



**I WISH
I WOULD'VE
TOLD
YOU**

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WHITNEY G.

I WISH I WOULD'VE TOLD YOU

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*For Mish.
I wrote this one for you.
Thank you.*

SYNOPSIS

WARNING: DO NOT READ THE BLURB FOR THIS BOOK.

It's better if you go in **BLIND**, trust me...

But if you **have** to know what you're getting yourself into, you can read the synopsis below.

She lied to me.
Not once, not twice.
This entire time.

To her, I was the "cliche Mr. Popular," the star quarterback who owned Friday nights.
To me, she was the goth geek in the bleachers, playing clarinet in the band.

Despite our differences, I climbed through her window every night.
Even when we started college.

She was the only person who truly understood me, and I couldn't stay away from her if I tried.
Our connection was hot and toxic, but we never dared to put out the flames.

We fell too hard, too fast...

And this wouldn't have been a problem except for the fact that I was already dating someone else.

Her sister.

**See? That's why you shouldn't have read this blurb and went in blind. Alas, this is an emotional ride of a romance with toxic undertones that will drive you to some unexpected places. The author just felt like writing this story one day, so don't say you weren't warned about what you were getting into.*

A NOTE FROM WHITNEY G.

Hey there!

Dear Awesome Reader,

Thank you so much for picking up *I Wish I Would've Told You!* I can't wait for you to dive into this crazy little story!

If you want to be the first to learn of my upcoming releases, sales, and special things that I only offer to my readers, be sure to [sign up for my Exclusive F.L.Y. List](#). (F.L.Y. = Effin Love You. Because whether you hate or love this story, I still love you for giving it a chance!)

Sincerely,

WHITNEY G.

PROLOGUE

ME



I swear I didn't mean to send him that letter.

Yes, I revised it fifty-seven times, spent eighteen days fretting over which envelope to buy, and paid for first-class postage, but I didn't *really* intend to drop it into a postal box.

It was supposed to be a simple “cathartic exercise” to heal old wounds. Yet, after penning letters to every person I'd ever hurt, I set aside several blank pages for him.

I wrote down all the ways I missed him and asked if he missed me, too. I told him that whenever I'm lying in bed at night—despite whatever guy may be sharing my sheets—I can't help but remember all the times he handled me better.

So much better.

He bent me over our high school bleachers after the home games. Made love to me in the backseat of an old-school Mustang. Devoured me in his father's office while the mistress cooked in the kitchen downstairs.

I penned rambling paragraphs of things I never wanted to forget and others that were better left unsaid. On page seven, my teardrops marred the lines so terribly that the sentence “I was so lonely,” read like “I was so horny.”

Then again, page eight featured nothing more than a drunken drawing of the time we were thousands of miles apart during one summer, so he'll probably interpret it the proper way.

None of those things concern me, though.

The problem is on page eleven.

Sixteen lines down, in the second to last paragraph, is a sentence that

unravels every lie I've ever told him. It's the one thing that will obliterate 'us' the moment he reads it.

The post office sent me a delivery confirmation minutes ago, so I'm standing outside our old meetup spot with gasoline and matches.

It's almost time.

I'm prepared to set our world on fire before my words can beat me to it...

PART 1

THE LIES BEGIN...

BACK THEN



Question:

Assuming you're a good person, if someone close to you is dating a guy you desperately want, but she isn't willing to give him up, which of these would be your next move?

- **A)** Let it go. Spend your time trying to find someone else.
- **B)** Fight. Because you truly believe this guy belongs to you.
- **C)** Explain how this guy is your soulmate and hope your friend will let go of him and understand.

Answer:

None of these.

A "good person" would never be in a situation like this.



*Dear Carly Hills,
I was the one who stole your Prada purse during our junior-year class trip. I didn't take anything out of it, though. I just tossed it into the Blackwater River because I was tired of you calling me a "Wednesday Addams looking bitch."
Sorry.
Well, not really.
Wish I Would've Told You,
—Scarlett*

My date's breath smells like Doritos. Not the good Cool Ranch flavor, the stale Nacho Cheese kind that should've been banned from production decades ago.

We're sitting in his car as it rains, and I'm wondering why he chose to wear a "Bros before Hos" t-shirt tonight. I'm also confused as to why he's staring at me with desire in his eyes when the only thing we have in common is our eye color.

"You're really mature for a high school girl," he says, running his fingers through my hair. "I wasn't expecting you to know anything about classical music."

I smile. "I've been playing violin and clarinet since I was four."

"That's very impressive." He pulls my head a bit closer. "So, that means you have some amazing *strumming* and fingering skills?"

“Um...I guess so.”

“I’ve never played any instruments, but I bet you’d be impressed with my strumming skills on your body.”

Why did he just stretch out the word ‘body’ like ‘bahhh-deee’?

“I hope you had a good time with me tonight.” He saves me from asking. “I’m looking forward to getting to know you a lot better.”

“Me too.” I nod, even though I have no intention of answering his calls after tonight.

I really need to give up on the idea of college guys being “intellectual and deep” once and for all. He’s the fifth guy I’ve dated, and although he didn’t try to slip his tongue down my throat or try to impress me with a never-ending game of beer pong, his conversation was as shallow and mundane as the others.

All he did was talk about himself.

“I really need to get home.” I lean back. “I have school in the morning.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to walk you inside?” He unbuckles his seatbelt. “I’d hate for you to slip in all this rain.”

“I’m sure. I have to go through the back door so I won’t wake up my parents before my curfew.”

“That’s the good thing about dorm rooms.” He presses a stale kiss on my forehead. “There are no parents and no one cares about curfew.”

“Sounds amazing.”

“It is amazing.” He wiggles his fingers. “I’ll call you on Friday so I can show you what I can do with these, okay?”

“Okay.” I vow to block his number once I get inside. “Looking forward to it.”

Stepping out into the drizzle, I wave at him before walking up my neighbor’s driveway. Then I watch until his headlights disappear around the corner before jumping the fence and running into my *real* backyard.

As thunder roars in the distance, I run to the oversized treehouse and unzip the duffel bag I left there hours ago.

Panicking, I pull a pair of sweatpants over my fishnet tights. Then I cover my black halter top with a hoodie.

I’ve got exactly fifteen minutes before my parents realize that the human-shaped mound on my bed is nothing more than sweaters and hoodies.

The lights in the kitchen suddenly turn on, so I slide behind the tree trunk. Seconds later, I see my dad heading toward the fridge.

Walking like a zombie, he takes out a beer and sits at the breakfast bar. He opens a laptop and stretches his fingers, making it clear that he'll be sitting there for a while.

Shit.

There's no way I can get through the back entrance without him spotting me, and I can't risk getting caught sneaking out without permission again.

I've been grounded more than enough this year.

Thinking fast, I pick up a rock and hurl it at the parlor room window.

It misses, so I pick up another.

Then another.

It takes five tries before a rock hits the glass and ricochets off a drainage pipe.

My father immediately stands and looks around.

Come on. Come on...

He doesn't make a move, so I pick up the biggest rock I can find and launch it.

This time, I break the glass.

My father grabs a baseball bat and runs toward the sound.

Finally!

I run to the house as fast as I can, getting soaked with each step.

My sandal strap snags on a lawn tool, and I fall face forward on the ground.

I yelp in pain as I struggle to free it from the blade, but it's stuck, so I'm forced to leave it behind.

When I make it to the steel ivy brackets that cling to the side of the house, I hold them for dear life.

Climbing up, I make it to the second story and push up my window.

Using my bare foot for balance, I force my body over the sill and fall onto the floor.

"I made it." I let out a sigh of relief. "I effin' made it."

The lights come on.

"I could've sworn your curfew was *ten o'clock*, Scarlett." My mom is glaring at me from the bed. "Didn't we discuss this the last time I grounded you?"

I glance at the clock, tempted to tell her that it's nine fifty-eight, but I bite my tongue.

"I also recall saying that you needed to *ask* to leave this house." She

crosses her arms. “You’re only seventeen years old, last time I checked. But since I clearly can’t trust you, don’t make plans for the next three weekends. You’re coming with me and your sister to shop for prom dresses in Nashville.”

“Can’t you drown me in our pool instead?” I roll over onto my back. “I think that would be slightly less painful for me.”

“Very funny, Scarlett.”

I groan and stand up. The mere thought of tagging along with my mom and sister for more than an hour is punishment enough.

She tosses me a dry towel and gets off my bed. “Where were you anyway?”

“Out on a date,” I confess.

“Really?” She smiles. “Who is he? Or were you with a she?”

“It was with a college guy, Mom.”

“I’m sure, hon.” She snorts. “So, you were with your weird little friend Kaizen?”

“His name is *Kevin*.”

“That’s what I said.” She smiles. “I like him a lot, and I love that he adores me.”

He hates you.

“Yeah, I was with Kevin,” I say, stunned that she still doesn’t know me in the slightest. I could literally tell her what I’ve been up to for the past several months and she wouldn’t believe a word.

In her eyes, I’m still the shy and awkward girl who prefers to lock herself in a room and practice music instead of making new friends.

“I was going through your closet a while ago, and it makes me wonder if you’re preparing for a slew of funerals that I don’t know about.”

“No, Mom,” I say. “I just love wearing black and grey.”

“It’s no wonder why no guys at school ever ask you out, then,” she says. “They probably think you’re the Queen of Death or something...Then again, at least you keep your makeup light and pretty.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

Please walk away and don’t give me the ‘beautiful’ speech...

“You’re such a beautiful girl, Scarlett,” she says, stepping closer. “You have brains and talent, and I’m just worried that you’ll end up old, crusty, and reading romance novels to get yourself off instead of experiencing the real thing.”

“That’s not why people read romance novels...”

“Of course it is.” She places her hands on my shoulders. “They can’t find men in real life, so they have to resort to dating the ones on the page. I don’t want you to be like that. I want you to find a great guy who treats you well, takes care of you financially, and keeps your panties wet without you having to flip a page, don’t you?”

“I don’t want to talk about sex with you...*Ever.*”

“I just know that you could land any guy you wanted if you were more like—”

“My sister,” I say, “I know.”

She nods, shooting me a sympathetic look. “I meant what I said about the next three weekends. Goodnight, Scarlett.”

“Goodnight.” I watch as she steps into the hallway and shuts the door.

I move closer and wait in the silence, thinking that maybe, just maybe, she’s changed her old, troubling ways, but the telltale sound of her clicking through music samples begins. Then she begins speaking in a high-pitched sing-song voice.

“Soooo, I just caught one of my daughters sneaking in past her curfew, so I sat her down to have a heart-to-heart conversation. It was important that we discussed her behavior, and although I had to punish her, she’ll respect me so much more as her mom for not giving her a free pass. Speaking of ‘free pass,’ when it comes to parenting teenagers...”

I put on my headphones and change clothes.

As a former mommy vlogger, my mother still has a habit of every moment, no matter how mundane *content*. Her life revolves around what will net her the most comments and likes, and even though the world knows her as “Sweet Southern Caroline” a woman who loves baking and has a Marry Poppins approach to life, she curses like a sailor and is more of a “Cool Mom.” (Oh, and the only thing I’ve ever seen her bake is a pre-package cookies,)

Thanks to all the money she made off her former “Caroline and the Twins” YouTube channel, we changed our last names and moved from our trailer park in Ohio to an estate in The South. We live in a fancy suburb where everyone owns at least four acres, and attend a school system that ranks in the top five of the nation.

It’s supposed to feel like a “prize,” but the past few years have felt more like a punishment...



BY THE TIME I open the door, my mom is long gone, so I head downstairs to the kitchen. I'm hoping I can persuade my dad to make her cancel the cruel and unusual shopping punishment, but he's not sitting at the bar anymore.

I pour myself a glass of milk and chug it down. As I'm opening a bag of Oreos, I hear a high-pitched laugh coming from outside.

Ugh, Tully...

Even though we were born six minutes apart, me and my sister couldn't possibly be any more different. I analyze our birth certificates and call the hospital for verification on our birthday every year.

We tolerate each other's presence like strangers who share a long transatlantic flight. Cordial when we cross paths, a light conversation here and there, but never anything beyond the surface.

Her dreams of being a top influencer have come true, and she has ten million followers who buy into the sugarcoated version of her life, numerous sponsors who've already paid her way to college, and most importantly, a mother who knows exactly how to help her build her "brand."

Peering through the blinds, I see that she's not alone. She's sitting next to her boyfriend, Easton Rush.

I suck in a breath at the sight of him in a white T-shirt that clings to his muscles, at his perfect pearly white smile that makes my heart race.

He's the star player of the football team, the sexiest guy to ever exist in this small town. With his sinewed muscles, stunning ocean blue eyes, and a face courtesy of a maker who said, "Give me fucking perfection," he makes grown women give him a second glance.

Leaning against his shoulder, Tully holds up her cell phone.

"So, we just got back from Gayle's Diner and I bought a ton of stuff that I'm making him try tonight," she says. "Since everyone swears by the waffle bites and custom creams, I can't wait to see what he thinks!"

She runs a hand through his ink-black hair before turning off the video. Then she looks at him. Do you want to eat chocolate or vanilla first?"

"Chocolate."

"Vanilla it is, then."

He smiles and picks up a tiny silver tin, while Tully places a spoonful of cream onto his tongue.

I watch as she films him trying flavor after flavor, forcing my blood to boil with every dollop.

Every time she playfully runs her fingers through his hair, I think about my fingers touching him there better.

Each time he laughs, I can hear the strain and the fakeness. Not the authentic full-throated one he has with me.

And in the rare moments that he places his fingers under her chin to adjust the angle of the camera, I think about where those fingers have tried to go with me, where they've trailed against my skin and made me lose all consciousness.

I *hate* this feeling, and I know that I should stop watching and walk away, but I can't.

I hate dating other guys, searching for someone who can make me feel even a tenth of what Easton does.

Stepping back, I return to my room and lock the window. I draw the blinds shut and close the curtains. Then I curl into a ball on my bed, put in my earbuds, and ignore the wetness that stains my pillowcase.

I'm not sure how long I lay there, but later I hear a familiar sound outside my window.

Tap! Tap! Tappp!

It's *him*, but I don't move.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

I remain still.

I feel my phone vibrating next to my head, and then he taps again, but I can't face looking at him tonight.

I just can't.

In addition to accepting that the college boys aren't worth my time, I need to accept that none of them will ever be able to wean my heart away from the boy who's owned it for over a year.



*Dear Heather Adair,
I once saw you shaving your head in the locker room before school, but I didn't think anything of it...Until I caught you doing it again. I also discovered that the "clinic in Memphis" you incessantly mentioned (whenever you missed weeks of class) doesn't exist. You didn't need to fake cancer to make friends. Everyone liked you already.
Wish I Would've Told You,
—Scarlett*

“Please tell me that there are some mornings when you wake up and say, ‘There’s no way I’m related to my identical twin sister.’” My best friend Kevin plops down next to me in the cafeteria.

“I say that every morning. Why do you ask?”

“Because apparently, she’s kicking off her homecoming campaign today and it’s far worse than what she did last year.”

“Nothing is worse than last year, Kevin.” I shake my head at the thought. “Nothing.”

“Want to bet me one of your cherry sour belts?”

I hold up the packet of my favorite candy, wondering if a bet is worth that much.

Last year, my sister enlisted the help of every cheerleader, basketball player, and football player to fill our school’s hallways with pink and white “Tully Crane for Queen” balloons.

Her post about it went viral within an hour.

She won the crown unanimously.

“She’s going with a Cinderella theme this time,” Kevin snatches the candy away from me. “She’s also bribing people for votes.”

“She thinks she’s too good to beg,” I say. “There’s no way.”

“Speak of the devil.” He smiles. “See for yourself.”

I look over my shoulder as Tully steps into the cafeteria, dressed in a sparkling pink ball gown that exposes the top of her C-cup breasts. Two friends are at her side, dressed like fairy godmothers and waving glitter wands.

She’s always been a master at commanding attention, and this moment is no exception. Everyone is staring at her like she’s some type of celebrity, and she’s loving every second of it.

“Are you voting for her?” I ask.

“No, I’m voting for Chelsea Hilton.”

“The girl who outed you in middle school?”

“She did me a favor.” He shrugs. “What about you?”

“I never vote. I’m sure she’ll win regardless.”

“Oh, me too. I just have to do my part in making sure it won’t be unanimous this time.”

I laugh as Tully makes her way to our table.

“Good afternoon, Sir Kevin and Lady Scarlett!” She pulls a handful of glitter from her purse and tosses it over us. “The homecoming season is officially upon us.”

Her godmother friends hold out two bright pink lollipops that feature her face, but neither I nor Kevin makes a move to grab them.

“Make your senior year un-dull by voting for your girl, Tullies!” She smiles. “A vote for me would not only be tasty, but it also won’t be waste-y!”

We stare at her.

“Ugh. Just vote for me, okay?” She lowers her voice. “Why haven’t you responded to my text message yet?”

“My phone’s in my locker,” I say. “I didn’t know you sent me anything.”

“Well, I did. So, hurry up and read it. It’s important.”

“Why can’t you tell me what it is now?”

“Because it’s *personal*, Scarlett.” She clasps my hand and looks into my eyes. “It’s life or death level important, and I desperately need your help.”

From her touch, I can feel her pulse racing, and for a split second, it feels

like we're seven-year-old girls again, partners in crime, willing to do whatever for each other without question.

Back when we were friends...

She lets go and clears her throat. "Since you're editor-in-chief of the senior yearbook, I expect you to name me as Most Likely to be a Supermodel. It's only fair since that's what everyone keeps telling me."

"Tully, I've told you before that's not a real category."

"Well, make it one." She scoffs. "If you want people to pay for a yearbook, you need to make sure people like me are featured as much as possible. No one cares about anything else."

Welp. At least she ruined the sister moment quicker than usual this time.

"Okay, onto the next set of voters." She serves me and Kevin a princess wave before walking away. Her minions follow her lead to bribe more peasants.

"Okay, remind me." Kevin sighs. "How many days do we have left until graduation?"

"Two hundred and sixty seven days and three hundred eighty four thousand, four hundred and eighty minutes," I say. "Do you want to know the seconds?"



AFTER FIFTH PERIOD, I pull my cell phone from my locker and check the text messages.

TULLY

Okay sooooo when Mom & Dad go to Aunt Jane's wedding, I'm throwing a house party. Since you're good at decor and shit, I'll need you to help set up so it can be amazing.

Oh, and we should consider this as our early birthday party sooo I guess you can invite your friends too! (Just a few though...)

I roll my eyes.

I should've known it wasn't really life or death.

The locker on my left suddenly slams shut and a familiar, intoxicating woody pine scent I love surrounds me. It's the scent that clings to all my sheets, lingers for weeks, and makes me wish it never had to leave.

Easton...

I avoid looking at him and rummage in my locker, pretending to search for something.

I can feel him staring, then glaring at me, waiting for me to acknowledge his presence, but I don't.

"Hello, Scarlett," he says, his voice low.

I say nothing. I flip through a chemistry book. Then, I pick up a pen and click it a few times.

"I know you hear me talking to you..."

I hum a Chopin refrain and rotate the violin case behind the clarinet.

My heart is beating so loudly that I'm convinced he can hear it.

"Scarlett..." He slips an arm around my waist and spins me around.

As he releases me, I feel the urge to press my hands against his chest, to kiss his lips, and tell him how much I missed him last night, but I don't.

I can't...

"Is there something I can help you with this afternoon, Easton Rush?"

"I believe so," he says. "I have a problem."

"You only have one?"

"I wanted to see a certain someone last night." He paused. "But her window was locked."

"Was it?"

"Yes." He narrows his eyes. "*It was.*"

"I guess I must've forgotten to leave it open."

"You also ignored all ten of my calls."

"You should've gotten the hint after the fifth one."

"Why do you have to do this shit to me every week?" He gazes at my lips. "Does arguing with me every other day turn you on?"

"Even if it did—and it *doesn't*—it's not like there's anything you could do about it."

He raises his eyebrow. "I'm coming over around seven tonight. I need you to leave the window open."

"I might not be there." I cross my arms. "I have a date."

"With who?"

"A guy I can actually go out in public with," I say. "He's also in college,

so he's far more mature. He knows all about classical music and shit."

"So do I, Scarlett."

"Not like *he* does. He's on another level than you."

"He plays piano?"

"He does. Far better than you'll ever be able to."

A slow smirk crosses his lips as if he doesn't believe a word I'm saying. He moves his head closer, nearly pressing it against my forehead, making my breath catch.

"Why do you keep wasting your time going out with these guys who aren't me?" He loops a finger under my necklace, lifting the petal-shaped charm he gave me last month. "It's not like you're sleeping with them."

"I'm not sleeping with you either."

"Until you come to your senses."

"Are you planning on asking my sister to join us, then?"

"I haven't fucked your sister." He looks offended. "You know better than that."

"Does *she*?"

Silence.

"I don't want her," he says.

"I know," I say. "You're just *in a relationship* with her."

"We're not discussing this right now." He looks like he wants to kiss me right here, like he wants to silence the heavy beating in my chest once and for all, but he can't.

Not now.

Not ever.

Too much is at stake.

"Easton!" One of his teammates calls from down the hall. "Come on, man! We're running late!"

He steps back, looking me over one last time. "Leave your window unlocked for me tonight."

"And if I don't?"

"Try me and fucking see..."



*Dear Aidan Mills,
I cheated off all your papers in AP History class, and I'm really sorry about that... I don't know why Mr. Meyers gave me higher grades than you.
Wish I Would've Told You,
—Scarlett*

The worst part of marching band rehearsal is being forced to wear our full cotton uniforms in the sweltering Southern heat. Then again, maybe it's the fact that our band practices are open to the public.

Since there's not much to do in our small town, random people show up to watch and shout commentary from the bleachers.

If I hear someone shout, "What's Tully Crane doing down there in the band?" one more time, I'm going to scream...

"At-ten-tion!" The drum major whistles. "All halt!"

I stop marching in unison with everyone else. Then the whistle sounds again, commanding us all to face forward.

"Trumpets, you came in a half rest late during the fight song, but the tubas thankfully saved your asses!" He yells from a ladder. "Woodwinds, perfect as always."

I force a smile. It's not like we get a prize for consistency.

"We need to be one hundred percent in sync for our first Friday night," he says. "It's the season opener, and you know the media will be watching our football team like hawks so we need to put on our best show."

“One of the flute player’s shoe strings is untied!” Someone from the bleachers yells. “She also missed a step when y’all were playing Sweet Caroline!”

I bite my tongue and look to the sidelines.

I spot one of my cutest classmates—Edward Johns—wrapping an arm around his long-term girlfriend. He’s kissing her cheek and whispering something against her skin, making her cheeks flush pink.

Everyone knows that she belongs to him, that there’s no point in trying to steal her way. The two of them are an unbreakable unit, just like Easton and Tully. Where one goes, the other follows. If you see one, the other is a few feet away.

What I wouldn’t give for me and Easton to have that.

In *public*.

I could add up all our private moments, and they would pale in comparison to what everyone else sees with him and Tully. What their millions of followers obsess over daily on social media.

“*At-ten-tion!*” The drum major’s whistle sounds, forcing me to look away from what I desperately want.

As I march into the next formation, I decide that I don’t feel like settling for sloppy seconds today. I’m not the slightest bit worried about Easton’s threat from earlier.

I’m spending the night at Kevin’s house.

Easton will just have to deal with it...



Later that night

The crescent-shaped night light in Scarlett's room isn't glowing for me. It's her silent signal that lets me know that she's home, that I'm welcome to come into the place that's become my refuge over the past year and a half. The place that makes me forget just how fucked up my life is in the dark corners no one else can see.

Maybe she's sleeping.

I cross the backyard and climb the ivy brackets under her window. Then I tap on the glass.

No answer.

I tap again, a bit harder this time.

Nothing.

Peering inside, I spot her curled under my grey blanket, so I text her.

Hey. I'm here. Open your window.

You know I don't sleep well without you...

The bulge on her bed doesn't move, so I call her.

"Hey there," she answers on the first ring.

"I'm here. Open the window for me."

"Okay, hold on." She pauses. "I just did. Anything else?"

"Stop fucking with me Scarlett." I roll my eyes. "Get out of bed and open the window."

“I’m literally staring out of an open window right now, Easton.”

“The window in *your bedroom*.”

“Oh.” There’s a smile in her voice. “*That* window. Well, that’s kind of impossible for me to do right now unless you want to tell me how to bend time and space.”

“I’m only going to ask you one more time....”

“I’m at Kevin’s house,” she says. “We’re working on a group project.”

“You two don’t have any classes together last time I checked.”

“It’s a duet for the band.”

“He plays the trombone,” I say. “I doubt there’s a clarinet duet with that.”

“Shows how much you know about music.” She’s definitely testing me.

“I’ve gotta go. Have a good night.”

She hangs up before I can say another word, and I call her again, but she doesn’t answer.

Grabbing the edge of the pane, I attempt to push it up in hopes that maybe she left it unlocked, but it doesn’t budge.

I’m tempted to break the damn glass, but a loud rustling below breaks my thoughts.

“*Easton?* Is that you?” It’s Tully.

Shit. I turn around and stare at her. I’ve never been caught coming here before.

“My room is on the other side, genius!” She smiles. “You clearly got knocked around too hard at practice today. Come down before Scarlett wakes up and pepper sprays you.”

“Right.” I climb down, and she immediately hugs me.

“You know, you don’t have to go all ‘Romeo & Juliet’ to convince me to finally fuck you, Easton.”

“Come again?”

“I know you’re trying to be a gentleman and all, but don’t you think we’ve both waited long enough for sex?” She stands on her tiptoes, threading her fingers through my hair. “Everyone thinks we’re doing it anyway, so I don’t see why you’re dragging out the inevitable. I’ve never gone this long without a guy fucking me...”

I blink.

To every other guy at school, Tully is the epitome of the phrase “sexy as fuck.” Her dark brown hair is always pulled into a perfect high bun, her deep green eyes hold a shade of mystery, and she knows exactly how to make

minds wander with her collection of tightly fitted dresses and skirts.

When we started dating the summer before our junior year, I wasn't the slightest bit surprised that we didn't have much in common except popularity, but I figured we could still have fun together.

We created a joint TikTok account and started posting random "When your boyfriend plays football and you're a cheerleader" type of things, and then one night we went viral.

Then we went viral again.

And again and again.

Before we knew it, the joint account had three million followers and sponsors lining up to pay us money that I desperately needed.

It was easy money, I enjoyed being around her, but then her sister was paired with me for an AP English project, and within seconds of her saying, "I hope you don't think I give a fuck that you're Mr. Popular because you're just as average as all these other guys." I liked her.

"I have my reasons," I finally say to Tully.

"Care to share at least one of them?"

"They're complicated."

"Of course." She smiles, pressing a kiss on my cheek. "I'm making spiked hot chocolate with my mom's brandy since I need to get some sleep. Want some?"

"Sure," I say. "Double the shots in mine..."



Dear Harriet Rayner,

There were so many days when I wished we could've been friends since we shared a love of all things goth and gore. I was thrilled that you invited me to your exclusive Halloween dinner, but there's a reason why I never showed...I discovered that you were @MissGreyHighAnonymous who spread rumors on social media about everyone at our school. You hurt a shit ton of people, including me.

*Wish I Would've Told You,
—Scarlett*

“Do you really need to rehearse that concerto again?” Kevin crosses his arms in the living room.

“I do, if I want to make sure it's perfect in time for my recital.”

“I mean, do you need to rehearse it *here*?” He laughs, gently prying the violin bow from my fingers. “It's been perfect for the past several weeks. Trust me.”

“Sounds like you're about to kick me out.”

“I'm not.” He sets my bow on the mantle. “But I'd like to watch our show with the pizza instead of your music. No offense.”

“None taken.” I place the violin into its case and crack open a soda. “You don't have to pretend like you haven't watched the next episode without me, by the way.”

“Good!” He laughs. “I'll still rewatch it with you, though.”

The doorbell rings, and he picks up the remote.

“You’re turn to pay for our nourishment,” he says. “I paid the last two times.”

“Of course.” I grab a few bills from my purse and head to the door.

The pizza guy isn’t waiting for me when I open it.

It’s Easton.

What the...

“Hello, Scarlett.” He grabs my hand and pulls me outside. “Is now a good time?”

“A good time for *what*?”

