. “Did you meet anyone at school?” he asked.

“I met someone named Maximillian. He’s cute and sweet. He asked for my number,” I offered with a shrug, forgoing the fact that I only viewed him as a friend. He was too sweet. Too nice. Too easygoing. I was attracted, sure. Good looking people were just that—good looking. Maybe it was Mama’s influence that attracted me to the things I shouldn’t want or the things I couldn’t have. I loved a bit of danger. I liked my relationships toxic and out of reach.

“You should bring him over sometime. We can invite your dad, too, just to really terrify him,” Lance offered, making me snort.

“Sounds like a plan.”

And then we ate our food. We joked. We bonded.

And I decided that Lance Trask was an exceptional person to share blood with.

Blakely

MEMPHIS ACADEMY FOR MATH and Science had a large, sprawling cafeteria. You would think that the heart of the campus would be the library, considering the caliber of its students. But like every other typical high school in the country, the cafeteria was where you could find the pulse.

My first day, I spent most of lunch hiding in the library, sulking over the fact that I kept getting looks of pity from my teachers and some of the students. However, Maximillian didn't let me escape today. He's been following me around, and the moment the bell rang for lunch, he grabbed my wrist and practically dragged me into the social circle of hell.

We sat at a table in the far corner near a large window that gave us the vantage of the entire cafeteria. I observed natural selection in its prime. Students segregated themselves based on interests, looks, and intelligence. I couldn't help but wonder where I fit in.

Shifting in my seat, I let Max plop a straw in my Coke as he mentioned it was better for my teeth. A few students that I recognized from my classes sat with us, as well as a couple of guys I'd never seen before. It seemed I'd made a lot of friends fairly quickly, which was shocking considering I hadn't really spoken to anyone. At my old school, I kept to myself and struggled to make meaningful connections; here it seemed people flocked to me, and I wasn't sure if it was because of the rumors or Maximillian.

Maximillian boasted that he was in every club imaginable. He wanted to run for class president, too. He was well liked, well known, and well

acquainted with most of the female population. It didn't take me long to find out that Max liked to date. A lot. The jealous stares tossed my way by prep-school geniuses were a dime a dozen. A hot future scientist was in high demand, apparently.

"You're from Texas, right?" a mousy voice asked. I turned to my right to stare at a girl with long blonde hair and dark, bushy eyebrows. She had a timid way about her, with downcast eyes and a button nose. I remembered that her name was Taylor, and I wanted to say she was in my class with Decker—I mean Mr. Harris—but I wasn't for sure. I liked her the most because she was quiet.

"Yep," I said with a pop. "Lived there my whole life."

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I turned the other way to stare at Maximillian. He was clutching me close in an awkward side hug that forced my chest to concave. Maximillian's thigh pressed against mine, making my skin heat up from the friction. I felt nothing though. My heart felt like it was on a lag, too busy wading through Decker Harris to appreciate the feel of this pretty-boy's undivided attention.

"I, for one, am happy Blakely moved from Texas," Maximillian announced with a boyish grin.

"I bet you are," a dark-skinned boy snickered while wiggling his eyebrows.

"Why did you move here?" Taylor asked. She was a nosey one, that was certain. Taylor seemed chronically inquisitive and a bit abrasive. I stared at her as she picked up the salad on her plate, intently picking up zero-calorie shreds of lettuce and dipping it into her vinaigrette. There was no cheese on her salad, nor any croutons. Just a bunch of healthy shit carefully proportioned to decorate her plate. Taylor seemed like a perfectionist, and I wasn't sure what to make of that.

I stumbled through my answer for a moment, remembering Rose's advice. "My mother died." My admission was like cement being poured across the table. "I found out I had a brother and moved out here to stay with him. It's been different, but I like it," I explained with ease, surprised how freeing it was to own my story and spit it out for the curious onlookers.

Taylor's eyes widened, but there wasn't actually any shock in her expression. Something told me that she'd already heard the rumors about my existence but wanted clarity from the source. "I'm sorry about your mother," she said in a lower voice before reaching out to place her tiny hand over

mine.

The corner of my mouth picked up as Maximillian squeezed me tighter. Something about this entire interaction made it feel like it was more about them than it was about me. I once knew a man that would say giving comfort was more enjoyable than receiving it, and as I stared around the table at the sympathetic faces, I realized that he was onto something. I kind of wanted to steal a little comfort back.

“Don’t be. Mama was kind of a bitch,” I said with a shrug while reveling in the shocked expressions that crossed my table-mates’ faces. Maximillian let out a short laugh.

“I’m starting to realize you don’t say what I expect you to,” he said gruffly before removing his hand from my shoulder and picking up half of his sandwich to shove it into his mouth. I watched in awe, mostly because he didn’t appear to actually chew his food, just pushed it down his throat.

“I’m starting to think it’s fun to be unpredictable,” I replied. My little bit of socialization was already starting to drain me, so I distracted myself by pulling out my homework from last night to read over it once more. Around me, people still talked as I worked through a couple of problems I was unsure about.

“That reaction is wrong,” Taylor’s voice rang out. Once again, I turned to her, taking in the fierce expression on her face and the way she was gnawing on her lip. “It’s kind of a trick question. May I?” she asked, gesturing for my homework.

Some people were prideful about knowing it all, but that wasn’t me. I welcomed critique. I welcomed being wrong. It just meant that I had more to learn.

After I nodded in approval, she started scribbling on my paper. My eyes watched her lead pencil drag violently across my work. She explained why the reaction was wrong and helped me work through the compound before making a minor adjustment on another problem. “Thanks,” I said with a genuine smile. This was something I could bond with someone over.

“No problem. If you need a study partner, let me know.”

“Taylor just wants an excuse to go to your house. We’ve all heard that you live with Mr. Harris,” a guy at the far end of the table said. He had bright red hair that looked like it had to come out of a bottle, and thick reading glasses covered most of his face. I glanced over at Taylor, who blushed profusely.

“Shut up, Buick,” she growled.

“Hey, can’t blame her. Decker is pretty hot,” I replied with a shrug. I felt like the best way to combat the sad looks and rumors was to spearhead their narrative with a story of my own. It’s the only way to survive. “He’s got a six-pack under those perfectly tailored suits.”

I laughed to myself, then glanced around the table at everyone, noting the blush on Taylor’s cheeks, the cringe on Maximillian’s face, and the chuckle hidden behind Buick’s palm.

“Miss Stewart,” a gruff voice said at my back. I’d recognize that voice anywhere. I could feel its tone in my bones.

Decker fucking Harris. I couldn’t escape him, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

I spun around in my seat with a smile plastered on my face. “Hey there, Decker. Did you want to have lunch?” I offered. “Or did I leave something in your car again?”

His lips dipped into a scowl that I felt in my knees. Weak. He made me weak.

“Blakely, can we speak for a moment?” he asked before straightening his face into something that resembled professionalism as he took in the audience we had. I could feel their gossip hitting my ears like nails pounding their assumptions into the coffin of my social standing. Oddly, I didn’t care anymore.

“Sure,” I replied with a smile before squeezing Maximillian’s hand and standing up, abandoning my lunch on the table. I wasn’t hungry anyway. Talking about my dead mother dampened my appetite.

I followed behind Decker, watching his long legs take steady strides through the hallways where loitering students watched us. I winked at a couple staring unabashedly just to fuck with them. I felt like Rose, no longer mourning and hiding, owning up to my shit while calling people out. I wanted my new life to be the perfection I was denied growing up, but maybe newness could feel more like me instead.

Down, down, down we went, toward his classroom at the end of the hall, secluded from the world. Decker held the door open for me, and I followed him inside before sitting up on the desk and rocking my feet back and forth beneath me. “What’s up?” I asked.

“Why are you talking about my six-pack abs to students?” he asked.

“Why were you in the cafeteria? Why did you tell everyone about my

mother?"

"Why are you still hung up on that?" he scrubbed his hands down his face while pacing the floors. He didn't have to speak out loud for me to know that he felt this was a mistake—one colossal mistake. He shouldn't have ever encouraged me to attend school here.

"I'm not. Actually, I'm kind of enjoying the openness. You think we should tell people we made out on a Ferris wheel, next?" I offered with a giggle, not expecting Decker to storm toward me with his hand up, placing a finger over my lips like a punishing kiss.

I mumbled against his skin as he hissed at me. "Do not say that!" As I rolled my eyes, he pulled away but stood near, positioned between my legs where nothing but plaid skirt and lace panties separated us.

Oh. And the school.

And Lance.

And our age difference.

And my jaded past, his asshole demeanor, and our complete and total incompatibility.

Guess there was more than inches separating us.

Our breath might have mixed in a cocktail tornado of air, but there might as well have been worlds between us. "I'm not stupid. I won't tell people I dry humped your cock in public, Decker," I whispered while watching his eyes grow heavy and hooded.

"Your mouth is going to be the death of me," he whispered before dragging his thumb across my bottom lip. My tongue snaked out to taste it. Coffee. He tasted like coffee.

"What a way to go, am I right?" I replied with a shrug before pulling away, resting my hands on the desk and pushing my chest out while tilting my head to the side to observe him.

"I was headed to the cafeteria to let you know that Lance got called to a meeting with the hotel owners in Louisiana. He won't be home tonight."

My heart raced. The implications of secrecy were painting heat along my thighs. But I kept my breathing steady. "Okay. And?" I asked, choking on my lust like the traitorous bastard it was.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

That's what I had told him right? This had to be nothing.

Something was creeping up on me.

"I'm going to be working late to grade papers," he rushed out. It sounded

eerily like an excuse. Pussy. I stared deeply into his dark eyes, then trailed lower to take in the maroon tie wrapped haphazardly around his neck and the strain of his jacket. There was a single bead of sweat collected on his upper lip that I wanted to taste.

“Are you avoiding me, Decker Harris?”

“Yes. Yes, I am.” Simple. Truthful. To the point. I could appreciate his honesty. It’s what we should do, right? Avoid one another and pretend the fireworks sparking between us wouldn’t catch the lawn on fire.

I got off the desk and ran my fingers through my hair before heading to the door of his classroom, my hand hitting the handle as the bell rang. “See you tonight, Mr. Harris,” I replied with a grin. My voice was breathy as I looked at him over my shoulder. Stealing one last look at his broody face, I then headed out into the hallway, not sure why I was tempting something that seemed impossible and inevitable all at once.

I could have sworn I heard his whisper, *see you tonight*, even though I’d left him back in his classroom.

I was losing my motherfucking mind.

Decker

I WAS MAKING my favorite dish, pulling out all the stops with homemade pasta and spaghetti sauce an Italian ex taught me during a summer in New York. I didn't pull out the paper plates, either. I had to remind myself not to open a bottle of wine because my...dinner companion...was underaged.

I did light a candle though.

I was insane. Fucking insane.

She had a short shift at Huck-a-poos after school, and for all I knew, she'd already eaten. But still I stood there, sweating over a pot of my signature *date night* dish. I'd made this countless times for countless women. It was the one thing I'd perfected and used to impress people.

I could feel Lance's speculative stare on my back. He might be in Louisiana for the night, but that didn't mean his presence wasn't here. I saw his warning glare beating down my back every time my eyes flickered to the shut door of his bedroom. Bad. This was very, very bad.

The worst part of all of it? She knew I'd show up. Blakely knew I'd be eagerly waiting for some alone time with her. I thought I was the one seeking to figure her out, but she was the one that could read me like a book. She was under my skin.

Under my motherfucking skin.

The door to the loft opened, and I held my breath like a fucking pussy. She walked in, her hair a sweaty mess from the Memphis humidity. The makeup lining her bright green eyes was smeared and smoky as she bit her

lip and breathed in the smell of dinner. She turned to look at me, like she already knew I'd be there—like she already knew I'd be standing here with my dick metaphorically in my hand, staring in awe of her flustered beauty.

“Hey, Mr. Harris.” I wanted to slap that verbal dissonance between us and demand she call me Decker, mostly because I loved the sound of those harsh syllables on her tongue. I used to think that I had control over my life, but I was starting to think that it’s safer to sit back and watch Blakely obliterate my ideas about restraint. She was more beautiful to look at than the fine lines of my perfect life, anyway.

“Hello, Miss Stewart,” I replied, calling her on her own game. Though my plan had backfired. She thought I didn’t notice the slight tremor in her bones every time I called her by her name, but I did. “Hungry?” I asked, though the food wasn’t exactly on my mind. Fuck.

Nothing, that’s what she’d said. Nothing I’d be.

Tomorrow, I’d be nothing. Tonight I wanted a taste of something.

“It smells delicious,” she noted before plopping her thousand dollar messenger bag on the floor and heading toward me in that tight little work uniform I equally loathed and adored. I loved that she didn’t care about the lavish gifts Lance kept tossing her way. She probably didn’t even know that bag hadn’t even been released to the general public yet. Lance was always about the finer things, not me.

“I made my special spaghetti,” I boasted, feeling ridiculous for feeling proud about something I shouldn’t be doing.

“Let me go change out of this outfit, then I’ll help you set the table,” she offered before disappearing into her bedroom. I tried. I really did. I tried not to imagine her slipping out of her sweaty shirt and shrugging those tight, denim mini shorts off her rounded thighs and leaving them in a pile of torment on the floor.

But I did.

No regrets.

She appeared again, looking fresh with a bare face and bright eyes, wearing an oversized shirt and leggings in the most effortless, casual outfit possible. It made my suit look out of place, and I suddenly feared that she would think I was trying too hard for something she wanted to be *nothing*. Nothing was such bullshit.

“I’ll go change, too. Tired of this stuffy suit,” I blurted out before passing her, our arms brushing. My chest constricted. My heart did that ridiculous

thump, thump, thump that had me questioning the different forms of addiction. If people could make you high, then touching Blakely was like a drug.

I stripped quickly and awkwardly, fumbling through my clothes for something that felt as effortless as her outfit. I settled on jeans and a t-shirt.

When I got back into the kitchen, Blakely had set the table and was humming to herself, shaking her hips as she lifted the spoon and took a taste of the spaghetti sauce. Her face looked squeamish. Shit. Did she not like the sauce?

“Not a fan of spaghetti?” I asked, sweat coating my back.

She blushed before spinning fully to face me, those green, needy eyes trailing my body. “Nope, it’s perfect,” she lied. I could see the lie on her face, like a beacon demanding me to make it better or figure her out.

“What’s wrong with the sauce, Miss Stewart?” I asked. She sneezed.

“I have a very minor garlic allergy,” she replied with a shrug. Fuck. Of course she did. My dish was swimming in something that could kill her. There was a metaphor swimming behind her kind eyes somewhere.

“Do you need an EpiPen?” I asked. How much garlic could kill her?

“One taste won’t do too much damage. But I should probably take some Benadryl. I can make myself a sandwich?” she offered. I didn’t want to be another person in her life she had to overcompensate for—rearrange her life and tastes and preferences for. She had enough of that with her mother.

“How about I order us some take out?” I asked before strutting over to the table to toss the meal I painstakingly prepared. It seemed fitting that the dish I used so many times to swoon love interests wouldn’t be fit for Blakely. Everything with her was different.

“Don’t waste it! You can eat your spaghetti,” she laughed.

“I’ll save it for lunch tomorrow,” I promised before taking it to the counter and grabbing my phone. She watched as I scrolled through different restaurants before deciding on one.

“Hey,” she said before opening the fridge. “A sandwich actually sounds perfect. What do you want on yours?” she asked before bending down to grab the lunchmeat and cheese. She looked so unapologetically angelic.

“Whatever’s on yours,” I replied.

We ate on the couch. She sat cross-legged with mustard on the corner of her lip, practically begging me to lick it off her perfect mouth, which was running a mile a minute. “You can’t honestly believe that the Drake Equation

Science Theory is accurate,” she joked before tossing a napkin to the side and scooting closer to me. “It’s a meaningless guesstimate with no proof!”

“Most scientific theories start out as guesstimates,” I argued. I didn’t actually believe in the theory, but watching her argue with me over science was getting me hard.

“So you’re saying this theory accurately predicts the number of extraterrestrial civilizations in the Milky Way? Ridiculous!”

“It’s not intended to be an exact number, just an approximation,” I argued.

“Dr. Frank Drake pulled numbers out of his ass. There’s no way to know for sure! He shared it just to be controversial. Most of its factors are unknown.”

I laughed as she rolled her eyes, those green orbs swimming in mirth. “Fine. But you have to admit there’s life out there. We’re not alone. It’s nice to find an explanation in something that doesn’t make sense to us,” I offered while wondering if there was a theory to explain why my chest felt like a cage barely containing my heart.

“Of course there’s life out there. I just think it’s limiting to slap a theory on it and pretend we understand it all. Maybe I should be an astronaut.”

“Giving up on being a doctor already?” I asked. That career path didn’t seem to fit her personality. Doctors were stiff and selfless. She’d been giving all her life; maybe it was time to be a little selfish and discover something for her own peace of mind.

“The human body disgusts me. Maximillian showed me a YouTube video of a septal myectomy, and I about puked. Have you ever *seen* the surgery for unclogging the congealed muscles of the heart? Gross. Pass.”

I laughed. I *had* in fact seen that particular surgery and found it interesting. “You didn’t think it was cool that they have to perform it on a motionless heart?”

“No. It freaked me out!” she exclaimed with a cringe. I wanted to dance over the conversation about *Maxifuckingmillian* but didn’t.

“There are lots of types of medicine. You don’t have to be a surgeon,” I offered, though I knew she didn’t want to be a doctor.

“Nope. Vomit, mucus, and pus aren’t my thing. Plus, I’m not much of a people person, and that job requires lots and lots of people in vulnerable states with sometimes volatile attitudes. I’m still searching for my career path. I kind of hate that MAMS wants you to know what you want to be

when you grow up right away,” she added before settling deeper into the couch and sprawling her legs out. The tips of her toes brushed against my thigh, and I had to hiss out a breath like a fucking pussy.

“We put a lot of pressure on people to know the plans they have for the future,” I agreed.

“When did you know you wanted to be a teacher?”

“When I learned that school was a good escape from my father. My test scores didn’t care that he had a billion dollar advertisement deal or that he could catch a football. You either knew the information or you didn’t. There’s power in that.”

She stared at me in awe for a moment, and I knew it had nothing to do with my father’s lucrative career. She liked the subtle truth I placed at her feet like a bloody offering, and she was soaking in the magic of it.

“I feel the same way, for different reasons, of course. My mother was known around town as a loser—an idiot. I guess I wanted to break the mold and be smarter than her. She used to brag that I didn’t get any of her looks, used to claim she was prettier than me. I never much liked the idea of bragging about something so fleeting, so I made sure to be smart. Smarter than her. Smarter than that damn town, too.”

I put down my barely-eaten sandwich on the coffee table to approach her, hovering my body over her waist as I precariously ran a finger over her wrist. Only her wrist. Anymore and I’d not be able to stop. “You’re beautiful,” I whispered. “You shine like the whole universe is right there at your fingertips.”

She let out a shaky breath before shaking her head as I snapped back, increasing the distance between us. “I wasn’t fishing for compliments,” she whispered.

“I don’t like fishing. It’s boring,” I replied.

She got up from her comfortable spot on the couch and started cleaning up after us, the anxious energy within her was blooming like a Venus fly trap, ready to snap at the first fly that came its way. “I’ll get that,” I offered before following her into the kitchen. Her shaky hands wiped down the countertops, smearing the spaghetti sauce I’d splattered in the process. I reached out to grab her wrist. “I got it,” I whispered before pulling her close. We stood there like statues, poised in the nothingness of our promise while aching to leap into *something*. Or maybe that was just me.

I leaned forward. “Nothing. This is nothing,” I promised before brushing

my lips against hers. It was supposed to be fleeting, like the beauty she wasn't interested in. Just a brief inhale. Just a slight taste.

It was catastrophic.

She bit my lip, tangling her tongue with mine in ecstasy as her frayed hair hit my cheeks. We moaned into each other's mouths, spilling our truths with guttural sounds. "Nothing," she promised before slipping her fingers under my shirt and pulling it up.

"Nothing," I promised while doing the same to her tattered clothes. The soft cotton fell like raindrops on the floor of Lance's loft, long forgotten the moment I saw her bared to me. I wanted to embrace the contact between our heated skin, feel her pulse pound against mine. I wanted to feel her life burrow under my skin.

I kissed her neck. Devouring her creamy skin with my tongue, and my palate burst with salt and the smell of her citrus body wash. Her fingers clawed at my back in long, slow drags that I knew would leave marks not nearly permanent enough for the feelings I had for this woman. I cupped her neck, holding her soft body in place while guiding her to the counter. I was clumsy while lifting her up to sit, those long flailing legs like curling leaves in a fire as I settled her.

"Can this be nothing, too?" I asked before tugging her bra down and palming her breast.

"Y-yes," she promised. I leaned down and flicked my tongue out to tease her pebbled peak. Her back arched. My body convulsed. Every nerve ending in my body was hers to command. My brain was saying, *kiss her deeper, you fool*. But my brotherly heart, the one that had a lifetime with Lance, was begging me to stop. It knew it would eventually belong to her. It was always meant to. I was up against the inevitable, but I wouldn't go down without a fight.

She pulled at my hair, yanking me back to bare my lips to hers. I kept my eyes open, not wanting to miss a single expression on her angelic face. She sank her teeth into my lips, pulling at the skin like she could chew it off. Her hands trailed over my abs before resting on the waistband of my pants. The tip of her index finger sunk beneath my clothes. Just a little more, and she'd touch me.

"Don't," I gritted as her hand moved lower.

"Why not?" she asked in a coy tone while ignoring my plea. Her hand was cold as it wrapped around my cock. I felt her thumb testing my head,

smearing precum over the tip. My body jolted. She smiled against my lips.

“Can I stroke you?” she asked. I wanted it, I really did. But recklessness like this required limits.

“Yes,” I relented.

Her curled palm ran up and down my length slowly, as if she knew I’d push her away the moment we hit my invisible boundary. I refused to come in my pants from her touch. Up and down. Up and down. Shivers erupted through my body, and I kissed her harder, showing her with my mouth everything I wanted to do but wouldn’t.

“Stop,” I gasped when I felt the rising blood flow begging to release. Her pout was palpable. I ate it up to ease the sting. I deserved blue balls. It would remind me later, when the guilt and shame were too much to swallow, that I still had a semblance of restraint.

“Touch me,” she begged while spreading those legging-covered legs apart. My hands trailed down her tight stomach. Slowly, ever so slowly. My palm cupped her heat as she whimpered.

“Like this?” I asked.

“Fuck yes,” she moaned on an exhale as I started rubbing her through the tight, thin material. That friction was needy and wanton, begging for her release. I knew that her slick heat was just barriers away, but didn’t trust myself to feel how hot and wet she was for me.

Nothing would ever be enough.

Faster and faster I moved. Kissing. Nipping. Flicking. Palming. Fucking with hands and mouths and secrets I didn’t want to share. “Decker,” she rasped. I moved faster. Stroking her tongue in time to the movements of my hand, dragging her heat along on my skin while begging for the branding of her orgasm. I wanted to feel her fully. Dive my cock so deep inside of her she never thought of anyone else ever again.

She fell apart so beautifully. Like a sigh and a scream. Like the splitting of an atom, building entire civilizations while yanking me out of my element.

But the first words to escape her lips after made me grow cold. “That was something, Mr. Harris.”

Something indeed.

Out of nowhere, my phone rang. My heart raced as I picked it up from the countertop. The moment I saw Lance’s name on the caller ID, my body hit a wall. “It’s Lance,” I whispered while arguing with myself whether or not I should answer it.

“Right,” Blakely said before hopping off of the counter and increasing the space between us. It was like someone snipped the tether between our bodies, leaving me to bleed out. I hated the tremble on her lips and the shrill ringing on my phone. I couldn’t be accountable to Lance. Something within me feared that he would know. He would hear the betrayal in my voice.

The phone stopped ringing, and we stared at one another. There was a dare in her wide stance. Those slender arms crossed at her chest were beating me down with the unspoken words buried deep there.

“We shouldn’t have done that,” I finally whispered.

Blakely

DECKER LEFT for work at four a.m. I know this because I was wide awake, buzzing with regret and an ache I couldn't quite place. I heard him when the shower kicked on and the subtle slam of our front door, letting me know just how he felt about our little slip up last night.

It wasn't a little slip up. It was a major fuck up. A divine gift.

Not five minutes after my crashing orgasm, he was scrambling for his shirt and cursing himself. "We shouldn't have done that," he whispered. The rational part of me knew this. I was analyzing the scene from all angles, regret pooling between my thighs like the orgasm he rocked through me.

I wanted to do it again.

"Lance is like my brother, you know?" he said while scrubbing his hands along his face, squeezing his eyes shut like it was too difficult to look at me. The turmoil in his eyes was too much to take in. I'd fleetingly predicted this somewhere between palming his dick and coming on his hand. I knew it would lead to this—we both did.

And yet we didn't stop. We stole sighs from one another, reveled in the friction of our bodies and the taboo nature of our desire for one another. We kissed like alcoholics, sipping wine from our lips for a brief buzz. It should have felt cheap, but it didn't. It felt selfish and wrong.

"I know. This was nothing, remember?" I took a baseball bat to those words and slammed them till they broke. How could something so vibrant and beautiful feel so hollow now? His eyes raged, daring the both of us to

whisper what we both knew. Feelings like this came in waves, and both of us were drowning. I didn't say that though.

We disappeared into our respective rooms with lead-filled steps. I could feel the ominous dare hovering over us. Say something. Admit something. Feel something. Want something.

I pitied myself for a little while. Spent hours counting the shadows on my ceiling as cars passed outside. This was what Mama did. She pined after men that didn't care about her. She kept saying he would be different. Or, *this is the one, Blakely. I can feel it.*

And for all my talk of not being like her, I realized that I was just running in circles, dragging myself right back to where it all started. I was a woman that compromised her happiness for a man willing to compromise his morals for a warm body. It made me sick, and I told myself enough was enough. I couldn't do this to myself, if not for Lance, for Mama. I didn't watch her die a painful death just to become like her. I was smart. I was headstrong. I was deviant and determined.

So I got ready for class with a smile stitched between my cheeks. My steady hands applied soft makeup to my lashes. My heels hugged the arch of my foot as I strutted around the loft, avoiding the kitchen because I couldn't stomach the idea of breakfast.

And I drove myself to class.

Maximillian met me at my locker, leaning against the cold metal with a notebook in his hand and a boyish grin on his face. "How are you this morning, Blakely?"

I returned his good-natured grin while chewing on the mint gum in my mouth. I was gnashing the rubber treat so hard my jaw was sore. I convinced myself that I wasn't pretending it was Decker between my teeth, though I could almost taste rust-like blood pooling in my mouth, thanks to my overactive imagination. "I'm wonderful, you?" I asked, the lie making my teeth loosen from their blow.

"Better now." Maximillian Hemsworth had charm in spades. It was a physical allure that teased your senses. His shirt was effortlessly pressed but not too stiff. His hair looked the perfect amount of messy and tame. His tie was slightly crooked, and those massive arms of his flexed the moment my eyes landed on them.

"You've got game, Maximillian," I replied with a smile, but I wanted to scowl. Dark hair and pursed lips flooded my mind. I whisked them away. I

was armor, baby. Steel.

"I feel like I'm pulling out all the stops. How about you let me take you to dinner?" Maximillian asked before shoving his right hand inside his pants pocket and bouncing on the balls of his feet, feigning that coy shyness I'm sure he thought girls loved. I breathed him in. Even his cologne, a masculine hint of sandalwood and bergamot, seemed orchestrated in some way.

No was the word I wanted to blurt out. "Why not?" I replied with a shrug. If I tried to put distance between Decker and me, Maximillian might be the man for the job—my metaphorical rehab, so to speak. Some people were like drugs. They made you feel great for a little bit, but then you felt like molten tar from the inside out. Decker was prime, white-powdered cocaine. The kind of stuff Mama bought with our tax refund money.

"Your enthusiasm is doing wonders for my pride, doll," Maximillian replied while biting his lip. I fluttered my lashes, a move I'd seen Mama do a million times, and it made me sick. I was just about to open my mouth to lick his wounds with some verbal enthusiasm, but a dark presence breezed past us. It felt like someone had walked over my grave. I turned to stare. Decker had dark circles under his bloodshot eyes and a blank expression on his face. He walked past like I was...

Nothing. Like I was nothing. Exactly what we told each other we'd be.

"Hey, Mr. H!" Maximillian called at his back. Decker paused. His spine so stiff it could cut ice.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he spun around to face us, his eyes never once greeting mine. "Get to class, Mr. Hemsworth," Decker gritted out before heading off toward his classroom.

Maximillian let out a low whistle. "Damn. I don't know how you tolerate him. Grumpy bastard," he said with a laugh. I nodded because it was the expected thing to do. Because if I didn't, I would have dropped everything and chased after Decker to demand an explanation or a promise. Neither would be productive.

"Let's go to class, alright?" I said before looping my arm through his in a comfortable gesture that felt like pricks on my skin.

"As you wish."

DECKER WAS INSUFFERABLE IN CLASS. It was like someone had shoved a stick so far up his ass that he was speaking in splinters. “Taylor, are you going to raise your hand for every question I ask, or do you have plans on letting other students speak up?” he asked while clicking through a slideshow on the front screen, letting out puffs of white-hot annoyance with every exhale. Beside me, Taylor lowered her hand before leaning forward so that her brown hair covered her embarrassed flush. Biology had never been so...tense.

“What is the purpose of an enzyme? You should have learned this last year, so every damn hand in this room better be up,” Decker gritted. No one seemed fazed that he was cursing in class.

My hand was the first to shoot up, and his eyes glossed over me like I didn’t exist. Buick raised his hand with a lazy wave as he stretched his back. “Yes, Buick?” Decker called on him.

“It’s a protein that speeds up the chemical reactions in our bodies,” he answered effortlessly while adjusting his thick glasses.

“Great, you actually read something last year, Buick. Congratulations,” Decker replied before taking a long gulp of his coffee and slamming it down on the desk.

He continued like that for a while, calling on everyone in the class while completely ignoring my existence. It was pissing me off. When we agreed on nothing, I hadn’t imagined he meant in the classroom, too. Every time I raised my hand, his eyes avoided the expanse of my skin and the annoyance in my expression. It was like I didn’t even exist.

“What are the different types of living organisms?” Decker asked before cracking his neck. There were only five minutes left in the class period, and I was determined to answer at least one question.

I raised my hand and blurted out the answer without waiting on him to call on me. “Eukaryotes and prokaryotes. Or multicellular organisms and unicellular organisms. Eukaryotic cells have a nucleus, while prokaryotic cells do not.” It was a reasonably straightforward question that I’d known the answer to since middle school, but I was proud to get the chance to answer all the same.

Decker finally, finally took a look at me. It was a glower that felt both disinterested and furious. He didn’t acknowledge my words. Didn’t say whether I was right or wrong. “Class dismissed,” he growled. Everyone collected their belongings just as the bell rang, but I kept rooted to my seat.

Maximillian stopped at my desk. “Ready for lunch?” he asked before

glancing over his shoulder. Decker's bad mood didn't go unnoticed in the slightest, and he seemed eager to get the hell out of Mr. Harris's domain.

"Yep. I'll be right there," I replied with a bright smile, hoping the annoyance I felt didn't show through my clenched teeth.

