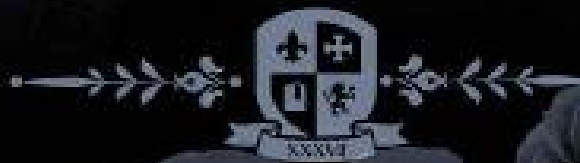




THE
ELITE

XXXVII



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SERENITY ACKLES

THE
ELITE
XXXVII



XXXVII

Book I

Serenity Ackles



XXXVII: The Elite

Copyright © Serenity Ackles

All rights reserved.

First edition, September 2023

Published by Axellia Publishing

Print ISBN: 978-1-912644-38-4

eBook ASIN: B0BRRWJHTR

Cover design by Natasha Snow Designs

Edited by Aethereal Press

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, distributed, stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval systems, in any forms or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, without express permission of the author, unless for the purpose of a review which may quote brief passages for a review purpose.

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locations are used fictitiously. Other characters, names, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblances to actual events, locations, or persons – living or dead – is entirely coincidental.

CONTENTS

[CONTENTS](#)

[ALSO BY SERENITY ACKLES](#)

[AUTHOR'S NOTE](#)

[DEDICATION](#)

[I](#)

[II](#)

[III](#)

[IV](#)

[V](#)

[VI](#)

[VII](#)

[VIII](#)

[IX](#)

[X](#)

[XI](#)

[XII](#)

[XIII](#)

[XIV](#)

[XV](#)

[XVI](#)

[XVII](#)

[XVIII](#)

[XIX](#)

[XX](#)

[XXI](#)

[XXII](#)

[XXIII](#)

[XXIV](#)

[XXV](#)

[XXVI](#)

[XXVII](#)

[XXVIII](#)

[XXIX](#)

[XXX](#)

[XXXI](#)

[XXXII](#)

[XXXIII](#)

[XXXIV](#)

[XXXV](#)

[XXXVI](#)

[XXXVII](#)

[XXXVIII](#)

[XXXIX](#)

[XXXX](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)

[WHY CHOOSE?](#)

[NEWSLETTER](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[WAYS TO CONNECT](#)

ALSO BY SERENITY ACKLES

**CONTEMPORARY REVERSE
HAREM**

XXXVII

XXXVII: The Elite

Coming Soon

[XXXVII: The Initiation](#)

PARANORMAL REVERSE HAREM

Elemental Magic Unleashed

[Grounded](#)

[Charged](#)

[Shocked](#)

Serenity Ackles & J. S. Lee

The Goddess of Fate & Destiny

[Cursed Luck](#)

[Stolen Luck](#)

[Twisted Luck](#)

Coming Soon

Chosen Luck

AUTHOR'S NOTE

XXXVII is a dark romance series. Consequently, there are trigger warnings for these books. If you're reading these books after reading other books by Serenity Ackles, these are much, much darker. If you've come here after reading dark romance, this will probably be a check list for you and possibly not as dark as some as you read. Either way, if you have triggers, please take the time to read below, and if you're not okay with anything, stop reading.

By the end, the leading lady will have multiple guys and a happily ever after. However, this is a dark romance and that happily ever after isn't coming quickly. XXXVII is a bully romance set in a college. The guys are cruel to her—some more than others. Although the majority of the bullying is done by others outside of the group, these guys are far from innocent. Things will get worse before they get better. This book ends with an orgasm and a shock—not so much a cliff-hanger, but definitely not a happily ever after... maybe not even a happily for now.

As mentioned, these books are set in a university/college. The FMC is 18.

This book and subsequent books contain dub-con. Depending on your definition of dub-con, later books in this series will contain somnophilia (technically, consent is granted prior, but I'll let you decide where that falls in your beliefs and whether you wish to continue reading the series based on that), but otherwise there is no non-con in this series.

Other triggers (in this book and/or subsequent books) include: exhibitionism (forced and voluntary), alcohol use, drug use, murder, control of food, video recording without consent, humiliation, bullying, blackmail, sleep deprivation,

choking, punishment, use of toys, and BDSM elements which should not be used as a guidance in any way.

Finally, this book has been edited, and proofread by a dozen sets of eyes, but unfortunately, pesky typos sometimes get past us all. If you do see any typos, please either reach out to me at Serenity@SerenityAckles.com, or complete the following form: <https://forms.gle/5qu1zkrVcSk3rqNP9>

DEDICATION

To my real-life Penny, Sarah.

Thank you for showing me what a friend is really like.

I

Tori

The last place I expected to spend my eighteenth birthday was prison.

I've seen prison on TV. Visiting rooms to meet friends and family change depending on the severity of the crime and what type of prison you're sent to. This one is maximum security. No picnic tables or the ability to touch your loved ones. Just an uncomfortable chair, a thick plexiglass window that doesn't look like it's ever been cleaned, and a phone to talk through.

I sit, waiting impatiently, although on the outside, no one can see my nerves. Over the last two and a half years, I've learned to hide everything that I'm feeling.

It's safer that way.

Eventually, a buzzer sounds, and a door on the other side of the screen opens. A prison officer walks in, followed by my brother.

Just over two years have passed since I last saw Cole. It's a few months until his twenty-second birthday, but today, he looks older. Time inside hasn't been kind. He's got a beard now, and his eyes look dead inside.

That being said, they brighten when he sees me, if only momentarily. As soon as he sits down, they're a dull gray again.

Although I've already got the phone against my ear, he hesitates before reaching for his. "What are you doing here, Vee?"

No one but Cole calls me Vee anymore. The name died when he was arrested.

“I would have come sooner, but Mom refused.”

Fun fact: anyone under the age of eighteen can't visit a family member in prison without a family member or approved sponsor—but my mom flat-out refused to let anyone else bring me.

Without lowering the phone, Cole drops his gaze and lets out a heavy sigh.

“Don't do that,” I tell him. “I haven't seen you in years. At least fake being happy to see me.”

Cole sucks in a deep breath and finally brings his gaze back to meet mine. “You look different.”

I *am* different.

The girl I was when he was sentenced died that same day. Back then, my blonde hair had always been styled, and I wore way more makeup. Head to toe, I had been covered in designer brands, and I'd spent every cent of my allowance—and more—on making sure I was having a good time.

But all that maintenance and partying relies on money. And as soon as your son is a convicted felon, work dries up and money stops flowing. My parents are broke.

Now, my hair is in its natural state. Time is one of the luxuries I used to have, being able to spend time in a salon before important events. Now, I either use my hot irons to straighten or curl my hair myself. A few of the designer clothes I have left are seasons out of date now, and the rest were bought in thrift shops. And the makeup all but disappeared when I stopped partying.

Although it wasn't lack of money that stopped me from partying. It was the new goal I had.

“I graduated top of my class,” I tell him, proudly.

Cole's reaction is exactly what I expect, lips parting and his eyes going wide. “You?”

With all that partying, I wasn't exactly caring about my grades, much to my parents' dismay. But after Cole was incarcerated, I turned my consistent Ds into As, even getting into a bunch of AP classes my senior year.

To be fair though, graduating top of the class is a lot easier when you transfer out of a private school and get forced to attend a New Jersey public school with a number instead of a name. There's not exactly a lot of competition for that top spot.

But I had fought to get a 4.0 GPA and *maintain* it.

Turning to the guard who's sitting in the corner of the room, I point to my pocket, and he nods. I've of course gone through a thorough security check before being allowed into the prison. My bag was put in a locker and almost everything taken from my pockets, except for the piece of folded paper.

I pull that paper from my pocket and place it in front of me, keeping it folded.

"You shouldn't be in here," I tell my brother.

With a sigh, Cole looks away. "Prison is where you go when you kill someone, Vee."

"Except you didn't kill anyone. You can't even look me in the eyes."

There's a moment's pause and then, with his jaw set, Cole turns back to me. "Then why did I admit to it? Why did I plead guilty? Why did the judge give me a life sentence *without* parole?"

"Pleading guilty and being guilty are two different things, and I'm going to prove it. I'm going to get you out of here."

Cole's gaze is locked onto mine. "Look, I'm glad you finally got your shit together and got the grades to get into law school, but there's nothing you can do to get me out of here."

"It's not law school." I finally unfold the paper and hold it up to the glass.

As Cole's eyes flick left to right, the color quickly leaves his face. "Vee, you can't go there."

I lower the paper, taking my time to fold it back up and slip it back into my pocket.

"I know you, Cole. Even in self-defense, you wouldn't have killed someone. Something else happened that night, and if you're just going to sit there and not tell me what, taking the blame for whatever that was, I'm going to go find out the truth myself."

"There is no truth. I killed a man, and I'm in prison."

Staring at my older brother, I shake my head. "I don't believe you."

"Whether you believe me or not, James Keyingham University is dangerous. The students aren't normal. They're rich and they're powerful, and they get away with everything."

"Like murder?"

Cole slams his hand against the glass, and the cool persona I've been hiding behind slips as I jump in my seat, nearly dropping the phone. Almost at once, the guard rushes over to Cole.

"You are not going to that college, Vee, I won't—" Before he can finish the sentence, the guard grabs him and yanks him away, the phone ripped from his hand so that it slams into the glass.

"Miss." The guard on my side of the room has moved next to me. "It's time to leave."

My heart is sinking as I get to my feet and follow the guard back out to collect my things.

This is the first time I've seen Cole for years, and I didn't want it to go like this, but college is starting in two days. I'm not sure what I was hoping for, but his reaction just confirmed *something* had happened that night. Something so bad that Cole is serving a life sentence instead of telling the truth.

And if he won't tell me, then it's up to me to find out what.

Even if that leads me straight to James Keyingham University.



It's late when I get home. The prison is in upstate New York, and when we lost everything after the conviction, we moved into a small apartment in New Jersey.

"I'm home," I call over to my mom. She's in her usual position on the couch, eyes glued to a mundane TV show with her mouth practically glued to the wine glass as she seems to drink more than she breathes.

It's not wine in the glass. Judging from the dark amber color, today's drink of choice is knock-off Jack Daniels. She doesn't even drink branded alcohol anymore.

As usual, I don't get a response.

My mom and I are barely on speaking terms now.

At first, it was because I was constantly asking her to take me to see Cole. Then it was because I kept asking questions that she either didn't know the answers to or didn't want to.

I head over to the fridge, pulling out a bowl of leftover pasta I'd made yesterday. After heating it up, I spoon it out into two bowls, placing one by the couch—mom won't eat anything unless I give it to her as she's usually lost in her drunken haze. I take the other one to my small room.

My life is like a reverse Cinderella story.

Before all this, we lived in a huge brownstone in the Upper East Side. My bedroom was the size of nearly the whole of this 2-bed apartment. Now, to make space, I had a bunkbed with the desk beneath it. The only way I could get the

free-standing closet in the room was to cover half of the window, which has a view of the alley below it.

I used to attend a private school which included horse riding in the curriculum. There wasn't a single item in my bigger-than-this-bedroom closet that didn't have a designer label on it.

Dad set up a flower import business when he left school, eventually branching out to having depots across the country, and stores along the east coast. He was ready to take the stores nationwide and was even in the process of making them global when Cole got accepted into James Keyingham University—without the need for a scholarship. He'd earned the grades, and my family had the money for the tuition, and the right reputation for acceptance.

Less than five months later, my brother was charged with the murder of a sophomore at the university—James Patrick Keyingham.

The court case had to have been one of the quickest in history, because before his first year at college was over, he had been charged, sentenced, and incarcerated.

Before the summer was over, my father's company had gone bankrupt, and we'd lost everything. Worse, my father had left my mom and me. I've not heard a word from him since. I'm not even sure he's still alive...

The house had been repossessed, I'd been *politely* asked to leave my school when the tuition wasn't getting paid—and my grades then had meant no scholarship was coming—and everything I owned had been taken from me.

Most of what I have in this room has been acquired after we'd moved in here.

Sitting down at the desk, I place my bowl of pasta in front of me. Before taking a bite, I pull the letter from my pocket and unfold it, smoothing out the creases.

The acceptance letter.

Working my ass off to get the grades I had, had paid off. Not only was I accepted into James Keyingham

University, but I also have a full scholarship. They give out two of these a year and *I* had been awarded with it.

Staring at the elaborate embossed crest of the college in the corner of the letter, I take a bite of my pasta, chewing softly as I stare at the Latin inscription.

Potentia. Existimatio. Successus.

Power, Reputation, Success.

Cole wasn't wrong. James Keyingham University was the college of the elite. With Cole's brains and dad's income, him getting into JKU had been a breeze. *His* dream had been to be a future Attorney General and JKU had the reputation of making leaders.

He hadn't even finished his first semester when he had been arrested.

Before I end up crumpling the letter up again, I pin it to my board—an old corkboard I found behind my high school one day which still has the faded ink of graffiti stained into it behind all study notes I've got pinned to it.

I finish up my pasta before packing the last few things in my bags. Tomorrow, I've got a train booked to the university, an hour outside of New York City. Now I've told Cole, there's only one thing left to do.

Tell my mom.

I've been putting this off. When I told her I'd been accepted late in the spring, she'd thrown a fit worse than Cole. And by thrown, I mean the empty bottles that had lined the sofa like a small shrine to the ghost of Jack Daniels himself had been picked up and hurled around the room until she'd passed out and I'd been able to clean up all the broken glass.

But telling her will wait until morning. Usually, there's a small sliver of time in the morning—after the hangover wears off and before she starts drinking again—that she'd be something like the mom I used to know.

Feeling my throat get thick, I push the memories from my mind and do one last sweep of my room. There's not much

of this place I want to take with me anyway. Just my mom's maiden name, which I'd legally taken just before I'd applied to James Keyingham University.

Tonight will be my last night as Victoria Reynolds, and tomorrow, Victoria Anderson will leave here to find the truth.

II

Tori

When Cole started at James Keyingham University, we'd all gone there together, Dad renting a U-Haul trailer to bring up all of his belongings. Now, it takes me two trains and a taxi to get here, and everything I have fits inside two mismatching cases.

Somehow, the college campus looks different. Back then, on the drive up, we'd been chatting about how Cole was going to enjoy his time here, and all the hope and possibilities that came with it. Now, even the weather seems to be telling me to go back.

The campus is small. More of a boarding school than a college, but when there are only about five hundred students, and both the reputation and tuition are as exorbitant as they were, I suppose it is all proportionate.

I'm not surprised to see that I'm the only student who arrives in a taxi. Every other car that lines the drive, waiting their turn to drop a freshman off is worth more than most families make in a year. I remember that from the last time I was here too.

Freshmen aren't allowed cars for their first year. I have no idea why, it seems pretty stupid to me, but at the same time, it isn't like I have a car they're stopping me from using. The majority of the remaining students drive themselves and have everything else moved in for them. Even back then, we'd been one of only two cars with a U-Haul.

Since I'd gotten in the taxi, it's been drizzling, but the gray skies now look like they are ready to drop all the water they have on us. I quickly pay the taxi driver then grab my

cases and hurry into the Ardwick Building. At the front and center of the campus, with a large clock tower, the Ardwick Building is the main administrative building on campus.

I don't know exactly how old the university is, but I do remember that it's considered one of the first founded in the country. Not that you can tell when you look at the buildings. All are built with red bricks, and the white woodwork looks like it was painted yesterday.

When I come back outside after collecting my room assignment, the rain has started pouring in earnest. Most of the paths have covered walkways, red brick with white molding to match the school, but I'm the only one dragging a case along. Everyone else has returned to their cars and driven to their dorm.

Losing everything has been hard to adjust to, and I won't lie, there are still days when I miss my old life.

Especially when one of the wheels on the old suitcase decides it no longer wants to be attached to the case and performs an escape act, which almost sends me flying. At the last moment, from behind one of the columns supporting the path's shelter, someone steps out and wraps their arm around my waist to stop me faceplanting the floor.

"Thank you." I extract myself from the other person and straighten out my clothes. As the uniform doesn't need to be worn until classes start, I've opted for comfort; leggings and an oversized T-shirt. Finally, I look up and everything I've ever learned to keep my face as indifferent as possible disappears with my case's wheel.

The man in front of me is a god.

I lived in Manhattan, and I saw all kinds of models and celebrities all the time, but the face of this guy seems unreal. His hair is blond and cut short enough to be styled with an effortless bedhead look, but with no hair out of place. Sitting below that are eyebrows, a shade darker than his hair, that have most definitely been shaped into that curve. A guy who takes grooming seriously.

His eyes are... I'm not sure what color they are in this dull light, but they look gray. And they're inspecting me, head to toe, with curiosity *and*—I'm not embarrassed to say—interest.

For the last two years, I'd hit the books hard. I had a goal to get into this college, and I wasn't going to let guys or partying stop me from achieving that. But before that, I had boyfriends. Hell, I lost my v-card when I was fourteen, and I wasn't the only one in school who'd been sexually active at that age.

It isn't that I've sworn off men, but I am here to find out the truth about what happened two and a half years ago. The only way I can do that is to keep as anonymous as possible for as long as possible. Something which already isn't going to be easy considering my status as the scholarship kid. If anyone finds out who I am—who my brother is—information and evidence is going to become infinitely harder to obtain.

Which means guys aren't a priority. Thankfully, I have a couple of vibrators packed away in the broken case to get me through the lonely nights, but that doesn't mean I can stop the butterflies in my stomach from the look he's giving me. And it also doesn't mean that I can't drink him in, giving me an image to focus on when I use one of those vibrators later...

“So, this is what it feels like to have women falling at my feet.” He gives me a grin that somehow makes him even more beautiful. Seriously, if this guy had been alive a few thousand years ago, he'd have been the inspiration for Adonis.

“I doubt this is an alien feeling for you,” I say, finally tearing my gaze from his face to look down at my case. Wherever the wheel went doesn't matter because the entire arm it was sitting on snapped in two. Nothing is fixing that.

“You look like you need some help there.”

When he doesn't move, I glance back at him and arch an eyebrow. “Wasn't that your cue to save the day and carry the case for me?”

He shrugs. “I didn’t say *I* was going to be the one to help you.”

“Wow.” I blink.

The guy takes a few steps back and leans against one of the columns, looking out into the rain. “I’ve already given you a freebie when I stopped you from needing plastic surgery.” He reaches up and taps his nose as he glances back at me. “Anything else is going to cost you.”

All I can do is stare at him, completely taken aback by his attitude, and then curiosity kicks in. “What’s your price?”

Apparently, my response is not the one he expected because he tilts his head and stares at me before finally pushing himself away from the column and walking back over to stand beside me. This time he doesn’t stop until his Berluti shoes are practically toe to toe with my secondhand Nikes. “If it were money, you couldn’t afford it.”

“And if it wasn’t?”

The look he gives me then feels like he’s somehow managed to ignite my insides. He leans in closer, and I can smell his Tom Ford perfume as he brings his mouth close to my ear. Instead of saying anything, he makes a hmmm, and I can almost feel it vibrate against me.

I swear if he wasn’t so close, I’d be fanning my face. Somehow, that’s the sexiest noise I’ve ever heard come from a man, and now my mind is racing, wondering what other noises he makes and what I need to do to hear him make them.

Suddenly, he stands upright, a huge smirk on his face. “Maybe I should ask you what dirty little thoughts you’ve got going around in your mind and pick one of those.”

Before I can comment, he swoops down and picks up the broken case like it’s filled with feathers and promptly starts walking away.

It takes a good twenty seconds for my brain to kick into gear, and then I hurry after him. “I never agreed to anything.”

The guy doesn't stop but glances down at me with another smirk. "Not yet."

His arrogance is becoming annoying, and I know without a doubt that he's gotten his way his entire life. Even more irritating is the fact that I can't even be mad. "Oh," I say, suddenly, looking around. "You don't know where I'm going."

"You're a freshman. You're in Bennett."

He moves across the campus with the ease of someone who's either a junior or a senior. His saunter has long strides, and while I'm tall enough with long legs that could keep up and match his pace, I stay a few steps behind. He's wearing designer jeans that look like they were made for his ass. Later on, when my imagination tones down his arrogance, I'm going to want all the details I can remember. Especially that ass.

James Keyingham University requires all students to live on-campus for the four years they're here, although there's not a curfew. Of course, there isn't. It's twenty minutes to the nearest town—where the train station is—was probably built before the college and zero amenities for anyone under the age of forty.

I'm sure there's some old-standing belief that the students will stay on campus and be good little angels who only study, but I know that's a load of crap. If the legal drinking age can't stop teenagers from getting drunk, then a remote college campus isn't going to stop college students from partying.

Plus, I had an older brother who once went here.

All the dorms are single sex, and there's a flurry of girls my age directing various moving men around as they carry their belongings into dorm rooms.

Like Moses and the Red Sea, the girls—and even the moving men—stop and move out of the way when the guy I'm following walks in. All eyes are on him, and I watch as more than one girl pulls out their phones, not bothering to hide their actions as they snap their photos.

As he passes, their attention turns to me. Curiosity, surprise and even disgust are directed at me as they look me up and down. Making sure my expression is blank, I walk past them, pretending I didn't notice.

Despite what Cole said, I knew exactly what I was getting into when I decided to come here. I used to be one of those girls.

Girls with so much money, the idea of being poor was an alien concept that I had no idea there were people out there who struggled just to put food on the table. People who needed help, while assistance became about as real as leprechauns and unicorns.

Despite losing everything, we'd never been *that* poor. But it was eye opening for me. It had taken almost a year before I even managed to wrap my head around everything to realize that there were people out there who were even worse off than my mom and me.

Which was when the arguments with her had gotten worse.

If we'd lost everything, and my mom wasn't working, how were we able to pay the rent on a two-bedroom apartment? How was Mom able to afford all the booze she was drinking like a fish? She once said it was from Dad, but he'd lost everything too.

The next time I asked her, she said it was hers.

The third time, it was from an account she managed to stop the government from taking from us.

Keeping my head held high, I continue to follow the hot guy carrying my suitcase through the lobby until he finally stops at the elevator.

"I can take it from here," I say as the silver doors slide open with two girls inside.

Almost instantly, they stop chatting as their gazes fall on the guy beside me. "Royal?" one girl says. She's gorgeous, with the brightest smile, immaculate makeup, and blonde hair pulled back into a high ponytail.

Royal... At no point have I ever asked his name.

Then again, he hasn't asked mine either.

"Gabrielle." As the elevator doors start to close, he sticks his free arm out, grabbing them so they stay open. "Are you getting out?" Although it's a question, his tone is more of an order.

Shooting me a suspicious look, Gabrielle nods and walks out, but not without running her hand over Royal's chest. "You'll be there later?"

Royal stares at her before giving her a smile. "Maybe. But you better be."

He says it with such a flirty tone, that I barely notice her stiffen momentarily before giving him the biggest smile. "I'll be there."

Royal waits for her and her friend to walk away before he gestures for me to get inside. As he follows in, another girl comes running over, but stops when she sees him. Without a word, Royal hits the button.

My brain is whirling in confusion at the whole interaction, that I continue following him on autopilot as the elevator arrives at the third floor, and then he leads me to the end of the corridor.

It's only when we're in front of room 37 that I look at him. "I never told you my room number."

"Am I wrong?"

"No, but I feel like I've just led a stalker to my room."

Royal steps forward, his body blocking me. Although my heart is starting to race, I refuse to back up. As a smirk grows on his face, he leans forward. With his mouth at my ear, he slides his free hand over my ass.

"You're one of the scholarship students. There are only two rooms you could be in, and as the other person is a guy, I'm certain this one is yours."

He steps back and holds up his hand. Dangling from his index finger is the room key assigned to me.

“Also, you followed me. So, I think that makes you the stalker.”

As my mouth drops open, he turns and unlocks the door. Pushing it open, he walks in and deposits the suitcase in the middle of the bed.

Just by the door is a mirror, and I can see that my cheeks are as red as they feel. *Great.* I push my own suitcase into the room, but I don’t shut the door behind me.

That doesn’t stop Royal from sitting down on the bed. He bounces on it a couple of times before his lips curl into a sneer of disdain. When he catches me watching him, he shrugs. “No expense was spared on this mattress.”

“At least you don’t need to worry about that, considering you won’t be sleeping in it.”

He lets out an exclamation of air, like he was going to laugh but thought better of it. But there’s a smile on his face. “To be fair, there wouldn’t be much sleeping involved.”

I don’t know what it is about this guy that has heat pooling between my legs, but I’m halfway to challenging him to make good on that statement. Whether that’s the right or wrong decision, I don’t have the chance to find out, because before I can say anything, he’s on his feet and walking over to me.

With my poker face back in play, hiding my disappointment, I just stare up at him.

“I’ll collect my pay later.” He walks through the door, holding onto the door frame as he pauses to look at me. “At the Freshman Welcome Mixer.” And then, reaching out to grab the door, he pulls it closed with him as he walks away.

Letting out the longest sigh, I lean back against the wall and close my eyes.

I didn’t have a *hard* ‘no-guys’ rule. But guys *are* a distraction.

I am here on a scholarship, and if I want to keep it, I need to keep my grades up. Between studying and trying to get to the bottom of my brother's case, there isn't going to be much time left for relationships.

But I wasn't expecting to have a god carry my case to my room and leave me wishing we'd broken in the bed.

Thankfully, Royal looks like he'd happily welcome most of the freshmen if they gave him half a chance.

The party is run by the faculty and sounds boring as hell. The invitation—they sent an actual embossed card in the welcome pack—has an actual dress code, already expecting us to wear the *college uniform*.

What kind of party was he expecting?

I open my eyes, my gaze drifting to the suitcase that's hiding my little battery-operated friend. I've got a couple of hours to unpack, shower and change... and definitely time for some quality alone time.

Just as I'm about to take matters into my own hands, a knock on the door behind me makes me jump out of my skin.

III

Tori

I yank open the door. I'm not sure what I was expecting, but it's not one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen in my life.

If there is anybody who looks as visually perfect next to Royal, it's this woman.

I made out with a girl once, back in high school. Although she had the softest lips of anyone I'd ever kissed, that make-out session confirmed I was cursed to like men.

But damn, this girl in front of me now is stunning. Her brown hair, which is half pulled back with the rest curling down her back, has about three inches of hot pink from the ends. She's got brown eyes that seem to sparkle, and heart-shaped lips that are slowly parting.

"Good god, you're hot." Although they're my thoughts, they're coming from the woman in front of me.

"I mean, same."

She blinks a couple of times and then her cheeks flush as she takes a step back. "I said that out loud, didn't I?"

I nod. "And I'm absolutely not upset about it."

"Good. Because I'm not hitting on you." She purses her lips. "I mean, I could, but I'd have to run it past my partners first."

She steps back into the hall, beckoning me to follow her. Curious, I do. To the room directly next to mine. She walks in but I stop in the doorway, my eyes widening at all the pink.

My dorm room has dark wooden furniture, off-white walls, and a set of new pillows. The only color comes from the blue—the royal blue of the school’s color—in the room’s curtains. There is absolutely no character—exactly like I expect to find in a college dorm.

This room, however, has baby pink walls and the lingering aroma of fresh paint. The owner of the room has already put up hot pink curtains, thrown a matching bed set on the bed, and there’s a fluffy rug the same color in the middle of the floor. Even all the notebooks and accessories on her desk are varying shades of pink.

“I didn’t realize we could paint our rooms,” I mutter. Honestly, I don’t care. I certainly won’t be painting my walls. But this feels more like I walked into her bedroom at home.

“Yeah, we can do whatever we want. My mom was all set to get her interior designer in to do this, but I wanted the full college experience. I didn’t even unpack before yesterday.” She turns back to me and smiles. “Do you like it?”

“I do,” I say, truthfully. I’m sure a lot of people would turn their noses up at an eighteen-year-old painting her bedroom in this color, but I think it’s cute.

“Oh, I’m Penny. Penelope Bergmann. But it’s Penny, not Penelope. That’s my grandmother, and she’s a homophobic bitch who disapproves of everything I do and say.”

“Tori Anderson.” I’ve been rehearsing that for weeks to seem natural and Penny is the first person I’ve said my new name to aloud.

“Do you have a minute to help me?” she asks, pointing to some folded fabric. “I want to put it up.”

I nod. “Tell me where you need me.”

“Just stand there and tell me if it’s straight.” Chuckling to herself, she picks up two hooks from her desk, pulls the tabs off the back, and then climbs onto the bed, gathering the fabric as she goes.

The next thing I know, she’s got her arms outstretched with a corner of a flag in each hand, letting it hover just above

her bed.

“Move about four inches to the right, and it’s centered.”

Penny shuffles over.

“Perfect. Then raise the right side slowly.”

Moving at a glacial speed, she does.

“Stop. You’re good.”

Penny slams the hooks and the flag against the wall, pushing with all her might. Then she takes a few steps back to cock her head each way. Finally, she turns back to me, dropping down to sit on the bed.

I sense her watching me, but my attention is on the flag. There are three stripes—pale blue, magenta and purple. On the left side is a white triangle that’s off-center, and in the middle of the triangle is a golden heart. I have no idea what it means.

“It’s the new polyamory flag,” Penny explains, as though she can read my mind. Or maybe it’s just the confusion on my face.

Turning back to face her, I find her watching me with a guarded expression, making me feel like this is a test.

“I’m sorry. I know there’s a lot of different flags for various letters of the LGBTQ.” I pointed up at the wall. “I didn’t know there was a flag for this.”

“Neither did my grandmother. That’s my talisman for keeping unwanted people away.”

“You’re a witch too?” I ask.

“Jewish.”

“So, you’re not...?” I point back at the flag.

“Oh, I am. I have a boyfriend who’s a freshman at Penn—Jake—and my girlfriend, Nicole, is in her last year of high school.” She points to a framed photograph on her bedside table.

Her girlfriend has curly brown hair and a really cute smile. She's between Penny on the right of her, and her boyfriend is on the opposite side. Unlike the two girls, he's not smiling, staring intently at the camera from behind his round-rimmed glasses. He's got the hot nerd vibe about him.

She's still staring at me, and I sigh, looking back at her. "You're looking at me like you're expecting me to tell you that's gross. Honestly, I don't care. I don't pick my friends based on their sexual orientation."

That is true. Although I'm ashamed to admit that a few years ago, I would have picked them based on how rich they were.

Penny lets out a long breath. "Sorry. When I first came out, and again when the three of us came out, high school was shit. I decided I wasn't going to hide who I was when I came to college, but I sure as hell wasn't going to put up with all the shit I did at school."

I nod. I've not been in her shoes, so I can't say I know how she feels, but I have been in a situation where everyone turned on me for factors out of my control. I sure as hell found out who my real friends were then.

"The same goes with Bubbe—my grandmother. My dad died when I was younger, so she took me and my mom in, but she automatically thinks she gets to dictate how I'm going to live my life. She thinks I've committed a mortal sin against God, but as far as I'm concerned, I can still have my faith and be bi." She shrugs. "You know, if you read all the holy books, they can be summed up in the same way: don't be a dick."

"Are you here on scholarship too?" I ask.

Penny laughs. "Oh, the only thing worse than being a bad bisexual, polyamorous Jew in Bubbe's eyes, is being poor. They'd have to cancel Hanukkah before Penelope Miriam Bergmann would allow me to go to anywhere other than an elite college on anything other than her dime. Joke's on her. I'm majoring in Political Science, then I'm heading to Yale law. I'm going to change the damn world. Or at least,

America, quoting her as my inspiration at every possible occasion.”

“I like your style.”

The humor seems to leave Penny as she stares at me. “Wait, are you here on a scholarship?”

This information isn’t something I consider important enough to keep a secret. She’s only going to have to walk back into my room and see the broken suitcase and realize something’s not right anyway.

Instantly, Penny waves her hands. “That’s not important to me—to anyone here.”

Folding my arms, I arch an eyebrow. “Really?” I ask, not keeping the skepticism from my tone. Sure, this might be college, and we’re all supposed to be more accepting when we get here, but how much money I have in this place? I’ll believe no one cares when I see it.

Penny offers me a sheepish grin. “Okay, so maybe a lot of people might...”

“Judge the fuck out of me?”

Without hesitation, Penny nods. “Sorry. Bubbe frequently tells me I’m too blunt. You passed my vibe test, and I don’t want to scare you off already. I’m trying to filter myself.”

“Just say what you want,” I tell her. I’ve had enough of people sugarcoating the truth or flat out lying about a situation. “I can handle it.”

She nods. “Fine. About half the school is going to make some form of comment about your situation, even though it has fuck all to do with them. Me? I have a limited number of fucks left to give.” When I don’t say anything, she stands up. “I’m serious. I keep them on my desk.”

“On your desk?” Arching an eyebrow, I glance over at her pink frosted creation.

Seeing me look, Penny walks over to the work surface and pulls over a hot pink cookie jar with a ring of baby pink

feathers stuck to the rim. She picks it up and holds it out to me.

Curious, I take the lid off and peer inside. At the bottom are what looks like paper confetti that gets fired out of the cannons at concerts, all black. I reach in and pull out a few of them. It's only when they're in my hand that I can see the word *fuck* handwritten on them in silver.

Before I can stop myself, laughter bursts from me. It's the fact these are all stored in a pink cookie jar.

"Be careful," Penny chides as she hurries to take the small slips of paper from me. "They're my last fucks."

She says it with such a straight face that I let go. Watching the papers fluttering to the ground, I stumble over to the bed to catch my balance before I fall over from laughing so hard. I'm not sure why because it's not even *that* funny.

And when I try to catch my breath, I make the mistake of looking at Penny. She's on the floor, picking up the last piece of paper *pouting* at me.

By the time I'm clutching at the pain in my side, she's laughing too, tears streaming down her face.

From her position on the floor, Penny rolls onto her back, her hair spreading out around her like an ice cream whip. "My stomach hurts."

So does mine. "If it makes you feel any better, I think my number of fucks is significantly lower." I wipe away the tears from the corner of my eyes, vaguely aware that there's mascara mixed in them, and I probably have some streaks down my cheeks.

I can't remember the last time I laughed that hard.

"It's decided. You're going to the party with me tonight. I won't go without you."

"Not gonna lie, sticking cocktail sticks under my fingernails seems a better option than that Welcome Mixer."

Penny sits up, wrinkling her nose. "Of course, you do. Everyone does. Unfortunately, the Freshman Welcome Mixer

is a requirement. But that's not the party I'm talking about. I'm talking about the real welcome party afterwards. The one where the faculty turn a blind eye and pretend we're all tucked in bed by midnight instead of committing all acts of freshmen regrets."

The only thing I'll regret this year is not finding out the truth of what happened here three years ago, and I have zero intention of failing to experience that.

A college party will be a piece of cake. What could I possibly regret?

IV

Royal

“She’s here,” I declare loudly as I walk into my house. “She’s hotter in person too.”

The silence that greets me is not unexpected. I’m down one roommate, and the other probably has his headphones on.

Since our freshman year, I’ve lived in the same place. Unofficially, at least. Until this year, I spent most of my time in my apartment on the Upper East Side, driving in for classes.

This year, it’s different. Syn wants us on campus—though it’s not for the “college experience”.

I walk into my bedroom and over to the closet. Seamus has been in while I’ve been out and hung up all of my clothes.

After leaving the freshmen girls’ dorm, I went to the gym and spent the last two hours lifting: leg day. My thighs are solid, much like my arms and my abs. Hard work, and I’m proud of them.

I strip out of my clothes, tossing them into the laundry basket. Naked now, I start to walk towards my bathroom. Halfway there, with a sigh, I turn and head back into the hallway.

“Gem?” I call. “Gemini? You in?”

The last part is rhetorical. Gemini rarely leaves the apartment unless either me or Syn are here, and Syn’s not due until tomorrow morning. He’s currently flying back from Beijing after spending the summer there learning Mandarin. That’s a whole family mess I don’t care to get into.

Instead, I stride down the hallway to Gemini’s bedroom. Knocking on the door is a formality, but I give him

three seconds to answer, just in case he hasn't got his headphones on. When I push the door open, I'm not surprised to see him at his computer, Razer Blackshark headset over his ears.

Rolling my eyes, I walk over to his side and lift the band up. Simultaneously, I'm greeted by loud rap music and an objection.

"The fuck—" Gemini turns, gaze dropping to my dick, and he sighs. "Fuck's sake. We agreed you'd at least wear pants in my room."

"Show me the agreement with my signature."

"Just put on some fucking pants, dickhead." He snatches the headphones back from me and sets them on their stand. His desk is immaculate, which is more than can be said about the rest of his room.