“For us to have a conversation,” he says. “You clearly wanted to try me by not being at home, so I came here to talk.”

I step back, somewhat stunned by the darkness in his eyes. We’ve made each other mad before, but I’ve never seen him look like this.

“Make sure he gives us extra parmesan packets!” Kevin calls out. “The crushed red peppers, too!”

“So, is now *not* a good time?” Easton says.

“It’s really not.” I motion for him to lower his voice. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“We’re talking *now*.” He grabs my hand again, pulling me to the far side of the porch.

“Easton, I swear to God, I—” My sentence ends on his lips, and my back hits the hot bricks.

He grips my hips as he slides his tongue against mine, daring me to refuse him, making me lose my breath. Then he bites down on my bottom lip.

“I know you’re trying to make a point about us,” he whispers against my mouth, “so congratulations. You’ve made it.”

“What I’m doing right now has nothing to do with you.”

“Okay.” He kisses me again, this time even harder, making me regret not letting him in last night. “You also know what tomorrow is for me.”

I say nothing.

“And regardless of how mad you are at me, I know you would never pull this shit on that day. Or am I wrong?”

I say nothing, because he isn’t. Because even during our worst moments, he’s always been there if I needed him.

A red car suddenly pulls into the driveway, and the delivery guy steps out.

We watch him walk toward us with a pizza bag.

“Two extra large pepperoni pizzas, a medium order of breadsticks, and a large coke, right?” He steps in front of us.

“Yes.” I finally turn away from Easton. “With parmesan and crushed red pepper packets.”

“Got it. It’s forty two dollars and fifty two cents.”

I hold out the money, but Easton pushes my hand away.

“I’ve got it,” he says, paying for it. “You can keep the change.”

The delivery guy smiles and then tilts his head to the side. “Easton Rush?”

“Yes.”

“Aw man. My dad talks about you all the time.” He hands me the food. “And my little sister is obsessed with ya’lls TikTok account, Tully. Your name is Tully, right?”

“Yeah.” I feign a smile. “Thanks.”

“Good luck this season dude!” He walks away without another word, and Easton waits until he pulls away before pressing a kiss on my forehead.

“Don’t do this to me again.”

“I won’t.”

“Good.” He looks like he wants to say more, but Kevin suddenly calls my name.

“Scarlett, are you dying out there or something?” He calls. “Scarlett?”

“I gotta go,” I say. “I’ll um…”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” Easton presses one final kiss on my lips before walking away.



I park my car outside the school gym at five-thirty in the morning. I haven't been able to sleep, and I know better than to try.

Stepping out, I grab my bag and head toward the side door.

Since joining the football team, I've become friends with the chief janitor, and he always texts to see if he needs to leave an entrance open for me.

I twist the knob until it gives way, but a loud voice drifts down the hall before I can disappear into the locker room.

"Is that you, Reed Hinson?" It's my coach.

"No, Coach."

"Then who the hell is it?" He shouts louder. "This complex is off limits until seven o'clock unless you're on my staff or a team captain!"

I roll my eyes and head to his doorway.

"It's me, Coach."

"Oh." He puts on his glasses. "Fate must be on my side today. Have a seat so we can talk."

I hold back a sigh. "Can this wait until later, Coach?"

"No." He points to a chair. "Have a seat."

I set down my bag and oblige.

He stares at me for several moments, rocking back and forth in his squeaky chair.

I clear my throat, hoping he'll hurry up and say something, but all he does is rock.

"If you're not about to say anything, can I—"

“Are you using the best brand of condoms?” he interrupts.

“What?”

“You heard me,” he says. “Are you covering your cock properly while you’re screwing these girls or what?”

I should’ve just stayed in my car...

“You do know what condoms are, don’t you son?” He narrows his eyes. “I gave you my sex talk when you were a freshman, didn’t I?”

“Unfortunately. With all due respect though, Coach, where the hell is this coming from?”

“I was like you back in my day.” He clasps his hands. “I mean, I wasn’t the top ranked high school quarterback in the nation or anything, but I was popular enough to make the sports news. Very popular. Feels good, doesn’t it?”

“It does...”

“You know what *doesn’t* feel good?” He stops rocking and leans forward. “A surprise baby by some gold digger who knows, just knows, you’re destined to do big things in college and will be huge in the NFL. I don’t want that to happen to you, so I want you to make sure you’re wrapping it up.”

“Thanks, Coach. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Not only do I want you to wrap it up,” he says, “But I want you to make sure you carry something around whenever you’re done and put it to use.”

He opens his drawer and pulls out a small stack of red packets. “These will fit in your wallet behind the condoms.”

“What are those?”

“Hot sauce packets,” he says. “Whenever you take off a condom, squeeze some of this into it so the girl can’t go behind your back and put your semen to use.”

What the fuck?

I stand to my feet. “I’m good, Coach.”

“No, trust me.” He pushes the packets closer. “The closer you get to announcing whatever college you’re attending in the spring, the closer the gold diggers are to sinking their claws into your future.”

“I’m going to leave now.”

“I smelled the scent of female desperation in the air once this school year started, once ESPN started running those long promos on you.” He’s officially talking to himself, not me. “The stench is unmistakable.”

“Are you taking new meds, Coach?”

“I don’t want to be invited to your baby shower for at least ten years,” he says, staring into space. “I wish I could go back in time and have someone say that to me...”

I turn around and head to the door.

“Wait, Easton!”

I look over my shoulder. “Yes, Coach?”

He picks up a blue envelope and holds it out for me. “Happy birthday son. I never forget.”

“Thank you.” I take the envelope from him and leave his office, shutting the door behind me.

“Easton?” Someone else calls my name.

Fuck.. I turn around and spot the offensive coordinator. “Yes, Mr. Hinson?”

“I wanted to make sure I caught you before I looked at some film.” He hands me a small gift bag. “Happy birthday.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He pats my shoulder. “Don’t let anyone ever tell you that you’re not the next best All-American quarterback. You have an incredible game, a beautiful supportive family, and good looks and shit, too.”

I nod. “Will do, sir.”

Turning away before I can be distracted again, I walk down the hall and into the team’s state-of-the-art locker room.

I check all the rows to ensure I’m the only person here. Then I open my bag and take out a framed picture that I can only face once a year.

My mother used to come here with me during this ungodly hour, armed with cupcakes and candles like I was still in kindergarten. She’d also bring a portable piano keyboard and request that I play a Chopin piece from memory.

Even though I’d long given up my old dreams of being a musician, she was proud of me for choosing “a sport that might actually pay your bills someday.”

I run my finger along the edge of her face.

The sudden sound of heavy footsteps makes me put away the frame. Before I can ask who else is interrupting my morning, my father rounds the corner, holding up a brown bag.

“I hope you won’t mind that I came here,” he says. “I brought you breakfast.”

“Thanks.” I motion for him to sit next to me.

I don't mention that he reeks of alcohol.

"Your mother was a really great woman." He hands me a box of waffles.

"Loyal to a fault."

"She never lied to me." His voice cracks. "Not one time."

"She didn't lie to me either."

"Very loyal."

"Yes," I say. "Very loyal."

We eat our food in silence, swallowing it down with our forced lies.

We've never discussed the truth.

It hurts too damn much...

My mother died on her way to our family vacation last year.

She was in the passenger seat of a red Corvette that didn't belong to my father.

It was our church pastor's.

The accident report revealed that they were half-naked, that the backseat floor was littered with condoms.

At the hospital, the doctors gave me a plastic bag of her things, and while I was texting her friends and families the news, I realized that most of the names in her phone belonged to other men with nicer cars than Corvettes.

My life had already been hanging by a thread, but that was the week it finally snapped.

The same week I met Scarlett...

"Well..." My father downs the last bite of his waffle and stands to his feet. "I know I'm not her, but Happy Birthday son. I've got to get my rehab meeting. I'm one hundred percent sober now, you know."

"Yeah." I watch him walk away. "I know."



Later that afternoon

Are you at home yet?

SCARLETT

I will be in an hour. Late practice. Some idiot decided to play a game with the fire alarm today.

How unfortunate...You're the only person who hasn't wished me 'Happy Birthday' today.

SCARLETT

Because you told me that you prefer to celebrate it on a different day...Have you changed your mind about that?

Not at all. Call me when you're heading home.

I TOSS my football pads onto the floor before slumping onto the living room couch. Trying to kill time, I flip through the channels, but nothing catches my attention.

I scroll down my contacts and call my best guy friend, Jeremiah.

"What's up, Shitface?" he answers on the first ring. "Miss me already?"

"Terribly." I shut my eyes. "I'm wishing you were kissing me right now."

He laughs. "I hope you're not trying to use the birthday sympathy card to get out of going with me to the gulf this weekend."

"Never."

"Good. What do you really want then?"

"A distraction," I admit. "At least half an hour if you can..."

"Of course." There's a smile in his voice. "This is the perfect opportunity for me to tell you just how overrated you are."

"I'm listening."

"You're not as attractive as everyone claims," he says. "There are plenty of other actors in Hollywood who look far better."

"Are you saying I look good enough to belong in Hollywood, though?"

"Shut up and let me finish."

Laughing, I shut my eyes and lean back on the couch, listening to him serve me lies until I fall asleep.



I'M DREAMING of throwing epic passes at The University of Alabama's stadium when something wet touches my thigh.

Confused, I look up at the sky, but it's bright blue. No sign of an oncoming storm anywhere.

"Easton! Easton!" The crowd cheers my name as my teammate rushes into the end zone.

The wetness touches my thigh again, leaving a strange trail, and I open my eyes.

Scarlett is kneeling between my legs, her fingers pressed against my briefs.

She looks up at me, and I smile.

Then I realize she's Tully.

What the...

"Hey there." She smiles and presses another kiss against my skin. "Happy birthday."

Fuck. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Giving you a birthday blowjob." She smiles. "Don't you want one?"

Only if it was from your sister. I clear my throat before those words slip from my mouth.

"Exactly." She presses her palms on my knees. "Lay back and let me finish."

"No, *don't.*" I clasp her wrists and stand up, moving around her. "I just want to be alone today."

"Ugh. Seriously?" She opens a bag, pulling out a champagne bottle and some type of dessert tray. "I bribed a guy to get us some top shelf alcohol and I even bought you birthday candles to go with this custom cookie cake."

I sigh. "I really just want to be alone today, Tully."

"But I'm your girlfriend." She stands.

"I'm aware," I say. "It's not personal."

"It feels like it." She walks over to me. "Why can't I be here with you? Like, on all days, why not today?"

"Tully..."

“Save it.” She looks into my eyes. “When you stopped letting me come over months ago because you claimed you didn’t sleep well with me in your bed, I bought that.”

“That’s the truth.”

“When you said, ‘I feel like we need to work on being better friends in our relationship’ I bought that bullshit, too.”

“That’s still the truth...”

“What about *my* truth, then?” Her voice cracks. “Like, I get the social media thing with the sponsors can be annoying, but we both signed all those deals and they pay us pretty well.”

“It has nothing to do with social media, Tully.”

“I also understand that you’re under a lot of stress since every college is trying to sink their claws into you, and everyone in this town thinks you’re some sort of celebrity, but...What about *me*?” She sighs. “What happened to the guy I was dating last year?”

I swallow, knowing that she could never handle the truth. She’s a drama queen through and through, and the only people who exist in her world are those who serve her best interests.

“I don’t really have anyone close in my life,” she says. “My mom loves her vlogging shit more than anything, my dad loves that money, and my friends are...” Her voice trails off. “I have friends, and I want to have you, too.”

I hold back a sigh.

She didn’t mention Scarlett.

She never does...

“I’ll let you have your birthday because well, it is your birthday.” She presses her hand against my chest. “But we need to talk within the next few days because I need to know that you still like me as much as I like you.”

She kisses my cheek. “Save the champagne and cookies for me, okay?”

“I’ll walk you to your car,” I say, stopping myself from making a promise I don’t want to keep.

I grab her hand and lead her outside to the silver BMW she supposedly “shares” with Scarlett. I’ve yet to see Scarlett behind the wheel.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” I say, shutting the door.

“I’ll hold you to that.” She blows me a kiss. “Happy birthday.”

I stand in my driveway long after she’s gone, and when I can’t take the silence anymore, I grab the keys to my dad’s car and head to the only place I

want to be.



Dear Elliot Tipton,

In debate class, you once argued that “parents who put their kids on the internet for content are selfish people who fuck them up for life.” I told you how wrong you were, how I grew up in a family like that and I turned out just fine.

You were right, though....

One hundred percent.

Wish I Would’ve Told You,

—Scarlett

I look like a poor girl’s version of Little Bo Peep.

All I’m missing is a flock of sheep and a golden herder stick.

“Stop frowning, Scarlett!” My mom fluffs the white petticoat under my pink dress. “This is a thirty-thousand-dollar period piece. You should be *thrilled* to wear something so beautiful.”

“The corset is too tight, Mom,” I say. “I can barely breathe.”

“Nonsense!” She grabs the strings and pulls them in even tighter. “Now, let’s see what we can do about these wayward ruffles.”

I suck in what will probably be the last breath of my life and wince as she stabs my skin with a pushpin.

Since I had the misfortune of beating Tully home from school today, I’m standing in for her latest sponsorship fitting.

“We’re sensing that the Renaissance era will be making a fashionable

comeback in the near future, and your daughter's online persona truly fits in line with our brand." A woman in a light lavender suit, who looks like she's descended from English royalty, sips tea in our living room.

"She has such lovely posture and bone structure." The woman smiles at me. "That dress truly comes to life on you, Miss Crane."

"Say, thank you very much, Scarlett." My mother chides.

"Thank you, Miss. Very much."

"Pardon me asking." The woman sets down her tea cup and walks over to us. "But are you sure you don't want to join your sister for this campaign? I know you don't have as many followers as she does, but if you both did videos on her account, I'm sure our marketing department would negotiate a higher payout."

"She's not interested." "I'm not interested." My mother and I say in unison.

"Not even for triple the amount?" She smiles.

"No." "She'll think about it." We speak in unison again, but our answers aren't in sync this time.

"I thought so." The woman smooths the lace sleeves of my dress. "Back in my day, there was no such thing as social media, influencers, or lifestyle bloggers."

"I'm sure life was much better back then..."

"You kids these days can completely bypass college and build immense wealth with the tap of your fingertips," she continues. "You can make connections all around the world without ever leaving your living room."

"They have no idea how good they have it." My mother chimes in. "I'm hoping Scarlett eventually takes advantage of her good looks and charm."

"I hope so, too." The woman picks up a footstool and motions for me to step on top of it. "Let's finish the rest of the fitting, shall we?"

I tune out their conversation as they poke and prod me with needles and make notes on measuring tape.

When they're done, I rush upstairs and lock my bedroom door.

Easton is already inside, leaning against the window with his arms crossed, amusement twinkling in his eyes.

"Something funny, Birthday Boy?" I ask.

"I'm not used to seeing you in bright pink."

"Oh." I look down at the dress. "Don't get used to it."

"What's the occasion?"

“Being a stand-in for Tully.” I shrug. “I was planning to call when I finished and got out of this thing.”

“Let me help you.” He walks over and motions for me to turn around.

Staring at him through the mirror, I watch as he unzips the side of my dress. He slides his finger along the sash tied at the front and slowly loosens it.

With his eyes on mine, he saves the pearl necklace I’m wearing for last, unclasping it and pressing a kiss against my neck.

Every nerve in my body comes to life and my heart skips a beat.

“You’re not supposed to kiss me there,” I say.

“You’re right.” He kisses my neck again. “Why is that?”

“Because it’s against my ‘I don’t want to go there with you’ rules.”

“You were supposed to rewrite some of those…” He lets the pearls drop to the floor. “When exactly are you getting around to that?”

“Soon.”

“You’ve said that before.”

“Then you shouldn’t be surprised.”

He sighs and gently grabs my waist, spinning me around to face him.

“I hate that I didn’t meet you first,” he says.

“Would that have changed anything?”

“Fuck yes.”

I want to believe that, but hypotheticals have never been my strong suit. It’s hard for me to see the shades in anything; it’s always black and white.

He pulls me into his arms and kisses my lips. “I got you a present.”

“On *your* birthday?”

He nods and points to my desk. A huge bouquet of pink roses is sitting on my books, and a new silver charm—a rose petal—is waiting to be added to my necklace.

“You don’t have to buy me things to get me to like you, Easton,” I say.

“I’m aware.” He laughs, letting me go. “I want you to have certain things.”

I walk over to the charm and quickly loop it onto my necklace before changing into a t-shirt and shorts.

I climb into bed first, and he follows, pulling me flush against his chest. Staring into my eyes, he toys with strands of my hair, and I inhale his scent.

“We need to find a new meetup spot for our weekends at some point,” he says.

“What’s wrong with your dad’s offroad shack?”

“The ‘For Sale by Owner’ sign isn’t there anymore. I think someone bought it and he hasn’t told me yet.”

“No, no one bought it.” I shake my head. “I stole it and tossed it into a dumpster so no one can call about it anymore.”

“You know that’s a crime, right?”

“Are you planning to report me?”

“I might.”

He laughs. “Hypothetical question. If you got arrested for something you did, but the police were convinced that you *didn’t* do it and let you go, what would you do next?”

“Go about my life.”

“You’re supposed to wait for three options before responding, Scarlett.”

“Not when I already know the answer.” I smile. “What would *you* do?”

“Probably the same thing.”

We both laugh, and he slides his hands under my body, rolling me on top of him.

I wait for his kiss, but something next to me catches his attention.

Stretching his arm, he grabs a sheet of crumpled yellow paper.

“No, don’t look at that!” I try to grab it from him, but he keeps it away and unfolds it.

“How the hell did you get an ‘F’ on a Sex Ed quiz?” He laughs. “Everyone gets an ‘A’ on these things.”

“Maybe with the old teacher.” I groan. “This new lady wanted us to write down our inner-most thoughts about sex, and I told her I was reporting her to the principal.”

“So, this is a retaliatory ‘F’?”

“It’s a ‘You’re being dramatic and you have two days to redo this assignment, or else’ F.”

He laughs. “Would you like some help?”

“No...I’ll just write, ‘I think about Easton Rush going down on me and screwing me in the back of car his all the time’ and see what she says next.”

“You should’ve told me that a lot sooner,” he says, trailing a finger against my mouth. “I think about tasting other your lips all the time, and I wish you would hurry up and let me...”

His fingers leave my lips, and I feel bereft.

We stare at each other in silence for what feels like forever,

communicating without saying a word, wishing—like always—that things were different between us. *Easier* between us.

My phone buzzes at midnight, and I lean over him to turn it off.

“Happy birthday, Easton.”

“Thank you, Scarlett.” He pauses. “If it were for my mom lying to me and my dad the entire time, I’d probably feel like celebrating it.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. Just promise that you’ll never do that.”

“Tell you sorry?”

“*Lie to me.*”

I nod. “I promise.”

“Good.” He kisses me one last time and pulls me into his arms. “Go to sleep.”

PART 2

THE LIES KEEP SPINNING



Question:

If you knew that you'd suffer no consequences for holding onto a secret that hurts someone you love, what would you do?

- **A)** Keep it to yourself. There's no point in hurting someone for no reason.
- **B)** Invite them out to a public place and tell them. Honesty is always key. No matter what.
- **C)** Write it in a letter with as many details as possible to get it off your chest. Send it later to clear your conscience.

Answer:

A.

But not because you are concerned with hurting *them*.
You don't want to hurt *yourself*.



Dear Yemi Davis,

I could never understand why you demanded to sit far away from “those Crane girls” whenever we were assigned to the same class. Until now. I truly had no idea my dad was sleeping with your mom and making plans to be with her long-term.

*Wish I Would’ve Told You,
—Scarlett*

When people unfamiliar with The South hear “Gulf Shores,” they typically envision dark waters on brown-sanded beaches. They flee to Florida and crowd that coast, completely unaware of the secret white sand and palm trees hidden along the edges of Mississippi and Alabama.

In the weeks before the football season begins, I always look for any excuse to escape to our shores on weekends.

Today, I’m tagging along with Kevin at an “Ole Miss Fraternity & Sorority Beach Party” all in hopes of him getting a glimpse of his “totally not a crush” or “landing a hot guy.”

For some reason, he’s far less easy-going than usual.

“No, no, *hell no!*” Kevin shakes his head at me as I step out of the women’s restroom. “You’ve got to be kidding me, Scarlett!”

“What’s wrong?”

“I told you to dress to *impress* today.” He looks over my swimsuit. “You

look like you're about to swim with the Amish."

"Seriously, Kevin?"

"A one-piece bodysuit?" He presses a hand against his chest. "Why get dressed to go swimming at all?"

"Okay, that's it," I say. "I'll go home then."

"Not so fast." He sets his bag down on a ledge. "I figured you'd pull this bullshit, so I came prepared."

He rummages through the bag and pulls out a sparkling red bikini.

"Here," he says. "Put this on."

"Kevin, I came here for you to find a guy. Not me."

"Well, no guy will come near me if he knows that I let my best friend come out of the house wearing that." He presses the suit against my chest. "Hurry up before someone sees you."

"Fine." I return to the restroom and change. Then I stare at my reflection in the mirror.

The glittering red top makes my C-cups look like Double Ds from every angle. The matching bottom features cut-out holes on both sides, with silver strings that barely keep the crotch area in place.

The word "Bootylicious" is embroidered across my ass cheeks.

He can't be serious about me wearing this...

I brush my hair into a side ponytail and hope that Kevin will take one look at me and tell me to put on what I had before.

When I step out again, he gives me the thumbs up.

"Much, much better." He hands me a bottled margarita. "Now, watch me walk over to that taco bar and tell me if my looks are off today."

"They never are, Kevin."

"*Watch me.*" He walks away, and I laugh.

For whatever reason, he has no idea how fucking hot he is, how it saddens all the girls at school to know that he'll never have any interest in them.

His golden blond hair gleams in the sunlight, and his well-toned stomach muscles lead down to a perfect "V" in his navy blue shorts.

His stride is pure confidence, and as he deviates from the route and stops at an umbrella stand, something cold drips onto my shoulder.

What the...

I look to my left and see abs.

Perfect rock-hard abs.

Then, a smile and eyes behind oversized shades.

“You’re not twenty-one last time I checked,” the deep voice says.

“I wasn’t aware I needed to be just to come to the beach.”

“I’ve watched you drink two of those glass margaritas so far.”

“I only brought enough for me and my friend, sorry.”

“That’s not why I came over here.” He laughs, pushing his shades onto his head.

It’s Jeremiah, Easton’s teammate and best guy friend.

“You’re not twenty-one either,” I say. “You’re barely older than me.”

“That’s not the point.” He points to the bottle. “I’m smart enough to keep my alcohol in a water bottle so no one suspects anything. Bring your shit over to my tent so you won’t get kicked out.”

“What’s the catch?”

“There isn’t one.” He’s still smiling at me. “Unless you didn’t come here alone, that is. If you did, you have to promise to dance with me later.”

“She’s here with *me*.” Kevin suddenly appears at my side. “She’s my girlfriend.”

“I thought you were into guys.” Jeremiah raises an eyebrow.

“I’m into girls *and* guys,” he says. “Unlike you, I don’t discriminate.”

“Right...” Jeremiah rolls his eyes. “Well, I take it you won’t want to come play with a few of my Ole Miss fraternity friends?”

“Of course not. I’m here to treat Scarlett to a romantic day at the beach... Is there a guy named James over there by chance?”

“There are four James over there.”

“Any of them gay?”

“Three of them.”

“*Sold*.” He grabs my hand and pulls me to my feet while Jeremiah grabs the handle of our cooler.

Completely lost in his own world, Kevin starts muttering to himself, saying, “Be cool, Kevin,” “Just be cool,” as if that’ll help calm his nerves in any way.

“Don’t take this personally,” I say to Jeremiah, “but I’ve always thought that you were a bit of a douchebag.”

“I can be.” He laughs. “No offense taken. Since we’re being honest, though, can I say what I’ve thought about you?”

“Let me guess, I’m a standoffish goth girl?”

“You’re a sexy as fuck goth girl.” He looks me over. “Of course, I’ve

never tried to talk to you before today, so I can't really vouch for 'standoffish.' I'll let you know how I feel about that after tonight."

"Are you coming onto me, Jeremiah?"

"Yes." He laughs, slipping an arm around my waist. "Watch your step."

I stumble as we hit a patch of rocks and keep my gaze straight ahead as we approach the oversized white tent.

There's a row of beach chairs, a large cooler filled with "water bottles" and two tables set up for beer pong. I'm tempted to ask Jeremiah how he can afford to buy a tent this huge, but then I remember that his parents own every pool store in town.

"Allow me to make you a daiquiri," he says, letting go of me. "You want pineapple or strawberry?"

"Strawberry."

"Me too," Kevin says.

While Jeremiah steps away, Kevin whispers, "If I hit it off with any of these guys, would you be willing to stay past sunset?"

"Of course."

"Perfect! Oh, and don't turn your head right now, but almost every guy at the beer pong table is staring at you."

"What?" I ignore his warning and turn around, spotting a horde of guys drinking and looking right at me.

Blushing, I spin around. "They're looking at something else."

"No, they're not," he says. "But if it makes you feel any better, whenever you start talking, they'll render you invisible like every guy at school does."

"Why are we friends again?"

"Because you pay me well." He laughs as Jeremiah returns with our drinks.

"The guys standing by the surfboard stand are your type," Jeremiah tells Kevin. "You should try to make an impression before more people get here. You're welcome."

Kevin doesn't say thank you. He rushes away from us without another word.

"So..." Jeremiah wraps his arm around my shoulder. "How long are you staying here today?"

"As long as Kevin wants."

"Sounds long enough." He smiles. "What were you planning to do while he tried to land a boyfriend?"

“Find an ebook to read, I guess..”

“No, you’ll hang out with me,” he says, leading me to the shore, temporarily making me forget that he and I can never be together.

Before I can come to my senses, loud shrieking sounds behind us.

We stop walking and look back, spotting a group of cheerleaders racing toward the tent.

Following behind them is Tully...Then Easton.

My heart skips a beat as he steps into full view. He’s shirtless, his six-pack abs on full display with black and grey shorts.

“Easton!” Jeremiah calls out to him. “Easton, come here!”

Easton looks over at us and lifts the shades onto his head. His jaw drops when his eyes meet mine, and he looks between us.

“Hurry up, Shitface!” Jeremiah laughs.

Easton keeps his gaze locked on me as he gets closer.

“What’s up?” he says.

“I’m trying to convince my new friend here to stay the entire time, and I think a deciding factor would be you.”

“I know it would be.” He’s clenching his jaw. “What exactly can I do?”

“Help me set up the fire pit a little early and tell her I’m a good person.”

“I’ll help you with the first thing,” Easton says, looking me over. “You look fucking beautiful in that bikini, Scarlett.”

I suck in a breath at his forwardness. “Thank you, Easton.”

He eyes the shiny clasp between my breasts, and I can feel him wanting to step closer and run his fingers along the fabric.

For a moment, it feels like it’s just him, me, and the sloshing waters.

“Where the hell did you get that swimsuit?” Tully’s high-pitched voice instantly jolts me into reality. “That is fucking stunning on you.”

“Thank you, Tully.”

“You two stay here,” Jeremiah says. “Me and Easton need to handle some things.”

We nod, but the moment they walk away, Tully calls out to her cheerleader friends.

I plop down in the sand and hope to get through the rest of this day without any more awkwardness.



An hour later

EASTON

You told me that you were studying with Kevin today.

That's what he said to lure me into coming here... You didn't mention anything about a date with my sister.

EASTON

She's not supposed to be here. It was supposed to be just me, Jeremiah, and some guys from some frats we met last year. She drove here with her friends.

How very convenient.

EASTON

Don't let him touch you again...

JEREMIAH SIGNALS for me to walk over when the fire pit is ready,

“Okay,” he says, opening a box. “We’ve got beer soaked marshmallows, chocolate, and graham crackers. You get to make a s’more for me as a thank you.”

“What an honor.”

“You’re very welcome.” He smiles and calls out for other people from the tent to join him.

I pick up one of the sticks, and as I stab a marshmallow, Easton moves next to me.

“Have I mentioned how fucking beautiful you look today?”

“Yes.” I swallow. “Thank you.”