Maximillian squeezed my hand, which was clutching the wooden desk with a vice-like grip, before heading out, his leather backpack slung over his shoulder. "If you want to discuss something school-related, you'll need to schedule an appointment during my office hours, Miss Stewart," Decker said before flipping through a stack of papers with white knuckles and a sour expression.

"You need to chill," I whispered before getting up and walking over to his desk. "I get you're freaked out about what happened but—"

"I suggest you keep your mouth shut, Miss Stewart. I'm freaked out about nothing, I assure you."

"So your piss-poor attitude is just your natural disposition? Hmm. Makes sense." My words were like a slap, and his face flamed with anger the moment the insult left my lips.

"I'm sorry, did you just insult your teacher, Miss Stewart? That's highly inappropriate behavior."

"What's inappropriate is you punishing me for something we both did. Stop ignoring me. Stop avoiding me. Can we please just go back to being awkward friends that love Lance? Last night was..." Decker winced as my voice trailed off.

"If you say nothing, I might lose my goddamn mind," he grunted.

"I was going to say great. Let's move forward cordially."

Decker stood up and rounded his desk, heading over to me with a frown. "That's the thing, Blakely," he whispered, his hot breath feathering over my skin as he sunk closer to me. Oh so, so close. He was just an exhale away. It was wrong, but my skin tingled, my breath hitched. He was so close yet felt worlds away. "You feel this?" he asked.

I swallowed before answering. "Yes," I replied.

"This is why I can't just move forward. I've always been an all or nothing kind of guy. I can't entertain a cordial existence with you because I'm not strong enough to hold back. I promised Lance space, so that's what I'm going to give you. Please respect my restraint by not testing it further. Leave."

Like a rubber band pulled so tight it was on the brink of snapping, Decker took a step backward and let out an exhale of relief once we were out of one

another's orbits. "Okay," I offered. This was what I wanted, wasn't it? I didn't want a man with half-hearted intentions that got off on a woman's attention. He set the boundary, and I decided then to respect it.

"Go to lunch, Miss Stewart," he ordered.

"Yes, Mr. Harris."

Decker

LANCE WAS CALLING. I stared at my phone, willing his name to disappear. I'd never ignored his calls. I'd usually been overly eager to speak with him my entire life. He'd always been a lifeline—a brother. But now I was hiding from his calls like a pussy.

I answered it just before it went to voicemail. "Hello?" my voice lacked the usual warmth I generally reserved for my best friend.

"Hey man, you okay?" Lance asked. I could hear the whirling echo of his car as it sliced through the wind and traveled down the highway. It annoyed me how easily he picked up on my turmoil with one single greeting.

"Yeah. Just a rough day at work. Teaching isn't easy, you know?" I played it off, hoping he bought my story. I didn't have the heart to tell him that only one student was driving the ever-living crazy out of me.

Last night was a mistake of catastrophic proportions. I wasn't self-absorbed enough to compare the pain I felt to global warming, but if I were ice caps, I would have melted. The oceans were rising. Waves upon waves of shame were filling me up.

"I hear ya," Lance agreed, slipping quickly into the conversation. "This new hotel owner is going to be the death of me. He wants me to come to Louisiana weekly for meetings. I don't know, man."

I gritted my teeth. Weekly meetings weren't an option. One night was all it took for my resolve to crumble. Maybe I should move into my barely-renovated home already. It didn't have running water or electricity yet, but at

least she wouldn't be there.

"That's ridiculous," I agreed, maybe a bit too harshly.

"I don't want to be gone all the time. Blakely and I are finally connecting. I don't want to ruin that by being in Louisiana all the time. Plus, I'd miss you. Then there's Sean." Sean was Lance's newest boyfriend. I hadn't met him, which was how I knew it wasn't serious, but I was surprised to hear Lance bring him up.

"Tell the hotel manager that you can do virtual meetings. If he wants you in Louisiana, he'll have to pay a premium. And obviously, we need to talk about Sean. Is it getting serious?" I prodded. Lance always had a stream of partners. Men. Women. Old. Eccentric. Docile. Bland. Vibrant.

Lance just loved. Plain and simple. Most of the time, it got him in trouble. He didn't have a type; he was attracted to souls. I often wondered if his need to connect and burn bright was because his flesh and blood gave him up as a baby, but I never asked.

"I think it's time you meet him. I'm nervous. Do you think Blakely will like him? We haven't necessarily had the coming out parade. Everyone in my life has just always known that I'm pansexual, and I'm kind of anxious to tell her."

I let out a slow, steady breath. "I don't know Sean, so I'll have to reserve judgment. If he's anything like that Blair bitch project you brought home last time, you might need to worry. Blakely isn't going to care who you stick your dick into."

"You're right. Why am I so fucked about her accepting me?"

Because Blakely was the type of person you craved acceptance from, I thought.

"Because she's your sister, and it's still new," I answered. I was starting to feel twitchy talking about her, so I switched up the conversation. "We haven't hung out in a while, just us. Let's go to Joe's tonight when you get home. We can talk about Sean and when I'll get to scare him off."

Lance laughed. He was always amused by my protectiveness, just as his effortless way of protecting me had always amused me. I had to work at my vigilant behavior; his version of caring came naturally, like breathing.

"I think you'll like him. Let's go out to Joe's—just us. I know things have been different since Blakely showed up. It's okay to admit you want some time with your best friend."

I did miss him. I missed what we were before she showed up. I missed the

absence of guilt. I missed not knowing this sense of yearning and pain. “Yeah, yeah whatever, fucker.”

Lance chuckled. “It’s always just been you and me. Everything is changing. Sean. Blakely. You’re still my best friend, Decker,” he said with a smile. “Still my bro.”

“Don’t get sentimental on me. You know I’m not good at that shit. See you tonight,” I laughed half-heartedly before hanging up the phone. Lance *was* like a brother to me, and he was the reason I couldn’t continue this thing with Blakely.

I looked around my classroom, my eyes zoning in on Blakely’s seat. It killed me to think of her face, the disappointed glare in her eyes when I’d dismissed her. I guess, in some ways, I felt like her mother—putting myself and my friendship with her brother first. This would be better for us in the long run, and I knew that it felt wrong now, but eventually she’d thank me.

I hoped.

I DIDN’T WANT to eat at Huck-a-poos. I didn’t want to sit at the bar, listening to Lance vent about Sean while Blakely floated around in her too-tight uniform with her tongue sticking out to lick the salty sweat off her lips. Joe’s was shut down for renovations, so Lance suggested we go here. Hoping not to be suspicious, I readily agreed, though now I regretted not suggesting something else.

My eyes followed her everywhere she went. It was like gravity, the weight of the atmosphere pulling me to stare. She tipped her head back and laughed at something a guy in her section said.

I wanted to know what that fucker said.

I wanted to hear her laugh, but the music was too loud.

“So what do you think?” Lance asked. I snapped my eyes back to him.

“I think that’s great,” I effortlessly answered while kicking myself for not paying attention.

“You think I should go with him to his grandmother’s funeral?” Lance asked, his eyes dipped in confusion. Shit. I definitely should have been paying attention.

I rolled with the punches. “Does Sean want you to go?” I asked.

“Yes,” Lance replied.

“Do you want to be there to support him?” I pressed, already knowing the answer. Lance would be there for anyone and everyone.

“Well, of course, but it’s all so new. We aren’t official or anything. Isn’t it weird to attend a funeral with someone you’re just...fucking? And what about Blakely? I just got back, and I can’t leave her all weekend. I haven’t told her about him, and you haven’t even met him yet. Shouldn’t we do your usual interrogation before I take a trip with him?”

Shit—fuck—damn. I was slipping. And an entire weekend with Blakely? A war started in my brain, half of me was plotting things to do all weekend to keep out of the house, and the other half kept seeing her lips parted, eyes closed, stars falling under her skin as her back arched in ecstasy.

“Blakely is a grown woman. Just explain to her the situation, and she’ll be understanding,” I promised, though I wanted to slap myself. Blakely wasn’t a grown woman—not really. She was entirely off-limits. “And I’d like to meet Sean eventually, but I think it’s time I start to trust your instincts, Lance.”

“Oh. Okay. Yeah. Right. I’m going to do it. I’m going to tell her,” Lance convinced himself, just as Blakely strutted up with a tray on her shoulder and a tentative grin on her face. Stray blonde strands of hair framed her cheeks in frazzled waves.

“Tell who what?” she asked before setting the tray down on the bar top. It was full of bare plates and food scraps.

“I have a boyfriend,” Lance choked out, his cheeks red and his eyes wild with fear.

“When do I get to meet him?” Blakely asked without skipping a beat. There wasn’t an inch of shock on her face. Good girl.

“Well, his grandmother died unexpectedly today,” Lance explained while dipping his index finger into his whiskey and swirling the mixture around before pulling it out.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Blakely replied before looking over her shoulder at Rose then back to Lance.

“The funeral is this weekend in New Mexico, and I’m going to go with him. Is that okay? I know I’ve been gone a lot lately.”

“Of course. I have shifts here and a ton of homework. Be there for your man,” she offered with a sincere smile that didn’t quite meet her eyes. I wanted to dig behind the plastered facade to hear her thoughts underneath.

Was she mad that Lance could go to a virtual stranger's funeral but not their mother's?

"Perfect. Wow. Okay. I should go call Sean, then," Lance said with a smile while looking at me. Then, he got up from his spot at the bar and headed outside. Blakely followed his back with her eyes before turning her attention to me.

"Let's keep our hands to ourselves this weekend, okay?" she asked before reaching for the tray of dirty dishes before I could even respond.

A delicate war raged in my mind, aching to reach out and wrap my arms around her or toss away my dismissal with a kiss. I watched her forearms flex as she picked up the full tray and spun on her heels to head out, but shouting stopped her in her tracks.

"What the fuck you say to me?" a balding man in his late fifties asked a scrawny college kid. I stood up as Blakely took a step back.

"I said back the fuck off!"

And then punches went flying. Blakely's tray went crashing down, glass and leftovers coated her creamy skin with sludge as a hard body was knocked into hers. I reached for her wrist to yank her back, when a man's fist connected with her chest, knocking her backward.

I saw red.

Not just the angry sort of red that demanded your attention.

It was a vibrant shade of pissed-off. I could have cracked a tooth with how intently I clenched my jaw. Curling my palm into a strong fist, I reared back and attacked her assailant, landing a hit right on bald guy's jaw. His head snapped to the left, so I threw another punch, this time aiming for his pouch of a gut.

In the corner of my eye, I saw Blakely's torso, concave as she clutched her waist. Someone pulled my hair. Whiskey spilled down my shirt.

The bald guy went sailing toward the ground, and the scrawny college dude pumped his fist in the air like he had a right to claim victory. What the actual fuck? I did all the work.

Storming over to him, I clutched his shirt through my vice-like fingers and pulled it tight, making sure to press the collar of the shirt around his neck like a noose. "Get the fuck out of here," I growled in his face, saliva forming in a pool between my teeth and my bottom lip as I shoved him toward the ground.

He crawled away while keeping his eyes on me, too scared to give me his

back. Pussy.

Within seconds, I was spinning around and picking Blakely up as adrenaline coursed through my veins like a parade. Thump, thump, thump went my heart as I cradled her and walked toward a side hallway. Rose and security rushed by to check on the other patrons, but I was worried about one person only.

Blakely.

She trembled in my arms as I set her down. Steady feet kissed the ground as her back braced itself against the wall. Her shirt was completely soaked through, and with every staggering inhale, the movement highlighted the fact that her clothes were sticking to her petite frame. Where her tank top dipped, I noticed that her cleavage was blooming a bright shade of red.

“Are you okay?” I asked before gathering a clump of her fallen hair, which was sticky from the alcohol, and pushing it out of her face.

Bright tears fell like icicles down her cheeks as she chewed on her lower lip and lifted her eyes to meet mine. “I’m fine,” she rasped before rubbing her palm across her chest. “He just knocked the air out of me.”

I looked around and noticed that a supply closet was nearby. Threading my fingers through hers, I pulled her with me to the door, opened it, and guided her inside. “Do you want me to look?” I asked. The room was stacked with canned goods, and a dim light hung overhead. She pulled her shirt down, ever so slowly until it was at the wire of her bra. I would’ve usually been kicking myself for such a perfect view, but I was too busy worrying if she was okay. The curve of her cleavage was starting to bruise, a grayish color peppering her flawless skin. I wanted to kill them.

“Does it hurt to breathe?” I asked. She tested my question out with a deep inhale, the air rattling in her chest before she whooshed it out. I breathed in the smell of her breath, getting drunk on mint gum and Diet Coke.

“Not really,” she replied before letting go of her shirt. Because it was drenched, the elasticity didn’t give. So instead of resuming its job of covering her up, the gaping trim still showed off the spot where a bruise was forming. It was like a beacon of pain, and I wanted nothing more than to make it disappear, take the throbbing on as my own.

She shook. I clenched my fist.

“Let me go get you some ice, okay?” I asked. I could hear loud voices on the other side of the door, and even though I knew she needed something, I wasn’t quite ready to leave. She was secluded. She was safe.

I had turned to leave when thin fingers wrapped around my forearm, stopping me. “Don’t go?” her stuttered voice pleaded. I turned back to look at her, and my heart sank. There was fresh, crisp fear burning through her eyes. The green hue was feral with anxiety. She bit her lip again.

I braced my hands on her shoulders, lightly holding her still. I wanted to crush her to my chest but didn’t trust myself to do so. “You’re safe now,” I promised. She would always be safe with me. She closed the distance between us and wrapped her slender arms around my neck. I felt her lips brush against my collarbone as she breathed me in as if to steady herself on my scent.

“Tell me a truth?” she asked. I wanted to tell her everything. I wanted to rip my brain apart for her to analyze if it meant that it would put her at ease. My mind flashed back to the Ferris wheel, where she willingly distracted me with stories. I decided to do that for her, too.

“I haven’t been in a fight since I was thirteen years old,” I admitted. “A guy was giving Lance a hard time. He had just started dating another boy, and you know how cruel middle schoolers can be. Lance has always loved people. Loved souls. He got his first kiss from a sweet girl in kindergarten and hasn’t stopped since.”

She nodded in understanding while keeping her face against my chest. She slithered her left hand down from around my neck until it was clutching the fabric of my shirt. “I was awful at it. If it weren’t for the teachers interrupting us, I probably would’ve had my ass beat.” Even though it was a painful memory, I couldn’t help but smile at it. I was so determined to take care of my best friend that I was willing to have a black eye and a bloody lip. And bruised ribs. And a bruised pride.

She hummed in appreciation, her lips vibrating against my pulse. “The first man that ever hit me was Mama’s boyfriend. I was six years old,” she said. Every bone in my body went rigid. “He looked like that guy out there, actually,” she continued. I felt my skin grow wet and cold from her tears; every exhale was brushing against the trail of wetness, making a shiver travel up my spine. I breathed her in as she continued, “He was drunk. Just like that guy was. He was aiming for Mama, but I was trying to protect her.” She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. “I guess I was always trying to protect her.”

I clutched Blakely tighter, confident that my firm hold would cut the circulation off in her torso. She pulled back to look up at me, her bottom lip

trembling as she shook her head once again and released my shirt to wipe her face with her fingers. “Tell me another truth,” she pleaded.

“I hate the word nothing,” I whispered.

She blinked a couple of times while staring at me. I was a dumbass for letting that truth slip. “My chest hurts,” she finally said while taking another step back. Her foot dragged across the floor as she increased the space between us. I opened my mouth to say something—anything—but a loud knocking on the door stopped me in my tracks.

“Blakely, baby? You in there?” Rose’s soft voice called out just before the knob turned. When the door opened, I sucked in a deep breath, but Blakely saved me from explaining why we were crowded together and in a room with the air so thick we could have suffocated on it.

“Hey, Rose. Sorry. I had a panic attack, and Decker got me away from the noise,” she explained. The vulnerability in her tone ate at me until I was nothing left but teeth marks.

“Oh, baby!” Rose said in her posh accent while her face wrinkled up in sadness. “I’m so sorry; my security team hauled those assholes out of here. Do you need anything?” she asked.

Blakely nodded. “Can I go home, please? Where’s my brother?”

“Of course, child. Your brother is outside looking for you. I have a spare change of clothes; wanna slip into it before you go?” We filtered out of the storage room as I felt Rose’s eyes on my torso. I looked down and saw wet marks from when Blakely clutched me close. Shit.

“I’m going to go find him,” Blakely said with a sniffle before wiping her hand across her mouth. She started walking down the hallway but paused to look back at me. “Coming, Mr. Harris?” she asked. I hated that I was *Mr. Harris* again. I didn’t want to be her teacher right now. I didn’t want to be her brother’s best friend. I wanted to be Decker. Protector. Healer. Savior. *Lover*.

“Be right there,” I replied stoically.

Rose’s voice cut through the static in my head, catching me off guard. “You got it bad, Deck,” she whispered, too low for Blakely to hear but loud enough for me to shiver with shame.

I didn’t respond, because what could I say? Yeah. I had it bad. But there was nothing I could do about it.

Blakely

SINCE THE INCIDENT at the bar a few weeks ago, a lot of nothing had happened. Rose moved me to the hostess stand, which meant no tips. I wasn't necessarily complaining. I felt safer at the front of the bar as it was near security. But still, I hated how shaken up I was. The bruise from my accidental attack had faded, but I still could feel the hit. It wasn't his fists my memory kept conjuring up, it was Mama's ex-boyfriends.

Decker went back to being *nothing*. I was starting to feel like that phrase was getting redundant. Even though we lived under the same roof, ate the same food, and participated in the same damn classroom, we only shared broken sentences and remorse between us. Even when Lance went to New Mexico for a weekend, we kept to ourselves, leaving the room if the other entered and disappearing into our seclusion for the sake of avoiding the awkward tension still simmering between us.

I still hadn't met Sean. I wasn't sure if it was because something happened during the funeral to make Lance wary or if he was embarrassed by me. Either way, Lance made an excellent effort to spend time with me, but every other night, he would disappear and not show up until the next morning. He planned nights with Sean around my work schedule, but I still felt lonely all the same. I wasn't upset with him, and I probably wouldn't even care if it weren't for the awkwardness between Decker and me.

And today I didn't want to feel lonely.

I slammed my locker door shut just as Maximillian walked up to stand

beside me. “Hey, Bae,” he said in a cheeky tone. He’d started calling me that a week ago, and it made me cringe every time. We hadn’t been on a date or even hung out outside of school, but he was persistently flirtatious. “How are you?” I wasn’t sure what to make of him. Sometimes, I caught myself staring; other times, I wished he would tone it down some. Feelings were fickle like that.

“I’m feeling anxious,” I replied. One of the great things about Maximillian was that I could be frank with him and he didn’t take me seriously. It was like leaving breadcrumbs, but geese kept snapping them up off the floor.

Maximillian ran his porn-worthy veiny hand through his blond hair. (What? I have a thing for hands.) “Anxious, eh? How come?”

“Today is what would have been Mama’s birthday. I feel like I’m supposed to be counting pennies for a cake or planning a surprise party she pretends not to know about.”

Mama was big on birthdays—specifically hers. She would celebrate the entire month, blow our money on cakes and presents. It felt odd to be doing nothing today. I didn’t want to be celebrating her. I had a lifetime of bending over backwards to make her birthday seem special, which was always odd because she never did that for me.

I guess in many ways, it was a routine—cell memory. My soul expected to be stretched thin for the whims of a self-indulgent woman, and I didn’t know how to handle the nothingness that came after her death.

Maximillian’s face dipped into a sad expression that looked like pity and disappointment. Pity probably because he felt bad for me, and disappointment because it was hard to casually flirt with girls that were supposed to be grieving their dead mother.

“Do you want to do anything?” he asked on a stutter.

I pondered his question for a moment. Did I want to do anything?

Yes. Yes, I did.

I wanted today to be about me.

“I want to skip class. Maybe drink some beer. Dance on a table or some shit.” It was precisely the sort of thing Mama would have done. I guess, in some ways, I could pay homage to her while stealing some selfishness for myself.

Maximillian’s mouth dropped open in shock, but he quickly mastered his expression before leaning against my locker. “I’ve invited you out countless

times, but now you want to get wild? On a Wednesday?" he clarified.

It was true. He'd invited me to a few parties on the weekend and dates during the week. I always had excuses or pretended to be too depressed to leave the house. I enjoyed Maximillian's company, and I didn't want to blur our dynamic with his hopes and my realities.

I'd make an exception just this once. "If you're not game, no problem. I can have a good time by myself," I replied with a shrug before shoving my messenger bag into my locker and slamming it shut. I wouldn't need it today.

"Oh, no, no, no. I'm going with you. I've got just the place in mind, too," he replied before putting his arm over my shoulders and hugging me close. "I'll drive, okay?"

We walked down the hall, with Maximillian's arm still wrapped around my shoulders and a wild grin on my face. I was looking forward to the day. When I had first woken up, Mama's birthday had haunted me. It made me sick. Maybe it was wrong to spend the day getting drunk in her memory, but I wasn't willing to sit around and mope.

The bell rang, and we continued to walk, and as we passed Decker's classroom, I glanced inside. I was met with the dark, steel eyes. It was a brief flash, a slight moment in time that seemed to last forever but couldn't have been more than three seconds. His eyes lingered on how Maximillian held me, and I saw the confusion in his expression. We should've been in class by then.

I watched his mouth open and close in indecision for a flash, but we were out of eyesight long before he could make up his mind. Decker probably knew we were up to something, but it would go against our promise to be nothing if he stopped and asked me about it. So instead, we made our way to the parking lot, leaving thoughts of our broody teacher behind.

Maximillian drove a Honda Accord. He was pretty popular around this place, so I was surprised to see that he drove such a mundane car. I liked it. It almost normalized him. "Where we going?" I asked while sinking into the seats, which smelled like AXE Body Spray. He adjusted the rearview mirror before flipping through the radio channels, pausing on a country-western station that blared music Mama would've enjoyed through the speakers.

"It's a surprise. Just leave it to me, okay?" he said with a grin.

It felt nice to have someone take the reins for once, and I was okay with letting him make the decisions. "Okay," I replied while biting the inside of my cheek. I sunk further into my seat and fought the first real smile I'd felt in

weeks from breaching my face.

This would be interesting.

"YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS," I said while staring down at the chocolate cake in front of me. We were at a bakery, and Maximillian was sitting across from me with his phone out, prepared to record the embarrassment.

"It's a smash cake, Blakely. Eat it." His order was full of mirth, and I stared longingly at the silverware he had tucked in his shirt pocket.

"It's not even my birthday," I replied with a chuckle before dipping my index finger into the moist cake and picking up a dollop of icing. "I don't understand why I have to do this."

There wasn't anyone at the bakery with us, so it wasn't too bad. Max had been doing a stellar job of distracting me thus far. I thought I wanted a wild night, but everything so far had been wholesome. He drove me to the aquarium, to lunch at his favorite fast-food restaurant, and now to this bakery, for me to do this smash cake. He was making today all about me, and it was healing in a way.

"It'll be fun. I promise not to show the video to anyone else, but maybe it'll help you get some of your frustration out. There's nothing like stuffing your face with something yummy to help cool off," Max said with a chuckle.

Rolling my eyes, I grabbed a handful of cake and shoved it in my mouth, making sure to smear the chocolate icing along my chin and lips in the process. Damn. That was a good cake. Maximillian was laughing as I dove in for another bite, this time forgoing my hands and just using my face. When I sat back up, I could feel bits of icing and cake stuck to my cheeks.

"Oh my gosh," Max began. His words were short and choppy because laughter kept interrupting between each syllable. "You're a mess." I realized just then how playful this entire moment was. Decker might have made me feel capable and honest, but Max brought out a light-heartedness in me that I hadn't experienced in a while. Life had been so sober with Mama's treatments and the uncertainty at Lance's house. It was nice to do something pointless and funny just for the sake of it.

"You—you got something right here," Max taunted while wiping at his cheek. I hurried out of the booth I was sitting in and circled the table to get

closer to him.

"I'm sorry, where did you say it was?" I asked with glee. He reached for the napkin as if preparing to wipe my face for me, and I went in for the kill. Pressing my lips to his cheek, I smeared the chocolate icing all over his face as laughter erupted from my chest. Flakes and crumbs littered the collar of his school uniform, and he grabbed my wrist, yanking me into the booth with him as we both roared with laughter.

It took us a moment to clean up, and I still had icing all over my shirt. Maximillian's lips were stained from the icing, and there was a clump of chocolate stuck in his hair. We looked a mess, and I didn't even care. It was worth it.

Once the icing was long gone, we shared a fork and took bites out of the destroyed cake. It was friendly intimacy, sharing a utensil. And the way Maximillian kept looking at me made me wonder if he thought more of this day than I did. It made me feel bad. How could I possibly explain to him that my mind was preoccupied? How could I possibly be interested in someone else when I still felt remnants of the fire that sizzled between Decker and me?

"Maximillian Hemsworth, stop looking at me with those loving eyes of yours." I tsked. A slight blush kissed his cheeks and brushed along the tips of his ears. I didn't mean to embarrass him, but the coy smile he was throwing as he looked at me made me pause.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Blakely Stewart. I look how I always do," he argued. "Who's got your heart so twisted up that you can't even think straight?" His question shocked the hell out of me.

"I-I don't know what you mean. Why would you say that?" I asked. Suddenly the bakery seemed to grow smaller and smaller, and it was like four walls were caged around my heart.

"I know when to quit when I'm ahead. Anytime I put my incredible moves on you, you get this sad look in your eyes. I don't know if you know this, but I attend a school for geniuses. I can pick up on a girl that isn't into me pretty well. There's this thing called body language and social cues."

I frowned despite his harmless banter. I didn't want things to change between us, but there would never really be anything there. It was like going into space and seeing how small the world really was first hand. You never looked at earth the same way again. "I want to like you. You're much more agreeable and better looking."

"I bet my dick is bigger, too," Maximillian joked.

“Probably. Wanna strip down so I can compare?”

Maximillian stood up and tugged at the button on his uniform slacks. “Don’t tempt me, Blakely Stewart.” I threw my hands up in mock surrender, and he placed a hand on my shoulder. His eyes peered into mine, that boyish smile hiding the questioning thoughts beneath. Max must have seen the terror on my face. Or maybe he realized I was too damaged, too distant to pursue anymore, because he pulled away.

“So,” he began with a smile. “How about that drink?”

Decker

I'D BEEN PACING the floors for the past two hours. It wasn't even ten o'clock, and I was acting like a caveman.

When I'd called Lance to let him know that Blakely wasn't in class today, he seemed unconcerned. "She texted me that she was taking the day off with Maximillian. It's our mother's birthday, so she needed a low-key day."

I didn't like that I didn't know today was her mother's birthday. I also didn't like that, instead of spending the day with me, she sought out Maximillian Fucking Hemsworth for comfort. If I were honest, I didn't like a lot of things lately, especially the distance between a girl I shouldn't be obsessing over and me.

I'd called her three times, debating on a fourth. Lance was in Louisiana and kept assuring me that she was okay. I wasn't convinced. Visions of Maximillian holding her close and capitalizing on her vulnerability made me sick to my stomach, and then I wanted to punch myself because I wasn't any better. The night at Huck-a-poos still haunted me. I wanted to hold her again.

I knew that if I bugged Lance about it any more, he'd start asking questions. I was in a precarious position, straddling concern with distance so we could keep our attraction to one another a secret.

But was there any attraction left? She avoided me like the plague now. The pull was one-sided, and it fucked me up to know I couldn't just forget how soft her skin felt or how she moaned at my touch. I had to wade through my restraint like it was a bowl of molasses.

The front door to our loft opened and in stumbled a staggering Blakely in the arms of Maximillian. Her laughter was like clumsy bells falling to the floor. The moment Max saw me, his eyes widened with fear.

Good.

“Mr. Harris,” he greeted as Blakely pulled a nimble finger up and pressed it against her lips with a giggle. She was shushing me.

She was drunk off her ass.

“You skipped my class today and now show up drunk?” I gritted out with a sneer. Max had the decency to flinch. “You better not have driven her home if you drank, Max. So help me God.” I clenched my fist in anger, reminding myself that I’d go to jail if I kicked his ass right here and now. Max let go of Blakely to throw his hands up in surrender.

“Oh, no, no. I haven’t had a drop of alcohol. Promise,” he said just as Blakely’s heel slipped and she went crashing down to the ground. I jumped into action just as Max grabbed her elbow. She was like dead weight though, because he couldn’t haul her up.

Weak ass punk.

“Move,” I ordered before bending over and picking Blakely up. Once she was cradled in my arms, I turned to look at Maximillian. “You have detention for the next month. Get the fuck out of my house,” I yelled, not caring that it was inappropriate to be holding Blakely against my chest or that I was abusing my power as his teacher to inflict punishment when I didn’t have the right. “And if I hear that you took advantage of her vulnerable state, I will make it my personal mission to punish you to the full extent of the law,” I growled.

Maximillian blinked. “Careful, Mr. H., I can’t tell if you sound like a jealous boyfriend or her father.”

I lifted Blakely to steady her in my shaking arms. I wasn’t even shaking because she was heavy—because she was way too light. Was she eating enough? Fuck, why was I worried about her eating habits?

I was shaking because I was so angry at this asshole for calling me out. “Is there something you’d like to say, kid?” I sneered. Blakely moaned in my lap, and I figured we had about twenty seconds before she was vomiting all over the front of my shirt.

Maximillian gave me a sly smile. It was one of those knowing grins that made me want to punch his teeth in. “After a few shots, she talked about you a lot. I’m not one to judge, but I suggest you take a hard look at yourself

before accusing me of preying on a vulnerable girl.” Max then reached up to brush a blonde strand out of Blakely’s eyes. “See you in class, Mr. H,” he said before spinning around and leaving the loft. Maximillian Hemsworth was going to be a problem.

I didn’t even have time to think about the shit storm that was brewing, because Blakely groaned against my chest once more. “I think I’m going to be sick,” she whimpered. My feet moved lightning fast to our bathroom, and I set her down on the cold tile before flipping up the toilet lid.

Her body folded over as she emptied the liquid contents of her stomach into the bowl. I gathered her hair up in my fist, keeping it out of the projectile vomit. Although it was disgusting, it was a strangely intimate move that had my body growing stiff with protectiveness and care. I tried to convince myself that it was second nature to me. I’d held my own mother’s hair up plenty of times when I was a teen. But I knew deep down that wasn’t it. I wanted to help Blakely. I wanted to be the one that comforted her and took care of her.

She heaved until her stomach was empty, then sat down on the floor, those crayon-green eyes squeezed shut. Grabbing a washcloth from the cabinet, I wet it with cold water before handing it to her.

“Would you like another truth, Mr. Harris?” she slurred. Her voice was gravelly, and I wondered if she was going to puke again.

“I want you to brush your teeth,” I said before grabbing her toothbrush and squirting the mint toothpaste onto the bristles. After handing it to her, I leaned against the bathroom vanity with my arms crossed over my chest and watched in rapt attention as she scrubbed her mouth clean of the vomit and alcohol.

When she was done, she stood up and leaned over the basin, spitting foamy toothpaste into it as her arm brushed against mine. I stiffened at the contact and told my dick to calm the fuck down. She was covered in sweat and vomit, and yet here I was getting hard at the thought of her—sick bastard. I was a fucking sick bastard. She touched me again, and based on the alcohol seeping through her pores, I briefly entertained the question of whether one could get a contact drunk.

Once she was done, she stared at her reflection in the mirror. The charcoal makeup that lined her eyes was now smeared. The blood vessels around her lips were prominent, and boozy sweat dripped down her forehead.