Gemini Alexander Remington of *that* Remington Oil, and *that* Remington Shipping, is nothing short of a technical genius, crazy clever at math, and set to inherit one of the largest fortunes in the world. Outside the apartment, he acts like every other member of the old money elite. His hair, clothes, and behavior are impeccable.

Inside our apartment, he's a computer game junkie who listens to rap music which would make the toes of his very white, very conservative mother, curl. And if she had any idea how much he cussed, she'd be insisting his father drag his ass out of here and into some reform school like he was a criminal.

Instead of grabbing some pants, I cross my arms. "She's here."

The scowl on Gemini's face changes as he arches an eyebrow, looking up at me from under his dark hair.

"She's hot."

Shaking his head, Gemini relaxes into the chair and sighs. "You know what Syn said."

“Show me the signed agreement.” This time, my comeback doesn’t hold as much weight, and nor will it when it comes to Syn. I hold my hands up as Gemini stares at me. “I said she was hot. I’m not going to fuck her.”

Gemini returns his attention to the computer screen—or one of them. He has a set up like he’s working for NASA, controlling a space launch. Not that I’m complaining because this man’s brains and skills are phenomenal. Honestly, they’re going to be wasted on his father’s company. He’d make more money on his own.

But that’s another family dynamic I’m staying out of.

“Good. Now fuck off unless you go put on some pants.”

“You have two hours until we need to leave for the Freshman Welcome Mixer.”

Gemini doesn’t respond, instead, pulling the headset back over his ears.

I flip him off and leave, heading back to my bathroom.

Victoria Reynolds, or Victoria Anderson as she’s now called, is... in for an interesting time. And hot as I think she is, dipping my dick in that isn’t worth it. If it were anyone else, Synclair Keyingham wouldn’t give a flying fuck about who I’m screwing.

But this girl?

If I were him, I’d be saying the same thing.

It might not have been her, but someone’s got to pay for what happened.

I spare a glance at my reflection in the mirror and then step into the shower, beneath the hot jet of water.

I’ve been friends with Syn since we were in diapers. I spent so much time at his house that his brother feels like my own...

Felt.

We might not have been blood brothers, but JP's death still didn't feel real to me.

I take my time with my shower and getting ready. The Freshman Welcome Mixer is a mere formality. An opportunity for the professors and the dean to welcome the new students and pretend that they're in charge of this college.

Everyone knows who really runs this place. Even the freshmen.

An hour and forty-five minutes later, I'm waiting in the kitchen. It takes ten minutes to walk over to the church, which means Gemini will leave his room in exactly two minutes.

I swirl what's left of the vodka around in my glass and then throw it into the back of my throat, enjoying the warming sensation.

On cue, Gemini walks into the kitchen looking like the angelic twin of the guy I saw a couple of hours ago. Like me, he's wearing the college uniform.

In the 1800s, back when this college was built, someone on the governing board decided that despite being a college, all students would be required to wear a uniform. Because a well-groomed man must always be presentable for the world, so why not get used to it in college?

Of course, the uniform isn't as uniform as the founding members envisioned. Now it's more of a *keep it work appropriate*, and every student has their tailors create their uniform with a unique twist.

Me? I prefer a round collar.

Gemini? He goes from one extreme to the other. If he's not in uniform, he's in skinny jeans and hoodies—usually with the hood up. It drives Syn crazy, though he never comments on Gemini's clothes. However, get Gemini in a suit, and he goes all out. He's a man who wears corsets. Fucker looks good in them too. He's got a tapered waist that suits them. I'm fairly certain one of his corsets would fit my thigh.

His long hair, which had been loose, unbrushed, and curling around the bottom of his neck, is now pulled back into

a sleek ponytail. Annoyingly, the guy is also blessed with those Asian genes that seem to grant him good skin that never ages.

Gemini's a good-looking guy, no question about that. He could pick up any girl—or guy—on campus and get them curled up like a pretzel, but I've never seen him with anyone. He just tells me he has a type.

“Let's get this over with,” he says, his tone flat. He sounds as enthusiastic as I feel, but I know that will change when we're in public.

“At least Syn isn't here this year,” I say as we move towards the door.

That's not because we don't like Syn. JP felt like family, but Syn—and Gemini—they *are* my brothers. Unfortunately, Synclair Keyingham, direct descendant of James William Keyingham—the university's founder, is required to stand beside his father as he gives the annual opening speech.

I don't care if he's my best friend's dad, the speech... the whole damn thing is always boring as hell, even if it is fully expected for someone in his position.

The sun has set, and the rain has finally stopped as we walk to the church. Even though it's late August, there's a chill in the air, sending a shiver down my spine.

Or maybe it's in anticipation of what's coming later.

The church is already full. Freshmen are down at the front, required to sit in the first few rows. James Keyingham University is one of the most exclusive undergraduate institutions in the country. Attending here guarantees entry into any of the Ivy's... As a result, there are only five hundred or so students in total.

The church comfortably holds all of us, including the faculty. Aside from the dean, they're all seated in the transept, in raised rows so they can be seen by all the students.

The illusion of power is strong in them.

Gemini and I head up to the second level. Around the edge, practically hidden in the walls, is a viewing area deep enough for one bench. Only current members of the Elite are welcome up here. Without Syn present, there are forty-seven of us.

I walk through, with other members stepping back so I can pass, so that Gemini and I can reach the center seats.

While almost every other university has a Greek system, the one at James Keyingham is different. Exclusive.

Elite.

There is no fraternity or sorority on campus. There's just us.

I take my seat, glancing down at the freshmen below, recognizing several faces at once. Sons and daughters of prominent members of society. Some of them will be invited to join us.

It doesn't take long for me to spot Tori. Somehow, she stands out in the sea of blonde, brunette and black hair more than the pink of Penny Bergmann beside her.

Although her shoulders are covered, I can see the cream of her thighs from under her short skirt. Her 'interpretation' of the uniform is so close to the original intended that she could have pulled it straight from the store. Unlike Penny who has clearly customized hers with hot pink at every available opportunity.

Tori crosses her legs, and instantly, my gaze is drawn back as the skirt moves up her legs another inch. The urge to know what it tastes like between those thighs appears from nowhere, and I find myself growing hard.

"Off limits," I mutter under my breath, turning my attention to the rest of the freshman class. I've never had any shortage of pussy or ass to pick from. There will be someone down there I can fuck later.

By the time the dean takes to the pulpit, I've still not found anyone else who's caught my interest.

Without Syn's dad monologuing, this year's welcome ceremony is over quickly. We politely applaud and wait for the faculty to disappear, and then certain members of the student entertainment committee start working their magic on transforming the church.

Keyingham Church is Presbyterian, built the same time as the university. There's a pastor who has a special house on campus, but unless there's a service, he knows better than to come here, especially tonight.

Within ten minutes, the lighting has changed. There's a DJ booth set up in the pulpit, and a bar has replaced where the choir once sat, already manned by two professionals who have been paid handsomely and made to sign NDAs.

Unlike what I've heard of most college parties, there's no red cups here, and all liquor is premium. As I head down to the party, I take a glass that's handed to me, and with Gemini close behind, we do the rounds. All of this is for show. The *real* party is happening shortly, in the depths of the church.

"Is everything ready?" I ask Gemini over the loud music.

"You bet." There's excitement brewing in his gaze. What's to come—that's what's got his excitement burning.

The first part of the initiation.

Each year, it's time to find the select sixteen freshmen who will be welcomed into the Elite. They're almost always a legacy, but that doesn't mean anything if they can't survive the initiation.

Unfortunately, the thing that has my excitement burning is standing on the other side of the room, sipping from a glass that could contain either water or vodka.

I glance over at Gemini. "You should make sure the cameras are ready. We don't want to miss any of this."

Despite my suggestion, I have absolutely no doubts that Gemini has already double and triple-checked everything for later, but the second I even hint that something could go awry, he's gone.

Leaving me to make my way to the flame in the corner of the room.

Unlike a moth, I already know better. This is one little fire I should stay clear of, but I've never been one to play it safe.

Besides, the real event will be starting shortly, and all I have time for is to fan that flame a little.

The moment I get close, Penny's eyes go wide, spotting me first. "You're Royal Davenport."

At that, Victoria turns, hair splaying out around her like a halo of gold. With it, the scent of cinnamon. It takes everything in me not to reach out and bring it to my nose.

"Royal?" A hint of pink darkens Victoria's cheeks.

V

Tori

The Welcome Mixer is exactly as I expect it to be. A generic welcome speech from the dean, droning on about how we had been welcomed into one of the most prestigious institutions in the world.

And then, the church was transformed into a nightclub. Aside from the blatant disregard for the holy building, there's something else lingering in the atmosphere that I can't put my finger on. Something... sinful.

Armed with a vodka and soda, I'm standing at the side of the room with Penny, listening to her as she tells me who everyone is. There are a few people who went to the same high school as her, back in Connecticut, but the rest she knows because they all live in the same world.

Sons and daughters of politicians, lawyers, and old money...

Meticulously, I take a mental note of every face and every name Penny tells me.

Somewhere, someone in this room knows the truth about my brother.

I was worried that whatever had happened, the students involved had left: graduated. My brother, if he wasn't in prison, would have also graduated. That narrowed the pool of suspects down considerably. I doubt there are many students who have ever repeated a year.

But in a place like this, there has to be rumors and gossip. With these people, everyone knows each other's business. It's just a matter of finding the right person.

I'm busy staring at a girl on the other side of the room, Bernadette Westcott, committing her name and face to memory, when Penny says a name, snapping my attention back to her.

“Royal Davenport?”

Turning, I fully expect him to be on the other side of the room. Not right in front of me. “Royal?”

He flashes me a smile—a smirk. “If it isn't my little stalker.”

“I don't think it's stalking when we're expected to be in the same place,” I tell him, dryly, although my heart is pounding for reasons I can't quite explain.

“You two have met?” Penny asks, her eyes wide.

“I tested out Tori's bed this afternoon.”

As Penny's mouth falls open, I roll my eyes. “If that was testing out the bed, you know how to leave a girl disappointed.”

Royal clutches a fist to his heart. “Ooof.” He leans forward, diverting his head at the last moment to my ear furthest from Penny. “I never leave a girl disappointed.” As he leans back, he gives Penny a wink before walking away.

“What the hell did Royal Davenport the *third* mean when he said he was testing out your bed?” Penny grabs my arm and pulls me back towards an alcove as though everyone around us is trying to listen in on the gossip.

As I move back with her, I realize that there are suddenly a lot more eyes on me than there had been before Royal spoke to us.

“He carried one of my cases to my room—”

“Slap my ass and call me Daisy—Royal knows how to do *manual labor*?”

From the look on her face, I might as well have told her I had a pet dinosaur.

“I don’t know about manual labor, but maybe chivalry isn’t dead?”

Penny snorts. “I have a friend who went to high school with Royal, and let me tell you, his reputation is still spoken of in that building. Tori, if Royal is carrying a bag for you, he’s one hundred percent interested in that.” She points a hot pink manicured finger at my crotch.

I glance over in the direction he walked off to. He’s nowhere to be seen. “And that’s a bad thing?”

The question is rhetorical. Honestly, I don’t give a crap about who fucks who and whether or not that relationship lasts longer than that one encounter. If anything, a random hookup is the most of what I wanted right now. And if Royal was interested in my pussy, with no strings attached, I’d be happy to put my bed through the paces.

Pursing her lips, Penny shrugs. “I mean, I’m not going to be the one to judge who you fuck but...” She frowns. “No, that’s a lie. There’s a list of guys at this place I would judge on, and while Royal isn’t one of them, you can do better.” She lifts the glass of the rose and cucumber infused gin she’s been holding onto and finishes what’s left of the glass. “I think I have time for one more, and then I’m heading back for a video call with Jake and Nicole. I’d invite you but...” she winks. “Three-way video sex.”

Plucking my near empty glass from my hands, she turns and heads towards the bar. As I watch her leave, a small smile on my face, a strange but familiar feeling settles over me.

Friendship.

When your brother is arrested for murder, not many friends stick around. And the few that did disappeared when we lost everything else. I suck in a deep breath and try to push the longing feeling away.

Penny actually seems like a decent person, but I’m not sure if I’ll ever be ready to tell her about Cole.

Just like she said, Penny stays for one more drink. Instead of heading back to the dorm with her, I decide to stay. There's so much money walking around this place, that I'm sure the dorms are soundproof, but after getting the lowdown on a lot of the students, I want to stay and see what else I can find out.

By this point, a murder on campus would have been some form of urban legend. At the very least, there has to be someone who knows something. It's just a case of finding the right person.

I've only had a couple of drinks, but it's enough to let that warm, buzzed feeling settle on my shoulders like a jacket on a cool summer evening. I wander through the crowds, enjoying the beat of the music, and for another moment, it's like I'm back in my old life.

Which reminds me of why I'm here.

Somewhere on this campus, a guy was murdered. *Allegedly* by my brother.

I'm not here for a party or a certificate. I'm here to find the truth.

Sucking in a deep breath, I look around the room. Earlier, I was so focused on who was on this floor that I failed to notice there's an upper level. And the only reason I do is because of the masked figure who disappears from my view just as I glance up.

A masked figure?

Curiosity gets the better of me. With everyone seeming to know who I am and yet doing their best to ignore me, I'm able to cross the room to a closed door in the shadowed corner. Glancing around to make sure no one is looking; I try the handle. Surprisingly, it turns and opens.

Something tells me that despite this, I shouldn't go through the door, because this is a church, and back there is where the pastor and all the church things are. But if I can't step through this door, what other doors will I stop myself from crossing the threshold of in the future?

Since no one is paying me any attention, I step through and close the door behind me.

The church is old. Behind this door, the stone corridor suddenly feels like the two-hundred and fifty-something-year-old building it is. Although there are electric lightbulbs suspended at regular intervals along the ceiling, the light is dim.

There's only a short walk before an archway leads to a spiral staircase. Up would take me to the balcony I saw the masked man on, but the stairway also curves down.

As I'm about to head up, a sound catches my attention, making me pause. It's a moan, and I can't work out if its owner is male or female, but if someone is hurt, I can't just leave them.

Changing my mind, I go down. It's only one flight of stairs and then I'm in another stone corridor. There are no windows down here, and the lights are even dimmer. I can no longer hear the party on the floor above, but now I can smell the faintest scent of burning, like a candle that's been snuffed out.

I hurry along the corridor to the first door. There's a security panel on the wall beside it with glowing digits that feel out of place in this ancient building. As I'm staring at the small display, I realize it's still flashing.

Placing my hand on the door, just above the handle, I rest my shoulder against it and then shove, using my body weight. The door clicks open, and I stumble inside, acting like I'm drunk, just in case there's someone in here.

The room is empty.

It's like I've stepped from the past into the future. The room isn't large. Maybe only three meters deep and four meters long. Across the back wall are two rows of four computer monitors. The four at each end are displaying the inside of the church and the party that's taking place upstairs. The quality of them is incredible. I can see faces clearly and everything is in color.

“Why does a church need this?” I mutter to myself as I step forward, peering at one of the end screens. The display has been separated into four, giving a clear view of the area around the pop-up bar.

The party seems to be in full swing. It’s only just passed midnight, but I suspect this is something that will go on for most of the night. Stepping to the side, I turn my attention to the four central screens. These are different. Unlike the others, these are in night mode. However, they all seem to be focused on the same room.

I’m not sure what or where the room is. All the other cameras are in the main room of the church, so my best guess is that these are also somewhere in the church—or under it. There are no windows in that room either.

The room is large and rounded. It looks like something out of a horror movie. There are recesses running around the top of the room, and they look big enough to fit a single person inside. There are five or six steps leading up to them, big and made of stone, like the rest of the church. And in the center of the room stands a large stone altar.

Or at least, I think it’s an altar. It’s square, maybe about three or four feet high, but the size of a double bed. Two people could easily lie down on that.

As I’m staring at it, trying to decide if I’ve had too much to drink since my mind is drifting towards sacrifices being performed on that stone, there’s movement on one of the screens.

Through a large doorway, several hooded figures walk in, each carrying a large lit black candle. In almost perfect symmetry, they walk towards the steps of one of the alcoves and use their candles to light the tall candelabras on either side.

The room lights up in a flickering warm glow, then the screens switch from the black and green hued night mode to color.

Each figure is dressed in black with hoods so deep, I can't see the faces of the few facing a camera. In a silent synchronized movement, they all walk up the steps into an alcove, turning back to face the altar.

“What in the hell is this?” I mutter. This feels like a movie, and I'm half convinced that someone has pressed play on something to mess with me.

And then four more figures walk in. While they're all wearing robes, their hoods are down. One of them is the girl from the elevator earlier today... what was her name...? Gabrielle?

Her blonde hair is free of the ponytail, hanging in soft curls down her back. The other girl is brunette with a shoulder-length bob. She's just as pretty as Gabrielle is. The other two people are guys. One has cropped sandy brown hair, and the other has almost eerie pale skin. Of the four, he's the one with a scowl on his face while the others look... nervous.

The four round the altar in a single file before they ascend to the top of it. There's no sound in my room, but something must have happened in theirs because all four turn and are looking at one of the figures in the shadowed alcoves. At the same time, all of the hooded figures step forward and pull back their hoods.

I can almost make out if they're male or female, but every one of them is wearing a mask—like one I'd expect to see at Mardi Gras. They're cream and gold with lace decorating the edges and covering most of their faces. That's when I see one—a guy as far as I can tell—whose lips are moving.

Lip reading is not a skill set I've learned, so I've got no clue what he's saying, but I can see the smirk on his lips. The four on the altar stare at him, and I watch all but the pale guy swallowing nervously.

And then, with no warning, the four reach up and pull their robes off.

They're completely naked.

What the fuck am I watching?

VI

Tori

From somewhere off screen, another girl appears. She's wearing a mask, although it's smaller than the others, covering the area just around her eyes. I'm almost certain Penny named her earlier.

Liselotte—she had an interesting name. Liselotte is wearing a matching bra and panty set. Cream and gold, like her mask.

She walks up onto the altar carrying an open wine bottle. The four people make a line in front of her, with Gabrielle at the front and pale guy at the back, and then they all stand like they're waiting for a cue. When I glance at the other screen, I see the guy who was speaking earlier. Sure enough, his lips are moving.

When they stop, Liselotte steps forward. Instead of handing the bottle over, she puts something in her mouth. The camera is clear enough that I can see it's a pill, but I can't tell what. Gabrielle leans forward and the next thing I know, the two are making out. Then Gabrielle breaks away and grabs the wine bottle, taking a large swig.

The whole process is repeated with each of the other three, and by the time Liselotte leaves the altar, Gabrielle is swaying slightly on the spot.

I'm quite sure this is going to involve sex and not a sacrifice, but I can't stop watching. My curiosity is winning out. But I can also feel my own body start to respond.

Gabrielle turns to the girl, and the two of them start kissing. Not like they had with Liselotte, which was clearly a way to make sure they each took whatever pill they'd been

given. Instead, they're making out with such heated passion, I'm almost convinced the two have done this before.

Meanwhile, the two guys are doing the same thing. Only, pale guy is clearly not into this as much as his partner.

The synchronicity disappears as Gabrielle and the other girl sink to the top of the altar, hands roaming over each other's bodies like nobody else is in the room. Or maybe *because* other people are in the room.

It takes a while longer for the two guys to progress past kissing, mainly because every time the sandy haired guy starts to reach for the pale guy's cock, the guy flinches out of the way.

Then the two guys stop, their attention snapping to the masked speaker who I desperately wish I could hear. Whatever he says has pale guy's hand straight on the other guy's cock, shaking his hand back and forth like holding a bottle of nail polish.

Of the few possessions I own, possibly my favorite is my re-furbished Kindle. There are few things I treat myself with, except for my KU subscription—when I can afford that. I don't have the money to live the life I used to, but I do live vicariously through my books, and I'm one who doesn't shy away from reading anything with swords crossing.

But whatever this is that's going on in front of me, there's nothing hot and sexy about them. It's awkward and uncomfortable, and the pale guy really doesn't look like he's enjoying himself.

Until the other guy pulls his hand off his cock, and instead, starts crouching, pressing kisses down his chest until he reaches the pale guy's cock. Pale guy closes his eyes, biting his lip. The sandy haired guy cups him, gently stroking his length, and just as slowly, the tension in the pale guy's body seems to relax.

With magic hands, the sandy guy turns the pale guy's cock, which is the pinkest part of his body, from soft to hard.

The pale guy's blue eyes open and fix on the guy kneeling in front of them. Then Sandy feeds the straining cock into his mouth, his head bobbing back and forth. Pale guy's head loll's back, and his lips part.

A very audible moan fills the room, and it takes me a moment to realize it has come from me and not him.

My attention has been so focused on them that I hadn't even noticed Liselotte return until she's placing something on the altar beside the two girls. It's long, black, and phallic, and honestly, I'm not sure exactly what it is from the angles in the camera. But it's one hundred percent a sex toy. Gabrielle picks it up and starts running her tongue up and down it.

A double-ended dildo.

Despite everything I'm seeing, somehow my mind is doubting they're really going to go as far as using it.

Until Gabrielle starts to ease it into the glistening pussy of the other girl.

Maybe I drank a little more than I realized because I'm feeling hot. Hot in all the wrong places.

Even though Penny had told me about the party going on upstairs, we'd both dressed on the conservative side—like most people had. Considering the mixer itself was hosted by the dean.

Ish.

The clothes certainly weren't what I'd go out to a Manhattan club wearing, much less a college party. But our skirts were still short, and hidden beneath the school uniform blazers so the faculty wouldn't call us out, were tops no one would ever consider appropriate to wear in a church.

Penny had insisted I wear her backless silver top. Aside from covering my skin, I'd kept my blazer on simply because I'd simply been cold. Now, I find myself unbuttoning it and wrapping it around my waist.

Better, but not helping with a dry mouth.

On the screen, Gabrielle is positioning herself over the other girl, easing herself down onto the other end of the dildo.

I'm completely transfixed until the door bleeps from behind me.

My heart feels like it's taken a flying leap into my mouth as I turn on the spot, searching for somewhere to hide.

Idiot.

I was supposed to be looking for clues—for anything that would lead to answers about my brother, but instead, I'm about to get caught watching porn being filmed because I'm too busy thinking with my lady dick.

The door opens.

Honestly, I'm not sure who I expect on the other side of it, but it sure as hell isn't Royal.

He locks eyes with me then tilts his head. A smile slowly creeps onto his lips. "Well, well, well..." he tears his gaze away to glance at the screens behind me, then he focuses his attention back to me. "Your stalker tendencies are a little more perverted than I realized."

"I'm not the one filming porn." I shoot back at him. "Do they even know they're being recorded?"

Royal's smile takes on an edge. Dangerous. Like a tiger showing his teeth. "They know exactly what they're doing."

"Well... good..." My comeback sucks, but I'm long overdue my exit anyway.

Royal doesn't move until I'm practically about to walk out of the door. Then he steps in front of me, using his body to make me back up as he swings the door closed.

Swallowing, I straighten my back and look up into his eyes. In this light, his gray eyes look calculating. Dark and menacing, with a detached coldness that sends my blood to ice.

“Where do you think you’re going? This isn’t Pornhub. You don’t get to watch anything without paying here.”

“Who said I was watching anything? I took a wrong turn and was about to leave when you came in.” My voice is level, but my heart is pounding in my chest.

The thing is, I’m not even sure it’s from fear.

He blinks slowly, then his gaze drops, deliberately to my breasts. “Your body says otherwise.”

Unable to help myself, I glance down. The backless top means I’ve gone braless, and my nipples are hard and pointing at him like they’re giving him a confirmational thumbs up.

Instead of trying to come up with another flimsy excuse, I half turn, using my chin to gesture to the screens. “What is this?”

“That’s...” He tilts his head before smirking. “Nothing you ever need to worry about.” He steps up to me, one hand settling on my hip. His hands are hot, so even though there’s only a thin sliver of skin showing between my top and my skirt, it’s still enough to make me sear from his touch. With his other hand, he reaches up and brushes my hair from my shoulder so he can lean further in. “I think I want to collect payment now, before it’s too late.”

My lips part, but before I can make the decision as to whether I’m supposed to be telling him I hadn’t expected to pay with my body for *anything* or if I want to know why it would be too late, his mouth is on my neck.

My body seems to respond on its own; I lean my head to give him more access, as I seem to *sigh* into him.

This isn’t failing at the first hurdle.

It’s not.

It’s my first day here, and although sand is slipping through the hourglass, there’s still time.

Time for me to have a little bit of fun...

The racing excuses and justifications in my head silence as soon as Royal moves, slowly tracing kisses up my throat and to my mouth. His lips are barely touching mine before he's forcing his tongue into my mouth.

Not that I'm giving any resistance.

Everything about this kiss is hot and hard, his tongue claiming dominance over mine. Now that my subconscious has gone quiet, my head feels fuzzy—in a good way.

I reach up and grab Royal's shirt, fisting the fabric as I pull my body up against his. There's no denying I was already getting turned on before, and now I need the friction and contact...

Like he knows what I'm thinking, Royal's hands slip around to my back. His warm hands sweep over my cool skin until they reach the clip holding my top together. Without breaking the kiss, he deftly undoes it, reaching up to tug the small piece of fabric off my shoulders. He pulls his body back, just a fraction, but it's enough to get the top off me completely before he's pressing his chest back against mine.

With our mouths still dualling each other, he slides one hand down my back, over the skirt that's hugging my ass. As his fingers tease along the lace covering my ass, he suddenly grips and lifts.

I wrap my legs around him, forcing my already sensitive core against him, moaning into his mouth as I feel his erection press up against me as he walks us a few steps backwards. Royal's balance sways slightly when I feel him kick out, and then drop me.

A yelp leaves my mouth as it's ripped from his.

It's not a far fall, and I land on the desk, but when I reach out at the last minute, my fingers hit the keyboard. The sound of moans and pants and sex is playing in the room.

Instinctively, I turn, staring at the screens.

I have no idea how they all moved into this position, but the pale guy is on his back with the girl Gabrielle was ploughing with the dildo, impaled on his cock. The dildo is

still inside her, but now, Gabrielle is kneeling in front of her with the other end deep inside of her pussy as she thrusts.

Royal's fingers are on my chin, pulling me back to look at him. Lust growing as he stares. "Eyes on me."

Despite the sounds in the background, the tone in his voice has me locking my gaze with his. Whether it's the soundtrack, or the look he's giving me, there's an ache in my pussy, and I'm breathing like I've just run a 5K.

Royal's gaze drops to my breasts, rising and falling just below his eye level.

Slowly, I reach up, cupping my breast as I rub my nipple between my thumb and finger.

With hooded eyes, Royal watches me, then a smirk appears.

He steps forward, placing a hand on each knee to push my legs apart so he can step between them. Reaching down, he replaces my hand with his, only his touch is rougher than mine, pinching the buds of my nipples tightly between his fingers as he squeezes.

The sensation has heat pooling between my legs. I gasp, and instantly, Royal is lowering his head, reclaiming my mouth with his lips, that are just as forceful as his hands.

As good as this feels, I need more.

To hurry this along, I place my hands on his belt, quickly unfastening it so I can undo his pants. Royal groans into my mouth as I slip my hands under the waistband of his underwear and pull his cock free.

Running my thumb over the wet tip forces Royal to shudder.

He breaks the kiss, breathing heavily as he stares down at me, still teasing my nipples. "There's a condom in my back left pocket. I'm not fucking you without it on, so don't rip it."

I'm on birth control because every other month, my periods have me curled up in a ball, gorging on a pint of butter pecan ice cream as I re-watch whichever Nicholas Sparks

movie I've chosen. But we all know birth control pills don't protect against STIs, and I'm sure as hell not about to put up a fight about using one with Royal.

"Then either pass it over or move closer."

My request earns me a particularly sharp twist of my nipples, which has me crying out in pleasure as I arch my back and push my breasts into him, but Royal twists his body, so I can reach behind him.

Still hidden beneath his pants, I take the opportunity to graze my hand over his ass. It's hard—all muscle. The fact that he's got a single condom in his pocket tells me a lot, but at the same time, I've pretty much spread my legs for him without much thought, so I'm in no position to judge.

Instead, I push his pants down over his hips, my gaze instantly focusing on the muscles in his thighs. This guy has probably never missed leg day.

Another sharp twist on my nipples has me gasping, but it brings me back to the moment. Never have I felt more pressure trying not to rip the condom inside the wrapper I'm opening, but it isn't long before I'm unrolling the thin rubber material down the length of Royal's cock.

Almost at once, Royal stops working my breasts and slides his hands down my side before they settle on my hips. He takes a step back and pushes my legs apart, like he's a hungry man pulling the fridge door open.

The instant cool air pools around me, I know I'm so wet that my panties are soaked.

Royal sweeps a hand back up my thigh before cupping me, fingers pressing against the wet fabric to brush against my clit.

Shivers run down my spine when his gray eyes lock onto mine, and that damn smirk is back on his face. "Soaked." He chuckles to himself. "Fuck me, little perv, were you playing with your pussy before I walked in?" He presses a finger against my clit, rubbing it back and forth before I can

reply. Not that I need to; my reaction says everything. “Watching turns you on that much.”

It wasn't a question.

His touch has me gripping at the table, biting my lip to try to catch the cry from tearing out of the back of my throat. “Royal...” His name is barely more than a whimper.

It's enough for him to grab the elastic of my panties and jerk them down. I only just manage to close my legs quick enough for him to pull them from me before they're literally ripped off and tossed aside, discarded without a second thought. Royal's hands are back on my waist, pulling me off the table.

I crash into him, but before I can react, he's spinning me around. With his cock grinding into the small of my back, he grabs my wrists, pushing me forward so my hands are back to gripping the table, and I'm almost bent in a ninety-degree angle.

“Keep watching, little perv.”

Although I don't care for the pet name he seems to have given me, my attention is on one of the giant monitors in front of my face. By now, all four people are on this altar. Their noises have been playing this whole time, but I've not really registered the change until I'm watching them.

Like before, the second girl still seems to have pale guy's cock up her ass as she props herself up by her elbows. She's the loudest one on the altar, her cries of pleasure seem to be verging on pleas. Beneath her, I can't see pale guys face, but as his hands are gripping at the girl's tits so hard, I can see red marks on her fair skin.

Gabrielle is still on top, thrusting away with the double-ended dildo still connecting them. On another monitor, I can see her face. She's got sweat streaming down her tanned skin and one of her shoulders is covered in bite marks. From the way she's cursing, I'm almost certain she's mid-orgasm, but she's not stopping. She has no choice.

With his knees on the altar, the fourth guy is taking her from behind, hard and fast. It's his motion that keeps them all going.

I lick my lips, but my mouth is so dry.

Royal, uses his feet to spread my legs wide. I don't fight him, instead, tilting my ass towards him.

All I want is him inside of me.

Royal guides his cock to my entrance, pushing the tip in. Before my body gets used to the angle, he takes me, hard, forcing his length in as deep as he can before his pelvic bone slams into my ass.

At the last minute, I manage to lock my elbows and stop myself from slamming into the table.

"Fuck." I cry out.

He's rough, and it hurts, but at the same time, my pussy is clamping down around him, not wanting to let go.

"So fucking good," Royal murmurs from behind me. His hands grip my hips, and that's the only warning I get before he's pounding his dick into me.

The first few thrusts aren't as enjoyable for me as they are for him, but as my body adjusts and my pussy gets used to him, I feel the orgasm building.

"Deeper," I gasp. I'm not sure it's possible, but it feels like the orgasm is building like a bubble of pressure inside of me, and I need his cock to burst it.

"Eyes on the screen," Royal snaps as my head drops.

"Harder."

The voice isn't mine or Royal's. It belongs to someone on the other side of the screen—one of the masked people.

The moment I look up, seeing the sandy haired guy thrust into Gabrielle like he's a piston, Royal pulls at my hips. In doing so, my body dips and then Royal's cock is driving deeper into me.

Words are leaving my mouth, but I have no idea what they are. I'm so close.

And then, like a spear, Royal's cock seems to pierce that invisible bubble, and I come hard.

"Don't you dare stop, neophytes."

It's the voice in the room again, but I've got no energy left in me to try and find the owner of the voice.

Like he's also following the orders, Royal doesn't stop.

I can barely feel my legs, and the only reason I'm still upright is because of his grip.

On screen, I notice Gabrielle and the other girl's face, recognizing their expressions, because I'm feeling it too: The need to stop, but also, for another orgasm.

And the way Royal's going, there will be one.

The guys on the screen have been going a lot longer than we have, and I'm almost certain whatever that pill was they took, it's the source of it, because surely, no one has that much stamina.

"Royal." I'm begging. "Please... I... Oh, God."

He pauses, and it's long enough for him to reach down and grab my knee. Then he's pulling my leg up and resting my calf on the table.

The respite lasts seconds, before he's resuming his thrusts. Only this time, the angle is different, and his cock is going deeper still, hitting another part of me that has me coming harder than the last time.

"Don't you dare," he snaps at me as my legs wobble.

It takes every last bit of effort to keep upright as Royal continues thrusting, making me wonder if he took one of those pills too.

On screen, Gabrielle screams through another orgasm.

Then, almost in perfect synchronization, the sandy haired guy and Royal seem to come together. Still inside me,

Royal stops. My orgasm, however, is still going, and my pussy is clenching his cock.

“Fuck me,” Royal mutters before pressing kisses against my shoulder.

Eventually, he pulls out and helps me bring my wobbly leg back down. He holds onto me, just long enough to reach past me and hit a key on the keyboard, cutting off all the cries and moans from the speakers.

I’m still gripping the table, breathing like I’d kept going through that 5K and decided to do a full marathon.

Behind me, I can hear Royal pulling the condom from him, and then the sound of his pants being raised and fastened. “That was fucking amazing.”

“Yeah,” I say, although it’s somewhere between a gasp and a sigh. “Yeah.”

“It’s a shame there’s never going to be a repeat performance. Get your shit together and get out of here before they leave, and you get caught. Unless, of course you want more.”

My mouth drops open, and I turn, but Royal has already left the room.

Wearing nothing but my skirt, I fall back against the table and stare at the door, still trying to catch my breath.

I’m under no illusion that this was anything more than a fuck. If he’d stuck around, he’d have found that out. But the venom in his tone caught me by surprise.

Now is not the time to dwell on the fuck and duck. Royal’s right about needing to get out of here. I look around for my panties and top, but neither are in the room.

Eyes wide in disbelief, I grab the cardigan that’s fallen to the floor and pull that on. The fabric rubbing against my tender nipples is almost an exquisite torture. If I was alone in my room, I’d be getting myself ready for a third orgasm. Instead, I glance over my shoulder and see more movement on

screen than I want as the masked figures start to walk down from their alcoves.

Hastily, I fasten my cardigan and hurry back up to the party as fast as I can, ignoring the feeling of my own juices that have started to run down my leg. No one pays me any attention unless I bump into them as I weave through the dancing crowds to the door. Then, outside, despite my discomfort and the accompanying ache, I don't stop until I've made it to my room.

VII

Gemini

I know everything about Victoria Anderson.

The moment Cole was arrested for JP's murder, Syn had me looking into him and his family.

New money. Their father was successful in his company when Cole was a toddler and Victoria hadn't even been born. Within a few years, the Reynolds were millionaires. While Cole was a straight-A student, hoping to study law, little Victoria was just another teenager with money.

Until her brother was arrested, she was all over social media with a hefty number of followers. At sixteen, she was good looking, and she had no problem showing herself off online. Honestly, there were times I'd look at her photos and question her age.

When her brother was finally sentenced, I had saved every bit of information into a folder and left it there. Until earlier in the year when college applications opened up and one submitted pinged the alerts I had still set up.

Victoria Reynolds, who had *legally* changed her name to Anderson, was applying to James Keyingham University.

The moment I told Syn, he became a different person.

JP's death was hard on us all, but for Syn, his actual brother, he'd turned into... a Stepford Wife.

Or a Keyingham Son.

With no JP, their father announced Synclair would be a presidential candidate.

And Syn, who, in all the years I've known him—which is pretty much my entire life—has *never* thought about politics, turned into a nodding dog for his father's every wish.

Fuck me, the whole learning Mandarin and studying in Beijing bullshit would have had alarm bells ringing. Not because Syn's father got through all the red tape to send his son to a country which still had the world's tightest travel and quarantine restrictions, but because Syn refused to order Chinese take-out.

Weirdo health freak...

But once I told him that Cole's baby sister was trying to enroll here, a light seemed to come on in his eyes.

Rage and revenge.