“It’s taking a lot for me not to touch you right now,” he whispers against

my skin. Then he tugs at the knot on the back of my top. “When did you buy this swimsuit?”

“It was a gift from Kevin.”

“Hmmm.” His hand travels down to my back, setting my skin on fire. “Do you think his long-term game is to ultimately pull a friends-turned-lovers thing with you?”

“I doubt it,” I say, looking off into the distance where Kevin blushes with some other guy. “You should probably take your hand off me now. People are starting to make their way over here.”

“So?”

“*Easton...*” I suck in a breath as he tugs at the strings on my bottom. “You can’t.”

He lets out a long sigh and steps back. He looks as if there’s something more he wants to say, but he walks away.

I finish making a s’more and look around for Jeremiah. Since he’s chatting with someone at the tent, I devour the treat and start making another one.

Looking over my shoulder, I spot Tully sitting in Easton’s lap and snapping pictures.

He’s not looking at her camera at all, though.

He’s still staring at me.

I try to read his eyes, wishing he could see the words in mine.

Stop letting her touch you...

As if he understands, he gently grabs Tully and lifts her off his lap, placing her on the ground beside him instead. She doesn’t seem the slightest bit offended; she keeps leaning close and snapping pictures.

“So, you *ate* one and burned one?” Jeremiah’s laughter makes me turn around. “That wasn’t our deal.”

“Sorry.” I look down at my charred stick. “I’ll make you another one.”

“No, that’s okay.” He picks up a stick. “Let me show you how this is done.”

I’m not sure how long we stand there talking about nothing, how I end up sitting next to him at the fire pit, but by the time I’ve had my third beer, I know that every second is pushing Easton closer to the edge.

He doesn’t laugh with everyone when there’s a joke or chime in when the frat guys and Jeremiah talk about their shared memories from last summer.

He sits silently, keeping his eyes on me.

“Psssst! Psssst!” Kevin slides between me and Jeremiah. “I need to borrow my friend from you, Jeremiah. I’m having a code red.”

“Okay.” He presses a kiss against my cheek, and Kevin’s eyes widen in surprise.

I don’t have to turn around to know that Easton is probably on the verge of fucking losing it.

Thankfully, Kevin pulls me away from the flames.

“Wait a minute.” I shake my head. “What does ‘code red’ mean again?”

“That you shouldn’t get too comfortable because your bestie may need to leave and he’s your ride home.”

“Honestly, the sooner we leave here the better.”

“May need to leave *with someone else*,” he says. “You didn’t let me finish.”

“Sorry,” I say. “You’ve drank more than I have today so you’re getting an Uber back and we’ll take one here to get your car tomorrow.”

“Ugh, fine.” He tosses me his car keys.

“Is it me, or does Easton Rush look ten times sexier than usual today?”

“It’s you.”

“Nah, I don’t think so.” He tilts his head to the side. “He normally has that charming Adonis thing going on, but he looks pissed as hell. Madness looks way better on him.”

I resist looking in that direction and change the subject. “Tell me everything you know about this college guy.”

“I thought you’d never ask!”

Grateful for his distraction, I listen intently and memorize as many details about the guy as possible. Just in case he turns out to be a psycho or a serial killer.

“Can you at least let me get a few things out of my car before we leave it?” he asks.

“Sure.”

“Can you also promise me that you’ll go out with Jeremiah let him fuck you?”

“What?” I slap the back of his head. “No, Kevin.”

He laughs. “At least let him get to second base. He’s hot as hell and single, you know?”

“Yeah, I know...” I change the subject as we walk to the parking lot.

A few raindrops hit my skin, and I look up at the sky.

“Looks like we’re leaving just in time.” Kevin tosses my bag to me, and I pull a dress over my swimsuit.

Before I can ask him to give me the college guy’s phone number, loud screams fill the air.

We both look toward the beach and within minutes, hordes of people run toward us like the beach just caught fire.

“Go! Go! Go!” They’re shouting. “Now! Leave!”

Kevin and I exchange glances, and I spot Jeremiah and Easton running in the crowd.

“What the hell is going on?” I ask.

“Maybe there was a shark attack,” Kevin says. “Kind of fucked up that no one stayed around to help, though.”

“Somebody called the cops for underage drinking so we gotta leave before they start detaining people,” Jeremiah grabs my hand. “I’ll take you home.”

“No, *I’ll* take her home,” Easton says. “Your car is full, remember?”

“Right...” Jeremiah sighs and takes my phone from my hands. He saves his number and hands it back to me. “I want to take you out, so I expect you to call me sometime this week.”

“She won’t,” Easton mutters under his breath, leading me to his car.

Bright blue and white lights are flashing in the distance, moving closer and closer to the beach.

“Wait,” I say. “You know what? I think I’ll just get an Uber back. I need to think.”

“About what?”

“It’s personal,” I say. “Just walk me to the taco stand and I’ll have someone pick me up from there.”

“I don’t think so,” he says. “What exactly do you need to think about?”

“A date.”

“You’re not going out with Jeremiah.” He shrugs. “There. I did the thinking for you.”

“I’ll never have one with you either...You can’t even save the smallest things for me.”

He looks over at the cop cars and sighs. “What do you mean?”

“I told you that I wanted us to try out Gayle’s for the first time together, but you already did that with Tully.”

“Oh?” He crosses his arms. “That’s what you think?”

“I saw you and her eating from the tins outside.” My voice wavers. “I saw you.”

“You saw us using the tins from one of her friends.” He hisses. “We stopped at a grocery store to get cheap ice cream and shit to fill them with, to make it *look* like it was Gayle’s because I told her that I’d already promised someone to try it out with them first.”

“Oh...” I swallow.

“This is the part when you say, ‘Easton, I want you to take me to Gayle’s before taking me home.’ You can also add an ‘I’m sorry for accusing you of some shit you’d never do to me.’”

“Yes,” I say. “That.”

He walks over to my side and opens the door. Then he presses a kiss against my shoulder and whispers, “Get in the goddamn car now so we won’t get arrested.”

I don’t argue with him at all.



The windshield wipers fight the rain as Easton speeds down the street.

His hand is resting on my left thigh, and I'm trying to think of something—anything, to talk about, but words are eluding me.

The weather serves as our soundtrack for most of the ride, and when we arrive at Gayle's, the drive-through line snakes around the block.

This place just opened this year, and it's been the talk of the town ever since. If you're lucky, the wait is supposedly only half an hour, and it seems we don't fall into that category tonight.

"You want me to go inside instead of waiting in this line?" he asks.

"We'll get soaked."

"That's why I just volunteered to go in by myself." He looks over at me, the dimples in his cheeks deepening. "You can sit in here."

"I don't think so." I unbuckle my seatbelt. "I'm going, too."

He lets out a low laugh and parks in the front row.

Reaching into the backseat, he grabs his varsity hoodie and hands it to me.

I pull it on and he rushes over to my side of the car. He pulls me against his side and the rain attacks us as we reach toward the entrance.

Inside, the decor is like a diner from the fifties.

He leads me to a booth in the back. Within seconds, a waitress rolls over on skates with menus and a tray.

"Since we're slammed at the drive-thru, here are a few samples you can try," she says. "I'll be back with you in a few minutes."

“Thank you,” we say in unison.

Easton wraps an arm around my shoulder and my heart races at the contact.

“We’re in public,” I say.

“I’m aware.” He uses his free arm to scoop vanilla onto a spoon. “Want to try this one?”

I blush as he places it against my lips.

We try the flavors one by one, and I have to hold back from saying, “Oh my fucking god” after every bite.

“What the hell are they putting in this?” Easton asks.

“I’m pretty sure it’s crack.”

I laugh and claim the peach flavor for myself. As I’m mid-bite, a large group of people rush in, cursing and yelling at the rain.

Taking off their hoodies, I realize they’re Easton’s teammates.

I move from under his arm and scoot away, but he grabs my thigh and pulls me back.

“Easton!” His second-closest friend Shaw walks over and slaps his shoulder. “I see you raced like a bat out of hell from the beach.”

He smiles and looks at me. “Tully, you look a little different today.”

“Because I’m *Scarlett*.”

“Oh.” He smiles wider. “Well, I’m sure Easton has told you all about me, right?”

“Not really.”

“Well, allow me to fill you in.” He plops down in the seat across from us while the other teammates take the tables near the windows.

“I’m the best guy you’ll ever go out with and I can give you multiple nights to remember.” Shaw continues. “What does that sound like?”

“I told you that she’s seeing someone.” Easton speaks for me, squeezing my thigh under the table.

“Yeah, well, he’s not here and that’s a shame.” Shaw feigns a frown. “If you were mine, I’d never let you out of my sight.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I say.

“You should.” He stands up and winks at me. “I’ll let you two get back to your conversation. Come stop by my table once you’re finished, though.”

“I will,” Easton says.

“Not *you*.” Shaw scoffs. “*Scarlett*.”

He walks away and I look at Easton.

“None of your teammates know?”

“No.”

Before I say anything else, my phone sounds with a call. My mother.

“I’ll be right back,” I say, standing. “Give me five minutes.”

When I make it into the restroom, I let my mother’s call go to voicemail and splash my face with cold water. Taking several deep breaths, I stare at my reflection.

Assuming that Shaw thought I was Tully because of my hair, I yank it out of the messy topknot and let it fall to my shoulder in waves. I pull a grey scarf from my bag and wrap it around my head.

Much better.

I smile and return my mother’s call.

“Hey Scarlett,” she answers. “Please tell me you’re someplace safe in the middle of this crazy storm.”

“I’m at Gayle’s,” I say. “I’ll be back soon.”

“No rush. Bring me one of their truffle waffle hearts if they have some left!” She sounds like a schoolgirl. “I can’t be the last person to try their stuff.”

“Will do, Mom.”

“Oh, and I was also calling because guess what?”

“You’ve changed your mind about making me go dress shopping in Nashville.”

“That’s not happening. Your sister’s ‘How I made homecoming lollipops’ post from Tuesday just reached four million views!”

“Yay.”

“It’s still climbing and getting like twenty thousand new ones every minute! So, I’m thinking...”

I set down my phone on the sink while she continues, uncapping my eyeliner and making the wing darker. Another un-Tully trait.

The door swings open and a swarm of cheerleaders walk in and take over the other other spaces at the sink. As if I’m not standing here.

“You look nice today, Scarlett,” one of them says.

“Yeah, super cute.” Another minion chimes in. “Anyway, Sandra, do you know if Ryan is coming tonight?”

I dissolve into the background and pick up my phone again.

“I think this is all a great sign,” my mother is saying while I step out of the restroom.

Out the corner of my eye, I spot Tully walking inside with her friends.

“We should definitely ask Telluride for an increase in sponsorship money next time, right?” my mom asks.

“Um...” My chest aches as I watch Tully give Easton a hug.

She raises an arm and threads her fingers through his hair, but he playfully pushes them away, whispering something into her ear.

Whatever it is, it’s enough to make her smile and make her and another group of cheerleaders head to their own table.

He turns around, looking at me, and I look away.

“Are you there, Scarlett?” My mom asks. “Scarlett?”

“I’m here,” I say, shedding Easton’s jacket off my skin. “Yeah, you should ask for that. I’ll look over the request form before you send it.”

“Thank you. Curfew is still ten o’clock.”

“Noted.” I hang up with her and call Easton.

“Why are you calling me?” He smiles at me.

“I’m catching an Uber to go home.”

“*Excuse me?*”

“Your friends are here and I’m sure you’ll want to spend the rest of the night with them and throw them off about us.”

He doesn’t respond. Instead, he motions for me to come back to him.

I remain still.

“Scarlett,” he says, “you’re not taking an Uber home.”

“Goodnight, Easton.” I end the call, and with his eyes trailing my every step, I walk over to Tully.

“Hey.” She tilts her head to the side. “What are you doing here? I thought you hated visiting new cafes.”

“I wanted to see what the hype was about.”

“It’s well worth it, isn’t it?” She smiles. “Did my TikTok video convince you?”

“You know she doesn’t watch us on there.” Easton is suddenly behind me. “I’m taking her home since you have the car.”

“Cool.” Tully picks up a menu. “Call you tonight.”

He nods and gestures for me to follow him out of the cafe.

I don’t want to cause a scene, so I oblige.

He stares at his jacket in my hands and silently commands me to put it back on.

I give in to that, too.

“We make a run for it on three,” he says. “One...Two...”

We both rush toward the car and instead of heading to his side, he goes to mine and opens the door.

He immediately turns on the heated seats and I stare straight ahead as he drives.

“I’m sorry our date got cut short,” he says. “If I’d known they were coming, I would’ve taken you elsewhere.”

I say nothing.

“You still have a couple hours before curfew. You want to go someplace else?”

I look out the window.

“Scarlett, say something.”

No...

He suddenly pulls onto a shoulder and turns on the hazard lights. Then he unbuckles his seatbelt.

“I’m sick of this shit,” he says. “What the fuck is the problem now, Scarlett?”

“The same one that’ll never go away.”

“And how is that my fault?”

“It’s no one’s fault, it’s fucking reality and I wish it wasn’t.”

“Again—” He glares at me. “How is that *my* fault?”

“You really have no idea how it feels to want something so badly but know you can’t have it?”

“You think I don’t want you as badly as you want me?” He hisses. “I’ve told you time and time again how much I do, and you brush it away because you think your feelings are more valid than mine.”

“I think you believe that you can have your cake and eat it too.”

“How the fuck does that make any sense?”

“You get to have a girlfriend during the day and her identical sister for a mistress at night.” I shrug. “You know, it’s a win-win for you if anything ever happens to me. You’ll just go for Tully and no one will be none the wiser.”

He glares at me, but I don’t care.

“You should go ahead and fuck her for some insurance, because you’ll never fuck me.”

“I’m never fucking her.” he says, leaning over the seat. “And I need you to stop fucking with me.”

“You can’t control how I feel, Easton.”

“I’d rather make you feel something else.” He kisses me before I can respond, sliding a hand through my hair.

Unbuckling my seatbelt, he whispers, “Stop fighting me,” against my lips.

I stare into his eyes as his hand moves up my thigh, pushing my dress with it. Still kissing me, his fingers find the strings on my bikini and slowly untie them.

“Spread your legs for me,” he whispers.

I hesitate and he slides a hand between my legs, using his fingers to caress my soaking wet clit. I moan as it swells under his touch.

“You’re so fucking wet for me...” He tears his mouth away from mine, sweeping soft kisses up and down my neck.

Pushing down my bikini top with his other hand, he swirls his tongue against my breasts and my breathing slows.

I cry out in pleasure as he sucks my nipple into his mouth, establishing a slow, additive rhythm between sucking and gently biting.

Just as I’m getting used to the perfect ways of his mouth, he slides two fingers inside me.

“Ahhh, Easton...” I arch my back against the seat as his fingers slide deeper, filling me and making me feel so damn good.

I shut my eyes as he continues to prove that he knows exactly what he’s doing, exactly how to make my body bend to his will and push me to places I never knew existed.

“Easton...”

“Yes, Scarlett?” He darts his tongue against my nipple again.

“Please.”

“Please *what?*” He whispers. “You want me to stop?”

“Never.”

“Then I think we should take this to your room...”

ME



Easton has one hand on the steering wheel, and the other caressing my thigh when we pull into my neighborhood.

The rain is still falling over the town in sheets, while lightning streaks across the sky.

“Are we going through the front or through your window?” he asks.

“Let me see.” I pull out my phone and log into the security system. My parents’ cars are gone, and I know Tully won’t be back for a while.

Disabling the cameras, I tap the screen a few times.

“We can go through the front,” I say, and he pulls his car under a sycamore tree at the corner.

He grabs an umbrella and walks over to my side. Then, as if that thing is a match for this storm, he pulls me under it and we rush toward my house together.

Our wet clothes drip onto the veranda’s wood as I unlock the door.

Inside, he follows me up the stairs and into my room.

Shutting the door, he pulls me into his arms and his mouth meets mine again. Heated and wet.

My dress falls to the floor in a heap. His shirt falls over my chair.

He pushes me against the wall, pressing his mouth against my neck before returning to my lips.

“Do you have condoms?” I ask.

His lips curve into a smile. “For what?”

“For...” I blush. “You know.”

He lets out a low laugh, kissing me again. “I don’t need those for what I’m about to do to you.”

“Huh?” My breath catches in my throat as he pulls me down to the floor.

I expect his mouth to return to mine, but he starts trailing kisses down my body from my breast to my stomach.

He doesn't stop there...

He kisses the fabric of my bikini bottom and he stares into my eyes as he unties the strings and tosses the fabric across the room..

I blush as he stares at my naked body like he wants to devour me from head to toe. Before I have a chance to react, he spreads my legs and covers my pussy with his mouth.

“Oh my god...” I grab fistfuls of his hair as his tongue darts against my clit, as his lips pleasure my slit.

Experiencing the two contrasting pleasures is too much to handle.

My back arches off the floor, and he gently pushes me back down.

“Easton, wait...”

He moans a “No,” against me, and the vibration of his deep voice serves me another type of unfamiliar pleasure.

It's all too much, too fast, so I grip his hair harder and try to push him away.

He doesn't let me. He places his hands atop my thighs, pinning me down harder as his devouring becomes even more relentless.

“*Fuck...*” My clit throbs in absolute pleasure and my legs begin to shake uncontrollably. “Easton...”

My body betrays me by giving up its control, and I feel the most intense wave of pleasure imploding inside me.

Easton holds me down as I come, and it feels like I'm seconds away from blacking out.

Still in a cloud of bliss and utter ecstasy, I look at Easton as he watches me catch my breath and calm down.

“You okay?” He smiles.

“Good.” He flips me over and buries his head against my pussy again, devouring me once more.

I moan into the carpet, and he squeezes my ass with a “Shhh,” when I get too loud.

At some point, I hear footsteps clacking down the hall, and I bite my bottom lips so hard that I'm certain I've cut it open.

As if he can tell that I'm about to explode again, that I'm getting closer and closer to an even higher state of pleasure, he slows down his tongue's

kisses, and he whispers, "I'll let you recover this time," as my body gives into him all over again.

He rubs a hand against my back and plants a kiss on the back of my leg. "You should've let me taste you a long time ago, Scarlett...I think I'm addicted now."

Tap, tap, clank!

"Do you hear that?" he asks.

"Huh? What?" I'm still on a high. "I didn't hear anything."

"Hmmm."

Clunk, clunk, clunk!

"You had to hear it that time." He flips me over and points to the curtains.

"It's probably someone's loud car."

"You should probably check."

"Can't you do it?"

He gives me a blank stare, then he helps me to my feet.

"It's probably just my neighbors." I walk over to the window. "Ever since they—Shit! Get in the closet. Now."

He rushes into my closet and I push the laundry hamper in front of its door. I pull a robe off the back of my mirror and tie it shut.

My window squeaks open seconds later, and Kevin steps over the sill before plopping onto the floor.

"Damn I'm out of shape." He breathes. "I feel like I'm about to die."

"Don't," I say. "Your dad stopped paying your family's health insurance."

He laughs and sits up. "Why is it so dark in here?"

"It's dark?"

"Yeah, it's dark as fuck." He stands and hits a light. "And since when are you a slob?"

"Huh?" I'm still recovering from Easton's mouth. "What are you talking about?"

"You're like the neatest person I've ever met." He picks up my dress, bra, and Easton's shirt, tossing them into my clothes hamper.

Then he picks up my purse and hangs it over the door handle.

"I'll give you a pass since your mom has been making you serve as Tully's body double lately, though." He eyes the newest renaissance dress that's hanging on a wardrobe rack. "Do they really think this fugly shit is making a comeback?"

“It’s not *all* ugly...”

“It is.” He laughs. “Tell them to hire my cousin so he can show them the difference between the victorian and the renaissance era.”

“I’ll make that a point of contention in my contract,” I say. “What are you doing here?”

“Using you as an alibi,” he says. “I lost track of time with the college guy, so I told my parents me and you were working on a project together.”

“They bought that?”

“Time will tell.” He laughs. “Do you have any clothes I can fit? My lie won’t work if I’m soaking wet.”

“Um...” I open the drawer I keep for Easton and offer him a shirt and sweatpants.

“Thanks.” He undressed in front of me. “So, I saw that you and Jeremiah disappeared for a while there on the beach and then he offered to take you home. What happened?”

“Um...”

“Don’t hold back. Serve me enough tea to keep me full in case I get grounded.”

“It was nice. We went out to Gayle’s, but half of our senior class got the same idea so we had to leave.”

“Was there a kiss?”

“No.”

“What about finger fucking? Did he flick your bean with his mouth?”

“Really, Kevin?”

“What? I know there wasn’t any sex, so I have to ask about *something*.”

“No, you don’t.”

“There *was* a kiss, wasn’t there?” He smiles. “I can see it in your eyes. How far did he get after that?”

“Oh my God...”

“Is that what you said when he made you come?”

“There was a kiss and he finger fucked me in his car.” I give him something. “Happy?”

“I’m thrilled. Now you can ask him to come over and do it again next week, so you won’t be so uptight every day.”

“You’re a terrible best friend, Kevin.”

“Thank you.” He laughs. “Want some of *my* tea?”

“Nope.”

"I'll serve it to you anyway."

"Rumor has it that Easton Rush is cheating on Tully."

"What? Where did you hear that from?"

"Around. Can you really blame him, though? He has grown women chasing after him these days."

"Did someone see him with another girl or something?"

"Worse." He sounds ecstatic. "Apparently one of her cheer clones spotted him walking out of that new designer gifts place in town with a shit ton of roses and some type of charm thing. She thought they were for Tully, but she never got them, and it's been over a week."

"Oh..."

"Yeah. Oh." He laughs. "As soon as I figure out who this other woman is, I'll let you know."

"Scarlett!" My mom shouts up the steps. "Scarlett?"

"Yeah, mom?"

"Is Kevin up there with you?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Okay, well, tell him goodbye. His parents are outside to pick him up."

"Damn, glad I came over," Kevin hugs me before leaving the room.

I wait until I hear his footsteps make it downstairs before letting Easton out of the closet.

"I wasn't planning tell him about the finger fucking." I avoid his gaze. "It just came out because that's how we talk to each other, you know?"

"Okay." He lips curve into a smirk and he walks over to the bed.

"You don't have anything to say?"

"Not really." He shakes his head.

"What about the roses? If he'd looked at my desk, he would've assumed that—"

"Shh," He presses a finger against my lips. "Don't worry about it. Let's just pick up where we left off."

"Sleep?"

"No." He leans back on the mattress. "Come sit on my face."

ME



*Dear PepsiCo & Frito Lay,
I'm not sure which one of you is actually in charge of chip flavors, but if
you're insistent on keeping "Nacho Cheese" flavored Doritos on store
shelves, can you please offer a complimentary pack of mint gum with every
sale?*

*Wish I Would've Told You (Years Ago),
—Scarlett*

Our Friday nights in the fall always unfold in the same predictable pattern. Cafes shut down from six o'clock until nine, as there's no point in staying open while the entire town is at our high school's football game. The police direct traffic and vow to lock up anyone who gets too rowdy.

The stadium seats are packed shoulder to shoulder with neighbors, classmates, recruiters, and anyone who has ever gotten a taste of what Grey Gulf Football has served over the past several seasons.

The team hasn't lost a game in years, but they play like nothing is guaranteed. On the rare occasion that they're behind in the first half, the crowd rallies hard in hopes to never have to feel a loss.

Easton's father has a reserved set of seats in the stands, but he always places a "You Never Really Know Someone" sweatshirt on his wife's place.

No one ever dares to ask him why.

"The fight song!" Our drum major screams at the top of his lungs, breaking me out of my thoughts. "The fight song!"

He waves his baton, counting us off, and I press my lips against the

clarinet, blowing the notes with the band.

The cheerleaders move in synchrony with our songs and then the football team races onto the field.

The screams are deafening as Easton waves to the crowd. His eyes meet mine, and he blows me a kiss.

Then again, maybe it's for Tully since she's right below me and blowing a kiss at him, too.

Strapping on his helmet alongside his teammates, he calls for a huddle and leads them into their signature chant.

“The battlecry!” The drum major screams. “The battle cry!”

I wet my lips and prepare to play my part, hoping that this night ends in the same predictable fashion that the other ones have.



AT HALFTIME, our principal stands at the center of the field and smooths her red hair.

“Good evening wolves!” She shouts into the mic. “As you know, tonight is the night when we formally announce everyone who has met the minimum requirements to run for our prestigious homecoming court!”

The crowd roars.

“Since when is running for homecoming this big of a deal?” Kevin scoffs. “It’s a glorified beauty pageant.”

“I think you’re just jealous because you can’t run.”

He smiles. “You know me so well.”

“First up—” She opens an envelope and rolls her eyes. “Eff Deez Hos?”

The section above us howls in laughter.

“Very funny guys.” She crumples the paper and stuffs it into her pocket. She opens another and doesn’t bother reading it.

She opens a few more envelopes before finally arriving on a real name.

“Tully Magnolia Ann Crane!”

The cheers are the loudest of the night, but hearing her name over the speakers makes me want to ask my mom what the hell she was thinking.

Then again, Scarlett Cressida May Crane is far worse.

As Tully waves and takes her place on the field, Jeremiah slides into the seat on my left.

“You got a minute, Scarlett?”

“I...” I’m completely caught off guard.

“I haven’t heard from you this week.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“I figured,” he says. “So have I, so I think we should collaborate on a date when we won’t be busy.” He leans closer. “Your sister is throwing a house party during our team’s bye-weekend, so will that work?”

He doesn’t give me a chance to answer.

“I’ll see you then.” he says, pressing a kiss against my cheek. “If something changes, you have my number.”

“Okay.” I smile and watch him return to his section.

When I face the field again, Easton is staring at me.



THE SCOREBOARD BLARES a bright red 32-12.

The Grey Gulf Wolves remain undefeated to no one’s surprise.

Playing the final notes to the fight song, I follow the flute section out of the stadium and into the parking lot.

EASTON

Meet me under the bleachers. Visitors side.

I’m already on the band bus.

EASTON

Then get off...Tell them you have a ride home.

Can you say “please”?

EASTON

Now.

I lie to my director about my parents wanting to drive me home and make my way off the bus. Not wanting to arouse suspicion, I duck under the concession stand's awning and wait for several minutes.

The moment the final yellow bus pulls out of the lot, I walk to the visitors' side of the stadium.

Easton is nowhere to be found.

Before I can call him, he wraps his arms around me from behind and kisses my neck.

"Ahhh..." I moan as he gently bites my skin and slides a hand into my pants.

"I told you that this belongs to me," he whispers, "Don't give any other guy the hope of ever getting it."

"I won't." I suck in a breath as he rubs my clit.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes...."

"Say it then," he warns. "Tell me your pussy is mine."

"It's..." I pause as he unzips the back of my uniform, as he bites my neck a bit harder.

"Scarlett, tell me."

"My pussy is yours..."



THE RIDE HOME IS SILENT, save for the occasional peck on my cheek from Easton and the fleeting sound of his air conditioning sputtering every time we hit a stoplight.

When he pulls behind the garden hedge that blocks our house from the neighbors, he puts the car in park and looks at me.

"Thank you," I say, unbuckling my seatbelt. "I'll see you later, Easton Rush."

He cups my chin and kisses my forehead. "I'll see you later tonight."

"Okay."

I slip through the garden and stop when I see shadows dancing through the windows.

My mom and Tully are doing the polka dance atop the dining room table. Like a truly “responsible” parent, my mom chugs a beer and hands the can to Tully.

My mind races with thoughts of what this means, and I settle on the best possible option: The hospital has finally written to us and admitted that they made a mistake.

Me and Tully are NOT related!

“Come up here and join us, Scarlett!” My mom squeals when I make it through the door.

“No, that’s okay.” I hang my bag. “Someone needs to stay down here just in case one of you falls.”

“We’re not going to fall, girl!” She picks up a beer and tosses it to me. “We’re going higher!”

“And higher!” Tully is definitely drunk. “Drink up and celebrate!”

I crack the can and take a small sip. “What’s the occasion?”

“You are looking at the new ‘Freshman Girl’ face for Whimstery Cafe!” Tully squeals. “I mean, technically I won’t be announced until I’m actually a college freshman, but I’ve already been paid an advance!”

I take a longer sip.

“Everyone will need to be all-in for Tully for every upcoming Thursday in two weeks,” my mom says. “Outside of what you’ve already scheduled, don’t make plans for anything else, okay?”