“I kind of look like her,” Blakely said in astonishment. She lifted her

nimble fingers to pinch her cheek as if the movement could wake her up. The alcohol probably made her entire face numb.

“Like who?” I asked, although I had a feeling I already knew the answer.

“Like Mama. Isn’t it funny how we all become our parents? You took care of me like I used to take care of her. I can’t remember a birthday that didn’t end like this. Seems fitting that I would celebrate in typical Sharron fashion.” She let out a disgusted huff.

“I’ll agree that tonight was a poor decision,” I deadpanned. “But one night does not make you like her. I wish you would’ve talked to me, though, instead of letting Maximillian Hemsworth get you drunk.”

She spun around to face me, then poked at my chest with her index finger. “Talk to you? We are so busy avoiding one another that I almost forget you exist.”

Her words were like a hammer to the chest. Blow after blow; she crunched the bones and tendons until she was beating my heart. “I’m sorry, Blakely,” I replied, mostly because I didn’t know what else I could say. There was no easy solution for this. I couldn’t allow myself to be close, but it also killed me to not be there for her. Somewhere along the way, I had grown to care about Blakely’s happiness genuinely. This didn’t look happy to me.

Her finger was still poised at my chest, though it wasn’t jabbing me anymore. I looked down as her hand flattened against my muscles. I let out a sigh of content as her warm palm circled my pecs.

“Let’s get you to bed,” I rasped. She wasn’t in the proper state to make good decisions, and I wasn’t strong enough to tell her no. We were just a collection of wilted weaknesses.

I guided her across the hall and into her bedroom. The moment I opened her door and stepped inside, the smell of her orange shampoo invaded my senses. It was bright with inviting hints of vanilla. I wanted to roll around in it.

On her desk was a stack of books and homework. Her work uniform was tossed on the floor. It looked so incredibly lived in, and yet we have been avoiding each other so much that I forgot we were even roommates. I wanted to examine every inch, take in her life. But instead, I guided her to her bed and sat her down.

Kneeling at her feet, I helped her out of the high heels that she was determined to wear every day to torture me. I wanted to rub the arch of her feet, which would likely be throbbing tomorrow. I was at war with myself

and ultimately decided that a simple massage was necessary. Cupping her foot in my hand, I ran my thumb down her arch, letting out a hiss of need when her body shivered at my touch.

“I wish I weren’t drunk so I could fully enjoy this,” Blakely said with a slight giggle. Her reckless decision was a stark reminder of the age difference between us. I had long ago given up wild nights. I liked to toss a couple of beers back with Lance, but my college party days were over. Hers were just about to begin.

“You’re lucky Lance isn’t here,” I growled before grabbing her other foot and massaging the heel for just a moment. I wasn’t actually sure Lance would care. He was always the free spirited one, and he was so focused on gaining her approval that he probably wouldn’t say a damn thing.

“You’re right,” she said before leaning all the way back and plopping her back against the mattress. I was eye level with her panties, which were on full display thanks to the schoolgirl skirt she still wore. I swallowed, daring myself to look while admonishing myself. I had always considered myself to be a gentleman, and I wouldn’t stop now.

Standing up, I eased her legs onto the mattress and helped her guide her head toward the pillow. Lifting the soft comforter, I tucked her in. “Are you going to tell me a bedtime story?” she joked. Those green eyes of hers were heavy with exhaustion. I saw all the weight beneath them. Today was difficult for her, even though she wasn’t willing to admit it.

And maybe it was because I knew she needed a brief reprieve from the guilt harbored in her soul regarding her mother’s death, I obliged. “There once was a little boy,” I began before sitting on the edge of her mattress. She reached out to grab my hand, lightly squeezing it in encouragement to continue.

“He had it all. Two parents he thought he could look up to and a great big house. Everyone adored him.” She snuggled deeper into the mattress, and I bet if she had a bowl of popcorn, she’d be happily munching on it as she stared at me. “But then that little boy grew up. He realized that parents were just regular people. With regular problems. He realized that big house was actually pretty lonely.”

Blakely interrupted. “This is a somber bedtime story, Mr. Harris.”

I shushed her before continuing. “But then he made a friend. And that big, lonely house didn’t feel so lonely anymore. And those disappointing parents didn’t feel as disappointing anymore. And his friend made him see

the world differently. His friend became family, and he made a promise that he would protect that friend with everything he had. They lived happily ever after.”

When I looked up at Blakely, mist had gathered in her drunken eyes. She was fighting to stay awake, as well as fighting the emotions bubbling up in her chest. It was important to me that she knew who Lance was in my life. She needed to understand why I had to keep things separate. Lance was my person, and fuck if that didn’t make me feel like a pussy for saying it. But he was. I got up, not willing to continue this story anymore.

“Hey, Mr. Harris?” she asked. Sleep was heavy, and so was her tone.

I was walking toward her bedroom door when I finally answered. “Yeah?”

“Do you think I’ll ever find a friend like that?”

I wanted to tell her that I could be that person for her. I wanted to take the loneliness in her cavernous heart and make it warm and inviting. I opened my mouth, determined to tell her all the ways I would fix the pain of her past. But light snores interrupted me. She was fast asleep.

Yeah, Blakely. I think you will.

Blakely

THE SHRILL RINGING of my cell phone woke me up. My head was slightly throbbing, and it smelled like I went for a swim in a bottle of Jack. Reaching for my phone, I frowned when I realized it was four in the afternoon. Had I seriously slept that long?

“Hello?” My voice was raspy like I’d smoked a pack of cigarettes, then grated my vocal cords down with sandpaper.

“Bumble Bee? Why do you sound hungover as hell?” Dad asked with a chuckle. I warmed at the familiar nickname he had for me as a kid. It had been a while since anyone had called me that.

“Because I am.” I didn’t bother lying to the old man, and he wouldn’t judge me. He’d had his fair share of benders in his time.

“Well, take some Advil and drink a Gatorade; I wanna take my best girl out to dinner,” Dad boomed into the speaker of the phone, and I winced at the loud sound. He was taking full advantage of my pounding head, likely trying to highlight the consequences of hitting the bottle too hard so that I didn’t go down the same path as him.

“Okay,” I choked out. My body wanted to hide under the covers, but I was excited to see Dad again. I could stomach feeling miserable for a dinner date with him.

“Pick you up in two hours. I got a car!” he exclaimed excitedly.

“Can’t wait to see it and hound you for running stoplights,” I replied in good humor. “See you soon! Love you.”

“Love you too, kid.” We hung up, and I clutched my phone to my chest. Despite feeling like hell, I was excited to see Dad again. It felt nice to find some normalcy in our relationship.

I stretched my hands high above my head, releasing the built-up tension in my spine. I then rolled my neck, listening to the greedy pops as my bones settled. My stomach sloshed from the alcohol still moving around in it. What day was it? Thursday? I was undoubtedly going to get in trouble for cutting class two days in a row. I didn’t even want to think about all the homework I needed to catch up on.

I turned to look at my nightstand and smiled when I saw a sheet of paper there. Grabbing it, I read the impatiently scrawled words in a reckless script.

Told the school you have the flu. You owe me a truth. Drink some damn water. Lance comes home tonight. Decker

My heart swelled as I tried to run through everything that had happened last night. Aside from the tender moment at the bakery, Maximillian slipped into strictly platonic territory. Only occasionally did his hand linger on my arm for too long, or I caught him staring at me with hope. Maximillian seemed to sense that I needed a friend more than a flirtatious love interest last night and made sure to make things easy and fun. I quickly wrote him a text, thanking him for the booze and for taking me home, before tossing my phone on the bed and walking into my bathroom.

The moment my eyes hit the toilet, embarrassment hit me like the vomit I spewed last night. I purged shame through my pores. I couldn’t even look at the porcelain throne without blushing. Decker had held my hair up. He was attentive and kind. The part of me that refused to hope said he did it out of a sense of duty, but I knew better. Decker still cared, so what was I going to do with that information?

Turning on the water, I got under the stream and steam while trying not to feel hope. Decker took care of me last night. Certainly, that had to count for something?

Whether or not he cared wasn’t ever an issue. It was the possibility of caring too much that had us feeling so restrained.

I lathered the citrus soap in my palm and ran it over my body while letting the smell of bad decisions slip down the drain. Once I felt human again, I turned the water off and towed dry before going to stand in front of the mirror. Images of last night flashed in my mind once more as I wiped away the condensation from the steam and stared at myself.

Today, I felt like myself again. Yesterday was needed but reckless. I didn't want to spiral into the destructive selfishness Mama used to live out.

My sopping wet hair made droplets of water travel down my back, and I opened the bathroom door to head back into my room, pausing when I heard the front door open.

Decker walked inside, carrying a messenger bag over his shoulder as he slammed the door shut and glanced down the hallway toward me. I clutched the towel tighter against my body. There was a silent standoff between us. His eyes swept over where the towel hit mid-thigh, his dark, gaze lingering on the triangle of skin peeping through the thick fabric.

"You okay?" he finally asked with a cough before running his hand through his dark hair. He shifted his bag over his crotch, and I wondered if he was trying to hide a growing erection. It thrilled me.

"Yep. Thanks for covering for me. And for last night," I whispered. The AC kicked on, and a blast of cold air left an icy trail down the drips of water coating my skin. I shivered, forcing myself to compartmentalize my emotions and convince myself that it was from the artificial chill in the air and not Decker's lusty look. It could have been easy. I could have dropped my towel and sauntered over to him. I could have demanded a kiss, stripped him bare, and taken him in the kitchen.

But affections like ours were rarely easy, so instead, I clutched my towel closer.

"Let's talk when you have clothes on," he choked out before practically fleeing to the living room. I watched his back for long enough to catch him stealing another look. And boy, was it a lingering moment. I bit my lip as he glanced over his shoulder. The world stopped spinning. His eyes were hooded. I debated dropping my towel once more, but he disappeared before I could convince myself that it was harmless.

Nothing about us was harmless.

So instead of doing all the things I wanted, I slipped into my bedroom and got dressed for dinner with Dad. Decker and I wouldn't be talking about last night.

"YOU LOOK LIKE SHIT, KID," Dad said with a laugh while pouring an ungodly

amount of ketchup onto his plate. We were back at the diner, with our table swimming in greasy food and chuckles between us.

“Don’t think I don’t notice that black eye you’re sporting, old man,” I replied with a wave of my hand before stealing the ketchup bottle to drown my own plate with it. “What happened?”

I was surprised to find that Dad was sporting a shiner when he picked me up. He’d always been a prideful man, so I waited until he had food in front of his face before asking. He couldn’t avoid me now.

“It’s nothing,” he gritted, but I knew a thinly veiled lie when I saw one.

“Dad, what happened?” I pestered.

“Blakely. You spent your entire life raising your Mama. I’m not going to let you wipe my ass, too. I’m a grown man; I can handle it.”

His words stopped me in my tracks. “I’m not mothering you,” I gritted. “I’m allowed to care. I’m allowed to ask about your life, Dad.”

“That’s the problem, kid. You don’t stop there. Do you know how on airplanes they tell you to put your own air mask on first before helping others? It’s been a while since I’ve flown, so I could be wrong,” Dad rambled while swirling a french fry in his ketchup. Admittedly, I hadn’t ever been on a plane, but I knew what he was talking about.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Well, you’re the type to give your mask away to someone that already has their own. Your mother was breathing your air, Blakely. I’m not going to do that. I’ve got my own supply. My own lungs.”

My eyes twinkled with moisture, and I swatted it away. I wanted so badly for Dad to be the one that raised me. He had his faults, but something told me he would have grown up for me. Dad would have *tried* for me—eventually. He was just so young when I was born, so stupid. He grew out of it. Prison had that sort of effect on a person.

Mama never did.

“Fine,” I finally said, though I was still itching to know what Dad was hiding from me. But if he wanted to prove he could handle his shit, I’d let him. I had to end this toxic cycle of feeling responsible for my parents. It was their job to feel responsible for me.

“So how is Lance? How’s the new school?” Dad asked, smoothly transitioning us into casual conversation territory.

“It’s good,” I choked out. “I really like my school. I’ve made a few friends. It’s challenging, but I really like it. I really like it. Really.” I sounded

like a broken record. Dad's face dipped, protectiveness rolling off of him in waves. His scowl highlighted the bruise on his eye and the scar on his upper lip.

"What's wrong, Blakely?" he asked.

I almost wanted to use the same analogy, reminding him that I had my own pair of fully functioning lungs. But I didn't say it. "I don't really want to talk to my Dad about guy problems," I admitted, and his face bloomed red. I wasn't sure if it was anger or embarrassment.

"You're not...pr-pregnant, are you?" he asked.

"Dad. I never had a curfew. Mama gave me my first drink at twelve, and I had to forge her signature on report cards because she couldn't be bothered to see her daughter's straight A's. There was only one rule in her house: Wrap it up. She bought condoms in bulk and put me on the pill when I started my period. I'm not having a kid any time soon."

Dad squirmed in his chair, his face twisted in pure agony like I'd stabbed him in the eye with my fork. "Okay, okay, I get it!" he whined before scrubbing his hands down his face. "Please, say no more."

I smirked before plopping a chicken tender in my mouth, slowly chewing it before swallowing. "Have you ever liked someone bad for you?" I asked, then immediately regretted my decision.

Mama. Mama was bad for Dad. Mama was the reason he ended up in prison. When I was eight years old, Mama and Dad got the bright idea to rob a store. Mama convinced him it would put food on the table, told him that if they didn't want me ending up in the system, they'd have to provide for me. The road to prison was paved with good intentions, and when the cops showed up, Mama sped off in the getaway car, leaving Dad behind while claiming she had a kid to raise. She didn't give two shits about me; she just didn't want to get caught.

"Never mind, don't answer that," I said while looking out the window. I didn't want to hash out all the things that twisted Dad up inside. He would have gone to the ends of the earth for her, and in many ways, he did. She was just too selfish to see.

"I can't believe I'm giving you boy advice. I might be rusty, but I'll give it a shot, okay?" Dad offered while taking a large gulp of his Diet Coke.

"This is gonna be good," I teased while leaning back in my seat and crossing my arms over my chest.

"Men are pigs," Dad began. I snorted. "We're wrong most of the time.

And we are stupid. We don't know what's good for us, and we make poor decisions.”

“This is the best speech ever, old man,” I said with a giggle.

“But sometimes we find someone that makes us want to be...better. Someone that makes us think. Someone that makes us want to be right—do the right thing. If they become better by being in your presence, they're good for you.” I let his words saturate my soul for a minute. What about me? Did Decker make me a better person? He encouraged me to voice my truth. Demanded I go to school and further my education. He put aside this...thing...between us so that I could have a shot at a real relationship with Lance that wasn't burdened by our taboo relationship. He held my hair when I puked.

Maybe I was the bad influence in our relationship.

“What if they think that staying away is what's better?” I asked.

“Then you have to respect it. Men are selfish. We take, take, and then take some more. We're fucking conquerors. Just read a history book.” I nodded, understanding what he was saying. “So if he's willing to not be selfish for your well-being, then hell, I actually approve of this guy.”

“What if I'm the one that wants to be selfish?” I asked before slurping on my drink and maintaining eye contact with Dad. He rolled his eyes.

“Then I'd tell you to stop being a man. You know, we thought you were a boy for like six months? Faulty sonogram. You've got that big dick energy, kid. Put that shit away and do what's right.”

I spurted Coke out my nose while choking on laughter. It burned my nostrils, and I had to grab the stack of napkins in the middle of the table to wipe my face. “Did you just say I have big dick energy? I can't even with that. Are you reading quotes on Pinterest again?” I snorted while trying to calm my breathing.

“I told you that I'm trying to get hip with the lingo!” Dad exclaimed with a laugh. On one of our calls, he explained that he finally bought a smartphone and was enjoying researching recipes on Pinterest. It was adorable, and I teased him about it whenever I could. “Ten years is a long time to be on the inside. I still don't understand this Yeet business.”

“I don't think anyone does,” I snickered.

The front door to the restaurant opened, and in walked three men decked out in all leather with their heads shaved. They looked sketchy as fuck, and I was going to comment on their shady appearance, when I noticed Dad's face

completely drained of blood. Something about these guys had him scared as hell.

“Hey kid, you ready to go? I just remembered I have something to do,” he choked out while looking down at his plate, gripping his fork so hard that I thought he would bend the metal.

“What’s going on?” I whisper-hissed while checking out those guys by the door.

“Don’t look at them, Bee. Keep your eyes on me,” Dad instructed, and my eyes zeroed in on the purplish bruise on his face, and my mind made the connection.

“Did those guys do this to you, Dad?” I asked as he filtered through his tattered wallet and pulled out some cash. Dropping it on the table, he reached over and grabbed my wrist. We were fast walking out a side exit within seconds.

“Dad, talk to me,” I whispered as the door shut. He dragged me to his beat-up Dodge and shoved me in the passenger seat, looking around the parking lot as his fingers trembled. I always thought my father was strong and immovable. Like a mountain. Like stone.

But now, seeing him struggle to stop the tremors in his body long enough to slip his keys into the ignition, I realized that my father was very much afraid of whoever those men were. It wasn’t until we were pulling out of the parking lot that I glanced at the window to the restaurant again. There, standing on the other side of the glass, the three men stared with their arms crossed over their chest, watching our car disappear down the road.

“What was that, Dad?” I asked. I tried to keep my voice calm, though I was freaking out.

“You have to pretend like you never saw them, Blakely,” Dad urged. He kept checking the rearview mirror as if worried they were following us. “I thought they left town, but they didn’t. Those men are very dangerous, Bee. This isn’t a joke.”

“Dad. Tell me who they are,” I pleaded. Dad seemed to gnaw on my plea. His eyes were shifty, his shoulders slumped in defeat.

“On the inside, I did things to survive. It’s all about who you know in there, Bee. I pledged myself to a gang, and now I can’t leave.”

“Shit, Dad,” I huffed while slamming my head against the headrest and squeezing my eyes shut.

“I don’t want that life. That’s not me. I wanted a fresh start for us, but it

appears like once again, I'm going to fuck it all up.”

“Dad, you have to leave town. You need to get out of here,” I rushed out while twisting to stare at him. “Wait until shit calms down. Can you call your parole officer?” I asked. I was frantically searching for a solution. I couldn’t leave my dad; we’d just finally found each other again. This was so fucked up. It felt like someone was standing on my chest, taking away my air.

“She doesn’t give a shit about me,” Dad spat. His face grew an angry shade of red. “I tell her I’m involved in gang activity, and she’ll find a way to lock me up again.”

“Maybe I should tell Lance? He’ll know what to—”

“NO! Absolutely not. You’re going to go home, and if you see those men, you’re going to steer clear, do you understand me? Don’t call me. Don’t seek me out. The only way I’ll be able to keep you safe is if they don’t know who you are. It might already be too late.” He seemed so certain, but I wasn’t convinced. There had to be another way.

Dad turned on the street leading to Lance’s apartment. “Dad, this is so—”

“I’m sorry, kid. I’m so fucking sorry. I tried, I really did. But right now, your safety is more important to me, okay?”

Tears started streaming down my face. “This isn’t right.”

“Guess you make me a better person, huh? I love you enough to leave.” The conversation with Dad from before felt so far away now. I sobbed harder as he put the car in park.

I reached over the center console to give him a hard hug. I breathed in the smell of his cheap cologne, mixed in with motor oil and sweat. “You have to come back, okay?” I choked out.

“I will, Bee. I will.”

When I pulled away, we stared at one another for another moment, then I let out a shaky breath and exited the car, leaving behind the one parent I had left.

Blakely

THE DOORMAN STARED CURIOUSLY at me as I walked inside Lance's building. "You okay, Miss Blakely?" he'd asked, but I ignored his call at my back. There was only one person I wanted to talk to right now. One person that would make all of this okay. Somehow, Decker Harris had become my safe haven, and I wanted nothing more than to wrap up in his comfort while I processed the terror coursing through my veins.

Tears were streaming down my face in a constant flow of agony. I had been looking forward to dinner with Dad, but I wasn't expecting it to end like this. It seemed fitting that his past would steal him away from me before we could even get started. This was why I didn't get close to people. It hurt too much when they let you down or left.

Even through all of this, I hated myself for making this about me. I was no better than Mama, taking other's demons and wearing them like a cashmere scarf to show off. She'd brag about her misfortunes for sympathy, and I never wanted to be like that.

"Her father is in prison."

"We barely have enough money for rent. I lost my job."

"These medical bills are piling up. I'm dying, you know."

Dad was in some serious danger, and all I could think about was how this would affect me. It felt too similar to her narcissistic behavior, and I wiped at my eyes to sever the thick disgust that filled me once I realized it.

I continued to furiously wipe at my face as I took the stairs up to Lance's

loft. I needed time to console myself and steady my emotions. I needed time to think about what we were going to do. Do I go to the police and risk ruining Dad's parole? Do I trust Lance enough to go against Dad's wishes and tell him?

Once at the door, I hovered my hand over the knob for another moment of self-pity before opening it. The first person I saw inside was Decker. He was sitting on the couch with his arm resting behind his head, slouching in the deep cushions while watching a game. I couldn't even appreciate how handsome he looked with his tight shirt and jeans because I was so upset. "You're home early," he noted without looking at me. I peered around the loft for Lance and noticed that he wasn't there. He was gone a lot lately.

They're going to leave you too, the nagging voice in my head whispered.

"Where's Lance?" I asked. My voice was audibly distressed, causing Decker to turn and stare at me.

"He went to go pick up a pizza and beer. What's wrong?" Decker asked. He stood up and made his way over to me. He moved slowly like I was a wounded animal that would snap at him, and I pressed my back against the door, feeling the need for space. Decker stopped about a foot away and raked his eyes up and down my face, taking in my red eyes and tear-stained cheeks.

"I'm fine," I whispered. I don't even know why I was lying. Decker was like a magnet for truth; he pulled it out of me. The man was painfully inquisitive and to a T. He knew everything about me, without even asking. It was like my soul was an open book to this man, and it both infuriated and invigorated me.

"What happened with your dad?" Decker asked in a soft voice before taking another step closer. Within seconds, his hand was braced against the door, caging me in as he leaned even closer. Our noses brushed. Tears fell. My chest constricted, my stomach plummeted. I breathed in the smell of his cologne while staring up at him.

"These guys showed up at the restaurant," I choked out, feeling partly guilty for already spilling Dad's secret. He had warned me not to tell anyone, but I couldn't bear this alone. There had to be an option other than just hiding and sending him on the run.

"What guys? Did someone hurt you?" Decker rushed out. His eyes turned dark with anger. I turned my head to stare at his arm and watched as the muscles in his forearm flexed. He used the one not caging me in to twist my gaze back to him. I couldn't escape the honesty; Decker demanded it.

"No, no one hurt me. But they saw me. Dad got into some rough stuff while he was in prison, and they followed him out. He told me he has to go on the run. He's leaving, he's leaving again."

My chest heaved in and out. Each breath was a painful reminder that another person in my life was unreliable. I didn't blame him, but I did. I didn't hate him, but I hated all the shitty situations and decisions he'd ever made. "Oh, Blakely," Decker cooed before wrapping his arms around me. He pulled me into a sincere hug, and I nestled my face in the crook of his neck, breathing in his comforting smell. "Did your dad say these guys were dangerous? Are they going to come after you?" Decker asked while holding me.

"I saw one of them staring at us as we drove away. I don't think they're going to come after me. But I don't really know," I said.

"Should we call the police? Do you know what these guys looked like?"

I squeezed him tighter before answering, my words were muffled because my lips were pressed against his pulse. "I told Dad we should call his parole officer, but he said she wouldn't be able to do anything. I feel so helpless," I explained.

Decker placed his hands on my shoulder and put me at arm's reach. Bending over, he peered into my eyes as if trying to gauge the pain within their green depths. "I'm gonna figure something out, okay? Lance and I have been talking about taking you to Chicago. Maybe it's time we take a weekend trip. Get away for a little bit and give your dad time to get out of town. In the meantime, I have a friend on the force that could possibly help us. I know you're worried about your dad, but *you* are my priority."

I couldn't meet Decker's gaze anymore. It felt too intimate, too important. So instead, I looked down at the ground and let hope bleed out of my lungs on an exhale. Decker was giving me his air. "What about Dad? Who's gonna make him a priority?" I asked.

"He's a grown man, and he's going to make himself the priority for now. I'll talk to Lance as soon as he gets home, and we will go to Chicago. You've already missed two days this week, might as well miss a third," Decker said while giving me a pointed stare I could feel in my bones. He used his index finger to lift my chin, forcing me to look him in the eye once more.

"Are you going to tell Lance?" I asked. "Dad didn't want me to tell anyone."

"Why did you tell me?" Decker asked, avoiding the comment about

Lance.

“Because even if things have been weird between us, I trust you. I’ve never had someone I could run to when I was upset.”

Decker’s thumb brushed across my lips like he was praising them for the words I’d said. I had to force myself not to open up and taste his skin. “You trust me,” he replied, awe painting his tone. “You can trust Lance, too. You can tell him, or I will. Either way, he cares about you and deserves to know what’s going on.”

On a whim, I wrapped my arms around Decker’s neck and stole another hug. I claimed his confidence and comfort as my own, letting the heat of his skin bolster me as I trembled in his arms. “Okay,” I whispered.

I felt Decker’s lips press against my forehead, and I closed my eyes to revel in the feel of his lips on my skin. It felt warm. It felt like home. It felt like safety and contentment and happiness. I had never had someone that was like a safe place to land. My life was full of turbulence, and Decker was like my calm in the eye of the storm.

“Blakely, you’re killing me here. I hate seeing you like this,” he murmured.

“I hate feeling like this. I’m worried about him.”

“We got this, okay?”

“Okay. What if they go after you guys, too? I don’t know how these things work. I don’t know what these men are capable of.”

Decker gave me a confident grin. “I’d like to see them try. Come on, Blakely. We won’t let anything happen—I won’t let anything happen. I care too much about you for that.”

Those words reminded me just how much Decker and I needed to discuss. We needed to talk about what happened last night and what was building between us. We needed to figure out how to stop this inevitable pull.

But we didn’t bring any of it up. Decker guided me to the couch and sat me down, threading his fingers through mine as he pressed his body to my side, offering wordless solace as I stared at the television. “When did you say Lance would be back?” I asked.

“I don’t know. He’s very picky about his beer, goes to a local brewery across town to get his pretentious IPA.”

I laughed. That seemed like a very Lance thing to do. We sat there in silence for a moment. Our skin kept brushing, but I wanted more.

It wasn’t until his pinky finger caressed the outside of my knee that I

caved. “I need you, Decker,” I whispered as I crawled into his lap, draping my legs over his thighs. I wrapped my arms around his neck, curling my body against his chest.

“What are you doing?” he asked in a soft voice.

“I just need a minute,” I rasped. I was sad and stupid and scared. I was reckless. I was redundantly predictable, using a vulnerable moment as an excuse to cling to Decker Harris for dear life.

“One minute, Blakely. That’s it.”

I trailed my fingers up and down his chest. He gasped. I nestled closer. He stiffened. I breathed him in and moaned against his skin.

He kissed me.

He consumed me.

He tasted my soul and asked for more.

“I shouldn’t do this,” he groaned against my lips, the tenor tone vibrating against my mouth. His sweeping tongue invaded my moans with fervor, making me grow hot with shame. I shouldn’t kiss him. I shouldn’t do this, here, now, anywhere, anytime.

I tore my lips from him, and it felt like severing a limb. Phantom pain rocked through my body. “I’m sorry,” I whispered while shaking my head. Here I was, fucking up our precarious relationship once more. “You’re trying to comfort me, and I jump your fucking bones. What is wrong with me? Dad is on the run for his fucking life, and I’m here doing this,” I hissed before gesturing between us then slamming my palm against my forehead. I went to move off his lap, but Decker held me still, his arms like steel cages locking me in.

“Nothing is wrong with you,” he cooed before gently removing my hand from my face. He gently kissed my palm, peppering affection along the lifelines grooved into my skin while keeping his eyes locked on me. “Not a single”—kiss—“damn”—kiss—“thing”—kiss—“is wrong with you, Blakely Stewart.”

“We should stop,” I murmured.

“We should,” he agreed.

“Are we going to?”

“No.”

I leaned forward and kissed his cheek. His arms wrapped tighter around me, crushing my bones against his hard muscles. “What about Lance? Your job?” I prodded.

“We’ll figure it out. I can’t do this anymore. I don’t even know what *this* is.”

“Let’s not define it by nothings and somethings anymore,” I whispered. I didn’t want this to be a momentary lapse in Decker’s judgment. It felt like this brief allowance of intimacy was a slow-moving train wreck. Once the metal crunched and the tires screeched, he’d remember why this wasn’t a good idea. Decker was simply triggered by his hero complex. He was motivated by the idea that this time, he could step in front of the metaphorical bullet, and I was selfish enough to let him. I couldn’t handle the disappointment if he declared anything tonight then went back on it tomorrow. I’d already lost one person with good intentions today.

“How about we just call this what it is?” Decker said before setting me off his lap. The front door knob jiggled. Lance was home and standing on the other side of the front door. I listened to a set of keys rustling through the door.

“What?” I whispered, knowing that our moment was nearly over.

“Tragically inevitable,” Decker replied just as the front door opened and Lance walked inside.

Decker

LANCE SWOOPED in to save the day, and I let him. He called Mr. Stewart's parole officer and demanded that she look into the situation. He called the apartment security and advised that more precautions be taken to prevent anyone from showing up unannounced. He called our parents and informed them about our random trip to visit them so we could get away while things cooled off—not that my parents particularly cared.

Then, he booked our flights, picking first-class tickets because he was feeling extra generous. He called his boyfriend—*Sean*—and invited him with us, but Sean turned him down. He worked weekends as a barista and couldn't get the time off. Usually, I would be extra eager to meet his boyfriend, but someone else had consumed all of my protective energy. Apparently, I only had enough headspace to pour my focus into one person at a time. Blakely had never been on an airplane before and was freaked out during takeoff and landing.

We had a moment of weakness on the plane. I could still feel her hand in mine, squeezing for dear life as the plane ascended. It was nice feeling like a person worthy of her faith. Lance saw but just laughed at her, chalking the hand holding up to her terrified expression on her face. I had half a mind to book more trips just for the opportunity to freely hold her hand in front of him without shame again.

Our parents' mansions in Barrington, a suburb of Chicago, sat side by side. Manicured lawns and designed porches littered the neighborhood. Not a

blade of grass was out of place. Everything about this place was pristine and organized.

I hated it.

Blakely got out of the limo that picked us up from the airport, a luxury Dad arranged because he liked to appear like the doting parent. I followed after her, pushing my pinky along her arm as I stood on the sidewalk between our two homes. It was a secret touch meant only for us, and I found myself stroking her creamy skin any chance I got.

Lance and I had met here between our two homes plenty of times. We were always playing pirates and robbers on the section of grass where our lawns met. Climbing the massive tree outside my bedroom window and chasing each other with water guns in the hot summer heat were a couple of my favorite childhood pastimes. There were a lot of good memories here, but a lot of bad ones too.

“Wow,” Blakely said with a low whistle while looking around. I didn’t think it actually hit her, the amount of wealth we had, until that exact moment. Her expression was wild and electric, tension heavy on her shoulders as she gnawed on her lip. I covertly brushed my pinky against her skin once more, this time dragging my padded finger along the vein in her wrist. She sighed. I needed to be more careful in front of Lance, but I couldn’t help myself.