So, for the last few months, I've been studying every part of Victoria Anderson's life.

I thought I knew it all... until I heard the sounds she made as Royal plowed into her.

And Royal...

Syn's going to kill him.

Royal fucks who he wants and rarely more than once. Him fucking Victoria will have no emotional attachment to it. The guy was literally thinking with his dick.

But Syn was pretty clear about the hell we were about to rain down on this girl, and that doesn't start with her getting laid at any point.

I sigh and hit the play button on my phone again.

Royal was a sneaky bastard about this one. I might be the genius, but he's no dumb fuck when it comes to technology. I mean, who is these days? And going into the system and deleting twenty minutes of security footage isn't rocket science.

Apparently, not deleting from the recycle bin was...

I made sure to grab a copy of that file before permanently deleting it.

Of course, that wasn't my intention. But for some reason, Royal didn't think I'd notice the gap in the time logs? And once I watched it?

At the time, I'd been in the Crypt, watching Gabrielle, Lissa, George and Declan get high and fuck, and there hadn't been a single twitch in my dick. But watching one of my best friends fuck *her*?

Dipping my hand below the waistband of my sweats, I pull my already hard cock free. Without taking my face off the small screen in my other hand, I start stroking myself, quickly matching my pace to Royal's.

I don't know if it's him or her, but I want to be in the middle of that.

She barely hesitated, practically spreading her legs the moment he had her on the desk. Then again, it's Royal. Not that I'd ever tell him, but I'd twist like a pretzel if he asked.

I manage to turn up the volume so that her cries are almost deafening in my headphones.

So far, Syn's been pretty vague on what he wants to happen to her. *Make her pay*. I know how twisted Syn was before JP died. This girl is going to regret coming here, and if Syn manages it—and I'm sure he will—Cole will be living with that regret too.

Setting the phone on my desk, not taking my eyes off the screen, nor pausing my wank, I reach for some Kleenex. Moments later, I'm spilling my load into the tissue.

As Royal walks off, leaving Victoria to gather her things together—and I haven't missed the fact that he's taken her top and panties—I stare at her surprised face. Slowly, my breathing returns to normal, and I clean myself off, tossing the tissue in the trash.

In another life, I might consider fucking her myself, however, this girl's brother killed my best friend's brother. She could be my fucking soulmate, but I'm not crossing that line.

Not that I think Royal did it intentionally. Like I said, the guy thinks with his dick. And judging from his parting

comments, he's not pussy-whipped. Probably thinks he's got her out of his system and fucked her over—literally and metaphorically. But he probably should have waited for Syn to approve.

I close the video and set my phone to the side.

And just in time for the headphones to be yanked off my head.

“Will you learn to fucking knock?” I ask as I turn and find Royal standing above me. This time he's managed to keep his boxers on.

Small miracles.

“I did knock, but you clearly had your porn turned up too loud.” His gaze drops to the still semi-hard cock I've not tucked back into my sweats, and he grins. “What were you watching, Gemini?”

You.

Rolling my eyes, I tuck my cock back in. “What do you want?”

“Syn's back. He's in the shower.”

Instinctively, I glance towards the door, even though he's clearly not there. “How is he?”

Royal steps back and scratched the back of his head. “Weirdly happy.”

That doesn't sound good.

With a sigh, I get up and follow Royal into the living area.

Officially, the rules at James Keyingham are that everyone is required to stay in the on-campus dorms, even if a lot of us have second apartments in Manhattan. Freshmen dorms are in the Bennett and Bona buildings, closest to the classrooms and the Ederson dining hall.

Of course, they're not quite like the 'standard' college dorms, or so I've seen online. All have private bathrooms,

none are doubles, and the quality of the furniture is as high as the healthy donations that come in from the alumni.

Dorms for the ‘average’ sophomore to senior are more like mini apartment complexes, only one half houses the men, and the other is where the women stay. They sit just on the edge of campus, although still kept safely behind the sprawling stone walls that surround the grounds.

They’re nice, I guess. But they don’t compare to the dorms of the Elite. We don’t have a Greek Row here. But the Elite do live in the best dorms on campus. The buildings aren’t as old as the others. They were built back in the eighties, matching the style of all the other red brick buildings. But inside, they’ve been remodeled over the years and currently look like some of the exclusive apartments you’d find in New York or LA. Each apartment houses four people. Two apartments per floor, and two floors per complex. Luxury, exactly as you’d expect.

Our place is special. Denali House is one of the original redbrick houses that used to house the dean several decades ago. Upstairs are six bedrooms with ensuites. Downstairs, an enormous living room, game room, a meeting room, and a kitchen with a dining room. Each room contains tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of tech and furniture.

It’s also the only building with a small carriage house that had been converted into a small apartment for our butler, Seamus.

Tonight should be his usual night off, but he’s coming up the stairs carrying two of Syn’s cases.

“Didn’t realize you were in tonight,” Royal tells him, moving out of his way.

“Mr. Keyingham called as he landed.” Seamus’ expression, as always, is blank. Without giving us a second look, he walks over to Syn’s bedroom, sets one of the cases down and knocks softly. After a moment’s pause, he opens the door, grabs the second case, and walks in.

“Why do we keep this guy around?” I ask. “Fucker freaks me out.”

Royal arches an eyebrow. “You going to start cleaning when we let him go?”

Flicking him off, I move past him and go downstairs. Syn’s not in the living room, but as I head into the kitchen, I see the lights on outside. Our place has a private garden, complete with barbeque pit and a small pool that remains heated all year round.

Knowing Syn’s already out there with a drink, I make a detour to our drinks fridge and grab myself a beer. Syn will be drinking Yamazaki, and Royal is going to grab a bottle of water because he’d have drunk his weekly allowance of alcohol last night.

Low and behold, I don’t bat an eye when Royal takes a bottle of Evian and follows me outside.

“How was the flight?” Royal asks as we walk outside.

It’s getting late and the area is lit entirely by solar-powered lights added three years ago when this garden was landscaped. Despite the lack of sun, Syn’s stretched out on a sun lounger, Bentley Platinum sunglasses perched on his nose.

Syn’s got the whole John F. Kennedy President vibe going on. Suave, good-looking, and still in a suit. Even though he’s twenty-one, he looks ready to take his place at the White House. It’s not just the looks. The guy was born to be in charge. He exudes power.

Syn glances over his shoulder as we walk over to him. “She’s here.”

Royal stays standing, but I sit down on the lounger next to him. “You want to ask Royal about her,” I say, earning me a set of narrowed eyes. The guy is all smiles and charm, but there’s something about his eyes when he’s angry that’s just kinda hot. “He helped her move in.”

Syn nods.

“Straight into the dorm room we picked out for her.” Royal folds his arms and stares at the garden. All along the borders are rose bushes, and he seems to be fixated on a particular bush in the far corner. “Have you decided what you’re going to do?”

Taking his sunglasses off, Syn tucks them into his shirt pocket as he stands. He walks over to the barbeque area where he’s had Seamus set up an ice bucket. There’s a bottle of Armand De Brignac in there, already chilling.

Carefully, Syn pulls it out and pops the cork. The noise echoes around our enclosed garden as he pours three glasses. Scooping them up, he returns to us, handing us each a glass.

“An eye for an eye, and a life for a life.”

“You’re going to kill her?” Royal asks, glancing over at me, eyes wide.

Syn takes a sip, not noticing the look. “I’m going to have her begging for life, which is more than my brother got.”

A few years ago, I would have said Syn didn’t have it in him. But now, as he looks at me and meets my gaze, all I’ll say is if that girl has any sense, she’ll leave James Keyingham now before we get the chance to find out.

VIII

Tori

My body aches. Mostly in a good way, but there's a slight burn of shame, despite everything. The sex last night was good—great even—and I was certainly a willing participant. I wasn't even worried about it being a one-night stand...

But there was something about Royal bolting out of there, taking both my panties and top with him, leaving me to get back to my dorm room alone that somehow made it feel more like we'd committed a shameful act.

Maybe we had...

Getting fucked while watching others get fucked?

Yet, even now, as I lie in bed, staring at the sliver of light that's coming in between the curtains, even the vaguest of replays is turning me on.

Closing my eyes, I suck in a deep breath and hold it before releasing. "Head in the game, Tor." Sitting upright, I stare at my reflection in the mirror opposite my bed.

Last night, after a walk back to the dorm, which seemed to take three times as long as it had to walk to the church, I took a long, hot shower. Considering how old this college is, I'm surprised how good the water pressure is. It's been a while since I enjoyed a shower as much as I enjoyed that one, and I'm grateful that there seems to be twenty-four-hour hot water here.

Because it was so late, I hadn't wanted to dry my hair in case I woke anyone. This morning, my hair looks like it's going to hurt to brush it out.

It's Monday morning and classes don't start until this afternoon, but I need to get into the local town of Keyingham. My tuition and accommodations are covered under the scholarship, but anything else? That's on me.

On top of that, I've got to be prepared for what happens when I leave here. Even though I'm certain James Keyingham is where I'll find my answers, the reality is that until now, there has been nothing. If I can't find anything here, my next step will be to hire a private investigator. And if I do find the evidence that I need to have Cole released, he's not just going to be set free. I'll need to pay for a lawyer for an appeal or a retrial.

Money stopped growing on trees for me. A job is a necessity.

Thankfully, included with the accommodation is a food plan. The dorm doesn't have anything to cook on, and hotplates are against the rules—not that I could afford to buy one anyway.

Which means, I need to take full advantage of breakfast. I have enough time to take another shower to help fix the mess my hair's in. Ignoring my protesting body, I force myself out of bed and into the bathroom.

The bathroom is nice compared to what I've seen online at other colleges. Technically, it's more of a shower room, seeing as though there isn't an actual bathtub. White tiles, dark wood, and golden fixtures. Honestly, I'm grateful it's not a shared shower block.

I don't take my second shower perhaps as quickly as I should do, but the hot water feels so good as it falls over me, that I don't really care. Afterwards, I hurry through drying my hair and putting a little makeup on before getting dressed.

As we're only expected to wear the uniform during class, I choose a pair of leggings and an oversized, off the shoulder T-shirt. Just as I'm grabbing my purse, there's a knock at the door.

Opening it, I find Penny grinning. “You’re up. Please tell me you’re a girl who eats breakfast?”

I nod, and she grabs my hand, barely giving me the chance to lock the door behind me.

“I’m famished,” she declares. “I was up quite late last night with Jake and Nicole. It’s always much more fun in person, but video sex isn’t that bad.”

My mind instantly flashes back to the images I watched last night. It’s not the same, but my pussy is aching, remembering how good Royal felt buried inside it.

Penny tells me about the plans she and her partners have come up with for surviving the year apart, and I’m managing to concentrate on her words until we walk into the dining hall.

According to the university website, the dining hall is one of the most unique in the world. There are large windows and seating of varying types—tables, benches, high and low—but their claims come from the food. Apparently, there are two Michelin starred chefs running the kitchens, and the evening meals are cooked to order from a menu which changes every day. For breakfast and lunch, it’s a buffet, but the food is supposed to still be restaurant quality.

But it’s not the dining hall nor the food that’s caught my attention.

Gabrielle has just walked past me. She looks rough. Although her hair and makeup are immaculate, her eyes are downcast, and she’s walking more stiffly than I am.

Last night, the question of what was happening had crossed my mind several times, but I hadn’t *really* thought about it. Behind the screen, it was weird, yes, but also hot. Now that I’m looking at her, I can’t help but wonder if she wasn’t as willing as she seemed.

“Tori?” Penny waves her hand in front of my face. “Are you hungover or still drunk?”

Blinking back to reality, I see she’s staring at me, expectantly. “Sorry, just a late night. What’s up?”

“I asked what you wanted. Hot? Cold?” She points at the food.

The website was right about the choices. I scan the offerings, ready to go get cereal until I see pancakes. It’s been so long since I had them. Probably back before Cole came here. “Pancakes,” I tell her.

“I was told the charred avocado and eggs were to die for, so I’m going to go grab them. First one grabs a seat?”

While she disappears for her meal, I grab a stack of pancakes and then drown them in syrup. As I grab a glass of apple juice, I see Penny, still busy getting her food, so I find us a table and sit down.

I’ve managed to devour a third of them before Penny joins me, her own plate piled high. “Fam-ished,” she says, sitting down opposite me.

Ederson Dining Hall is nice. Too nice to call it a dining hall, really. But I guess it’s just another way to show that everyone here has money: only the best for the best. With Penny distracted by her food, I look around.

Something feels... off. I can’t quite work out what it is, though. The vibe of the dining hall is bright, the sun warming the area, but the air conditioners are keeping the temperature cool. The colors are muted, except for random splashes of bright fabric from the chairs.

I glance over at the table close by, trying not to look too obvious as I watch the people sitting there. Everyone seems rather subdued. Maybe I’ve gotten used to high school cafeterias so loud you struggle to have a conversation without shouting, and also frequently had fights break out.

Looking around, I recognize quite a few faces from the Welcome Mixer last night, and I’m certain most aren’t freshmen. So why does everyone seem on edge?

And then the conversations in the room seem to instantly become whispers, everyone focusing their attention on the doors.

Curious, I turn, and almost instantly, see Royal walking into the dining hall. It's not to see him, as he naturally draws attention to himself like he's an angel.

I'm fairly certain the only angel who fucks like him is Lucifer.

Despite how things ended last night, I've not been nervous about the prospect of running into him again. His actions told me it was a one-time deal anyway, and I have no regrets.

As he moves forward, he clears a space for someone else to fill. This guy is Asian, although I'm not sure of his ethnicity. What I can say is that he's beautiful. He's got dark eyes, a pointed chin, and modelesque high cheekbones, which are even more prominent with his hair in a ponytail. His hair's not that long—there's just as much spilling out of the elastic band as there is pulled back.

Like Royal, this guy isn't wearing the college uniform. Whereas Royal is in jeans and a fitted T-shirt, this guy has ripped skinny jeans and a hoodie, despite how warm the day is.

“Who is that?” I mutter, mentally telling myself the question I'm asking Penny is only because I want to know who as many people are as possible, and not because I'm curious about Royal's friends.

“Who?” Penny looks up from her breakfast and over where they're making their way through the dining hall. “Oh, that's Gemini Remington.”

“Remington.” It sounds familiar.

“The guy is probably the richest person in this college, and he hasn't even inherited his parent's wealth yet. The Remington's are *old money*. Imports, exports, oil... the family has been part of that since...” Penny shrugs. “I guess back when this country was still getting established.”

I glance back at Penny, frowning. “He's one of *those* Remington's?”

That was why the name was familiar. Although my old high school wasn't as exclusive here, there were rich kids there. Even back then, when my family had money, it still paled in comparison to some of the other students. People of old money make the rich look poor. Gemini had never attended my high school, but I'd definitely heard of the Remington name.

"He's adopted. Him and his sister. According to the story Elena Remington gave the press, they chose adoption because they wanted to give some poor desolate children a chance at a good life." Penny snorts. "According to Bubbe—who thinks she knows everything—Daddy Remington is firing blanks, so buying a baby from an Asian country and passing it off as adoption was a publicity stunt because Elena Remington hasn't got a maternal bone in her body."

"You know him then?"

"Of him." Penny shrugs. "I went to St. Agnes, which was all-girl's, but my boyfriend does. Not that it really matters because everyone knows who the Remington's are. And Gemini? Yeah, there are plenty of rumors about him."

"Like what?" I ask, curious.

Royal walks through the dining hall, calling attention to himself from everyone in the room. You can almost see his ego soaking up all the attention. Gemini, on the other hand, walks like he's oblivious to it.

Opening her mouth, Penny pauses and shakes her head. "After the shit I went through in high school and all the rumors spread about me, I promised myself not to say anything I didn't know was true." She shakes her head again. "I'm sorry."

"What rumors?" The question comes from the table next to us. The girl sitting there is a pretty redhead with a scowl. "Smart but lazy? True. Guy's a genius but does fuck all in his classes, and barely scraped by to pass last year. That plus the rumors that he has some weird, borderline illegal kinks. Not that it matters what he gets up to. He and the other Elites aren't going to be getting expelled ever."

Looking at Penny, the surprise on her face tells me the rumors she's heard don't match up with these.

“Kinks?” I ask before I can stop myself. I'm not judging, because apparently, I've got one I didn't even know about until last night, but based on what I saw, I'm not the only one.

The girl's cheeks flame. “He's going to get what's coming to him one day. All of them will. You might think you're going to get far being an Elite, but they're still going to be the ones with all the power. If you know what's best for you, you'll stay far away from them.”

The girl gets up and walks off, leaving her plates behind.

Sharing a look with Penny, I frown. “Being an elite?”

Is she another scholarship student like me?

Penny shakes her head. “I think she's talking about the Elite—with a capital E.”

“There's a difference?”

“They do things a little differently here. Did you notice the lack of Greek system?”

“Vaguely?” I mutter, trailing off as I realize I have.

The Elite.

On the few occasions that Cole came home to visit, he mentioned the Elite, but I'd only ever assumed he was talking about the students in general—pretty much everyone who attends here is rich, powerful, and well-educated.

Never had it occurred to me that it was something more.

“Instead of fraternities and sororities, we have the Elite. Just one group, and it's both sexes. Only, there's no rushing. Either you're invited to initiate, or you're not, and that invitation is dependent solely on your family. They take legacies to the extreme, and very rarely look at fresh blood.”

“Are you a legacy?” I ask.

Penny shakes her head. “And I doubt I’m on the list for an invite either. Not that I care.”

My mind drifts back to the last Thanksgiving I had with Cole. He said something about the Elite. At the time, I hadn’t given that a second thought.

“Why don’t you care?”

Pursing her lips, Penny closes her eyes and draws in a long breath. “It’s not gossiping if it’s the truth.” She opens her eyes and fixes her attention on me. “Nobody holds a grudge like the current president of the Elite.”

“Who’s that?” I ask, thinking of all the guys she pointed out last night.

“Synclair Keyingham. And when he’s got Royal Davenport the third and Gemini Remington by his side, and the rest of the Elite to perform his bidding, the last thing *anyone* should do is get on the wrong side of him. And since his brother was murdered a few years ago, I’m not even sure he has any other side anymore.”

Penny’s words are being drowned out by the sound of my own blood pumping around my body.

Slowly I turn in the direction she’s pointing.

At the far side of the room is a table. There’s nothing special about it, and the chairs aren’t thrones, but it’s on a raised platform so everyone can see it. Or maybe that’s so the occupants can see everyone in the room.

And yet, this is where everyone keeps looking.

Sitting between Royal and Gemini is the one person in the whole world I wanted to avoid at all costs.

Synclair Keyingham.

The younger brother of the guy my own brother confessed to killing.

IX

Syn

For the first time in years, morning excites me.

I wake up, and instead of lying in bed, wondering how long I can stay there before I *have* to move, I get up and open the blinds. My room has a view of the back garden, and the slowly rising sun is only just starting to highlight the beds of roses.

Even before he became the Elite's previous president, Preston du Pont, my brother's best friend, had the whole of the garden landscaped, planting the roses in JP's honor. Although I never really associated my brother with flowers, it's a nice memorial.

Some days, I loathe seeing it.

Today, the blooms, still curled up as they wait for the sun, serve as motivation.

Blood red.

I won't rest until I've gotten my revenge for JP, and if blood needs to be spilled, so be it.

Turning, I focus my attention on the vivarium on the other side of the room. Basil is still awake and waiting for me to feed him. I walk over, pulling open the door and reaching in to hold my hand out. The green basilisk climbs onto my arm and his tongue flickers out to test my skin as he does.

"I missed you," I tell him as I run a finger along the crest on his head.

I've had him since I started here. When I made the decision to go to China, and to also live on campus this year, I had his vivarium built and moved him. Gemini promised me

he'd look after him, and to give him credit, he has. Basil looks well.

After helping him back into his home, I get out his food and place some mealworms in his bowl, but also add some cockroaches for a treat.

Since today's classes don't start until the afternoon, and I'm up this early, I decide to hit the gym now, rather than later. I can practically feel all the energy thrumming inside me, and if I want to play the long game, I need to keep it at bay.

About an hour after I've been distracted lifting weights, Royal walks in, whistling to himself. He stops the moment he sees me, pulling his AirPods from his ears.

"How long have you been in here?"

My shirt is soaked in sweat, but I'm not even tired. "A while."

Royal walks over to the treadmill and jumps on, but instead of starting it up, he turns back to me. "Look, I'm going to ask this because you're more of a family to me than my own, and no matter how you answer, you're still my bro, and I'll have your back for life, but... are you sure you want to go down this route?"

"JP is dead, and her brother is the one who murdered him. My dad tried to pull strings and get him into a less secure prison, but he couldn't. The only way we're going to get to him is through his sister, and she was stupid enough to come here."

Despite Royal's presence, I've not stopped my reps.

Royal stares at me for the longest time, but I don't drop my gaze, nor do I set the weights down. Finally, he just nods before turning the machine on and starting his run.

We work out together in silence, or rather, Royal listens to his music. I've never cared for music while working out.

By the time we've both finished, I'm famished. I head back upstairs for a shower and to dress. The work-out has

removed the restless energy I had, and now I feel focused.

Today is the day.

When I get downstairs, both Royal and Gemini are waiting by the door.

My father has always said a good suit is like armor. Even when it was JP set to take the family legacy back to the White House, he insisted that we always leave the house representing the Keyingham name. Some of my earliest memories are of visits to the tailor.

While I'm not wearing a suit for breakfast, I've tried. Royal... is smart, but casual in his jeans. Gemini, as per his usual, is wearing some all-black outfit that makes him look like he belongs in a skate park instead of representing the Elite.

Strangely, it's something I'm jealous of—although I'd never tell him that. Not his choice of clothes, but the fact that he just doesn't give a shit.

"I'll drive," Royal says.

Nodding, I follow him outside to our golf buggy. The campus is too small to drive to each building in a car, but we've been given permission by the dean to use this.

Permission... more like, he was informed we would be using it, and it was in his best interest not to disagree. The man is smart enough to know one call to my father is enough to get him booted out so quickly, he wouldn't even stand a chance at teaching in a middle school in Arkansas.

We arrive at the dining hall in the middle of the breakfast session, but before I can walk through the door, my phone rings. I pull it out of my pocket and frown. "You guys go in," I say before I walk off to the side to take the call.

"You missed the first initiation ceremony."

As usual, Preston doesn't bother with greetings. He's also stating the obvious, considering he said he would take my place when I told him I wouldn't be back from China in time.

"How did it go?" I ask.

“Salaway is going to cause us problems. I suggest we don’t allow him to pass his initiation.” Before I can respond, Preston hangs up.

“Dick.”

I don’t like the guy. I have to tolerate him because he was the President before he graduated, and I took the position. And he was JP’s friend... but honestly, I’m just glad I don’t have to spend another year with the guy.

But Preston du Pont is not important anymore.

I put the phone back in my pocket and walk into the dining hall. The crowd parts as I walk through, heading straight for our table.

There’s no assigned seating in here, but everyone knows the table in the back corner is reserved for the President and Vice Presidents of the Elite. It always has been. I join Royal and Gemini, who have already been served their breakfast.

As usual, Gemini is eating kids’ cereal. Today’s oversized bowl of choice is Cocoa Puffs, the liquid having already turned to chocolate milk. And Royal, despite spending more hours in the gym than me, and being Point Guard for the Keyingham Wildcats, is eating a heart attack on a plate.

One of the initiates steps forward, keeping his head lowered as he sets a glass of orange juice on the table in front of me. “I’ll get your—”

“Did I ask you to speak, neophyte?” I pick up the orange juice. From the corner of my eye, I see him turn red, clamp his mouth shut, and take a step back.

This year, there are twelve freshmen who think they will be invited into the Elite. There were thirteen. Even though at least one of their parents was also a past member, they’ve still had background checks performed on them.

This is what sets us apart from the Greek system.

Every past member is influential. There are members of the military, the government, the police... Lawyers, doctors,

and some of the wealthiest and most powerful businessmen in the country. Together, that gives us the ability to get anyone out of—or in—trouble.

Of course, very few of these members know exactly who is pulling the strings.

The initiation serves one purpose: find who's willing to follow orders. And if they can't, throughout the process, we'll have obtained enough material that later, they will anyway.

As my father told me, it's not the public that puts a man in the White House, and it's not just the president who gets laws passed.

The initiate returns, setting my eggs and spinach in front of me. He's learned, this time, keeping quiet as he does.

As he backs away, Royal leans towards me. "She's here."

Instantly, I sit up, scanning the tables. It doesn't take long before I pick her out, sitting on the other side of the room with Penny Bergmann. I had Gemini look into her before she started, as well as having a private investigator follow her.

For the last few years, she's been keeping her head down. Not long after the trial started, she deleted all her social media, and hadn't been back online since. She's been keeping a low profile—as she should. So why did she decide to come *here*, of all places?

I've seen her once before.

The day the judge delivered his verdict, she was in the courtroom. She was about fifteen then. Blonde hair bleached practically white and wearing too much makeup.

She's all grown up now and looks like a woman instead of a kid playing dress-up. Her hair is much longer now, and a darker shade of blonde. She's wearing less makeup too. Overall, she'd be quite attractive...

If she didn't look like the spitting image of my brother's murderer.

My hands curl tighter around the fork and knife in my hands. Considering how much I've been looking forward to her coming here, now that I see her, I'm torn between following my plan and leaping over the table to end it all now.

"You okay?" Royal asks.

She looks up then, locking eyes with me. And then, as though she has no idea who I am, she glances away and continues talking to Bergmann.

Slowly, I turn my head to face Royal. "Change of plans. I want all the Elite, including the initiates, in a meeting this evening. No excuses."

Royal glances past me, likely at Gemini, before looking back at me and nodding. "Whatever you need."

What I need is for *her* to feel the same pain I do when I see her.

X

Tori

There's something about the way Syn was looking at me that left me with an uneasy feeling I can't shake.

For half a moment, I thought he recognized me, but he just continued eating his breakfast while talking with his friends.

"You need to stay away from all of them," Penny had told me.

She had no idea how hard I was going to try.

I'm not stupid. Possibly crazy at this point, but not stupid. I knew JP's brother was a student here before I enrolled. I knew there was a strong possibility our paths would cross. And my plan was to avoid coming close to him.

If Syn ever works out who I am, I fully expect some kind of confrontation. He might not know it yet, but he hates me. If my brother was killed and his killer's sibling was attending the same college as me, I'd hate them too.

The uneasy feeling remains as I walk into Keyingham. The town is small and feels more like one of those quaint New England towns old people like to vacation in. Certainly not like a college town—even one as small as James Keyingham University. With New York City being a little over an hour away, my guess is the students go there.

There's a pizza place with grimy windows, a small grocery store, three coffee shops, and an antique store. None of which are hiring. According to one of the baristas, there might be some jobs available at Walmart in the next town, but without a car, that one's out.

Which leaves me looking for online jobs when I get back to my room. I'd seen something once about being a virtual assistant for an author, which seems like something I could do, but I was really looking for something in town so I could talk to the locals.

Oh well. Books need buying, and I can't afford to be picky.

Speaking of, I have a list of books I need for my classes, and as almost none of them are available on Kindle Unlimited, my other mission is to see which are available in the bookstore. The town isn't really catered for a college, the bookstore only has a small section dedicated to textbooks, and I already have them in eBook form.

Although I made it to college, I don't really have plans for the future. My goal is getting my brother out of prison, which means I need the lightest course possible. Something that's almost impossible at James Keyingham. Being a small college that's dedicated to *producing the future leaders of America*, the course selection is both small and intensive. Each one with a long "required reading" list.

I've not declared my major yet, and maybe once this is over, I'll pick something. For now, I have the minimum number of credits my scholarship requires.

Picking a book off the shelf, I turn it over to inspect the price and nearly faint. Before coming, I'd looked up the cost of new books online. But the secondhand prices are ridiculous—and they're no better than the secondhand copies sold online.

I set the book down, hoping that the college's library will stock the books I need, otherwise, I'm going to have to start an OnlyFans.

Hurrying out of the store, my thoughts are so preoccupied doing calculations on which textbooks I can afford should I need them; I'm not paying attention to where I'm going.

The next thing I know, I'm colliding into a person, and something hot spills over me.

"Shit," I cry, stepping backwards, somehow tripping over thin air to land on my ass.

Or I should be.

A strong hand is holding onto my wrist, stopping me from hitting the ground. As I get my balance and quickly check myself over, my arm is released.

"Are you okay?"

"I am so sorry," I say before finally looking at the person I've walked into... or at least, his chest. The crisp, pale blue shirt he's wearing is now covered in something that's either coffee or tea. "Are *you* okay?"

I've got no tissues on me, but my instinct is to try to rectify the mess I've made, so I pull the bottom of my oversized T-shirt over my hand and go to dab the stain.

"Stop."

His tone is harsh and has me recoiling my hand back.

"I am so sorry," I say again, finally looking at the face of the man in front of me.

Dark eyes glare at me. "You said that already. Maybe you should spend more time paying attention to where you're going and then you can spend less time apologizing."

This guy is a few years older than me—probably closer to thirty than twenty. And he's the epitome of being tall, dark, and handsome. His dark hair is cropped so close to his head that the clippers had to be on the shortest setting, and his skin tone is a few shades lighter than his hair. His full lips are pressed firmly into a frown as he stares me down.

A lot of effort is required on my part to bite back a comment about his attitude, because at the end of the day, I'm the reason his drink is over his chest instead of in the cup that's now lying on the ground beside him.

Instead, I pull my phone out of my pocket and quickly unlock it. “Do you have Venmo? I’ll pay for your dry cleaning, or a new shirt.”

Rolling his eyes, the guy takes my phone. He enters his details, but instead of handing the phone back, I catch him exiting the app. The next moment, his phone is ringing. “Just in case.”

I snatch the phone back from him, cancelling the call. “I will pay, you know.”

The guy shrugs. “How do I know that?”

“I apologized, and I’m going to pay for the damage. What more do you want from me?” I ask as I again, remind myself, I was the one in the wrong.

“I’ll send you the bill.” And then he walks off, brushing his chest with his arm as though that’s going to do something.

“Dick,” I mutter under my breath.

How much is dry cleaning these days? Is that even still a thing? It’s more likely that I’m getting a bill for a new shirt, which I will pay for, even if right now, I want to do so with actual pennies instead of transferring the money. The fact that I’ll have to see him again is the only thing removing that idea from my mind. Instead, I hurry back to campus, hoping as I go that it wasn’t a designer shirt because that’s going to eat into my budget.

Thankfully, I have to change into my uniform for class, so my own stained top becomes a problem for laundry day.

The rest of the day goes much better. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays are my busiest days. Tuesday and Thursdays are slightly better, but even so, it’s clear from the three classes I attended this afternoon that I’m going to have to dedicate more time than I expected to studying.

The scholarship requires me to obtain and maintain a minimum of a 3.9 GPA, and if I want to find out what happened to my brother, I’m going to have to put in the hours to study.

Maybe I *should* consider choosing a major.

My stomach is grumbling from missing lunch, and all I can think of is food. I'm on my way to the dining hall when I hear my name being yelled across the courtyard.

"Tori. Tori!"

Turning, I find Penny jogging towards me, her hair streaming out behind her. She comes to a stop with a small jump right in front of me. Almost at once, her phone is thrust in front of me.

"We never exchanged numbers. I was going to ask this morning at breakfast, but you just upped and left."

That's because seeing Synclair Keyingham threw me off. Instead of telling her that, I just take the phone and tap in my number.

"Sorry, I needed to get into town this morning."

Taking her phone back, Penny wrinkles her nose. "I drove through Keyingham when I came here. Why would you want to go there?"

Before I can answer, my stomach growls loudly.

Penny's eyes go wide as she smiles. "My next question was going to be if you'd eaten yet. Come on." With her other arm, she links hers through mine and starts leading me to the dining hall. At the same time, my phone starts buzzing in my pocket. "That's just me," she says as she taps her phone and then slips it back into her pocket. "Now you have my number too."

I'm not sure why Penny is in such a cheerful mood, but it's infectious. Although my stomach is rumbling all the way to the dining hall, even as we're picking our food out, I can't help but let everything drift away until all I'm left with is feeling like a normal college girl.

But the feeling only lasts until we take our seats, and I spot the now empty table that Synclair was sitting at earlier. Even with the room busier than it was at breakfast, no one is sitting there.

“You never answered my question.”

Today’s food theme is Asia. The sushi I’ve ordered was served on several plates and looks amazing. Despite this, I’m currently using my chopstick to poke out the avocado from inside my roll before I can eat it.

“What on earth are you doing?” Penny has a large bowl of beef phở and is slurping at the broth from her spoon as she stares at me.

“I hate avocado.”

She frowns. “You should have ordered it without.”

“I didn’t want to trouble anyone.”

“That’s literally their job. Most people here will ask to customize their meal somehow.”

Before I can tell her I’m almost done, my phone vibrates again. I quickly pull it out of my pocket and read the message. At once, my heart sinks.

Coffee Dick: Dry Cleaning bill \$20. Cleaner couldn’t remove. Shirt to be replaced - \$125. Total, \$145.

Penny leans over and peers at my screen. “What’s that all about?”

“I ran into a guy this morning.” I sigh. “I mean, it was my fault, but I ended up getting coffee all over his shirt, offered to pay the bill, and here we are.”

Pursing her lips, Penny sits back. “Guy’s doing you a favor. That’s cheap.”

If you have more than \$300 in your bank account, it probably is. Instead, I send nearly half of my savings over to the Venmo details given, while silently praying that the library has books that I need.

When I look up, I find Penny watching me, gnawing on her lower lip. “What?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think. Do you need me to cover it for you?”

Quickly, I shake my head. Yes, I'm running a very tight budget when it comes to my finances, and maybe I shouldn't be turning down an offer of help, but I don't want to be indebted to anyone. Especially not money.

If my dreams come true and I find the truth that sets my brother free in a matter of days, money won't be an issue. And if I have to stay here for longer than a semester, I'll just feel obligated to pay that back.

"It's fine. Though if you know anywhere that's hiring?"

I'm not expecting a response, but Penny tilts her head. "I mean, I do, but it depends on what you're prepared to do."

"If the next words out of your mouth are OnlyFans—"

"No, although, if you hit that right, it would be good money." She shrugs. "Actually, it's probably a much better option. I can help you set it up. Take some sexy pictures for you?"

"What was the other option?"

"Oh." Penny frowns. "The dining hall. Mina Clemence had someone fired this morning." She glances over her shoulder at the serving area. It's all clean and empty for the dinner service, but wait staff are constantly walking through, carrying meals out to tables. "But I wasn't really serious. No one wants that job."

Nobody except me.

A job is a job, and sure, there might be better money with OnlyFans—or whatever site I went with—but once something was on the internet, it was there forever. And honestly, I wasn't sure if I was ready for that.

But more than that, it gives me a new opportunity.

Anyone who was here at the same time as Cole and JP may have already graduated, but there is a much better chance that a faculty or staff member is still here. Trying to get either to open up was going to be hard, but if I was a fellow staff member, I might find an opening.

“Penny, you are amazing,” I say before I finish poking the avocado out of my sushi.

I’m not sure if it’s the avocado or the job, but Penny has a look of disbelief on her face. Before I can decide whether I’m ignoring it or not, the volume of the conversation in the room drops.

Without looking, I know it’s Synclair Keyingham. Although I refuse to look up from my sushi, from the corner of my eye, I can see him, Royal, and Gemini heading to their table.

“That’s my cue,” I mutter.

“Huh?” Penny asks.

I give her a smile as I shake my head. “I’m heading to the library. Want to join me?”

Penny wrinkles her nose. “I hate libraries. Too quiet. I only go there when I need to, and that’s not this early in the semester.”

XI

Syn

The Elite and the initiates are punctual.

Glancing through the door, it looks like no one has disobeyed my orders and missed the meeting. Inside the room, there's a low buzz of chatter, and the few snatches of conversation that I do hear are of confusion.

I'm not surprised. Formal meetings like this are rare, especially this close to the beginning of the semester.

Certainly not in the church.

The Elite have been part of the university since the first students passed through the doors back in the 1840s. The use of the church dates back to the Civil War, and legend has it, key strategies that helped win the war were discussed in the rooms under the church.

It's probably true, but today, more important matters will be discussed.

"Lyle did a headcount. They're all here," Royal tells me.

While the church is almost as old as the founding of our country, over the last decade, modifications have been made for comfort and technology. The main rooms have retained the traditional interior—uncomfortable wooden pews included—but this room, hidden below the ground, has rows of informal armchairs for the initiated members of the Elite. The initiates, of course, are standing in the back.