“Why?”

“Because we told a few little white lies and we’ll need your help.”

I down the rest of the beer and consider opening another.

My mom jumps down onto the floor, and I grab onto her shoulders to steady her.

“What are the lies?” I ask.

“We told them that she has a personal hair stylist on deck.”

“Well, I’m sure you can hire one,” I say. “That actually seems like a pretty decent expense to have now since you’re starting to get more sponsors.”

“We’re going to look into that for sure.” She smiles. “But, we also told them that she has more availability than she really has. We didn’t take into account the other sponsors’ needs and after the London Fog thing, I realized that we can save time if we just use you as a stand-in.”

“What?”

“We scheduled her Q&As for Thursdays, as well as live meetings, and fittings. She can be multiple places at once, thanks to you.”

“What if I don’t want to do that?” I say. “You promised no more required things since we moved here, Mom.”

“Well, that was before the Whimstery deal,” she says. “And these are the things that pay the mortgage and bills on this lovely home we have.”

I swallow down the words on the tip of my tongue.

With all the money she made from exploiting us online in the past, this home should’ve been bought in cash. The bills shouldn’t cause too much stress at all at this point.

“We also are thinking bigger!” Tully is singing now. “Private flights instead of first class, bank accounts for our future kids, my grand wedding to Easton someday, and I’m sure you’ll want to open some grand goth store, right?”

I say nothing.

“I started drafting a tentative schedule so you can actually see what we’ll need,” my mom says. “This is going to be like the old days on my Youtube channel all over again!”

As if I don’t have any say in the matter, no life of my own, my mother jumps down and hands me a black and pink folder.

She tries to grab my hands and make me dance along with her and Tully, but the only thing moving are the tears in my eyes.

When Easton climbs through my window later that night, he asks me why I’m crying, but I don’t tell him.

I don’t want Tully to take over this part of my night, too.

EASTON



Days later

The University of Alabama's campus stretches across hundreds of lush green acres. The football stadium is the centerpiece. I've been in contact with the head coach for years and today is just a meet and greet with the team counselors. A way for them to suck up to me again and get a subtle commitment that I haven't changed my mind about attending here.

As I walk toward the building, Tully jumps from behind a hedge with a bright red balloon bouquet.

"*Roll Tide!*" She smiles. "Wow. You look good as hell in a suit."

"Hey...What are you doing here?"

"As if I would ever let you do this alone."

I step back. "What do you mean? This is just a meeting, Tully."

"Oh, I know, but you've mentioned how excited you are about it, and how they have to pull out all the stops to impress you, so..." She loops her arm in mine and kisses my chest. "I figured that I should tag along and give you an unbiased point of view."

"You hate football meetings, Tully."

The smile on her lips gives that away.

"Okay, fine." She laughs. "This is like, the last free Thursday I'll have for a while so I decided that I'd rather come see you do this instead of going to Scarlett's recital."

"Scarlett has a recital today?"

"Yeah she's playing the Nickel Panini Capeesh or something."

"The Twenty-four Caprices by Niccolò Paganini?"

“Yeah, that.” She shrugs. “It sounds boring as hell no matter how you pronounce it.”

“Is your mother going to watch her?”

“Probably not.” She shakes her head. “This new Whimstery thing is going to take over our lives for a while, so she’s out auditioning stylists for me.”

I nod, still thinking about the fact that Scarlett has a recital today.

Why the hell didn't she tell me?

“You’re here a full hour early?” A guy in a crimson polo shirt and khakis walks up to us. “I’ve heard that Easton Rush is punctual, but damn, son.”

I force a smile as the guy extends his hand. “I can’t help it, sir.”

“Hey, me and Coach Saban will never ever complain about you being early,” he says. “And who is this lovely lady?”

“His girlfriend.” Tully smiles. “Tully Crane.”

“Nice to meet you, Miss Crane.” He shakes her hand. “I’ll be sure to show you where our guys’ girlfriends sit during the games and see if that impresses you. Would you two like something to drink before we begin?”

“Lemonade.” Tully speaks before I can tell him I’m good.

“Right this way.” He gestures for us to follow him.

“Mr. Vaughn, you should also know that I’m the one who you really have to impress today,” Tully says. “I’m the deciding factor in his decision.”

“I see...” He looks somewhat intimidated. “What schools are on your list, Miss Crane?”

“Ole Miss, Tennessee, and Florida.” She spouts off the three places that are dead last on my list. Three places that Scarlett and I have talked at length about and listed all the many reasons why they’ll never work for us.

“Us”...Why the hell didn't she tell me about this damn recital?

“Well, I’m confident that when we’re done today, Alabama will blow all three of those schools out of the water, Miss Crane.” He holds a door open and I check the time.

It’s only nine the morning but it already feels like this day has gone on for far too long.



Three hours later

TULLY IS CARRYING A CUSTOM red Birkin bag that bears “Roll Tide” on the handles. Apparently, the staff keeps five of these thirty thousand dollar bags on hand for the top recruits every year, and of course, no one will ever mention anything about it.

We’ve been treated to brunch in the head coach’s office, shown around the stadium, and escorted through every inch of the state of the art practice facility.

“We pride ourselves on this state of the art spa,” the offensive coach says. “It’s ranked in the top three in the nation.”

“Who are the other two?” Tully asks.

“Wrong question.” He looks at her. “We’re ranked number one. We just try to sound humble every now and then.”

I smile. I already know that, just like I’ve already memorized the layout of this campus and all it has to offer thanks to me and Scarlett scoping it out this past summer.

“Do you have any questions for me, Mr. Rush?”

“Not right now,” I say “I’ll email you if I think of any, though.”

“Please do. What about you, Miss Crane?”

“Does the cheerleading squad travel with the football team?”

“Not on the college level, no,” he says, pausing. “But if you decide to continue your cheering career here and bring Mr. Easton with you, I’m sure we can discuss some personal travel arrangements on game day if you like.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

We need to end this arrangement a lot sooner.... “Thank you for the tour, sir,” I say. “I was impressed.”

“I hope so!”

I wrap my arm around Tully’s and escort her to the parking lot before she can say anything else.

ME



Dear Mr. Liasson,

I never told anyone about how you used to gently squeeze my ass or brush up against my breasts during those “mandatory” private practices in middle school. I didn’t know that wasn’t normal at the time, and if I could go back in time and report you, I would. Alas, I’m sorry that Ashley Ford’s father took the law into his own hands.

Rest in Peace.

I Wish I Would’ve Told You,

—Scarlett

My palms sweat as I hold the bow against my violin onstage.

The spotlight is shining brighter than usual, and the audience in the theater is staring at me in anticipation. They want to hear if all the hype about “Scarlett the Wonder” is true.

To them, I’m the girl from Ohio who once lived in a trailer park, but was spotted playing an abandoned violin outside. The girl who could play a piece from ear without any formal training and had teachers lining up just to help her succeed.

If they read any of the headlines about “YouTube’s Caroline and The Twins Move to More Private Life,” they assume that I’m still being taught by a maestro.

But I had to give that up long ago.

“We all have to make sacrifices for our new lives...”

I take a deep breath and shut my eyes, gently pressing the bow against the strings. I don’t have to look at the sheet music ahead of me to play, so I shut

my eyes and let my emotions take full control.

The notes fly from my fingertips easily, filling the auditorium with a story of love and hate. A piece about a girl who was stupid enough to fall for a guy she shouldn't want, a guy she desperately *needs*.

I transition into the piece they were expecting, *The Twenty four Caprices by Niccolò Paganini*, and then I return to the piece I've composed about me and Easton.

Toxic and tragic, up and down, around and around, never-ending...

I hold the last note and open my eyes to a completely quiet audience.

I'm convinced that I might've played too long, but then they stand on their feet and applaud.

For what feels like forever.

I stand from my chair and hold back tears, taking a short bow.

The conductor steps onto the stage and hands me a massive bouquet of red roses.

"I have a bouquet for your parents as well," he says. "Tell them to meet me backstage."

"Okay." I smile. I don't tell him that I told them the wrong time on purpose, that I saved myself the heartache and allowed them to serve me excuses for why they didn't feel like listening to "that string stuff."

"I know you're going to the University of Alabama next fall," he says, "but I've written a few letters on your behalf for some other programs I'd love for you to consider. With talent like that, I can only hope that you don't waste it all on marching with a clarinet."

He walks away from me and steps to the mic to address the audience.

"Let's have one more round of applause for Miss Scarlett Crane, please."

I wave at everyone and bow last time before leaving the stage. After packing my violin and saying goodbye to my fellow orchestra members, I take the alley exit.

Easton is leaning the building outside, holding a bouquet of pink roses and a gleaming silver gift bag.

My heart skips a beat, but I don't say a word.

I just stare at him.

"Why didn't you tell me about this recital?" he asks.

"Because I didn't want you to come."

"What did you say?"

"I'll repeat it," I say. "I didn't want you to come."

“Why not?”

“Because this is something that’s mine,” I say. “I don’t have to barter with you on a time and place in the shadows, and I don’t have to share it with Tully.”

“Scarlett...”

“I guess you’re the last to know, though,” I say, my voice cracking. “This is the last Thursday I’ll have to enjoy for a very long time thanks to your girlfriend’s newest sponsorship.”

“Can I take you home so we can talk about that?”

“No. I’m going out to celebrate with my fellow violinists.” I shrug. “Please don’t ruin this memory for me.”

“Wait, Scarlett.” He grabs my hand. “Please let me—”

“Leave me alone, Easton.” I jerk away from him. “Just leave me the hell alone.”

I walk away, leaving him standing in the alley.

EASTON



Call me back when you see this.

Why is your window locked?

You're not at Kevin's, so where are you?

Scarlett...??? Why are you avoiding me?

ME



Dear Soledad Jones,

The real reason I stopped letting you borrow my paperback novels is because you dog-eared the pages and wrote notes along the margins in pen. I cried each time you returned one to me in this condition, and I hope for your next book buddy's sake, that you've learned to do better. It's also not too late to atone for your crimes...

*Wish I Would've Told You,
Scarlett*

Tully's house parties are legendary.
Even I can't deny it.

She always insists on a grandiose theme, and her friends work like crazy to bring it to life.

Last year's Hawaiian luau featured handmade leis with silk flowers, a tiki bar, and giant sparkling orbs that floated in our pool. If the floating clouds that hang from every inch of our ceiling tonight are any indication, this year's "Sinners & Saints" party will be even more memorable.

"Do you think someone will spank me tonight?" Kevin asks, pulling on his devil's tail.

"Doubt it, but I hope someone grabs one of your horns and hurts you with it."

"I'd love that." He laughs and hands me a string of lights. "You still haven't told me how things are going with Jeremiah. What did y'all talk about on the phone this week?"

"We haven't had the time," I say. "Something always comes up so I have

to cancel it.”

“Something comes up like a hot college guy asking you out?”

“No, Kevin.”

“That’s the only acceptable excuse for not jumping into Jeremiah’s arms,” he says. “And that better be why you’ve been slightly mopey these past few days.”

“Yeah, kinda...” I swallow a lump of guilt. I’ve wanted to tell Kevin about Easton for a long time, but something always holds me back.

“There you are, Scarlett.” Jessica Reid, Tully’s best friend, steps into the doorway dressed in a sparkling white angel costume. “How are you doing tonight?”

“She’s fine.” Kevin speaks for me. “She doesn’t speak the demonic language, so I’ll translate whatever the hell you came here for.”

She rolls her eyes. “I really like your black devil costume,” she says to me. “The thigh-high boots are amazing, too.”

Her compliments are never free so I don’t pay her a thanks.

Instead, I cross my arms.

“When I bought this angel one, I thought I was doing the right thing since we have *a ton* of pictures planned by the clouds near your pool. I mean, a devil in heaven. That was the contrast I thought we were going for.”

“Okay, Satan.” Kevin looks as confused as I am. “Where are you going with this speech?”

“This party will affect Tully’s high school legacy for years to come.”

“Um, no...” I shake my head. “It’s really not that serious.”

“I misread the group email, and I’m the only cheerleader dressed as an angel, so since you and I are the same size, I was hoping we could switch.” She rambles. “Besides, you wearing black is so fucking cliché at this point and it wouldn’t kill you to wear something different for a change.”

“You can tell her to get out now, Kevin.” I look at him. “We’re done talking.”

“You know, she may be a bitch, but she has a good point.” He extends his hand to her. “We accept your offer.”



TWO HOURS LATER, our house is filled with seniors and college freshmen. I push my way through the angels kissing near the stairwell and the grinding demons in the kitchen to make a cup of Jungle Juice.

Kevin has long abandoned me in favor of some guy on the swim team, so I'm pretty much walking around and making sure no one breaks anything whenever I'm not restocking toilet paper in the bathrooms.

I'm also trying not to get my angel wings stuck between anything that moves.

"Wow," a deep voice says from behind. "You get sexier and sexier every time I see you."

I turn around and see Jeremiah dressed as "a saint." Well, those are the two words he's etched across his perfectly muscled chest with a black marker, and he's wearing white pants.

"Want to dance with me?" he asks.

"Only if you can explain how the hell what you're wearing counts as a costume."

He laughs. "I'll take that as a yes."

He grabs my hand and I let him lead me into the living room. Slipping his arms around my waist, he holds me close as the DJ plays the last bridge of a sexy R&B song. When it ends, he spins me around so my ass is pressed against him and he whispers into my ear, "Are you ever planning to call me sometime, Scarlett?"

"Maybe."

"There's a lot we have to talk about."

"Like what?"

"Like how I think you should let me show you how good I could be for you."

"You're going to college and then to the league after that," I say. "I'm sure you have plenty of girls at your disposal."

"That's true." He pushes one of my wings before blowing against my neck. "But I want *you*."

I suddenly spot Easton dancing with Tully across the room and lose my train of thought. His eyes are on me, and I can tell he's been watching us this entire time.

Pretending that he's the one dancing behind me instead of Jeremiah, I reach a hand up and thread my fingers through his hair.

Jeremiah lets out a low groan of approval and squeezes my waist a bit

tighter.

“I’m assuming you’re not dating anyone else,” he whispers. “You wouldn’t touch me like that otherwise.”

“It’s complicated.”

“Can’t be.” He kisses the shell of my ear.

Easton clenches his jaw as Jeremiah rubs his hand against my side.

The DJ changes the song to a slightly faster track and I move my ass against Jeremiah’s hardened cock with the beat.

Easton whispers something in Tully’s ear, and I glare at him.

He glares right back.

I spin around and focus my attention on Jeremiah.

“Something wrong?” he asks.

“No, just got tired of facing that way.”

“Yeah, this is a much better view.” He grips my hips, and I wrap my arms around his neck.

We dance together for three more songs and from the way he’s looking at me, I can tell that he’s wishing we were alone.

I’m wishing that I’d stayed in my room instead of coming to this party.

As the DJ switches to random lo-fi, someone taps my shoulder from behind.

“We need to talk,” Easton says. “Now.”

“She’s busy at this time, Easton.” Jeremiah tightens his hold on me. “Whatever it is can wait.”

“It can’t actually.” Easton grabs me from behind. “Not for another second.”

“Dude.” Jeremiah pushes Easton in the chest. “Are you drunk or something?”

“I’m one hundred percent sober.” Easton tugs me away from Jeremiah and through the crowd, pulling me through the hallway and outside onto the porch.

“Hey Easton! Hey Tully!” New arrivals call out as he holds the door open for them.

He groans, looking over at the chairs on our veranda before damn near dragging me to the side garden.

Letting my hand go, he pushes me against the brick wall.

My wings take most of the impact.

“What the hell were you doing with Jeremiah in there?” He growls.

“*Dancing.*” I snap. “The same thing you were doing with my sister.”

“I wasn’t touching her or pretending like I wanted to fuck her.”

“Who said I was *pretending*?”

“My heart isn’t a goddamn yo-yo, Scarlett.”

“Then why are you allowed to toy with mine?”

“You started this shit.”

“Then allow me to end it.” I hiss. “I’m done with you. Fuck you and fuck this toxic ass relationship. I can’t take it anymore.”

I start to walk away from him, but he grabs me and pins my wings to the bricks again.

“Don’t make me scream, Easton,” I say. “Let’s just end this.”

“Is that what you really want?”

“That’s what I said.”

“That’s not the same thing…” He grabs my hands and lifts them over my head, pressing them against the house. “Tell me. Is that what you really want?”

“No.”

His lips meet mine in a fury, and he kisses my mouth like he owns it.

Letting go of my hands, he slides a hand under my dress and pushes my panties to the side. He slides two fingers inside me and I moan and grind my hips against his hand.

Our eyes are locked on each other as another emotional levee breaks, and he kisses me even harder, as if this is our last chance, as if he needs to give me a reason to never deny him again.

I never want to kiss anyone else, though. I only want anyone to experience this man’s lips for the rest of my life.

“Fuck. We can’t be out here.” He stops kissing me and pulls me away from the house. From the look in his eyes and the speed in which he’s moving, I don’t bother asking where we’re going.

He takes me through the side entrance and escorts me into the garage.

My head hits a hanging light as he locks the door, and suddenly my ass is pressed against the front of my dad’s Buick.

“For the record, I tell you everything, Scarlett,” he says, gripping my waist, “Fucking everything. No matter how ugly it is or how hurtful. I always tell you the truth and I need you to promise to do the same with me.”

“How many different ways can I possibly say that this relationship is too complicated?” Tears prick my eyes without my permission. “Do you want me

to say it in different languages?"

"No..."

"I *hate* seeing you with her, Easton," I say. "Is that better?"

He brushes away a stream of my tears.

"I hate hearing everyone talk about how cute of a couple you are, and I hate knowing that in the end, I'm the only one who will look like the bad person."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone will think I stole you. I'm sure you'll look awful too, but they'll attack me way more."

"You shouldn't care what anyone will think," he says, "We both know the truth."

"What exactly is the truth, Easton?"

"I'm in love with you, and I don't care who the fuck finds out. Their reactions won't make me feel any less for you. Nothing will keep us apart, not even *you*."

I stare at him, completely speechless.

Done talking, he moves between my legs and pulls the top of my costume down—exposing my breasts and sucking my right nipple into his mouth.

I moan and grab onto his hair.

"I want you," he whispers. "*Now*."

"I want you too..."

He pulls a condom from his pocket and unzips his pants.

I take the packet from his fingers as he pulls out his cock, and I gasp at the sight of it.

I've felt him pressed up against me in my bed before, blushed when he slid his hand over mine and made me touch it, but I've never really stared at it. Never really realized how much I wanted to feel it inside me until now.

Smiling, he retakes the condom and pulls it over himself in one smooth motion.

"Take off your panties for me," he says, eyeing my thighs.

I push up my skirt and push them to the side.

"No, *off*." He slides a finger under the lace and yanks them forward, ruining them with ease.

We both watch the lace fall to the floor.

"Here." He grabs me by the waist and lifts me up, setting my bare ass on the hood of the car.

“You're so fucking perfect...” He stands between my legs, positioning his cock right against my soaking wet pussy. “You're all I want.” He slowly slides into me, and I cry out from the pain, but I don't care how badly it hurts.

I want him more than ever.

More than my next breath.

I press my hands against the car's metal as I adjust to his length, and he holds onto my hips to prevent me from losing my balance.

He fucks me deeper and deeper, harder and harder, and with every stroke, what was once pain shifts into a sweet pleasure.

“Does this feel good?” His lips meet mine again. “Do you like me fucking you?”

“Yesssss.”

“Say my name,” he demands.

“Easton...”

“Say it again...” He slides his tongue against mine, keeping his thrusts steady.

“Ahhhhh.” I tense as my legs begin to shake. “*Easton...*”

I don't get the chance to prepare for what comes next.

I shut my eyes and scream into his chest as I lose control, as pleasure consumes my entire body and leaves me shaking and utterly wanton.

Easton tenses seconds later, pumping into me one last time.

We remain entwined, breathing hard, our chests rising and falling as the bass from the party softly knocks the wall.

Placing a kiss against my neck, he pulls out of me and tosses the condom into a trash can. He buckles his pants and then smooths my dress into place.

“Here.” He helps me off the car and adjusts one of my wings. “You should go back to the party first. I'll go in a little later.”

“Okay.” I head to the door.

“Wait, Scarlett.”

“Yeah?” I look over my shoulder.

“Don't dance with Jeremiah again.”

I let go of the doorknob and walk over to him. “I don't want us to go back to the party.”

“Then we don't have to.” He pulls me close. “Going upstairs to your room is out of the question, though, and we can't stay in here.”

“We have a treehouse in the backyard.”

“There's a couple fucking in there already.”

“Poolhouse?”

“Someone is in there, too.” He kisses my forehead. “Come home with me.”

EASTON



“**Y**ou should stay with me another night.” I run my fingers through Scarlett’s hair in the morning. “You don’t have to leave.”

“I have to run to FedEx and scan some contracts for my mom,” she says. “I’ll come back.”

“I have a scanner here.”

“Do you have a fax machine?”

“No, but I can go buy one.” I sit up. “There’s plenty of money in my account.”

“Save it for something that’s actually worth it,” she says. “Besides, I already ordered an Uber.”

I kiss her again and sigh. “I could’ve driven you there, Scarlett. You’re not telling me something.”

“If you must know, I would like to go home and shower, and then put on new clothes, because my boyfriend fucked me all night and I’m pretty sure I reek of sex.”

“He doesn’t mind.” I laugh and help her up before I’m tempted to take her again.

“Here,” I give her one of my clean shirts and a pair of sweatpants, and we change together.

Pushing my window open, I help her climb down the fire escape on the side of my house. I wait until the Uber picks her up from my neighbor’s driveway before heading back inside.

“Why is it all the way up there?” Someone wails in the kitchen. “Like who the hell can reach that?”

I round the corner and see my father’s latest girlfriend peering into the

pantry. She's wearing a silk slip that leaves little to the imagination, and a cigarette is hanging from her lips.

As of today, she's been dating him for two weeks, and that's his longest record so far.

"Hey, Easton," she says.

"Barbara."

"Can you grab the creamer off the top shelf for me? Oh, and the caramel too."

"Sure." I walk closer and get it for her. "Anything else?"

"Your girlfriend is here."

"Where?"

"I think the question you mean to ask me is, which one?"

"No," I step back. "'Where' is the correct question. Trust me."

"She brought muffins and broke down in tears, so I'm making us some coffee and telling her that everything is okay."

"The word 'where' usually means a room or a side of the house."

"I overheard a girl moaning in your room last night."

"Why were you anywhere near there, if my dad's room is downstairs?"

"That's not the point."

"I'm not into older women."

"And I'm not into boys." She scoffs. "I know that boys and men don't tend to value monogamy and honesty as much as we women do, but karma eventually will bite all you cheaters in the ass."

"Thank you, Pastor Barbara." I smile. "Any more sermons you care to share with me?"

She narrows her eyes as Tully steps into the kitchen.

"Hey." She smiles. "Hope you aren't mad that I stopped by. I was just in the neighborhood."

"He's your *boyfriend*, Tully." Barbara moves over to the coffee maker. "You should be able to show up and see him anytime that you want."

Tully hugs me and hands me a muffin. "I made that this morning."

"You mean you *bought* that."

"Okay, fine." She laughs. "I warmed it in the oven. That still counts. Anyway, um...I didn't mean what I said to you last night."

I raise my eyebrow. I've forgotten that we even spoke.

"I told you to leave if you weren't going to sleep with me," she says. "That we were over if you didn't finally prove that you wanted me in that

way.”

“Tully...”

“I can respect it,” she says, swallowing. “I’m not used to a guy treating me like anything other than arm candy or a pretty face...It’s different, and I’ve been doing some reading, and apparently if a guy really respects you, he doesn’t necessarily have to have sex with you...Especially if he really likes you.”

“We really need to talk about something, Tully.” I can’t take this shit too much longer.

Barbara shakes her head, glaring at my direction, but she doesn’t say a word.

“No one stayed to help, not even Scarlett,” she says. “So um, if you’re not doing anything, would you mind riding back with me to help?”

“Sure.”

ME



*Dear Greg Walters,
I was honestly flattered that you asked me to the winter formal, and I'm sorry that I turned you down by saying, "I'm going alone." Truth is, I was in love with someone else and I wanted to go with him...Looking back, I should've considered your offer.
Wish I Would've Told You,
—Scarlett*

KEVIN

Where the hell are you?

Please don't tell me you're making me do a Sad Sunday night/toxic Tully party recap by myself?

I'm so sorry. I forgot.

I'll make it up to you next week. Promise.

KEVIN

Hmmm. Okay. I'll hold you to that. I want ALL the tea!

PART 3

THE TRUTH IS OVERRATED



Question:

If the love of your life confessed to murdering someone years ago, what would you do?

- **A)** Act like you have no idea what they're talking about. Vow to never bring it up again.
- **B)** Call the police and reveal what you know.
- **C)** End the relationship, but vow to keep their secret for the rest of your life.

Answer:

None of these.

If you're in love with a murderer, you're fucked.

ME



*Dear Travis Jones,
I keyed your car because you made my sister cut herself all summer during
her sophomore year. She may not be my best friend, but she didn't deserve
the way you treated her.
Wish I Would've Told You,
Scarlett*

On Monday morning, my fingers tremble as I stare at a bright blue envelope.

“Are you planning to open it, Miss Crane?” My band director, Mr. Jones, smiles at me.

“No, I’m waiting to wake up in reality.”

He laughs. “You’re in the real world right now, Miss Crane. I promise.”

I continue staring at the envelope.

The return address bears the logo from the London Music Program. It’s been my dream to play there since I was a little girl, since my first private tutor wooed me with stories and albums of her time abroad.

“You have to open it at some point.” Mr. Jones laughs. “Whenever you get around to doing that, come and tell me your thoughts, okay?”

“Okay.” He walks away and I run my fingers along the edges before tearing the envelope open.

After unfolding the paper, I blink a few times to make sure my eyes aren’t playing a trick on me.

Dear Miss Scarlett Crane,
We wish you'd applied to our program sooner, but we're honored to accept
someone of your caliber into our esteemed summer program.
We'd be further honored if you considered joining us for a special six month
program that will run through the spring and end before most college fall
semesters begin.
Please respond promptly to this letter.
The London Music Program

GOING to London would mean missing prom, graduation, and...*Easton*.

I tuck it into my backpack and head to the cafeteria.

Kevin pushes my shoulder as he walks by. Then he sits on the far side of the room.

Confused, I follow him and set down my tray.

He immediately stands up and leaves.

What's wrong with him?

Leaving my food, I follow him again. He moves faster and slips into the indoor pool facility.

Once I step inside, he grabs my hand and then pushes me against the wall.

"What the hell is going on with you, Kevin?" I notice the cold look in his eyes. "You're starting to worry me."

"I saw you this weekend."

"I saw you, too," I say. "We hung out at the party."

"I saw you damn near fucking Easton Rush outside." He hisses. "*Easton. Rush.* Your sister's boyfriend and you haven't said shit about it to me."

"I..." I swallow. "We were just drunk."

"Scarlett, I wasn't born yesterday."

"You said it yourself. Tully overdid it on the tequila."

"That wasn't a drunken kiss." He looks into my eyes. "That was an 'I want you to fuck me' kiss and it didn't end for a long ass time."

Silence.

"As much as I hate your sister, what you're doing is dead-ass wrong, so I'll give you three options," he says. "One, you promise to never do that again and I'll take your secret to the grave with me. Two, you tell Tully and

apologize, or—”

“I love him.” I interrupt. “I’ve loved him long before they were a thing and the only reason I dated college guys was to keep my mind off him, to try to move on from him, but I can’t...”

His jaw practically unhinges and hits the floor.

“I didn’t tell you because I didn’t know how to.” I let out a breath, grateful that someone else finally knows. “I’ll tell you now, though. Please let me tell you now...”



HOURS LATER, we’re sitting on the floor, our backs pressed against the tile as the pool waters slosh in front of us.

Kevin has been silent the entire time I bared my soul. Never interrupting, only finding new ways to look shocked and confused.

The bell rings for the final period of the day, but neither of us makes a move to go to class.

Students rush in, clad in their swim gear.

Easton walks by us and stops.

“Hey Kevin and Scarlett,” he says.

“Hey.” “Hi.”

“Will you tell your sister that I’ll be over later? I have a meeting after practice.”