Every little touch. Every little sigh and lingering glance had my dick at full attention. We hadn’t figured our shit out, but I wasn’t holding back anymore. I didn’t see the point. Blakely made me feel capable, reliable and needed. I wasn’t doing either of us any favors by staying away. It might go nowhere, but I wanted to be there for her while we navigated this crisis with her dad.

“I thought you were *maybe* upper-middle class with credit card debt out the ass, but this is like...” her voice trailed off, and it was kind of adorable in a refreshing sort of way. I found myself staring for an inappropriate amount of time at the freckle right outside the corner of her mouth. It was tiny and faded but oh so tempting.

“Both my parents are world-renowned surgeons,” Lance boomed with pride. “They’ve written books, gone on Ted Talks. They take power couple to the extreme.” Blakely nodded before looking down at her outfit. She was wearing tattered jeans and a band shirt. Her hair was a frizzy mess from the red-eye flight, and the mascara on her lashes was smeared. She ran her hand

along her shirt while biting her lip.

“You look great,” I whispered so low only she could hear.

She let out a shaky breath just as the ornate front door opened and out walked Mrs. Trask. She was wearing slacks and a button-down shirt, her black hair swept up in one of those classy bun type things that no-nonsense women and ballerinas wore. Her teeth were bright white and artificially straight as she walked forward with her arms outstretched for a hug. Her dark skin looked soft under the shining, Chicago sun. It wasn’t until I saw her wistful eyes that I realized how much I missed the Trasks.

“Lance! You better get your ass over here and give me a hug,” she teased. Lance dropped his duffle bag and ran for her like the Mama’s boy he was. They embraced as she squealed. Lance picked her up a bit just to prove he was a strong, growing boy, because that’s the kind of shit he liked to do. “Put me down, you weirdo,” she protested while swatting his arm.

Once her feet were firmly on the ground, she turned her attention to me and grinned. “Hey, Mrs. Trask,” I greeted with a shy wave. Blakely turned to look at me with a teasing smile at my awkwardness. Fuck. I wanted to kiss that smile off her face.

“Mrs. Trask, huh? No more Aunt Katy? We’re too cool for that now?” she teased, drawing my attention back to her. Mrs. Trask then stalked over to me for a hug. I gently patted her back, and she pulled away to finally get a look at Blakely. Her eyes softened with barely-masked pity, making me cringe. I knew Blakely was repulsed by sympathy from strangers. She didn’t like people knowing her story without being the person to reveal it. We had to be honest with the Trasks about why we were here, and I knew it was bugging Blakely to see the sympathy pouring out of Mrs. Trask. “Blakely, it’s so nice to meet you,” she said, warmth dripping from every syllable.

Mrs. Trask was adept enough at reading body language not to offer Blakely a hug. She simply stretched out her hand for a handshake, Blakely readily accepted it, and Mrs. Trask maintained eye contact in those reassuring ways most doctors had mastered. Mrs. Trask was used to instilling confidence into her patients and made sure to do that with Blakely, too.

“It’s really nice to meet you,” Blakely replied before snapping her hand back and wrapping it around herself. I didn’t even think she realized how scared she looked.

We stood awkwardly on the front lawn for a moment before Lance finally broke the tension. “Okay, well, let’s go inside,” he offered while picking up

Blakely's suitcase. Lance and Mrs. Trask walked inside, and Blakely and I followed after.

"They're going to love you," I promised in a whisper.

"She looks at me the same way you did when I first showed up on Lance's doorstep," she gritted. I felt disbelief and chagrin. Mrs. Trask didn't have a mean bone in her body. It just wasn't in her nature. I wished I could go back in time and change how I approached our first meeting. Maybe if we started off on the right foot, this forbiddenness wouldn't be so daunting. I pulled on her wrist, stopping her in the hallway as Lance and Mrs. Trask put away our stuff.

"When I first saw you, you know what I thought?" I whispered.

"No." Her eyes were still somber, so I bent lower to stare at her straight on.

"I thought, *damn, she looks like the perfect storm.*" Her face wrinkled up in confusion, and I realized that I was royally fucking this up. "Shit, that's not what I meant. I think storms are beautiful. Chaotic. They're filled to the brim with power and electricity. They spark change. They inspire new growth. Storms can be scary, but I love them," I whispered.

And I think I'm starting to love you, I wanted to say, but for now, this metaphor would have to do.

She looked around for a moment before leaning up to slowly kiss me on the cheek. I closed my eyes like the simple peck was a blowjob. I was thoroughly fucked, and I didn't even care. "I just thought you looked like a creeper," she finally whispered while pulling away. I stared at her face as she started laughing in amusement.

"Punk," I chided.

"Decker?" a familiar man's voice said, making my stomach drop. I spun around, praying he didn't see everything that had just transpired.

"Mr. Trask! So good to see you!" I said while stretching out my hand in greeting. Lance and Mrs. Trask started to descend the stairs at that moment.

"Good to see you too, son," Mr. Trask said with a grin. He looked like he had gained some weight since the last time I'd seen him. He'd always had a ridiculous metabolism and looked skeletal. He had tan skin and brown eyes with balding gray hair on top of his head. "This must be Blakely, I presume?" he then asked while giving me a curious glance.

"It's nice to meet you, sir," Blakely replied on cue. I was starting to sweat from the nerves. It was hard keeping such a huge secret when all you wanted

to do was scream it at the world. We all stood in the entryway for a moment, talking about our flight and the weather. I knew I should have gone next door to see my parents, but I didn't want to. There would be no excited greeting from Mom. There would be no proud family dinner with us sitting at the dining room table and catching up. Dad liked to take us out to five-star restaurants and show off his happy little family to convince everyone the home intruder incident wasn't his fault.

I wouldn't eagerly go to my childhood bedroom to reminisce over my life. I wouldn't watch television on the couch with Mom or talk sports with Dad.

The only family I had was Lance Trask. And now, Blakely.

The only place I wanted to be was here.

"Decker, go get that plate of food on the kitchen island. I made some healthy snacks for us. Let's all stop standing around and go sit in the formal living room."

"Yes, ma'am!" I replied. I didn't want to leave Blakely for even a second, but she followed after Lance with her mouth dropped open in shock as she took in the home and all its pristine, beautiful decor. As I passed by on my way to the kitchen, I watched her settle on the couch next to Lance with an uncertain huff. Once in the kitchen, I quickly grabbed the tray. It looked like cucumber bites with cream cheese. It was so quintessentially Mrs. Trask.

By the time I made it back to the living room, Mrs. Trask was already bringing out the big guns of the conversation. "Blakely, I am so sorry it's taken us this long to meet. Your mother requested a completely closed adoption. I wish I could have had the opportunity to know you."

I winced before setting the tray down and sitting in one of the plush, cream accent chairs by the fireplace. "I didn't even know I had a brother," Blakely swallowed before eyeing the cucumber snack with trepidation. "Can you tell me your adoption story? I've been thinking about that lately."

My brows went up in surprise at her question. Mrs. Trask smiled. Lance put his arm around Blakely's shoulder and pulled her in for a small side hug. Mr. Trask just started stuffing his mouth with snacks, unencumbered by the heavy topic.

"Well, we knew early on in our marriage that pregnancy wasn't something I wanted. Adoption had always been our goal, and when we put ourselves on the registry, Jonathan and I knew it would happen when it was meant to."

Mrs. Trask's eyes turned glassy with emotion as she stared lovingly at her son and husband. I'd always been jealous of their close-knit family. "We were on the list for almost seven years. In that time, Jonathan built up his career as a world-renowned heart surgeon. I built up my plastic surgery practice. We had a fulfilled life but were always waiting. It was like I knew this piece of my soul was out there just waiting for me. And then we got a call about a particular boy with a heart defect."

I watched Blakely's eyes snap to her brother's. "You had a heart defect?"

Lance's lips pulled into a straight line. He was never a fan of telling others about his heart problems. It was ironic to me that a man with one of the most giving hearts I'd ever known had a defective organ pumping blood throughout his body. "I had pulmonary valve atresia. Basically, there was a valve in my heart that didn't form correctly. It required surgery soon after I was born."

"Jonathan performed the surgery," Mrs. Trask stated proudly. At the mention of his name, Mr. Trask's head popped up, and he coughed with his mouth full, spewing crumbs everywhere. Mrs. Trask continued with an eye roll. "The agency your mother worked with was worried they wouldn't be able to place him anywhere but remembered us. Two doctors seemed ideal for a baby that needed extra care."

Blakely reached out to briefly squeeze Lance's hand before turning to Mrs. Trask. "I'm really thankful you found each other," Blakely said with a tight smile. "Is the heart defect genetic?"

Mrs. Trask looked nervous to answer, but I'd never known her to be dishonest. "It's very commonly associated with fetal alcohol syndrome. We assume that Sharron also smoked while pregnant," Mrs. Trask whispered.

I realized then that it was time to change the subject. Blakely was turning pale and looked like she wanted to vomit. "Lance, we should show Blakely the old treehouse," I said with a smile, drawing the attention back to me.

Mrs. Trask joined in. "Decker Harris, I doubt you'd fit into the crawlspace to get up there."

My lip tilted in amusement. "You're probably right. How long ago did we build that?" I asked.

And just like that, everyone switched to lighter topics. Blakely engaged in conversation, but her eyes were always vacant. Everything that had happened the last few days was starting to pile up. I couldn't imagine what she was feeling. Was it difficult to see the contrast between where Lance grew up and

her own childhood?

But my girl—fuck, when did I start referring to her as *my* girl?

My girl smiled as she spoke, not once treading into the dangerous waters of what led us all here to this exact moment. I'd do everything I could to keep her from drowning.

Blakely

“DO YOU LIKE TO BAKE?” Mrs. Trask’s voice said from behind me. I’d retreated to the kitchen half an hour ago to shake the nerves in my bones. Being here, seeing Lance’s childhood home, it was messing with me.

I wasn’t jealous, though any sane person would be. I was happy that Lance was given such an incredible life. I liked Mrs. Trask, or Katy, as she insisted I call her. She was lovely, and even though Jonathan wasn’t very talkative, he was funny to watch. It was odd that someone so clumsy and goofy could perform such detailed surgeries.

I just kept thinking about Mama. I kept wondering how Lance could look at me and not feel hate. Mama gave him up while he was fighting for his life. She wasn’t there when he had heart surgery as a newborn. She didn’t think to find him until she was at the end of *her* miserable existence. Did she ever wonder if he was okay? Did she even care? Mama thought she did the heroic thing by giving him up, but she abandoned him in his time of need. “Blakely? Sweetheart, did you hear me?”

I turned around and faced Mrs. Trask with a forced smile. “I’m sorry. Yes, I like to bake, though I’m not very good at it.”

“Lance just walked over with Decker to the Harris’s to say hello to his parents. We have time to kill; how about we bake a pie?”

My mouth dropped open in shock. A pie? She wanted to bake a pie? How...wholesome.

“You’ll have to walk me through it,” I admitted.

"Well, that's what recipes are for. Grab those apples in the fruit basket and start peeling them. I'll get started on my homemade crust. My husband will think I've been abducted by aliens for making something with sugar in it. But special times call for treating yourself, yeah?"

I just nodded, mostly because I didn't know how else to respond. I grabbed the apples as she placed a cutting board on the kitchen island, accompanied by a peeler. She hummed as she got the ingredients for her crust, giving me reassuring smiles as she floated across the marble tile in her kitchen. She really was beautiful. Her smile was infectious. "Lance tells me you're attending MAMS? I've heard good things about that school. Are you hoping to go into a science field?"

"I don't know what I want to do. I thought I wanted to be a doctor, but bodies kind of gross me out. Maybe pharmaceutical research? I think I've convinced Decker I want to be an astronaut."

Katy Trask laughed. It sounded like birds chirping in the wind. "Decker is hopelessly helpful and gullible. I bet he'll sign you up for a NASA internship."

"Funny, he said Lance was the one that was constantly helping people." Katy stopped mixing the dough to look at me. She seemed to gnaw on her inner cheek for a moment as if debating on what to say.

"There's a difference, you know," she began. "I love those two boys. Lance helps because he has so much love in his heart but no place to put it. He's good to me, but he's always wanted to know about your mom—and now you. He just wanted the chance to love, you know? I'm really thankful that you're giving him that opportunity, Blakely."

My heart fell in my stomach, and I nearly sliced my finger as I looked up to stare at Katy. She tilted her head to the side, emotion evident in her eyes. "And what about Decker?" I asked. She gave me a knowing smile that made me uncomfortable.

"Decker helps because he wants to be the hero. He doesn't think he's good enough at saving people, so he overcompensates. He couldn't save his mom from her alcoholism. Couldn't save his father from his ego. Couldn't save himself when he had a gun pointed at his head."

Air got trapped in my chest, and I tried not to show how much her words truly affected me. "I didn't know that about his parents," I replied lamely.

"Not many do. I'm only sharing because I know their relationship doesn't make sense to a lot of people. Lance needed someone to love. Decker needed

someone to save. They've both reversed those roles numerous times, but their brotherhood is a bond that I'm incredibly thankful for. I'm sure you're wondering where you fit in that dynamic, but I think you already know."

Visions of pancake breakfasts and forbidden kisses filtered through my mind. "Yeah. I think I do."

LANCE AND DECKER were gone long enough for Katy Trask and me to make two pies and a meatloaf dinner. She kept the conversation light, focusing on embarrassing stories from Lance and Decker's childhood. I laughed so hard my cheeks hurt, and it wasn't until she was setting the table for dinner that I realized Decker and Lance were still gone.

"Go fetch them, yeah? Tell Decker to come, too. I doubt his parents planned anything."

I wanted to ask more questions about Decker's parents but knew it wouldn't be appropriate. So instead, I nodded and headed out the front door, pausing at the sight of Decker's large house. Should I have called? No. Katy said to go get them. Why was I questioning everything lately?

As I walked toward the front door, I thought about the night before we got here. Something had changed in Decker—something I didn't quite understand. He was more open about this...thing...between us. He was warm. Accepting.

It scared the hell out of me. I'd been hoping for his affection for so long I didn't know what to do now that I had his attention. I knocked on the door while clicking my heels, and it wasn't until the doorknob was turning that I realized I'd be meeting Decker's parents for the first time. What if they didn't like me? Why did I care?

Luckily, it was Lance on the other side of the door. "Hey," he greeted with a sad smile. "Dinner ready? Sorry we left you there; something came up."

A shrill scream in the living room, followed by Lance's wince made me gasp. "Tell Mom it's a bad time..." he rushed out while trying to shut the door in a lame attempt at blocking me from the commotion inside.

"Who is that Lance?" a slurred voice said at his back.

"No one, Mrs. Harris." A manicured hand landed on my brother's

shoulder, yanking him back and granting me an unobstructed view of Mrs. Harris.

I'm sure she was beautiful once. She had dark eyes, washed-out skin, and cracked lips. She was thin—too thin. It was like she had spent more time counting calories than actually eating.

"Are you fucking my husband?" she cried out while wiping her lips with the back of her hand. "That's where he is right now. Fucking one of his *whores* instead of visiting with his son who never visits anymore!" Her voice was like a screech as she reached out to grab my shirt. I took a step back to escape her reach.

"I'm not fucking your husband. I'm just eighteen," I replied calmly. I'd seen destructive before. Was raised by a hurricane, so I could detect the switch in the air.

"That hasn't stopped him before," Mrs. Harris said with a roll of her sunken-in eyes.

"Well, I'm here to tell you dinner is ready. You going to sulk about your shitty husband some more or introduce yourself and get presentable for dinner? I made a meatloaf." To anyone else, my words might have seemed crass, but this was how I handled Mama. I learned that she didn't respond to doting. She couldn't handle calm reassurances. She needed brutal honesty and a selfless soul willing to dish it out.

She blinked a couple times, ruminating in my comment while deciding which part of my words to address first. Lance gave me a scolding look, but I knew how to handle this situation. Taking care of Mama required nerves of steel and a mean streak. When people were so caught up in their own bullshit, it required a certain level of sass to yank them back down to the real world.

Where the hell was Decker?

"Who are you?" she finally asked.

"Lance's sister," I replied while reaching out to shake her hand, but snaking it back when I noticed dried vomit on the back of it. "Why don't you get cleaned up? We'll go to the Trask house in twenty minutes." It was essential to not allow inebriated people the opportunity to formulate an excuse. I'd said variations of the same thing my entire life.

"You're going to stop crying over him."

"You're not going to miss another day of work."

"You're going to get out of bed."

Mrs. Harris sniffed, drawing me out of my dark thoughts. "I suppose

dinner would be nice.”

I smiled before walking past them both and inside. “Want help picking out an outfit? I bet you look terrific in blue,” I said while looking around. Where Lance’s house was warm and inviting, Decker’s home was cold and empty. No photos on the wall. No personality. The only thing I noted was football memorabilia proudly mounted to the wall.

“I do look good in blue,” Mrs. Harris said with a small grin while following after me. Lance stayed in the entryway, shaking his head while fighting a smile.

“Where is Decker?” I asked and gestured toward to a long hallway leading to a bedroom where the sheets were a heap of fabric on the floor. An expansive portrait was hanging on the wall of a large man with a scar under his eye. The painting was slashed to shreds, and on the floor, Decker was picking up broken glass. The moment he heard us enter, he spun around to face me, embarrassment flooding his cheeks.

“Blakely? What are you doing he—”

“She’s helping me find a pretty dress. I’m going to look hot. Can we do a photoshoot? I’ll send pictures to Tony.”

Decker’s eyes widened in shock, but I didn’t miss a beat. “Nah, that would make you look desperate. Go have a good time, make him wonder.”

“You’re right. I should post a pic on the gram!” she exclaimed. Her lingo felt forced, and I wondered if she spent most of her life pretending to be younger to appeal to her husband’s disgusting preferences. It was something Mama often did.

“What are you getting dressed for?” Decker asked with a sigh. I took a good look at him, and my heart nearly broke on the spot. He seemed unsure and sad. He stared at his mother like she was a porcelain doll with a chip in her painted on face.

“Dinner with the Trasks. I was invited, isn’t that nice? I have a life. I have friends. I have things to do. I won’t be sitting here and waiting for Tony. He can sit and wonder what I’m up to!”

Decker turned to face me with an expression that seemed to ask, *is this your doing?*

“Yep! I also made an apple pie. It’s delicious.”

It took us a minute to pick out her clothes, and I quickly realized that she had a critique for her body with every dress I picked.

That one makes my stomach look fat.

I don't like how my arms look in this one.
This color makes my hair look dull.
This fabric clings to my flabby skin.
This is way too short. My varicose veins are atrocious.

Every slurred complaint made me wonder just how much she'd actually had to drink. I doubted she would make it across the lawn and through dinner. She'd probably fall asleep before we even left the house. We finally settled on a knee-length bodycon dress that was really inappropriate for a casual dinner, but she didn't care. She simply pushed Decker and me out of her bedroom so she could get dressed.

In the hallway, I found a note from Lance saying that he'd left for dinner and would see us there. "Guess he got tired of waiting. Your mom is pretty picky about clothes," I mused. When Decker didn't answer, I spun around to face him, his distraught face catching me off guard.

"He's going to be gone all weekend. Mom saw a receipt for a lingerie store," he whispered. I took a step closer to him. "I didn't realize how bad it's gotten." He ran a hand through his hair before turning to look back at her bedroom door. "Maybe I need to move back to Chicago? Maybe she needs to try rehab again?"

I took another step as he talked himself through everything. Each step closer, his voice broke more and more until he was nothing but choked whispers full of emotion. I cupped his cheeks with my hands, forcing him to look me in the eye. "I'm going to tell you something that I wish someone would have told me," I began before leaning up to brush a tender kiss against his lips. He melted against me, but I pulled away before it could turn into something we couldn't stop. "You are not responsible for her. Her self-destruction is not your fault. Love her where she's at, but don't think for a second that her behavior has anything to do with you. Put your air mask on first, Decker."

My mind immediately went to my father, and I wondered how he was doing. The worry was still there, but I wanted to take my father's advice to heart. Decker was like oxygen to me. Our plane was crashing, but I just wanted to breathe him in.

Decker's eyes skated over my skin, and he wrapped his arms around me for a hug. I tucked my head under his chin, feeling the steady rise and fall of his chest as he processed my words. "She sure is taking a while to get dressed," he finally said after what felt like a tender eternity.

“She probably passed out. I was stalling,” I admitted. “You going to stay here with her or go to dinner?” I asked.

“Dinner,” he bluntly replied.

I smiled against his chest. “Take a deep breath, Decker. You’re doing great.”

“After dinner, meet me in the treehouse,” he said before pulling away. It felt like the promise of more, but before I could ask him why or how or what the fuck we were doing, he was walking to the door and glancing back at me over his shoulder. “You coming with me?” he asked.

“Always,” I whispered.

Blakely

THE GUEST ROOM I was staying in was across the hall from my brother. I knew what I was doing was wrong, and there was a foreboding sense of understanding boiling in my gut. Once Decker and I started this, we wouldn't be able to stop. It was dangerous for us to be alone together. I almost wished that Lance would hear me tiptoe across the wood floors and down the stairs. I wanted Katy Trask to stop me when my hand touched the back door to their home.

But I met no obstacles. It seemed that fate wanted Decker and me to bring this building tension between us to a head.

Chicago was one of those towns where the sun was blistering hot in the summer, but the wind blew with a whispered warning that autumn was coming. It was weird to think about how much time had already passed.

The moon was out now, leaving nothing but a breeze that licked my skin. My bare feet crunched in the dewy grass as I made my way over to the tall tree house hoisted high in an aged redwood in the back of Lance's backyard. Leaning against the bark with his arms crossed over his chest, Decker stared at me. The moonlight cast shadows along his scruffy face. He wore all black, looking intimidating as I approached him. I took my time and stared at his broad shoulders with fresh eyes. So much rested on them.

"How long have you been waiting?" I asked while running a hand through my wild hair. I was wearing my pajamas, though I debated on dressing up. Being around Decker made me feel giddy and flirtatious. I liked

the way his eyes lingered on my body. I loved the way his words embraced my soul. Still, I stayed in the thin tank top and shorts. We'd never even been on a date. Would he be the type to enjoy getting dressed up for a nice dinner? Would he plan a casual night? I feared I'd never know.

"Since dinner," he replied without shame. I could feel the earth rotate beneath my feet and hear the secrets of the world whispered in static motion against my neck.

I looked around the yard, noting the fireflies dancing in the distance. It looked like twinkling lights casting sparks of hope along the lawn. "Why did you want to see me, Decker?" I asked. I didn't want to assume anything. Would this be just another conversation where we promised each other this would be nothing? Would this be just another argument about why we were wrong for one another?

Decker's response surprised me. "I wanted to see you. I wanted to be near you."

I took another step toward him. Questions were forming on the tip of my tongue. I realized then that I wanted to know everything there was to know about Decker Harris. I tried to find similarities in our upbringing. I wanted to know about the things that hurt him. I wanted to know what made him happy. His hopes. His triumphs.

"Why did you want to see me?"

Decker surged forward. He was like a force as he wrapped his arms around me and blinded me with a searing kiss. I felt him ricochet throughout my body.

His kiss was nuclear.

My body exploded with heated lust.

He molded his muscles against my soft skin, claiming my mouth as his tongue swept across my lips. He threaded his hands through my hair, pulling back as he bared my neck to him. I felt devoured and shaken.

I dug my nails into his back, clinging for dear life as he bit along the thudding pulse lining my neck. I felt enveloped in his toxic taste. "What are you doing?" I rasped. I wanted to make sense of this. But most of all? I wanted to make sure that he was certain. He had been hinting since I came home from dinner with my dad that this was more, but tonight felt different. It felt like we were finally plunging into the icy cold waters of our affections for one another. The new sensations bit at my skin but felt refreshing all the same.

“Are you sure about this?”

“I’ve never been more sure about anything.”

I shoved at Decker’s chest until his back was crushed against the bark of the tree. It was ironic that our souls would finally collide at the place where he built a friendship with my brother. If we were going to ruin everything, it seemed fitting that we would consummate it on an altar of their brotherhood.

Dragging my nails down the front of his chest, I rested my hands at the waistband of his jeans before delivering a forceful kiss of my own. Our mouths were like fists.

His lips fused to mine. His body shuddered at my touch. I moved my body like a wave against his, but it wasn’t enough—it would never be enough. I craved a closeness to Decker that no amount of kisses would fulfill.

Hiking my right leg up, I rested it on the peg of the ladder leading up to the treehouse. He started grinding against my core, his tented jeans pressing against the throbbing spot where I needed him most. He looked luminous in the light, and though my heavy eyes wanted to close so I could sink in the feel of his body, I didn’t want to miss the sight of his blissful face or his swollen, bruised lips.

His finger traced my leg, then started rubbing along my hot center, on top of my pajama shorts. My legs shook. Moans burst past my lips for him to feast on. His palm created unhinged friction against my nub, and I nearly toppled over when his finger slipped behind the barrier of my shorts and into my cunt.

“Can you fit in the treehouse?” I asked while tearing my lips from his and looking up at the small building above us.

He smirked, and I knew his reply before the words escaped his lips. “I can make it fit.” I snickered before moving to ascend the ladder. He quickly followed after me. I felt his eyes on my ass as I climbed, and I added an extra sway to my steps as I arched my back. It felt like each step was another nail in the coffin. Another plunge into the depths of this decision.

His hand pressed the curve of my back. “Hurry up before I eat you out on this ladder.” I hit a full stop, making him chuckle. “Go, Blakely,” he groaned.

When I finally got to the trap door, I shoved it open and hoisted myself inside. Finding a small lantern, I turned it on and watched in amusement as Decker stumbled after me, struggling to get his hips through the small opening. “Need help?” I asked when his foot slipped. His palms slammed on the plywood floor as he steadied himself.

“I’m fine,” he gritted.

It wasn’t until his massive body was lying on the plywood platform that I looked around. Forgotten toys and a sign that said *no girls allowed* were spewed around the small room. It was just big enough for both of us to lie down.

The act of climbing seemed to have slowed our impulses, and now that we were alone in the secluded homage to his childhood, doubt started to creep across both of our expressions.

“So what now?” he asked.

“You tell me.” I wasn’t going to be the one to decide. If we did this—whatever this was—it would be mutual. I didn’t want to feel like Mama, coercing and seducing a man.

“Take off your clothes, Blakley,” he ordered after a tense moment.

I happily obliged, shedding my sleep tank and shorts the moment that demand left his lips. “Good girl,” he whispered in awe as his hooded eyes swept along the curve of my breasts and my tight stomach. His gaze lingered on the birthmark on my hip. I watched his appraisal of me while mulling over his praise. The first time he’d said “good girl,” it had awakened something hot inside of me. Now, I just wanted to please him more.

I lay down without instruction, using my clothes as a thin, makeshift pallet to protect my skin against the bite of the rough wood. He moved to hover over me and rested on his knees before reaching behind his head to remove his shirt.

The moment his chest was bare, I leaned up to flick my tongue over his nipple while grabbing the waistband of his jeans. He positioned himself between my legs, and the only thing separating us were his jeans and my thin panties. I was slick with needy heat as he kissed me again.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, increasing the friction as I ground against him. He palmed my breast through my bra as I writhed beneath him. It wasn’t enough.

“More,” I begged as he slipped his fingers under my underwear and shoved them down.

“More,” he relented while reaching to unclasp the button on his jeans.

“More,” I whispered as he stumbled to pull off his pants with desperate need.

“More,” he pleaded when I wrapped my hands around his cock and stroked him. His back arched. He shuddered and the air fizzled from the

friction our rubbing bodies created. I half wondered if we were going to burn the treehouse down.

“Shit, you feel so good,” he groaned as I pulled my hand away. He started grinding along my slit, coating his cock with my heat while rubbing against my clit. Faster he slid. Up and down, bumping my sweet spot as he lavished my mouth with consuming kisses. He felt eager and wild. The intimacy of our moment left me feeling gloriously exposed. It enticed my senses. His touch was indelible.

I was building. Building. Burning up from the inside out. Reaching for that invisible tether of pleasure within and coaxing it to blossom before us.

And then he stopped. Stopped.

Decker fucking *stopped*.

“What’s wrong?” I asked when he got off of me and sat with his back against the wall. His dick was hard as hell as he hung his head in shame.

“This. This is wrong.”

Oh hell no, we were too far gone to stop now.

I ruminated on his refusal for a moment. I allowed myself a brief moment to absorb my feelings. Anger. Disappointment. Grief. Loss. Guilt.

“Fuck you, Decker,” I spat while pulling up to a sitting position. “Fuck. You. Fuck your mind games. Fuck your guilt. Tell me why you stopped!”

My voice was so loud I was sure the neighbors would hear, but I didn’t care.

“I’m your teacher,” he stuttered.

“I’ll transfer out of your class,” I bargained while crawling closer to him.

“I’m Lance’s best friend!”

“He’ll learn to be happy for us,” I promised while settling over his lap. I hovered to keep space between us.

“I don’t have a condom,” he rasped.

“I’m on the pill,” I promised before sinking onto his hard cock.

My walls stretched to accommodate him. He was so big. I was so full. We both moaned the moment our bodies connected, and it was like harmony, perfect harmony. It was serendipitous. It was haunting. It was ideal but somehow wrong, too.

I wanted this thing to be mutual between us, but I’d taken that choice away. Now he couldn’t stop.

Up and down I moved, all while he refused to look me in the eye. I rode him hard and fast, light whimpers escaping my lips each time he bumped that

deep need within me. Grabbing his chin, I forced him to look me in the eye as I reached my peak. I wanted him to watch me come undone. “You see this?” I asked as sweat dripped down my face. “You see me riding your cock?”

“Yes.” His voice was hoarse.

“Look me in the eye when I come, Decker. I’m yours. I’m fucking yours.”

I broke apart in his lap, creaming his dick as I screamed his name over and over and over. It was one of those rolling orgasms that just seemed to go on and on. He watched it all, his mouth parted in ecstasy as I shivered and arched, my body contorting to accommodate the pleasure coursing through me.

And when I was done, I rested my forehead against his, breathing in his whiskey breath smell and exhaling his name. “Decker, I’m yours,” I promised.

We sat like that for a moment, his dick still hard as steel and twitching inside of me as if to spur me to move again. “Decker, I’m yours,” I said again. I wanted him to feel how much he owned me. I wasn’t sure when it happened or why the world decided two people who didn’t belong together should feel this way, but I was falling for Decker Harris. Or maybe I already had.

Finally, Decker replied to my declaration with a simple word that echoed his acceptance.

“Mine.”

In an instant, I was pulled off of him and slammed down onto the plywood floor. My head cracked against the hard wood, and the jagged grooves bit into my skin, but I didn’t care. He parted my thighs with one hard press of his hands and plunged inside of me, his slamming movement almost punishing against my sensitive pussy. “Mine,” he said with a hard thrust. “Say it again.”

“I’m yours, Decker. I’ve been yours since you confronted me in the hallway outside our loft,” I promised through broken, clipped words and harsh breaths.

“This mouth is mine.” He leaned forward and bit my lip, tugging the plush skin with his teeth as he slid in and out. Wet noises filled the treehouse as our bodies slipped and collided. “These breasts are mine,” he added before pinching my nipples between his thumb and index finger, pulling my peak as far as it would go while teetering me on the edge of pain and pleasure.

“I’m all yours, Decker,” I gritted as my back arched off the plywood.