The 65-inch 4K smart screen currently displays a 3D image of the university crest slowly spinning clockwise. There's even a 'discreet' microphone designed to pick up the

words of the speaker, and a state-of-the-art speaker system is hidden in the recesses of the wall.

Tugging at my shirt sleeves, I straighten my back and walk into the room. The second my foot hits the stone floor, the room falls silent, and the only sounds are breathing and my footsteps.

I don't stop until I reach the front of the room, where I turn and face everyone. After three years, I know the names of everyone in here, including the initiates—even if they haven't earned that acknowledgement yet.

Truth be told, I don't like many of them, but they are the sons and daughters of most of the most influential families in the country. They'll have their uses.

“Nearly three years ago, James Patrick Keyingham, JP, the reigning president, and my older brother, was murdered.”

Almost at once, the atmosphere in the room changes.

Although no one breaks the silence, it's like I've spoken magic words that have ensured I have everyone's full attention.

But if it is magic, it feels like black magic. A ghost has been summoned—one I've tried to banish. Although it's invisible to everyone, including me, the moment I mention my brother's name, it feels like something was in my chest and squeezing at my heart.

The pain is almost crippling, but if no one can see my ghost, they're sure as hell not seeing my pain either. Like the grip on my heart isn't hurting me at all, I keep my face blank and my back straight.

“His murderer was found at the scene, covered in his blood. That person is now serving a life sentence in prison,” I continue. “However, this year, his sister was accepted into this year's freshman class.”

Several mouths drop open, and I can see a number of people look at each other, but still, the room remains silent until a junior raises his hand.

I nod. "Callum."

"I assume a decision has been made to allow her to remain rather than having her expelled?"

I nod, unable to stop my smile. Should I choose to, I could have her removed from the campus in under twenty minutes. "She is to remain... until true justice has been served."

"You want to kill her?"

The question slips from the mouth of one of the initiates. Annoyingly, it's George Williams and not Declan Salaway, the initiate Preston wants gone. That would have been an easy dismissal.

As my eyes meet George's, I see instant regret and fear in his. "Know your place, neophyte. If that is the order, then you will carry it out."

Being part of the Elite means you are prepared to do whatever is expected of you, and fifty years ago, the Elite's president may well have issued that order. But, for the most part, the majority of the Elite aren't useful until *after* graduation.

I scan the room, looking everyone in the eye before I speak again. "While I would fully expect *any* member here to fulfil any and every order given, this girl will not get such an easy option."

Finding Gemini at the back of the room, leaning against the door like he's giving a half-assed effort at making sure no one leaves, I nod. Gemini pulls his phone out of his pocket and taps at the screen. Almost at the same time, the screen behind me changes.

Refusing to look at the image of blonde behind me, I keep my attention on my audience. "Some of you will already recognize this girl. Regardless of any interaction you've had with her so far, as of now, it ends. No one is permitted to talk to her unless you've been specifically instructed by me. That includes during classes. Her name will never be uttered. And

together, we're going to make her life the living hell that will suitably honor JP's life."

A hand shoots up.

I nod at Lenora.

"How far can we go?"

I arch an eyebrow: the first emotion I've allowed myself to show since walking in the room. "How far do you want to go?" My question is rhetorical. "When you completed your initiation, you were told that being a member of the Elite earned you so many privileges and opportunities. Most of you will benefit from them after graduation. But one that comes now is protection. We control the cameras, and we control the faculty. Your hard limit is do not kill her. She can't suffer if she's dead."

And if she doesn't suffer, her brother won't either.

The previous Elite President, Preston, said once that people would do anything you asked of them provided you give them the right motive.

I told him if you removed the consequence, people would do what was asked and a whole lot more—you wouldn't need a motive.

It's time we see if I was right.

XII

Tori

As it turns out, the dining hall manager is looking for new workers, and although she seems dubious when I express my interest, she still hands over a paper job application for me to complete.

To show her I'm serious, I complete it in front of her. Regardless, she says she'll think it over and get back to me tomorrow. I'm not convinced she will, but I tell her I'll keep my phone on.

Since my savings took a hit, I do as I told Penny and head to the library. When I was working to pull my GPA up, I frequently had to go into Manhattan to their public libraries, spending most of my weekends studying. The 'library' at my high school was probably as big as the janitor's closet.

Although the libraries in the city are considered some of the best in the world, I was never really taken in by the architecture. It was a warm, quiet place to study.

The library at James Keyingham University is in the center of campus and two stories tall. Regardless of how impressive it is, it's the last place I plan to spend any unnecessary time in.

Last year, it was renamed the James Patrick Keyingham library, and when I walk in, I'm confronted with an eight-foot memorial statue of the namesake in the center of the entryway.

I'm no stranger to the face of James Patrick. He was a good-looking guy... but seeing him every time I have to come here would be a constant reminder of where Cole is.

Unfortunately, my luck quota is spread thin. While the library does have a copy of almost every book that's on my reading list, they're not allowed to be taken from the library. Every book I pick up looks brand new, so I'm confident there's no student here who will need them, but it means I'll be spending more time here than I care to.

The second floor has desks at the back of the building, but not a single one of them is occupied. Despite how every student probably has all their required books, I'm sure they're only empty because it's the first day of classes. No doubt, as it gets closer to midterms, this place will fill up.

Since one of my classes has already assigned reading today, I take a seat at a desk and pull out a notebook to take notes of the chapter I've got to read. Although I have a laptop, I got it the year Cole was arrested. It's not really that old, but I keep getting a message when it starts up about the health of the battery. The thing lasts about twenty minutes without a power cord these days.

With a quickly depleting savings account, I'm not sure I can afford a new battery, much less a new laptop. But as the blue screen of death has appeared a couple of times, I really don't want to push my luck with it. For now, the laptop will stay in my room, and I'll take notes by hand like students used to do back in the old days.

Tonight, I only have a couple of hours of work to do, so when I leave, it's not that late.

On my way out, I stop at the statue and stare up at the image of JP. I've been here nearly two days already, yet I know nothing more than I did before I arrived.

"His name was James Patrick Keyingham. He would have graduated last year."

I whip my head around at the sound of the voice, finding Synclair Keyingham a few feet away from me. With the way he's staring up at the statue, for a moment, it feels like he isn't even paying attention to me.

Then his hazel eyes meet mine, as though he is waiting for a response.

There doesn't seem to be any visible hint of recognition from him, and although my heart is still pounding in my chest, I'm finally able to find my breath. Not my words, though. Despite everything, JP was his brother, and I'm not sure there's a right thing to say to that.

But I also have a dozen questions ranging from what he was like, to what he was doing the night he died.

I stick with silence, however, and just nod.

"He was murdered. Here." Synclair doesn't take his gaze from mine. "On campus."

His expression hasn't changed. It's like I could be anybody, and he's just speaking because I'm here.

And yet, the hairs on the back of my neck are standing on end.

There's nothing about him that overtly screams *threat*, but there's something about his demeanor that seems to be telling me this guy is that dangerous, I need to get out of here.

Now.

I give him a polite smile, bob my head, and then start to walk away.

"Do you believe in ghosts?"

Not really. And Synclair doesn't strike me as someone who does either, but his question feels so out of place that I falter.

"There's a legend that ghosts are the souls of the dead, roaming the earth until revenge has been served."

While I could pass everything else off as a coincidence, this sounds even more like a threat, but when I turn back, Synclair's attention is back on the statue.

"You think his ghost is roaming the campus?" I ask, keeping my gaze trained on his face.

A sound escapes Syn that's somewhere between a laugh and a snort. "I don't believe in ghosts." He turns back to face me. "But even if they are real, they're not as terrifying as the living."

Something dark flickers through Syn's eyes. I'm not entirely sure what it is, but it fills me with dread and a sense of foreboding.

I'm here to find the truth, not make enemies. Over the past couple of years, I've felt myself become a stronger person. More importantly, high school taught me quite quickly that if you want an easy life, you keep your head down.

But right now, my anonymity is my power. I give Synclair a small smile and continue with my exit plan.

It's not until I'm halfway across the campus when I feel my pounding heart start to calm. There's nothing about Synclair that has given me any indication he knows who I am, but that one interaction has already got the alarm bells ringing.

Back in my room, I turn on my laptop and open up Google, searching for the name, James Patrick Keyingham. Although there are countless news stories and websites covering his murder, each one's link has turned purple. I've read them all dozens of times before, and I'm only back to see if there have been any updates.

But the reason I'm here at this university is because none of them give me any information. The focus is always on my brother and never on the crime scene. JP was one of those guys who everyone liked, had so much potential, and as Synclair said, was preparing for a political career. There are countless accounts of what a great person he was, and I'd yet to come across anything negative about him.

Aside from knowing he was stabbed *somewhere* on campus, I still didn't know exactly where. For all I knew, he could have been killed in one location and moved to another.

My mom went to court every day of Cole's trial, but even when I asked her, she'd never been able to answer. I fucked up when I went to see Cole because I should have

asked for more details about what happened before I told him about the scholarship, but I didn't expect him to get so angry, cutting our meeting short.

James Patrick Keyingham was a descendant of the founder of the local town and university he was named after. His whole family tree is full of senators or politicians. For someone so famous, and in a case so high profile, it bothers me that there's so few details available.

Well, details about JP...

The press had no problem with sharing all of Cole's personal details—including his address. That was the *only* blessing when my mom and I moved to Jersey.

When it's clear my search is unproductive, I shut the laptop down and go for a shower.

By the time I fall into bed, it's still early. I love my sleep, and I've learned to take what I can when I can, but sleep doesn't come as easy as it usually does.

Tonight, I'm lying awake for hours, thinking about Syn's eyes. Or more specifically, the look he was giving me with them.

XIII

Tori

My first class of the day doesn't start until ten, but I'm not surprised that I've still not had a response from the dining hall manager about the job before it. Penny, who is also in this Communications class, is sitting beside me in the small classroom, lost in TikTok as I type out a polite email to the manager, letting her know I'm serious about wanting the job.

"I'm not kidding, it happened right here on this campus. My mom didn't want me to come here until Daddy told her the murderer had already been caught and there hadn't been a single crime reported in the three years since."

At once, my email is forgotten when I look over my shoulder at the two girls taking seats a few rows behind me. It's early, and there aren't many people here yet. Both are wearing uniforms, but their skirts are much shorter, and instead of a shirt, they're wearing a cute vest top.

These two were at the Welcome Mixer. The girl with russet-brown skin is Monica, and according to Penny, her dad is an incredibly successful media lawyer working for a magazine conglomerate in Manhattan.

The other girl, Ellie, has skin paler than mine and a lot of it is on a show—she's got a small fan already set up on her desk, aiming at her face. Penny said Ellie's father is a foreign diplomat, based in one of the Scandinavian countries. She was born there, but still technically on US soil. She was the one whose words instantly caught my attention.

"No, I meant seriously, as in you've only just heard about this? My father was super busy because the family kept trying to sue any paper that printed anything about it." Monica

reaches into her bag and pulls out an obviously brand-new MacBook Pro. “There wasn’t a single report or gossip columnist who wasn’t reporting it.” Monica narrows her eyes. “Where did you say you were living?”

“Sweden. And don’t be so surprised. There are so many murders in the states that barely any of them even make the news in Europe unless it’s another mass shooting.”

Monica shrugs, and I see her mouth move, but whatever she responds with, I can’t hear.

“What are you frowning at?” Penny asks. As I look back at her, she glances over her shoulder.

“The point is, it happened here on this campus,” Ellie continues as she pulls an iPad out of her own bag.

“I know. Even my father was surprised. Usually, the students here are of a much higher caliber.”

“A student?” Ellie’s mouth drops open.

Penny glances back at me and continues. “Oh, they’re talking about JP. That’s Syn’s older brother. I told you about it at breakfast yesterday.”

“Yeah, I just...” I shrug. “I don’t really know any of the details. I’m trying to hear what they’re saying.”

My attention goes back to Monica and Ellie, but they’re now busy talking about some hot new teacher.

“He was murdered by one of his friends. With a lame-ass excuse too. Dick. I mean, JP was a nice guy. Nothing like his brother, although his brother was nicer back when JP was alive.” Penny reaches up, running her hand through her hair, fluffing it out. “I remember being at a fundraiser when I was fifteen and meeting JP. He was probably our age at the time, and I don’t know about you, but no one wants to talk to fifteen-year-olds. We were at the same table, but instead of ignoring me, he was chatting about there not being enough female representation in the senate. Which, of course, is true. Said he’d look forward to working with me one day.”

“Really?”

Penny nods. “He was pretty convinced he was going to be President. I mean, it’s in his blood. But he seemed genuine and friendly, and I wouldn’t be mad if he had been President one day. Unlike Syn. I don’t care who the opponent is, I’d vote for the other guy just to keep Syn out of the White House.”

Having finally met Syn for the first time last night, I agreed with Penny. Our encounter still has me feeling uncomfortable, so I sure as hell wouldn’t trust him to run the country.

“The guy that killed him straight up confessed, and now, he’s in prison. Life without parole. He’s lucky.”

“That’s lucky?”

Penny nods, but her attention is now back on TikTok. “New York doesn’t have the death penalty anymore. I know JP’s parents were pushing to have it reinstated, but even if they did, the courts won’t go back and resentence people. Ironic considering JP was against it.” She suddenly frowns and looks at me. “Where do you stand on the death penalty?”

“I think that if a system can’t guarantee the person that they’ve sentenced is one hundred percent guilty, they shouldn’t be sentencing anyone with something so horrible as death,” I say, before I can stop myself.

Pursing her lips, Penny nods. “Honestly, I can’t say that if that had been my brother that I wouldn’t want his murderer to be put to death, especially when he was so clearly guilty *and* he even confessed, but yeah. I can’t say I’m exactly pro-Death Penalty.” She continues and picks up her phone again. “Glad we’re on the same page on that too.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell Penny the truth, but I stop myself. Ultimately, she’s right. Cole did confess. And I have no proof—yet—that he’s lying.

“What do you know about the mur...murder,” I ask, stumbling over the word.

Penny doesn’t seem to notice as she shrugs. “He was a freshman.” She frowns. “Actually, I really don’t know much about him, which probably says a lot more than it doesn’t. I

mean, if I knew who he was, he probably would have had a better lawyer.”

“But he confessed, right?”

“Yeah, but if you have enough money, no one’s serving a murder charge.” Penny wrinkles her nose. “I swear, the justice system in this country is so fucked up. I can’t wait to change it.”

While her intentions are admirable, I’m fairly certain that no matter how far up the legal hierarchy she makes it, she’s going to have a hard time with that one. But as she’s going into a rant about that, I know I’ve lost my opportunity to find out more about Cole.

Instead, I reach for my bag, grabbing my notepad. As I search for the pencil I put in earlier—I’ve always preferred taking notes in pencil instead of pen—I’m very aware that everyone else around me either has a laptop or a tablet in front of them.

“Welcome to Communications 101.” The words aren’t shouted, but they still carry clearly around the room. “No matter what profession you wish to work in, your ability to communicate effectively will be the key to how far you’re able to succeed.”

My head is still down as I search my bag for the pencil, but the voice has the hairs on the back of my neck standing up on end.

Because I recognize the voice.

Clenching my fingers around the pencil, I sit upright. And standing next to the professor’s desk, at the side of the whiteboard, is the guy I spilled coffee on.

Fuck my life.

“Communication isn’t just what we say,” the professor continues. “It’s what we wear, it’s how we stand, and it’s the silent language our body uses.” The gaze that has been gradually sweeping the room pauses on me, but like he doesn’t recognize me, he continues looking at each student. “Every moment you’re in this class, you are being graded.”

“He can grade me,” I hear someone behind me say. They’re loud enough for almost everyone to hear and start sniggering.

The professor doesn’t crack a smile. Instead, he walks to the board and picks up the pen to write on the board. The board is a smart board, and he switches settings so whatever he writes appears in his own handwriting instead of being changed into a font.

Dr. Payne Wright.

His handwriting is immaculate, and despite the length of the board, he manages to keep his name almost perfectly straight.

“BDSM King,” another girl says, earning another chorus of sniggers which Dr. Wright continues to ignore.

Instead, he walks back to the desk and pulls an iPad out of his leather case. “Attendance is mandatory.” And with that, he proceeds to read through the list of students in the class, marking us present when we answer. Once completed, he sets the iPad down and looks at us all. “By show of hands, who here has read the introductory guidebook?”

Everybody’s hand goes up. Guidebook is generous. It was a two-page document listing a few ground rules, like mandatory attendance and no talking in class, as well as how the class was going to focus on written and spoken form this year. At the bottom was the list of required reading for the year. Thankfully, all but one of the books, I’d found in the library.

“Then you are familiar with the rules.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” Dr. Wright’s gaze snaps to me “Ms. Anderson. Perhaps you could share them with the class?”

“Attendance is mandatory, be on time, hands in the air if you wish to speak, and ensure all readings for the class are completed.”

Slowly, Dr. Wright tilts his head. “And?”

My lips part, but I've got nothing. There were four bullet points on the sheet: four rules. I glance at Penny, who tries to angle her iPad to face me, but stops when she sees Dr. Wright staring at her.

"Our grades are based on points?" I ask, wracking my brain for anything else that was on the guidance document.

"Anybody else?"

Instantly, a dozen hands shoot up into the air.

"Yes, Mr. Lister."

Noel Lister is sitting a couple of rows in front of me, but he turns his head to look pointedly at me before standing. "As per the required reading for the first class, one must stand when answering a question or addressing the class. Listen actively and attentively. Do not interrupt anyone who is speaking, instead, raise your hand and wait to be acknowledged. Critique ideas but not people. Provide evidence instead of opinions. Turn your cellphone off in class, and finally, do not leave class early without permission from the professor."

My skills at keeping a poker face might be excellent, but they're doing nothing to combat the heat I feel on my cheeks. But as much as I am embarrassed, I'm angrier at myself for missing this. And how had I missed something about required reading for today's lesson?

"Thank you, Mr. Lister. And Ms. Anderson, that's a point deducted for not doing the required reading and an additional point for failing to stand." Dr. Wright nods at a guy in the first row, who stands up and turns to the class. "This is my TA, Quentin Harrington. One of his jobs is to record points awarded and deducted, which are then included with your midterms and finals. Anyone who Mr. Harrington records as ending this class with negative figures, regardless of your grade will receive a fail. No exceptions."

Without my laptop, I can't check if there's any other required reading for today, but I manage to catch a glance of Penny's iPad and see the text with a link to a website where I

assume the rules are listed. How did I manage to miss that? Praying there wasn't more that I missed, I try to avoid eye contact with the professor for the rest of the class.

"This class is going to be tough," Penny mutters after the professor has walked out of the room. "I didn't realize we'd need to memorize everything we read. I'm sorry, I should have asked."

"Asked what?" I say, sighing. "It's my fault for missing it. I'll have to be more careful in the future."

"He is really hot though."

I might not have gotten off on the right foot with this professor, but even I can't deny the guy is good looking. He held the attention of most of the class for the whole lesson, and I'm sure it was mostly because the man's features were so striking that you couldn't help but stare.

"Shame he's so old." Penny slides her iPad back into her bag.

"Would you make a move if he wasn't?" I ask, smiling. The guy is probably in his late twenties, so he's not *that* old. "Isn't the bigger issue that he's our professor?"

XIV

Tori

Although the dining hall manager, Doris, hasn't replied to my email, when she sees me at dinner, she offers me the job.

"I need help with the food prep before breakfast, serving, and washing the dishes after dinner, ten shifts a week. Sundays are non-negotiable. Can you handle that?"

I have no interest in my social life while I'm here, so partying on a Saturday night and risking missing the breakfast shift isn't an option anyway. Getting up early is fine, but not being able to get my studying started until after eight, and therefore, not being able to get out and investigate is a little problematic. But at the end of the day, I'll have to make it work.

My first shift is the following morning. The first classes of the day are at 8 a.m., so breakfast starts at seven. And the prep shift starts at five...

Ugh.

Even though it's the beginning of the year, it's still quite late when I leave the library after finishing my homework. As I hate early mornings, I grab a shower before bed. It's only as I'm drying my hair, checking my emails, that I get a notification through the school's communication app.

JKUFacultyApp is an app built specifically for the university's employees. Most of the features are for the faculty, but there's one menu option which gets more use than others: the section that allows me to scan my app when I start and finish my shift, and of course, the roster.

The notification has changed my start time from 5 a.m. to 4 a.m.

Closing my eyes, I suck in a deep breath. Then I turn the hairdryer off and accept the change. A job is a job, and I need the money. An extra hour won't kill me.

When the alarm goes off the following morning, and my room is still dark, I'm reconsidering that my stance. Dragging myself out of bed, I move around my room like a zombie, washing my face, brushing my teeth, and braiding my hair. Doris said there was a uniform to wear, and I'd be able to collect it and change when I arrive, along with a pair of black shoes. I just need to wear a black skirt.

The walk to the dining hall is eerie. Although it's as dark as it was when I left the library last night, now, there are no people around. A few of the dorm windows have flickering lights, like the occupant is still up, watching TV, but outside, it's deadly quiet.

James Keyingham University is in the countryside, so the drive stretching down to the entrance leads to a road which has the campus gates at the end of it. Aside from the quiet hum of the few air-conditioning units that are whirring away on top of the buildings, the stillness of the night has me wrapping my jacket tightly around myself.

Doris gave me instructions to report to the back entrance where the staff enters. Only, when I get there, the doors are locked, and the lights are off. The small parking lot is empty.

I'm early. While the job is hardly the most important thing to me right now, I'm still unable to show up to a class, never mind a shift, without being at least ten minutes early. With a sigh, I lean against the building and pull my phone out to check the app, but the thing keeps giving me an error message and crashing.

The phone, like my laptop, is the one I had back in high school. It's an iPhone, so it doesn't look out of place, but it's definitely past the upgrade date. The battery, like the laptop, lasts about eight hours—if I don't use it. I've also got the cheapest pay-as-you-go in the world, which means virtually no data. For most places on campus, there's wi-fi, so

it's not an issue. But back here, I'm either out of range, in a dead zone, or they have intentionally turned the routers off as the dining hall is closed.

As I don't want to risk going back to the dorm and checking online in case I end up being late, I sit down on the step and wait.

I'm not scared of the dark, and I'm not scared of being alone, but the longer I sit here, the more angsty I get.

Finally, after nearly an hour, I hear the low grumble of an engine and a car pulls into the parking lot. Doris gets out, looking surprised to see me. "You're early, Ms. Tori. I like the eagerness."

Instead of correcting her, I just nod.

Doris unlocks the door, switching the lights on, and leads me into the small staff room. At the back are lockers, one of which is already empty and waiting for me with the JKU dining hall uniform hanging inside it. After showing me where the bathroom is, she leaves me to get changed.

The navy blue fitted shirt of the uniform proudly boasts the university crest embroidered in silver where the left breast pocket would be normally. Along with the black apron, it doesn't take too long to change into.

By the time I find Doris again, a few more staff members have arrived, and all the lights in the kitchen are on. According to Doris, as she takes me on a tour around the facility, there's a staff meeting on Sunday morning, which is why they're non-negotiable, and the staff is briefed on the menus for the week.

Not that I need to worry about cooking anything.

Doris has already told me that isn't one of my responsibilities. If I have a morning shift, I just have to prep whatever food—mainly vegetables—the chefs require, and then I will be stationed in the dining hall. If it's an evening shift, instead of prepping any food, I have to wash dishes.

I've had zero experience working in a kitchen, but thankfully, one of the chefs gives me a quick lesson, and

prepping the vegetables is mainly washing them, and then depending on how they're cooked, I either hand them over to a sous chef who has insane knife skills, or I chop them into chunks for a soup or sauce.

I'm mostly left alone until the dining hall opens for breakfast, at which point Doris comes to collect me and stations me beside a woman called Lan Fen to show me the ropes. Although it's a buffet style set up for breakfast and lunch, someone needs to make sure each tray, dish, and bowl never drops below twenty-five percent full. Then we grab the food and restock.

While it's not rocket science, when the dining hall starts to get full, I do find myself rushing around as certain items seem to empty together. The trays of scrambled eggs disappear almost at the same time as the croissants.

"I can't believe I'm waiting for bagels," a girl behind me mutters, although I'm fairly certain she's not trying to be discreet in complaining to her friend. "It's bad enough I have to wait for them to be toasted, but to run out?"

Placing the last bagel in the bowl, I carefully slide the empty tray below the table, hiding it beneath the table skirt as Lan Fen showed me, and then turn to the girl with a smile. "I'm sorry about that. Was it a toasted bagel you wanted? Seeded or plain?"

The girl sneers. "Don't you listen either? Cinnamon raisin."

For breakfast, the expectation is that students serve themselves, but this girl is just glaring at me as though it's my job. I glance over at Lan Fen, but I've seen enough times this morning alone where she just serves everyone like it's her job.

It's my first day, and I don't want to cause any drama. Besides, it's not like toasting a bagel is the same as cooking the evening meals. The dining hall has a tool to cut bagels evenly, and then you put the bread into the toaster. I'd never seen a toaster like this one before. It's more like a mini conveyer belt instead of something that pops up when it's

done, but it does mean, when there's several people waiting to toast something, there's a much shorter wait.

The bagel comes out on the other side, so I take the tongs and place the two slices onto a plate, then onto a tray, before sliding it towards the girl.

"Enjoy," I say with as much brightness as I can muster.

The dining hall serves butter with the toasted selection, but instead of individually wrapped portions, the butter is cut directly from a block and served on a small plate. I'd noticed they needed a new block as I waited for the bagel to toast and as I'm about to head into the kitchen to grab it for them, the girl grabs my shirt and drags me backward, turning me roughly to face her.

"What the fuck is this?" she asks loud enough to carry over the immediate crowd, and instantly draws people's attention.

I glance down at the tray in her hands. "A toasted cinnamon raisin bagel."

"Why would you serve me this?" she practically shrieks. "I'm allergic. Are you trying to kill me?!"

"That's what you asked for."

"Ms. Tori, what's going on here?" Doris appears out of nowhere like she has superpowers.

"I asked for a poppyseed bagel, and she gave me this." The girl thrusts the tray towards Doris.

"It's true," her friend says. "Pepper-Rose clearly said poppyseed *and* to make sure it wasn't touching the cinnamon bagels because she was allergic."

My lips part and my eyebrows draw down. Although my hands are clenched in fists by my side, I hold off on saying anything. *Pepper-Rose* absolutely did not say anything remotely similar to that. I have no idea why her or her friend would bother lying about it.

"Well?" Doris asks, her attention on me.

Giving the growing crowd a quick scan, I know no one else is going to speak up for me either, so I suck in a deep breath and lower my head. “I’m sorry. I must have been mistaken. Let me make you a fresh one.”

With everyone watching me, Pepper-Rose gets a smug smile on her face as I get a fresh poppyseed bagel, use a different cutter, and then toast another bagel. When Pepper-Rose and her friend walk away, Doris waves Lan Fen over and then leads me into the back.

“If you’re wanting a job here, that means you’re not one of them,” she tells me. “This is their world and things work differently in it. Most of these students already have more money sitting in their bank accounts than an average family earns in a year. They’re always right, regardless of the situation. And in my position, I’m always going to have to side with them.”

She allows me to return to my tasks without anything more to add. No matter what, I need to get to the truth behind my brother’s conviction, and right now, that means I need this job.

I’m in the process of refreshing the sliced salmon when a familiar voice stops me.

“How’s it going?” Today, Penny’s hair is in a high ponytail with an enormous pink bow. She’s rocking the uniform like she’s in a Japanese anime.

“I am sure there are worse jobs out there.”

“You know, I really don’t mind giving you some money,” she says.

The offer is even more tempting now, but I still shake my head. “I’ll handle it.”

“Are you working tonight?” she asks. “Want to meet for dinner after classes?”

“I’m on the late shift tonight, but I can eat with you beforehand.”

XV

Tori

I know from clocking out this morning, that this evening, I'll be in the kitchen on dish duty. For the last couple of weeks, aside from a couple of difficult students like Pepper-Rose, where I've made sure to be particularly careful with how I serve them, for the most part, most people ignore me.

Since I started in the dining hall, the amount of people who bump into me, acting like I'm not there to the point they don't even acknowledge they've knocked me, seems to be increasing daily. There are a couple of people in some of my classes, and it's the same.

Like I don't exist.

Maybe there really are people out there who just don't acknowledge people's existence when they have certain jobs or status.

With every class I attend, the homework seems to double. I've saved a little bit more money, and this weekend, I hope to get into Keyingham to buy a couple of books, which should help cut down the amount of time I spend in the library. Even doing the bare minimum just to pass is sucking up all my free time.

Penny is in a bubbly mood all through dinner, looking forward to tonight already because she has a 'date' with Jake and Nicole. But I've stopped paying attention.

Royal has walked in.

He's one of the people who seem to be completely oblivious to my existence. Even when he comes up for food, and I say hello, he doesn't even react. It's like I imagined speaking.

It's not like I was expecting a proposal after our hookup, but even I have to admit him acting like he can't see me does hurt more than I want it to.

This evening, Royal is with Syn and Gemini. I've noticed that the three of them don't tend to eat breakfast together all the time. For the past few days, it's usually Syn and Royal with Gemini appearing later—if at all. I've not worked over the lunch hours because of my classes, but when I've been in to eat, their table is always empty.

This week, it's been hit and miss for even just one of them to eat in the evening.

I'm not even sure why I care.

"I've already arranged for a car to pick us up. Tori?"

"Us?" I tune back into Penny. Sitting opposite me, she's staring expectantly. Our food was finished a while ago, but we're still in the dining hall, waiting.

"We're going to Manhattan tomorrow. You said you'd go with me."

Trying to keep a distance from Penny has been impossible. Although, at this point, I'm not even sure I want to. It's been so long since I've had a friend, and she's always appearing, waiting for me so we can go eat together, that I... like it.

While she doesn't join me at the library—and mostly, we're in different classes anyway—for our Comm class, I usually join her in her room, studying as we graze on snacks.

Penny is... nice. She's smart and determined, and the more time I spend around her, the more I start to believe that she really could change the country one day.

"I did, and I will," I tell her as my eyes drift over to Royal, Syn and Gemini. They're at their usual table. There are twelve first year students, and they all seem to rotate serving those three. Currently, a guy called Devon and a girl called Margarite are clearing their finished plates away.

Over the past few weeks, I've learned a little more about them. Syn is this year's president of the Elite, and as his best friends, Royal and Gemini, have earned vice-president status. From what I can gather, their service is part of the hazing of the freshmen initiates.

Of course, there's no such thing as hazing on this campus because that's illegal... but from some of the college horror stories I've heard, this is easy.

"Good." Penny gives me a bright smile before frowning as she picks up her phone for the dozenth time. She lets out a loud sigh before setting it back down. "For fuck's sake, when are they going to give this big announcement?"

Earlier in the afternoon, between classes, a campus-wide message was sent out. Naturally, the first reaction was panic, because why would a message be sent to everyone unless something was wrong. But it turned out to be a message requiring all students be present in the dining hall for a 7 p.m. announcement.

Whatever it is, it's the last thing on my mind. I'm more preoccupied with the fact that practically every chair in the dining hall—which is big enough to seat almost every student at the university—is taken. And that means the pile of dishes I've got waiting for me in an hour is going to be enormous.

Before the backlight on Penny's phone goes out, I glance over and catch the time: 6:59.

Just as I'm about to point out that it's technically still early, the crowded room starts to fall silent. Curious, I sweep my gaze around the room, stopping as soon as I realize Syn has stood and is waiting.

I'm impressed despite myself. Not many people in the world have the presence to be able to make a room fall silent like this. Then I frown, pulling my own phone out of my pocket to check the announcement message.

Syn not only has the presence to control a room, but also the ability to use the university text service to send a message?

“I’m glad so many of you were able to attend this evening,” Syn says.

I can’t stop myself from staring at him—like everyone else in the room. The guy is good looking, there’s no question about that. He’s not as muscular as Royal, but his shoulders are wide, his waist is slim, and I know he’s not lacking in the muscle department. On top of that, he has perfectly straight, white teeth, lips with a slight natural pout to them, and eyes you can’t help but get sucked into.

It’s only once I lower my gaze to his chest that I spot the small, black microphone poking out of his shirt. Despite being required to wear the college uniform to class, he dresses formally most of the time, anyway. But the mic explains why his voice is carrying so clearly across the room.

“I know most of you have other activities to attend, so I will keep this brief. Two and a half years ago, my older brother was murdered, here on this campus.”

There’s a low murmur of whispers as more than one table starts talking to each other, but almost at once, as Syn’s eyes narrow, the voices fall silent.

“James Patrick Keyingham was an exceptional person,” Syn continues. “And in honor of his life, on the anniversary of his birthday next week, I will be hosting a party.”

As the room bursts into a round of applause, and several hoots and cheers, I sit back in my chair and half-heartedly clap like everyone else. As I do, I scan the room. Although there’s a very high possibility that his killer has already graduated, I’m trying to see if anyone is reacting differently. I’m looking for people to add to the top of my list for talking to first.

“Although we’ve suffered from a tragedy from losing him in this world, I want everyone here to know that James Keyingham University is still one of the safest colleges in America, and my brother’s killer is already in prison.”

Syn's words have me dragging my attention back to him as pain ripples through my chest. He has the room almost silent again as they listen, and it takes everything in me not to stand up and correct him.

“That being said, I think it's only fair to let you all know that, despite his incarceration, within this room, there is someone with the audacity to enroll at this campus. Someone who's mere presence is an insult to my brother's memory as well as the reputation and honor of this university—of me *and* all of you.”

Unable to look away, I continue to stare at the top table. My whole body is frozen in place, except for my heart, which seems to have doubled in speed as it pounds away in my chest.

Throughout his speech, Syn's gaze has been sweeping the room, as though he's trying to talk to everyone individually, but at that moment, his eyes meet mine. The corner of his lips twitch, like he's about to smirk, but he catches himself. Those golden eyes that anyone would be thrilled to have looking at them, are locked onto me.

And the look in them is of rage and revulsion.

I'm unable to break our stare, but I'm equally aware that people are starting to work out who he's looking at as they turn in my direction.

“The sister of my brother's murderer, Victoria Reynolds, is sitting in this room, under the fake name of Victoria Anderson.”

My cheeks are burning, and I can hear my own heartbeat echoing in my ears, almost drowning out Syn's words... almost. Beneath the table, my fingernails are digging into my skin, through the skirt I'm wearing for my shift later. Other than that, my back is straight, my chin is up, and I'm not backing away from Syn's glare.

Until I hear three words spoken from the person sitting across the table from me.

“Is that true?”

Instantly, I look at Penny. Her eyes are wide, and her cheeks are flushed, but otherwise, her face is expressionless. It's like looking at a doll, and somehow, that feels worse than if she'd responded with anger.

Before I can answer, Syn's talking again.

"Despite this completely deplorable act, I do not want anyone on this campus to act out towards this individual in any way. Remember, we are not the vile people here. Instead, I humbly request that no one reacts or interacts with this..." As he stares at me, Syn purses his lips. "Worm. Effective immediately, Victoria Anderson is cancelled."

When I chose to come here, I knew I stood the risk of someone finding out who I was. I expected some kind of confrontation. Many scenarios had played through my head, and for each one, I imagined how I'd confront the accuser.

Not once had I predicted anything close to this.

Nor had I considered how shitty it would really make me feel to have everyone in a room staring at me with a mixture of hate and disgust. Again.

And while I was certain my brother hadn't killed JP, he had pleaded guilty, and I still had no evidence to prove otherwise. So what could I say to Syn's accusations?

I finally break my stare with Syn and look down at my empty plate. Although my dinner had been delicious, it was now churning in my stomach.

In front of me, movement catches my attention, and I look up to see Penny sitting back in her chair.

If everyone in the room staring at me like I'm some kind of monster hurts, it's still nothing compared to the feeling that rips through me when I look back at Penny. Regardless of how I said I wasn't going to make friends, I had. Losing her was hurting more than back in high school when the kids I'd been friends with all my life turned their backs on me.

Picking up my phone, I stand and walk through the dining hall, trying my best to pretend I can't see the sneers or hear the whispers as I pass each table and walk to the door.

Outside, the moment the doors to the dining hall swing closed behind me, the only thing I can hear are the cicada beetles causing a racket in the trees, until they're drowned out by the roaring sound in my ears. All I want to do is run back to my dorm, but even if the path didn't take me straight past the dining hall windows, I'm not sure I'd make it without falling over.