“Sure thing.”

He walks away and Kevin shakes his head.

“Wow,” he says. “You two are ver impressive. I would’ve never read into that ‘meeting’ until now.”

“He’s not talking about me, Kevin.” I lean against his shoulder. “He really does have a meeting with his coach.”

“That’s exactly what you want me to think, isn’t it?”

“It’s the truth.”

“The truth you want me to believe...” He smiles, but it quickly fades from his lips. “You know that this situation is going to end horribly for you, right?”

“No,” I say. “It just won’t be a typical ‘happily ever after,’ that’s all.”

“You’ll be lucky to get a ‘happy for now’ ending, Scarlett,” he says.

“These type of things always end in utter tragedy.”

“I can think of plenty of similar situations where everything worked out.”

“Give me one.”

“I...” I have nothing.

He has a point.

EASTON



“Okay, here’s an easy hypothetical question,” I say to Scarlett over the phone. “If the love of your life gets severely injured and the doctors say he won’t live for much longer, what do you do?”

“I want to answer a less morbid question.”

“A,” I continue anyway, “Stay by his side until he dies, and never love another. B. Tell him goodbye and move on with your life. C. Spend time looking for doctors who can give you a second opinion and save his life.”

“B,” she says.

“Why?”

“Because I can still have option A.” She laughs. “I’ll tell him goodbye but still stay by his side, and I’ll be forced to move on, but I’ll never love another.”

“You’re really bad at these, Scarlett.”

“I’m better than I was last year.” She’s still laughing. “Why did you rush to leave my room just to call me an hour later?”

“My dad called,” I say.

“Same issue as usual?”

“Yes.”

Silence.

“Your sister said something about me needing to come over earlier than usual this morning, so I’ll see you soon.”

“Okay. See you soon.”

I end the call and step out of my car.

My Dad is stumbling out of an all-day coffee shop, and I can smell the stench of alcohol on him from here.

He moves toward the driver's side and motions for me to throw him the car keys.

"No, thanks." I roll my eyes. "You can't call me to come get you *and* drive my car. Get on the passenger side."

"I bought you this damn car, son. Give me the keys."

"How much have you had to drink today?"

"Nothing. I've told you that I'm drinking Listerine in between my coffee fixes. They make it stronger than usual these days, that's all." He's still holding out his hand for the keys.

"I'm as sober as a judge," he says. "Give me one of those weird word problem things you're always doing and see."

"Okay, Dad. If mom was really loyal, just like you're really sober, you can drive."

His face falls and he drops his hand.

"I thought so."

He moves to the passenger side and gets into the car.

We ride back home without another word.



THERE'S a long red carpet in the front yard when I pull into the Cranes' driveway later that morning.

There's also a cream blue Mustang.

Confused, I walk around it and admire the leather interior before heading up the porch.

Before I can knock on the door, Tully opens it and drags me inside.

"Oh my god, it took you long enough!" She tugs me into the kitchen and picks up a wardrobe bag. "Here. Hurry up and change into this."

"What's going on?"

"You're about to do a 'promposal' and ask me to prom."

"I was actually hoping to talk to you about that..."

"What about it?"

"He's here! He's here!" A woman I've never seen before steps behind the breakfast bar. "Let's hurry up and get this ready before the sun gets too much

higher, people!”

Strangers in t-shirts come out of nowhere and walk past us.

I hold back a sigh, waiting until the last person is gone.

“I was thinking we could go to prom alone, Tully.”

“*What?*” She steps closer. “What do you mean, alone?”

“That we don’t have to go as a couple,” I say. “We can still dance there and hangout since we’re up for king and queen, but we don’t have to do any insane planning or work on any social media projects because—”

“You’d rather go with *someone else?*” She finishes my sentence for me. “Who?”

Your sister. “We need to talk in private.”

“I agree.” She crosses her arms. “Let’s start with the obvious. Are you breaking up with me?”

“No.”

“Why are you my boyfriend?”

“Because I’ve signed a few contracts with you and they don’t end until our second semester of college.”

“Oh, be still my beating heart.” She rolls her eyes. “You don’t like me anymore?”

“I do like you, Tully. But as more of a —”

“Why aren’t we getting ready, Easton and Tully?” A guy wearing a “Proposal, Inc.” shirt steps into the kitchen. “Is something wrong?”

“*No,*” we say in unison.

“Easton was just being the ultimate professional in saying that he hadn’t technically signed off on today’s event,” Tully says.

“Only because your girlfriend signed first and said you would be totally onboard.” He flips through a stack of folders and clicks a pen. “We were discussing the idea of you wearing one of our special boutonnieres to match with her upcoming dress, and she mentioned that you hadn’t asked her out to prom yet.”

Because I wasn’t planning to...

“So, I figured, why don’t we help in that department and do a sponsored video about our actual prom services instead of a single prom night photo, you know?”

I don’t say a word.

I just glare at Tully.

“Here you are, Mr. Easton.” The guy flips to the last page, where my

signature should go. “The total payment has increased a bit as well. We agreed on seven thousand dollars each.”

“This is only for today’s shoot and doesn’t include anything on prom night, correct?” I ask.

“Um....Correct.” He looks confused. “I mean, we’re assuming you two will go together, so depending on how well this does, we may consider a second sponsored video for that.”

“Let’s just get this out of the way.” I take the pen from him and sign my name. “I only have an hour for this.”

I take the wardrobe bag upstairs, in hopes of catching Scarlett, but she’s no longer in her room. Instead, there’s a post-it note on her door.

Mom:

Ran off to get early morning donuts and coffee with Kevin. Will be back. I left the KTP contract for you & Tully on the coffee table in the living room.

Fuck.

I change into the tuxedo and return downstairs.

As I’m heading toward my car to get my phone, a woman grabs my hand and leads me to the Mustang.

Tully is dressed in her cheerleader uniform, looking far too thrilled about this.

“Can we get a few kisses with you and Tully in the front seat?” The photographer asks.

I resist the urge to roll my eyes, but I lean forward and oblige.

For far too long, they make us pose in front of the car, and then I get on one knee and ask her to prom, conveniently in time for her cheer squad and my teammates to arrive.

It’s not until the end of the shoot that I notice Scarlett staring at us in tears from the sidewalk.

19.5

ME



I *thought he'd alluded to wanting to go to the prom with me...*

I know I'm being illogical, but seeing Easton ask her to prom in such an elaborate way hurts like hell.

I ask my mom if I can spend the next several weeknights at Kevin's house, and I block Easton's calls and texts.

ME



*Dear Ella Masters,
Thank you for nominating me to take your spot for consideration in England.
I know it was you.
Wish I Would've Told You,
—Scarlett*

TULLY

Meet me at Whimstery Cafe around 7ish. Girls night!

You sent this to the wrong person.

TULLY

No, I didn't. I want you to come hang out with me.

Why?

TULLY

Because I love you and want to spend time with my sister.

Bullshit.

TULLY

Okay, fine. I need some candid pics of us hanging out in their cafe for the brand deal. I got you a sexy date for afterwards.
wink wink Thank me later.



The cafe is full of college students, but Tully and I fit in perfectly. She's wearing black and grey like me, and while her lips are stained in a bright purple, mine are colored with a bright red.

"So..." She sips her coffee. "How's your senior year going?"

"Good. Yours?"

"Pretty effin awesome." She smiles. "I'm homecoming queen for another year in a row, and I'm sure that prom queen is next. Speaking of prom, you don't have to come with me and mom to the next trips to Nashville unless you want to."

"What's the reasoning?"

"It's top secret, so you have to promise not to tell first. Not even Kevin."

"I promise."

She looks around as if someone may be listening. Then she leans forward and whispers, "Vera Wang is launching a new Southern Belle line for affordable evening wear and they're sending me four gowns to choose from. I get one for the spring formal and one for the prom."

"That's amazing, Tully," I say. "Congratulations."

"Thank you!" She leans back. "The only thing that sucks is that I have to send them back for alterations and color adjustments, and the tuxedo shop that Easton is using may not be able to match his boutonniere to mine in time."

"I'm sure they'll find a way to get it done."

"Who are you taking to prom?"

"Um..." I pause. I haven't told her or my mother anything about London. I have a feeling that one, they won't care, and two, they'll try to talk me out of it for their own selfish reasons.

"I'm not sure who I'll go with yet," I say. "I have a few offers on the table."

“Well, Jeremiah Sanders is beyond interested.” She smiles. “He’s fucking hot, and you should totally take him up on that. We could all ride there together!”

“Maybe.”

“Yayyy!”

“Yay.” I take a large gulp of my coffee.

We stare at each other, searching for something to say, a way to keep this weak conversation going, but there’s nothing.

Eventually, she takes out her phone and taps the screen, and I listen in on the couple arguing at the table next to us.

Thankfully, Jeremiah and Easton walk through the doors minutes later, saving us from ourselves.

“Come over here for a second, Scarlett,” Tully motions for me to sit next to her.

I stand up and Jeremiah whispers, “I’m taking you home tonight, no matter what,” as I pass by.

Tully insists on posing for a few pictures together, and when we’re done, Easton clears his throat.

“Scarlett, can I talk to you outside for a second?” he asks.

“She’s right there, Easton.” Tully kisses his cheek. “She can hear you just fine.”

“This is personal,” he says. “We need to go outside.”

“I don’t see how personal it can possibly be since you barely know her.” Tully shrugs. “You can say whatever it is in front of everyone, I’m sure.”

“No.” He’s staring at me. “I’m sure that I can’t.”

“She already told me about her on-and-off again boyfriend, and going out with college guys here or there,” Jeremiah says. “I know you’re tempted to grill her about me, but we talked about everything last night. We’re fine.”

“You’re talking on the phone to him now?” Easton tilts his head to the side. “Really?”

“Yes, *really*.” I smile at him even though I feel my heart aching in my chest. “He’s lucky to have someone like you who does everything he can to make sure he doesn’t get hurt...”

“Yeah, Easton really is the best friend I could ever ask for, but he’s been a bit off all week,” Jeremiah laughs. “He’ll be fine, though. Anyone want a pumpkin spice latte?”

“Me,” we all say in unison.

“Okay. Be right back.” He leaves the table and I immediately look down at my phone to avoid conversation.

Against my better judgment, I click on Tully’s profile and check the response to the picture she just posted of us.

Half a million likes and counting...

Then I click on the one she just posted of her and Easton. A short video of her kissing his cheek.

Two million likes and counting...

I can’t watch shit like this anymore. I’m far too jealous.

My heart has had a taste of Easton Rush, and it refuses to indulge in any other flavor. The best thing for me to do once and for all is to put an end to this—to *us*—once and for all.

I *have* to go to England in January.

My heart won’t survive otherwise.

EASTON



When I pull into Scarlett’s driveway the following morning, she’s standing over a bike and buckling a helmet.

“Scarlett?” I roll down the window. “You’re more than welcome to ride with us this morning.”

She doesn’t look at me.

“We can skip first period to grab a coffee and talk.”

“I’ll pass.” She picks up her backpack. “Thank you, though.”

I start to get out of the car, but Tully steps onto the front porch.

“Scarlett—” I keep my voice firm. “I would really prefer it if you got in my car and rode to school with me this morning.”

“I’ll still pass. Thanks.”

I glare at her, waiting for her to look my way, but she doesn’t cave in the slightest.

“Come on, Easton.” Tully slides into the passenger seat. “We need to get our morning coffee and post it as soon as possible.”

Scarlett grabs onto the handle bars and pedals away without another word.



I KNOCK on her window later that night, but there’s no answer.

I know she’s in there, so I tap harder.

Still no answer.

She walks into the room and shuts the curtains, so I climb down the brackets and head to the front door.

“Hey there, Easton.” Mr. Crane smiles, ushering me inside. “Are you here to help us with another one of Tully’s projects?”

“Not this time.”

“Well, we need more tape.” Their mom groans. “And I just broke my second ruler of the night.”

“I’ll run to the store and get it for you.” Scarlett is suddenly on the steps.

“Go with her, Easton,” Mrs. Crane says. “Keep her from wandering down the book aisle and reading until the store closes.”

“I’ll come right back, Dad, I swear.” Scarlett protests.

“I know. Hence why Easton will make sure of that.” He shoos her away, and I try not to grab her waist and kiss some sense into her as we leave.

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

ME



Dear Jessica Reid,

Me and my sister haven't always been close, but she deserved a better class of friend than you. You're a two-faced user, a master manipulator, and a straight up bitch. I can't wait to see you get a dose of your own medicine one day.

*Wish I Would've Told You,
—Scarlett*

I can't breathe in his car.

His sexy scent is suffocating me, and his glare is a heated enough to burn a hole in my skull.

"If you're made at me about the promposal, you should know I only did that because it was for a sponsor." He grits his teeth. "Your sister fucking ambushed me before I could set foot in the damn door."

"You know, I'm starting to think that sponsors run your life."

"Come again?"

"You have agency, Easton. You can choose to do and not do things, and I'd prefer it if one of the things you didn't do was fucking hurt me."

"How long do you plan on holding this silly ass shit over my head?"

"We should get a cheese and sausage platter while we're at the store," I say, changing the subject. "My dad will love you even more for that. He's convinced that your prom date with Tully is a sign that you'll eventually get married."

“I’m not staying at prom for more than an hour with Tully,” he says. “I want me and you to go someplace together instead.”

“Someplace *in secret*, right?”

“Scarlett, I’m trying not to lose you,” he says. “But you’re making this really fucking difficult.”

“You could’ve picked up the phone or texted me with some type of warning,” I say. “I had to hear it from one of our neighbors and rush back to see it for myself. You looked nice by the way.”

“What if we didn’t wait until the deals expired?” he says. “What if I dumped Tully tonight and told her that I just wanted to be with you?”

I turn to face him, waiting for his laughter, but the look in his eyes is calm.

Calm and dead-ass serious.

“You...” I sigh, thinking of all the money and complications that are tied into those deals. My college tuition, sadly, is one of them. “You can’t do that and you know it.”

“If you’re trying to leave me, yes I fucking can.”

“I’m not ready to be a villain yet, Easton.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Being in love is supposed to be easy, and with you it isn’t...It comes with tons of terms and conditions, string after string of complications.”

“I agree. This is the most stressful relationship I’ve ever had.” He hisses. “I can’t win for losing.”

“Me either,” I say. “And that’s what I mean about being a villain...In the rare event that we ever did get to be together, neither of us will be heroes. I’m sorry but, I think we should break up for a while.”

“You know what?” He nods. “I think that’s a fucking good idea.”

—



THREE WEEKS LATER

EASTON



Scarlett looks sexy as hell in the bleachers this afternoon, even though she scowls every time I glance her way.

My nights without her have been completely unbearable, and I hate knowing that I have to look forward to another one.

I'm not ready to make nice yet...

“Easton!” Coach calls my name.

“Yeah, Coach?”

“Do you know what you’ve accomplished at this practice today?”

“No.”

“Me neither.” He glares at me. “You’re unfocused and you need to go home.”

“What?”

“Go home, Easton.” He shakes his head. “I can’t afford for whatever the fuck in going on in your brain to spread to your teammates.”

I unbuckle my helmet and jog off the field. I grab my bag and notice twenty seven missed calls from a number I always hate to see,

Sighing, I wait until I’m in my car before calling it back.

“Red Roof Casino and Mini Resort,” a familiar deep voice says. “This is the manager, Jeff, speaking. How may I help you this afternoon?”

“It’s Easton, Mr. Jeff. I’m just returning your call.”

“It’s your dad again, son. I need you to come get him as soon as possible.”

“Do I need to bring him a change of clothes?”

“Not this time.” He sighs. “Just come get him out of my casino.”

“I’m on my way.”



I WAVE to the security guard once I pull into the casino's parking lot.

"Where is he, Redmond?"

"Fifth floor, Blackjack tables. Take the east elevator."

"Thank you."

I take the elevator and hold back a breath as it rises floor by floor. I also mentally thank the casino manager for never letting my father's true colors bleed into the local press.

When the doors glide open, I anticipate seeing him in his usual state: sweaty and slumped over in a chair, but he looks good today.

I smile, prepared to ask if this is his attempt at telling me he's trying to get sober, but then I notice the sea of navy blue and red balloons behind him. The banner that reads "Congratulations, Easton! Courtesy of Ole Miss."

What the fuck has he done?

My father rushes over to me, and a photographer snaps a picture of us.

"What is this, Dad?"

"A private party to congratulate you on maintaining the honor roll while achieving such an amazing high school football career."

"Why is this being done with *Ole Miss* though?"

"They're my alma mater, so they just offered this." He smiles. "Don't question it."

"I told you I'm going to the University of Alabama."

"There's nothing wrong with making the Roll Tide guys sweat a little," he says. "Plus, Ole Miss has one hell of an offer that you could at least consider."

"How much did they pay you to make me come here?"

"Nothing, son. I'm hurt that you would even think that about me."

"How fucking much?"

"I said *nothing*." He hisses through his teeth. Then he links his arm in mine and leads me into a hallway.

"Look, just smile while you're here and have a piece of cake. Shake a few hands with the athletic department executives, and then you can leave."

"I'm leaving *now*."

“They gave me five thousand dollars guaranteed, but they’ll give me twenty if I can convince you to come take a tour and speak to the coach during a sponsored weekend trip.”

“Bullshit.” I push his arm away. “You’ve lost way more than that during a gambling weekend, so there’s no way you sold me out for that amount.”

“It’s true, son.” He pulls out a mini bottle of hand sanitizer and takes a sip. “This is just vitamin water.”

Right...

“Can we go back out to the party now, Easton?”

“No,” I say. “I don’t believe you’re telling you the truth.

“I really am.” The look in his eyes tells me that he’s lying his ass off.

The door opens, and Tully steps between us wearing an Ole Miss t-shirt and matching sweatpants.

“Is everything alright in here?” she asks. “People are starting to talk.”

“You knew about this, Tully?” I look at her.

“Yeah, I figured the extra content would be good for our account and make Alabama invite us back to woo us some more.” She’s delusional. “You looked totally surprised when you say the banner, so we won’t need to edit anything.”

“Tell Ole Miss to fuck off,” I say to them, stepping back. “I’m not interested and I’ll *never* be interested.”



I STORM up the steps and slam my bedroom door shut. I don’t want to talk to anyone for the rest of the fucking weekend.

Opening my drawers, I rummage around for my boxing gloves so I can hit something for the rest of the night.

I manage to find one of them before a faint sound outside catches my attention.

Plink! Plink! Plink!

I walk over to my window and see Scarlett standing in my backyard with a hand full of rocks.

Teary-eyed, she stares at me for several seconds before throwing another.

I push up the window, thinking she'll come up so we can finally talk, but she hurls a new rock.

Then another.

"Fuck you." She hits my chest with one. "*Fuck you.*"

I step onto the ledge and climb down, all while she keeps hurling them at me.

"Fuck you, Easton Rush." She cries as her last rock hits my shoulder. "Fuckkkk you."

"Stop this, Scarlett." I grab her wrists and pull her close. "*Stop.*"

"I hate you," she whispers. "I fucking hate you."

"I miss you, too."

"You haven't called or groveled or anything."

"You haven't given me a chance to..." I kiss her lips. "Give me chance to,"

"No." She tries to pull away from me, but I tighten my grip. "I wasted my first time on you...I hate that I gave you my virginity."

"You *what?*"

"You heard me. I *wasted* my first time on you." She looks into my eyes, and her irises reveal that she doesn't mean what she's saying. "You didn't deserve it."

"You never told me that you were a virgin." I'm stunned. "You've mentioned being with other guys."

"No...I've teased guys and come close," she says. "But I never went all the way until you, and now that we're over and you're not trying to get me back, I officially regret it."

I stare at her, utterly speechless.

"Let me go." She tries to wriggle from my grasp. "Let me go right now because—"

I stamp my mouth over hers before she can say anything else, before we can waste another second being apart.

She stops fighting me, letting her hands fall, and I wrap an arm around her waist. I keep kissing her until she's damn near breathless.

"How did you want your first time to be?" I whisper against her lips.

"I don't think it matters now..."

"*Scarlett...*" I kiss her again, holding her tighter. "How did you want it to be?"

ME



Dear Olivia Hall,

I've given you over twenty clarinet reeds and six sheet composition books and you never paid me back for any of them... Alas, I was the person who charged over fifteen pizzas to your house last year, so you don't owe me anymore.

*Wish I Would've Told You,
—Scarlett*

Easton leads me to the old Mustang that's parked in his dad's garage. He opens the door to the back seat, and I climb inside, laying my back against the leather.

Climbing over me, he covers my mouth with his and stares into my eyes. I run my hands against his back, moaning as he deepens our kiss.

"You're all that matters to me in this life, Scarlett," he says as he gently bites my bottom lip. "Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"Do you really?" he says again, sliding his hand under my skirt.

"Yes." I say again, knowing he means it.

"Good." He rips off my panties and tosses them to the floor. Before I know it, he's flipping me over so that I'm on top of him, straddling his lap.

"If you wanted to ride my dick for your first time, that's all you had to say..."

I blush and unzip his pants, pulling out his cock.

It's already rock hard, so I lean forward and kiss his tip, making him moan in pleasure.

He pulls out a condom, but I let my lips linger on his cock a bit more. I open my mouth wider as I take him deeper down my throat.

“Damn, Scarlett...” His breathing slows, and he pushes my hair off my face. “Your mouth is fucking perfect...”

I gag when he’s completely in my mouth, and I slowly pull back, taking him in and out again, listening to him get more turned on.

I rub my hand up and down his shaft and he presses the condom packet between my fingers.

Giving his cock one last kiss, I tear the packet one with my teeth and slowly roll it over him.

He smiles at me, looking beyond impressed. Then he lifts my hips, silently commanding me to lower my pussy onto him.

I press my hands against his chest and take him in, inch by inch, loving the way he feels.

Without waiting for him to say anything, I start rocking my hips and riding him.

I wanted him just like this.

I’m getting him just like this...

He reaches his hands up and caresses my breasts, teasing my nipples with his fingers.

He moans and sits up a bit, covering my lips with his. “Slow down baby,” he says, but I don’t.

I ride him faster, and he grabs my hips to adjust my pace.

We move together in a perfect, seductive rhythm, and within seconds, I’m approaching a high again.

Pleasurable waves are crashing through me and I can’t help but speed up again.

“I’m about to come,” he whispers to me. “Unless you...”

The rest of his words are drowned out by my screams.

“Ahhhh, Easton, fuckkkkkk!”

He holds onto me as I collapse with his name on my lips.

He reaches his release shortly after me, keeping his hold on me as he comes.

Kissing a light kiss against my stomach, he rolls me off him and positions me so we’re laying side by side, facing each other on the seat.

We lay in silence for several moments, our bodies pressed tightly against each other as we recover.

“Why can’t it be like this all the time?” I whisper.

“Because I wasn’t smart enough to meet you first.” He kisses my forehead and threads his fingers through my hair. “What else aren’t you telling me today?”

“Huh?” I lift my head. “What do you mean?”

“Your first time aside, I refuse to believe that the promposal is the only thing you’re upset about,” he says. “What else is it?”

“I’m leaving for England in January. It’s for that symphony program I told you about.”

His fingers stop moving for several seconds. He slides his hand under my chin, tilting my chin up so I’m looking right into his eyes.

“I thought you said you weren’t going to that until the summer.”

“That was before I did some thinking.”

“About us?”

“Yes...” I nod. “That, and I’ll never have an opportunity like this again, and I honestly think I could use the space.”

“Space?”

“Time for us to figure out if this relationship is worth it.”

“If you think we’re breaking up because you’ll be an ocean away, you’re sadly mistaken.”

“You might discover that life is a lot easier when I’m gone,” I say. “The ‘most stressful relationship you’ve ever had’ won’t be a factor anymore.”

“I don’t want to fight with you again, Scarlett...” He presses a finger against my lips. “I really don’t.”

I don't either...

“If you think going to London will prove something about our relationship, then go. But just know an ocean between us isn’t going to stop me from loving you or waiting for you to return.”

“You’re not going to date other people while I’m away?”

“You’re not either.” He shakes his head. “How am I supposed to sleep at night, though?”

“We’ll figure something out.”

“Can you consider coming back for a week to see me in the spring?”

I nod my head even though I can’t, that even if I could, I wouldn’t.

“Well, there’s still a month and a half left.” He kisses my lips. “Get on top of me again.”

ME



*Dear Jeremiah Sanders,
If we'd met sooner, we probably would've had a great relationship. You were
a way nicer guy than I thought and a complete gentleman.
Wish I Would've Told You,
—Scarlett*

Eight large tour buses are parked outside our school, ready and waiting to carry our senior class to Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, for the weekend. Even though the signup forms boasted about “plenty of chaperones,” only two teachers are attending.

One of them smokes weed with the hockey players every Friday.

“Don’t have too much fun while you’re gone, Kevin.” I hand him a can of bear spray. “Oh, and don’t forget to watch your back if you go into the woods alone.”

“I won’t, *Mother*.” He hugs me. “You know, it’s not too late for you to come with me.”

“Ha! I’m still shocked you’re going. We’re supposed to sit in your car and make fun of all these people.”

“Well, maybe I just want to see what all the hype is about for a change.” He shrugs. “We only get to be high school seniors once in our lifetime.”

“Okay.” I press my hand against his forehead. “Who are you, and what have you done with my best friend?”

“I’m serious, Scarlett.” He looks into my eyes. “You’re going to miss out on an entire semester while you’re away in London, so I don’t see why you need to miss out on this, too.”

I look over at the basketball team as they lift an oversized bong from a trunk.

“Your sister isn’t going, if that makes the decision easier.”

“Since when?” I cross my arms. “She’s been hyping herself up about this all week.”

“She changed her mind.” He holds his phone out for me, showing Tully’s latest video post.

“Guess who just got invited to a last-minute Revlon undergrad ambassador opportunity? My college career is starting already!”

“I’ll go home and pack,” I say. “I’ll be back within the hour.”

“I’ll save you a seat!”



Around midnight

THE BRIGHT LIGHTS of Dollywood Theme Park shine bright against the dark sky, teasing us with what’s to come when the gates open in the morning.

Our row of rented cabins is perched in the mountains, and the class idiots are attempting to attract bobcats and bears to join our vacation.

I’m watching them set out cold steaks and burger patties around our class flag outside.

“I was just calling to let you know we made it, Dad.” Kevin paces while he talks on the phone. “Yes, I promise I won’t do anything stupid and check in with the chaperones every two hours.”

“One of our chaperones is trying to bait a bear right now...” I say.

“Of course, I’m rooming with Scarlett.” He smiles. “Yes, I know you think she’s the most responsible friend I’ve ever had...Yeah, I’ll have her call you tomorrow. Okay, bye.”

“It sounds like your parents don’t trust you, Kevin.”

“They have no reason to.” He laughs and picks up his duffle bag. “Okay, bye. I’ll be back to hang out with you tomorrow.”

“What? Where are you going?”

“That college guy from the beach is picking me up for the night,” he says.

“Cover for me.”

“You fucking skank.” I cross my arms. “That’s the real reason why you wanted me to come here, isn’t it?”

“I love you, too!” He rushes out of the cabin before I strangle him.

“We need to make more bear sounds!” “More berries, too!” Someone screams outside the window.

Closing the blinds, I run a long bath and change into a swim suit and a hoodie. I grab a book and make my way to the other side of camp, where empty hammocks are swinging under oak trees.

I read a few chapters of my favorite book, so engrossed that I ignore the spider crawling on the back of my neck. As I’m nearing my favorite part, the soft touches become far more pleasurable.

“Easton?” I look up and notice him standing behind me.

“I didn’t think you were the type that liked class trips.” He smiles. “We could’ve rode here together.”

“You drove?”

“I wasn’t planning to,” he says, helping me down from the hammock. “Until you didn’t come to the window.”

“You could’ve called.”

“I saw Kevin’s post with you on the bus.”

“Oh...” I blush as he slides his hand against my neck. “Why aren’t you at the pit with your teammates?”

“Because I can live without knowing what it feels like to be mauled by a bear.” He cups my face in his hands. “But most importantly, you’re not there.”

He stamps his mouth over mine, kissing me like he doesn’t care if we get caught. I wrap my arms around his neck, feeling his cock harden against my thigh.

As I catch my breath, he stares into my eyes.