“This tight”—pound—“little pussy”—pound, pound, pound—“is mine, too,” he promised between each slam of his cock. His touch was wrought with power. His scorching touch enveloped me in sensations, and I felt my body prepare for another orgasm.

“I’m going to come again,” I said as my bottom lip dropped, preparing to release another scream. I couldn’t keep quiet, and I was so in the moment I almost didn’t care. He placed a hand over my mouth to muffle the noise.

“Your come is for me. Only. Me,” he said.

Our bodies curled and fought as we orgasmed together. We were nothing but a collection of rising swells. Falling empires. Dying realities and blooming beginnings.

We’d become our own truths.

Blakely

I WOKE up in a cloud of soft sheets. I stretched my arms high above my head and wiggled my hips, smiling when I felt the ache there. Decker and I spent hours in the treehouse. Bugs crawled along the wilted wooden beams, an audience to our depraved declarations for one another.

We didn't make any promises for the future. We didn't make any plans or figure out this mess of our attraction. We simply spent hours acquainting our bodies and working each other over again and again until we were nothing but a sweaty mess of limbs. It was beautiful.

A soft knock on the door brought a smile to my face, and I got out of bed and sauntered over to the door. But when I opened it, it wasn't Decker on the other side. It was Lance. I didn't know why I was expecting Decker to be there. It wasn't like we could have this sentimental morning after. We couldn't enjoy coffee at the breakfast table while exchanging lingering stares that whispered what had transpired between us. "Good morning," Lance said with a smile while handing me a cup of coffee. I fixed my expression into something that didn't look like I was thoroughly fucked last night and gratefully accepted it.

"Good morning," I replied. Lance chuckled.

"Did you sleep well? I've never seen you this cheerful in the morning. If you like the guest room, we can recreate it back at the loft?" he offered.

Shit. I wasn't doing a very good job of hiding the fact that I was still high on Decker Harris. "I just really like it here," I said. It was the truth. Despite

knowing that we were running from whatever men were chasing down my father and the uncomfortable confrontation I'd had with Decker's mother, it was lovely.

"I'm thrilled to hear that, Blakely. We can visit as much as you'd like. Mom and Dad really like you," Lance said with a broad grin that made me feel guilty. The implications of last night hit me like a freight train, and a swarm of negative emotions started to paint over the happiness I had felt. Lance must've noticed the shift in my expression, because he then spoke. "We don't have to though. I was just suggesting. I don't want to pressure you into anything—"

"I would love to come here again, Lance. Your parents are really nice. I'm really glad that you had them," I said reverently. And it was true.

Lance scratched the back of his neck before looking down the hall, then back at me. "Mom is making breakfast. I know you don't like pancakes, but how do you feel about French toast?" he asked. I was curious how he'd learned that I didn't like pancakes, but I realized seconds later that Decker probably told him.

"That sounds wonderful. Maybe we can call Dad's parole officer again?" I'd been so wrapped up in Decker that I didn't even think about Dad last night. But standing here in the harsh realities of the morning glow reminded me that we were here for a reason.

"I already spoke to her. Your dad is nowhere to be found; seems he fled Memphis. We're probably safe to go back tomorrow, and the guys he was associated with are on a watch list. The authorities have assured us that we are perfectly safe."

It sounded like they were brushing everything under the rug, but I didn't voice my concerns to Lance. I wanted to be back in Memphis. If Dad needed something, I wanted to be close by. I didn't like the idea that no one could find him. What if he hadn't fled? What if the guys got to him?

"If you say so," I said.

"Besides, I hear you have a lot of school work to catch up on. Cutting class, hmm? I let it slide because it was *her* birthday, but I don't believe for a second that you conveniently got the flu on Thursday."

I winced. "It's been a long week," I explained. "I'll be back to normal on Monday."

"Good," Lance began. "I would hate to have to ground you or sick Rose on your ass."

I was hoping that Decker would join us for breakfast, but it was just the Trasks and me. Jonathan talked about his work mostly. He was incredibly passionate about saving lives, and it almost made me reconsider my disgust for the human body. Katy was incredibly kind, asking me about my interests and avoiding the topic of my mother. I wasn't sure if she was just intuitive or if Lance had warned her that there was a painful history there, but either way, I appreciated her determination to make me feel welcome.

The hours passed by, and I grew more and more nervous. I didn't want to ask Lance where Decker was and make him suspicious of me, but after lunch and dinner passed, I started doubting myself. "Where has Decker been all day?" I finally asked as Katy began to clean up our dessert plates.

"He went looking for his dad," Lance explained. "He should be back soon though. Figured we could watch a movie in the theatre room," Lance explained.

"Ooh! That would be fun!" Katy said with a grin. "I have the perfect movie—"

"We're not watching *The Notebook* again," Jonathan growled. Her pretty face fell.

"I was thinking maybe something with superheroes?" Lance offered while tossing the leftover food on his plate in the trash.

I heard the front door open and shut, and my heart constricted. Decker joined us in the dining room, and his eyes connected with mine. Warmth, pure warmth. He said a thousand reassuring words with a single glance before walking over to pat Lance on the back. "Hey, man," he greeted.

"Hey, how was your dad?" Lance asked before grabbing what was left of the dessert pan and plopping it on the table in front of an empty seat. Decker sat down and started digging through the Sundae Pie, eyeing me before answering Lance's question.

"He said he was too busy to see me," Decker said with his mouth full. A hint of whipped cream was on the corner of his mouth, and I leaned forward to wipe it clean with my tongue but stopped about a foot away when I realized what I was doing. I was already fucking this up. I was obviously not good at secrets.

"Fucker," Lance said. "Well, we're going to have a movie night. You can watch people blow shit up to feel better."

Katy piped in. "I still think we should watch *The Notebook*—"

"NO!" Jonathan, Lance, and Decker said at the same time.

I grinned while wondering how often Katy had been outvoted by the guys. A sneaky idea came to me. “I’d rather watch *The Notebook*, actually,” I said before winking at her conspiratorially. Lance’s face dropped. Jonathan pulled at his collar. Decker just gave me a knowing grin. I knew he’d see right through my comment. I didn’t actually want to watch the movie, but I liked making them squirm.

“I mean, I guess we can watch it?” Lance said with a frown like he’d eaten something sour.

“I’ll make the popcorn,” Jonathan said before disappearing into the kitchen. Katy clapped her hands in excitement before grabbing Lance’s wrist and yanking him toward the winding staircase and upstairs. I could hear her excited squeals even after they disappeared up the steps.

“You play dirty pool, punk,” Decker said before grabbing a forkful of dessert and placing it on his tongue. I looked around, making sure no one could see us before stepping over to him.

“I like Katy. I figured I could suffer through *The Notebook* if it made her smile,” I replied with a shrug. He smiled for a minute, then looked back down on his plate. His face was masked, but I knew there was a storm of thoughts brewing behind his dark eyes. “Are you okay?”

Decker’s face fell further, and he dabbed a napkin on his lips before responding. “I’m not surprised. This is what he does. You can’t help but hope...”

“That they’ll change?” I finished for him.

“Yeah. I just hate it, but there’s not much I can do.”

Deciding that Decker needed a distraction, I grabbed his index finger and placed it in the cool whipped cream portion of his dessert.

“What are you doing?” Decker asked excitedly before looking around. It was almost exhilarating, the rush of hiding, as wrong as it felt.

I feigned innocence before replying. “I just wanted a taste.” I plopped his finger on my tongue and licked it clean, watching in amusement as his mouth dropped open and he shifted in his seat. My eyes glanced down as I removed his finger with a pop, delighted to see that he was fighting a hard-on in his jeans.

Decker swallowed, then whispered in a soft voice, “I want a taste later tonight. Come over.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied before biting my lip.

“Good girl.”

I WAS LYING in Decker's childhood bedroom, staring up at the ceiling where numerous glow in the dark stars were pasted. It was surreal, being so close to him. He was on his side with his head propped up on his hand, staring at me as he traced circles along my arm. "So this is where the magic happened, huh?" I asked.

Decker sighed like a preening peacock before moving to the sliver of skin on my stomach where my shirt had risen. Chills traveled down my spine as he spoke. "Yeah, I studied for a lot of tests in this room. Sometimes it got pretty hot and heavy. I stripped the quadratic formula down and claimed her right here on this bed."

I giggled. "I love it when you talk dirty. Say something else," I demanded while sitting up and pushing him back down onto the mattress. Within seconds, I was straddling him and peppering kisses along his scruffy jaw.

"Decagon," he whispered in a heady tone.

"Oh, yes, keep going." I could feel the light chuckles in his chest, bouncing up and down.

"Hubble's Law of Cosmic Expansion," he added.

I started kissing his neck. His chest. "Tell me more," I purred half-jokingly. "Should we test out the big bang theory?"

I was taking this too far, but it was fun and lighthearted. Decker and I needed more of that. He chuckled while threading his hands through my hair and lightly pushing me down further. "Was there something you wanted, Mr. Harris?" He pressed his hips up slightly, which was the universal sign of *put my dick in your mouth, please*. I was happy to oblige but wanted to make him squirm a bit.

"I used to hate it when you called me that," he groaned as I hovered my lips over the waistband of his sweats. His dick was hard as a rock and bobbing against my neck. I shoved his pants down over his thighs and smiled at the large cock just inches from my lips.

"Why?" I asked before licking up the shaft. His body twitched.

"Uhm," he rasped, and I realized that I'd never witnessed him being at a loss for words before. This kind of power was invigorating. "It was a verbal dissonance between us. I wanted you to call me Decker."

"And now?" I asked before sliding my mouth over his hardened head, tasting salty precum on my tongue.

“Now, it’s kind of hot.”

I pumped him up and down, his cock hitting the back of my throat as I hummed. I used my lips as guards around my front teeth and pressed, adding to the pleasure. He held my hair and watched me, as if not wanting to miss the sight of his cock disappearing in and out of my mouth. “Fuck, Blakely.” The admiration in his tone, mixed with the slurping sounds escaping my mouth, was erotic.

He shifted his leg between mine and lifted up, hitting my throbbing center with his thigh, and I started grinding against him as I worked his dick. I’d never been the type of girl that enjoyed giving head. The act always felt so degrading and one-sided to me. But now I understood the appeal. There was power in holding the key to someone’s pleasure in your mouth.

I slid off and licked my lips. “You taste so good, Mr. Harris,” I said in a whimper.

“Fuck, don’t stop.”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

Decker squirmed as I resumed giving him, in my humble opinion, the best damn blow job of his life. His muffled groans filled the room, and I knew the moment he was close. Could feel that rising twitch at the base of my throat as I dry humped his leg. He was right there on the edge. I coaxed his orgasm with a demanding hum, cupping the base of his shaft with my palm.

“I’m going to cum in your mouth,” he said without asking for permission.

His cum shot out like ropes down my throat, and I swallowed every last drop. Then, I continued to slide up and down to wring out his pleasure for as long as possible. He writhed and moaned and sighed and bit his lip, tossing his head back on an *oh fuck* while arching his back.

It wasn’t until he started to grow soft that I pulled away. He clawed at my hips and tossed me down on the bed, ripping my shorts and panties off with greedy hands that were abrasive and rough. “My turn, punk,” he said before yanking my thighs apart and licking a straight, long, slow, intentional line up my center, pausing right before my clit. He wanted me to be on the edge of my seat, and I was.

“What are you waiting for?” I asked while lifting up. His hands pushed me back down into the mattress.

“I’m just enjoying the view, Blakely,” he replied.

Then, his mouth latched onto my clit, those plump lips wrapped around

my nub as his tongue worked it over. The light flicking wasn't enough, I needed him to press harder. "Don't hold back, Decker," I moaned.

He pulled away as I looked down at him. His lips were shining from the taste of me as his bright teeth molded into a grin. "I stopped holding back a while ago."

And then he proved how much he was done denying this by swallowing my orgasm whole.

I rode his face like a champ, tugging at his hair as his conquering mouth feasted on me. And when I was done, he moved up to hold me close. We spooned on his mattress in post-orgasmic bliss as I listened to the steady breathing rattling around his chest. In and out. The constant homeostasis working without either of us thinking about it was comforting. I loved how normal this felt, but the idea that this was temporary kept flashing across my mind.

"What now, Decker?" I asked, hating the words that left my lips. I knew this conversation was necessary, but it felt like a knife in the chest of our new and budding acceptance of *this*.

"Now I'm going to hold you," he replied simplistically, but I knew he was evading.

"And after that?" I asked.

"I can't decide," he replied in a sad, small voice, making my heart squeeze. "I don't know if I want you to ride my face or fuck you until you're screaming my name."

I wiggled against him with an exasperated sigh. "You know what I mean, Decker," I chided.

"I know, I know. I'm just not ready for that conversation because it scares me."

"What about it scares you?" I asked.

"Everything." His answer was blunt and honest. We'd worked hard for honesty. I didn't want fluffy promises that would never come to fruition. I didn't want to pretend, but I didn't want to let go just yet either. "I'm scared that this could fuck up a job I love. I'm scared Lance won't be happy for us. I'm scared I'll fuck up with you. Say the wrong thing. Hurt you. I'm not good at relationships in good conditions, so how am I going to handle navigating one with so much secrecy? And if this ends, are you going to stop talking to me? Because I don't think I could handle not having you in my life at this point. You're so refreshingly perfect for me, Blakely."

That was a lot to digest, and I didn't know where to start first. "As far as school, we will be careful. All interaction will be restricted to the loft. No lingering stares or public displays of sexual tension."

"Have you seen us? We're like burning ammonium dichromate! Impossible to ignore."

"I love that you use obscure chemical reactions to describe our sex life," I joked. "But really, we'll be careful until graduation. And I can transfer out of your class."

"Please don't. I love seeing you every day," he begged while kissing the back of my neck. My entire body settled. "Okay. So we hide this, then what?"

"Then I graduate. Then we slowly ease Lance into the idea that we like each other."

"And what, just hide the fact that we've been secretly dating for a year?"

"Are we dating?" I felt like an immature child, begging to slap a label on this so it felt real.

"Yes. Exclusively. And Max is off-limits. Shit, I think he knows."

My mouth dropped open in shock, and I turned to face Decker, he was rubbing the bridge of his nose with his fingers while looking thoroughly stressed. I wanted to kiss each fear away. "How?"

"You're a chatty drunk."

"Fuck." I felt like burrowing under my blankets and never emerging again. Our relationship hadn't even really begun, and I'd already ruined it. Maybe we couldn't handle the secrecy. "I'll transfer out of MAMS. I can go to the local high school and do my thing. Then we can let Lance know and not let this hang like a secret between us. Let's be...honest."

"MAMS is the best opportunity for you to get a scholarship, Blakely. I can't let you do that."

"Well, you're the best opportunity I have at being happy, Decker." It was the truth. I'd never felt this way before, and I wasn't willing to give it up. "I can get straight A's anywhere I go. I'm kind of brilliant."

Decker burrowed his face in my neck and let out an annoyed groan. "This is infuriating," his muffled voice rang out. "I don't want you to give up on MAMS just yet. I don't want to tell Lance just yet."

I knew we had different reasons for not wanting to tell Lance yet. Decker was afraid of his reaction, but for me? I was worried that Decker would leave me just like everyone else and decide that this wasn't worth the massive

effort. Why upset my brother needlessly if this was going to end? “Then let’s just see how this plays out. Who knows, maybe you won’t like me anymore. Why uproot friendships and schools needlessly? We can play it cool. Be subtle and just go with the flow. No labels. No expectations. Just enjoying each other’s time and letting it grow from there.”

Decker’s eyes burned me up. He was taking in my words with gnashing teeth and an angry scowl. “That’s not really going to work for me, Blakely,” he seethed before cupping my cheek. “I want the labels. I want expectations. I want this to feel permanent, because even though you’re probably assuming the worst in that beautiful, brilliant mind of yours, I’m not. I’m assuming that you’re it for me, and now I have to figure out how this is going to work.”

I swallowed. I wasn’t expecting such a heartfelt declaration, but my soul seemed to settle a bit at his words. “I want to figure it out, too,” I finally whispered.

“You know what I love about the scientific process?” Decker asked. It was so out of the blue that I felt emotional whiplash. One second he was declaring something that had me envisioning a future with him, and the next he was talking about school.

“No?” I wasn’t sure where he was going with this change in the conversation.

“The trial and error,” he began. “Let’s try. I mean really try. A day at a time. A month at a time. A year at a time. Let’s do what we’re doing until it doesn’t work anymore, then try something else. But know that you aren’t some classroom experiment for me. You’re not a theory or a test. Being with you is like discovering all the secrets of the universe. I just want to treat you like the precious truth you are, Blakely Stewart.”

Tears welled up in my eyes at his words, and I pressed my palm to his chest just to feel the beautiful, glorious heart beating beneath it. “Let’s try, Mr. Harris,” I conceded.

“Let’s try, punk.”

Decker

WE GOT BACK to Memphis late Sunday night, and I snuck into her bedroom while Lance was blissfully unaware and asleep down the hall. I felt like an addicted dick, prioritizing my need to hold her twenty-four-seven instead of our promise to *try* keeping things between us a secret.

Worth it. It was so worth it. I'd never slept so well. She slept soundly, reaching out in the middle of the night to touch my bare skin. It was like even in her dreamy state, she craved being near me. I could relate to the desire.

I watched her as she softly snored, like a total creeper. I held her close when she whimpered lightly in her sleep, then felt her body soften and relax when I pulled her close. That citrus smell I loved was comforting as I breathed her in and drew circles with my fingers along her spine.

And since Lance had to leave for work early, we got to get ready together in mock-normalcy. I watched her slip on her uniform and rub lotion on her supple skin. She brushed her long, blonde hair while staring in the mirror. When she applied lip gloss? I grew so fucking hard I had to leave the room. It was mundane but sensual. I never wanted or valued something more.

I brought her coffee and read emails as she caught up on homework, our eyes kept finding one another across the table as she ran her foot up and down my leg. I slowly drove her to school, wanting nothing more than to drive around and hold her hand, but instead parked a couple blocks away. She kissed me on the cheek with a lingering press of her lips, those long eyelashes of hers tickling my cheek.

And I didn't really believe in perfection. Maybe it was the scientist in me; I thought that everything could be improved upon. We were hardwired as intellectual beings to search for the best, but for once in my life, I didn't feel like ripping apart the hypothesis of our relationship and scrapping it.

Blakely Stewart was perfection.

Today was perfection.

Maximillian Fucking Hemsworth, however, was not.

That preppy dick walked her into *my* class and gave me a smug grin that had me reaching for the pop quiz on my desk. I knew he was probably a good looking guy. He had charm in spades and was persistent as fuck. I didn't even care that he had suspicions about Blakely and me. I wanted him to know.

I'd fail the motherfucker, I really would.

"Have a seat," I instructed well before the bell had rung, mostly because Max was sitting on Blakely's desk and twirling her hair on his finger. She blushed and swatted him away, but it was too damn playful for my liking. Come on, babe. Kick him in the balls.

I knew I was glowering at him, and I didn't have a right to. Blakely promised me exclusivity, and I had to trust that. But I still didn't like the asshole, and being a jealous bastard was in my blood. "I hope everyone had a good weekend. Today we're going to discuss the genotypic ratio. Who can tell me what that is?"

Taylor's hand shot up as she blurted out the answer. "It's the pattern of offspring distribution according to genotype." She looked smug, but I couldn't be mad, because she was right.

"Correct. The genotypic ratio describes the number of times a genotype would appear in the offspring after a test cross." I made my way over to the board while explaining, then hurriedly wrote an example down just so I could turn back to watch Blakely write in that adorably enthusiastic way. She always had her teeth sunk into her lip and her eyes focused on the page.

But then I spun around, and I caught Max looking down at his crotch like a grinning idiot, and I knew he was texting on his phone. "Mr. Hemsworth, please bring your phone to the front of the classroom," I said in a booming voice, practically feeling giddy at the prospect of crushing him in my fist.

Max rolled his eyes as he walked to the front of the room. He handed over his iPhone with a huff, and I started reading from the screen. My teeth gritted in frustration when I realized that he was writing a text to Blakely.

"From Max: You look pretty today, Bae. How about I take you out

again?"

I rolled my eyes as the class snickered. Maximillian looked like he wanted to pummel me but masked his expression into a calm facade before spinning around to face the girl I was pretty sure I'd be willing to lose this job for. "What do you say, Bae? Wanna do dinner again?" he asked while walking over to her, swagger eminent in his steps. I wanted to bust his fucking kneecaps. "I'm not above begging," he added before sinking down to his goddamn knees.

The asshole was getting an F in my class.

I was quickly losing control of the classroom and knew that if I didn't reign it in soon, we'd never get anything done. Blakely looked at me for a millisecond before bringing her attention back to Max. "I don't think my boyfriend would like that very much," she replied with a smile.

The class erupted into "ooooh burn" and cackles. Max picked himself up off the floor, and I had to fight back a pleased smile. *That's right, fucker.*

"Who's the boyfriend?" he asked with a frown, though he was trying to mask his hurt. I almost felt sorry for him—almost. I too would be devastated to have missed out on Blakely.

I tried to salvage the distraction with a stern frown. "We're not here to discuss love lives, Mr. Hemsworth," I growled.

Blakely ignored me and quickly answered Max. "An ex from Texas. We got back together and are going to make the long-distance thing work." She gave him a convincing smile before scribbling something on her notebook.

I had to forcibly remind myself that this was a lie and that there wasn't some bumfuck in Texas trying to take what was mine. "Fair enough," Max said. "I'll settle for friendship." He then turned around to face me and grabbed the phone from my palm with a wink. "And if this *Texas* boyfriend fucks up, I'll be waiting."

You'll be waiting a long time, Maximillian Fucking Hemsworth.

SHE BROKE the rules and stayed after class. I didn't mind. Once the door was shut, I pulled her out of view from the window and picked her up to sit on her desk. Parting her legs, Blakely grabbed my tie and yanked me between her thighs. It was a compromising position, but my resolve was weak. "It's kinda

hot when you're jealous," she whispered, though her eyes were fixed on the door. We wouldn't stay like this for long, but I was willing to saturate my skin with her presence for every available second.

"Boyfriend in Texas, huh? Is he as smart and good looking as I am, or should I be worried?"

I could tell by her grin and the way her eyes moved from the door and to my lips that she wanted to kiss me. "He's really hot," she whispered. "He's nice. Kind. Smart. I think..." Her voice trailed off as a locker slammed shut outside. Our little bubble was one bad move from bursting. One casual onlooker. One random pop in from a coworker.

"You think what?"

"I think I'm falling for him," she admitted before touching her lips with the tips of her fingers.

I sucked in a breath and once again hated this secrecy. It was so stifling and made me clench my teeth. I wondered fleetingly if the allure had something to do with how forbidden this all was, and even though it made it fun, it wasn't worth the pain of not being able to touch her when I wanted to.

I wanted to kiss her on my desk and make her come on the stack of papers I needed to grade. I wanted to hold her hand in public. Wrap my arm around her shoulders in front of her brother and joke about our relationship with Rose. She didn't deserve to be hidden.

Right now, she deserved to be rewarded for that admission. I knew it didn't come easy to her. "I don't want to say this here, because we don't have time and it's cheap and fast and not what you deserve, but I love you," I rushed out before mentally kicking myself.

And then the classroom faded away. The time slowed. The secretive seconds and distance between us melted into hot lust. Blakely leaned up as I leaned down and somewhere in the middle, we met at the perfect angle for a kiss. As her hand rested on the waistband of my pants, each rise and fall of her chest had me aching to slide my finger inside of her.

"We're so bad at this secrecy thing," she groaned.

"Secrets are overrated," I conceded before clinging to her lip with my teeth and pulling at the soft pillow of flesh. She tasted like mint, and my hands went to her neck just so I could feel her erratic pulse.

"We should stop," she whispered while parting her legs wider. I pressed against the soft fabric of her black underwear. I'd probably have a wet spot on my pants for how heated she was.

“We should,” I agreed between kisses while palming her breasts.

“I’m going to stop. Any minute now,” she said again before grinding on my dick. The desk she was sitting on squeaked.

“One more minute,” I pleaded while sliding my hand down to her skirt and dipping inside of her heat. She was *dripping*.

“Fuck,” she said before pulling away. “I’m going to lunch because, if I stay here, you’ll lose your job for sure.” I took my finger and sucked on it, enjoying the look of her heady eyes and the taste of her on my tongue.

She got up from the desk and pushed at my chest. The space between us was torturous. It was all so new; I didn’t feel like I was adequately acquainted with every freckle on her face or the curve of her breasts. Every moment of my day was filled with wanting to know her better, and I wasn’t sure this desperate newness would ever fade.

I watched her walk to the classroom door with her messenger bag slung over her shoulder, and when her hand landed on the handle, she paused. “I love you too,” she whispered so low I almost didn’t hear, but my chest swelled with pure, blinding happiness long after she disappeared into the hallway.

I love you, too.

I love you, too.

Mine.

Mine.

Mine.

“Good girl,” I whispered into my empty classroom.

Blakely

“I’M NOT GOING to the fall formal, Maximillian. My boyfriend is in Texas. I don’t see the point,” I argued for the fifteenth time while slamming my locker shut. He’d been hounding me for weeks, begging me to attend with him *as friends*. The only thing friendly about his persistence was the smile on his face.

Maximillian’s blond hair was a mess today, and he tugged at the strap of his backpack while he grinned. Handsome, cheeky little devil. “It can be casual! Let me talk to your boyfriend. I’ll assure him that my intentions are pure,” he teased. He was continually mocking me about my elusive Texas boyfriend, and it annoyed the hell out of me. Maximillian knew. He knew. I knew he knew by the way he taunted Decker—Mr. Harris—relentlessly. And yet he never said anything.

“Nah. I’ve got plans tonight anyway. I don’t even have a dress!” That was a lie. I had a dress. It had been hanging in my closet since I got here, just waiting for an opportunity to be seen. The only problem was, the only person I wanted to wear it for couldn’t actually take me out on a date.

“You should just go naked,” Maximillian offered, and I gave him a pointed look. He held his hands up in surrender. “Fine. Be lame. Don’t go to the dance that literally *everyone* is going to be at, you rebel hipster loner.”

“Have fun with Taylor!” I called over my shoulder while heading to Physics.

That night, Lance was off with Sean again. I still hadn’t met this mystery

boyfriend, but I didn't mind. The more time Lance spent at his apartment, the more time I had with Decker.

I was sitting at the kitchen table when Decker walked through the front door, carrying his leather bag. His eyes lit up the moment he saw me, and I took a moment to appreciate the black suit he was wearing. He'd undone his gray tie some and unbuttoned the top of his button up shirt, revealing some of his delicious chest.

"Hey," he said. "It's not too late for the dance if you still wanted to go." I warmed at his thoughtfulness but shook my head. He'd told me numerous times that I could go to the dance tonight, though I knew the idea of me spending any amount of time with Maximillian drove him mad. I appreciated that he reined in his jealous tendencies, but still didn't want to attend. Time with Decker was precious, and I was determined to enjoy whatever I could.

"I was thinking," he said with a grin. "We should have a dance of our own tonight."

"Oh, really?" I replied while closing the textbook in front of me and grinning back up at him.

"Really. Go put on a pretty dress, though you don't need it. I'll get the music going."

"None of that old school shit, Mr. Harris," I chided before disappearing into my room. The dress I wanted to wear once belonged to Mama. It was deep blue and short. The fabric was soft, and anytime I put it on, I felt pretty. I loved how it lightly clung to my skin and draped along my torso. Mama got it from one of her boyfriends. She hated that the bust was too large for her and that it fit me perfectly; she was always self-conscious about her breasts. I cherished the satin dress. Not because of its origins or because it reminded me of her, but because it was one of the few precious things I owned that genuinely made me feel beautiful.

I slipped it on and found some nude heels Lance bought me to pair with it, then applied a little makeup. I stared in the mirror for a moment, trying to remember the last time there was such a sparkle in my eye. Moving to Memphis looked good on me. Decker Harris looked good on me.

When I made my way back into the living room, the lights had been dimmed, and soft music was playing through the speakers. Decker lit a single candle on the mantle, then turned around to face me once he could hear my heels clicking on the wood floors. As I'd hoped, his jaw classically dropped, making a blush hit my cheeks. "You look incredible. Breathtaking. I'm-I'm

speechless here.”

“Come dance with me, Decker,” I said while holding my hand out. He didn’t need telling twice.

Decker sauntered over, then wrapped his arms around me. I nuzzled his neck, breathing in the deep scent of his cologne while swaying to the music. “This is just what I wanted,” I whispered as his hand drifted lower to cup my ass.

“I would have picked you up in a limo if this was our dance. I would’ve been nervous out of my goddamn mind, too, wondering how a nerd like me scored a date with you. You would have been way out of my league,” Decker replied before spinning me around and crushing me back to his chest.

“I doubt that. Have you seen yourself?”

“Have you seen *yourself*?” Decker asked. “You’re beautiful, Blakely. I can’t stop staring at you. And it’s not just these plush lips,” he kissed me for emphasis, a light peck that I wanted to drag out but he cut off too soon. “It’s not your delicious curves”—his hands ran down my sides—“or your long legs,” he added before lightly touching my thigh.

“It’s not?” I asked.

“No. It’s your selflessness. Your fire. Your intelligence. Your heart. Fuck, you have an amazing heart once you let people in.”

“You’re going to give me a big head, Mr. Harris,” I teased before running a hand through his dark hair. It was so soft. “I wish our timeline would have aligned better. I would have gladly fumbled through an awkward high school dance with you.”

“My younger self would have been fighting a boner all night,” he joked.

“Your older self seems to be having the same problem. Need some help with that, Mr. Harris?” I asked with a teasing grin before trailing my hand down his chest and past his waist until I was cupping his hard-on over his pants.

“Fuck, you kill me.” He groaned before taking a deep inhale of my hair. “I know you’re on the pill, but I’m going to grab a condom and bend you over the kitchen table,” he rushed out before backing away. “Give me five seconds.”

Decker disappeared down the hall, and I smiled after him, the thrill of the moment coursing through me. How did I get so lucky? How did something so disastrous and ugly turn into the best move of my life? I had a brother that I liked, maybe even loved. I had Decker. I was at my dream school on track to

graduate with honors. Everything was just perfect.

And then the door jiggled. Fuck.

Lance was here. Right now. Right fucking now.

I turned on the lights and quickly blew out the candle just as Lance opened the door and entered the loft. I fixed my face into a fake smile while greeting him. “Whoa! Look at you! Hot date tonight?” Lance asked before dumping his bag on the floor. I heard Decker’s door shut and breathed out a sigh of relief. Crisis averted.

My brother looked effortlessly handsome with his graphic tee and faded jeans. He ran a hand through his hair and let out a low, polite whistle while gesturing for me to spin around. I curtsied and humored him, feeling giddy at how sweet he was being. I couldn’t help but wonder how it would have felt to have his sort of enthusiasm growing up.

“It’s the fall formal tonight, but it seems my date has stood me up. Was just about to go get changed and watch a movie.”

Lance’s jaw dropped. “Who in their right mind would stand you up?” he asked while rubbing his hands together. “Oh gosh, I’ve been waiting for this moment. I get to beat some dude up for breaking my sister’s heart now, don’t I?” he asked with glee while pacing the floors. “Give me a name. I’m so excited! I get to be the protective big brother now!”