Instead, I head in the opposite direction, circling around to the back of the building to the staff entrance. Finally hidden away from everyone, I reach out, resting against the building before I stumble.

"You knew this might happen, and it's not the end of the world," I tell myself, out loud, over and over, until the roaring in my ears finally quietens and I can hear my words.

I turn around, leaning against the building, and then take more deep breaths.

"Everyone knows now, and at least you don't need to worry about them finding out. The worst is over." I'm trying to be positive, but the feeling isn't resonating. "Now you can focus on finding the truth."

"Ms. Tori?"

XVI

Tori

Turning my head, I find Doris watching me from the doorway. She's tall, with short, cropped hair, and curls tipped in red. There are a few wrinkles around her eyes, and she looks like she's in her late forties, but I suspect she's older.

"You're due to start your shift shortly. Would you consider starting early? We've had so many people dining in that the plates are piling up." She gives me a kind smile, and with that one action, I'm certain she heard everything Syn said.

Nodding, I turn and head over, following her inside. As I go to swipe in, she briefly pats my shoulder and then leaves me. I'm not sure why, but that makes me want to cry more than everything that happened on the other side of the dining hall.

Instead, I go to the dishwashing station. As Doris said, there's already several stacks of dishes, and as I look at them, I realize they're worse than usual. Not just the amount, but the state they've been left in.

Normally, for the dinner service, the wait staff clears the tables, and once they're in the back, they scrape the plates and stack them. The lower plates in the piles look like they've been scraped, but the further up, it's clear that's not happened. As one of the waitresses appears, carrying several plates, I can tell by the speed she's moving, they're just too busy.

With a sink full of soapy water, I start on the closest pile, scraping the contents into the giant trash cans, soaking the plates that need it, and then using the dish hose to rinse the others before I load the dishwasher.

Over and over, I repeat the actions in a cloud of steam. It takes at least two more hours before the final plates come in, and by the time I've finished, the only person left in the kitchen is me and the chef who's still here to lock up.

I'm exhausted as I follow him outside, and I don't stick around to watch him. My feet feel like they're on fire, the small of my back is burning, and I'm flexing my fingers because they feel so stiff. Despite trying to be careful, there's several stains on my shirt, and I know there are splatters of food on my face and my arms, thanks to the overzealous dish hose with a geyser-like spray sending bits of food flying all around.

It's nearly midnight, but as it's a Wednesday night, campus is quiet. I've since learned that most students head into the city on the weekend to party, but during the week, if anyone is partying, it's in their dorms. That's not quite the college experience I was expecting here... Not that I'll ever get an invite anymore.

When I get back to my dorm, there are a few girls wandering around, but like I'm a ghost, not a single person acknowledges me. Not even to sneer or make an insult. Although I'd heard Syn tell everyone to ignore me, I wasn't expecting them to take the instruction so literally.

Tonight, I'm too tired to care. All I want is a hot shower and to collapse on my bed. Thankfully, I don't have a shift tomorrow, but being at work so late tonight means I've not had chance to do any reading for Coffee Dick, aka, Dr. Wright's class.

In my room, I peel out of my uniform, throwing everything into the laundry hamper hanging on the back of my door, and then I head into the small bathroom. Of course, the light isn't working. Using the light from the bedroom, I stand in the doorway, staring up at the dead bulb.

The university won't send anyone out to replace that at this time, and I'm not going to bed when I feel this grimy. Too tired to care, I head in and turn the water on, grateful that it's instantly hot.

Behind the frosted glass, and in the shadows of the bathroom, I can only just make out what I'm doing as I wash and condition my hair on autopilot. My eyes are barely open, and I'm prepared to have the worst bedhead in the morning instead of drying my hair tonight.

With my hair up in towel, and another wrapped around me, I head back into my room, ready to sit down and at least attempt to put a brush through my hair when there's a knock at the door.

I head over, pushing the laundry basket to the side so I can peer through the peep hole. "Penny?" Not caring I'm still in a towel, I open the door.

"Hey, can we..." Penny's eyes widen. "What the hell happened to you? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Frowning, I glance down at the arm which isn't hidden behind my door and almost at once, my mouth falls open. My skin is mottled in blue, varying in intensity from navy to pale blue. "The fuck?"

Without closing the door, I walk over to my mirror. Speechless, I stare at my reflection. My skin is naturally tanned. Only, currently, I look like some weird experiment where someone tried to breed a Smurf with a human and something went wrong.

My shoulders and chest are the worst. My face is mostly okay, aside from a few streaks of blue down my cheeks and a few splotches poking out from under the towel. The blue has run down my arms, and when I look down at my feet, I realize they're just as bad as my shoulders.

"Oh god," I mutter, the words barely audible. My eyes drift to the towel on my head. Like I'm ripping off a band aid, I yank it off. Hair, stained in blue patches like my body, spills over my shoulders.

Everything seems to stop as I stare at my reflection, and I've even forgotten about Penny until she's suddenly by my side, picking up a lock of my hair.

Without saying a word, she walks to the bathroom, flicking the light switch. When she sees the light doesn't work, she pulls her phone out and turns the flashlight on, stepping inside. "Fuck me."

Moving in a daze, I follow her into my bathroom.

Penny has the door of the shower open, and the light is picking up the white tiles stained with blue. If it were blood, it would look like a massacre. She reaches inside, pulling the shampoo off the side and squirts it into the base. The liquid is white.

It's only when she reaches to swap the bottle for the container that she stops. I'm not sure why until she shines her light up towards the shower head. The water dripping is tinged with blue.

Penny sets the bottle down then faces the sink, turning the faucet on. The water that comes out is clear.

As she turns the tap off, I walk to the shower, reach up and pull the head off. There's a rush of water spilling from the showerhead, which makes it seem like ink is coming out of the pipes, but as Penny appears behind me, shining the light upwards, I can see the water there is clear.

I tip the shower head upside down, and a small cube falls out. It's so dark, it looks black, but the water it sits in instantly turns a vivid blue.

"Have another shower," Penny tells me. "I'm sure it will wash out." She steps out of the room, leaving the door open. She also leaves her phone on the toilet, the flashlight shining up at the ceiling to give me extra light.

Tossing the showerhead and whatever the block is, into the sink, I turn back to the shower and turn the water on. Water comes gushing out of the pipe, but it's thankfully clear.

Keeping the shower door open so I can see myself in the light, I do my best to wash the blue off. My skin feels raw from all the scrubbing, but I'm finally able to get my skin to change from blue to bright red, everywhere but the palms of my hands, my feet, and a small section on my collar bone. The

whole time, despite the intensity of the pouring water, I keep my hair under it, hoping it will take the worst with it before I attack it with almost all of what's left of my shampoo.

When I step out into my room, Penny stands from the corner of my bed she was sitting on. "You look much better."

I walk in front of my mirror and stare at my reflection. My skin does, mostly... my hair, not so much. "Sure," I say. I'm exhausted, and I feel like all my energy has been wiped out of me.

"But I have nail polish remover and an idea," she tells me.

"I don't think nail polish remover is going to fix this." I hold up a bit of my hair. Because my hair is blonde, parts are still tinged with blue, only it's blotchy and ugly. "Penny, you should go."

With everything else that's happening, this seems so insignificant, but I've been fighting back tears, and right now, I'm about to lose the battle.

"Just sit down and do what you need to," Penny tells me as she tugs me over to my desk. She pulls out the chair and doesn't move until I sit.

On the side of my desk, sits a small free-standing mirror, so as I pull that towards me.

Penny grabs the towel I'd taken off my hair and abandoned on the floor earlier. She quickly looks it over then turns back to me, using it to scrunch the ends of my stained hair hanging down my back.

I'm too tired to fight her, so I just sit there, staring at my reflection. I thought I'd manage to get the blue, but as the redness from my earlier scrubbing eases, it's obvious there are still blue marks all over me.

When the hair is dry enough for Penny's satisfaction, she sets the towel over my shoulders and pulls my hair out from underneath it. Then she gets my brush and starts to work through the knots.

“We’re past the campus curfew now, which means I couldn’t get to a store, but I think if we pull it back into a braid and then you wear a cap until the weekend, we can get this fixed when we’re in the city,” she tells me.

I’d been thinking about that, but I wouldn’t be allowed to wear a cap in the dining hall when I’m working.

“I wish I hadn’t washed it out,” I say as I stare at the splotches. The longer I’ve been staring at the blue stains, I’ve managed to switch from upset to angry.

“Really?”

Using the mirror, I look at her. “Whoever did this, did it because they want a reaction out of me, to upset me. And yes, it did when I first saw it, but I wish I’d left it all over me and then walked around not caring if I looked like a Smurf.”

Penny’s eyes widen. “Wait here.”

She runs to the door and leaves my room. My door has barely swung closed behind her before she’s back, brandishing two boxes of hair color, a plastic bowl, and brush.

“I guess I could do pink too.”

“No.” Penny sets the boxes down on the desk in front of me before she starts opening one. “I mean, we could be pink twins if you want to, but I was thinking we make our own dye. Instead of adding the pink dye, we add blue.”

“You mean that block of dye? Is that possible?”

“Honestly, I have no idea, but the shampoo didn’t really change the color, so I’m figuring we can mix something up and hope for the best. We could just add it to the shampoo, but I think we’d have better results if we mix it with the developer.” She picks up one of the bottles on the desk.

I shrug. “You’re the expert.”

“Me?” Penny shakes her head.

“You didn’t do your own hair?”

Penny gives me an awkward smile. “No,” she admits. “My salon did it. They had to bleach the ends of my hair first.

I have the dye so that I can add it to my shampoo to keep the pink vibrant.”

I’m sure that if I filmed this and put it on the internet, some hair colorist with a YouTube channel would be cringing in a reaction video, but at this point, my hair already looks like a mess. There’s probably a fifty-fifty chance of us getting a consistent color versus all of my hair falling out.

The moment I nod, Penny starts squeezing all the developer into the bowl. After discarding the empty bottles, she pulls on a pair of the cheap plastic gloves that come in the box and then gets the dye block from the bathroom.

Using her hands, she mashes it up before adding it to the developer and mixing it in. The blue in the bowl is so dark, it looks the same color as a pair of new dark jeans. Finally, she picks up the brush and stares down at me. “Are you sure?”

“Just do it.”

Penny continues in silence, working on one section of my hair at a time. When she was mixing the concoction together, I was certain there was far too much in the bowl, but by the time she finishes, it’s practically empty. And after smoothing my hair, she twists it up into a knot and clips it in place.

Carefully, she peels her gloves off, drops them in the empty bowl, and then she turns to the bed to pick something up. When I was in the shower, she must have returned to her room to pick up the nail polish remover, because she hands me a few soaked cotton pads. “I’m not sure this will work, but let’s try.”

“Why did you come?” I’m busy attacking my collar bone, and she’s rubbing a spot just below the back of my neck.

“You ran off at dinner.”

Dinner.

Syn’s speech.

That was probably eight hours ago, but somehow, it feels like days have passed, even though the memory is burned

fresh in my mind.

“The overwhelming show of love and support was simply too much,” I say, dryly.

The rubbing on my back stops. “Not gonna lie, I was surprised. And a little upset, especially considering the other week, we were talking about JP.” Penny walks around so she’s in a position that I can look at her instead of her reflection in the mirror.

“What he said is true.” I don’t look away.

Neither does Penny. “Last I checked, you and your brother were two separate people, and unless you were here, you didn’t have anything to do with it. And I googled the story—unless you’ve perfected time travel or something, you weren’t there.” She folds her arms. “I mean, I get why Syn is pissed, and if I was in his shoes, I would be too.”

Honestly, I would be too.

“But I’m not him. And I was upset because you hadn’t told me. *But*, objectively, would I have told you if I were you?” She shrugs. “While I’d like to think we’re friends, even I would probably have waited.”

“We’re friends?”

Penny rolls her eyes. “Girl, it’s nearly three in the morning, and I’m still here trying to make you look like less of a Barbie with frostbite. What do you think?”

There’s a lump in my throat, and I try to swallow it away. I’m that exhausted even though I know she wouldn’t be here, helping, otherwise, I just can’t process it now. All this time, I’ve been preparing for not having a friend, *especially* after everything came out, that had become my default setting.

“But I have to ask, why *are* you here?”

“I know he confessed, and I know it looks cut and dry that he’s guilty, but I also know my brother. He’s smart and driven, but he’s not a murderer. The *only* way I’d believe that guilty confession is if it accompanied some story of self-defense.” I turn in my chair so I’m facing her properly. “I

don't know if it's because he pleaded guilty from the beginning or because something was done to keep the case under wraps, but I have spent hours—*months*—trying to find details about what really happened that night. I don't know what, where, how, or why, but I'm certain my brother is innocent.”

With her arms still folded, Penny sucks her teeth before nodding. “I'm not saying that I know anything, because I don't. But the Keyingham's are powerful people. They'd have more than enough influence to keep any details they didn't want known under lockdown. Although that begs the question of why. And if there is more to JP's murder, this university's alumni are some of the most powerful in the country.” She runs a hand through her hair. “Fucking hell, Tori. Digging into this is going to royally piss off some very important people.”

James Keyingham University is extremely proud of its alumni, listing everyone on the website, the brochures, and even engraving their names on a wall on the side of one of the buildings like a memorial. I'd seen the names and googled them.

“You don't have to worry. I'll handle it.” It's not like I have any other choice.

“Tori, I've been worried since Syn declared war on you in the dining hall.”

My mouth goes dry. “War? He told everyone to ignore me. What did he say after I left?”

“Nothing.” Penny points at my head. “But that isn't ignoring you, and unlike you, I know Syn. Regardless of what he says, you're the sister of the guy that killed his brother. You are walking down a road that's full of landmines and enemy fire. And the person supplying all that ammunition is Synclair Keyingham.”

XVII

Tori

I don't make it to breakfast, and it's not because the hair dye experiment failed.

While dealing with my hair, I never got around to the reading for Dr. Wright's class, so I borrowed Penny's textbook and attempted to get the words to sink into my tired brain.

The nail polish remover was mostly successful, except for a few places. And aside from my palms, the rest I could hide under clothes. My hair, on the other hand, had turned out far better than we could have hoped for.

The blue is so rich and vibrant, and the conditioner has given my hair a gorgeous shine to it. While I hate how it happened, I love the color. I have no intention of finding a hair salon this weekend.

I keep my head held high as I walk to class. Apparently, the color is also bold enough that Syn's instruction of ignoring me is forgotten about because almost everyone turns their head to look. I return every stare, searching for the telltale sign of someone who's pissed off their prank didn't go to plan, but I'm not lucky enough to find the culprit.

When I get to class, although I'm early, I'm not the first one there. Walking through the door, there's a number of people already seated, and they all become silent as I enter.

Giving them a bright smile, I cross the front of the small room so I can go to my seat. It's only when I turn to sit down that I see the graffiti on my desk.

Murderer.

Whore.

Criminal.

Traitor.

You're as guilty as your brother.

Over the top of it all, there's a white, thick liquid.

Taking a deep breath, I stare at it and not the people in the classroom, forcing myself to keep as neutral as possible. Technically, we don't have assigned seating, but ever since the first day, everyone's stayed in the same seat.

What they've written doesn't really bother me. I've had this, and worse, back in high school. The liquid... it could be craft glue, or it could be bodily fluids. And while I'm hoping with the quantity of it, that's unlikely, I'm not ruling it out.

This class is popular, and I know there's only one spare seat at the front of the class, right next to Dr. Wright's TA, Quentin. It sucks, but it's better than sitting here. I'm just about to take Penny's seat when Dr. Wright comes in. Before he can close the door, Penny runs in, ducking under his arm.

"Sorry," she says as she rushes towards me.

"Hurry up and take your seat," Dr. Wright tells her.

Penny jogs up the stairs to me, slowing and frowning as she gets close. "What's wrong?" she whispers.

"Go take the seat next to Quentin."

She shakes her head, ready to try to squeeze past me, and then she notices the desk. "What the hell?"

"Is there a problem up there?" Dr. Wright calls.

"Yeah, there is," Penny says. "There are some disgusting people in this class."

"Let it go," I mutter at her. People are whispering, and I don't want Penny getting dragged into this.

"Tori, that looks like somebody's jizz. And don't get me started on the graffiti."

“What’s the problem here?” Dr. Wright is already walking up the stairs towards us.

“That!” Penny points at the desk.

Dr. Wright stares at the mess for a long moment before he turns to us. “Ms. Bergmann, please take the seat next to Mr. Harrington.”

“And Tori?”

He looks at me. “You can sit on the end of my desk.”

I take seconds to weigh my options before heading down to Dr. Wright’s desk. Although I feel like a child being punished, the only other option is sitting next to that desk. So, while I hope it really wasn’t some guy’s jizz, I don’t really want to find out.

The rest of the class goes by with little drama. I’m aware of everyone staring at me, but aside from occasionally meeting Penny’s eyes, I keep my attention on the professor.

When the class dismisses, I put my things into my bag and stand.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Dr. Wright asks me.

I, along with a number of other students, stop.

“Victoria Anderson. The rest of you can carry on.”

Steeling myself, I step back, mouth *I’ll see you later* to Penny, and wait until the room empties.

“At the end of the hall is this floor’s cleaning closet. I suggest you hurry up and get what you need.”

“I...” I frown. “You want me to clean that up?”

Dr. Wright shrugs. “You expect the janitorial staff to do it? Or would you like the bill instead?”

“I have another class,” I protest. “And that’s not my fault.”

“I will leave the cleaning staff specific instructions not to clean that desk, and next class, you will return to sitting

there.” Dr. Wright glares at me with enough intensity to make me hurry out of the room.

It would be so easy just to turn and walk out the door, and not come back, but instead, I leave to find the cupboard. Cleaning that mess isn’t anyone’s job other than the asshole who created it. I just know there’s no way of finding out who did it before the janitorial staff cleans, and after Penny went to so much trouble to help me last night, I don’t want anyone else to have to suffer.

I’m not sure what the best way to clean that would be, so I grab as many different bottles as I can carry, then head back to the classroom.

My next class is in another building, and I only just make it on time when I have to leave this one. I’ve already decided to skip as I walk up to the table.

Dr. Wright is sitting at his desk, watching me.

I ignore him.

Thankfully, there were gloves in the closet, and I pull them on before I start spraying the table down with bleach. Whatever the, now dry, liquid is, it seems to come up easily.

The graffiti, not so much.

With the lack of sleep, my mind seems to go numb as I try to wipe away all the horrible words.

I’ve heard people say that when you get to college, things change. You’re allowed to be yourself, and college students aren’t anywhere as bad as high school students are.

Right now, I feel like I’m back in high school when people I thought were my friends proved how fragile our friendship was. Only, I’m choosing to be here now. *This*—the... bullying—it’s not going anywhere. This isn’t something that’s going to die down in a couple of weeks.

The easiest thing I can do is leave.

But even as I think of that, in my mind, I see my brother in jail.

It's so hard to put into words exactly why I feel so sure that he's innocent, especially with no evidence, but I've always felt this strongly about it, and that hasn't changed. Whatever the truth is, it's here at James Keyingham University. And if it is here, I need to stay too.

"Is there a reason you simply accepted the instruction to clean that desk?"

Dropping the cloth I'm using, I look up and find Dr. Wright has moved closer, watching me work. "You mean I shouldn't have?"

Dr. Wright crosses his arms. He's wearing a light blue shirt, similar to the one he was wearing when I knocked his coffee over him, and as he folds his arms, the fabric around his biceps strain.

"You think I did this?" When he doesn't respond, I pick the rag back up and point to the words that are starting to fade.

"Some girls love attention."

Instead of flinging the dirty rag at the professor's face, I hold it in my hand, squeezing it tightly. "I have had more attention in the last few years than anyone would wish for. The last thing I want here is more."

"Evidently." His eyes are on my hair.

"I'm the victim here," I say, refusing to explain my hair to him.

Without dropping his arms, Dr. Wright inhales deeply. He drops his gaze to the desk, staring at it before he raises his gaze to look at me. "Knowing what your brother did, here on this campus, you decided the smartest thing to do was to enroll here?" There's a hint of incredulity in his voice, but his expression remains stony. "What did you expect would happen when the students found out the sister of a serial killer enrolled in their school?"

"Serial killer? Cole didn't kill *anyone*. Don't you dare ___"

“And now you’re threatening a teacher?” Dr. Wright cocks his head.

“I am not threatening anyone,” I say through gritted teeth. “I’m merely requesting that you get your facts right.”

Dr. Wright’s eyes narrow and his eyes fill with the same venom I saw in Syn’s. He moves towards me, and I step away, my back almost instantly colliding with the desk behind me. “Before you start preaching ‘facts’, I suggest you actually find out what they are, Ms. *Anderson*.”

He turns on his heel and walks back to his desk, pausing only long enough to grab his bag before walking out of the room.

I count to ten before releasing my breath and then I fling the cloth onto my desk. My hands are shaking, but its anger raging around my body.

It’s one thing to have these comments from students, but I wasn’t expecting it from a professor.

What the hell does he know anyway? He’s new. I overheard one of the girls behind me saying he started working here at the beginning of last semester.

But to accuse Cole of being a serial killer?

I’m going to make sure I find the truth and get Cole released. And then I’m going to stand in front of the administration building, directly below the clock tower, at the front of campus, with my brother by my side, and wait for every single person to apologize.

And Synclair Keyingham and Dr. Payne Wright will be at the front of that line.

XVIII

Tori

Whispers follow me around all day.

Whispers that are just loud enough for me to hear what's being said, but whenever I look in the direction of whoever's speaking, no one says anything. No one even looks at me.

Taking Syn's words to heart, everyone is pretending I don't exist.

Which sounds great in theory, until I'm trying to navigate the hallways and paths. Then, if I'm not shoulder-checked, I'm shoved to the side. After one particular push literally sends me flying into a bush as I try to cross the courtyard, I end up taking the least populated routes, even if they take longer.

By the time I've finished my last class, I'm exhausted and hungry. Penny is waiting for me outside of my building and hurries over. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She's been messaging me since she was ushered out of our Comm class this morning, making sure I'm alright. I give her a smile. "I'm starving," I tell her. "And I'm going to need to grab a nap before I attempt to tackle any assignments tonight."

"Ugh, just come to my room tonight. I have enough sugar to keep us going all night."

I nod. Although I've got some work that requires textbooks in the library, I can get away without tackling that until tomorrow. Tonight, I want an easy night.

Penny links her arm through mine and leads us into the dining hall, telling me again that my hair color is amazing, and she's seen the jealous looks people have given it.

As I look around the dining hall, it's not jealousy that I'm sensing. Much as I want to tell myself I'm imagining things, after the last twenty-four hours, nothing is going to make me relax.

Thankfully, the dining hall isn't as busy as it was yesterday, and Penny and I are able to grab a table in the corner. Automatically, I look over to Syn's table. Empty.

Although I don't relax completely, I'm able to let out a breath, and I feel some of my stress ease. We order our food and manage to eat the whole meal without any drama.

"I'm going to grab a nap, and then I'll swing by your room later," I tell Penny as we walk to the door. "I think I'll ___"

Out of nowhere, some guy the size of a mountain walks straight into me, sending me flying into the wall, and cracking my elbow on a fire extinguisher.

"Are you fucking blind?" Penny yells, so loudly, everyone is looking at her.

Everyone except the guy who just keeps on walking.

Rubbing my elbow, I join Penny's side. "I'm invisible," I say, dryly.

"This is fucking pathetic." Penny rolls her eyes.

"You have something to say about it?"

The two of us turn around and see a girl with long sandy hair pulled back into a messy bun. Her arm is clinging onto a guy with the kind of scruffy hair he's clearly put hours of work into making it look that way. Both of them are purposely looking at Penny.

"Yeah, because I'm not a sheep, Dawn," Penny responds to the girl who asked the question.

“So you’re siding with the murderer?” The guy arches an eyebrow.

“Tori didn’t kill anyone.” Penny turns, angling herself so she’s facing the audience of diners. “Which, considering you are all supposed to be some of the smartest people in the country, I find unbelievable that not one of you can figure that out.”

Not a single person has ever stood up for me. Friends who I’d known since I was a toddler, who I grew up with, had turned on me. Some went silent, ghosting me rather than saying anything, but most were quick to say hurtful things—and that was *before* my brother had even gone on trial.

I was staying quiet, not because I was scared, but because I was angry. All this petty behavior made me feel like shit, but high school had taught me that things die down from most people if you didn’t react. They get bored quicker.

It sure as hell didn’t make it disappear, though. My reprieve hadn’t come until I moved states, enrolled in a new school, changed my number, and deleted all my social media.

Right now, if I react, I’ll do or say something that would get me kicked out of this university, and I didn’t go to all the trouble just to get leave without answers. But I sure as hell wasn’t going to just stand here and do nothing if it meant Penny felt she had to say something.

I step in front of Penny. “Your issue is with me, which as Penny pointed out, makes no sense, but if you’ve got something to say, you say it to me.”

Somehow, I’m not surprised when neither Dawn, the guy next to her—or anyone in the dining hall—says anything.

“Fucking pathetic,” Penny mutters. She grabs my hand and pulls me towards the door.

“You want to be careful,” Dawn calls after us. “Associating with her is no different than associating with a criminal.”

Penny pulls me away from the dining hall before she finally lets go of my hand and slows her pace. “Smartest

minds in the country, my ass.”

“Thank you,” I tell her.

She stops and looks up at me, wrinkling her nose. “For what?”

“Saying something. You shouldn’t have, but thank you.”

“What do you mean I shouldn’t have?” Her eyes narrow. “Tori, this whole thing is bullshit. I get Syn might be upset, and maybe a few others, but half the people in there don’t even know who JP is. And you’re not your brother—not that he did it,” she hurriedly adds. “But all that is bullshit behavior, and bullshit behavior needs calling out.”

I nod, and then sigh. “I wish it was that simple, but it isn’t. I can handle it, but I don’t want you to get caught up in this.”

“See, the thing is, you’re my friend. And I’m not leaving you to deal with all that by yourself.”

There’s a huge lump forming in my throat, and all I can do is nod.



“Oh, come on,” I cry in dismay.

My laptop has decided to give me the blue screen of death in the middle of using it. Again.

Although I planned on studying with Penny, I’d barely settled down in her room before her grandmother called but after trying to ignore the call four times, on the fifth ring, Penny surrendered, and I left to let her take the call.

In the end, because I hadn’t taken any of Penny’s textbooks with me, I’d gone to work in the library. As usual, it was almost empty, so I found a spot in the corner. Instead of starting any of my assignments, my mind wanders, distracted by what Dr. Wright said earlier.

At no point had I ever heard anything about there being more than one murder my brother was accused of, so why had he decided to call him a serial killer?

After staring into space for a while, I decided to google the case again, this time looking up other deaths on campus... which was when the laptop died.

The only other death that I managed to confirm was one in the eighties when a student committed suicide. Considering my brother hadn't been born yet, I'm pretty sure it isn't connected.

There was a bookstore off First Ave that I walked past a few times that I knew stocked secondhand textbooks. I was planning on dropping in when I went to the city with Penny this weekend, but now it was looking like I'd have to bite the bullet and do something about the laptop.

“Fuck.”

“Not even if you were the last person on earth.”

I don't need to turn around to know the owner of that voice. Taking my time to close the lid of my laptop, finally, I turn to find Syn behind me.

His cold, hazel eyes are watching me like a bird of prey.

Before I resort to trading insults, I take a breath.

“Look, I understand why you're upset, and if I were you, I would be too. But I'm not my brother. And I know he's in jail, and he pleaded guilty, but he didn't kill your brother. I'm here because I know I can find the truth.”

Syn doesn't react other than to narrow his eyes a fraction.

Hoping he's willing to listen, I get up and move closer. “I came here under another name because I was hoping that I could do what I needed to without upsetting you. Clearly, that didn't work, so how about you pretend you have no idea who I am, and I will find the truth as quickly as I can so that you'll

never have to see me again. And JP's real killer will be locked up where *they* belong."

Before I can blink, Syn has wrapped his hand around my throat and shoved me up against a bookcase. The force knocks the air out of me, but that doesn't stop Syn from tightening his grip further. "If I *ever* hear you utter my brother's name again, I'll remove that tongue of yours."

I'm not a fighter, but after being in some scary situations when I was in the Jersey high school—where there were constantly fights breaking out—I'd taken it upon myself to learn some basic self-defense.

Of course, the first rule is to be aware of your surroundings and to avoid being in dangerous situations to begin with—something I'd done by clearly misjudging how Syn would react.

Struggling to breathe and not having any room to be able to act in any way that would put me at even a slight advantage given his strength, I do the first thing that comes to mind.

I stop fighting and go completely limp.

Not expecting any dead weight, Syn lets go, and I crash to the floor. While he's still working out what happened, aiming for his crotch, I punch as hard as I can. There's little strength in me, and I only just hit my target, but it's enough for him to stumble backwards and give me precious seconds to scramble away.

I run to my desk, scoop up my laptop and bag, and then I run without looking back.

XIX

Gemini

“Clearly, there’s been a misunderstanding.”

It’s a little after six, and after a drive through Manhattan rush hour traffic to get to the police station, I’m already irritated, but this two-bit rent-a-cop rookie makes me want to punch someone.

Instead, I’m keeping my temperament cool to match the \$8,000 suit I made sure to change into before leaving campus. I’m trying to ignore the cop and speak to the upset woman who’s waving her arms around like she’s a side-character in a Jane Austin novel, and that my sister’s behavior has caused her the greatest inconvenience in the world.

“I would hardly call putting a five-hundred-dollar, one-of-a-kind necklace into your purse and trying to walk out of the boutique without paying a misunderstanding,” the woman says. “I have it all in HD video if you need to take a look.”

“With all due respect, that’s a five-thousand-dollar purse my sister is using.” I know nothing about purses, but I know Virgo well enough to know that every inch of her is covered in designer brands, from her body lotion to her jacket.

I also know her well enough to know she sure as hell put the necklace into her purse...

“My sister has no reason to not pay for your jewelry,” I continue, pulling out my wallet. “However, as we’re clearly not at your store, I am happy to pay for that piece now, as well as an additional sum for the... inconvenience... of having to travel here and wait for my arrival.”

“It’s not about the money,” the woman says with an indignant sniff. Until I open my wallet, and she sees tips of the

crisp hundred-dollar bills. “But considering this was a *major* inconvenience, and I’ve had to miss a show...”

Three thousand dollars and a signed NDA later, I’m walking my sister out of the police precinct with no charges and a guarantee her actions will not make their way to social media.

Naturally, my car has a parking ticket on it, but I pluck it off the windshield and toss it to the ground before I open the door for Virgo. She refuses to look at me as she gets in and stares out into the distance.

I close the door gently and then walk around to get in myself. Only when I’ve pulled out into the traffic and started the journey to Eric and Elena’s apartment does she say anything.

“You didn’t have to come.”

“I should have let you get arrested? You can pull off orange, but you can’t pull off prison. They’ll have you file down your talons.” Today, Virgo’s nails are black, matching the lipstick and boots she’s wearing.

“Eric wouldn’t let me go to prison.” Virgo shrugs. “It wouldn’t look good for him.”

“No, but he’s five seconds away from sending you to boarding school in Italy, and we both know that’s the closest you’ll get to wearing anything from Milan, because school is code for convent.”

As I’m right, Virgo has nothing to say to that.

Regardless of what’s happening, once a month, I’m required to attend a family dinner at home. Honestly, I’m sure the only point of them is for Eric to remind me and Virgo that we’re lucky we were chosen to be adopted out of the destitute poverty we’d been living in before we were ‘rescued’.

There hasn’t been a single meal I can remember when I’ve not been reminded that it’s my obligation to repay them by taking over the family business. My first act will be to appoint my sister as my partner. Despite her current behavior, that’s what she wants.

And the reason she's acting this way is because Eric doesn't think she's capable because of some sexist, racist bullshit, which is all in our *imagination* because how can he be sexist when he has two women on one of his boards, and how can he be racist when he adopted kids from Korea and Vietnam?

"Virg, you know I'm going to make sure you have your place in running all of his businesses, so why are you doing this? You're smarter than me, and you could be in college programs now, but—"

"Why bother?" she asks. Her attention is on the barely moving traffic around us. "I graduate college early, and then what? You can't do shit—"

"Language."

She says something in Vietnamese, which I'm almost certain means shit. Putting her crazy smart brain to use, Virgo can speak French, Spanish and Vietnamese almost fluently, the latter, she learned specifically to annoy Eric.

I let out a long sigh and glance over at her, giving her an unimpressed look.

Virgo rolls her eyes. "You can't do anything until you take over the company. Eric thinks I'm like Paris Hilton."

Paris Hilton is a socialite from Eric's days. She's old, but she's got hot MILF vibes. She's Eric's go-to when he wants to put Virgo down, and I had to do some research to figure out how it was an insult.

"Did you watch any of those TikToks I sent you? The joke's going to be on him. He only ever saw the act. She's smart as hell—not as smart as you, of course, which makes you deadlier."

From the corner of my eye, I see the corner of her lip quirk upwards. And then it's gone.

The traffic seems to be especially bad today, and it takes nearly an hour just to get to our apartment. Inside, we're greeted by 'Nanny'. Honestly, I have no idea what her name is. She's not even the same woman who was acting as our

nanny the last time I was here for dinner, and that was two weeks ago. I've had more nannies than I care to remember, because either Eric or Elena—or both of them—fucked them and got bored, or they couldn't handle Elena's temper.

Speaking of, the he and she demons aren't here, so I make the easy decision to stay and have dinner with Virgo before I head back to campus.

Nanny works in silence, like a ghost, leaving me and Virgo alone to watch some trash show Virgo's currently hooked on, until she announces dinner is ready.

And nothing prepares me for the dinner she's made. I've got a juicy filet of salmon, spiced chickpeas and asparagus. It looks delicious, but my appetite is destroyed when I look over at Virgo's plate.

Her salmon is a fraction of the size of mine, the chickpeas look bland, and there's no butter on her asparagus. At best, it's a child-sized portion, but I'm not even sure a kid would eat that unappetizing plate.

“Where the fuck is the rest of it?” I demand.

“Ms. Virgo's meal has been carefully agreed with Ms. Elena,” Nanny informs me with a tone that suggests she might stick it out through Eric and Elena's temper tantrums better than most other nannies have.

As far as sisters go, Virgo is pretty. She's slim compared to most American girls, but for as long as I can remember, Elena's had this idea in her head that because Virgo's Vietnamese, she's got to be 'Asian-thin', which is a thing that only exists in Elena's head.

I thought it had gotten better the past couple of years, because whenever we have dinner, Virgo's had the same food on her plate as me, and not once had Elena made a passing comment on her weight.

“Is this what it's like when I'm not here?” I ask, directing my question at Virgo.

“It's fine,” Virgo tells me like this whole thing is normal, and then proceeds to eat her meal like it's the most

delicious thing she's ever had.

The moment Nanny leaves the room, Virgo bursts into tears.

I'm still raging when I race back to my dorm. Despite my plans to stay, Virgo insists I go back to campus. According to her, she asked Elena to help her lose weight because she's put on a few pounds.

There isn't a bone in my body that believes her, but right now, I'm powerless to do anything. Virgo is still a kid, and there's nowhere I could take her without Eric finding us and dragging us back. Unappetizing meals would be the least of our problems then.

I've barely gotten into the house when Syn appears.

"What's wrong?" he asks the moment he sees me, whatever he's about to say, no longer important.

"Elena has Virgo on a diet. Again."

Syn folds his arm and jut's his jaw as he thinks. Then he closes his eyes and sighs. "We'll get our revenge. It's just a matter of time."

I wish it was just a matter of time.

The truth is, I've now got evidence lined up that would ruin Eric and Elena under normal circumstances. Sixteen affairs between the two of them, violence, abuse, and racism to people they employ—including video evidence. Documents which show neither me nor Virgo were legally obtained when they 'adopted' us.

But Eric's family are an integral part of the oil industry. They've financed so many campaigns for government positions, right up to the White House, that anything we tried would be covered up in a heartbeat.

Syn knows as well as I do, that even if we get to a position where we hold the power, we won't. The Elite hold the power.

Or that's what everyone has been led to believe.

But within the Elite, are a smaller number of people who really do hold all the power in the country. Every election is rigged. Every president is carefully chosen, regardless of how different their policies are, because of the control that is held by these few.