“I told you that I wanted to spend every night together until you leave for England,” he says. “I *meant* that.”

“I believe you.”

“Good,” he says, kissing me again. “Turn around and bend over...”

PART 4

SOMETIMES LIARS WIN



Question:

If you could fly away from all your biggest problems for six months, what would you do while you're away?

- **A)** Vacation like there's no tomorrow, without a care in the world.
- **B)** Use some of the newfound free time to map out how you'll fix everything when you return.
- **C)** Take a course to better yourself whenever you're not relaxing by the closest beach.

Answer:

This is a flawed question.

If your biggest problems can be solved by flying away, you don't have any *real* problems.

ME



Shit, I'm late...

Rain pelts the streets as I rush through London's early morning traffic.

My umbrella flails in the wind, and I give up arriving at my first symphony practice dry.

I make it to the grand auditorium with seconds to spare and smooth my hair before pulling the heavy door open.

My classmates turn around in their seats and stare at me, and I toss my umbrella to the ground. Then I plop down in the first empty chair I see.

"Are you Scarlett Crane?" A pink-suited woman on stage calls. "Miss?"

"Yes, that's me."

"You're thirty seconds late, Miss Crane." She crosses her arms.

"I'm sorry...I got lost from my hotel, and then I—"

"Excuses aren't acceptable at this level, Miss Crane." She cuts me off. "I would expect that someone of your caliber would be the first to arrive here every day."

A few people in the audience murmur in agreement.

"Every student in this auditorium is allowed one late arrival over the course of this entire program." She's glaring at me like she hates me already. "You've already used yours, so don't ever let it happen again."

The auditorium is so silent now that I can hear my eyes blinking.

"You're assigned to Dorm Room E, Suite Seven," she says, picking up a packet. "Pass this back to Miss Crane, please."

The packet surfs back toward me, and I flip it open, taking out a keycard and a packet that holds the printed schedule for the next six months of my

life.

For some reason, the earth doesn't shift under my feet. No butterflies flutter in my chest. My heart beats its usual steady rhythm.

Deep down, I know that I've made the right decision to come here, but the excitement faded weeks ago.

Somewhere between the late nights of never-ending sex with Easton, our stolen kisses in dark hallways, and him begging me to change my mind, I've realized he was right about "space."

I still long for him every minute, and I wish he was here.

Not only that, but the senior year milestones that I once scoffed about—the Spring Fling, the Senior Weekend, the Prom—are now things that I'm mourning.

Things I regret giving up.

Fuck...

EASTON



“**Y**ou look good in crimson red.” Scarlett smiles at me via FaceTime. “I think Alabama was about to lose their shit when they saw you bring out that hat for Florida.”

“I did that to build some suspense.” I return her smile. “I thought you weren’t going to pay attention to anything here at home.”

“I would never miss out on your signing day.” I pause. “Tully looked great in the background. Your coach seems to really like her.”

“A lot of people like her,” I say. “She’s very good at pretending to be charming.”

“She also good at making it look like y’all are happy together online.”

“Don’t you dare start that.” I shake my head, not wanting her to go there right now.

“Nothing’s changed, Scarlett.” I look into her eyes. “Except for our sleeping arrangement, unfortunately.”

Laying back in her bed and inhaling the scent on her sheets, I lower the camera so she can see my hardened cock.

“*You* make me happy,” I say. “But sadly, I’m left to handle this by myself every night because you refused to listen to my advice.”

She blushes.

“You should take off your panties for me.” I rub my hands up and down my cock. “Show me what I’m missing.”

Biting her lip, she lowers her camera, giving me the perfect view of her wet pussy.

“Do you wish my cock was inside of you right now?” I ask.

“Yes...”

“Then why aren’t you showing me that?”

Her breath catches in her throat, and I roll over and hit the lights, commanding her until she comes.

ME



Dear Scarlett,
Today was the “unforgettable” Senior Spring Fling. And, like the good best friend that I am, I’m sharing a list of everything you missed.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
5. *Me.*

That about sums it up.

It was wack as shit without you.

Missing you fiercely,

Kevin

P.S. If I suffocated your sister and stuffed her body under the bleachers, would you snitch on me? She’s even bitchier now than she was before you left, and I’m really tempted...

EASTON



A couple months later

“We’ve had record sales on our boyfriend sweaters thanks to you two!” Tina Yardley, the CEO of ‘Together Wearers,’ holds out two shiny gift bags for me and Tully. “I’m hoping we can discuss extending our deal past your sophomore year of college.”

“That’d be awesome!” “I’ll have to think about it.” Tully and I speak in unison.

“Silly me,” Miss Yardley says. “I forgot you might be heading into the NFL by then, Easton.”

“Exactly,” I say. *I won’t be with Tully then either...*

“Well, consider these gifts my way of saying that you’ll always have a sponsor in me, no matter what you choose to do in the future.”

I nod and Tully gives her a hug.

Thankfully, our contract with her company isn’t a renewable one, and we’ve both made it more than clear that any other negotiations can be handled with our lawyers.

“Lawyers” that don’t technically exist, but that one word is enough to make any sponsor give us some breathing room.

While Tully escorts her to the door, I refresh my inbox.

SUBJECT: **I Miss You.**

Dear Easton,

I'm currently sitting in The Barbican Centre, watching the London Symphony Orchestra perform, and although this is definitely a highlight of my semester...I miss you.

Terribly.

Last night I dreamed you climbed through my window and held me while I cried tears about being homesick.

There really isn't another reason I'm sending you this email.

Hope your day is going well...

I can't wait to come back home.

I love you & can't wait to be together once and for all,

Scarlett

LATELY, the time zone differences have been far more brutal on our relationship than they were before.

Between my two-a-day practices, her twelve hour rehearsal days, and the social media "responsibilities" in between, we're currently settling for weekend catchup sessions that last fifteen to twenty minutes at best.

And emails.

Lots of and lots of emails...

"Don't forget to meet me at Patty Hall on Thursday for our TikTok video at Raising Canes." Tully steps in front of me.

"Will do," I say. "Anything else?"

"Yeah." She crosses her arms. "What's her name?"

"Excuse me?"

"You're not deaf, Easton." Her voice cracks. "Who is the other girl you're sleeping with?"

I stare at her, not saying a word.

"I mean, based on how you're treating me these days, it's clear that you're only becoming more and more distant so..." She looks into my eyes. "The least you could do is tell me the truth."

"You're right," I say. "I'll tell you eventually."

"I'd like to know *now*."

"It's not up to me, unfortunately."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" she asks. "Are you sleeping with someone else? Are you actually cheating on me?"

I leave the room before I can say anything else.

“Come back here and tell me what the hell that means, Easton!”

PART 5

DISTANCE DOESN'T SOLVE ANYTHING



Question:

If you only had one month to live, which of these best defines how you would spend your final moments?

- **A)** Live in denial like nothing is happening and keep the news about your inevitable death to yourself.
- **B)** Take out your bucket list and rally friends & family who will help you accomplish things before your time runs out.
- **C)** Contact everyone you know and make sure they know how much you love them.

Answer:

Any of the above.

You're dying. You can't afford to be indecisive anymore.

ME



The stifling heat sifts through the open cab windows, welcoming me back to the South. My grey halter top is sticking to my skin, and the fresh red welts on my ankles are courtesy of hungry mosquitos.

Home sweet home.

“You a freshman at ‘Bama?” The driver looks at me through the rearview mirror. “Or are you returning?”

“It’s my first year.”

“Well, let me tell you—” He smiles. “A pretty girl like you should keep her options wide open until you graduate. My sons go there, and although they’re smart as hell and will probably earn enough to take care of me someday, all they do is go to fraternity parties and screw around outside of class.”

“Um, okay...I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You should.” He stops at a red light. “Focus on the books and nothing else. Well, books and football. You can always make room for football.”

I notice a grey “Roll Tide!” elephant hanging from his rearview mirror.

“I take it that you’re a fan?” I ask.

“I’ve been rolling the tide since I was five years old.” He beams. “With that boy Easton Rush as our quarterback this season, we’re going all the way this year and next. Have you ever seen him play?”

“A few times...”

“Oh man, I bought a few tickets to his high school games just to see if all the hype was real. I was on pins and needles, hoping the rumors about him coming here to play for us were true and...”

I tune out his words and smile, nodding along.

I told Easton I was coming into town Friday, not today. I'd planned to surprise him by showing up to his dorm a few days early, but my heart made the decision before my brain could run through the logistics.

The moment I made it to baggage claim, I spotted huge banners that featured Alabama's five-star offensive line, with Easton standing and smiling at the center.

I knew then that I'd made a mistake.

Crimson-colored jerseys that bore his name and number filled every gift shop I passed, and the excitement for the massive industry of college football was as palpable as the humidity.

He'll be even busier now than he was before.

I highly doubted that the most popular athlete on campus—Hell, the most popular athlete *in this state*—would be able to go anywhere with any girl who wasn't Tully without arousing rumors and suspicion.

"You did say the Lakeside dorms, right?" The driver's voice cuts through my thoughts.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you've arrived." He steps out of the car to take out my luggage, and I stare out the window.

A row of red-bricked buildings stand guard in front of a blue lake while students push carts across the parking lot.

"I think that's everything." He shuts the trunk. "I hope your freshman year is everything you want it to be."

"Thank you, sir." I hand him a twenty as a woman in a grey polo shirt rushes toward me.

"Welcome to the University of Alabama!" Her deep and syrupy drawl is a warm hug. "I'm Mae Turner and I've been assigned to help you get settled into your living space today! You're one of the lucky ones who gets a solo suite with a shared living space, so are you ready to meet your roommate?"

"Not really."

"That's alright, hon." She pats my shoulder. "All those jitters will go away once you have a bite of my 'Don't Ever Fuck a Frat Boy Apple Pie.'"

"Are the fraternity guys here really that bad?"

"The word 'bad' doesn't even begin to describe it..."



Later that evening

“IF YOU CAN, try not to talk too loudly whenever Sulphur is sleeping in the living room.” My new roommate, “Sarah Lee from Tennessee,” smiles at me from our living room couch. “She’s old and doesn’t like noise.”

“No problem,” I say. “Anything else?”

“Not that I can think of at the moment,” she says. “I promise I’ll never get annoyed by your clarinet and violin practices. I have the best brand of earbuds on the planet.”

“Good to know.” I smile at her. “Is Sulphur in your bedroom? Can I meet her?”

“You’re meeting her now, silly.” She waves her hand. “Can’t you see?”

I look around the room, scanning all the spaces under the furniture where her beloved cat may be hiding.

“She’s right here.” She holds up a grey and white pillow. “See?”

“*Huh?*”

“I thought it was cruel to have her stuffed via taxidermy, so when she died, I brought her back into my life as my favorite pillow.”

“Sulphur’s not alive?” I can barely hear my own voice.

“The whiskers were the hardest features to put back into place, but the best things take time.” She flips the pillow over, revealing Sulphur’s “face” frozen in time.

Only one of her eyes is open, and I’m too scared to ask why there’s a button sewn onto her tongue.

She strokes the pillow a few times, and then she kisses its corner. “I placed her litter box near the water heater, but don’t worry. I’m good about changing it, and she’s not messy at all.”

I have no words to say.

“Let me know how your campus tour goes,” she says, standing. “I’ll schedule one of those after me and Sulphur take our nap.”

I *still* have no words to say.

I watch as she cradles the pillow, carrying it to her room.

Beyond disturbed, I grab my keys and rush outside.

Following a group of freshmen, I make my way to the Student Center and pick up my official orientation packet. While pulling out the activities list, my phone vibrates in my pocket.

EASTON

You should let me pick you up from the airport when you land this weekend. What time does your flight get in?

I swallow, looking around to see if he's nearby.

I think it's best if I just meet you on campus. Got a lot of stuff to unpack + band meetings.

I'm sure you have a lot of football stuff as well, right? Heard you and your teammates are on all the baggage claim banners in the airport.

EASTON

We are. That's another reason why you should let me pick you up. I haven't seen those yet.

I'm sure Google can help you if you'd like...

EASTON

I want to see them in person with my girlfriend.

Tully is available.

EASTON

Funny. I'll call you tonight. Love you.

Love you too.

ME



Two nights later, I'm standing outside of Tully's dorm room across campus. She's decorated the door with pictures, and for some odd reason, each one features the two of us.

We're smiling in matching pink onesies, running through a field in overalls, and laughing at each other in our mom's old backseat.

She doesn't have a single picture with her cheerleader friends or anyone from high school. She doesn't even have Easton...

Confused, I knock against the wood.

"Hold on, I'm almost done with it!" She yells before opening the door. "Oh, hey. What's up, Scarlett?"

"I came to get my stationery collection," I say. "Mom said you might've accidentally packed it with your stuff."

"Yep, I did." She pulls me inside, and I look around her room in utter shock.

Without discussing it, we've purchased the same grey floral bedspread and matching accessories. Everything from the curtains, to the lamps, to the coffeemaker, her room is an identical replica of mine.

"I think I put it down here." She slides a hand under her bed and pulls out my small wooden trunk.

"Thanks," I say. "Have a good day."

"Wait." She grabs my arm. "Don't leave me alone yet."

"Um, okay..."

"Can I ask you something?"

I nod. "Sure."

"Do you ever miss our friendship?"

“What do you mean?”

“Come on, Scarlett.” She crosses her arms. “Surely you remember that there was once a time when we were each other’s ride or die besties, two peas in a pod who both hated everything about the mommy vlogger world.”

“That was a long time ago, Tully.” I pause. “We’ll always be sisters, no matter what.”

“I would prefer it if we were best friends again, though.” Her voice cracks. “I could use one of those these days.”

I raise an eyebrow. The most we spoke this summer was via email, and it was all about contracts and her social media plans.

She asked me about London twice.

“Your bestie, Jessica Reid, is attending school here too, right?” I ask.

“She is, but...” Tears are welling in her eyes. “She was just using me all this time...She dropped me once I told her I wanted to hold back on shopping and eating out so much. It took me all this time to realize I was paying for everything, and...”

She doesn’t finish that sentence.

“Anyway, I want us to go back to taking long weekend drives like we used to,” she says. “I know you have some intense band rehearsal and classes, and my schedule is pretty packed, so I’m thinking we can start doing that after the third game day. Just me and you.”

Right... “Are you dying or something?”

“Oh my god, no.” She laughs. “I just want us to be friends again.”

I can’t tell if she really believes what she’s saying, or if she’s been drinking.

“This summer made me realize that all the followers in the world don’t mean anything if you can’t think of a single person to call in the middle of the night when you’re having a mental breakdown.”

I nod, unsure of what she expects me to say.

“I can’t even talk to my boyfriend. He won’t even *kiss* me,” she says. “Between now and when we talk, can you try to find the reasoning behind that in one of your psychology books?”

“Um...” I shake my head. “We need to talk about Easton, Tully.”

“No, we don’t.” She shakes her head. “I only want to focus on the things that can be fixed in my life.”

“Why do we have to wait until the third game day to hang out then?”

“Because I’ll get dropped from the squad if I miss any events in the first

month,” she says, looking somewhat wistful. “There are hundreds of girls who want to be on the team and I can’t risk them taking my spot. That, and I want to make sure I spend as much time as possible with my *real* best friend.”

She hugs me and my entire body stiffens at the unfamiliar contact. Confused, I lift my hands and softly return her embrace. “Okay, Tully,” I say. “Third game day it is...”



I MANAGE to evade four drunk guys, an invitation to an off-campus bonfire, and a freshman rap battle on the way back to the lakeside building.

There’s a free “Welcome to College” pizza party” that’s taking place in the recreation center, but I’m not in the mood to meet any new people.

Not yet, anyway.

Slipping into my room, I flop onto my bed and call Kevin.

“I don’t answer my phone for Southern bumpkins anymore,” he answers on the first ring. “I’ve moved on to more sophisticated pastures.”

“I love you, too.” I laugh. “You have no reason to be at the University of Pittsburgh this fall. You should be here with me.”

“Nah, it’s nice to finally be someplace where every stranger doesn’t want to talk about college football or randomly say—”

“*Roll Tide!*”

“Don’t make me hang up on you.”

“I was hoping you’d hate Pittsburgh the day you arrived and come running back here,” I say. “You actually like it, though?”

“I *love* it,” he says. “You have to come see me on winter break so I can show you how many bridges they’ve squeezed into this city.”

“I’ll think about coming.” I smile. “Tell me about the campus.”

I lay back and shut my eyes as he paints pictures of a place that seems too good to be true, but before I know it, his new friends are begging him to go to someplace called Primanti Brothers, so we say our goodbyes and vow to talk later.

I pull a blanket over my chest and put on my headphones.

Staring at the ceiling, I contemplate the pros and cons of giving in and going to that pizza party, but a sound I haven't heard in months suddenly interrupts my thoughts.

Tap! Tap! Tappp!

Certain I've imagined it, I turn up my music, but the tapping sound comes again.

I sit up and look over at my window.

Easton?

I walk over to the pane, feeling my heart race at the sight of him dressed in a muscle shirt and jeans.

He motions for me to push up the pane and I quickly oblige.

"Hi..." I say. "How did you know I was here?"

He steps closer, reaching out and running his fingers through my hair.

"Better yet," I say, "How did you find out what dorm building I was in? I haven't told you yet."

"You didn't have to." He smiles and my heart skips a beat. "I could've sworn you told me that you weren't coming back until this weekend, though. Didn't you tell me that?"

"I can't remember."

"Clearly. Well, imagine how surprised I was to see you walking in the food court earlier..." He's still smiling, making me realize the view I've missed all spring and summer. "I had to sit there and listen to some of my new teammates talk about what's mine, and I'm quite disappointed that you lied to me."

"Are you planning to come inside my room or stand out there and preach to me?"

"It's bad enough that I haven't seen you in months," he says, still talking, "but when I think about the fact that I've also suffered every night without you and you denied me when you got here, I'm not sure how to feel."

"Okay, Easton." I grab the edge of the pane, playfully shutting it.

Laughing, he pushes it open with ease and climbs inside my bedroom.

Without saying a word, he walks over to my door and locks it.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Thinking of all the ways you can make this betrayal up to me." He pulls me flush against his chest, presses his lips against mine.

"Did you miss me?" he whispers.

"Not really." I lie.

He slides his hand under my skirt and presses a finger against my panties, which are already soaking wet.

“I told you how I feel about lies.” He smirks. “I guess I need to show you what happens when you do that.”

My back hits the wall and he presses his mouth against my neck.

I moan as he tears my cheap t-shirt open, exposing my chest and stomach.

He kisses a heated trail between my breasts, all the way down to the hem of my skirt.

Unzipping it, he watches it fall to the floor, and then he kisses his way up to my mouth.

Shutting my eyes, I give in to his kiss, to the lips I’ve missed for far too long.

As he’s owning my mouth, I hear him unwrapping a condom.

Then I feel him pushing my panties to the side.

“Look at me, Scarlett...” he commands, and I oblige.

Without another word, he slides into me in one hard thrust.

“Oh Godddd.....” I moan as he fucks me like it's the first time, like he can't get enough of me, like it'll never be enough and before I know it, I'm already coming.

Sliding out of me, he grabs my waist and spins me around.

“Grab the edge of the window...”

I bend over and he slides into me from behind and it almost knocks all the breath out of my lungs.

“Don't let go.” He slaps my ass and thrusts into me harder.

From the way he's fucking me, I know he has no plans to stop anytime soon.

I don't want him to...

He suddenly grips my waist as he reaches his release, kissing the back of my neck as he comes.

Still breathing hard, he slides out of me and pulls me onto my bed.



“LET'S GO SOMEWHERE.” Easton whispers against my lips after my

fourth orgasm.

“Now?”

“Yes.” He runs his fingers through my hair. “Right now.”

“It’s kind of soon, isn’t it?” I look into his eyes. “I mean, I’m sure most people will assume I’m Tully, but if we run into anyone who knows her or mentions—”

“I’m not taking ‘No; for an answer,” he says, “but if you want to stand there and give me every excuse in your arsenal so I can have all of them, please be my guest.”

He kisses me before I can say another word, and before I know it, I’m following him outside and into his car.

With the windows rolled down, he caresses my hand behind the gear shift as the night air blows against my skin.

“Stop thinking so much, Scarlett,” he whispers.

“I’m not thinking at all.”

“It’s four in the morning and if anyone on this campus is awake right now, they’re not heading anywhere we are. Trust me.”

“Okay.” I let out a breath and try to focus on the moment.

On us.

An hour later, he’s pulling past his house and into our old hangout spot, but it looks far different from how I remembered it.

In place of the old shack is a beautiful, black A-frame cabin, complete with a tin hot tub on its deck and two grey hammocks on its side.

“Whenever I wasn’t practicing with the football team this summer, I worked on this,” he says. “I came here every time I thought of you.”

“How often was that?”

“Every fucking day.” He trails a finger against my lips. “Coach said we have forty eight hours before we have to completely lock in and focus on the season. I need to spend all that time with you. Preferably right here.”

I look up at the cabin again, stunned at the details.

“Something wrong?” he asks.

“Yeah...I’m feeling extremely guilty right now,” I say.

“Why?”

“The only thing I brought you back from London is custom tea.”

He lets out a low laugh. “I got an umbrella and some pajamas in the mail from you last week, too. That’s good enough, but I don’t think that’s what you’re really thinking about.”

It's not... “It’s silly, but I have to ask you something.”

“The answer is no, Scarlett.”

“Have you slept with anyone else since I’ve been gone?” I ask the question anyway. “I’ve read comments and seen things online, and I trust you, but there’s just a small part of me that—”

“I haven’t slept with anyone else since you.” He kisses my lips and unbuckles my seatbelt. “And we’re about to make up for several months of lost time.”

EASTON



*Quarterback Easton Rush STUNS in Season Opener
Alabama Has Never (EVER!) Looked Better
In Rush We Trust! 410 Completion Yards for Easton!*

The national, local, and school level headlines are what I've dreamed of for years. The adrenaline rush I feel each time I run out of the tunnel and into a stadium full of crimson and white dressed fans on game day is utter magic.

The first weeks of the semester are falling into a predictable pattern that only needs one deletion to be perfect.

There's practice, practice, practice, content with Tully, class, class, and more practice. And then every night ends with me climbing through Scarlett's window, sliding under her sheets and making sure she knows that she's the love of my life.

She always will be.

With every day that passes, it's becoming harder and harder for me to put on a convincing show with her sister.

ME



A couple weeks later

“Do you think Easton Rush is a good fuck?” The redheaded flute player ahead of me asks. “Like, on a scale of one to ten, how good do you think he is in bed?”

“Um...”

“He’s dating your sister, so you *have* to know.” She leans closer. “Twins tell each other everything, so I’m sure she’s told you *something* about his bedroom skills.”

“He’s probably a nine on an off-night.” The flute player on her left laughs. “He’s in my Psychology lecture hall this afternoon, so I’ll take some more secret shots of his bulge and let you know.”

“Has he caught you doing that yet?”

“No, but her sister shot me a glare the other day because she knew what I was doing.” She’s still laughing. “To be fair, I would probably be protective as fuck as well if I was bound to be his wife someday.”

“You haven’t answered my question yet, Scarlett.” The redhead waves a hand in front of my face. “How good do you think he is in bed?”

“I have no idea.” I force a smile. “He’s not mine.”

“He’s not ours either, so that’s why we’re speculating...Have you seen the video he and Tully put up last night?” She continues talking to the other girl, rendering me invisible. “He treated her to some private restaurant I’ve never even heard of, and it looked expensive.”

“He’s probably never breaking up with her, but a girl can keep snapping crotch pics and dreaming...”

As they laugh, I pull out my phone.

I'm telling Tully about us this weekend...Right after the game.

EASTON

I thought we agreed to do that together?

I need to do it myself first. There's a lot she needs to hear from me personally.

EASTON

You'll come to my room when you're done?

If you don't beat me to it and climb through my window first.

EASTON

Good point. I'll come over around midnight.



THE FOLLOWING SATURDAY AFTERNOON, I stuff my band uniform into its plastic wrapper and smooth the hat's crimson plume.

Our home crowd is still roaring in the stadium behind me, as if today's game isn't long over. It's another Alabama win in the books, which means getting out of this parking lot will require a delicate dance of dodging the drunk and the rowdy.

"Here's my set." I hold out the bag to my section leader. "Can you mark that I've turned it in?"

"No. I'll do that when we get back to our facility, as usual." She points to the bus. "Takeoff is in fifteen minutes, Crane."

"I'm not riding back with the band today," I say. "I have somewhere to be."

"Please don't make me give you a demerit this early in the season." She sighs. "You're like the most talented player I've ever met, and I need you to

show some leadership. I want to nominate you for section leader someday.”

“It’s important,” I say. “I promise it’s just a one time thing,”

“Is it a matter a of ‘life or death’?”

“If I’m still alive tomorrow, I’ll let you know.”

“Okay.” She smiles. “I’ll let you get away with this one time, but never again. Clear?”

“Clear. Thank you.” I cross through the parking lot, wading through waves of “Roll Tide!” in search of Tully.

“Hey!” She jumps off the hood of our car and hugs me tightly. “I’m so glad you came! I thought you were going to forget.”

“I don’t see how. You’ve sent me reminder messages all week.”

“Right, well.” She laughs nervously. “You never know these days, but I guess that’s why we’re sisters. We never let each other down when it matters.”

What the hell is going on with her?

“Really, Tully,” I say. “Are you dying?”

“Let’s take the scenic route to Gayle’s.” She ignores my question and slides behind the wheel, and I follow her into the car.

The ride to the diner is silent, save for the occasional car of screaming fans that we pass on the road.

While riding past a wheat crop, I take out my phone and log into her personal cloud. There are no new updates or medical files, and her last check-up was normal.

So, she’s simply lost her mind these days...

When we make it inside the diner, we stare at each other behind towers of cinnamon brushed waffles and strawberries.

After several minutes of silence, we talk about our classes, small things we love about Alabama’s campus, and walk along our usual boundaries of stranger talk.

She tries not to let our conversation stall for too long, and she looks at me like she’s really trying to be friends again.

For a moment, I feel like we could possibly start over here, and perhaps I can wait to tell her about Easton, but I can’t delay the inevitable anymore.

She needs to know, and I need her to know.

No matter how much it hurts...



AN HOUR LATER, I carry our to-go bags to the car with Tully and take a deep breath before she pulls onto the road.

“I need to tell you something, Tully,” I say. “It’s something that I’ve wanted to tell you for a very long time.”

“Okay. I’m listening.”

“I’m in love with Easton.” I rip off the Band-Aid. “I’ve been in love with him for quite some time, and he’s in love with me, too.”

She snorts. “Be serious. What exactly do you need to tell me?”

“This is it.” I look over at her. “I’ve been dating him behind your back for over a year now.”

“*What?*” She slams her foot on the brake. “Stop messing with me, Scarlett. This isn’t funny.”

“I’m not joking.” I keep my voice firm as my heart clenches in my chest. “I can’t go more than a day without thinking about him, and I get sick—literally fucking sick, whenever I see you two together because he belongs to me and your relationship is just one of convenience.”

The words are flowing past the filters of my mind. They’re unmeasured and heavy, and tears are now pricking my eyes.

“I never meant to fall for him because I never thought he was my type, but one conversation for our group project led to another, and before I knew it, he was climbing through my window every night.” I can’t stop talking. “I’d overheard you tell Jessica that you felt like he was more of a friend than your boyfriend most of the time, and that you wondered if you would still be together if it weren’t for the sponsorships.”

Glaring at me, she grips the steering wheel so hard that the bones of her knuckles begin to show.

“If you still want to know the answer to that,” I say, “it’s no. You wouldn’t be together, because he would be with me...I’m in love with him, and before this season is over, he and I are going to be together.”

Silence.

“Is that all you have to say?” Her voice is terse.

“No. That’s it.”

“Okay,” she says. “Get the fuck out of the car.”

“No.”

“Fine.” She unbuckles her seatbelt. “*I’ll* get out.”

She steps out and slams the door shut.

I unbuckle my seatbelt and rush after her. “Come back here, Tully!” I yell, but she’s running away.

I catch up to her at a stop sign and grab her arm, but she pushes me away.

“Let’s get back to campus,” I say. “We can talk about this after you calm down.”

“*Calm down?*” She hisses. “You want me to calm down after all the shit you just threw on me?”