I giggled at his elation while taking off my heels. Usually, others might have said that my romantic night with Decker was ruined, but I actually wasn’t bothered by Lance’s intrusion. “There will be no beating anyone up,” I chided. I felt terrible for yet another lie but didn’t see any other option. I was actually pretty proud of myself for coming up with something so quickly. “I didn’t really want to go anyway. Besides, look at me. He’s already missing out. I think the absence of my presence is punishment enough.” I winked to feign confidence and put my hand on my hips.

Lance grinned. “I like the way you think, Blakely,” he said before making his way over to the kitchen and grabbing a Coke out of the fridge.

“I thought you were staying at Sean’s tonight,” I asked.

Lance faced me just as his face fell, and I watched as he started staring at his feet. “Ah, I decided to come home. Missed my baby sister too much,” he deflected. I wanted to pry but didn’t want to be too intrusive. It seemed like he wasn’t unwilling to open up about his relationship. I had no right to complain though. I decided not to press him on it even though I wanted to. I was starting to understand why Decker felt so protective of Lance. I had

started to feel the same way. Lance was so bright and joyful; he was the type you wanted to hold tight and shelter from the world. Sometimes I even fleetingly wondered if he would have been this optimistic ray of sunshine had he been raised by Mama.

“Oh! I spoke to your dad’s parole officer and managed to get a case opened on his disappearance,” Lance said. “I know we’ll find him soon, Blakely.” My heart swelled again. I hadn’t heard from Dad since the night he warned me away. I was worried about him but felt helpless to do anything. The system was flawed and didn’t care about an ex-felon. We hadn’t seen more of those men around, but I had a feeling this wasn’t over. Like most of my life right now, I was in a state of limbo and waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Thank you, Lance. I can’t say it enough. It means a lot that I don’t have to go through that alone,” I choked out.

Lance circled the kitchen island and wrapped me up in a hug. “You don’t have to do anything alone anymore, Blakely. I’m here for the long haul.” Moisture collected in my eyes, and I swatted it away when our embrace ended. “Anyways,” Lance began, all tenderness in his tone now gone, “a dress like that shouldn’t be put to waste. How about we go to dinner? Where the hell is Decker?”

As if on cue, Decker appeared out of his bedroom and came sauntering down the hall. He looked frustrated as he ran a hand through his hair. He’d changed out of his suit and into jeans and a t-shirt. I wasn’t sure which outfit I liked more. “Was just grading papers,” he supplied lamely.

“Well, stop. We’re taking Blakely out to dinner,” Lance said before clapping his hands.

Decker’s face twisted up into a look of agony as he responded. “I’m not sure. I have a lot of work to get done,” he replied. I knew that he didn’t have anything to do tonight, but the idea of sitting with Lance and me while I was wearing *this* dress would be awkward and torturous. I had to fight back a snicker.

Lance wasn’t easily deterred. “Too bad. We’re going out,” he replied. “Go put on one of those fancy suits you own and meet me here in ten minutes. I have a perfect place.”

Tonight had definitely taken a different turn, but I was excited. I was actually looking forward to a night with both Lance and Decker. Since we got back from Chicago, we’d all kind of separated to do our own things. Decker

and I were so focused on keeping our relationship a secret, that we had inadvertently kept our distance from Lance in the process. I decided that this would be very good for us.

“Sounds like a plan,” I agreed readily.

LANCE TOOK us to a high-rise restaurant at the top of a five-star hotel. It was fine dining at its best. The waiters put a napkin in my lap and held the chair out for me. It was a five-course meal, and by the third course, Lance and Decker were giggling like a bunch of schoolgirls as they drank wine.

“Do you remember that girl you dated in high school?” Lance asked while taking another sip. “You had me break up with her because you were too scared to.”

Decker stuttered, his voice a little too loud for the fancy setting. I had a feeling that they often got like this when they were together. Boisterous. Loud. Lost in their own world and memories. It was beautiful to watch. “She told me she practiced witchcraft. I didn’t want her placing a curse on me,” Decker explained in rapid-fire.

“Well, we both know how well it worked out for me,” Lance said while rolling his eyes. I took another bite of salad before resting my chin on my fist. I found myself feeling a little jealous of their long-lasting friendship. Would we have had stories like this if I knew Lance sooner?

“Don’t remind me. She set your hair on fire in Mrs. Anderson’s English class!” They both roared with laughter, and I joined in.

As if remembering that I was still there, Lance turned to me. “What is the worst date you ever went on?” he asked with a mischievous chuckle.

I actually wasn’t willing to divulge the details of the worst date I had ever been on. And because it was a lighthearted dinner, I decided to tell them the story that was easier to swallow. “I once dated the quarterback of our football team, and if you know anything about Texas football, you’d know that being on his arm was a huge deal in our tiny town,” I began. I could still remember Kenneth. He was handsome and smart. Kind, but a little odd.

“Oh my gosh, I bet he was hot,” Lance joked.

Beside him, Decker looked like he wanted to punch something. I was enjoying his jealousy just a little too much. “He was *very* hot.” I made sure to

draw my words out for emphasis. Decker rolled his eyes at my antics before slyly rubbing my calf with his foot. I stiffened.

“So,” A cough escaped my chest. “He told me to meet him at his house one time, and I didn’t think anything of it. I knocked on his door, and it was his mother who answered. We hadn’t met before, but we had been going out for a few weeks, so the timing was appropriate. I figured he just wanted me to meet his parents.”

“Why does this sound like it’s going to take a bad turn?” Lance asked. Decker’s foot drifted up, and I parted my legs, but he never touched me there, he kept his exploration of my body limited to my knees.

“Because it is,” I answered Lance. “His parents were lovely. They sat me down at the kitchen table and started talking about their son’s goals for his life. And then,” I began with a long, dramatic, drawn-out sigh. Lance was on the edge of his seat, and Decker was staring intently at me. “They started to give me the talk. The sex talk.”

“No!” Lance said while cackling. Decker had a wide grin on his face as he shook his head. His foot retreated.

“Yup. They wanted to make sure we were safe, and he just sat there the entire time, letting them tell me how a penis worked and how to track my ovulation to prevent pregnancy.”

Both men were bent over and laughing so hard that even Lance had tears streaming down his face. It had been one of the most mortifying moments of my entire life, but now I could look back on it and smile. “You officially win the competition for the worst date ever,” Decker said in a bright voice.

I leaned back in the soft chair while crossing my arms over my chest. I unintentionally pressed my breast up and blushed when I saw Decker drop his fork. “What can I say? I’m a winner.”

“But did you have sex with that guy?” Lance asked with a laugh. “Wait. Don’t answer that. Gross,” Lance quickly added with more chuckles. My eyes flickered to Decker, and I realized how awkward this was. We hadn’t exactly had the conversation about past relationships, and it felt weird to talk about it now.

“Nah. I eventually got tired of his parents asking me if I took birth control regularly and when my next cycle was. They were way too involved in their son’s sex life.”

After chatting a bit more, I got up and excused myself for the restroom and made my way across the swanky restaurant while thinking how perfect

this night had turned out. I loved watching the two of them interact. Their friendship was strong and intimate. It was beautiful to watch but heartbreaking, too. I felt terrible knowing Decker and I were harboring this secret that could tear them apart.

After freshening up, I exited the bathroom and stopped when I saw Decker standing in the hallway. The moment our eyes connected, he pushed me back through the threshold and slammed the door shut, locking us both inside. “I’m sorry we couldn’t finish things back at the loft,” he rasped before kissing me.

I could’ve gotten drunk on the taste of wine on his lips. It was intoxicating; I never wanted it to stop. He cupped my neck and squeezed lightly before sucking on my collarbone. If he didn’t stop soon, I’d emerge from this bathroom with a dark, obvious hickey. “I’m having fun,” I said with a smile while guiding his face back up and away from my neck.

Decker kissed my forehead before speaking again. “I’m glad. Damn you look so good in this dress. I want you for dessert.”

It felt wrong, clinging to Decker in a fancy bathroom while Lance was sitting alone at the table. We were being too risky once again, and yet, I held him. I smiled at the perfectness of the night. I kissed his wrist and tugged on the waistband of his suit pants. He palmed my breast and grabbed my ass. We were two seconds from fucking in the bathroom. “Lance is waiting,” he whispered, though he sounded pained to say it.

“Lance is waiting,” I affirmed. And we went back out to the dinner table separately but feeling an intense longing for one another. Dinner was perfect.

Blakely

WE SLIPPED into a comfortable routine of secrets.

Thanksgiving was just around the corner, and somehow, we managed to survive two months of secret rendezvous, lingering stares, and brief touches that meant more than we could ever say. There was an intense yet hollow sort of happiness between us. We connected so deeply, so profoundly, so beautifully that it almost felt too good to be true, but then there was the added weight of secrecy beating us up. If hiding could leave me battered and blue, I'd have two black eyes, cracked ribs, and bruises. We were always too close to getting caught. Too open with the blinding affection and tension between us.

“You’ve been quiet today,” Decker observed while wrapping an arm around my waist as I washed dishes in the loft. I felt the scrubbing bubbles lathering over my skin as I tried to formulate my response. I didn’t want him to think I wasn’t happy, I was just exhausted.

“Are you tired of hiding?” I asked.

“Yes.” His response was immediate and blunt. I loved his honesty and how we were always on the same page.

Decker grabbed my hips and forced me to look at him. I wondered if he could see the exhaustion in my expression. School was kicking my ass lately. I had straight A’s, but it was hard to keep up. He helped me study in the evenings, and even gave pointers on a presentation I was going to give. I appreciated him tremendously but felt like I couldn’t keep up.

He leaned down for a kiss, making a smile break out on my lips. But instead of kissing me, he whispered over my mouth. “Lance is supposed to be gone tomorrow. Why don’t I take you out of town? We can make this feel more public in a place where people won’t recognize us?” he offered. It wasn’t the first time he had, either. It just felt too risky. This loft had become our prison and our safe haven. I didn’t have it in me to risk losing that.

Decker’s lips found purchase on my forehead just as the front door swung open. “Hey! I got home early.” Lance’s voice died off as Decker pulled away from me. A cool sheen of nervous sweat coated my skin as I turned away to greet Lance, who was staring at us curiously, a hint of anger on his angelic face.

“Hey,” I said with a smile before walking around the kitchen island to greet him. “How was work?” Could he hear the tremor in my voice? Could he see the intimacy bouncing between Decker and me?

“It was fine. What are *y’all* up to?” Lance asked while keeping his eyes on Decker. The speculation and assumptions were twisting like a tornado behind his blue eyes.

“Just talking about school.”

“You were standing awfully close to be talking about school,” he accused. It was right there, right at the tip of his tongue. Relief like a cannon burst through me, but I kept my mouth shut, offering Decker a curious glance to see if this was it. Would we finally tell Lance? He said he wanted to trial and error this thing between us, but I was ready for the next phase in our experiment.

And the look that greeted me was full of terror and pain.

Decker was gripping the island so hard I was confident it would crack. His lips were slightly curled, and his muscles flexed. Now was not the time.

I intervened, trying to salvage this moment, but it felt so, so wrong. “I’ve just been worried about my project in Chemistry. It’s embarrassing. He walked in on a total meltdown. And this shit with my dad is really freaking me out.” All of these things were honest. I wasn’t really lying to Lance, just avoiding telling him the full truth. It was ironic that the half-truths our relationship were built on still held us back now. Dad hadn’t reached out since he left two months ago. I was really fucking worried those men had him. School and work were wearing me down.

But none of it had me as worked up as Decker’s and my secret affair. And I was starting to realize that all these secrets were acting like a wedge

between my brother and me.

“Oh, Blakely,” Lance said before wrapping me up in a hug. I hadn’t even realized I was crying until my salty tears were saturating his shirt. “Why didn’t you tell me? Do you need to call in to work tonight? Take a break?”

Lance was a chronic fixer, and it made me feel worse.

Pulling away as I wiped my face, I answered him. “No. I want to go tonight. It’s a welcome distraction. I just need some extra help lately, and Decker saw me crying. I’m sorry.”

“Of course,” Lance replied. “And I’ll be around to help out more, too. Sean and I broke up this past weekend. I wanted him to come meet you, but he said that was too close to *labeling this relationship* for him. I knew I shouldn’t have dated someone that hadn’t come to terms with his sexuality yet. I can go to his grandmother’s funeral, but meeting my family is too much, apparently.” Lance rolled his eyes in a painful, slow motion that was brimming with pain.

“What? You didn’t tell me,” Decker blurted out from his spot in the kitchen. The shock was evident on his face, as well as a hint of guilt.

Lance shrugged. “You’ve been extra busy lately.”

I took a good look at my brother and noticed the heartbreak in his eyes. “I’m sorry about Sean,” I croaked.

“I’m sorry about your dad,” he replied.

The three of us stood standing there in silence for a long while, the things we weren’t willing to say making the air thick with tension. “Well, you better get ready for work. We can eat ice cream and watch movies on the couch tomorrow,” Lance finally offered.

Placing a hand on my brother’s shoulder, I nodded solemnly before disappearing.

Something told me this conversation was far from over.

“WHY THE LONG FACE, HOT STUFF?” Rose asked as I mopped the floor after closing. My feet were tired. There was beer on my shirt. I wanted nothing more than to curl up and cuddle Decker.

“I’m just tired.”

“What kind of tired?” Rose asked. “The emotional tired? The physically

tired? The hopeless sort of tired? Are you the kind of tired that lamely uses a universal term for exhaustion but you're really just falling apart?"

Rose was spit firing questions, one after the other, and I felt my body give in. My face contorted into pain, the kind that wasn't exhaustion. "Oh, baby, come here. Is this about Decker?"

My mouth dropped open. "You know?"

"That boy tells me everything. Of course I know. I'm actually a little offended that it's taken you so long to open up to me," she tsked while grabbing the mop from my hand and wrapping me in a big hug. She smelled like vanilla and incense.

"Lance almost caught us tonight, and all I wanted to do was tell him," I whimpered.

"So why didn't you?" Rose guided me to a booth and sat me down, reaching across the table to hold my hand in solidarity.

"I was going to. But then I looked at Decker and saw his face. He looked terrified. It's a lot of pressure, you know? Walking this tightrope between telling Lance and preserving their relationship while trying to build my own with Decker. Add the issue of school and living together, and it's a clusterfuck of massive proportions."

Rose nodded as I spoke, while pulling a joint out from her shirt pocket and lighting it up. She took a slow, deep inhale and held it in her chest for a long while before blowing out rings of smoke. "You love them, don't you?" Rose finally asked with a smile. "I'm so proud of you. Look at that big ol' heart opening up for the world to see."

"*That's* your takeaway from all of this?" I asked incredulously.

"You're focusing on all the wrong stuff. When you arrived in my office, you were closed off. Your aura was jaded and dark. Now you love two people so much that you're crying in front of me. If that's not progress, then I don't know what is."

I mulled over her words while tracing scratches in the wood on the table. "I do love them. It's why I feel so selfish and guilty. My mama never cared who she bulldozed over to get what she wanted. I can't help but feel like I'm doing that with Decker. I want—love—him so much that I'm willing to potentially destroy Lance in the process. It's at the point where it's not just our relationship that'll hurt my brother, it's the betrayal of keeping it secret that'll ruin him."

"It's gonna burn, babe. But it's all temporary."

“Temporary? How can you be so sure?” I asked with a huff.

“Because, child, this whole damn life is temporary. You’re not promised forever. You’re not even promised tomorrow. You get one life. One heart. One opportunity to make your existence count, and even if Lance never speaks to the two of you again, it’ll all be temporary, even when it feels like forever, it’s not. And I don’t know your brother, but he’s not going to throw away decades of friendship over this. He’s not going to push you away like everyone else in your life has, Blake.”

“It’s Blakely, Rose. Blakely.”

“Atta girl.” Rose took another drag of her joint and closed her eyes happily as she held it in. Her smile was infectious, and I wished I could have the sort of confidence and optimism she spewed daily. “Tell them, Blakely. Life’s too short for secrets. Call Decker up right now and say it’s time to put his big boy panties on and handle his shit.”

“Right now?” I stuttered.

“Right. Now. I’m gonna sit with you while you tell him.”

I fished my cell phone out of my pocket and stared at the screen for a long moment, debating on whether or not I could actually do this. My chest constricted as I pulled up his name and hit dial. My stomach fell the moment his deep, tired voice answered on the other line.

“Hey, punk,” he greeted in a low voice. I envisioned him sitting in his bedroom, lying on his bed and staring at the ceiling. He was probably in sweats and rubbing circles along his abs. “Are you on your way home? Need me to come get you?”

“I’m about to leave. I can walk with Rose. How was your night with Lance?”

Across from me, Rose rolled her eyes. She damn well knew I was stalling. “Brutal,” Decker replied, snapping my attention back to him. “He knows me too well. Asked who I was dating, because I’ve been happier lately. I made up some bullshit about a girl online, but he wasn’t convinced. I think he’s onto us. Maybe we should tone things down a notch? We have to be more careful.”

I let out a shaky sigh. “What if we weren’t more careful?” I asked.

Decker didn’t immediately respond, and I suddenly felt very, very tired. “What are you suggesting?”

“I’m suggesting we try something new. I’m suggesting we tell him. I’m suggesting I switch schools. I’m suggesting we do this for real, Decker.”

The other end of the line went silent for a long moment. I could hear my heart pounding in my ears as I tried to calm myself.

“I can’t, Blakely. Not yet. It’s still too soon,” he finally said.

I glanced at Rose, but she was blurry from the tears in my eyes. “Then I can’t do this. I care too much about both of you.”

“Are you breaking up with me over the phone?” he seethed. “Is Rose there? Come home, Blakely. Let’s talk about this, okay? I’m not saying never; I’m just saying not right now.”

It hurt. It hurt so fucking bad. It felt like my soul was on fire, but I knew I had to end this. I refused to be like my mama. I refused to be someone’s dirty little secret. “And I’m saying when you’re willing to tell Lance, I’ll be willing to try with you again.”

I hung up like a child, slamming it down on the table. I was unwilling to hash this out any further. He was right, it was ridiculous to do this over the phone, but when else would we? It’s not like we could have a fight with Lance just down the hall. We couldn’t go out and do this thing over dinner. We couldn’t hash things out in his classroom. We were stuck, and Rose was right. Life was too short to feel stuck anymore.

But I was tired, so very tired. My chest was shaking with exhaustion. My eyes felt heavy as they shed tears. “Wanna stay at my place, baby?” Rose asked with a tender smile.

“Yes, please. I just want to sleep.”

“That’s the best cure for being tired, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

I cried all night and didn’t get a wink of sleep.

Blakely

IT WAS impossible to sit through Decker's class and not feel the urge to cry. I spent all of last night in Rose's RV, sobbing my eyes out while trying to find a way to make this work and crumbling when every option hit a brick wall. I wasn't willing to sneak around anymore, and he wasn't willing to tell Lance.

Decker didn't look too well, either. His eyes were bloodshot and surrounded by dark circles. His button-up shirt was wrinkled, and he barely put any effort into his lecture. It broke me to see him so broken. It hurt me to see the evidence of his hurt. But once again, the world stood in our way. I couldn't approach him in class, and Lance would be home tonight.

We spent most of our class reading from our textbook, but I couldn't bring myself to read. He brooded at his desk but kept his eyes on me. I usually would have bugged him for being so obvious, but I guess we didn't have to worry about that anymore. My heart was breaking, but I didn't know what else to do. I knew that we could overcome the age difference and the fact that he was my teacher. But I couldn't keep the secret from Lance. It made me feel too much like my mother, and I didn't want to deceive Lance.

"Blakely, please stay after class," Decker instructed. I wasn't expecting him to speak to me. What hurt the most was the feeling that he wasn't willing to fight for us. Last night, I turned my phone off, but there were no messages when I turned it back on this morning. No calls. No pleas for me to come home. Maybe it was immature to want to be chased. It was undoubtedly unhealthy and something my mama would've done. But I wanted Decker to

love me enough to at least try.

“Yes, Mr. Harris,” I replied as the class filtered out. Maximillian waited by the door and gave me a nod of solidarity before disappearing into the hall.

Decker and I sat in silence for far too long. His lack of words spoke a clear message right through my heart and echoed everything we’d been building up to. Nothing. Say nothing. Do nothing. Keep this a secret.

He wanted me to be empty of my honesty and full of him.

“Surprised you wanted to talk,” I finally spat out. I couldn’t handle squirming under his pain-filled stare any longer.

“What? Because I didn’t text or call after your little outburst last night? Unlike you, I don’t prefer to break people’s hearts over the phone.”

Ouch. Last night, I felt confident in my impulsive decision. Now, I wasn’t so sure.

“When would you have suggested we have this conversation, Decker? After class? Over dinner with my brother? Hell, we could just call an assembly of all the people we’re lying to and announce it to the fucking world.”

He slammed a fist on his desk and stalked over to me. I stood up and backed away, not trusting myself to be close to him. Decker was relentless, determined to close the physical and emotional distance between us with every step. My back hit a lab table, and I looked around for an escape but couldn’t find one. Within seconds, Decker was cupping my neck. “You broke me,” he choked out while squeezing lightly.

“You broke me first,” I rasped.

His lips clashed with mine. We fought with our teeth, our hands, and our souls. I pushed at his chest, but he didn’t move. He never moved. That man was rigid in every sense of the word. He took what he wanted without care for the ramifications, and I let him.

I was almost worried about where we were. I almost cared that he was devouring me in his classroom and that at any moment, someone could walk through that door and destroy the secret we’d been harboring. But that was what I wanted, right?

So even though it hurt—even though it killed me to taste the mint on his breath and the hurt on his tongue—I caved into my body’s demands and kissed him back. “I don’t deserve you,” he whispered between kisses, so low I almost missed it.

“Is that why you let me go? Is that why you gave up on me?” I asked

while unfastening the buttons on his pants. I hoped his groans filled the hallways of this damn school.

“You didn’t even give me a chance,” he growled before picking me up and placing me on the lab table. My legs parted, and he stepped closer to me. “We agreed to try.”

I yanked on his hair before lavishing his neck with more kisses, scraping my teeth along his sensitive skin before sucking on his pulse. I moved with the hopes of marking his mind, body, and soul. I wanted the evidence of my love for him branded on his rough skin. “I’m done trying. I’m done hiding.”

“What about my job?” Decker asked as I pulled his hard cock out of his pants. It was huge in my palm, throbbing at my touch.

“If you cared about your job, you wouldn’t be about to fuck me on this table, Decker.”

“Punk,” he groaned before thrusting his hand between my thighs. His fingers found my heat, and I threw my head back as he stroked my electric need.

“Admit it,” I demanded while aligning him with my center. He continued to tease my clit, and it was cruel how amazing he felt. “Admit it, Decker,” I said again when he wordlessly pushed my panties to the side.

“No,” he replied before sliding in me. I could have torn a hole through my lip with how hard I was biting it. My fingers clawed at his back. His hands dug into my hips. My heart was on fire with hate and energy and pain.

He thrust again and again, slamming the table against the classroom walls. Certainly, someone would hear. Was this his way of giving in? Of telling the world about us? I said his name, my voice growing louder with each syllable.

“Be quiet, Blakely,” he ordered before slamming his palm over my mouth. I whimpered at his silencing of me. I knew it was rational. I knew I shouldn’t want to be caught. But it was too symbolic of our relationship for it to not hurt.

Tears streamed down my cheeks and I didn’t let another sound escape my throat. If he wanted to say goodbye like this, I’d let him. I’d leave him in a way that honored our relationship: without a word.

A million lifetimes passed between each thrust. A million heartbreaks. I made peace with my broken heart in the silence of our fuck. I accepted his decision when we both came on the desk. We were nothing but writhing bodies. Only harsh gasps escaped our parted lips.

When he pulled out, it felt like he took my soul with him. He rested his forehead against mine as he calmed his breathing, his dark eyes never once leaving mine. “You’re mine, Blakely,” he promised, and it was the first lie I think he’d ever told me.

“Not anymore,” I promised before getting off the table and straightening my clothes.

Mama used to say that you could tell a lot about a man by the way they left you. She had enough practice being left to know what she was talking about. So I walked out of Decker’s classroom with my head held high, my fists clenched, and my soul on my sleeve. The day Mama died, I vowed to never be like her, and today I was the one that did the leaving.

Blakely

As I WALKED down the hallway and toward the lunchroom, Max called after me. I kept my feet moving, wishing this day would be over. “Hey,” he called out. “Are you okay?”

I briefly nodded and continued to walk, but he tugged at my shoulder and pulled me against the lockers. “I’m fine,” I choked out. The hall was mostly empty, as the bell had just rung, but I still felt crowded. The world felt too small.

Max looked left and right before speaking to me in a low voice so as not to be overheard. “You and Mr. Harris look like shit, babe. Did something happen?” he asked. “You can tell me. We’re friends, remember?”

I swallowed back emotions while trying not to give him a reaction. Everywhere ached. My heart, my sex, and my soul were battered by Decker’s touch. Sex with him in his classroom should have been hot and memorable, but it felt wrong. It wasn’t us; it was two fighting bodies trying to convince themselves that they belonged together.

Even though Decker and I were over, I wasn’t willing to out our relationship entirely to Maximillian. “I broke up with my boyfriend from Texas,” I finally admitted. It felt good to tell someone, even though it was veiled with a lie.

Max rolled his eyes. “We’re still saying it’s a boyfriend from Texas? All right, I’ll play.”

Against my better judgment, I smiled at his willingness to not ultimately

call me out on my bullshit. "It just got too hard," I admitted. "It was too much work. Too much risk. Too many secrets and hopes with no place to go." Max took another step closer before bracing his hands against the lockers by my head. I felt caged in but comforted. "He didn't even fight it," I said with a choked sob. "I deserved a better goodbye, and I can't even blame him. It happened over the phone. And then just now..." My voice trailed off. I couldn't talk about what just transpired. "I'm the one that ended things, so why does it hurt so bad?"

"It hurts because he's a dumb ass," Maximillian replied simplistically. "Look, I've embraced the friend zone. Hell, I've built up camp here. But if I had a girl like you? There's nothing I wouldn't do to keep you. I'd stalk you down, drive all the way from Texas, and demand that you stay with me. You need a man that shows up, and if he's not willing to do that for you, then I'm happy to show you what it feels like to be properly chased." His smile was warm, but I pressed at his chest with a pain-filled giggle. He remained firm and leaned close enough to rest his forehead against mine. It felt wrong to stand so close to him after everything that had happened, but I reveled in the comfort he offered.

The thing was, I'd never want Maximillian the same way I wanted Decker. Decker taught me how to breathe again. He helped me sail across an ocean of pain and loneliness. He carried me to a place of self-care and acceptance. Decker Harris bled truths from me like a cherished offering. Nothing would ever be the same. But I couldn't love a secret, not when our relationship was built on raw honesty. I couldn't love a lie.

"Shouldn't the two of you be at lunch?" a low voice growled. It was a voice that haunted me. Decker.

Maximillian snapped his attention toward Decker, but I kept my gaze firmly on the ground as shame filled my cheeks. I knew what this looked like and didn't want to see the pain I just knew was on Decker's face.

"Sorry, Mr. H. My girl here has a broken heart, and I was just trying to help her out." His tone was dripping with insinuations and insults, and Maximillian was glowering in Decker's direction.

Decker took a step closer to us, his fists were clenched like he was trying to grit back the words begging to spew from his lips. "I bet you were just waiting to step in and *help out*," Decker replied. He stood directly in front of Maximillian, and I shoved my way between them. This was getting ridiculous. My hand touched Decker's chest, and I felt him shudder at the

touch and let out a hiss.

“Someone has to help her,” Maximillian growled.

Decker took another step forward and raised his fist, stopping once he realized we were in an open hallway. “Careful, Max.”

“You be careful, Mr. Harris,” Max retorted.

Decker rolled his neck and straightened his tie. We both looked utterly wrecked. There was a bruise forming on his neck and a lipstick stain on his collar. “You better go to lunch, Mr. Hemsworth. I’m not going to ask twice.”

“I can’t do this,” I whispered to myself, but Maximillian heard. I wanted to punish my heart for fleeing from what was giving it a pulse.

“Fine. Have a nice day, Mr. H,” Maximillian replied darkly. Grabbing my wrist, he pulled me away from the source of my broken heart and toward the lunchroom. Every step away from Decker felt painful. It was like I was walking through thick mud. I didn’t want to be away from him, but I knew I couldn’t stay. I was trying to walk away and hold on at the same time. There was a war brewing between my soul and my head. I wasn’t sure which would win. He was chaos to my heart, and I was poison to his realities.

I took one last glance at Decker from over my shoulder and nearly ran to him at the sight of his stormy expression. There was lightning in his eyes. Maximillian kept pulling me away.

Once Decker was out of sight and we were near the lunchroom, my phone started ringing in my pocket. I pulled it out to check who was calling me during the day. The only people I ever spoke to were Lance, Decker, and Maximillian. It was a number I didn’t recognize, but I picked it up and answered anyway. “Hello?”

“Blakely! Do not listen to them—”

My stomach sank when I realized it was my father on the other line. His voice was scratchy and worn as if he’d been screaming. “Dad? Dad!” I was screaming into the phone. The answering silence was too loud, and my mind was morbidly interpreting each second that passed where he didn’t speak.

“I think that’s enough,” a dark voice answered that didn’t belong to my father. You could almost hear the evil in his tone, it was burdened with bad intentions. My stomach sank, and I nearly fell to my knees in the middle of the hallway. Maximillian was watching me in shock with his mouth hanging open. “I’m assuming this is Blakely, correct?” they asked.

“Yes, this is her,” I stuttered. “What have you done with my dad?” I bit the inside of my cheek to calm my nerves, knowing that I needed a level head

to navigate this unexpected call. Blood pooled in my mouth, but I didn't care.

"We have your father. He has a debt to pay, and it looks like you have the means to pay for it." A debt? What did that even mean? Was he talking about money or something...else?

I felt hands on my shoulders as Maximillian forced me to look him in the eye. My wide eyes stared at him as I spoke on the phone. "I have no idea what you're talking about, I have no money. I'm a fucking waitress! Where is he?" Although I'd been able to save up some cash, it wasn't nearly enough. If they wanted money, I sure as hell didn't have any to spare.

"Don't play stupid with me, Blakely Stewart," the dark voice answered. Maximillian reached for my phone, but I shoved him away. I needed to hear everything, so I could make sense of it all. "We've been watching you. I know that brother of yours has a fat wallet," he added. "All you have to do is bring me fifty grand, and the debt will be paid. If you don't, your father will pay in blood."

"I-I need proof of life. And where will I bring it? How will I even—"

"I'll send you a photo of your father, and you'll figure it out. You attend that fancy school, don't you? I'm sure you can use that pretty head of yours to find a solution that doesn't end in your daddy's death. Hurry."

The line went dead before I could rush out my confusion and excuses. There was no way I could come up with fifty thousand dollars at the drop of a hat. "Blakely? What's going on?" Max asked while shaking me once more. My phone pinged, and a photo of my father came through with an address and a time. Dad had two black eyes, a busted lip, and a gash along his forehead. He was hunched over as if he couldn't hold himself up. A choked sob escaped my chest the moment I saw it. The address was for a place in Memphis, and the time said five p.m. tonight.

A million thoughts raced through my mind as I tried to make sense of everything. Maximillian's voice was muffled compared to the roaring in my brain. I couldn't go to the police. The men keeping him captive would undoubtedly kill him. Not to mention, cops didn't particularly care about convicted felons on parole. I wanted to run to Decker, explain to him what was happening, and beg for his help. But I didn't feel like we were okay enough for me to ask him.