A secret society within an elite brotherhood.

And even when you're a member and you have that power to wield, you can never really use it without it destroying you in the process.

I wave my hand and shake my head. "I'm going to go play a game."

Syn narrows his eyes. "Speaking of revenge and games. The worm was in the library today, with some bullshit excuse, and not a single apology. Change her schedule."

Nodding, I pull out my phone and open the app. The app the university uses for scheduling and emails is the same as the one the faculty uses for their scheduling—and both were created by me. It takes seconds to remove Tori from her next shift, so it only shows on her schedule.

"What's going on with her socials?" Syn asks.

"Nothing. She's literally the only person I know with no social media," I reply without looking up from my phone as I play around with her work roster some more.

To be fair to her, few teenagers have any knowledge when it comes to security and privacy settings on social media. They share way too much information, far too easily. Admittedly, my tech skills in high school were far superior to most, but it hadn't taken me long to get all her information.

So, I wasn't surprised when someone doxed her, sharing all this information with the world. The comments had come in fast and furious. Her socials were gone within two months.

"What's it going to take to hack her laptop?"

I look up, surprised. "Why?"

Syn just grins at me.

XX

Tori

A sound in the middle of the night wakes me with a jolt. Feeling completely disorientated, it takes me a moment to realize the noise is my phone ringing and not the alarm as I reach for it and stare blurrily at the screen.

Doris

“Hi, Ms. Doris,” I say, my voice croaky.

“Ms. Tori, where are you? Your shift started half an hour ago.”

Instantly, I’m sitting up, shaking my head. “No, I’m not down for the morning shift today.”

“Yes, you are. And unless you’re dying, you’d better get in, sharpish.”

“I’ll be right there,” I say before she hangs up.

Confused, I stare at my phone. After my run in with Syn last night, I’d come straight back to my room and went to bed. But the last thing I did was open the JKUFacultyApp to check what shift I was scheduled for today, to make sure the appropriate alarm was set.

Dinner.

The shift I had down was to do the closing clean after the dinner service had finished. But as I open the app up to check now, it’s clearly telling me I’ve got the breakfast shift, which, as Doris pointed out, did start half an hour ago.

“Fuck.” I jump out of bed, hurrying around my room in a slight panic. A broken laptop and the ever-decreasing

inclination to go to the library if I was likely to be found there by Syn again meant that I needed to earn more money.

I manage to make myself presentable in record time before I'm leaving my room and running across campus to the dining hall. After apologizing profusely to Doris, I quickly jump in and try to catch up with my jobs, apologizing just as much to the chefs who had to do the food prep instead of their own job.

My shift flies by, and before I know it, I'm out front, restocking the breakfast items as they deplete during the service. The slight advantage to everyone ignoring me is that no one asks me to prepare anything, but my guard is up as I have to avoid people walking into me.

The shift finishes an hour before the breakfast service does, which is enough to allow me the chance to eat. However, after I clock out, I head straight back to Doris's office to apologize again.

"I really am sorry," I tell her, ready to finally explain what happened, but instead, I just shake my head. "I messed up. I won't let it happen again."

Doris nods. "You're actually not a bad worker, which surprised me, because I didn't think you'd last longer than your first shift." She purses her lips as her gaze drifts up to my hair. "Technically, there's nothing in the rules to say you can't color your hair, but that is..."

"A prank."

Her lips settle into a thin line, but I see pity in her eyes. Then she waves her hand and dismisses me.

I start to leave but stop. "Just to confirm, my next shift is tonight?"

Doris shakes her head. "Tomorrow morning. And tomorrow night as you requested Saturday night off." When I don't leave, she tilts her head. "Is there something else?"

When I'd taken the job here, aside from earning some money, I'd seen the opportunity to be able to ask the staff questions about Cole. I'd kept quiet at first; I didn't want to

scare anyone off and I also wanted to get a feel for everyone so that I knew who to talk to first.

The day before Syn's announcement, I'd finally asked one of the sous chefs as we prepped in the morning, but he was new and hadn't been here at the time. Since then, while they weren't exactly going out of their way to avoid me, even the small talk had dried up.

"You've worked here a while, right?" I ask. "Do you remember what happened to JP—James Patrick Keyingham?"

Doris turns back to her desk, focusing on a curled printout of inventory that's resting over her keyboard. "I'm sorry, Ms. Tori, but I need to finish this. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"I know, I'm sorry, it's just—"

"Goodbye, Ms. Tori."

I'm not sure why she suddenly acts so cold, but I back out of the room. Sometimes it feels like Doris is my only ally and the last thing I want to do is put a rift between us. For now, I'd try with some of the other staff before approaching her again.

Penny wanted to go to New York, so I asked Doris if it was possible to swap the dinner shift so I could head into the city and not worry about getting back in time. Surprisingly, she was okay with my request.

Finally feeling like I can slow down and relax, I go back into the dining hall and grab some scrambled egg with toast. When I go to find a seat, I see a familiar head of pink tipped hair, so I head over to Penny, taking the seat opposite.

She looks up as I sit and tries to mask a wince. "You look..."

"Tired?" I shrug. "I misread my shift and was nearly an hour late for work."

Nodding, Penny's attention drifts to her breakfast. She's got her usual charred avocado and egg, but the food is

barely touched, and from the dull sheen on the eggs, I'm almost certain the plate has gone cold.

“Are you okay?”

Chewing her lip, Penny looks up without raising her head. “Don't be mad, but I need to cancel our Saturday plans. Bubbe has summoned me home.”

“Is everything okay?”

Penny drops her gaze, half shaking her head, half shrugging. “It's... don't worry about it. It's just Bubbe being Bubbe.”

I take a few bites of my breakfast, but Penny aimlessly prodding her food has me lowering my fork. “You don't look like someone I shouldn't be worrying about.”

With a long, drawn-out sigh, like Penny has been carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders, Penny lowers her hand and finally looks at me. “Someone called Bubbe,” she says, miserably. “They told her about you, and how we're friends. So now Bubbe is telling me you and I shouldn't be friends.”

The news seems to turn the small amount of food in my stomach into a heavy, cold lump. “I understand.”

Penny narrows her eyes. “I spent three hours last night telling Bubbe that she gets no say in who my friends are, and that's exactly what I'll tell her on Saturday. I'm upset because I had plans, and now I have to spend probably nine hours with my grandmother ranting the same thing on repeat, and I'm going to have to get up early for that *privilege* because she's sending a car to pick me up at eight in the morning.”

Tears well in the corner of my eyes before I can stop them.

Folding her arms, Penny sits back and gives me a stern look. “Stop acting like I'm some kind of martyr, because I mean technically, after enduring that lecture.” She continues, “Yes, I am. But equally, Bubbe doesn't get a say in who I date or who my friends are.”

Before I can tell her how amazing I think she is, her phone pings to life.

And it doesn't stop.

Notification after notification.

A horrible feeling sinks in as I watch Penny pick up her phone and investigate. It takes seconds for the color to drain from her face.

“Penny?”

She shakes her head. “It’s nothing, don’t worry. Just a group chat.”

As she flips the phone onto silent, I quickly reach over and snatch it from her hands.

Just kill yourself.

Worthless scum.

I bet she’s fucking the killer and the sister. She’s got a boyfriend and a girlfriend!

What a whore!

No wonder her father killed himself – I would too!

The comments are all coming from users with no profile pictures and numbers for names. Anonymity, hiding the identities of those around us.

Penny snatches the phone back from me, but I’ve seen enough.

“I think... I think we should end our friendship here,” I tell her.

“Oh, fuck off,” Penny snaps. “Let them say what they want. I heard half of this before.”

“It won’t end.” Aside from one or two comments about her sexual preference, the focus was on me—on Cole. A guy she never even met. “Their issue isn’t with you. And if you think those comments are bad, I promise you, they’ll only get worse.”

“If you can handle it, I can—”

“I deleted all my social media, Penny. That’s why you can’t add me on anything. I create an account from a new email with the default profile, and they still find me. I’m handling it because I have to. But you don’t.”

Penny stares back at me, unblinking as she runs her tongue over her teeth. Then suddenly, she slams her hands down on the table, either side of her plate, the noise startling me and sending the room into near silence.

Standing up, Penny looks around the room. There aren’t many people in at this point, but they’re all focused on our table. “You people are absolutely pathetic. You’re adults so fucking act like it. This is harassment. This is—”

With my focus on Penny, my mouth parted in surprise, I don’t notice movement from the corner of my eye until it’s too late. Out of nowhere, a bright green blur flies towards us, and then my head is ringing in pain.

The next thing I know, green sludge is dripping down the side of my head, running into my ear and down my collar. My shoulder, arm, and side is covered too. On the floor, there’s an extra-large glass, somehow, still in one piece.

Dazed, I look up at Penny.

She’s standing there looking as stunned as I feel, with green goo splattered across her face.

My head is throbbing from where the glass hit me, but I’m grateful it hit me and not Penny.

I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths, trying to ignore the grassy taste of the breakfast smoothie where it coats my lips. Then I open my eyes and look at Penny. “I’m sorry,” I tell her, sincerely meaning it.

She doesn’t say anything as I stand up and walk out of the dining hall amidst the familiar sound of laughter. I’m thankful for that too.

Making no effort to remove the smoothie, instead of heading back to my dorm, I walk straight to the library. My plan is to wait there, but even before I’ve gotten halfway across the campus, I come across the person I’m looking for.

Synclair Keyingham.

He's not alone, of course, and I'm not shocked to see Royal and Gemini with him. The three of them are in a golf cart, with Royal behind the wheel. Although they seem to be expecting me, they all seem surprised at my appearance.

Royal's lips part, and there seems to be a flicker of concern in his eyes, whereas Gemini's look like they're about to pop out of his head.

But the moment Syn sees me, he starts laughing. "You really did choose to crawl out of something this morning, didn't you?"

Sucking in a deep breath, like I can't quite manage to fill my lungs, I pause. It only takes me a moment to make sure I feel as calm as I'm going to manage right now, and then I change directions and walk over to the golf cart, coming to a stop a few feet from Syn.

There's a sneer on his face as he looks me up and down. "Are you above bathing now too?"

"What is it going to take?" I ask him.

His lips fall into a flat line as he glares at me, but I can almost see the cogs working in his brain. "To do what?"

I can handle this. I can handle anything...

Anything done to me.

Going after Penny?

After this, she *might* stay away, but my gut says she's stubborn enough to stay by my side. I have no idea if that glass was aimed at me or her, but I absolutely refuse to let my only friend get hurt because of me.

"Penny Bergmann. What's it going to take for you to make them leave her alone?"

XXI

Syn

Alone and broken. That's what I want.

I want Cole Reynolds to know how it feels to lose a sibling.

I need Victoria Anderson—*Reynolds* to suffer the pain of being alone.

I crave someone to focus all my rage and hatred on.

“You speak as though I'm in control of how others act when they see another person siding with a murderer,” I say, coldly. “Did you not hear me when I said everyone was to ignore you? That defaults to any scum who chooses to side with you.”

Although her eyes go wide, they don't leave mine. She frowns. “I just have to end my friendship with her?”

“It's not for me to say how others will react, but...” I shrug.

She rubs her temple, drawing my attention to her hair. When Dominic informed me that he had broken into her room to mess with her hair, this wasn't what I expected. Aside from a few faint blue stains around her hairline, the color is bright and vibrant. Annoyingly, it makes her eyes look even greener. Eyes that should be fighting back tears, but instead, are glaring resolutely at me.

“Please,” she says before suddenly sinking to her knees. “I understand why you hate me, but please, Penny is just trying to be a good person. You can consider our friendship over, so please leave her alone.”

Truthfully, I wasn't expecting that. For someone with the *nerve* to come here and not only act like her brother isn't a killer, but spout shit about how he isn't even guilty—someone so selfish—could think of someone else?

Only, if I was her, I'd be acting and saying all the right things to manipulate me.

And I will not be manipulated by this bitch.

"I know everything that happens on this campus," I tell her. "If you say one thing and then I see you two together—and I will see you—then there will be nothing I could do or say that would prevent anyone from acting how they see fit."

"Thank you," she says, quietly.

Ignoring her, I turn to Royal. "Drive."

He's staring at her, brows furrowed. The frown doesn't leave his face as he looks at me, but he does release the brake, and we drive away.

"Syn, man, what the fuck was that?" Gemini leans forward so his face is between mine and Royal's shoulders.

Shifting in my seat, I turn so I can face both him and Royal, but I make sure not to have her in my eyeline. "What do you mean?"

"You could have told her to leave, and she would have. You'd have won."

"Won?" I repeat, incredulously. "Won what? There is no competition here. I don't want her to leave. I want her broken. I want her here, where I can keep an eye on her, and where I don't need to worry about her going to the press with shit about her brother being innocent."

Gemini sinks back into his seat and stares off at the buildings as we drive past.

"She looked pretty broken to me," Royal says, suddenly.

Narrowing my eyes, I glare at him. "*That* was not broken." I look between the two of them, irritation growing.

“Since when have you two started feeling bad for her? What about JP? What about me?”

Royal sighs, but it’s Gemini who speaks. “Go fuck yourself. We all miss JP.” He folds his arms and glares back at me. “And when haven’t I done anything that you’ve asked?”

“Dick,” I mutter before turning to stare at Royal, who’s being silent when it’s usually him who has something to say about everything.

Finally, he acknowledges me with a side eye. “She was covered in fuck knows what and on her knees. She looked pretty fucking broken.”

“We’ve still got a long way to go before we’re there,” I tell him. Someone who chooses to come here and stay, is going to take a lot more than a fucking smoothie over her head to break.

“Yeah, well you need to get your shit together then.” Royal snorts. “All you can think about is Vict—”

“Don’t say her fucking name.” I hiss at him as I punch his thigh.

The cart jerks to the side. “Fuck’s sake, Syn,” Royal snaps back. “You hate her, we get it. The campus gets it. The fucking Elite get it—and that’s the fucking problem. Anyone who isn’t a fucking freshman is starting to complain that this year’s initiations are too easy.”

Gemini’s hand clamps down on my shoulder as he leans forward. “Royal’s right. The only thing the initiates are doing this year is serving us in the dining hall. We spent three years planning what we were going to do when we were in charge, so let’s have some fun.”

“Pick one, get them in a blue wig and fuck them so they can’t walk for a week,” Royal says.

I go to punch Royal again, but Gemini practically dives into the front seat to stop me. “You wanna punch us, then you do it when one of us isn’t driving the fucking cart. Or we open the ring up.”

Shaking my arm free of Gemini's grip, I sit back and fold my arms, forcing myself to calm down. I've spent years controlling my anger, only unleashing it physically in fights where I know the other person won't go to the police. Organized underground fights on campus or off.

No one cares about cuts and bruises until they are accompanied by a police record, and my future—my life—depends on having no criminal record and no evidence of even the vaguest untoward behavior that could be used against me in the future.

My father is one of the few individuals in the world who has the power to ensure anything I did would be erased in an instant, but if he had to use his resources...

Maybe I do need to work off some anger.

"Find me someone to fight by tomorrow night. I don't care if it's a fucking homeless guy from the city or an initiate. Tell the Elite this weekend we're taking the initiates to church." I turn to Gemini and Royal. "Giving the church a good cleaning will keep the faculty happy."

The day passes by in a haze of boredom. Aside from the breakfast excitement—and I was provided with many videos from different angles—class is dull. At this point, college is nothing but a formality. Political Science now. Guaranteed entry to law school. Work until I'm "qualified" enough to become a senator, then on to president.

Everything I do between now and then is make sure I look good on paper.

At dinner, she's nowhere to be found. After we left her, she went back to her room and didn't attend any class until after lunch. Penny Bergmann ate alone. Maybe she will keep her promise, but when I said I had eyes everywhere, I wasn't lying.

Aside from a small army of students reporting her actions, I had a camera installed in the corridor outside her room. And if Gemini did as he said, I'll soon have eyes inside too.

“I got you a guy from the city,” Gemini says as we head back to our house. “Figured you’d want to go to town on them, and we know an initiate isn’t going to fight back properly.”

Having seen this year’s initiates, I doubt any of them can fight anyway.

Royal went straight to the gym after class, so it’s just me and Gemini in the golf cart. As he steers us around the final corner to the porch where the golf cart lives, I see the neon green Lamborghini parked up outside our house.

“Fuck my life,” I mutter.

The car belongs to Preston du Pont.

“Did you know he was coming?” Gemini asks.

“No.”

While it’s not unusual for past presidents of the Elite to visit, they usually only attend for special events. I tolerate Preston because he was friends with my brother, and because he’s my predecessor. But I prefer to tolerate him with advance notice when there’s an event, he can fuck off and annoy someone else.

I head inside, and almost immediately, Seamus appears. “Mr. du Pont is waiting for you in the living room,” he tells me, like I could have possibly missed the Lamborghini.

Finding the smile I reserve for the camera, I walk into the living room. “Preston, what brings you here?”

Preston is in one of the armchairs, staring at the screen of his phone. He looks up when I walk in. “Six weeks, and you’ve let the Elite go to shit. You’re lucky I’m here and not your father.”

I glance over my shoulder as Gemini closes the door behind us. One of the more specialist features in this house are the heavy doors, designed to keep conversations private.

Seamus may have worked here for years, but he’s the help. People like that, with no power or money, have

absolutely no loyalty.

“The Elite has not gone to shit,” I tell Preston. On the outside, I appear calm, but inside, the anger is already appearing from his insinuation.

“And yet I’m hearing that aside from the initiation ceremony, none of the initiates have had to prove themselves. And that asshole, Declan Salaway, is still here.” Preston gets to his feet, slipping his phone into his pocket.

Overall, my brother was a great judge of character. JP had this ability to read people well, and while he was able to make everyone feel like they were his friend, his actual circle of friends was small and exclusive. For some reason, it always confused me as to why Preston was part of that circle.

The only conclusion I was ever able to come to was because of Preston’s father and mine.

“What’s the rush?” I walk over to the couch and sit down. “The first few weeks are when the workload is the lowest. Midterms are coming up. Don’t you think it’s much more fun to watch them suffer when they must decide between Elite activities and an exam?”

Preston stares at me, and then a grin breaks on his face. “That’s actually pretty good.”

“This weekend, we’ll have them cleaning the church. Next weekend, we’re getting them wasted and dumping them in...” I look over at Gemini, “Connecticut?”

Gemini nods. “No wallets, no phones.”

Suddenly, Preston claps his hands together. “I knew there was a reason you were named my successor.” He glances at the door and looks back at the two of us. “And that, I think, is the perfect time for us to deal with Salaway.”

“What’s the deal with him?” Gemini asks.

“His father is...” Preston purses his lips. “Let’s just say, his father needs a little persuasion when it comes to his company.”

Declan's father owns a medical supply company. One that did rather well during the pandemic thanks to our connections in the Chinese government. Recently, there were some questions put to the senate about the validity of one particular conspiracy theory regarding supplies being ordered prior to the outbreak.

“The fall guy needs a push.”

Neither Gemini nor I ask any further questions.

“Anyway,” Preston says brightly, “I think it's time to crack open a bottle of brandy.”

Fucking marvelous.

With the fake smile plastered back on my face, I head over to the drinks cabinet to serve our unwanted guest.

XXII

Tori

I'm lying in bed, waiting for my alarm to go off. I've been tossing and turning all night, and after the brief sleep I managed to wake from a while ago, I gave up trying.

When I decided to come here, I knew I wasn't in for an easy time. I'd been through all this once before, and I thought I was prepared. No social media, and therefore, no opportunity to be bombarded with the constant stream of anonymous posts and threats, which had certainly made things easier now compared to high school.

I'd gotten used to being ignored, and aside from the occasional pang of missing my previous social life, I was fine with hiding in my room.

But I never counted on making a friend. Not a friend who was there because I was cool and popular, but a friend who didn't give a shit about my past and was fully prepared to stick by my side regardless of the crap she was going to get in return.

Or maybe she wouldn't have.

Penny had only really experienced a limited amount of the hate I'd had on her social media. Maybe if I'd waited to see how much she could take before going to Syn, she *might* have stuck it out.

But who should have to? Especially when she was only getting all the hate because she was my friend. And what if she eventually had the realization that I wasn't worth all that crap anyway?

Last night, after doing my best to ignore her all day, she knocked on my door and refused to go away until I

answered. Like a coward, I wanted to tell her to go away through a closed door, not wanting to face her, but I owed her more than that.

Instead, I opened the door and politely told her that our friendship was over.

Then I shut the door in her face.

Penny didn't knock again, but she had sent me a text message.

Reaching for my phone, I pick it up, my face instantly unlocking the screen and taking me to the message.

Penny: Before you block my number, I wanted to tell you this. I know why you're doing this, and a part of me is thankful. But you are seriously underestimating me. Friendship isn't a subscription you can just cancel. I'm here, and I'm going nowhere.

Until then, as much as it pained me to say it, I understood Syn. Ultimately, he was a victim too, suffering the loss of his brother. I don't know why I thought it would be as simple as changing my name and trying to avoid him, but I understood why he was angry at me for being here.

But there was no reason to bring Penny into this.

No matter what bullshit he said about not being able to control how others acted, he was responsible for this. Any sympathy I had towards him had disappeared when he made me choose between keeping a best friend or keeping her safe.

My phone screen has gone black, but it lights up as my alarm goes off, ready for my breakfast shift.

Moving like a zombie, I dress in the work uniform, brush my teeth, then fix my hair and makeup before heading out. As I step into the corridor, I stare up at the little red light in the camera opposite my door. The addition was there when I returned to my room to wash the health shake off me and change into my college uniform.

Syn wasn't lying when he said he had eyes everywhere, but this was a much too obvious statement.

I glance over at Penny's door before locking mine. Then I leave the dorm and head to the dining hall. Today, Doris has me in the back for the whole shift, and I'm grateful.

Since working here, I've realized that there's an unwritten rule with the kitchen staff. Behind the doors, where the students don't go, it's almost like a sanctuary. Because when you're out front, no matter what the students say or do, you take it, or you turn a blind eye to it.

I know everyone here is aware of what's been happening to me, but back here, no one mentions it. I just get sad smiles and looks of pity.

When my shift is over, I get my breakfast. I've not got much of an appetite, but I grab a bagel and a coffee. Trying to ignore everyone, I find a table in the corner, but I've been scanning the crowd, looking out for that familiar pink hair. Either she ate earlier, or Penny skipped breakfast today. Either way, it means I can eat alone and not worry about her trying to join me.

I've barely sat down before a shadow falls over my plate. Looking up, I find Dawn glaring down at me. She's one of this year's initiates for the Elite, and I know this because she's wearing a maid uniform.

Most maid uniforms are plain and modest. Usually a dress, but the skirt falls past the knees, and the sleeves usually fall to the elbow or longer. We used to have a maid, as did most of my friends.

The uniform Dawn is wearing isn't quite "Halloween" French Maid costume, but that's only because there's a couple of extra inches in the skirt and covering her cleavage. All the initiates that serve Syn, Royal and Gemini have to wear a uniform. The girls show a little skin, whereas the guys have waistcoats and suits with tails.

Penny told me it was lowkey hazing of these guys. Make them wear something silly and have them serve the

Elite's president and vice presidents.

She clearly had no idea about what went on beneath the church.

"Can I help you?" I ask Dawn.

"That table is taken."

I let out a long sigh. "Of course it is. Is this where you tell me to leave?"

Dawn shoots me a withering glare. "You have been assigned a table."

"Sure." I pick up my drink and take a sip.

"That's fine. Penny can take it instead."

Looking up at Dawn, I set my coffee down, barely registering that the action has sent coffee spilling over the side of the cup. Then I glance over at Syn's table. His golden eyes are watching our interaction carefully.

I'm not stupid. I know full well that this table is going to result in some form of public humiliation at best. But I get to my feet, pick up my tray, and give Dawn a smile like she's about to present me with a seat at a table with the King of England. "Lead the way."

Dawn wrinkles her nose like I'm a bad smell, which, to be fair, after a three-hour shift preparing vegetables and washing dishes, is probably the case. But she turns on her heels—because the maid outfit wouldn't be complete without impractical three-inch stilettos—and walks away.

She walks like she's on a runway. The outfit is designed to create attention, and regardless of whether or not it's embarrassing, she's owning it.

Dawn leads me through the dining hall to Syn's table. Today, it's just him there. I have no idea if the other two have eaten and left or just never came in. The other initiate serving Syn, Peter, is standing back, like he's one of those guards outside Buckingham Palace that don't ever react to anything.

For a moment, I'm sure Dawn's about to make me sit at the table with Syn. At the last moment, she stops and points.

Their table is long; big enough to seat six people, even though only Syn, Royal and Gemini ever sit there. It lives on a small platform at the back of the room, the rise of about a foot, enough that anyone in the dining hall can see them clearly, and they can see everyone. Weirdly, it reminds me of a head table at a wedding. Although all the tables in the dining hall have pristine white tablecloths and cloth napkins in the same shade of blue as the university colors, this one has a runner with the university crest in the center. There are also two fresh flower arrangements at either end, bigger and more extravagant than any of the other arrangements in the room.

The table Dawn points to is a single. Metal, with the seat attached. It's right in front of Syn's table on the lower level, and it's facing them, not the room. There's nothing on this campus that looks like this, and I know this has been ordered specifically for me.

More irritating than the fact that even though this table was probably custom built, is that the ridiculous amount of money it surely cost to have this made and shipped was probably not even a factor.

"What do you think? I had it made especially for you," Syn says, confirming my suspicion.

Summoning my poker face, I place my plate and cup on the metal surface and take a seat. The metal is ice cold and seeps through my clothes. Worse still, the dimensions are off. The height of the table is lower than the rest in the dining hall, and so is the seat, making me bend my knees uncomfortably as I try to fit in.

Above me, Syn stares down, a smug smile on his lips. "You will eat every meal there."

I suck in a long, deep breath, but don't respond. Instead, I pick up my croque monsieur, and take a bite. The cheese has gone cold, and is no longer appetizing, but I chew slowly, never breaking my gaze with Syn.

With my attention on him, I don't see Dawn until it's too late. She pulls the croque monsieur from my hand, dumping it on the plate, which she quickly removes along with the cup of coffee.

"What are you doing?" I demand with my mouth still full of food.

"You think you're allowed to eat that?" Syn asks. He cocks his head, before shaking it and tutting. "From now on, you will share the honor of being served exclusively by the freshmen members of the Elite."

A tray is placed in front of me. This is one where there are various sections, designed for the food to go straight into it. Although it's the same blue as the university colors, I'm certain this is something created especially for me. Like with my table, I'm getting prison vibes.

My brother is in prison, so I must be subjected to something similar?

Or worse.

The tray has three compartments. One is for the plastic spoon, which, at this point, if it was a real knife, or even a fork, I would be tempted to use it as a weapon. Another section has a paper cup filled with water. The largest part contains only a pile of white rice. The mound is barely bigger than the fist I'm clenching on either side of the tray.

Syn gets up and casually walks down to me, perching on the edge of the table. He leans closer. "The university is providing you with three free meals a day, and you will receive that. Your food will be served to you at 8 a.m., midday, and 5 p.m. every day. If you miss those meals, you will not receive another. And if you try to get any other food..." Syn lowers his voice. "I will ensure whichever staff member provides it to you will lose their job faster than you will be able to finish your meal."

With the sunlight streaming in through the window behind him, the way it catches his light brown hair makes it glow. His golden eyes and strong jawline make him positively

handsome. But Synclair Keyingham is nothing more than a Trojan horse. Alluring on the outside, but full of evil intent.

“One day, you’re going to regret everything you do to me.” Like him, I keep my voice low. “And the only way I’m even going to consider *listening* to an apology from you is after your public declaration of all the shitty things you’ve done, when you’ve lost everything, when you’re down on your knees, begging me to forgive you.”

Syn chuckles, but there’s no real humor behind it. “I’m never failed to be amused at how the masochism kink presents in different people. Spoiler alert, Victoria. The only ones regretting anything will be you and your murderer of a brother.”

XXIII

Tori

When I left for the dining hall this morning, I was exhausted. Now, fueled by a new desire to find out the truth about my brother, I feel more invigorated.

I head back to my room so I can change into my uniform for class, already re-writing my weekend plans. While I'm still upset that I won't be able to spend the weekend in Manhattan with Penny, I've already decided the day will be spent looking for answers.

I'm sure there's something obvious I've not even considered, because there should be more evidence of a murder taking place on campus. Not just a faded white outline, but something somewhere that could even tell me where JP was killed.

When I arrive on my floor, there's a package outside of my room. I slow my pace, instantly suspicious. It wasn't just my social media that got spammed. Before we moved, there were regular deliveries with contents ranging from literal shit—and I honestly couldn't say if it was human or dog—to trash. Physical hate mail with messages so vile that if it didn't look like a bill, the letter automatically went into the trash.

Aside from the glowing red light from the camera opposite my door, the corridor feels suspiciously quiet.

Walking up to the parcel, I keep a slight distance as I inspect the box. There's nothing identifying about the brown cardboard, other than the envelope with the university logo, addressed to me, taped to the top. Hesitating, I reach down to pull the envelope off and pull out the sheet from inside.

Dear Victoria,

Please accept our sincere apologies for the late delivery of your laptop. As you will be aware, scholarship students are entitled to a laptop which they are welcome to keep after they have graduated.

Your laptop was ordered upon acceptance of your place at James Keyingham University, however the item was not in stock, and unfortunately, we failed to realize this happened.

Sincerely

Dean Welcroft

The signature is hand signed, and the paper is embossed, but I'm still suspicious. I don't ever recall seeing anything about receiving a laptop. I pick up the box and unlock my door. Once I've locked the door behind me, I carry the box over to my desk and set it down, carefully cutting the parcel tape with a pair of scissors.

Inside is a still-sealed MacBook Air.

I stand there, staring at the box instead of removing it from the package it was delivered in. All the crap from high school, and the revival of it here has clearly put me into ultimate defense mode because a \$1200 laptop wasn't even on the list of things that I was preparing myself for in that box.

Sinking into my chair, I rub my chest. For the last few days, I've felt like even though I'm breathing, my lungs aren't ever filling with air. With my own laptop on its last legs and the worry of trying to get it fixed, this is something which literally feels like it's giving me a little breathing room.



Whether it's one less worry off my mind, or the residual irritation from having to eat my tray of rice in front of Syn before work, as I'm clocking out after my evening shift in the

dining hall, when my first idea where to look for information hits me.

One of the chefs is still in the staff room, waiting for me so he can lock up. He's on the couch with his feet on the arm, reading a copy of the university newspaper. I rarely see anyone reading it because most people read the digital version. In fact, I didn't even realize there was a paper version.

When my brother was arrested, I refused to look into the details. I'd be distracted by the comment section on TikTok with the awful things written about him by people who never even heard of him before.

I didn't watch the news anyway, and I certainly didn't read official news sites. The closest I got was articles shared on Facebook, and again, I'd always get distracted by the comments.

When I finally decided to look into the circumstances of what had happened, I was already in a new high school. It was only then that I discovered how few details had been shared anywhere, especially compared to other murder trials.

The thing is, although I didn't really pay much attention back then, I'm almost sure I remember seeing a photograph of a room and something saying this was where JP was killed. Only, I've never seen it since.

Of course, I could be imagining it, but I just feel like information was deleted or hidden. Which seems absolutely insane when the world loves tragedies like this. Plus, that would take a lot of power or money to accomplish, and why would you need to cover it up when someone has already confessed?

I stare at the newspaper in the chef's hands and the brain fog seems to clear.

The Keyingham Ledger.

If there's still a physical copy now, then there was one back then. Their website has next to nothing on it; just a tribute to JP—which also seemed a little suspicious to me. But if there's a physical archive...

As I hurry back to my room, the exhaustion I was feeling starts to lift. It's Friday night, so most students have either left to go home for the weekend or travel, or they're partying. The library will almost certainly be empty.

After rushing through a shower to wash away the smell of the kitchen, I change into a clean pair of shorts and a T-shirt. With my damp hair pulled back into a messy bun, I'm straight back out of my room and walking across campus to the library.

My route takes me past the student parking lot. From what I have learned, the students here come from all across the US, and a few from overseas, but there are usually a lot of really expensive parked cars with New York plates on them. Tonight, there's more here than I expect.

If people are sticking around, it probably means there's a party. I've never been to one, aside from the Freshman Welcome Mixer, but I've realized that the faculty turn a blind eye to anything that isn't related to grades, and that includes the underage drinking on campus.

As I suspected, the library is empty aside from one of the librarians; an old woman called Ethel whose eyesight seems to be better than the rest of the faculty. This is the only place where the rules seem to be upheld. She looks up from the thick romance book she's reading as I approach the desk.

"The university newspaper, The Keyingham Ledger... do you keep hard copies of previous editions?" My fingers, behind my back, are crossed.

"Hard copies?" She tilts her head back and forth like an owl. "I thought your generation was all about digital everything."

I point at her book. "I prefer physical copies."

Ethel nods, and then she shakes her head. "The physical copies are in the basement archives, but you need to come before seven on a weekday. I can't leave the desk unmanned, and it's only me."

Feeling utterly deflated, I turn and leave. Outside, I sit on a bench, staring out across the campus.

I came here thinking finding out the truth would be easy, but we're nearly halfway through the semester, and I'm no closer to finding any answers. Now that I don't have plans tomorrow, I think I'll try to visit Cole—if he'll allow visitors. Maybe now that I've been here, and he sees I've got no intention of leaving, he'll finally spill some secrets and tell me what happened that night.

After enjoying the peace, for a while, I head back to my room. It's only as I'm walking back that I finally see other people.

Royal.

Even from this distance, I recognize his muscular outline. Apparently, so does my pussy. Royal has barely even looked at me since that night, and whenever he has, he's been right beside Syn. And yet my body still remembers how his touch made me feel.

Before my mind starts to betray me and replay the memory of fucking him, I shake the memories from my head. What happened in that church basement should stay there...

Keyingham Church.

Which is the same direction Royal is heading. There's nothing else that way...

Exactly what did I see in that church anyway?

That night, Royal distracted me. He'd done a good job. Mostly, when I remember that night, I either thought about how good it felt when he fucked me as I watched an orgy, or I would get angry at myself when I started to feel bad because he fucked me and acted like it never happened.

He'd distracted me so well that I barely even think about the orgy in a non-sexual kind of way.

Four people having sex wasn't unusual. Four people having sex in the basement of a church, surrounded by people in robes and masks while the whole thing was recorded was.

Even as far as hazing went—and the four people involved were four of the twelve who serves Syn, Royal and Gemini at mealtimes—that seemed very... specific.

I'm not sure why, but I turn, following Royal.

He doesn't turn around once, but I'm far enough behind that if he does, he hopefully won't see me. As I suspected, he is making his way to the church, which, despite how late it is, has lights on inside.

Something tells me that unless Royal is hooking up with Noel, Christmas isn't coming early, and he isn't attending Midnight Mass.

Or, as I think back to the Freshman Welcome Mixer, maybe he is...

I wait a few minutes after Royal has gone inside before I hurry over, keeping an eye over my shoulder in case anyone else appears. The big wooden door is closed when I get there, so I carefully open it a crack. Thankfully, like most things on campus, the wrought iron hinges are well maintained, and there is no creak to give me away as I peer in through the gap.

I can't see anyone. Slowly, I open the door further. The lights are on, but the room is empty, leading me to believe that Royal must be doing something in the rooms below the church.

There's a tiny voice in the back of my mind that tells me this has nothing to do with me, and that whatever is going on, it's most likely linked back to the Elite and Syn. So really, the best thing I can do is leave, but... my curiosity has got the best of me.

Shutting the door behind me, I take the long route around the edge of the room in case I need to duck down behind a pew and hide, but no one appears as I run towards the door in the back corner of the room. My heart is pounding, and not from my run, as I descend the circular stone staircase, keeping my steps light to avoid an echo, and give away my presence.

At the bottom, I pause, listening for sounds of life before I poke my head into the corridor. It's empty too. I take a deep breath and then walk down the corridor, stopping in front of the strange security room I was in before.

This time, the door is locked. Staring at the digital keypad, I know I've not got the time to try all the possible combinations, and even if there's a way that I could somehow see which numbers have been pressed to narrow down the options, I've got nothing with me other than my phone.

My gaze drifts towards the end of the corridor with the stone arch and a large, closed, wooden door. This one doesn't have a keypad on it.