“Yes.” I keep my voice flat. “I also want you to refrain from acting like a victim.”

“*Excuse me?*”

“You can be upset and curse at me all you want, for as long as you want, but you’re not a victim in this.”

“Are you?”

“No one is.”

“I can assure you, *Scarlett Cressida May Crane*, that you’re the fucking villain in this, and I regret ever trying to reconnect with you.” She pushes my chest. *Hard.*

“Wait a minute...” She narrows her eyes. “Did you fuck him?”

“Tully, look.”

“Answer me.” She pushes me again. “Have you been fucking my boyfriend behind my back, too?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“*Have you been fucking him?!*” She yells. “It’s a yes or no question, so *tell me.* Tell me right the hell now.”

“Yes.”

“Wow.” She shakes her head. “You’re a fucking snake.”

“And you’re a bitch, but I’ve never held it against you.”

“When I tell all my friends what you’ve done—”

“You don’t have any friends.” I cut her off. “I’m sure they have a completely different story as to why that is, because I don’t believe your version at all.”

“Mark my words.” She moves closer to me. “You’re in for a world of hurt.”

“That's fitting since no one has ever hurt me as much as you.”

“Whatever.” She scoffs. “What exactly do you expect to happen once you're supposedly *with* my boyfriend?”

“I literally just told you.”

“Oh, okay.” She crosses her arms. “You don't think people are going to be the slightest bit confused when my twin sister is with my boyfriend?”

“Ex-boyfriend,” I say. “I don't care what other people think.”

“You say that now, but you know what? Since we're sharing hurtful-ass secrets, you want to know something I've been keeping from you?”

“No.”

“Tough shit.” She looks into my eyes. “Regardless of what you said about not thinking he was your type, I knew you *liked* Easton. I saw the way you looked at him on the bleachers during our sophomore and junior years, and I snuck into your room one night and flipped through your little stationery trunk...”

My blood suddenly runs cold.

“I read all those dumbass letters you write, but never send to people, and I read all about how you wished you had the courage to tell him you were into him, that despite your differences, you felt something whenever he was around.” She pauses. “I made my move on him the next day, and just so you know, I had his cock in my mouth first...Your getting my sloppy seconds.”

I suck in a breath and try to remain stoic, but it's impossible.

Her words have cut me to the bone. “Is that all you have to say?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I wish I would've told you that sooner...I *hate* you, Scarlett.”

“I hate you too, Tully.”

We stare at each other, teary eyed and numb, our hearts bloodied and bruised, our minds spinning in ways we don't bother to explain.

She walks to the car first, and I follow.

Without speaking another word, she cranks the engine and drives toward campus.

I stare straight ahead, wondering if we'll ever speak again after tonight.

As she's rounding the corner that leads into our county, a pair of blinding headlights shine a little too close to our car.

And they keep getting closer...

CRACKKKKKKKK! HISS!

I hear the crash before I realize I'm a part of it.

Something white hits my face as our car careens and spins out of control. We both scream as the windshield shatters, as shards of glass fly everywhere.

Smoke and flames are all I can see in front of us, and in the distance I can hear someone yelling.

What was that?

I hear more screams, and then a loud whistling sound.

Still in shock, I look to my left and notice two red and white sticks moving down.

The sticks stop moving and then they begin blinking.

We're stuck on a set of train tracks...

No, no, no...

I need to open my door and get out, but I can't move.

"Scarlett?" Tully cries. "Scarlett, can you hear me?"

I stare ahead at our mangled dashboard, at the blood that's smeared along the leather.

Everything dissolves into a blur.

And then my entire world is black.

TULLY



“**S**carlett, can you hear me?” I press my thumb against her neck, waiting to feel a pulse. “*Scarlett?*”

I lay my head against her chest, but I hear nothing.
She’s gone.

PART 6

SOME LIES ARE BETTER THAN THE TRUTH



Question:

If you were forced to choose between hurting the person you love most and losing them once they know the truth, **or** breaking things off to spare their feelings and save them from ever knowing the truth, which would you pick?

- **A)** Because honesty always wins, no matter what. (And hey, they might come back to you someday)
- **B)** Because they'll never look at you the same if they find out, and you don't want to hurt them harder.

Answer:

B.

They don't deserve to know how horrible of a person you are.

TULLY



“**D**runk driver.” “I heard he was going one-twenty in the sixty before the train hit the back of their car.” “We need to talk to their parents about their survival chances once we’re out of the O.R.”

I’m straining to hear the words around me, but they’re all faint.

Every muscle in my body is numb, and I’m trying to figure out why the floor under me is moving so damn fast.

Where am I?

I struggle to open my eyes, but the view doesn’t look familiar.

The lights above me are bright white and they’re moving as fast as the floor. Masked faces surround me, and now they’re shouting at each other.

“Scarlett Crane is in Room Two, we need to move Tully Crane to Room Four!”

An image of my sister bleeding in the front seat suddenly flashes across my mind.

“Excuse me...” I attempt to speak. “Where is...Where is my sister?”

Beep! Beep! Beeeep!

The masked faces suddenly cover my face with a blue bubble and my world turns black again.

EASTON



Hey. How did Tully react when you told her about us?
Did you change your mind about doing that tonight?

I refresh my inbox for the hundredth time before setting it down on the grass.

Sirens have been blaring all over town for over half an hour, so I decide to head somewhere quiet.

Walking into the athletic complex, I hold out my student ID, but the security guard doesn't take it.

"You have to scan this for the door to open, Max." I smile at him. "Remember? They changed the system last week and you joked with me and my teammates about it."

"*Dude...*" He sighs. "Please tell me you're only here as some type of weird coping tool because I'm not good when it comes to talking about sad shit."

"I can scan it against the machine myself, if you push it a bit closer."

"*Easton.*" He stands up from his chair, looking as if he's seen a ghost. "You know, right?"

"Max, I'm a little too tired to joke with you right now. I came here to get some peace and quiet."

"Your girlfriend and her sister were in a really bad accident tonight." The words rush out of his mouth. "They had to use the jaws of life to get them out

of the car.”

“*What?*”

“It’s all over social media...” he says. “Haven’t you seen it?”

EASTON



I make it to the hospital in fifteen minutes flat. The waiting room is a sea of crimson red, every chair occupied by fellow students and teammates. “Hey son.” Coach walks over to me. “I was just about to call you.” “How bad is it?” I ask. “I don’t think I’m the right person to tell you.” “*How fucking bad is it?*” I need to know now. “They’re both in critical condition,” he says, “They have them in an adjoining room, and that’s the last I heard.” “Where is this room?” I start to walk past him, but he grabs my arm. “They’re not allowed to have visitors, and even then, it’ll only be with the parents’ permission.” “Where are their parents, then?” “Their parents don’t know yet.” “How is that possible?” “They’re on a flight right now,” he says. “Police are going to notify them whenever they land. That’s all I know right now son.” My world falls apart in an instant, and I slump into a chair. I wonder if this is my fault, if maybe they argued about me when Scarlett revealed the truth. Even though I overhear the whispers about the culprit being a drunk driver, a man who is “also in critical condition,” my heart feels like lead. For hours, I see people coming and going, hear people asking questions that are asked yet never answered. Before I know it, Scarlett’s mother is kneeling in front of me and clasping my hand.

“They're in a shared recovery room, Easton,” she says, “The seventh floor, 713. You can go see them whenever you're ready.”



IF THE LAMINATED identification charts weren't hanging from the end of their beds, there would be no way to tell the difference between Scarlett and Tully.

They're both wrapped head to toe in bandages, with metal splints protruding from their legs and tubes flowing from their mouths to massive machines.

A nurse is adjusting an IV bag and writing down a few notes. Her eyes meet mine and she averts her gaze.

She tries to walk past me, but I gently grab her hand.

“Wait,” I say. “Can I ask you something?”

“Depends on what it is.”

“On a scale of one to ten, how bad are their injuries?”

“Sir, I don't think that's something I can say. You'd need to ask for their parents' permission and then the doctors would have to—”

“Just fucking tell me.” I cut her off. “You don't have to give me exact facts, just give me an idea.”

She looks over at the beds and sighs. “Without being too specific, one of the girls is a ten.”

“And the other?”

“The other girl is a *twenty*...and that's if she's lucky.” She walks away without saying anything else.

Letting out a breath, I set a bouquet of flowers next to Tully's bed. Then I walk over to Scarlett's, placing her favorite rose bloom on her nightstand before sitting next to her.

“Don't fucking leave me...” I say. “We're supposed to finally be together this year.”

There's no answer from her lips. Just the soft buzzing and humming from the machines.

Undaunted, I place a hand over her casted wrist.

“Let’s pretend I climbed through your window tonight,” I say. “I have a hypothetical question for you...”

37.5

EASTON



Two Weeks Later

Rush(less): Alabama Earns Narrow Victory Without Star QB; No Updates on Girlfriend's Injury Status

Easton Rush Should Play in His Girlfriend's Honor Instead of Giving Into His Emotions

Will Easton Rush Play in Week Three?

EASTON



“**W**hy hasn’t anyone given us any new updates today?” I glare at the doctor on a Friday morning. “All the staff has done is adjust the settings on these fucking machines.”

He sighs. “Mr. Rush—”

“Don’t you dare say the same shit you said an hour ago,” I say. “I’m tired of hearing that.”

“Both of these young ladies are very lucky to be alive,” he repeats his usual words anyway. “I’ve run through their list of injuries, and as a football player, surely you know that we’re not looking at a quick recovery.”

“Are we looking at *any* fucking recovery?”

He sighs and scribbles on his clipboard. Then he tears off a sheet and hands it to me.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“A prescription for some sedation medication. The pharmacist is on the first floor.”

“With all due respect, Doctor—” I crumple the paper. “Football and medication don’t go together.”

“You’re not playing football, though. You haven’t played in weeks.”

Bullshit. “I played last week, and I have a game against Clemson tomorrow.”

He furrows his brow. Then he places a hand against my forehead.

“Easton Rush...” He speaks slowly, enunciating every syllable in my name. “The game against Clemson was two weeks ago. You haven’t left the hospital since you got here, son.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes. It is.” He looks alarmed. “Your coach sent one of his interns here with clothes, your teammates brought practice footage, and your father has stopped by every night to check on you. Do you recall any of those things?”

“Yes.” I lie.

“Well, today is Friday,” he says. “Just in case you’re wondering.”

“Who are we playing tomorrow?”

“Ole Miss,” he says. “Why?”

I don’t answer.

I look over to where Mr. & Mrs. Crane are sitting on the couch, both engrossed in their cell phones.

They’ve been far too embroiled in arguments to say much of anything outside of “Hey there, Easton,” and “It’s another pretty fall day outside, huh?” to me. Despite the brewing animosity, their mother has not-so-subtly vlogged from their bedside in tears—focusing on her feelings, not their condition—and their father has started a multi-million dollar GoFundMe account.

He bought a brand new Jaguar last week.

“I’ll be back tomorrow afternoon,” I say, kissing the bandage around Scarlett’s forehead. “I promised to beat the hell out of Ole Miss since they didn’t accept you...”

“You’re still mixing the twins up, Easton,” the doctor says. “Tully is the one on the left.”

“I’m well aware of that ...”

TULLY



Five Weeks Later

“Can you see me, Miss Crane?” A nurse waves a hand in front of my face. “Can you blink once for yes and two for no?”

I try to blink, but I’m not sure if it’s working.

“That’s okay.” She smiles. “We’ll try again tomorrow.”

She leaves the room and I stare across the room at my sister.

Her condition is worsening with each passing day.

Despite opening her eyes every now and then, it’s clear that she isn’t improving. The universe is allowing her to cling onto life’s edges to give us all a sense of false hope.



“HOW MUCH LONGER SHOULD WE keep her on life support if she doesn’t improve per the schedule?” my father whispers to my mother. “She wouldn’t want to live like this.”

“We’ll talk about it in a few months. It’s not just her I’m worried about, remember?”

“Just say a few months then.” He sighs. “And please stop feeding updates about Tully to social media. It’s not fair to Easton.”

“I have to make sure her accounts stay active so her followers won’t forget about her.” She pauses. “And so they’ll keep donating.”

“I think we have enough by now.”

“That’s rich coming from you.”

“Is this for your online followers’ best interest or hers?”

“Excuse me for not wanting to rip my daughter from the world so quickly.” My mother snaps. “I’m sorry I can’t be more like you and stick my dick in a mistress whenever I have problems.”

Silence.

“Yes I know all about you fucking Renee Davis this year,” she says. “You can keep screwing her for all I care and run off to whatever plans you two have made together, but you can’t do it until after the girls recover and their accounts are active for six months.”

“What?”

“I need to make sure I have enough content to stretch out past their discharge date.”

“You’re a real piece of work, Hannah.”

“I know. I’m a fucking masterpiece.”

EASTON



SCARLETT

I hate the way you look at me in between classes. You make it so effin obvious.

Do you have to tap that hard on my window? I know it's you...

Why can't you stay away from me? Better yet, why can't I stay away from you?

I'm officially losing my mind. I'm sitting in a chair next to Scarlett and reading our text message threads from last year.

Still dressed in my football uniform, I couldn't care any less about today's record breaking 75-12 win. I hit the field, played my best, and hauled ass to get back to her side.

"Please say something, Scarlett," I caress her hand. "*Please.*"

Her response is the same as always.

Silence.

The only other noise in this room is the steady beeping from the machines.

"Well, well, well. I should've known," a deep voice says, making me look up. "But I guess I needed to see it with my own eyes."

Jeremiah is standing in the doorway, holding a bouquet of roses. He steps inside and sets them on Tully's table.

"It took me a minute to figure this out, but you're the 'on and off again boyfriend' that Scarlett told me about, right?"

"Yes."

“Figures...” He takes off a backpack and places it on the couch. “Your clothes for this week are in there. You’re welcome.”

“Thanks. Did you bring Coach’s notes from today’s game, too?”

“You’re joking, right?”

“No.” I let go of Scarlett’s hand. “I could use a good distraction.”

“Dude you had an eighty eight percent completion rate today,” he says. “The only thing Coach said about you was ‘leave him the fuck alone.’”

“Noted.”

He looks over at Tully and sighs. “I hope you’re talking to her as well while you’re here.”

“I am.” I nod. “I tell how her fucking sorry I am for not telling her the truth every day...”



THE NEXT DAY, I force myself to walk around the hospital’s campus. I’m in desperate need of fresh air and conversation.

The only people I find are doctors smoking near the delivery dock, though. Even then, they’re engrossed in conversations about surgeries, and I need a break from that, too.

I head toward the freight elevator that leads to where all the janitors hangout, but a woman’s shrill cry stops me dead in my tracks.

Rounding the corner, I spot her banging her head against a vending machine and arguing with a police officer.

“My son can't stay here for one more day?” She cries. “Surely there are more tests that need to be done.”

“The doctors say he’s cleared and fine, so no.” The cop’s voice is flat.

“I’m his mother and I’m telling you that he’s *not* fine. And I really don’t appreciate such short notice regarding an arrest. It’s not necessary.”

“Ma'am, your son nearly killed two people, and one of those people is connected to one of the most high profile college players we’ve had in years... He's lucky he only has a concussion and a few fractured bones. He’s also lucky that no one from the university knows where he’s been recovering all this time.”

My blood begins to simmer.

The elevator doors glide open, but I don't get into the car. Instead, I step back and lean against the wall.

“*Nearly* killed,” she says. “That means those two young ladies are going to be alright after they recover, correct?”

“That's something that only the sheriff and the prosecutor know at this time.”

“But *you're* the sheriff, sir. My son didn't kill anyone. It was an accident.”

“His blood alcohol level was six times the legal limit.” The sheriff's voice is terse. “They had to pump his fucking stomach before they could get him into surgery.”

“He still didn't kill anyone.” She pleads. “What if those girls were drinking too? I bet they were at the same party he was and the spiked punch snuck up on them, too.”

“Stop talking, Miss. You need to focus on getting your son one hell of a lawyer. We're fulfilling the arrest warrant in Room 236 at noon.”

The officer's footsteps trail down the hall, and the woman holds her cell phone up to her ear.

I don't stick around to listen to her conversation.

I take the elevator to the second floor.

When the doors open, I walk down the hall and stop at Room 236.

I know I shouldn't be here, that I should turn around and walk away, but I can't. I need to get a glimpse of the guy who's ruined all of our lives.

Letting out a breath, I open the door and step inside the room,

A blond guy who looks about my age is sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing a “Top Dawg” t-shirt.

“I asked you for more Jell-O an hour ago.” He groans, not looking up at me. “Are you here to tell me you don't have any more?”

“No.” I step closer. “That's not why I'm here.”

“Well, could you make yourself useful and see what the hell is going on with my lunch?”

“Nah, I can't do that.” I step closer. “I don't work here.”

“Then get out and empty my trash on the way out.”

“Okay.” I close the gap between us. “That's a very good way to word things.”

He finally looks up at me, squinting through slightly swollen eyes.

On his wristband, there's a yellow sticker, and I know from several

conversations that it means he's in good condition. He can walk if he chooses to.

He can blink, talk, and eat without the aid of any machine.

He's placed Scarlett two steps from the grave, but he's practically unscathed...

"No need to hover over me for the trash can," he says to me. "It's over there, dude."

"No, it's right here." I punch him square in the jaw. The impact knocks him off the bed and onto the floor.

I stomp him repeatedly as he tries to get up, cursing him, hating him.

Stooping down to his level, I pummel his face with my fists, and his blood colors my fingers.

"Please, stop! Help! Help Me!" He cries for mercy, but I don't show him any.

Every time he screams, I hit him harder. Any time he attempts to get away, I stomp his chest.

I'm not sure when a security guard runs into the room to try to get between us, but it takes four more of them to get me to stop.

He's barely breathing by then.

EASTON



*Alabama's Star Quarterback, Easton Rush, Charged with Attempted Murder;
Held Without Bail*

University of Alabama Issues 'No Comment' on Easton Rush's Team Status

*Unapologetic: Easton Rush Shows No Remorse in Strangling Drunk Driver
Who Hit Girlfriend*

TULLY



Four Weeks Later

I open my eyes, shocked that Easton isn't in our room today.

For some strange reason, it feels like he hasn't been here in a while, and this room is a bit more elegant and softer than the one we were in before.

Ever since I regained consciousness weeks ago, I can't tell the morning from afternoon, and the "forced walking" that the nurse makes me do every day leaves me exhausted and drained for hours.

The one thing I can't forget though, is the last argument we had. The pain and the guilt gnaw at my heart every fucking day.

If we'd been on better terms, we would've never had to go to Gayle's that night. We would've never argued and danced with death.

No matter how many ways I try to spin it, the truth is evident to me: One argument pretty much costs us our lives.

All over a fucking guy...

Sitting up in bed, I spot my sister's foot moving and immediately hit the "call nurse" button.

"Yes, Miss Crane?" Her voice sifts through the speaker.

"My sister is moving!" I say. "She's finally waking up."

She rushes inside and I point to the bed.

"Oh, Miss Crane." She shoots me a sympathetic smile. "I've told you about this before. It's just an involuntary muscle twitch."

Oh...

"It is time for me to check her vitals, though."

I nod, and watch the routine, noticing that they've added more tests and tubes, not less. They've wheeled her through multiple operations and her frail and helpless body remains the same day after day.

It's like they're cruelly allowing her to hold onto life as well.

When the nurse leaves, my sister's foot twitches again.

That's definitely not involuntary...

Grabbing onto my bed rails, I take my time climbing out of my bed and into a wheelchair. Then I roll over to her.

"Are you awake?" I ask. "Are you moving your leg on your own?"

Nothing.

I sigh, but her eyes slowly open and shut.

"Can you see me?"

She blinks.

"Are you trying to talk?"

She blinks again.

"Okay, wait." I roll over to a chair and pick up a notepad. I write out the letters of the alphabet in three rows, and roll back over to her side.

"Don't struggle to talk," I say. "Just blink when I have the right letter, okay?"

She blinks, and I smile.

"Is the first letter a vowel?"

Yes.

"Okay, good," I say. "I'm going to point all those out one by one..."

She falls asleep after giving me two letters, but hours later she awakes and gives me one more.

It takes a week, because on some days she doesn't wake up at all and the doctors have to run more tests, but she manages to spell out a message.

I need a favor. Letters.

EASTON



The handcuffs on my wrists are too loose.

The officer who fastened them kept looking as if he was embarrassed to do so.

I refuse to complain about that, though...

I'm currently sitting in the inmate phone bank, across from Scarlett and Tully's father, separated by glass. I've rejected most visitor requests with the exception of my dad and my lawyer, and I'm grateful that the local news is banned on all the jail's televisions.

"We may have to consider some specialty care for Scarlett given something that came to light this morning." His voice is soft. "I mean, she's not a complete vegetable and we won't know all our options just yet, but... Tully is able to move around more now. I figured you'd want to know."

I say nothing.

"Our entire town and the university is on your side," he says. "You had a totally normal reaction in defending someone you loved."

"This new prosecutor is just trying to make a name for herself. She'll never get support from anyone after this, and the new guy will definitely get you out of here if the trial doesn't do it first."

"I think me being in here is for the best."

"You need to be playing on that field, son. That's what's best for you and your future."

"I don't have a future." I shake my head holding back tears at the thought of not having more days with Scarlett. "I don't have anything to live for anymore."

"Don't say that," he says. "I doubt there's any jury who will convict you

once you plead not guilty and go to trial.”

“I *am* pleading guilty,” I say. “My lawyer worked out a deal for three to ten on assault charges. Medium security prison. That beats risking a jury and a mandatory twenty five to thirty murder charge in Angola Prison.”

“What? Are you out of your fucking mind?”

“I really did try to kill him,” I say. “I wanted him to die.”

“Don’t say that, son...”

“He took away the only thing I had left to live for.” I shrug. “I won’t lie on a stand about being sorry.”

“Easton, listen to me.”

“Thank you for the update on Scarlett and Tully,” I say. “If you ever want to talk about anything else, write to me from here on out, okay? I don’t want anyone visiting me in prison.”

“Easton, wait.”

“*Guard!*” I hang up the phone and stand to my feet.

“Easton, wait!”

The guard unlocks the door that leads back to the jail and I walk away.

**Two Months later**

Dear Mother,

We took you off our approved visitors' list today.

*Our lives are not content, and we're worth so much more than likes,
comments, and clicks.*

*We will call you when we wish to see you, and you are not allowed to bring
your cell phone anywhere near us because we don't trust you.*

*The university is allowing us to defer our scholarships until we're ready to
return, so we plan to move in to a house together for awhile.*

*Please respect our wishes & tell Dad to expect a similar letter soon (if he's
not too busy with his mistress, that is)*

Sincerely,

Tully & Scarlett

I enclose the letter into an envelope and secure a stamp onto its front. There are several more letters I have to send on behalf of my sister, but there's one I can no longer ignore...



Dear Easton,
All this time, all this fucking time, I guess I was always meant to be collateral damage, a means to an end so you could move on in life with my sister.

MY. SISTER.

If she dies, I want you to know that you'll have just as much blood on your hands as that reckless drunk driver since we were arguing about you seconds before the crash.

I don't know why I'm even writing you this letter.

Tully

DEAR TULLY,

First, it's good to hear from you and nice to know that Scarlett is still on this side of the ground.

Second, I'm sorry if I made you feel you were collateral damage.

I fell in love with Scarlett without realizing it, and I should have told you that, but we were already trapped in a web of sponsorships & obligations.

I didn't believe you would understand, and Scarlett didn't either.

If I could go back and do things differently, I would.

If you can't be civil with me, that's fine.

Just send me updates on Scarlett.

Sincerely,

Easton

DEAR TULLY,

It's been a month since I sent you my last letter. Please give me an update on Scarlett.

Sincerely,
Easton

DEAR EASTON,

One of her kidneys failed, and she slipped into a coma...

I found a few letters Scarlett wrote to you but never sent. Do you want those? I'll send you other updates as I'm able to.

Tully

PS: Did you ever have feelings for me? Any at all?

PPS: I didn't mean what I said about blood on your hands in my last letter, but I'm feeling a deep sense of guilt and regret that our last conversation was about a guy.

DEAR TULLY,

Yes, please send me the letters that Scarlett wrote for me.

Is she alert and out of the coma yet? How is she?

Sincerely,
Easton.

PS: I liked you, Tully, but our relationship was just a business to me. I'll always be in love with Scarlett.



Dear Easton,
Thank you for being honest.
Scarlett's letters are enclosed.
Tully

DEAR EASTON,

If you're reading this letter, it means that I sent it on a terrible day without thinking. That said, I'm not sure if you and I should pursue being together so soon ...

When I arrived on campus this morning, a few people called me "Tully," and it took me a minute to realize that they weren't joking.

That's the real reason I didn't call you the second I came into town.

Not sure I'll ever send this.

Only needed to vent.

Scarlett

DEAR EASTON,

I woke up early this morning, and I couldn't go back to sleep, so I got dressed and meandered around campus.

Somehow, I made it into the practice facility and spotted you working out in the gym.

I must've stared at you for an hour, trying to will my feet to move toward

you, but I couldn't.

For one, too many of your teammates were around. For two, after spending the night before with you, I didn't think you'd ever let me go so ...

Anyway, I don't feel nervous about telling Tully the truth anymore. I'm not sure how I'll feel regarding *other* people knowing, but if you promise that you won't care, I'll try my best not to either.

Love,

Scarlett

PS: I have this strange feeling in the pit of my stomach about spending time with her this coming Saturday. It's hard to explain, but I wonder if I should cancel or ask her to meet another day.

Please tell me this is all in my head.

DEAR EASTON,

Scarlett regained consciousness today.

Her eyes fluttered open, then she looked at me for a very long time.

I didn't call the nurses in case I was imagining things. Instead, I asked her to blink three times if she knew who I was.

She didn't blink, though.

She said, "I know exactly who you are."

I asked if she remembered you and she said, "My boyfriend."

PS: I'll write back to you as long as you keep writing back to me. Let's talk about lighter things, okay? I'll give you updates each time, but...I could really use a friend, too...

EASTON



A Year & a Half Later

Every day in prison is a routine, but no day feels the same. Since the amount of letters I receive at mail call is impossible to keep up with, I give most of them to my cellmate and he writes back as if he's me with glee.

“Hey,” he says, flipping through today's envelopes. “Didn't you say only ones from Tully are off limits?”

“Yeah.” I jump down from the bunk and grab the letter from his hands. It's not a direct letter, though.

It's this month's “Pray for Tully and Scarlett” update from my old church.

“Not that one,” he says, handing me a pink envelope. “This one.” I take it and stare at the words in fucking disbelief.

DEAR EASTON,

This is the last letter I'll ever write to you.

My sister is now moving into another state of recovery at the Harriet Long-term Care Facility, but we've spent the past several months reconnecting and getting to know each other better.

It's been hard opening old wounds, but the late night conversations and tears are worth the laughter that comes in the morning.

We're starting a new chapter of our lives together, with new boundaries,

and new dreams, and we think it's best if we close the chapter on this one.

Scarlett wants you to know that she'll always love you, but she doesn't want you to write back. She asked me to include a final question, and she wants you to know that she chooses option B.

Question:

If you couldn't be with the love of your life because doing so would hurt the both of you in different ways, but you never wanted to love anyone else, what would you do?

- A. Try to be with him anyway. Love is a hundred times stronger than fate.
- B. Write him one (or two) final letters and tell him how you feel, but make it clear that you have to move on in different directions for now.
- C. Ghost him. He'll eventually get the point.

I Wish You Well,
Tully

THERE'S *no way she means this shit...*



Easton's next letter arrives on a Saturday, tucked between an overdue internet bill and a gardening brochure. Addressed to "You, I'm So Sorry," it's as if it pained him to pen my name.

My first thought is to pretend it never came, to toss it out with the ads for tools I'll never buy since I told him not to write me back, but curiosity has a strange way of overpowering common sense.

Tearing the flap open before I can think things through, I slowly drown under the weight of his words, and within seconds my tears are soaking the page.

With every sentence, the past returns to me frame by frame, and before I know it, I'm sinking to the floor and wishing I could tell him the truth.

But it's too late.

Far too late...

EASTON



Two months later

“**I**nmate 56724, Easton Rush!” A guard yells in front of my cell on a Saturday. “*Inmate Rush?*”

“Yeah?” I sit up from my bed.