Lance. I had to go to Lance.

Shit, I couldn't go to Lance. He was in Louisiana. Fucking Louisiana. He'd texted me this morning that he had to meet with his client there. My

brain was working through solutions like this was a final exam.

“Fuck, Blakely. Tell me what’s going on. You looked terrified!” Maximillian said louder.

“I have to go,” I answered.

“Like hell you do! I heard what was going on. What’s wrong with your dad?”

I glanced down at my phone once more and stared at the broken, battered photo of my father. “It’s safer if you don’t know,” I finally answered before shrugging out of his grip. I started jogging down the hallway as Maximillian called after me. I needed to get to my dad. I couldn’t afford to lose the one parent I had left.

Decker

EVERYTHING HURT.

My head.

My heart.

My fucking chest.

If this was what love felt like, then count me out. It wasn't supposed to be like this. I wasn't supposed to fall for a girl that was too young, too off-limits. I risked my job and my best friend for what, pain?

Everyfuckingthing hurt. But I knew that I'd do it again in a heartbeat. The worst part about it all was the consolation prize of knowing that she was right. I had to sit here and witness her mutual pain, and the look on her blotchy, tear-stained face wrecked me. The only reason I didn't drive to Rose's house last night and demand she stay with me was the fact that she was doing the right thing. I wasn't courageous enough, strong enough, or good enough for Blakely Stewart. She gave me an ultimatum, and once again, I was too cowardly to bite the bullet and take away her pain.

And I knew I hurt her. No one wanted to feel like a secret. She repelled the idea of being anything like her mother, and our relationship was selfish. I understood why she did what she did and how she did it, but it didn't make the pain go away.

After guzzling whiskey like it was water last night, I convinced myself that I was right for not wanting to be honest about our relationship. I told myself that risking my job wasn't worth it, even though I knew damn well I'd

quit in a heartbeat for her. I was an educated man. I could survive this. She was *worth* surviving this for.

My job *should've* been my fear, but it wasn't. And when sobriety kicked my ass this morning, my real fears came colliding like a tidal wave in my chest. I feared losing the only friend I'd ever had. Would he really be mad? Would he really hate me?

Lance loved hard. He was the most unselfish person I knew. He was selfless and compassionate. He was a prominent supporter of love; it was evident in the way he approached life. His affections and devotion to people came without resentment or stipulations. But this would destroy him.

When shit hit the fan, I knew I wouldn't be enough, I wasn't good enough for her. I'd told her that I wanted expectations and labels, but truthfully the idea of commitment terrified me. I had my parents' blood flowing through my veins, and that had to count for something, right? The only thing I was good at was being Lance's best friend.

"Mr. H?" a breathless voice called from the doorway, and I snapped the number two pencil in my hand at the sound. I wasn't in the mood to see Maximillian Fucking Hemsworth. Seeing him in the hall with Blakely felt like walking on hot coals. I had to put on a brave face, but it burned me up. Turning in my seat to look at the asshole, I had to hold back a sneer. Maximillian was smart. Available. Determined. Courageous. He wasn't afraid to make his intentions known. He wasn't scared to look like an asshole and ask her out.

He was probably here to gloat. I could tell in the way he pulled her away and walked her to lunch that the fucker had plans to show Blakely what devotion and dedication actually looked like.

"Go away, Max. My office is closed," I growled. This piece of shit was really trying my patience. If I didn't lose my job for falling in love with a student, then I'd definitely lose it for kicking his ass. It would be worth it.

"It's Blakely," he began, but I cut him off. There was no way in hell I'd talk about her with him. I couldn't do it.

"I don't want to talk about—"

"Something's wrong," he huffed out. The angry haze clouding my brain started to fade and was quickly replaced with anxiety as I looked at him. Max looked terrified, and every damn alarm in my head started going off.

"What's wrong?" I asked as the toxic thoughts in my head reminded me that he was probably more qualified to help her.

“She got a weird call about her dad, then disappeared. I think something’s wrong, and even though it seriously pisses me off to have to come to you, I think we need to find her before something bad happens or she does something reckless.”

“What did the caller say?” I asked.

“She kept asking what they’d done with her dad. She mentioned something about only being a waitress, then ran off spouting some shit that it was safer if I didn’t know.”

Fuck. I quickly picked up my cell phone and dialed Lance’s number. He answered on the second ring as Maximillian hovered over me. “Hey, have you spoken with Blakely?” I greeted him with an immediate question.

“No? Is she skipping class again?” Lance asked with a light chuckle. “She’s been needing a break. You’ve really got to stop meddling. If I were concerned, I’d say something.”

I ground my teeth before responding. I wanted to tell him that I had every right to meddle. He couldn’t hoard her anymore. “A student just informed me that Blakely got a call about her father and ran out of the school. Apparently, she was really freaked out,” I explained. I was orbiting the black hole in my heart with trepidation.

“Fuck!” Lance yelled. “I’m in Louisiana, but I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Please tell me you put a tracker on her phone,” I gritted while gathering my things. Max was watching me move while gripping his backpack. I could tell he felt lost and out of the loop.

“I did,” Lance answered. “I also have one in her car. I’m going to call the detective assigned to Frank’s case.”

“Good. Send her location the second you hang up,” I demanded before ending the call. A numbness bred from overwhelming fear settled over me as I started walking toward the door. I settled into the eye of the storm so I could have a clear head while finding her. I couldn’t afford to be irrational, though I wanted to break every damn thing in my classroom.

“What’s the plan?” Max asked while shuffling back and forth on his feet.

“You’re going to class. I’m going to find my girl,” I growled before exiting the classroom.

I was nearly out of earshot when I heard his low response. “About damn time.”

WHEN LANCE TOLD me her phone was pinged last at a pawn shop, my heart sank, and I connected the dots. Whoever called her wanted money. Fast. I wanted to believe that it wasn't her father asking for cash, but I couldn't rule anything out. I pulled up to the shop, depressed to find that her car wasn't parked outside. She wasn't there anymore, but I went inside to ask. Maybe it could lead me to more information about what was running through her head.

She wasn't answering our calls and texts, which pissed me off even more. How did so much change in just a day? I knew we were going through a rough patch, but that didn't mean I wouldn't be there for her. Fuck! Of course she believed that. I'd proven last night that she couldn't rely on me.

The shop was cluttered with knock-off purses, electronics, and jewelry. The shopkeeper was tatted and had a creeper mustache and beady eyes. "Hey, man. You here to sell or buy?" he asked in a lazy, stoner drawl.

"I'm here to ask a couple of questions."

His eyes widened, but he quickly forced himself to relax, my intentions having obviously put him on edge. "I'm not answering shit unless you have a warrant, cop." Anger swelled within me, and I reached across the desk to grab his shirt and yank him over the jewelry cabinet, his torso slamming against the glass. I didn't even care that he had a rifle sitting beside him. I was a man on a motherfucking mission.

"I'm not a cop, motherfucker," I growled. He started sputtering about the weed growing in his backroom and offering me a bag of grow. His musty smell made me want to gag. I didn't want his fucking pot; I wanted my girl. Every second he rambled was a second she was in danger. Fuck that. I pulled him entirely over the cabinet and threw him on the ground.

"I don't want your shitty weed. There was a girl with blonde hair that was just here. What did she want?" I asked.

He sputtered out his response. "Sh-she sold me a bag, a MacBook, and a watch. I gave her two grand for all of it, and she seemed pissed that I was low balling her but desperate enough to take it."

I picked him up and slammed him against the tile floor in agitation. My hypothesis was correct, she was scrambling for cash and selling everything of value she had. His head hit with a resounding crack. I got up while dusting my hands off, then started walking out. "I'm calling the cops, asshole," he called at my back.

"You do that. I'm sure they'll love the weed you're growing in the back room," I replied while dialing Lance's number. I felt so close and yet so far.

Once outside, Lance picked up the phone. "Did you find her?" he asked.

"She wasn't at the pawnshop," I growled.

"It says she's at some used car lot now," Lance said, his voice far away like he was looking at his phone while speaking. "Why is she in a car lot?"

"I think whoever called her wants money. Do you have her bank information? Can we do a transfer?" I asked while getting into my car and pulling out of the lot.

"Do we really want to do that? We shouldn't negotiate with gangbangers, Decker. Let's find her first."

"We don't have time!" I yelled into the phone while punching my steering wheel. "I don't want her showing up there without enough cash. She's being impulsive, and I wouldn't put it past her to show up with whatever she has, and them punishing her for it not being enough."

Lance went quiet for a moment before answering. "You're right. I'm still waiting for the detective to call me back, too."

"Send me her bank info, and I'll wire two hundred grand to her account. Do you think that's enough?"

"Shit, Decker. That's a lot of money."

"I don't care. Keep sending me her location. The plan is to find her before she goes to them, but if we don't find her, we want her to be prepared, okay?" Once again, Lance went quiet.

"Decker, what's going on with you and my sister? I know you care, but this..."

I didn't have time for this conversation, but now was better than ever to admit what I felt. "I'm in love with your sister, Lance. I've been in love with her since the moment she knocked on your door. You're my brother, but she's my soul. My fucking soul. We can talk about this later, and you can kick my ass if you want, but I'm going to make sure she's safe first."

Lance didn't answer me immediately. I knew he was storming with betrayal and trying to figure out how to respond. I could practically feel his hurt through the phone. It killed me that it came out this way, but I was done hiding. I was done thinking I wasn't good enough and letting anything hold us back. "Find her first, Decker. Then, we'll talk."

He hung up the phone and sent me the address of the car dealership she was supposedly at. Something told me she was selling her Toyota. I pulled

out of the parking lot and headed that way. No more waiting on the sidelines. No more cowering. Blakely Stewart was mine, and I'd go to hell and back to save her.

Blakely

I BLINKED at the numbers on my receipt. No fucking way. “This can’t be right,” I said to the bank teller. I sold my car for seven hundred dollars; its only value was in scrap metal. Last I’d checked, I had three thousand dollars in savings. Two grand from pawning off everything of value I owned combined with the cash from my car. I’d been willing the number to magically increase all afternoon, and now that I was at the bank, I wondered if God finally decided to answer my prayers.

“You had a wire transfer from someone named Decker Harris thirty-five minutes ago equaling two hundred thousand dollars,” the teller said while typing away on her computer. My mouth dropped open in shock, and I had to shake my head to get rid of the disbelief. How did he know?

A whispered reassurance answered my unspoken question: *Decker Harris always knows.*

I started fumbling for my phone and winced when I saw the numerous ignored calls and texts from Lance, Decker, and Max. I felt terrible and childish, knowing that I should have made more of an effort to reach out to them, I just didn’t see any other way. I wasn’t willing to risk my father’s life. I had to play by their rules and pray it worked.

“Do you still want to withdraw everything?” she then asked, forcing me to snap my attention back to her.

“Um,” I mumbled, not sure if I wanted to actually use Decker’s money. It felt so incredibly wrong. But desperate people did desperate things. “Just fifty

thousand, please. In cash.”

Her lips pursed as she looked me up and down. She had orange-blonde hair and overly full lips. She was getting on my damn nerves. “I’ll need management approval.”

“Then I suggest you call your management,” I growled. I was running out of time. I had to be across town in an hour and didn’t want to think of what would happen to Dad if I was late. Every tick of the clock was another second that my father was in danger. An hour ago, my contact sent me another photo of Dad, this time with his hand bent at an odd angle. It looked broken, but I couldn’t know for sure. The words accompanying the text were painfully clear.

Tell no one.

“Blakely!” I spun around and nearly fell apart. Decker looked worse for wear as he jogged over to me. Bankers and patrons stared curiously at us as he wrapped me in a hug. “I’m so fucking glad I found you.”

I welcomed the feel of his skin, his pounding pulse roaring against mine as he squeezed me tightly. The last time I saw Decker was still blatantly clear in my mind, but I pushed it away. I needed this—needed him. But I knew this intimacy was fleeting, so I reveled in it. “How did you know where I was?” I asked.

“Max told me what happened and then Lance pinged your phone’s location. I went to the pawnshop and the car dealership. I kept missing you and was worried I’d be too late. They want money, don’t they?” he asked.

“They have him, Decker. They have my dad.” My words were constricted from the emotions strangling me. It felt freeing to share the burden of this news with someone but terrifying, too. “They’re going to hurt him,” I added. My fumbling hands lifted up my cell phone to show him the image that was burned in my brain. He took in Dad’s swollen, bloody face and the dark room he was tied up in.

“Fuck, Blakely. Why didn’t you come to me?” he asked as the bank teller walked up to her station with a manager.

“With everything that’s happened, I just...”

“I will always be there for you, Blakely. I don’t care what is going on.”

“Ma’am,” the bank teller interrupted us. “We need your signature to approve the withdrawal.”

I gave Decker a look before signing the paper she had thrust in front of my face. Fifty thousand dollars was more money than I’d ever seen in my

life. I couldn't even fathom the amount. It made me sick as they counted the cash in front of us. Soon, they were placing it in Decker's briefcase, and we were walking outside.

"Thank you for that," I mumbled, pride making a burning shame fill my chest. "I'll pay you back. I don't care how long it takes." Conviction clung to my words as we made our way to his car. I didn't want to use Decker's money, but I didn't see any other choice. It made me perpetually sick to know that I'd owe him for the foreseeable future. Decker hated parasitic people, and I never wanted to be someone that used him.

"I don't care about the money, Blakely," he whispered softly while placing a hand at my lower back. I wasn't even sure he realized he was touching me. It was just instinctual.

"But I do. I'm going to pay you back. I promise," I replied in earnest.

"We can talk about it later," Decker said before opening the passenger door to his car for me.

"Okay," I replied, feeling numb and helpless.

"So tell me what your plan was exactly," Decker demanded the moment we were settled in the leather seats of his car.

I didn't exactly know how to answer him without sounding stupid. I knew that I was reckless and impulsive, but I felt trapped. I didn't know what else to do, but I knew I had to do something. "I was going to show up with what money I had and bargain for my father's life. Maybe call the police before I go inside. With that plan, I'd at least know that help was on its way while making sure they didn't kill Dad the moment they saw red and blue lights."

I handed him my phone with the address as he pulled out of the bank parking lot. "I want you to look at that plan like a scientist, Blakely," Decker said while shaking his head. "You overlooked a lot of variables in that scenario," he growled under his breath in annoyance. I didn't like his tone or the flippant way he approached this.

"This isn't some fucking experiment," I replied in a curt voice.

"Exactly! This is your life, Blakely." The exasperation in his voice was exhausting. "I knew you had a hero complex, but I had no idea how stupid you were," Decker said before wrenching his face up into a pained expression. "I'm sorry, I know that was rude."

"I get you're mad at me, but can we please focus on the problem at hand? There's no need to lash out. This is why I didn't go to you in the first place," I complained. My eyes kept glancing over at him as he drove. The sleeves of

his button-up shirt were rolled up, showing off his muscular forearms. He was biting his lip while contemplating my words.

"I *am* focusing on the problem. You can't just storm in there with a briefcase full of money," Decker argued. I opened and closed my mouth, trying to come up with a way to make him understand.

"And I can't just ignore it, either. I know you're the type to quietly pretend nothing is happening and pray it'll resolve itself, but I don't have that luxury."

"Are you talking about our relationship or your father, Blakely? 'Cause I can't keep up."

I gripped my thighs so hard my nails broke skin. I was livid. "What would you do? What would you do if it was Lance tied to a chair with cuts all over his face, two black eyes, and a broken hand? What would you do if they asked for fifty grand in exchange for his life and said they'd kill him if you told anyone?"

My analogy seemed to work because Decker's face drained of blood. He looked so pale and terrified. It was easy to be rational when it wasn't your loved ones on the line, but he had to know it wasn't so simple. There didn't seem to be any way out of this that didn't involve someone getting hurt. Hell, Dad was already hurt.

I wanted to be rational. I wanted to have time to find a solution that didn't involve bloodshed, but these men had already proven to be brutal and violent. They didn't care about Frank Stewart. They wanted their money. Going to the police might have been the smart thing to do, but I wasn't willing to gamble with Dad's life.

"Okay, okay. I get it. We have to be careful," Decker finally admitted. I let out the breath I didn't even realize I was holding.

"We're on the clock. I don't want to know what'll happen if we don't get there by five," I added while anxiously checking the time on the dash. We only had forty-five minutes to get there. I didn't want to think of what else they'd do to Dad if we weren't punctual. Visions of his bloodied face assaulted my mind once more.

"We'll get there in time," Decker assured me before grabbing my hand. I let him hold me tight as he drove, stroking my thumb across his rough skin while staring out the car window. The world outside was a blur.

"And then what?"

Decker turned onto the highway while letting out a slow sigh. I knew his

mind well enough to know that he was thinking of all the variables. “Then, I guess we’ll save your Dad.”

“Thank you, Decker,” I whispered.

“Don’t thank me yet.”

Blakely

I WAS EXPECTING a shady warehouse or some secretive criminal hangout, but the address Decker pulled up to was brimming with light and people. We were at a historic hotel in the business district of Memphis about twenty miles away from our loft. It completely contradicted the scary thing we were about to do. A family was sitting outside on a park bench with a mother bouncing her toddler on her knee. I almost doubted Decker and questioned if we were at the right place.

“This is it,” Decker said while staring up at the building. He pulled out his phone and started typing a message. “I’m sending Lance our location with instructions to call the police in twenty minutes.”

Mere seconds after Decker hit send, his phone started vibrating in his palm. I glanced at the screen, noticing that Lance’s name was on the caller ID. “Are you going to answer that?” I asked.

“No. He’s going to ask questions and try to talk us out of this. Hell, *I’m* trying to talk myself out of this.”

I placed a hand on his shoulder, and he turned to look at me. “You don’t have to do this, you know,” I assured him. This was my battle. This was my cross to bear.

“You’ve always had to do this alone. I know this isn’t the hospital or one of your mother’s ex-boyfriends, or any of the other hard shit you’ve done alone in the past. But I’m going to be here for you, Blakely.”

I leaned forward and placed a chaste kiss on his cheek, not caring that our

relationship was in limbo. We stared at one another for only a second, but I felt forever in his meaningful gaze. “You promise you won’t do anything stupid?” he asked. “We trade the money and get out of there quickly. No hero shit, Blakely. I can’t even stomach the idea of you getting hurt.”

“I promise,” I lied. I’d do anything to protect those that I loved. I loved my father, and I still loved Decker, too. I wasn’t comfortable with him going in with me, but I knew he wouldn’t entertain my request for him to stay in the car.

“Good girl,” Decker replied. We then got out of the car and headed inside, the briefcase full of cash in Decker’s hand.

It wasn’t hard to spot our contact. He stood out like a sore thumb in the hotel’s fancy lobby. With dark eyes and a scruffy goatee, the man looked intimidating in his all black attire and laced up combat boots. I could see the outline of a handgun against his tight shirt, as if he wasn’t afraid to let the world know he was packing. Leaning against a pillar in the hotel, he propelled off and started walking toward us the moment he saw my wide eyes. “What if Dad isn’t here?” I quickly asked Decker under my breath as the man approached. This could’ve all been a waste, an opportunity for them to get fifty grand and for me to host another funeral.

“Let’s wait and see,” Decker replied just as quietly right as the man stopped in front of us.

“Are you Blakely?” the guy asked. He had a surprisingly high-pitched voice that reminded me of a mouse. I was too scared to answer him, so I simply nodded. It felt like the hinges in my neck were rusted from the stress blanketing my bones. “Come with me,” the man demanded.

Decker and I followed him to the elevator and got inside, where an elderly couple and a young businessman on his cell phone joined us. It was so painfully mundane and crowded. I wanted to scream that we were in danger and warn everyone in this damn hotel what was about to transpire. However, I kept my lips sealed shut. Decker’s words were on repeat in my mind.

Exchange the money. Get Dad. Get out. No hero shit.

One by one, everyone got off the elevator except for us. They were off to do whatever it was people without threats over their head did, while we headed to the top floor. The penthouse suite awaited us, and the man guiding us looked at Decker curiously as we ascended.

“The boss isn’t going to like that you brought someone,” he observed.

My retort was full of venom. “Well, I don’t like that he’s got my father.”

The words tumbled past my lips before I had a chance to realize how stupid they were. If we wanted to get out of this alive, we needed to keep a calm head. Decker grabbed my hand and squeezed, a confident reminder that he was with me but also annoyed by my outburst.

The man guiding us simply tipped his head back and laughed in a high-pitched giggle that ultimately ruined his badass persona. “Oh, he’s going to have lots of fun with you. I hope he lets me watch,” his mousy voice replied.

The doors opened to the penthouse suite before I could ask what that meant, and we were shoved inside. Men with large guns flanked us the moment we entered the lavish room. Decker stared at the weapons strapped to their chests with trepidation. I briefly wondered if he was remembering the night he was held at gunpoint, and hated myself for putting him in this position.

The penthouse had marble floors and large windows surrounding the living room, giving an unobstructed view of Memphis. On an eclectic blue velvet couch sat a man who was eating popcorn and watching TV, laughing at whatever was being said on the screen.

“Boss, she’s here,” our escort said. “It seems she brought a friend.”

The man on the couch sat up and turned to look at us, a wide grin taking over his face, which showed off a gold front tooth. He looked just as terrifying as the rest of them, but there was an extra sense of sinister cockiness to his body language that made every hair on my body stand up straight. His eyes were an icy shade of blue, and he was wearing dark sweats. “You made it,” he observed while eyeing the briefcase in Decker’s hand.

“Who are you?” I bravely asked while fighting the urge to tap my fingers against my thigh. I didn’t want to show him even an ounce of anxiety. I knew men like this; they got off on the fear they commanded from their victims.

“You can call me Boss,” he slyly responded. I didn’t like the authority in his tone or the implications of his name. I used to believe that all humans were capable of redemption, but there was a flaw in that logic. Not all people were *human*. Humanity was a gift not everyone readily accepted. Instead, they filled their hearts up with venom instead of empathy. This man wasn’t human; he was evil.

Without acknowledging the money, Boss simply snapped his fingers, and one of his men walked forward to yank it out of Decker’s grip. I couldn’t hold back my rage. There was no negotiating, no talks. He just plucked the insane amount of cash from Decker’s hand with an assuming wink. “Hey, we

had a deal!" I yelled. Boss didn't seem fazed, he simply watched as the briefcase was opened up for him, showing off the numerous stacks of cash inside.

"Guess you really are a genius," he said before picking up a pile of money and sniffing it. His low, slow inhale was almost erotic in nature. I could even see from where I was standing a few feet away that his pupils were dilated with sensual glee. He was a conceited man that got off on the smell of cash, and a fleeting thought flickered through my mind: *He was Mama's type.*

When Boss was done inspecting the cash, he set it back in the briefcase before standing and stalking over to me.

My teeth chattered. Beside me, Decker went hard with tension, every muscle in his body was flexed and ready for action. I could feel the wave of protective energy flowing between us. Decker was still holding my hand, but he kept his vice-like grip on my nimble fingers. My bones could have cracked from the pressure. "I thought I told you not to tell anyone," Boss said while looking Decker up and down. He seemed unimpressed with my bodyguard.

"I didn't tell anyone. He found me and refused to let me go alone."

"You must be pussy-whipped or stupid. I'm not sure what's worse," Boss said to Decker while looking him up and down with annoyance.

"Why are you doing this?" I found the courage to ask. Boss turned his attention back to me, his smile disarming as he took a step closer.

"We don't tolerate deserters in my gang," Boss began, "If we offer you protection on the inside, then we demand that you work for us on the outside. Your father broke our code and had a debt."

I wanted to stare at the watch on his wrist, mostly to gauge how much time had passed. How long would it take the police to show up? I noted once more that we're in the penthouse suite, which occupied the very top floor of the hotel. Whenever the police arrived, these men would have plenty of time to know if we had ratted them out. We were stuck.

I wanted Boss to keep talking, to waste as much time as possible. The longer he was rambling, the longer the police had to get to us. "I paid his debt," I gritted.

The man laughed. It was a sinister sort of sound that felt chilling and cruel. "If I'd known you'd bring it so willingly, I would've asked for more. Maybe I should ask for more."

"I'm not bringing you another cent until I see my father," I said in a louder voice full of false bravado. Boss must not have liked my snarky words, because he snapped his hand out to wrap his fingers around my neck. I tried to jerk away, but he squeezed, locking me in place with his steady grip. I tried to heave in gulps of air, but my lungs couldn't expand. Grinning at my struggle, Boss then pressed even harder while staring me in the eye.

"The way I see it," he began as Decker took a step closer. He was on the verge of beating Boss to a pulp, despite the men surrounding us with guns. I could feel the angry energy hammering throughout the room. "You're not in any position to be making demands," Boss said. Decker lifted his hand up to yank him away, but a man clutching a pistol aimed at him, halting Decker in his tracks. Meanwhile, my vision was fading to black.

One second. Two seconds. Three seconds. I felt my legs go numb. My chest was on fire. When he finally let go, I gasped for air and fell to my knees, coughing and sputtering the moment I hit the ground. Oxygen had never tasted so sweet. My lungs flexed as tantric air filled me up like a placebo for dopamine. I'd never felt so thankful for the ability to breathe.

The relief was short-lived though, because Boss then threaded his fingers through my hair and yanked me hard. I felt clumps of my blonde strands disconnect from my scalp at the jerking movement. Tilting my head up to look at him, the man called over his shoulder while keeping his eyes on mine. "Bring me, Frank," he ordered in a bored tone as if all of this was a regular occurrence.

Three men disappeared into a side room, and within moments, I heard shuffling behind the door. Grunts and moans then erupted from the room, and moments later, they emerged from the shadows while dragging my father's broken body. Dad's hands were tied behind his back, and his shirt was coated with fresh blood. There was a bandanna tied over his mouth, and my heart sank the moment I saw him. When our eyes connected, Dad growled and started thrashing. I wanted to rush over and help him out of his restraints, but Boss's hold on my hair kept me in place. Despite being tied up, Dad still managed to fight though.

Boss finally let go of me as he laughed at my father's feeble attempts to break free. I stood up as my father jerked his arms and legs back and forth. He screamed as loud as he could, though the sounds were muffled from the gag in his mouth. One of the men holding him punched him in the ribs, and the distinct crunching sound made me want to vomit. "Don't hurt him!" I

cried out.

Decker, who had been silently watching throughout the entire exchange, finally spoke up. "We gave you your money, now just give us Frank, and we'll be on our way."

Boss started to stroke his chin with his bony fingers as if contemplating what he wanted to do next. All of his men were hanging on his every move, waiting for the order and effectively feeding his ego. How desensitized were they to violence? How conditioned were they to follow Boss's orders?

"I suppose you're right. The debt has been paid. And this sorry sack of shit..." He paused to wind up and punch my father in the gut as I whimpered. Dad's entire body went limp. "Isn't worth my time," Boss finished.

"Please let us go," I begged.

"Release him," Boss finally conceded.

The men holding onto Dad reluctantly started to untie him, making sure to leave his gag on. I knew Dad was in bad shape when he remained slumped over on the ground even after his hands were freed. I looked at Boss, wondering if this was a trap. He seemed like the sort of man to give false hope only to yank it back once you settled into the idea that he wasn't going to hurt you.

"I don't have all day," he growled while gesturing toward my father.

Not needing to be told twice, I rushed over to Dad and tried to help pick him up. Decker went with me, and together we hoisted him off the ground and rested his arms on our shoulders. Not a single person moved to help us, and it didn't seem like they were too concerned about a bloodied man traveling through the hotel. Whatever sort of organization they were a part of, they were confident in their power.

Decker and I dragged Dad toward the elevator, and the moment my index finger moved to press the button leading down, Boss started to laugh. It was a menacing sort of sound that made me freeze up. Even though I struggled under the weight of my father, I glanced over my shoulder to see what was so funny but cringed when I realized what he was laughing at. Boss was standing at his living room window, looking down below. "I thought I told you not to call the police," he said while spinning around. At his words, his men unholstered their guns and aimed them at us. I could feel the threat of death at my back.

I quickly pressed the elevator call button, even though I knew it was hopeless. "I don't know what you're talking about," I stuttered before

glancing at the blinking light above the door. *Come on*, I thought.

“Then why did five cop cars just pull up to my hotel? I thought you were some kind of genius, bitch. Now you’re just taking advantage of my kindness.” Boss seemed calm even though the men around us were bursting with toxic energy. I looked up at the elevator light once more, praying for it to open.

All the while, Boss just stood there with his arms crossed over his chest as he stared out the window. It was chilling that he didn’t even seem concerned. I wouldn’t put it past someone like him to have the law in his pocket. Everything happened too quickly. “Back off,” Decker growled when a man with a rifle stalked closer. A meaty hand wrapped around my bicep, tugging me out from under Dad just as a stream of bullets rained down on the room.

I covered my ears at the loud boom, and Dad dropped to the floor. I could hear sirens in the distance through the peppering shots. I screamed.

“Blakely!” Decker bellowed while trying to get to me.

“You’re not getting out of here alive,” Boss promised. It was so chaotic that I almost didn’t notice the gaping wound in Dad’s back. I almost didn’t notice how he was gasping for air or how his body twitched as his life fled from his body. I tried to run for him, but the man holding me kept pulling me back. I watched in terror as blood poured from his lips, and screamed until my throat was raw.

He died swiftly, though it felt like an eternity passed in the blink of an eye.

Another man slammed Decker against the wall. I watched in horror as the barrel of a gun found purchase against my temple. Still, the love of my life fought to get to me. “Get the fuck away from her!” Decker yelled.

I should have screamed. It seemed like the natural thing to do. But I was too shocked to even move. Another string of bullets rang out as the elevator doors opened, revealing an empty, cavernous escape we’d never get to use. The man holding me didn’t budge. My feet were stuck to the floor like the thick roots of an oak tree, buried deep despite the storm happening within the penthouse. “Blakely, fight!” Decker begged.

More bullets. Decker kicked the man pinning him down. “Kill him first. I want her to watch,” Boss demanded before finally turning away from the window to grab the briefcase full of cash. Most of the men left with him through a hidden set of stairs, but the two men detaining us stayed behind to

finish the job.

Decker punched the man holding him. I was sobbing, not sure why I was still alive. I couldn't stand to watch. This was my fault. Decker was going to die because of me.

Another punch.

Decker fought hard and landed a kick to the man's gut.

Another punch.

Somehow the gun dropped to the floor during the struggle, and Decker seized his moment. They both lunged for the weapon, but Decker was first. That's when I felt the cold metal of the gun pointed at me slipped from my skin. I watched in agony as the man holding me aimed at Decker.

The first shot hit his friend, but they both went down, the attacker landing on top of Decker. The man I loved groaned while trying to shove the dead body off of him. Another shot. Decker screamed like it had hit him, but I couldn't see for sure.

"No!" I yelled. Slowly, Decker stopped struggling beneath the dense body on top of him. I felt my soul slip out of my mouth as I wailed. He was dead. Decker Harris was dead.

The man with the gun walked over toward the carnage with stoic calmness. He kicked at their bodies with a slight shrug before turning around to face me.

I took a good look at my soon-to-be killer. He wore tight jeans, a white shirt and had greasy, matted blond hair. Numbness relieved my soul of its agony, replacing despair with acceptance. "Do it," I begged. I didn't want to live in a world where Decker Harris and Frank Stewart didn't exist.