From what I had noticed on the footage that I saw, there was one camera pointed at the only entrance and exit to the room. Assuming this door led directly to that room, I might be able to get inside and hide behind the stone altar in there whilst having enough cover to not be seen.

Either way, the longer I stand here doing nothing, the more likely I am to get caught anyway.

Instead of leaving, I walk over to the door, place my hand on the iron ring pull, and before I can change my mind, lift and turn.

XXIV

Tori

I'm instantly greeted by a noise which has me freezing on the spot. The noise is not the one I was expecting. Pausing for a moment it occurs to me that the sound is loud, harsh sounding chanting. Something more along the lines of what you would hear at a football game than what is normally heard in a church.

And the only name I can make out is "Syn."

The noise drowns out the alarm bells that have started ringing in my head, telling me to abort. Instead, I walk in to see what's happening, although holding back, to peer out from behind the wall.

The door leads out into a corridor that stretches out in two directions. While the outer wall is stone, broken up by the occasional dim light, the inner wall is almost entirely open, giving a clear view of the corridor as it curves around to the far side where there's a staircase descending to whatever is below.

There are a lot of people up here, all with red cups in their hands. Apparently, there's no need for fine glassware back here. Although everybody's attention on the center, looking down at whatever is happening, I stay back, hiding in the shadows.

A few weeks ago, I might have gotten away with being in here, but right now, I'm public enemy number one, and no one is going to let me stay, even if their orders are to ignore me.

Whatever is happening below involves Syn, but the cheers don't make sense for him to be having sex.

If I leave now, without even trying to see, I'm going to be so pissed off with myself.

With a deep breath, I take a couple of steps forward—just enough to be able to see.

Unless there are two circular rooms built beneath this church, this is the same room I watched the members of this... *cult* having an orgy in. The floor is full of people focused on a stage in the center. Between the people up here and the ones down there, there are maybe two hundred. Since I recognize some familiar faces, I'm certain they're all members of the Elite.

Which is when I realize the large stage which they're all focused on is actually the same stone altar. Poised imposingly on the top of it, is Syn. He's wearing only a pair of black shorts, the kind that cling to your body and don't hide anything, and a pair of gloves.

Although it's impossible to not see the muscles, my attention is on his hands as they are moving in a frenzy, punching the upper body of a man I don't recognize.

Unlike everyone else in the room, the man is older, maybe in his forties. He's much leaner than Syn, and he's covered in tattoos. He's got a beard and although his hair is plastered to his head from sweat, it's clear it's long and unkempt.

The other thing that's clear is although Syn has a cut on his face and a few marks on his body and the old man managed to land a few hits, he's now winning.

I've never been interested in fighting. My brother would occasionally watch a boxing or MMA match, but this seems more like an attack, and no referee in sight. If there was, I'm sure he'd be calling the fight by now because although the man is somehow still standing, the hits from Syn feel like he'd get disqualified in an official fight.

I've seen enough.

Quickly I step back into the shadows, scanning the room to make sure no one has noticed me. I don't stop until

I'm back in the corridor, and the door is closed behind me, blocking all sounds from the room behind it.

There's something about that whole thing that just seems...

Wrong?

Out of place?

Both?

This is a college for the richest people in the country. Any fights they have feel like they should be held in a boardroom. And if they are interested in fights, they should be watching, not participating—especially not someone like Syn.

That fight felt raw and vicious. Organized but unsanctioned. The kind of underground fight with a cash price paid in actual notes by people who need it.

The last thing Syn needs is money. The man he was fighting probably does, which makes the whole thing feel like a scam. If something like this was made public to the world, it would do more damage than good, which means if Syn isn't in it for money, and he's not in it for a title, he's there for violence.

I know Syn is dangerous. At first, I underestimated how dangerous, because until he had his hand wrapped around my throat in the library, I hadn't thought he would physically hurt me.

But seeing how he was laying into that man, it's obvious I've underestimated how dangerous he is again.

Syn isn't someone who should be running a country, if that really is his goal in life. Anybody who saw that fight would think the same thing.

That's when I realize I should have recorded it.

The thought is forced from my mind as quickly as it enters it. Going back in would be too risky now. I need to leave here, and not only never come back, but find some food I can eat in my room, so that I don't ever have to cross Syn's path again.

Judging from the man's state, the fight is going to be wrapping up soon, and the last thing I want is to be here when people start filing out of the door. I head for the stairs, and just as I'm about to go up, I hear the door open, shouts and cheers spilling into the corridor.

Breaking out into a run, I charge up the stairs, slowing only when I reach the door at the top and make sure there's no one in the church, even though the other option is being caught by the owners of the voices I can hear following me.

I'm barely in the church before the main door starts to open. I'm about to dive behind a pew and hope for the best, but at the last minute, I spot another archway with more steps, this time, leading upwards.

Without thinking, I charge up them, trying to keep light on my toes. The stairs lead to the upper balcony that lines three of the four walls of the church. The balcony is narrow with one row of benches, and just enough space for a single row of people to stand in front of them.

I stay in the entrance, my side pressed up against the cold stone, as I stare down at the people below. The one who comes in from the outside is a senior who I think is called Rich. He's skinny and tall with a long face and long nose.

"Is it over?" he asks, his voice carrying clearly up to me.

"Will be soon," someone responds.

"Really?" Rich looks at his watch and arches an eyebrow. "Guy lasted longer than I expected. Where did they find him?"

Two people come into view from the direction of the door I came out of. One is a guy I've seen on campus but don't know what year he's in or what his name is. The other, I recognize. He's the one who was with Dawn when she attacked Penny in the dining hall—Nicholas.

The two quickly walk over to Rich, and then the three of them walk back outside. I only manage to hear that the man

Syn is fighting was brought in from the Bronx before they get outside.

Letting out the breath I'm holding, I close my eyes. Until those three come back and safely disappear back into the depths of the church, I'm stuck up here waiting for *everyone* to leave.

Unless there's a fire exit that I can escape from.

Behind me, someone clears their throat.

The sound catches me so unaware, that I manage to trip over my own feet. Somehow, I stop myself from completely falling to the floor, instead, smacking my shin against the edge of the bench in front of me. Ignoring the pain in my leg, I turn.

Watching me from the shadows is Royal.

"Given how we last met, I'm almost not surprised to find you here," he tells me, making no effort to move. "And yet, given that Syn has painted a target on your forehead, this really is the last place I'd expect you to be." He arches an eyebrow. "Did you cheat to get in? Because you really can't be that stupid."

Despite everything, the fact that he could accuse me of cheating when I worked my ass off to get accepted here really pisses me off, thankfully causing the adrenaline coursing through my veins to turn into red hot fury.

"Fuck you." I spit at him.

A sly smile grows on his face. "Did you come all this way just for round two?" He steps out of the shadows. "Do you want my dick buried deep in your pussy again?"

Ignoring the heat that's pooling between my legs, I keep my back straight and give him my best sneer. "There are few things I want less."

Royal half laughs, half snorts, and yet somehow, he makes the noise sound somewhat attractive. "I call bullshit, little perv. I can practically smell how hot for me you are right now."

“Get over yourself. You weren’t even that good,” I tell him, the lie spoken so confidently that even I’m convinced.

Royal opens his mouth, but before he speaks, he grabs my wrist and jerks me towards him. The start of a cry begins to escape me, but as he twists me around, pinning me against his chest, his other hand clamps down over my mouth.

His arms are like a vice, holding me so tightly I can barely move. “Unless you want to be caught, I’d shut up,” he whispers in my ear, just as the main door opens.

Instantly, I freeze. It’s Rich, Nicholas, and the other guy.

“—to be you, Tyler,” Rich is saying, laughing at the third guy.

Tyler shrugs. “Yeah, but my plan is to make anyone who fucks with my hangover clean this place with a feather duster up their ass.”

“I had planned on staying in bed until the festivities tomorrow evening, but that’s a show I could get out of bed for,” Nicholas says then laughs. “Genius, my friend.”

“Wait until after lunch, both of you.” Rich warns them. “The faculty will be here in the morning, taking photos so they can brag about students doing community service or some shit. But after that, do as you will. Get all those neophytes in the aprons of the maid get-up and only that.”

Tyler tilts his head. “Can you imagine Gabrielle in an apron that barely covers her tits and cunt, a feather duster sticking out of her ass as she scrubs the floor?”

“She’ll be cleaning up her own juices as she goes,” Rich barely manages to say before laughing. He drops to his knees, crawling across the floor making exaggerated moans and groans.

As the sound is drowned out by Tyler and Nicholas’ laughter, Royal removes his hand from my mouth.

Even if his arm wasn’t still wrapped around me, holding me against him, I don’t move. I’m barely hidden

behind the wall, and if I can see them clearly, if they were to look up, they'd probably see me too.

“Make a move or utter a sound, and they see you,” Royal whispers in my ear, so quietly, I can barely hear him over the laughing.

As my brain is trying to process his words, his hand moves under the front of my T-shirt, and then it goes behind the waistband of my shorts and panties. He slides a finger along my slit, brushing my clit.

At the touch of his cold finger, pleasure jolts through me, and despite myself, I jerk back into him.

“I knew you were lying, little perv.”

I clamp my hand over his wrist, ready to pull his hand off me, but his lips are back against my ear.

“Ah, ah, aah. Not unless you want to be watched this time.” Despite my hand on his wrist, he slides his finger back and forth over my clit.

This isn't going to end well, I know that. I'm not sure what game Royal is currently playing, nor what his endgame is. I should be stopping him. I should be fighting him off—to hell with the guys below seeing me. More important is the utter principle of the fact that my life is turning into hell because of his best friend...

I tighten my grip.

And then Royal extends his finger further back, playing with the opening of my pussy.

“Stop.” At least I think I say stop. It sounds more like a gasp. At the same time, I loosen my grip.

Royal doesn't even pause, his finger never stopping as it slides back and forth between my clit and my opening. Instead, he forces his foot between mine. As my legs part, he sinks his finger into me. “Do you really want me to stop?”

I clamp my teeth down on my lip to smother my own moan. My gaze is locked on the three guys below. They're still

talking, but I can no longer hear what they're saying. I'm too busy fighting back every noise my body wants me to make.

“My naughty little perv likes this, don't you?”

Certain I'm imagining him, I don't respond.

His hand stops moving. “Tell me you like it.”

This time, his voice, quiet enough that the three guys don't react, is clear in my ear.

I don't trust myself to say anything. Instead, I spread my legs a little wider.

As Royal chuckles in my ear, he sticks his finger back in my pussy, this time, adding a second as the heel of his thumb rubs my clit.

My teeth are biting my lip so hard, I'm surprised I can't taste blood. Despite myself, I arch my back then push myself into him, trying to get into a position that will let him go deeper.

Royal obliges.

There's an orgasm building. Good as it feels, I need him to stop. I'm seconds away from three people witnessing me come from Royal finger fucking me.

That realization makes this seem so much hotter, but what I need and what I want do not match up.

“I think that's enough,” Royal mutters.

My hand tightens around his wrist again, but this time, I'm holding him in place.

The smug chuckle in my ear has me dying of embarrassment, but I refuse to let go.

Still laughing, although it's more like silent huffs of hot air, Royal resumes fucking me with his fingers. And then, as his fingers are deep in me, he curls them.

To stop the cry escaping my mouth, I move my hands, clamping them down so tightly over my mouth that I can barely breathe. The orgasm rushes through my body. I manage

to stay almost silent, but the lack of air is making me lightheaded, and somehow, that's making my orgasm even more intense.

I try to last as long as I can before I rip my hands away and inhale a deep breath. I'm dizzy. My entire body is tingling, and my pussy pulsing as Royal pulls his hands from out of my panties.

With no warning, he sticks his fingers into my mouth. "Clean them."

There's not a single sliver of hesitation as I close my mouth and run my tongue around his fingers, sucking my own cum from them.

"If I say I want to bury my dick so deep in your pussy that stopping yourself from screaming my name so fucking loudly that you're going to have everyone wondering what all the noise is, are you still going to tell me you can't think of anything you want less?"

The answer should be yes. Yes, that's exactly what I will say, because I really can't think of anything else I want less...

Instead, my response is to shake my head, because right now, the last piece of rational thinking I have is missing.

"Shame, because nothing has changed since I said the last time was a one-time thing."

All of a sudden, Royal releases me. I hadn't realized he was the reason I was still standing until my weak legs are forced to support my weight again. Just as I'm finding my balance, he pushes me away from him. It's not hard enough that I fall over, but it is enough to push me right out into the open.

Eyes wide, I look down.

The church is empty.

"You have five minutes before I let people leave the Crypt." Royal turns and descends the stairs without looking back.

When the door clicks behind him, I sink to the bench, trying to catch my breath. I'm hot and cold at the same time. My body is tingling in all the right places, but my legs feel wobbly, and I'm still a little lightheaded.

Most of all, I feel the regret burning through it all.

Not from what we just did.

But because I should have lied and hidden how much I really was wanting a round two—not only from him, but also from myself.

“What are you doing?” I say aloud. There's no answer to that question.

I have no idea if I can trust Royal, but if he was telling the truth about me only having five minutes to get out of here, I need to move. Be back in the safety of my room, where I could attempt to give myself a talking to.

Not here.

Hoping that my legs will hold out, I stand, reaching for the wall to support me. As I do, I look up, across the church at the balcony across from me.

From the far corner, two dark eyes meet my stare.

Dr. Wright.

XXV

Tori

The journey to the prison is longer and more complicated from James Keyingham University than it was from home. Despite everything that happened in the church, I somehow managed to google the directions before I went to bed, making sure I set my alarm early enough that I could get to the prison before visiting time.

There are quite a few people in the waiting room with me, but no one really makes eye contact or talks to each other. One by one, they're all granted access until it's just me and a guy who turned up forty minutes after I did.

When the guard comes out and calls my name, I've prepared myself for him to tell me that Cole doesn't want to see me. Instead, he tells me I can see him and leads me to the room I'd met him in previously.

Cole sits in front of me, not long after I've taken my seat. As he picks up the phone, his eyes are already scanning my appearance. "Blue?"

"Not my first choice, but I'm making it work," I tell him. Like him, I'm taking in his appearance too. Their uniform here is pale green-gray, and it makes his already pale face look sicklier than before. His hair is longer, but his beard is trimmed. And his eyes still look dead inside.

"I was hoping you were here to tell me that you didn't go to James Keyingham after all, but you look like shit."

"Unless this is coming from the winner of Prison Pageant, you can fuck off," I tell him, but I'm not really mad. This was the kind of thing we'd say to each other all the time

before... before this. “But no, I’m at James Keyingham, like I said I would be.”

Lowering the phone, Cole looks away, his shoulders sagging. Then he raises the phone back to his ear. “Do they know who you are?”

I nod.

“Just leave, Vee.”

“Look me in the eye and tell me you did it.”

Without hesitation, Cole stares me dead in the eyes. “I did it.”

Contrary to the current situation, my brother’s not a bad person. He wanted to be the Attorney General. He was popular and well liked. But he was also a good liar. While I had to work hard on my poker face, he was able to hide the lies and the tells.

Honestly, if I didn’t know my brother and I was sitting across from him, questioning him, and he dropped that confession, I’d have accepted it too—without a single hesitation.

Yet there’s still this gut feeling, deep in my core, that this is one of the biggest lies he’s ever told.

“Then tell me how, and tell me why.”

“Just let it go, Vee.”

And that right there is why I have doubt.

“The only time Mom and Dad let me near that courtroom was the day you were sentenced. And now, whenever I try to find out the details as to what happened—even a location—I can’t find anything. It’s like someone managed to get on the internet and wipe away all traces of this.” Resting my elbow on the small ledge, I lean forward. “So, unless you can tell me what happened and why, I’m staying at James Keyingham University. I don’t care what they do to me—”

“Do to you?” Cole’s eyes go wide as he looks me up and down. “Have they hurt you?”

“JP’s brother has me labeled as public enemy number one, but it’s mainly petty shit.” I point at my hair.

Cole sucks in a breath like he’s been hurt, and for a moment, with the pained expression, it does look like something is wrong. “Leave, Vee. Please. Just drop out of that university, get far away, and stay away. I know you think you’re helping, but this is more dangerous than hair dye pranks and whatever other bullying shit they’re doing to you.”

When he was fourteen and I was eleven, while my mom was getting her hair done, she let Cole take me to the ice cream parlor a few shops down in the same shopping mall. On our way back, a dog jumped out of nowhere and went for me. Without a moment’s hesitation, Cole pushed me out of the way, and the dog bit him instead. He had to get fourteen stitches and plastic surgery on his arm to make the scars almost invisible.

To this day, the only time I’ve ever seen my brother look scared is around dogs.

Until now.

There’s fear in his eyes.

“Cole, did you admit to murder because you felt you had to?”

Instead of answering, Cole diverts his gaze behind me. Before I can turn to see what he’s looking at, his attention is back on me. “Vee, I need you to let this crazy idea go, and go home. Not back to James Keyingham, but home.”

“And I need you to give me one good reason why.”

Cole hesitates and then the uncertainty is gone from his eyes. He doesn’t move an inch, but he lowers his voice so it’s barely above a whisper. “I can give you thirty-seven.”

“Go on then,” I say in a taunting tone, like he’s got no balls to follow through.

In the past, he’d do exactly that just to prove a point.

This time, he gives me a sad smile. “I just did.” And then he hangs up the phone and stands up.

“Cole!” He’s already got his back to me, waiting for the prison guard to descend on me.

“Miss, I think it’s time to leave.” He’s not the only one with a guard at his side.

Accepting defeat, I stand and turn, following the guard out of the room. In doing so, I glance at the area behind me that Cole had been looking at. The only thing there is the camera in the corner of the room.



The whole journey back to campus, I replay the conversation in my mind, trying to figure out if the visit had been a success or not.

Thirty-seven reasons?

Was that how many clues or answers I needed to find?

People?

“What the hell happened, Cole?” I mutter to myself as I look down at my laptop screen. I’m back in the library working on an assignment. Next week, I’ve got four to hand in, their grades included in midterms. The week after, the exams start.

Although I’ve read what I can from the textbooks, these assignments require additional reading, and I simply don’t have the cashflow to buy all the books for that as every other student in the school does. But I can at least read them in the library. I’m fairly certain half of these books have never even been opened.

This assignment is for Communication Studies, and it’s the last one I’ve got to finish. *The Rise of Social Media During a Pandemic...* The years when I was predominantly off social media because of Cole.

And I'm not allowed to have all my sources be websites.

I turn my attention back to the pile of books beside me, hoping at least one of them has something I can use.

The afternoon passes before I stop, my stomach grumbling. Leaving campus early meant I'd missed breakfast, but I did have a bagel and a coffee at the station as I waited for my train. I stopped at the same place on the way back, grabbing a large sub before I returned to campus.

But now it's evening, and I'm starving.

Only after I've made sure all the useful references and quotes are in a Word document, and I've returned the books, do I pack up my things. The weather seems to have made the switch from summer to autumn while I've been in the library, because the evening has a chill to it that wasn't there last night.

With a lot of students leaving the campus for the weekend, the dining hall is quieter than usual. I can smell something spicy, and I try to remember what was on the kitchen's boards for the weekend meal options, but as I go to take a seat, one of the initiates seems to materialize in front of the table.

"That's not your seat," Harrison tells me.

Earlier in the week, I tried getting food at breakfast one day. An initiate appeared, took my food from me and refused to give me anything else until I moved to my special table in front of Syn. In the evening, when we had table service, none of the staff had come to me. People who I'd been working with for the past few weeks were ignoring me outside of the kitchen.

Staying and eating was quickly becoming less appealing, but I was still hungry.

Without making any effort to hide my irritation, I follow Harrison to my table and sit down. The table in front of me is empty. Not that I'm complaining. It's hard enough to find my food appealing when Syn isn't sitting in front of me.

Harrison keeps me waiting for twenty minutes before he gives me a plate of lukewarm rice. By this time, I'm shoveling it into my mouth, barely noticing that it needs a little seasoning.

The rice fills a hole, but it's not enough to leave me satisfied. I'll be hungry later. But I refuse to show anyone.

There was a time when, after Mom and I moved to Newark, that I had to learn how to cook and shop for groceries. All of that used to be done by a housekeeper, and even if my mom did know what to do, she barely left her room for the first six months. After that, her grains were liquid and distilled.

I've been spoiled here, because I'm no stranger to very basic, burnt meals. And that was assuming I'd managed to get enough money for groceries that week. I've gone to bed hungry before.

If Syn wants to break me, he needs to try harder than that.

The little food I have doesn't take long to eat, and once I've finished, I head back to the library.

I'm not in here long before I have company.

The library only had two floors, but it's one of the bigger buildings on campus, sprawling out to the right of the Ardwick Building. While the majority of books are on the first floor, the second floor uses the floor-to-ceiling wooden bookcases to split the area into smaller workspaces.

Although rarely used, almost all of these workspaces have a few computers. The area I'm in is smaller with only a handful of power outlets on the wall. There's only one large, wooden table that can seat eight people, but it's also one of the very few areas which has an exit on three sides—or at least an escape route into the next work area.

After last time, I make a point of sitting at a table facing the main entrance to the room. I'm not going to believe Syn's not going to turn up again, but if he does, I want to

know where he is before he can wrap his hand around my throat again.

This time, I see Syn before he even steps into the workspace.

He's not alone. Both Royal and Gemini are with him.

The three of them are wearing suits and look like they're going to a boardroom, or even a wedding—certainly not a library. Their suits are very similar, but like the university uniforms, they seem to have a personalized twist to them.

Gemini has a corset waistcoat poking out from behind the jacket. I barely see him anymore, and when I do, he's wearing ripped jeans and a hoodie. Now, his chin-length hair is scraped back into a stubby ponytail, and he's also wearing a hint of eyeliner, which combined with the suit, makes him devastatingly handsome.

At the back, leaning against a bookshelf with his top few buttons undone, is Royal. When my gaze meets his, he raises two fingers to his mouth—the same two fingers that were inside me less than twenty-four hours ago—and makes a show of sucking on them.

My body betrays me, heat flooding between my legs, but I fight not to give that away. I'm not having him know how turned on he gets me, and I'm not going to let anything like that happen again.

Besides, if he thinks for one moment that I'm going to get embarrassed or something like that, he can think again.

As Syn starts walking towards me, I put my attention on him. He might have these two with him, but the only thing about him I trust is how much he hates me.

The guy looks good.

Great, even.

But there's also a whole list of serial killers whose good looks helped lure women to their death...

Most of the time, Syn wears his uniform, and even on the weekends, his 'casual' is more smart-casual. If he wants to go into politics, he's taking his image part seriously.

Tonight, he looks more impressive than usual, and I can't work out what it is that he's done differently to pull it off. Then again, I also don't care.

Last night, there was blood on his face, but aside from a small cut by his eyebrow, there's no sign that he'd even been in a fight. I'd seen more of the other guy, and he had several blows to the face.

Was Syn that good at fighting?

Syn stops in front of my table and looks down at me. "Check your emails."

... That wasn't what I was expecting.

However, it doesn't stop the dread curl through my stomach as I open up my university email to see what could be in store.

There are three new emails since I checked earlier this afternoon. All three sent almost simultaneously from the three guys in front of me. Each titled *Important*.

Although they've come from their own university email accounts, I hesitate to open any of them. At this point, those emails could contain anything, and the guy in front of me isn't on the small list of people I trust.

"Your computer looks new," Syn says when I don't do anything. "If you want to keep me from throwing it against the wall, I suggest you hurry up and read your emails."

My old computer doesn't turn on at all anymore. This MacBook came at the right time, and I desperately need it to get all my assignments done. The university won't get me a second one.

Silently praying this isn't a trap, I click on the email from Synclair Keyingham, and open it up.

Midterm assignment: Discuss the use of foreshadowing in Crime and Punishment by Fyodor

Dostoevsky.

Length: 1500-2000 words

Confused, I look up at Syn. “You want me to tutor you?”

XXVI

Syn

“Do you really think a senior would ask a freshman to tutor them?” The suggestion has me sneering in disgust. “If I were to do that, I’d start by finding someone with some level of intelligence.”

No, I don’t want her to tutor me. I couldn’t think of many things I want less than to be stuck in the same room as her for a significant period of time, where I have to listen to what she’s saying.

“The assignment is due on Monday. If I receive anything lower than an A, you will be punished.”

“You think I’m going to do your assignment for you?” she asks, incredulous. “You don’t think I’m capable of tutoring you, and yet you think I can write an essay on a book I’ve never read, and get you an A?”

Do I fuck?

Honestly, I’ll be surprised if she manages to pull off a C. I’ve already had an initiate submit assignments for us last week. But Gemini has devised some ingenious site where, when she uploads a document, he gets access to her computer. And while that would only take one assignment, I have another way to fuck with her.

“Assignments for me, Royal, *and* Gemini. There were three emails.” I stand there, waiting for her reaction, trying not to look at her hair. One of the initiates had come up with that idea and knowing how important appearance is to girls, I approved. The fact she then dyed all of her hair still irks me, not at all because it looks good on her.

The words practically explode out of her mouth in a burst of laughter. “You expect me to read a book and write three assignments in less than two days? How hard were you hit in the head?”

My mind flashes back to last night. I’d paid a small amount—although lifechanging to the homeless guy I fought last night. When he got the first hit, I was sure they’d finally found me a worthy opponent, but the guy hadn’t lasted long. At least I managed to vent some of my anger.

There’s no way she knows what I did, of course. But her laugh has that anger flaring back up. It takes two strides to close the distance to the table, where I slam the lid down on her laptop, trapping her hand. She lets out a cry of pain, which is at least somewhat satisfying, but I ignore it. She gets her hand free, but I don’t let go of the laptop. “What did you say?”

She’s nursing her hand under the table, but it doesn’t stop the defiance in her eyes. “If you’re so eager to get an A, maybe you should look online. There are people who will happily take money from you and give you an assignment you need. For that matter, I’m sure you could probably even pay off the professor.”

“We’re not paying you,” Gemini pipes up from behind me. “And it’s three different books.”

Her eyes widen a fraction, but she doesn’t take them off me.

Maybe there is some intelligence in there...

“Even if I didn’t have my own assignment to do, I do not have time to do these, and I’m a freshman who isn’t in some senior level course.”

Obviously.

I’m supposed to be at the church for one of the initiate’s... events... But this was something I wanted to do first.

Only, her insolence is walking a fine line between irritating and impressive, so before I get swayed in the wrong direction, I need to remind her who’s in charge.

I trace a finger over the glowing apple on the back of her laptop. The laptop I made the university send her. “Let’s be clear, worm, I do not justify myself to anyone. When I tell them to do something, they fucking do it. Apparently, you need to learn this.” I look up at her without raising my head and the effect makes her shiver visibly. “You think being here is difficult now? Because I promise you, I can make it much worse.”

Despite her reaction, she continues to glare back at me. “You underestimate me.”

A smile I have no control over creeps over my face. The only one who has been underestimated here, is me. “No, I know all I need to about you. And you might last a couple of weeks before you’re on your knees in front of me, but Penny? How long do you think she’d last?”

People like her think that they’ve got nothing left. That they have nothing left to lose.

But people like her always have someone they want to protect.

She swallows a couple of times, and when she finally does speak, her voice is quiet. “You promised that you’d leave her alone.”

“Were there witnesses?” Royal asks. “Did you get anything in writing?”

I see the moment her resolve breaks, and it makes me wish I’d taken my phone out to record it. “The deadline is 9 a.m., Monday. Submission details are in the email. And if you try to hand in something in an effort to fail any of us, you won’t be the only one with their personal *reserved* table.”

My phone starts vibrating. Without pulling it out, I know it’s going to be from another Elite senior, finding out where I am. As she doesn’t seem to have anything else to say, I turn and nod at Royal and Gemini. In silence, they follow me out of the library to the golf cart Royal parked out front when we arrived.

“You think she’ll do it?” Gemini asks.

I get in the front of the cart beside Royal. “She will. The only thing I can’t decide is who she’s going to hate more—me, or herself for doing it.”

Now, I’m ready to enjoy the evening.

Last night we opened the Crypt up to allow all members of the Elite to party. As expected, the room was trashed. Today, all the initiates were required to make the Crypt, as well as the church, spotless. The three of us checked in around lunch to make sure everything above ground, where the faculty was attending, was being properly cleaned, but overall, the responsibility fell to the seniors.

Initiations are a sacred part of joining the Elite. Most fraternities and sororities rush for a couple of weeks, some, maybe a month. Only, we’re not part of the Greek system, and none of the rules apply here.

Royal drives us up to the church, and aside from the lights inside, there’s no one around. Until we walk into the church, and I see the figure standing in front of the altar, looking up at the pipes of the organ, which hasn’t been played in decades.

Preston du Pont turns around, and he’s not smiling. “Why didn’t you answer your phone?”

The call in the library. I assumed it was a member but had never bothered to check. Then again, had I seen Preston’s name, I wouldn’t have returned the call tonight anyway. “Why are you here? The closing ritual isn’t until November.”

“A member of the Elite is always a member of the Elite, and this is an Elite event.” Preston looks between the three of us. “Why are you late? The leaders are supposed to lead by example.”

A member of the Elite might always be a member of the Elite, but etiquette dictates they do not attend campus events unless invited. As a former president, he’s allowed to disregard this, but he’s probably the only former president who has. Clearly, his position in his father’s company isn’t giving him the power rush he needs.

“Late?” Gemini asks. As I glance at him, a grin appears on his face. “But we’re the reigning executive committee. The party don’t start ‘til we walk in.”

Had he said that to anyone else, I would have chastised him—even if it would fall on deaf ears. But he’s talking to Preston, so he can be as inappropriate as he likes.

“No wonder the associates are starting to complain.” Preston steps off the small stage and walks down the aisle towards us. “You are not only members of the Elite, but you are also the president and vice presidents. That alone should be enough for the three of you to be responsible of your position.” He looks us each in the eye, one by one, stopping at Gemini. “Do I have to remind you who I am?”

Two weeks after we buried my brother, I found out what it meant to be a Keyingham. My father took me to Washington, D.C. As we stood in front of the Capitol, he told me that I would be in charge one day. At first, I’d assumed he meant that after JP’s death, I would need to take up his destiny of becoming President of the United States of America, and I would be here as part of that journey when I became senator.

I was partly right.

Then my father informed me that he—and by default, me—were members of a very special, very secret group. A group that was also all Elite alumni, but whose existence was completely secretive to anyone outside of it.

A group with enough power, money, and influence to pick the next president and push forward bills and laws of their choosing. A group that could decide which wars were fought and won. A group that could dictate how everyone in the country would live.

I didn’t believe him at first. And then he gave me a time and a date, and coordinates. Three days later, at the time and location he’d given me, a commercial plane crashed. No one survived. Including the wife of the man who was standing in the way of a private arms contract.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I see both Royal and Gemini shifting their weight. Although I remain still, I bite back my remark. It might be me who will be POTUS one day, but right now, it's Preston's father who outranks mine.

"Why are you late?" he asks, bringing his attention back to me.

"Just ruining someone's weekend."

Preston cocks his head. "This is the random girl you've got the members messing with? I've been meaning to talk to you about this, Synclair. This is not an effective use of time for members when they should be focusing their energy on the initiatives."

"She's not a random girl," I tell him, curling my hands into fists beside me. "She's Victoria Reynolds." It's the first time I've said her name aloud for some time, and it still tastes as bitter on my tongue. "Cole Reynolds' sister."

It takes exactly one second for Preston to recognize that name. "She's here?"

Although I'm surprised that he wasn't already aware of this, I nod.

Preston stares at me, motionless, like he's just shut down until he frowns. "She's *here*? Why?"

"Some delusional belief that her brother is innocent, and this place holds the answers to a cover up." I shrug. "I don't care why, but she's here, so I intend on making her life miserable, don't you worry."

Annoying asshole that he is, he was still JP's friend.

"Standing up here is just making us even more late," Royal says, stepping forward as he breaks the silence. "We've got the initiates in the stocks, and you, Mr. President..." he clamps his hand on Preston's shoulder. "You get first dibs on whose mouth you put your cock in."

At that, Preston peels his gaze off me and looks at Royal, arching an eyebrow. "Stocks?" he repeats as he grins. "Maybe I have underestimated you."

The three of us have spent years coming up with ways to take our reign to the next level, but right now, the only person I want in them is Victoria Reynolds.

I'd have tears streaming down her face, choking on my cock as I fucked her mouth.

The things I would do to her if she were an initiate, and with that NDA, I wouldn't need to hold back...

XXVII

Tori

They say university life is supposed to have a few all-nighters. Party all night, then head to class, or stay up all night studying.

If it were my own assignment, I wouldn't mind.

Instead, it's Monday morning, and I'm washing dishes, dead on my feet.

When Syn left, I continued working on my own assignment. I'd been adamant that Synclair Keyingham could go fuck himself and write his own assignment. Royal and Gemini too.

And then, as the hours started to creep into the early evening, I pushed my assignment aside and looked at theirs.

Penny was a good person and didn't deserve to be pulled into this anymore.

Did I think this would end it all?

Of course not.

Syn would use Penny for as long as he wanted to, and I'd probably end up doing exactly what he wanted every time too.

And honestly, I'm too tired to figure out if that makes me brave and noble, or utterly pathetic.

I'd only gotten about four hours of sleep between the two nights. I stayed in the library, alternating between sitting and standing while I typed, finding the coldest part of the library, and had music blasting in my ears so that now my earlobes ached from the earbuds.

In the end, I resorted to the internet to get summaries of all three books, rather than read them all. Other sites and an AI generator helped me answer the questions. I'd even gone to the trouble to reword it all so that none of them got pulled up on plagiarism or AI content, and somehow, I not only managed to get their assignments handed in, but mine too.

Putting the last stack of plates away, I head to the locker room and check my appearance before I go to get something to eat. My skin is pale, and there's a whole set of luggage under my eyes. Carefully, so I don't poke myself in the eye with the mascara wand, I apply some makeup.

Yes, I want to make an effort for Syn, but only in the sense that I refuse to let him see how tired I am because of him.

Makeup makes me look a little more alive, even if I'm still dead inside. When I leave the back, I find an Elite initiate waiting for me, and she looks worse than I do. The way she keeps swallowing, and wincing, she's probably got a hangover mixed in with lack of sleep.

As I follow her to my table, I realize she's also working with a slight limp. "Ilana, are you okay?" I ask before I can stop myself.

Without turning around, her response is to raise her hand and flip me off.

"Whatever," I mutter. I sit down at my table, hiding my discomfort at the cramped space.

Syn is here, sipping a cup of tea or coffee, reading today's copy of the Wall Street Journal. I'm not sure if that's supposed to be some weird flex, because I'd expect him to be reading it on a tablet, like most normal people do these days.

Gemini is nowhere in sight, as usual, but Royal is still eating his breakfast. There's a pile of bacon on the plate in front of him, which he's eating with his fingers, staring at me as he does so.

Although I can't keep the irritated sigh from escaping, I stare back, arching an eyebrow. God, what I would give to

finish those off. Instead, I've got rice.

On cue, Ilana puts the tray in front of me with a clatter, the plastic rattling noisily against the cutlery. Her wince is somewhat satisfying.

The noise finally attracts Syn's attention as he lowers the paper and glowers at me. "If you can't eat that quietly, you won't eat it at all."

Asshole.

I flash him a bright smile and pick up my spoon so I can eat a large mouthful of bland, overcooked but lukewarm rice. Needless to say, it doesn't take me long to wolf down my meal.

Syn walks over to me. "I assume the assignments were submitted on time."

"You assume wrong." I look up at him and set my spoon down. "They were submitted early."

As I stand, Syn looks me up and down. "You look like shit. I hope you didn't stay up all night working on them. You clearly need all the beauty sleep you can get."

I'm too tired to think of anything resembling a witty comeback. Instead, I just walk away. There's just enough time to have a quick shower before class. Aside from the smell of kitchen that's seeped into my hair and clothes, I've not showered since before I visited Cole in prison.

Although breakfast sucked, the little bit of food has perked me up, so I feel a little more human and a little less zombie. And seeing Syn read the newspaper reminds me that I've arranged to have access to the archives of the Keyingham Ledger this evening.

Even if I am tired, I'm not missing that opportunity.

I strip off my clothes and dump them in a pile in the corner of the room. At some point soon, I'm also going to have to tackle some laundry as my clean clothes are running low again.

In the bathroom, I reach into the shower and turn on the water. I've learned my lesson. When it's obvious the water hasn't changed color, I step into the stream of water.

Almost instantly, I let out a squeal and jump out of the jet of water, barely managing not to slip and fall.