“Pack your shit.”

“Am I moving cells?”

“No,” he says, sliding an envelope through the bars. “You’re moving out. The warden wants to process you tomorrow.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Come open up that envelope and you will.”

TO: Circuit Clerk, Circuit Court of Tuscaloosa County, Tuscaloosa, Alabama

Whereas, EASTON RUSH, convicted of the crime of attempted manslaughter, Circuit Court of Tuscaloosa County and was sentenced to 10 Years Incarceration and whereas it has been represented to me that said is a fit and proper subject for **Executive Clemency**.

Now, Know Ye, that I, James Folsom, Governor of the State of Alabama, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution of this State, do by these presents:

PARDON Easton Rush of the said crime of which convicted, hereby acquitted and discharged of and from all further imprisonment and restored to

all the rights of citizenship which may have been forfeited by the conviction.

Grant Pardon With Order Permitting Expungement Under The Provisions of 20 ALCS 2730/4.2(e), Including The Right To Ship, Transport, Possess, Or Receive Firearms, Which May Have Been Forfeited By The Conviction.

EASTON



Two days after my pardon, my father is waiting outside the prison gate for me. He's leaning against a blue luxury car and fidgeting with a Rubik's cube.

He tosses it into the backseat as I approach, running toward me with his hands outstretched.

"*Finally!*" he says, pulling me into a long hug. "Fucking finally."

"You're hugging me like you don't come to see me every week."

"This is a lot different, and you know it." His voice cracks. "I've been up all night hoping this wasn't a dream."

"Me too." I admit. "Me too."

He lets go of me, but he quickly pulls me into his arms again.

I don't pull away until he stops crying.

"Let's get away from here," he says, "I got us a reservation at the new Gayle's."

"Thanks." I open the passenger door, but he wags his finger.

"You're driving." He smiles. "And this car is yours. You should take it for a long spin after you drop me off."

"Will do."

I walk to the driver's side and crank the engine, speeding the hell away from the past.

The penitentiary's tallest smokestack disappears in my rearview mirror and I'm in no hurry to remember any of my days there.

"I haven't had a drink since the day you left." he says. "I haven't mentioned it during any of my visits because I didn't want to jinx myself, but I'm living a completely sober life."

“You don’t even sneak sips of Listerine or hand sanitizer?”

“I gargle salt.” He laughs and grabs his Rubik's cube. “I have an entire basement full of these and a group of sobriety partners. I made Barbara join, too.”

“Good to know, Dad. I’m proud of you.”

“Scarlett and her family have been pretty tight-lipped about things, so I’m sorry I don't have any updates on her for you.” He pauses. “I even tried calling her dad’s job a few times and pretending to be a long lost family member, but he didn't fall for that at all.”

I hold back a laugh. “Don't you mean *Tully*?”

“No,” he says. “I’ve known it was you and Scarlett for a while.”

Silence.

Despite calling him as often as possible and seeing him in the visiting room once a week, I’ve never ever mentioned Scarlett.

It hurts too fucking much.

“How did you know?”

“Give me some credit, son,” he says. “I wasn't born yesterday.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I saw you with her after games,” he says. “Tully doesn't own a band uniform, and I know she would never willingly go visit our old cabin all those times.”

“Why didn't you ever say anything?”

“There was nothing to say...Besides, I was drunk off my ass most of the time, and you wouldn't have taken anything. I said seriously.”

He's probably right. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“The warden said my clemency would be made public and that I should brace for news crews, but I didn't see anyone out there.”

“You *want* to see those parasites?”

“Not really.”

“Well, it won't be made public until the end of next week, but ... I may have promised his office a small thing that we can discuss later.”

I roll my eyes. “Please tell me you didn't mention that I'll consider Ole Miss after all this? Seriously Dad. I hate your alma mater and you've got to let that go.”

“Ha! I didn't even mention college.” He punches the glove compartment and tons of envelopes fall to the floor. “When news got out that the governor

was considering you for clemency, every fucking team in the NFL started sending letters.”

“Why would they ever want a felon on their team?”

“You mean in addition to other felons that they already have?” He jokes. “You’re asking the wrong question, son.”

He pats my shoulder. “Who *wouldn't* want Easton Rush on their team?”

EASTON



After dropping my dad off at home, I speed onto the highway. The extended care facility that Tully mentioned in her “last letter” is five hours away, but I don't care.

I have to see her.

I *need* to see her.

Not hearing her voice and feeling her skin while I was at her side in the hospital was bad enough, and despite all this time that's passed, I refuse to believe she wants us to be over.

The mere idea of her being on the mend and wanting me to move on without her is infuriating.

How could she think I'd ever be okay with that?

When I make it to the lobby, the receptionist stares at me without saying a word.

“I'm here to visit Scarlett Crane,” I say. “Can I sign in, please?”

She says nothing.

“Is there something else here or someone else here that needs to handle this for me?”

No answer.

I'm tempted to walk past her and find Scarlett myself, but a man in a white coat appears.

“How may I help you Mister...” He raises an eyebrow. “*Easton Rush?*”

“I'm here to see Scarlett Crane, please.”

“She hasn't been a patient here in months, damn near a year actually.” He crosses his arms. “Is this some type of joke?”

“No ... Did she move to another facility?”

“I can't give out a patient's personal information, son.” He slides a clipboard toward me. “But if you write down your email and phone number, I can pass along that you dropped by, if you like.”

“No, that's okay.”

I rush back to my car.

I search for every long-term care facility on the internet, but then I hear a tapping sound on the window.

It's the nurse.

“Yes?” I roll down my window.

“We're not allowed to give out patient information, Mr. Rush.”

“I heard the doctor the first time he said it.”

“I wrote it on a napkin and accidentally dropped it into your car...” She slips it through my open window, walking away as I unfold it.

*32 Yellowbird Cove,
Mountain Brook, Alabama*

That's closer to my home, but too far for me to drive tonight.

I decide to check into a hotel and enjoy a real bed for the first time in years. I'll head towards Scarlett in the morning.

EASTON



T heir new house is light blue with a veranda that stretches around to the backyard. Pink roses and bright lilies dot the flower beds, and on the right side of the house are metal ivy brackets.

Armed with flowers and a bag filled with a few things I brought from home, I take a deep breath before walking up the driveway.

When I reach the front door, I pause and read the words above the doorbell.

The Crane Sisters
Best Friends for Life

I press a finger against the doorbell, and the soft sounds of Scarlett's favorite song play.

The door swings open and Tully's smile falters. She grips onto a cane and steps forward.

"Um...hey," she says. "What are you doing here?"

"Hey." I hold out the roses, but she doesn't take them.

"I thought they gave you ten years..."

"The governor pardoned me."

"Wow," She says, looking shocked.

"That's good for you. Why are you here?"

"I want to see Scarlett."

"Then come back later," she says. "She's out on a date with her boyfriend."

“She’s seeing someone?”

“That’s what I said.” She shrugs. “Anything else?”

“Tully, look,” I say, “I know I’m the last person you want to talk to these days, but can you please just set that to the side for a few seconds?”

She sighs. “It’s time for me to take my medicine, so you can come in, but only for a couple minutes.”

“Thank you.”

She takes the flowers from me, and I follow her inside a beautiful and airy living room and into a kitchen.

“This is a very nice place,” I say.

“Thanks.” She opens a cabinet. “I picked it since I figured this was close enough to our past, but far enough for a fresh start.”

She sets six different prescription bottles on the counter and stares at them. Then she looks at me. “Um...Scarlett usually does this for me but she’s late. Do you mind?”

“Not at all.” I pick them up one by one and dispense whatever’s on the label into her hand while she sips from a glass of water.

“How have you been, health wise?”

“As good as I can be. My doctors claim I need to invest in a shit ton of hydrotherapy since I can’t seem to get consistent with the three-times-a-week physical therapy.”

I tilt my head to the side, remembering a line from her old letters. “I thought your physical therapy only had to be once a week.”

“I wish that was the case.” She shrugs. “I just don’t like thinking about it.”

“Why did you stop writing letters to me?” I ask, unable to let that go. “Better yet, did Scarlett really say that she wanted me to move on without her?”

“Huh?” She raises her eyebrow. “What letters?”

“The ones you used to write before you stopped.” I pull a few of them from my bag. “I saved all of them because I was hoping we could still be somewhat cordial when I was released.”

She takes one of the letters from my hands, flipping through its pages and looking confused.

“Easton...” She shakes her head. “I didn’t send you these. I didn’t even *write* these.”

“This is your handwriting, Tully.” I’m tempted to ask if she’s struggling with memory loss, but the irony of that question holds me back.

“It’s close to my handwriting, but...” She continues flipping through the letters. “I swear I didn't write these.”

“None of them?”

“No.”

What the hell is she saying? “What about when you told me that Scarlett’s kidney failed? Does she have a dialysis schedule or did she get a transplant?”

“*She* gave me her kidney.” She crosses her arms. “How do you know anything about that?”

“Okay, wait, wait.” I’m getting confused. “I thought—”

“Scarlett is fine,” she says. “I mean, as fine as you can be after all the shit she’s been through. She had her moments, but they put her on a different recovery plan and she recovered before I did.”

The world suddenly shifts under my fucking feet. My previous years away play in my head in a blur, and the fact that she can’t remember the letters isn’t a memory failure at all.

Scarlett wrote them...

“You look like you're about to faint, Easton.”

“I need to step outside for a second.”

I turn away without another word and return to the veranda.

A gray car pulls into the driveway as I grip the railing.

The driver's side door opens and Scarlett steps out. Her dark brown hair has hints of honey highlights and she has a few small scars on her arms and face.

She’s still as fucking beautiful as the first day I met her, and there’s—

My thoughts come to a complete halt as she opens the back door, revealing a bright pink car seat with a sleeping child inside.

What. The. Fuck?

I slowly walk down the steps into her line of view.

Her face pales and her eyes widen.

She looks tempted to return to her car and drive off, so I walk toward her before she can make that decision.

“You’ve moved on that fast?” I ask. “New guy, new baby?”

“Something like that...”

I can’t fathom that idea, so I stick to the main issue at hand. The lies.

“Please tell me this is a nightmare that I’ll wake up from soon,” I say. “Please tell me you didn’t send me letters for over a year pretending to be

your fucking sister. Tell me I'm wrong about that.”

She doesn't say a word.

Tears run down her cheeks.

“Scarlett, say something.”

“How are you even here right now, Easton?”

“That's a conversation for a different day,” I say. “Let's stick to the first one. You've been lying to me this entire time?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

She shakes her head.

“How could you do that to me? Why would you not want me to know that you were recovering?”

“I...” She sighs. “I sent you a letter explaining everything. You were supposed to get it today.”

“Well I'm not in prison anymore, so feel free to explain it.”

“I can't.”

“You can and you will. What exactly is in this fucking letter, Scarlett?”

“Everything...”

“Including you admitting that you're a liar who just wants to play mind games with me?”

“No.”

“Then tell me Scarlett. What's the fucking truth?”

“Please keep your voice down.” She pleads, looking over her shoulder.

“I don't care if anyone hears me.”

“Wait here.” She walks to the car and opens the back door.

When she stands back, she's holding a sleeping baby girl in her arms.

As she comes closer, I can't help but notice how pretty her daughter is. How she looks exactly like Scarlett and Tully, except for her eyes.

Her eyes are...Mine...

The muscles in my stomach twist and Scarlet carries the little girl inside, and my mind is running through a list of timing equations.

Scarlett returns to me moments later, her eyes redder than before.

“We were talking about the letter I sent you,” she says. “If I'd known—”

“How old is your daughter?”

“One.”

“Is she mine?”

“Yes.” Her voice cracks. “She's yours...Ours.”

My heart was broken before, but now I think it's imploding.

"You didn't think enough of me to include a mention of a *daughter* in any of your fake Tully letters?"

"I had a good reason for leaving it out."

"That's fucking unforgivable."

"Easton, listen to me."

"You made me think that you were nearly fucking dead for months, Scarlett." I can't soften the vitriol in my voice. "Nearly dead. I almost killed someone for you. I went to prison because I didn't want to live without you. Do you have any idea how... How could you do this to me?"

"Easton—"

"All I would want to hear is you explaining how the fuck could you do that to me?"

"It wasn't my original intention to lie to you." She stutters. "I didn't want to hurt you."

I step back, still seething. "Every time I got a letter from Tully, I... Beautiful as hell or not, I can't even look at you right now. Fuck this."

She tries to grab my arm as I walk away, but she's not strong enough.

I return to my car and speed off into the distance.

ME



“Is anyone home?” I bang on Mr. Rush’s front door an hour later. “Please answer me!”

I can’t get Easton’s face out of my mind. Despite the time that’s passed and the livid looks he gave me, he’s still sexy as hell. He was wearing a simple white T-shirt and jeans, and he easily put every guy who has ever approached me to shame.

I desperately wanted him to kiss me and take me, to tell me we could pick up where we left off despite my lies...

“Scarlett?” Easton’s dad appears seconds later. “Are you alright?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Can you give me Easton’s cell phone number? I need to talk to him.”

“He was supposed to buy a new phone today, but I haven’t heard from him yet,” he says. “Can I text you whenever he gives it to me?”

“Yes, please. The moment you have it.” I can’t bring myself to leave his doorway just yet. “Is he here? Are you keeping him in there and not telling me?”

“No, Scarlett.” He places his hands on my shoulders. “Calm down, calm down.”

I shake my head. “I can’t. He knows about the baby...I should’ve told him.”

“No,” he says. “You shouldn’t have.”

“With all due respect, if you’d seen the way he looked at me an hour ago, you’d think differently.”

“I doubt it...” He pauses. “The only reason he did so well in prison is because he didn’t think there was much on the outside for him. He loved you

more than anything, even football, so knowing that he had a daughter would've made things worse for him emotionally. We both know that."

I shake my head.

I'd believed that before, but now I'm not so sure.

"It'll be alright." He looks over at my car, where I've left the back door hanging wide open. "Bring my grandchild inside, so we can talk."

EASTON



There are no fucking words.

Actually, somehow, Scarlett wrote seven thousand of them.

The envelope they're covered in is the first of all the letters that bear her actual name on the front. The seal features a smudged kiss from pink lipstick and pencil sketches of pink petals.

But the bold words on the flap are what initially caught my attention.

I Wish I Would've Told You

I'm sitting at my kitchen table, reading her words and I haven't come across anything that excuses or explains her years of lies. Nothing that excuses keeping the birth of our daughter from me.

My heart is reeling and broken in pieces, and yet I still have this urge to comfort her about this bullshit she pulled.

Sighing, I take another sip of coffee and start the letter from the beginning, hoping that this time will be the time when I can finally get past the third page.



ON PAGE ELEVEN, sixteen lines down, in the second to last paragraph, her

writing shifts from wistful to downright painful.

I want you to know that I've lied to you.

Not once.

Not twice.

This entire time.

Every letter you received from "Tully" was actually from me.
(And there's a reason I used the recovery center or the hospital for the return address.)

At first, I wanted you to let go of me, of *us*, because I knew that living without me was painful enough for you. It was painful for me, too, but I could move around in the world and temporarily lessen the pain; being locked inside a cell doesn't offer the same ability.

You told my father that you didn't want anyone to see you behind bars, and I know you meant that...

The media harassed me and Tully for months when we were released. They had questions and they wouldn't give up until they finally realized we didn't have any answers.

Any letters that you sent to certain people—fangirls mainly—were reported on from time to time...something called "the Freedom of Information Act," I believe.

Your father helped me discover a loophole, though.

Since medical records & hospital correspondence don't fall under that act, that's why I used those addresses.

I still feared that news would get out, though, and without you here with me to face the "sister's boyfriend" mess, I couldn't do it...

I desperately wanted to tell you that I gave birth to a beautiful baby girl, *our* beautiful baby girl, and I considered bringing her to the prison to meet you, but...I just thought that would hurt you more since you wouldn't be able to leave with us.

I named her after the flowers you always gave me.

I Wish I Would've Told You,
Scarlett

ME



Days later, when I open the door to check my mail, I find Easton standing on my porch.

He's glaring at me like no time has passed since our last argument.

"Is now a bad time?" he asks.

"Yes." I start to shut the door, but he overpowers me and holds it open.

Stepping inside, he looks around the living room. He says nothing for several seconds, and then suddenly, he crashes his lips against mine.

The force of his kiss knocks me back against the wall.

"Easton—"

"I didn't come here to *talk*." He bites down on my bottom lip and I moan at the mix of pain and pleasure, at the familiar feeling of his mouth against mine.

None of the fantasies I've had at night can compare or do the reality justice.

He slides a hand under my dress and I spread my legs.

Pushing the lace to the side, he whispers, "Fuck, Scarlett... You're still so fucking wet for me."

"Yes..."

He presses his thumb against my clit and deepens our kiss, tasting me again and again. As if it's been far too long.

Unzipping his pants, he pulls out his cock and rubs it against me.

"Wrap your leg around my waist," he commands.

I oblige and he slides inside me all at once, filling me and making me feel whole again, fucking me against the wall.

I melt into him like no time has passed, like things never got fucked up

between us.

His eyes remain on mine with every deep thrust, and he serves me angry kisses between breaths.

“This is still mine,” he rasps. “And you’re still so fucking tight…”

I dig my nails into his neck as he picks up his tempo, and I stop trying to keep up.

He pushes me to the edge, denying me again and again until he has no choice but to let me come.

Then he reaches his own release seconds later.

His eyes are still full of anger when he pulls out of me.

He zips up his pants and leaves without another word.

ME



The following morning

“**D**elivery for this address.” The UPS driver holds out a signature pad. “Can you sign this for me?”

“Yes.” I scribble my name and he whistles to someone in the truck before walking away.

For the next several minutes, he and the other worker place box after box in my living room, all of them addressed to “Rose Rush, Your Father Loves You.”

I close the door after they place the final box in the corner, but they ring the doorbell again.

“Yes?” I say.

“We forgot one.” The driver hands me a bouquet of pink and white roses.

The tag hanging from their stems reads, “I Wish You Would’ve Told Me Too...”

ME



“Get that out of your mouth, Rose!” I grab a laptop charger from her lips as she giggles. “That’s not for eating!”

“It’s also not a real one, remember?” Tully smiles from the doorway. “I made that one out of fabric. The prong is made out of twine and glitter.”

“So, that makes it okay to put in her mouth, *Aunt Tully*?”

“It does.” She walks over to Rose and scoops her into her arms. “Let’s go to Aunt Tully’s room and get more things to make Mommy mad.”

I toss the fake charger into a basket and straighten up the room. Rose has torn through all the gifts Easton sent her, and I know they’ll return to the middle of the floor tomorrow.

As I’m picking up a set of oversized legos, I hear a sound that brings my world to a halt.

Tap! Tap! Tappp!

I rush over to the window, but Easton isn’t there.

Tap! Tap! Tapppp!

It’s coming from downstairs...

I rush down the steps and open the door.

Easton is standing on the front porch, a pink teddy bear in hand.

“Hi,” I say.

“Hello, Scarlett.”

“I got all your gifts.”

“Only one of those was for you.” He smiles. “Does Rose like them?”

“Yes.”

“Can I see her today?”

“You can see her whenever you want.”

He steps forward, closing the gap between us. “Can I ask you a hypothetical question?”

I nod.

“If the love of your life got out of prison early and came to understand why you held a secret from him, and admitted that you were right for not inflicting more pain on him, would you agree to starting things over?”

“That’s not how the questions work,” I say. “You’re supposed to give me the options.”

“I’m hoping there’s only one...” He kisses my lips. “I love you, Scarlett...I’ve never stopped, and I thought about you every day.”

“I love you too, Easton.” I feel a lump rising up my throat. “I would never willingly hurt you, and I swear—”

“It’s in the past.” He ends my sentence with a kiss. “Can we please start over? This time the right way?”

“I would like that.”

“Me too,” he says. “Can you introduce me to my daughter now?”

EPILOGUE

SEVERAL MONTHS LATER

ME



*Dear Tully,
I'm glad that we're the best of friends again, and I will do everything I can to
make sure that never changes.
Congratulations on your engagement to Jeremiah. (Yes, I'm writing and
mailing this letter as if we don't still live together.)
Wish I Would've Told You,
Scarlett*

“Do you think we need to step in and prevent Rose from hanging out with that boy?” I ask Easton.

“What boy?”

“The next door neighbor,” I say. “He thinks that her tree house is his tree house.”

“He’s three years old, Scarlett.”

“He’s too old for her.” I keep my eyes on the backyard as Rose and her playmate take turns eating dirt. “You know, you don’t have to play for the Saints just because they’re close to Alabama.”

“They’re not that close at all,” he says. “They’re in New Orleans.”

“So, we really have to move there before the season starts?”

He laughs, wrapping his arms around my waist from behind. “I’ve told you before that you can stay here and fly back and forth to my games all you want.”

“You did not say that, Easton.” I smile as he presses a kiss against my

neck. “You said hypothetically speaking...”

“Exactly.” He kisses me again. “We’ll work it out together, but in the meantime, can you give me an answer on marrying me? I asked you two weeks ago and you said you needed time to think about it.”

“What?” I let go of him and turn around. “You didn’t ask me that.”

“I did...I put it in a letter, mailed it to this house, and everything.”

I gasp and rush to the foyer where we toss the mail. I flip through all the bills, junk mail, and the crap from insurance companies that we leave unopened for future fire piles.

I check again and again, and there’s no letter to me from Easton.

“Maybe it got lost in the mail.”

“No, there it is.” He points to a simple white envelope from a junk mail-like place.

It’s addressed to Tully.

“*Seriously?*” I say.

“I wanted you to see how that made me feel, just one time.” He laughs as he tears the envelope open, and then he flips it over before getting down on one knee and pulls a stunning diamond ring from his pocket.

“Yes,” I say, not needing him to explain why he’s always been the man I love. “I will marry you, Easton Rush.”

He stands and pulls me into his arms, kissing me like only he can.



The End

Thank you so much for reading this story!

Flip the page for a sneak peek of *Sincerely, Carter*, another story of mine that features letters, laughs, and some intense emotional moments between best friends Arizona & Carter who don't know how to handle the change in their relationship.

PROLOGUE

CARTER



I can still remember, with the type of clarity that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, the very beginning of bullshit. At least, in my own life.

I was ten years old, and my parents—“The Jameses at 1100 Joyce Avenue”—were holding a fundraiser in our home. In the middle of the thousand-dollar-a-plate dinner, my father decided to give an unnecessary speech.

There he was—six-foot-four, true American blue eyes, and genuinely greedy—talking about how he wanted to invest in healthier menus for the kids in school. He also wanted to help invest in better disciplinary ideals, since he knew of a certain child (it was me) who couldn’t stay out of trouble to save his life.

Still, none of those ideals warranted the ‘bullshit’ label.

The next ones did.

As he was toasting all his sponsors in the room, he lifted his glass and said, “I consider everyone here tonight to be a friend of mine. If you’re not a friend, it’s only because you’re family, and family is forever. The main reason I’m saying this right now is because my own late father taught me a very important lesson that has stuck with me all these years. Some people come into your life for a reason, some a season, and some a lifetime.”

There was loud applause, lots of cheering and heartfelt “So true ... So true ...” responses tossed around the room at that moment. And then an older man stooped down to my level and said, “Your father is right, you know? Remember everything he just said.”

“What did he just say?”

“He said some people come into your life for a reason, some a season, and some a lifetime.” He smiled. “You should keep that in mind as much as you can in your life.” He winked at me and walked away.

I didn’t know it then, but my father and his fickle follower had practically predicted my future.

A few years after he gave that speech, he must’ve figured he’d obliged his “reason” in me and my mom’s life, because he left us both. Several years after that, my mother decided that she was tired of being a mom, that her “season” of motherhood was done, and that her real calling could be found in smoke bars and casinos. As far as for ‘a lifetime,’ I could only think of one person who ever came close.

FOURTH GRADE

CARTER



Dear Miss Carpenter,

I am sorry that I was bad in class yesterday. I did not mean to cause a disrupshun, and I am sorry that I broke your best pens, but I am not sorry that I HATE Arizona Turner.

She is ugly and she talks way too much. I don't know why you never send her to the office like you send me. She deserves to be punish too, and I hope she dies tomorrow so I won't have to see her or her ugly metal mouth anymore.

Sincerely,
Carter

I SMILED and handed the letter to my mom, hoping that this time would be the charm, that she wouldn't make me rewrite it all over again.

I was beyond tired of Arizona getting me into trouble and laughing about it. She thought she was so smart because she knew the answers to all the questions in class, but I knew them, too.

Especially because I knew where our teacher kept the answer key and I always stole it at lunchtime.

My parents knew her parents personally because they always had to go to conferences about me "picking on her" and "making her cry," but no one believed me when I told them that she was the one who started it.

She always started it.

"Carter..." My mom took a deep breath and shook her head. "This is a

terrible letter. It's worse than the last three you wrote."

"How? I didn't call Arizona any names this time. I just said I wanted her to die."

"You don't think you're hurting her feelings whenever you call her ugly?"

"She is ugly."

"She's not ugly." My father stepped into the room. "Now, those braces in her mouth might be, but as a whole? She's pretty cute."

"Seriously?" My mom glared at him, and he laughed.

"Sorry." He walked over and patted me on the back. "It's not nice to call someone ugly, son. No matter how much you hate her. You've got to stop letting this Arizona girl get to you. This is the fifth time this year you've gotten in trouble."

"Eighth time." My mother corrected him. "He pushed her off the swings when she was in mid-air last week."

My father looked at me. "And what did you do this time?"

I didn't answer him. I looked down at the floor instead.

"He stood up in the middle of a math test and said, 'I hate you, Arizona,'" my mom said. "He then proceeded to grab the poor girl's test paper, ball it up, and throw it across the room. He missed and knocked his teacher's favorite glass pens to the floor."

Shaking his head, my dad sighed. "Just stop talking to this girl, okay? Don't even look her way. You're going to have to learn to ignore her, no matter what. Something tells me she won't be a 'lifetime' person for you anyway. She's just seasonal, so she'll go away soon. Trust me."

"Glad to see you finally acting like an adult about this." My mom ripped my letter in half and focused her attention on me. "Now, sit down and write a nice letter to your teacher, an even nicer one to Arizona, and tell her that you're not going to be mean to her anymore. Try to think of something nice to say, too. Maybe mention something about those pretty dresses she always wears?"

I groaned, but I picked up my pen and wrote.

It took me five more letters to get it right, since she made me take out the words "stupid," "hate," and "die," but I finally got it perfect around midnight. Then I promised myself that after I gave Arizona my letter tomorrow, I would never ever speak to her again.



THE NEXT DAY AT SCHOOL, I set the sorry note on my teacher's desk super early and walked down the farthest row—plopping down in the very last seat. Then I took out my homework and tried to finish a few more math questions before class started.

I counted four times seven on my fingers and saw Arizona taking the seat next to me.

“Good morning, Carter,” she said.

I pretended that I didn't hear her.

“Carter?” She tapped my shoulder as I wrote twenty-eight on my paper.

“Hello?” She tapped my shoulder even harder. “Carter? *Carter?*”

“*WHAT?!*” I finally looked at her.

“Don't you have something for me today? Something nice and important?” She smiled her huge mouth of metal.

Ugh. She's so ugly. “Nope.”

“Your mom didn't make you write me another ‘I'm very sorry' note?” She crossed her arms. “Because that's exactly what she told my mom on the phone this morning.”

“Well, your mom must be deaf and dumb, because I didn't write anything for *you.*”

“*What?*” She gasped. “Take that back or I'll snitch!”

“Go ahead and snitch!” I shrugged, waiting for her to raise her hand and tell on me like always.

She didn't. She just stared at me. Then she reached into her pocket and tossed a folded note onto my desk.

I wanted to crumple it into a ball and throw it right at her face like I should have done yesterday, but I opened it instead and read:

DEAR CARTER,

I am sorry that I made you act bad and break Miss Carpenter's pens yesterday, but I am not sorry that I HATE you. You are ugly and you talk way too much. That's why I always get you in trouble, because you never

shut up and you think you know everything, BUT YOU DON'T! I really wish you will get hit by a bus one day soon because you suck. You suck A LOT.

Not Sincerely,
Arizona

WE BECAME best friends that very day.

[One click Sincerely, Carter via Amazon & Kindle Unlimited!](#)