He casually raised his gun and aimed right at my chest. A million thoughts rushed through my mind, but one prominent irony rang clear as a bell: It was poetic justice that he would shoot me in an organ that died the moment Decker Harris stopped moving. "You want me to kill you, don't you?" he asked. The man had a deep Southern accent.

"Do it," I said again, this time with more force. I closed my eyes, imagining a Ferris wheel. I imagined Decker and I sitting in our carriage, secluded from the world and lost in sensations. I imagined his lips on mine. I imagined his whispered promises. I love you. I love you. I love you.

Bang. A shot. An ending. A beginning. I clutched my stomach and looked down, expecting to see crimson. But there was nothing. Snapping my attention to the man threatening my life, I watched as he fell to the ground,

blood pooling through his shirt.

My eyes went to Decker. He was scarily pale and holding a gun while pinned under a dead man. He dropped the weapon and closed his eyes the moment the elevator doors opened.

Police flooded the room, demanding that I put my hands in the air while simultaneously shouting their questions at me. But I could only say one thing again and again and again.

“He’s dead,” I cried.

“He’s dead,” I sobbed.

“They’re dead,” I whispered.

Decker

“HOW LONG?”

That was the first question I’d heard after clawing my way out of hell. It was a far-away voice that clipped the pounding in my head. “How long, Blakely?” Lance’s voice asked again, I wanted to open my eyes, but it felt like rocks were laid across my eyelids and weighing them down.

“It feels like forever, but months?” Blakely’s soft voice replied. I felt my chest constrict as hands wrapped around my arm and lightly squeezed. There was a constant beeping in my brain that pinged in time to my racing heart.

“Months? You’ve been hiding this for months?” Lance replied incredulously. I tried to open my mouth but couldn’t. I wanted to defend myself and protect my girl. Lance was obviously hurting, and I knew better than most that hurt people, hurt people. It shouldn’t have happened like this. Blakely shouldn’t have had to weather the storm by herself. But I couldn’t fucking wake up.

“We didn’t want to hide it from you, Lance. It started out as something we both denied, then it became something more. By then, it felt wrong to say anything.”

“It was wrong to *start* anything, Blakely,” Lance’s cold voice replied. My heart sank. “Did you not care about his job? He could have lost everything because of you.”

I wanted to tell Lance that I would have happily given my career up for Blakely. The risk was worth the reward. “I know, Lance. I know.” Blakely

sniffled, and I wished I could open my eyes and reach up to wipe the tears I knew were streaming from her cheeks.

“And what about me, huh? He’s my best friend. Isn’t there some sibling code we’re supposed to stick to? You can’t be serious!” I heard a crash as if something was thrown on the ground. Blakely flinched beside me and removed her hand from my arm. Fuck. I tried harder to move. I commanded my legs to lift up, but couldn’t tell if it was actually working. “I can’t believe I was so fucking stupid!” Lance roared. “I can’t believe I didn’t see it. You seduced him, and now look!”

Though I couldn’t see, I could still feel their heavy stares on my body, lingering on the throbbing pain in my side. “I know, Lance. I’m so sorry. I never meant—”

“Never meant to hurt him? Never meant to drag him into your problems? Never meant for him to get shot trying to protect you? What were you thinking, Blakely?”

The room went silent for a moment, and I tried to open my mouth to speak. My body was a traitorous bastard, letting me down when my girl needed me most. Once again, I tried to make a sound, do something, say anything. Nothing worked. My body felt like a stranger, with my soul just occupying it. “It’s all so ironic,” Lance then said. “I mean, truly. The night before you arrived, Decker warned me about you.”

I could hear the beeps growing faster, mimicking the racing of my heart. “What?” Blakely asked.

“Yep. We knew about your mother, and he warned me. He warned me!” Lance was yelling now. I wanted to stop this. Blakely didn’t need to know about my jaded assumptions. Fuck!

I could still remember the night before Blakely arrived. I’d told Lance he was making a colossal mistake. I told him that this was yet another person that would come in with the intent of filling the void in his heart but would just steal more from him in the process.

“What did he say?” Blakely asked while pulling away from me. The moment her citrus scent left, I whimpered like a fucking pussy. I needed her near. I needed to squeeze her hand reassuringly.

“Decker told me it would be a giant mistake to let you live with us. He said you were probably just as bad—if not worse—than our mom, and that we would be better off without you. I hate to admit it, but he was right. Look at where Decker is right now! You almost got him killed. You almost lost

him his job!"

There was a long, drawn-out silence. A war was raging in my chest. The old me was wrong, so, so terribly wrong. Blakely was selfless and kind. Compassionate. Smart. She fought to separate from her mother, and I hated that Lance was preying on her most profound insecurities. "You're right," Blakely finally whispered.

"I love him, Blakely. I love him more than anyone in this world. You almost took that from me, and I don't think I can ever forgive you for that," Lance choked out. I felt his hand clasp around mine as he sobbed.

"I'm so sorry, Lance. I never—"

"Just go. Please, just go."

THE MOMENT I had control of my body again, I spoke the three words that had been tormenting me. I wasn't sure how much time had passed. I wasn't sure where I was. Phrases like *nasogastric tubes*, *endoscopies*, and *kidney functions* flurried around the hospital room as I rested, but I didn't know how bad it was. I only knew how I felt. I only knew that my body seemed heavy and weak.

"Where is Blakely?" I asked. My throat was on fire.

"Decker, you need to take it easy, okay?" Lance replied. My vision was blurred, but I could see the outline of his blond hair and the thick reading glasses he wore when he was too lazy to put on his contacts.

"Where is Blakely?" I asked again, making Lance curse. I blinked once, twice, and by the third blink, I could clearly see my best friend. Lance looked awful. His hair was greasy like he hadn't showered in days. The wrinkled shirt he was wearing was stained, and I could clearly see his chapped lips and the dark circles under his eyes.

"She's gone," Lance replied darkly. "Let me call the nurse."

"Don't. Don't call anyone. Where is Blakely, Lance?" My best friend squeezed my hand and bent over my body, saturating my hospital gown with his sobs. I patted his head, realizing that my one-track mind was probably insulting. He'd obviously been worried about me, and I was a dick. "Hey, I'm okay," I offered lamely, though my voice sounded strained.

"I was so fucking worried about you," Lance replied while clutching me

tighter, it was like he couldn't believe I was still there with him. "It's always been us. Why didn't you wait for me? Why did you do such a stupid thing?"

"We didn't have a choice, Lance. Where the fuck is Blakely?"

"I don't know!" Lance roared in response. "I sent her away. She could have gotten you killed, Decker. You warned me that she was trouble, and you were right. I should have never brought her into our lives. I should have noticed."

Lance stood up and furiously wiped at his eyes while pacing the room. He was reverberating with pain and anger, but I didn't know what to do. Blakely didn't deserve all the blame though.

Lance sobbed even harder as he stared at me, his blue eyes red and drenched with pain. We had a silent stare off for a moment, and I watched with dread. Fuck. This was it, the moment I'd feared. The secret we'd been ignoring would finally be out in the open.

"I love her, Lance," I whispered.

Lance shook his head. "Please stop talking. You're in a fucking hospital bed with a gunshot wound. Your mother is downstairs drinking vodka from a coffee cup."

"I love her, Lance," I said again, this time more confidently. Lance ran a hand through his hair in agitation. He was still avoiding the truth.

"You've had three surgeries over the last week," he added, his resolve crumbling.

"I love your sister, Lance. I love Blakely." My words were like a whip against his expression, turning his sadness into anger.

Lance paused in his pacing to turn and look at me. I felt every fear. I felt his determination. I felt the secret between us burst wide open in a split decision.

Lance stalked over to me and grabbed my cheeks. At first, I thought he was going to admit the fear I'd been harboring, but instead, his rough lips connected with mine. Shock hit my senses, making it impossible to move. A part of me knew this needed to happen. I knew we'd never work through our issues unless I gave him this moment. He didn't seem to care about my morning breath or my lack of enthusiasm against his sweeping tongue. He kissed me like it was a long exhale he'd been holding in his chest.

But it felt wrong, so wrong. He was my brother. My soulmate—but not my lover.

His teeth sunk into my bottom lip, tugging at mine in desperation. He

licked at the seam of my mouth, his tears saturating my skin. I shoved at his chest, pushing him away. I couldn't do this to him. I couldn't lead him on. This was never going to happen. "I fell in love with Bl—"

"Don't you fucking say it. Don't finish that sentence," Lance begged.

"I love her, Lance," I whispered, though the various instruments I was hooked up to beeped violently. "I love her. I fell into a deep, irreversible, demanding love with your sister, and there's no going back. I love her brain. Her heart. Her soul. I love how she speaks. I love how she makes me a better man. I loved saving her, and I'd do it again. Even if it landed me in the hospital. Even if it killed me. I love Blakely Stewart, Lance."

Lance fell in love with me a long while ago. It was why I couldn't tell him about Blakely. It was why this entire thing was more fucked up than I could ever admit to. I was my best friend's darkest secret, and I entertained the limbo between us because, in a way, I loved him too. But I could never love him the way he wanted me to. "It's always been you, Decker," he sobbed. "I've always loved you."

I reached up to tenderly wipe the tears from his face. "Lance," I began as moisture began to fill my own eyes. This was what I feared most. This was why I couldn't say anything and why I turned away relationships. It was why I was so hellbent on keeping Blakely a secret. It killed me to destroy Lance, and I knew that after this, we would never be the same. I just hoped we could find a new normal in all the pain.

"I'm so sorry. You've always been in my life. You've always been like a brother to me, but I've known. I've always known. I just never wanted to talk about it because you've never brought it up. I was scared that things would change if I admitted I could never love you the way you want me to love you —the way you deserve to be loved. You're family, Lance. We have a bond that is more precious to me than anything in this world, but it will never be the romantic love you crave, and I'm so sorry about that."

Lance grabbed a tissue and blew his nose, his eyes squinting in pain as more tears fell. "I know. It's not fair," he croaked. "I'm putting you in this impossible situation, but I tried. I tried not to love you. You made it so damn hard," he added with a light chuckle. "Even with your fucking morning breath and greasy hair, I'll probably think of that kiss for the rest of my life."

I chuckled. "I'm not sure if I should be flattered or offended."

"Probably a mixture of both," Lance replied with a shrug.

We sat in silence for a while, holding each other's hands and staring at

one another. I took in the curve of his nose, his high cheekbones, and the way his eyes appraised me back. I treasured Lance. He was bright and beautiful, and his optimism tore me from some of the darkest moments of my life. “You have to let me go, Lance. I can’t stand the idea of not having you in my life, but if you need space to work through this, I’ll understand.”

“I don’t know what I need, but maybe you’re right. I need time to process it all. I’ve never had the chance to properly let go because you’ve always been there. No one ever compared. No one else ever mattered. Sean and I broke up because he wanted me to end my friendship with you. He was jealous.” I nodded, already knowing that was the case. It’s what happened with most of his relationships. “I just kept hoping, and when you got hurt, it nearly killed me.”

“I’m so sorry, Lance. I can’t say it enough,” I replied. Each tear that slipped from his eyes felt like another bullet to the gut. My heart hurt for him. For us. For Blakely.

“I knew I loved you the day I tackled that woman with the gun. I knew that I’d rather die than imagine a world without you,” Lance observed. “And now look at us. You’re diving in front of bullets for someone else.”

The power of his words settled between us. I loved Blakely like he loved me. It was a painful realization that would change us forever. I wanted to ask about Blakely, demand he tell me where she was. But my friend needed me, so for now, I’d swallow my burning desire to be near her. For now, I’d love my best friend.

For now, we’d heal.

Blakely

I BURIED my father on a Thursday. It was hot for fall in Texas, and the sun shined brightly for such a gloomy occasion. It was the second funeral I'd ever attended in my life. My fourth-grade teacher showed up for the service and asked how living in Memphis was. I lied and told her it was wonderful, though I was currently staying in a seedy motel outside of town.

I wore a white sundress. Dad would have loved it.

Frank Stewart must have taken my lungs with him to heaven, because I found it was impossible to breathe. Unlike at Mama's funeral, I sobbed uncontrollably and without internal conflict. I let my mourning slip from my eyes as they lowered him into the ground. The preacher didn't know Dad but spouted universal truths. Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

Death. It all revolved around death.

It wasn't until the preacher was walking toward his Honda that I realized it was over. I sat in the grass and ate the sandwich I packed, chatting with Dad like this was a regular occurrence. I buried him on the opposite side of the cemetery from Mama, but I felt her presence there too. "I'm mad at you, old man. We were supposed to get our fresh start," I said before taking a bite of my sandwich and swallowing. I'd never felt so alone in my life, but sitting here, talking to a cheap tombstone seemed to soften the blow to my heart.

"I tried. I really did," I whispered. "I know you did too. I hate that it happened like this. I hate that I couldn't save you. I hate that you needed saving, but I'm going to be okay, Dad." I didn't actually know if I was going

to be okay. I had no home. No plan. No car. The money Decker sent me sat stagnant in my account. I used some of it for Dad's funeral while telling myself I'd pay him back. I felt cheap and like the leech he'd accused me of being the first day we met, but I didn't have many options.

I looked at the bottle of whiskey I'd brought and took a small sip. It burned all the way down in a way I didn't like. It would've been too cliche to get drunk at a cemetery, so I poured it out on the grass and hugged my knees to my chest. I talked to Dad for what felt like hours. "You took my lungs, old man." My chest constricted with lamentation.

"Remember that guy I told you about? I fell in love with him. I fell in love, and it almost killed him. It makes me sick."

"Love is a cruel bitch, huh?" a dark voice said at my back. I turned around with my mouth gaping open, shocked to see Lance standing there. "Can I join you?" he asked.

"Y-yes," I stuttered. The last time I'd seen Lance, he blamed me for Decker, and he had every right to. He settled in the grass beside me in silence. It seemed that neither of us knew what to say, though I was thankful for his company. I wasn't sure I deserved it.

"I fell in love with Decker ten years ago. I never told him, but of course, he knew. Decker has this way of figuring people out."

I nodded. I'd realized when I'd left the hospital that there was more than just betrayal buried in Lance's hurt. He was devastated. At first, I'd convinced myself that Decker didn't know. But I couldn't find comfort in that lie. There was a reason Decker clung to our secret so fiercely. It wasn't about betraying a friend, it was about breaking a heart.

"I never would have. If I'd known..." I began.

"I didn't want anyone to know. No one wants to be the guy in love with his best friend. I tried convincing myself I'd get over him and filled my heart up with others so I could move on. But I never let go."

I reached out to grab Lance's hand. "He has that sort of effect on people, huh?" I asked."

"I've always loved souls. Been attracted to the way a heart beats more than the gender of a person. Men. Women. I've dated a lot. And Decker Harris has a beautiful soul, though I think you already know that."

I nodded. "Why are you here? Don't you hate me?"

"I did hate you," Lance immediately replied. I nearly choked on the bile rising up my throat. His words were painful to swallow. "But not anymore. I

can't blame you for loving someone I can't seem to fall out of love with. And I created this secret. I should have told Decker ages ago what I was feeling so we could work through it, but I didn't. He was trying to protect me in his own way. Decker is *always* trying to protect the people he cares about."

Soft tears slipped down my cheeks as I leaned to rest my head on Lance's shoulder. "I'm going to stay here for a bit and figure my life out. I'd really like to give us another chance. I know it won't ever be the sort of relationship we wanted, but I hope we can find a happy medium that works for both of us."

"I don't want that, Blakely," he whispered. My heart broke, but I understood it. I didn't want to be the source of his pain. I said in the beginning that I wouldn't force him to be in a relationship with me. Pain was more effective than blood in determining who we let into our lives.

"I understand," I choked out.

"No," he began while turning to look at me. "That's not what I mean. I don't want you here. I want you back in Memphis. I want us all to work through this and get to a place where it doesn't hurt. I want to ask your forgiveness and move forward. You aren't like our mother, Blakely. You're so much more."

I wrapped my arms around his neck for a bone-crushing hug. I couldn't even articulate how thankful I was to hear him say that. "I'd love that so much. I'm so sorry. I never wanted to hurt you."

"I know things are strained with Decker, and you don't need my blessing, but I want to give it to you anyway. I've been thinking a lot about what it means to love someone, and I think his happiness means more to me than anything else. You make him happy, Blakely. I love him enough to accept that. I just need a little time."

"I don't think Decker and I can ever get back to what we were. I always knew our time was fleeting. I'm toxic, Lance. I need to figure my life out before I do anything else." Lance stared at me for a lingering moment, then stood, stretching out his hand to help me up. I readily took it, and he guided me through the various tombstones to Mama's plot. Once in front of it, I felt a gnawing sort of agitation pop in my chest.

"Tell me something about her, Blakely. Don't hold back."

"She drank way too much," I sobbed.

"Tell me more," Lance demanded.

"She would bring men home. Some of them hurt me."

“More.”

“She never wanted to be a mom. She was selfish. She only cared about herself.”

“Keep going,” Lance ordered.

I felt anger rising like a tidal wave of pain through my soul. I felt every distrust, every disappointment flood through me, leaking through my eyes and pounding through my clenched fists. “When she was sick, I felt wrong for hating her. I felt wrong for looking forward to being free.”

“You’re free, Blakely,” he whispered.

“I used to pray that I could leave her and this fucking town behind to start over, and then she died, and I felt like it was my fault. And then I felt like the worst human ever for not crying or grieving her like I should. She used to ask me if I’d miss her when she was gone, like wringing out my misery would somehow make death more palatable for her. And I lied. I told her I’d miss her, but I don’t. I don’t at all.”

Lance wrapped his arms around me and held me as I confronted all the anguish in my system. “You aren’t like her, Blakely. You aren’t toxic or selfish. You aren’t cruel. You aren’t wrong for feeling happy. You should be able to let go.” He pulled away while keeping his hands on my shoulders, forcing me to look him in the eye. “You’re the best thing she’s ever done. Stop allowing her faults to twist your perception of yourself. We will get through this. You are not Sharron. You are you.”

We sat there at Mama’s grave for what felt like hours, swapping childhood stories. Some of it was painful to talk about, some of it was funny.

Most of it was healing.

Lance talked about Decker. When he first fell for him. Why he kept falling for him. We shared our mutual care for a man neither of us felt like we could have. We held hands as we cried, soaking Mama’s soil with tears that didn’t belong to her. We talked about our plans for the future. We talked about our hopes for one another. We talked about broken hearts and broken minds, about cancer and God and the suffering of people.

We bonded in a way that wouldn’t have ever happened if it weren’t for Mama. It was the only and most precious gift she could have ever given me.

“Ready to go home?” Lance finally asked when the sun had started to set. I nodded in response before standing up. It was time to go home. My real home. The home I shared with my compassionate, caring, and loving brother. He started heading toward the parking lot, but I stayed for a second longer to

stare at Mama's grave.

"Thank you for Lance, Mama," I whispered to the ground, knowing she was somewhere between heaven and hell. A sharp gust of wind blew through, jostling my hair and slapping at my cheeks. It was cold and demanding, breezy, and harsh. I swear the cemetery smelled of roses and cigarettes. The air around me was a selfish swirl that racked against my skin and beat me raw.

And somehow, I knew Mama had heard me.

Decker

THREE MONTHS. I gave her three months. I willed my phone to ring, forced myself not to ask Lance about her every time we met up for drinks. I tried, I really tried to give her space even though I knew space was the last thing we needed. It took me a while to heal, but I learned that bullet wounds were easier to fix than a broken heart.

But we all needed time. Time to heal. Time to grieve. Time to figure our shit out. Time to cope. But time did nothing to dull the ache I felt for Blakely —and it was an agonizing sort of pain. The kind that tore you up and spit you back out. I knew I'd never be the same.

I moved out of Lance's loft and found my new normalcy in our distant friendship. The bond was still there, but I gave him the space he craved to navigate this new stage in our relationship. I missed him a lot, and this big house, which once seemed like a good idea, was nothing compared to the comfort I had in our shared loft.

I knew Blakely transferred to a local school, and it killed me to know she gave up so much potential to get away from me. The one time we spoke about her, Lance assured me that she wanted to protect my career. I understood it, but I didn't like it. I didn't like much of anything these days.

It took a while to get better, though I was back in the classroom, albeit a bit grumpier than before. I knew Max had seen Blakely. He talked about her loudly to Taylor, giving updates on how she was doing since the death of her father. It killed me to be away from her as she grieved. She'd lost two parents

in the span of a year. The only consolation I had was that Lance was guiding her through her mourning.

I was painting the kitchen when I heard a soft knock on my door. Assuming it was a delivery for those light fixtures I ordered, I casually placed the paintbrush in my hand on the paint pan and went to answer it. Everything felt so slow. Everything was muted without Blakely. I caught myself imagining what she would think of the house I'd worked so hard to fix up. I imagined the warmth she'd bring to these walls.

Swinging open the door, my heart fell to my feet when I saw Blakely standing there in a pair of overalls and holding a paintbrush. She looked gorgeous, with her pale, blonde hair pulled back and a shy smile on her face. "Hey," she said.

"Hey," I replied, when what I really wanted to say was *I love you. Please come home to me. Please love me back.*

"Lance mentioned you were painting today and said I should come over to help." It was a thinly veiled implication saying all the things I was too scared to ask. She held Lance's approval and acceptance in her words, and I couldn't fight the grin that kissed my lips.

"I could definitely use the help," I said in a low voice while stepping aside to let her inside. She walked through the threshold and looked around, smiling at the wood floors as she padded across them. The walls were a shade of green that matched her eyes. The white furniture paid homage to her sun-bleached strands. The light fixtures I picked were delicate, like the curves that graced her body.

"Wow. This is beautiful, Decker," she whispered in awe while trailing a finger along a side table. It was coated with dust from renovations, and I wished I'd known she was coming over so I could have cleaned up some. It was important to me that she liked the home I built; it was a shrine to my love for her, and I one day hoped I'd be lucky enough to have her living here.

She turned to look at me and swallowed, those entrancing eyes of hers trailing each dip and groove in my abs as she licked her lips. I looked down and realized I was shirtless and dripping with sweat. Patches of white paint coated my abs.

I loved the effect I had on her. "You ready to paint?" I asked, interrupting her welcomed perusal. She coughed then squeezed her eyes shut.

"Yup," Blakely replied, popping the *p* with her plush lips. "Lead the way."

We walked into the kitchen, a thousand burning questions searing my tongue. How was she? How was school? Did she still want me?

Did she still *love* me?

"This kitchen is amazing," she cooed while taking in the granite countertops and decorative cabinets. I was painting an accent wall the same color as the dress she wore the night we danced in Lance's living room. She was everywhere. She set her paintbrush down and turned to look at me, uncertainty in her eyes. I saw the same burning questions staring back at me. "So where should I start?" she asked.

I almost let my cowardice win. I almost told her where the paint was and where I desired her strokes, but I didn't. "Tell me a truth, Blakely," I demanded in that old familiar way which bonded us together. She smiled.

"I'm nervous as fuck," she admitted.

"Me, too," I answered honestly while taking another step closer. "Tell me another truth."

She set down the paintbrush and took a step toward me. Just a few more truths, and we'd finally meet in the middle. "I missed you," she whispered.

"I missed you, too."

Another step. Another truth. Another pull that yanked us closer. I stared at the straps of her overalls, begging them to snap. I took in her long legs and the tear in the jeans at her knee. "Tell me a truth, Decker," she whispered.

I cupped her neck and peered into her eyes. Her hands wrapped around my arms, squeezing at my biceps as she waited with bated breath for my admission. "I still love you, Blakely Stewart."

"I love you, too."

I kissed her like she was the last drop of water in the world. I savored her. I devoured her. I nipped and caressed and fucked with my tongue, lavishing her mouth with all the words I wanted to say over the last three months. She responded with earnest, tracing circles along my abs as her thankful tears coated my cheeks. Our truths were a tangible connection savored between us. She tasted divine and like my most cherished thoughts.

"I love you so much. You're my lungs, Decker. You're my heart."

I snapped her overalls off and watched with fascination as the heavy denim shimmied to the floor, leaving her in nothing but an old shirt and a pair of pink panties. We collapsed to our knees, and it felt like we couldn't get enough. My fingers dug into her skin as she tugged at my hair. She removed her shirt as I took off my gym shorts. "You're my everything," I said between

broken kisses and mended promises.

I unclasped her bra and groaned when I saw her perfect breasts bared to me. Cupping each in my hands, I kneaded and tugged as she writhed beneath me. Her hand dipped below the waistband of my boxers, and I almost came on the spot when her warm fingers circled the shaft of my cock. “I need you, Decker,” she moaned into my mouth.

I needed her, too. I needed her in every sense of the word. With her back on the hard tile, I peppered kisses on every inch of skin I could see. Coating her neck with my brand, I dipped lower as her back arched. I then kissed her stomach. I kissed her hip. I kissed her inner thigh and licked at the supple heat pooling through her panties. “May I?” I asked.

“Please,” she whispered before lifting her hips up. I pulled off the last layer of clothes between me and her perfect pussy, then lunged for a taste. Fuck, she was so sweet. I couldn’t get enough. Her moans echoed off the bare walls of my kitchen as I flicked my tongue over her clit, again and again, coaxing a tantric orgasm from her body. She stared at me, her hooded eyes heavy with intent as I enjoyed her. I wanted to eat her pussy until I died. I wanted to always have the taste of her on my lips.

Her orgasm was like a sweet, sweet symphony, calling me home, burrowing deep in my soul as I enjoyed every last drop of her pleasure. I didn’t let up until the last of her muscles had stilled. I wiped my face on her inner thigh before removing my boxers. “You’re mine, Blakely Stewart,” I promised. “You always have been.”

I aligned our sexes and pressed at her entrance, knowing that we could never finish this until she gave herself to me entirely. “I’m yours.” I slammed inside of her with a jolt, letting out a stream of curses as her tight cunt hugged me. I moved with the intent of making her feel me—only me. I wanted her to remember this moment. There was nothing between us now. No secrets. No lies. No harboring guilt or betrayal. It was just Blakely and me, and it was perfect.

Each slam sent our bodies into a frenzy. I sucked on her lips, enjoying the feel of her shaking body against mine. There were no doubts. No hang-ups about right and wrong. It was the first time we’d fucked without anything holding us back, and it was the most freeing expression of love I’d ever experienced. “It’s only you,” she whimpered as I slammed into her again.

“Only you,” I echoed.

We both came apart beautifully. Her screams were loud. My panting

deafening. We fell apart the way we fell together—with passion and truth. With love. She writhed, but I held her still, milking every last bit of that moment and burning it in my brain.

After our breathing had slowed and our bodies relaxed, I pulled out and held her close, tenderly stroking her hair as I stared deep in her eyes. “Tell me a truth,” she said softly.

“I want this forever,” I admitted. It was the scariest truth I’d muttered to date. What if she didn’t want me back? What if she changed her mind? What if I hurt her? What if...

“Me, too,” she replied.

Me, too.

“Good girl,” I said.

EPILOGUE

BLAKELY

Two years later.

“IT’S PERFECT WEATHER FOR A WEDDING,” Rose said blissfully. I buttoned up her sleek, black dress as thunder roared outside. She looked incredible in her floor-length gown with flowers pinned in her hair. I bit back a laugh while thinking of my own white dress, which would probably be see-through by the end of the ceremony. There would be no umbrellas today; Rose preferred to dance in the rain.

The music played as we waltzed down the aisle in Decker’s backyard. The rain poured down on our heads, making my blonde hair stick to my neck. It was perfect.

Decker stood at the end, waiting for me as he took his place next to Lance. He looked handsome in his tux, despite it all. Those dark eyes took in my drenched appearance as I made my way toward him. There was even a leaf stuck to pants and mud coated on his shoes. I loved him. I loved every imperfect part of him.

My brother had that boisterous smile plastered to his face. True, unbridled happiness was flowing from his expression. I stopped in front of him, offering a kiss on his cheek before standing in my place. “I love you,” I whispered to him. “I’m so happy for you.”

Rose strutted down the aisle with her eyes locked on my brother, surrounded by Mr. and Mrs. Trask and everyone else that loved them. The crowd was a hodgepodge of people Rose and Lance had collected over the years. I was glad he found someone that loved the same way he did—without

restraint. Lance once told me he fell in love with souls. He said it was the heart of a person he was attracted to, and Rose had the perfect heart for someone like my brother.

The ceremony was short and simple. They each wrote their own vows, and my eyes kept flickering to Decker's, smiling at the idea of this one day being us. I was still in college, still working on my undergrad degree in education. I wanted to teach. Decker helped me find my passion and supported my decision to go to Rhodes College. It was local, but I stayed in the dorms freshman year. He was adamant that I have the full college experience, though we realized it was a waste of money when I spent more nights in his bed than in the college dorms.

The reception was moved to our living room when lightning struck a tree outside. We danced barefoot on the wood floors Decker and I had made love on too many times to count. We laughed, and Decker stole Lance for a dance. I watched the two men I loved most in this world celebrate their friendship and brotherhood. They fought hard to get to where they were, but they came out stronger than ever.

AFTER WE SENT Lance and Rose on their way, I started cleaning up. Decker watched me as I hummed to myself, picking up beer bottles and roses petals. It felt like Mama was here, and I found myself feeling comfortable with the poignant scent. I'd finally gotten to a place where I could feel thankful for the role she played in my life. She brought me to Lance. She gifted me with Decker. "You look beautiful, you know," Decker whispered into my neck as he wrapped his arms around my waist. "I don't think I've ever seen you so happy."

"Weddings are lovely," I admitted before spinning around to face him.

"Tell me a truth, Blakely," Decker said, making the corner of my mouth quirk up in a smile. It had been a while since we'd asked for truth. We lived our honesty now.

"I want to marry you someday," I replied. Decker dug deep into his pocket and pulled out a little black box before getting down on one knee. My mouth dropped open in surprise as I stared at the glorious, perfect man kneeling before me. "Tell me a truth, Decker Harris," I choked out through

emotional tears.

“I want to marry you, too, Blakely.”

THANK YOU FOR READING!

Thank you for reading Burnout. If you have time, I would greatly appreciate a review.

This book was a soul project. I love these characters and hope you do too. The idea for their story came to me after thinking fondly about a creative writing professor I had in college. He was ridiculously handsome and smart —a dangerous combination.

I worked at the campus library shelving books and was fired for reading too much on the job. I remember crying in his office, complaining about the injustice of it all when he said something I still think about to this day. (Don't tell Mr. June)

“There’s something sexy about a girl that reads, hmm?”

I was swooning, ya’ll. SWOONING. He even did that sweeping eye-fuck thing hot guys do.

I wish I could tell you that he bent me over his desk, but real life isn’t always as fun as the books we read.

So here’s to you. Keep reading, you sexy badass, you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the support of my dear friends, Denise, Savannah, Claire, Jess, Kayla, and of course my wonderful PA, Amy March.

Also, I am especially indebted to my author tribe. They not only encourage me to work hard, but inspire me to be a better writer.

I am grateful to all of those with whom I have had the pleasure to work with during this book. I'd like to especially recognize my editor, Helayna Trask. She always takes the time to dive into the worlds I create and make sure they are perfect for you all. I would also like to thank all the dedicated members of The Zone.

Nobody has been more important to me in the pursuit of this series than the members of my family. I would like to thank my parents, whose love and guidance are with me in whatever I pursue. Most importantly, I wish to thank my loving and supportive husband, Joshua. Thank you for working hard for our family. And to my two wonderful children:

Everything I do is for you. Everything.

ALSO BY CORALEE JUNE

Cruel

Sunshine and Bullets

Void