The water is ice cold.

"Fuck's sake." I curse, loudly.

Since I've gotten here, the water has always been gloriously warm. I can only blame my sleep-deprivation on not noticing the lack of steam. Making sure I'm clear of the jet stream, I reach back and turn the control hotter. Then I stick my hand back under the water and wait.

Hot water never comes.

Frowning, I turn the shower off and then turn on the faucet on the sink. Just like the shower, the water is icy.

"Of course."

Even if I report this to facilities now, I'll not have hot water before class. Thankfully, over the last couple of years, I've gotten used to periods where my mom forgot to pay the electric bill or the water bill. The shower we had was barely functional half of the time, either. Cold showers, while completely hellish, are not completely alien to me.

Sucking in a deep breath, I turn the shower back on and inch under the water. *This* is when having great water pressure sucks. So much cold water being shot at my body is awful, and I make the quick decision that today, my hair is going up in a ponytail, and I'm not washing it. In record time, I have my shower, desperate to get out into the warmth.

At least this woke me up.

With my towel still around me, I pull my laptop from the bag I abandoned on my bed before I hurried out to work this morning and open up the university portal to log the issue. Then I quickly get dressed, refix my hair and makeup, throw the laptop back in my bag, and hurry to class.

It's Communications Studies with Dr. Wright. Just like nothing has changed, Penny is still sitting in the seat next to me. She's stubborn and won't move, whereas I tried to move and was yelled at by the professor.

I sink into my seat and keep my attention focused on myself, getting my laptop out of my bag, or the remnants of the graffiti on my desk. Actually, I prepared myself to clear the desk of trash, but there's nothing there. Perhaps everyone has gotten bored...

"How was your weekend?" Penny asks me. "I went back to Connecticut to see Bubbe."

While there's nothing I'd like more than to ask her how it went with her grandmother, I keep my lips clamped shut and stare at the blank document I have open, ready to take notes. I don't doubt that there's at least a dozen people in this room watching us right now, ready to report back to Syn, and I'm not going to give him *anything*.

"I have a good idea of what you're doing, and you suck," Penny says in a low voice. "It's fine. My social media went crazy for a few hours, but everything has stopped now. There was nothing over the weekend, and I told Bubbe that she had no say over my friends."

My poker face is being put to the test. Everything stopped because of the agreement I made with Syn, but it's harder not to react to what she says about her grandmother. She was summoned home because of me?

So not only will being friends with me make college awful for her, but going home will suck more than usual too.

I can't even risk telling her to leave me alone.

Thankfully, the chorus of sighs around us alert me to the fact that Dr. Wright has walked in. Today he looks a little more informal than usual, with the first couple of buttons of his shirt undone beneath his jacket.

He stops in the center of the room, and his gaze goes straight to me.

With everything that's happened since Friday night, I'm completely unprepared. Seeing him in the church was a forgotten memory that comes rushing back as I sit here. I can feel my face and neck burning as I drop my gaze.

How much *had* he seen? And what was he even doing there?

"What did you do?" Penny mutters under her breath before I can convince myself it was some weird hallucination on my part.

When I look back up, Dr. Wright seems to be taking his time looking at the face of every person in the room. Considering his job is to teach college students, he seems to be looking at everyone with suspicion and contempt.

Maybe we've all disappointed him.

"And the start of this class marks the deadline of your assignments. Anyone who failed to submit their work on time will automatically lose fifty percent of your points in this assignment. Which means, unless you can hand in a perfect assignment, the best you're receiving for this assignment is a D," he announces, like it's a new development.

It's not. This was written very clearly, in bold, red font at the top *and* bottom of the assignment page.

Dr. Wright moves over to his desk and pulls his tablet out from the bag he'd placed on top. He turns back to face us, tilting his head. "Shall we see who's going to need some luck or holy intervention in their midterms next week?"

There are some sniggers, but there's something that makes me feel like he's not trying to be funny.

After tapping the screen of his tablet, Dr. Wright lowers his arm. "It seems that the only person who was disrespectful to me and this university is Ms. Anderson."

XXVIII

Tori

“Me? That’s not possible.”

The professor holds up the tablet, screen facing the class. Like I can read that from this distance. “And yet, the system tells me otherwise.”

“No.” I shake my head. “No, that’s not right. I submitted it yesterday morning.” I’d just had a nap, and my highly filling breakfast, and gone straight to the library. After a final proofread of my assignment, I made sure to submit it before I carried on with working on Royal’s assignment, so I didn’t forget.

“Ms. Anderson, I will not be arguing with you on this matter. The submission system has the assignments of every student in this class barring yours. You can stay behind at the end of class if you wish to waste your time with excuses, but right now, I’m starting our lesson instead of wasting the time of your classmates.” Dr. Wright sets the tablet down on his desk then walks over to the Smartboard. He glances over his shoulder at me. “Considering we will be going over the midterm assessment today, I suggest you pay attention. You’re going to need all the extra points you can get.”

The lesson is the last thing I’m paying attention to.

Instead, my mind is racing as much as my heart. In the end, the assignment I submitted hadn’t been written to the best of my ability anyway. I left it to the last minute and I spent more time on the assignments for Syn, Royal and Gemini. But my goal was to be at this university long enough to find the truth, not graduate valedictorian, or even summa cum laude.

Which means something had to be submitted.

And I'd done that...

Instead of paying any attention to what was going on the Smartboard or what was coming out of Dr. Wright's mouth, I'm opening my email. At the top of my inbox are the three confirmation emails from the submission system for Syn, Royal, and Gemini.

There isn't one for mine.

Which makes no sense, because I submitted mine, then went to my inbox to confirm it had gone through before going back to work on Royal's stupid question. It was there when I saw each of their confirmations come through...

I check the other folders in my email, and then I run a search.

Nothing.

"Fuck my life," I mutter under my breath as I bring my elbows to the desk so I can sink my forehead into my hands.

I've done exactly what I *thought* I tried to not do. Did the work for other people and forgot to submit my own. Clearly, the lack of sleep has made me misremember, and I thought one of their submissions was my own.

"You okay?" Penny whispers.

"I could have sworn I submitted it," I respond before I remember I'm not supposed to be talking to her.

"It's only a third of your midterm grade. Even if you get a D, you still have a presentation and the exam next week. You can still pass the class."

This time, I stay silent. Instead, I sit back in my chair and try to catch up on what Dr. Wright has been saying. It's not the grade—I'm just really pissed at myself for getting so distracted by Syn's demands that I fucked this up. Which is probably *exactly* what he set out to do.

There were plenty of people laughing at my misfortune, so I'm under no illusion that he isn't going to hear about this.

At the end of class, I go wait by Dr. Wright's desk as he packs up, trying not to look embarrassed as most students choose now to remember I exist and stare at me.

The professor finally picks up his bag and looks at me, arching an eyebrow. "I was being rhetorical, but if you feel you need to give me some half-baked excuse, feel free."

Instead of waiting, he joins the thinning crowd of students leaving the room.

"Asshole."

Honestly, I didn't think I said it that loud, but Dr. Wright stops and turns to look at me. "My office. Now."

To the chorus of a few jeers, I wince.

Where's your poker face, Tori?

Wondering what else can go wrong today, but also knowing *that* was on me, I follow the professor out of class. From the way everyone seems to stop and watch me as I walk through the corridor, it feels like news has spread quickly.

I've never been to Dr. Wright's office before, so I'm surprised when he leads me out of the building and to the Sterling Building across the quad. The room is exactly what I expect of a college professor at the most exclusive university in the country. Dark wood—and lots of it. Floor to ceiling shelves, a desk that looks like it was crafted before the civil war, and a separate round table with four chairs around it.

However, there's little in the room offering a glimmer of Dr. Wright's personality. Or maybe the lack of everything is telling enough. The bookshelves have very few books, and while some have a few ornaments or photographs on them, most are empty.

On his desk is a Mac, a docking station for his iPad and phone, a leatherbound notebook, and a very ornate name plate with Dr. Payne Wright PhD. inscribed on it.

Dr. Wright walks up to his desk, sets his bag down beside it, and then turns. Leaning against it, he folds his arms

and tilts his head. “Let’s hear it then.” He sounds bored, but his eyes are cold. They’re always cold.

“I didn’t come to give you excuses,” I tell him. “I actually came to apologize. I thought I had submitted it, but I checked my emails and there was no confirmation.”

There’s a glimmer of surprise as his eyes widen slightly, and then almost instantly, they narrow. “An apology isn’t going to change the fact that fifty percent of your points have already been deducted.”

“I know.” I pull my laptop out of my bag and carefully set it on the table.

“What are you doing?”

“Submitting it now.” I navigate to the submission page and select my assignment.

Or I try.

Frowning, I open up the file browser and navigate to the folder my assignments are saved in. The one for this class is empty.

“Okay.” I breathe, trying not to panic yet. If my dumb ass has managed to delete it, then it will be in the trash.

Although there are files in there, none are my assignment.

“Do you need to enroll in an IT class?” Dr. Wright asks, dryly. “I hear the Keyingham Retirement Village holds one every other weekend.”

I’m barely listening as I switch to the Cloud, hoping somehow, it’s just a syncing issue. But no matter where I look, the assignment is completely gone.

Submitting the assignment now is no different than submitting it later. As long as it’s submitted before 9 a.m. tomorrow, it’s still only fifty percent of the points I’ve lost. I would need to go back and find the references again, but I’ll be able to recreate something tonight, and something is better than nothing.

I need the grades because the scholarship requires my GPA to be 3.9 or higher. If there are going to be issues, it will be the end of the semester, and I've still got the other part of the midterm for this class, as well as finals.

Otherwise, I've got a semester to find my answers.

Shutting the lid of my laptop, I straighten and then turn to Dr. Wright. "I'm sorry. I will submit the assignment later. It still needs some work."

"While I appreciate that for some, Greek life—or whatever they've called it here—is the be-all and end-all for some students, the other pledges still managed to hand their assignments in on time." The look he gives me isn't of disappointment. It's more like this is exactly what he expected of me. "Perhaps you should reconsider your..." he runs his tongue over his teeth, like he's tasting the word. "Extra-curricular activities."

My cheeks heat up, but it's not from embarrassment, because if anything, he should be embarrassed.

"Respectfully, *sir*, I've submitted *every* other assignment in all my classes on time, so far. This was the only one I've missed, and I intend on making it the last. As for whatever extra-curricular activities I choose to do on a Friday night—or any other night—as long as they're not in your class, they are my business. And while I appreciate the concern, I don't think you need to be watching me that closely."

Considering all the shit I've been dealing with lately, I can't believe the one time I decide to put my foot down, it's with a professor. Dr. Wright, of all people. But as much as I regret saying some of that, I suck in a breath and keep my back straight.

Dr. Wright purses his lips and tilts his head, staring at me in silence for a length of time that's long enough to make me feel uncomfortable.

"Why are you here?" he asks me, eventually.

"You told me to come to your office."

“I mean, here.” He raises his arm and lets it drift towards the window. “James Keyingham University. If you got accepted here, you’d be able to get into almost any other college in the country, and yet you came to the one where your brother murdered people.”

“One. Singular,” I say through gritted teeth. “There weren’t multiple victims.”

Dr. Wright pushes himself off the table and walks over to me, stopping a few paces from me. Although I’m tall myself, right now, he feels monstrous.

“Just who are you?” he asks me. His eyes are narrowed, and there’s a cold hatred in them as he looks at me.

“Excuse me?” It’s no longer a secret that I’m Cole Reynolds’ sister, and he knows this.

“The problem with the students here is the sheer entitlement and arrogance you all have. Who are you to decide that one person’s life has more value than another’s?”

Entitlement? Me? “*Excuse me?*”

“You have come to this campus, knowing exactly what happened here, and you flaunt around like you do not care how the friends and family of the victims your brother killed might feel.”

“Victim.” I snap. “It’s just one person—”

“Your brother killed two people!” Dr. Wright yells, making me flinch. “Just because he was convicted of one murder does not mean that’s the only person he killed. And the way you and your family continue to deny this, never mind cover it up is despicable.”

XXIX

Tori

My whole body is trembling, but I can't move. It's like all my brain power is going into trying to decipher what Dr. Wright said but is failing miserably. Because that doesn't make sense. It's not even possible.

Cole didn't kill JP.

And he didn't kill...

"Who?" The word is barely audible, so I clear my throat and try again. "Who else did he kill?"

"Lucy Barnes."

Like my brain is the MacBook and I'm desperately searching for the assignment, my mind is racing, trying to recall anything about the name. There's so little information available about the case that I've probably memorized most of the sites I've visited.

I don't recall a single one mentioning that name, much less him being accused of her murder. And after he said Cole killed someone else last time, I went and searched the internet, but didn't find anything.

Dr. Wright's eyes haven't left mine as I stare helplessly at him. Slowly, they start to narrow, but the anger is replaced with confusion. "Even now, you're going to stand there and continue to cover it up with your lies?"

"I don't... I don't even know who she is."

Like I've flipped a switch, the anger is back. "Get out."

I grab my laptop, not bothering to stick it in my bag as I run out of the room. I don't stop running until I get to my

room, locking the door behind me.

Breathing heavily, I walk over to my bed and drop my bag and laptop on it before I sit down. My hands are still shaking, but I feel numb.

Time passes, though I'm not sure how long, before I manage to pull myself out of the strange mental shutdown I'm in.

"It makes no sense, because it's nonsense," I say as though there's another person in the room with me.

I don't know why Dr. Wright made this up, or why he's out to get me, but the reason I can't remember anything about this at all is because it never happened to begin with.

Sucking in a deep breath, I get up and walk into the bathroom to wash my face with cold water. With the water still dripping from my chin, I stare at my reflection and take a few more deep breaths.

"Pull yourself together, Tori," I sternly tell myself.

After drying my face, I return to my bedroom, grab the laptop and sit down at my desk. There's a really easy way to settle this. I go to Google and type Lucy Barnes, Murder.

The only results lead me to a seventy-year-old woman who was murdered a few years ago, and even then, her name isn't an exact match.

I add James Keyingham University, and there's still no matches.

Relief rushes through me, and I relax back into my seat.

I *knew* it wasn't possible.

But why on earth would Dr. Wright—a *professor*—make up something like this?

We didn't exactly get off on the right foot, but the animosity has spiked straight into malice for no reason.

Did he know JP?

Did he teach him?

Or is it more than that? Is he friends with Syn? Is that why he was at the church on Friday night?

My mind is racing again, so I force myself to focus on one thing at a time. I load up the James Keyingham University homepage and search for his biography. Every professor here is listed so that the college can brag about their faculty members' expertise and accomplishments.

Dr. Payne Wright, Ph.D.

There's a full-length picture of him taken in his office. He's leaning against his desk, just like he was with me earlier. Although his sleeves are rolled up, showing off the muscles and veins of his arms, and the top couple of buttons of his shirt are undone, he doesn't look relaxed. He doesn't even look happy.

The all-too-familiar cold glare has been captured with perfect lighting. Most annoying is that he still looks like a model despite this.

Dr. Payne Wright, Ph.D., joined the faculty at James Keyingham University as a Professor of Communication Studies. Dr. Wright graduated from the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania...

He's younger than I thought, either thirty or about to turn thirty, judging from when he received his Ph.D. He was also working in Silicon Valley—literally on the other side of the country—until he started teaching here last semester.

When JP was killed, he was in California. Which means, unless they somehow managed to cross paths, it's unlikely that he even knew JP. Unless he befriended Syn this year, he probably doesn't know him either.

Sitting back in my chair, I rub at the back of my neck. This is making less and less sense.

Until this year, I've never met Dr. Wright before. Admittedly, I did spill my coffee on him, but aside from that, I can't think of a single instance where our paths could have

crossed before. So, if he's trying to fuck with me, I can't think of a reason behind it.

Even though I'm exhausted, I get up and start pacing the room. I know I would be able to think more clearly if I got some sleep, but right now, my mind is in overdrive, so a nap isn't going to happen.

After a while, I sit back down at the laptop to try again.

Lucy Barnes, Keyingham.

And just like that, I get hits.

Eyes wide, I lean forward and click on the first result.

Lucy Barnes was a girl who had just graduated the small high school in Keyingham. She'd been working at a bar in town—one that is now closed down. She'd gone missing a few years ago... the same time Cole was at James Keyingham University.

There is nothing about a murder, though. In fact, the only suggestion as to what happened to her was one article which suggested she'd run away to avoid a debt of some description.

Her picture is on one site. She was really pretty. Light brown skin, big brown eyes, and, in this picture at least, she has shoulder-length white hair, which I'm almost certain is a wig.

The longer I stare at her picture, the more familiar she feels. Which is ridiculous since I'd never met her before.

I sit back in my chair, frowning. Even though I know who she is, this still doesn't make sense. How does Dr. Wright know her? How does he know she's dead? Why does he think Cole did it?

Cole could have met her if he went into town, but there wasn't a single article linking her to James Keyingham University. And none of the articles mentioned my brother either.

Whatever *this* is, I don't have time to waste on it now. Dr. Wright can accuse Cole of killing this girl all he wants, but

until the police are involved, it's not something I'm going to focus on.

Today, I need to re-write the stupid assignment for the stupid professor, make it to my afternoon classes, and then I have an appointment in the library to go through the Keyingham Ledger and try to figure out what happened with the murder my brother is accused of.

But first, I really do need a nap. After closing the internet browser, I move over to my bed and flop on top of the covers, still fully clothed. At the last minute, I remember to pull my phone out of my pocket, set an alarm and put it on charge. Then I close my eyes and let the sleep win.



Today's dinner of barely-warm rice is as filling and nutritious as ever. I decided earlier to write off what was left of my morning, skip lunch, and then head to my afternoon classes. We were mostly reviewing the topics likely to be on our midterms next week, so I spent most of the afternoon recreating my assignment. I rushed to the library after the last class to add the references that I needed, and then submitted the assignment.

And then I was starving.

The dining hall menu—for everyone else—is either lasagna, coq au vin, or a vegan risotto. All around me, students are digging into their restaurant-quality meals, and the smell is making my stomach grumble.

In front of me, Syn is eating the coq au vin, and never have I longed for chicken more. I glance down at the rice in front of me and sigh. I'm trying to eat as slowly as I can, hoping that if I can draw it out, I might end up feeling full.

“Where have you been?” Syn asks.

Royal takes the seat next to him. “Gym.”

Royal's hair is damp, but since there's no sweat on his body or the T-shirt he's wearing, it's probably because he's just showered. Determined not to stare at the bare arms with his veins showing, I drop my gaze back to the unappetizing meal in front of me.

"Gemini?"

"Gaming," Royal responds.

It's been a while since I've seen Gemini in the dining hall. Then again, I discovered that he, Syn, and Royal have a butler who probably cooks their meals for them.

The bigger mystery should be why Syn and Royal eat here, but it's probably because Syn gets his kicks out of watching me eat. With that thought, I sit up a little more and try to act like the meal in front of me is the last of a huge bowl of the most delicious bibimbap I've ever had.

I glance up and find Syn watching me. Flashing him a smile, I reach for my glass and lift it before taking a sip.

He rolls his eyes, but in doing so, freezes. Slowly his eyes narrow. "What the hell is he doing back?" he asks Royal.

Both Royal and I look in the direction of the door. Walking towards their table, carrying a plate of lasagna, is Declan Salaway. He's in the weird waiter uniform all the Elite initiates wear. As far as I can remember, it is his day to serve the president. If anything, as Syn has almost finished eating, he's late.

Despite their confusion, neither Syn nor Royal say anything as Declan sets the lasagna down in front of Royal and then steps back to the usual spot at the back of the room beside the other initiate, Cassie.

I don't think I've seen Declan smile once since I've known him. He seems to have a permanent scowl on his face, like Syn. Only, annoyingly, Syn looks like that moody bad boy whereas Declan looks like he'd be the one reporting the underage drinking at a party.

Today, he looks different. Tired, like he's not getting sleep like me. And paler than usual. But at his sides, he's

clenching and unclenching his fists, more nervous than angry.

Given Syn's comment, it's probably related to his initiation, but I find it hard to be sympathetic.

I also don't have the time. I've got to be at the library in half an hour so I can look through the past Ledger articles. With Syn distracted by Declan, I finish the last half-spoonful of rice, swallow down the water, and then leave.

The library is busier than it's ever been. Midterms must be scaring people into studying. I have to wait at the desk first for Ethel to finish helping other students, and then while we wait for the other librarian to cover the desk.

Finally, I'm led into the basement of the library. Unlike beneath the church, it somehow feels creepier down here. The lights come on as we walk down the corridor, over tiles which look like they were laid in the seventies. We walk past door after door, below ceiling tiles which look more suited to a public school, not this place.

Wherever else the money gets spent on this campus, the basement of the library doesn't seem to be on the budget list.

Eventually, Ethel stops in front of a door and unlocks it. The room inside is as big as a classroom. Just like upstairs, there are rows and rows of shelves, only these are metal. Each one is full of cardboard boxes.

"How far back do these go?" I ask, my eyes wide as I peer into the room.

"Everything in here is post 2000 when the Keyingham Ledger launched its online edition."

"Is that all?" There are hundreds of boxes. Although the first few shelves closest to the door are empty, the boxes on the shelves I can see are labeled by month and year. It seems like more than two or three hundred boxes in here.

"Why?" She looks at me, frowning. "Do you want older copies because you really should have said that sooner. Anything pre-2000 is stored in temperature-controlled archives off-site and needs approval from—"

“No,” I say, hurriedly. “I only want to go back a few years. I was just curious.”

“Oh, good.” She looks relieved as she glances at her watch. “Mr. Bernard finishes in an hour. I can only let you have forty-five minutes before I have to lock this area off.”

Had my plans for the day not been completely screwed up, I’d have been here earlier. But hopefully, that’s all the time I need, and if not, I can come back tomorrow.

Ethel has barely left before I’m searching for the box that should contain the news about JP’s death. The further back I go, the more dust there is, and there’s a thin layer covering the box from November three years ago.

After pulling it off the shelf, I lower us both to the ground and take a deep breath. Then I take the lid off. Inside are ten newspapers: two copies of each weekly edition and the special *in memoriam* edition. Although the paper has started to brown, the newspapers don’t look like they were ever read before they were put in the box.

JP was murdered November 6th and Cole was arrested the same day. The newspaper was published two days later. The articles in this edition are exactly what I’ve read online, only seeing photos of Cole being led to a police car with his hands handcuffed behind his back still makes me feel like I’ve been punched in the chest.

Trying to ignore that sensation, I scan every article in the paper related to JP or Cole. Just like online, there’s nothing here that tells me any details.

No matter how I look at this, it just doesn’t make sense.

People are fascinated with murders and murderers—countless documentaries and shows have been created to cater to this interest. Even the murders where the suspects still haven’t been caught and evidence is lacking get hyped up because of the ongoing mystery surrounding them. And yet, somehow, this one, the one with a victim who might not garner sympathy given his wealth and privilege, would certain have

people discussing whether or not he deserved it and there's *nothing*. Not even a conspiracy theory.

Evidence might “disappear” but not to this extent.

Steadily, I work through each week's paper. By the end of the month, each newspaper has become progressively more wrinkled, pages no longer lining up, as I've dumped them in piles to the side. The news has almost dried up, and by the time the paper was printed the following week—days after the special edition—Cole had already been charged. There weren't weeks of trying to work out who killed him, no further investigations, and no breaking developments.

Frustrated, I sit back and rub the back of my neck where my muscle is aching from leaning over and reading at an awkward angle for so long. I was so sure there would be *something* in here.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and check the time. I've got five minutes before Ethel comes back. My plan was to check the papers from the court case, as well as those that were released in between, but it looks like I'll have to come back another night for those.

Carefully, I start placing the newspapers back in the box in the same order they were originally. I pick up the lid, ready to set it back on, when I notice something on the front page of the original paper. In the top right-hand corner, under the date, in a font so small I hadn't noticed two words: *2nd edition*.

Curious, I put the lid down and pull out the newspaper so I can look at the one underneath. This one's dated the same as the first, but I hadn't looked at either because I assumed them to be the same. Only this one didn't have any text about the edition.

“Ms. Anderson?” Ethel's voice calling into the room startles me.

“Sorry, just a moment,” I call back. Before I can change my mind, I thrust the paper into my bag, put the other back in the box, and then get to my feet. Stepping out into the

small corridor between the shelves, I hold the box up to her. “Just going to put this back on the shelf, and I’m all done.”

She nods, and I turn to scoop up the lid, quickly returning the box to its home. Then I bend down to grab my bag, cringing as the paper rustles inside as the bag rests against my body.

Ethel is too far away to hear, and she doesn’t seem to notice as we walk back upstairs. I wait for her to lock the doors before I thank her.

“I hope you got everything you need, dear,” she says before walking back to the main desk where the other librarian, Mr. Bernard, is waiting for her.

Feeling like I’m going to set off alarms as I leave the library, I walk as quickly as possible, not stopping until I get into my room. Only after locking the door do I let out a breath of relief. I’m acting like I’ve walked out of Tiffany’s with a ten-thousand-dollar tennis bracelet still on my wrist, but for the first time, I feel like I’ve got something important in my possession.

And if that’s the case, that information is priceless.

XXX

Tori

Turning around, I take two steps towards my desk before I stop.

Something feels... off.

Unsure what has the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end, I carefully scan the room, trying to look for anything out of place or missing, but nothing looks different.

Which was exactly how everything seemed the night someone tried to turn me into a Smurf...

After placing my bag on my desk, I walk straight into the small shower room and flick on the light. And it actually does turn on this time. Not satisfied, I turn both the sink faucet on and the shower, waiting for a while before I safely conclude there's no dye lurking.

Nothing seems out of place in my bathroom, but I grab every bottle and tube, quickly opening, sniffing, and pouring a little bit of everything.

It all seems so... normal.

Frowning, I wipe my hands and walk back into the bedroom, scanning the room from a different angle. Just as I'm almost certain I'm being paranoid, I pull open the drawers and closet.

Yet nothing seems different in there either.

"There is nothing wrong with being cautious," I tell myself. I'm probably nervous because of the newspaper I took.

After one final glance around the room, I move back to the desk and sit down. It takes a few more minutes before I'm

able to take the newspaper from my bag, then I lay it on the desk in front of me.

Above the fold, aside from the lack of edition on the top right-hand corner, there's no noticeable difference. But when I unfold it to see the full spread, and start reading the text, it's clear the main article is completely different.

Tragedy has struck James Keyingham University with the Keyingham police confirming the name of the victim as that of James Patrick Keyingham. Keyingham, direct descendent of our eponymously named university, was a freshman member of the Elite, studying pre-law.

Keyingham was found dead near the campus gates, by campus security, at 5:03 a.m., with Keyingham police arriving on the scene at 5:15 a.m. A witness described how he saw freshman, Cole Reynolds present himself to the police. "We'd left the Elite's Inaugural Ceremony party when we saw the flashing lights, so we went over. The police were blocking off the area around JP's body, but we could see blood on his head. A little while later, Cole walked straight up to the cops right beside us. He seemed eerily calm, and then he just admitted to being responsible."

Police confirmed that Keyingham had obtained a headwound but refused to confirm if that was the suspected cause of death. At present, no further information has been provided.

Speaking to this reporter, Dean Welcroft said, "An official statement by the university will be provided later this morning, however I wish to reassure students that this was an isolated incident, and a suspect has been taken into custody. This is a tremendous shock and loss to our community, and we will have counseling available for anyone who wants or needs it. In addition, all classes will be cancelled today."

I stare at the words, rereading them over and over. Convinced I'm hallucinating, making things up, I pull my laptop out and turn it on. Quickly, I navigate to the Keyingham Ledger's online article—the same one that appeared in the second edition—and compare the two texts.

The second paragraph is completely missing online.

This is the first time I've ever seen it, and despite it being only five sentences long, it's still more information about the murder than I've ever read.

There was an Elite party that night? Was Cole there?

Whether he was or wasn't, what were he and JP doing at the campus gates?

As many answers as I got, twice as many were replacing them.

James Keyingham University is small. Ridiculously small. With only about five-hundred students, it's more like a boarding school. I've been here nearly half a semester, and I can probably name at least half of the students, say what their parents do for a living, and I certainly know the rest by face.

The idea of Cole knowing JP, especially since they were both freshmen majoring in pre-law, isn't a stretch for me. But he never mentioned JP, and I'd never seen him in any of Cole's Instagram pictures.

I reach for my phone about to redownload the Instagram app when I realize my battery is almost dead. Naturally. After putting it on charge, I finally redownload the app and log in.

My original profile is gone. Back when everyone started posting hateful comments and sending death threats, I deleted every social media profile I had. When I started to look into the case, I created new profiles—first in my name, and then, realizing that was a stupid move, leaving whatever username the apps assigned. It didn't take long for people to find the supposedly anonymous accounts, but I deleted the apps when I realized none of them gave me any new information.

After confirming the login, I'm not surprised to see notifications for hundreds of message requests, but I ignore them. Going back to Cole's profile would be a waste of time now. My brother set his profile to private, so unless he accepted me as a friend on there, I wouldn't be able to see his posts again.

But if I remember correctly, JP's profile was public.

It still is. But after looking at the first few pictures, he's clearly someone who thinks very carefully about what photographs he shares. Everything looks so... posed. And not just in the *Living the Best Life* style of Instagram.

It's more *I'm perfect and you won't find dirt on me here*. Which makes sense considering Penny said he wanted to run for president one day.

It doesn't stop me from scrolling, studying each picture.

And then I find one of him and Syn. For reasons unknown to me, I click on the tag and find myself on his profile. Everything here feels just as fake, but the further back I scroll, the more genuine Syn's smile seems.

He also has a pet lizard called Basil, which he features a lot. It's kinda cute, but I'm also surprised. Surprised that Syn has a pet at all, but if he was going to have one, I expected it to be a snake. A python. He needs a good hug...

Unfortunately, social media doesn't hold any new answers either. If JP really was serious about getting into politics, there wouldn't be anything about it on any public profile. He—and Syn—probably have a second, secret account *if* they even use it.

My gaze drops to the newspaper again.

At least I know more than I did a couple of hours ago, but I'm not sure where to go now.

Other than my bed. I'm exhausted, and I've somehow spent hours scrolling Instagram. Thankfully, my dining hall shift is tomorrow evening and not tomorrow morning, but I've got midterms next week, and considering I've fucked up this

assignment for my Comm class, I need to spend some time studying. Hopefully, grades from the other classes might be enough to keep my GPA high enough for my scholarship.

As I walk over to my bed, I quickly check the JKUFacultyApp, more out of habit than anything. And I'm glad I do because I was wrong, and my shift tomorrow is the breakfast one.

"Get it together, Tori," I mutter as I plug the phone in and set it on my nightstand.

After using the bathroom and brushing my teeth, I change into the shorts and T-shirt I wear to sleep in, and pull back the covers on my bed...

Worms.

My bed is covered in damp dirt and wriggling worms.

I'm sure the pure shock is the only thing that's prevented me from screaming.

I feel like everything has stopped—time, my thoughts, my body, my breathing...

My legs wobble, and I stumble into the bedside table. I grab the edge before I fall completely and take a few deep breaths.

This was what my body sensed was *off* with my room when I got here. Somehow, I'd been right when I thought someone was in my room. But while *no one* wants to find anything in their bed, never mind worms, in the back of my mind, I'm grateful it's not worse.

I don't like bugs, but worms are harmless, and they're still confined to the bed. It could have been cockroaches or snakes...

Carefully, I peel back the comforter, picking off any worm that's stuck to the fabric and adding them to a writhing pile on the fitted sheet. The comforter is tossed to the side, and I focus my attention on the pillows. Although the worms are mostly in the center of the bed and none are on the pillows, I strip the cases anyway and drop them on top of the comforter.

Then I lift the sheet up, holding the neck of the bundle tightly as I take it off the bed. The worms and dirt are heavy, but after making sure my phone and key are safely in my shorts pocket, and my sneakers are on my feet, I grab the comforter and pillowcases.

Outside my room, I glare up at the security camera pointed at the door. After rolling my eyes, I walk as calmly and gracefully as I can with the laundry in my arms, down the corridor to the elevator.

Instead of heading to the basement, I go outside. It's late, but not too late for others to be out. I ignore the eyes I know are watching me and walk into the middle of the flowerbed outside the dorm. Then I let go of half of the sheet and an avalanche of mud and worms descends onto the plants.

Once I'm sure there are no worms left on the sheet, I gather it back up and head inside, this time, going down a floor instead of up.

Of the many things the fees cover for this place, included is a laundry service. The university app has a function allowing each student to arrange for someone to pick up their laundry and have it returned a few days later.

Scholarship students, however, don't have that option.

Instead, my dorm has a laundry room in the basement. There are a few washers and driers in here, available for any student to use, but in all the times I've used it, I've never seen anyone else in here. To be fair, if I had the option of someone doing my laundry for me, I'd use it too.

I go in, dump everything in the first two washers, add the detergent, and then get it going. Thankfully, I have a spare set of bedding, and when I looked through my closet earlier, I know that they're still fresh enough for use.

Instead of waiting for the bedding to wash, I head back to my room, making sure I continue to look like I don't have a care in the world until my bedroom door is safely closed behind me.

Had I not found that newspaper earlier, after everything else that's happened today, I probably would have returned and started packing my bag.

Even though I'm exhausted, and my mental energy is the lowest it has been for a while, the spark of hope is still burning. Only now, it's like Syn poured gasoline from a can labeled "fuck you" on top of the flame.

XXXI

Royal

“Fuck’s sake, we’re Gen Z, not Boomers,” I grumble to Gemini. “Why are we still doing this shit?”

We’re in the meeting room in our house. Considering there is a table which is large enough for sixteen people, there are only nine of us currently seated at it. Everyone at this table knows why we are here, this area of the house is used for the more private Elite executive board meetings.

There are ten days left until the end of the initiation period, which also coincides with the end of midterms. Assuming the initiates survive the last week—and all of them, including Declan Salaway made it back following this past weekend’s activity—they’ll be welcomed into the Elite at our Inaugural Ceremony.

Which is a really dumb way of saying debutant ball.

Okay, so maybe the private ceremony in the Crypt is a slight deviation, but having some formal event in the church where we officially introduce the initiates as full members of the Elite to the rest of the student body is boring. Antiquated. A waste of fucking time when everyone already knows who they are.

Can’t we just skip to the good part?

Beside me, Gemini shrugs. He doesn’t say anything, but he doesn’t need to. It’s tradition.

But watching our Social Chair, a senior named Alice, use the meeting room’s smartboard like she’s my basketball coach showing plays, only the X’s are where the initiates are going to line up in front of the chancel—or whatever stupid

name Alice gave the part of the church in front of the altar—is putting me to sleep.

“Once you’ve finished your welcome speech, the DJ is ready to go.” Alice finally concludes.

“All refreshments and canapes?” Syn asks.

AKA alcohol and drugs.

Another member of the committee, Lucas, nods. “Confirmed.”

“Great,” I say, loudly. “Then we can wrap this up now.”

As soon as Syn agrees, I press a button on an app. Seconds later, the door opens, and one of the initiates steps in to hold open the door. It’s after hours, so Seamus has finished for the evening, which leaves the initiates to take the task of serving us.

Back when the house was used by the dean and there were actual servants working here, each room had a bell system: pull a chord, and a bell would ring in the servant’s quarters in the basement.

The servant’s quarters are now the gym and utility room. Instead, when Gemini was a freshman, he created an app specifically for the Elite. No more chords and bells necessary.

If we can bring that into the twenty-first century, why the fuck can’t we do it with the ceremony? The rest of the student body is only there because they know we’re going to give them the best post-midterm party. Everyone on campus already knows who our initiates are.

Once everyone, including the initiate, is dismissed for the night, the three of us head to the living room. I dive onto the closest couch, beating Gemini for the remote, and get Netflix loaded up.

“You ever ask Preston what’s going on with Salaway?” Gemini sits down on the recliner closest to the window and looks over at Syn.

“Change of plans.” Syn shrugs. “I assume the guy’s father complied with whatever the request was.”

When the initiates were taken off campus at midnight on Saturday night, blindfolded, drunk, and only with their underwear, Syn told me Salaway wasn’t coming back.

While the female initiates were dropped off in pairs, in the middle of nowhere Connecticut, pre-placed trench coats and shoes, and their junior mentor close by to keep an eye on them, the guys had been split into two groups and had to work a little harder to find clothing. With the two groups, it had been easier to remove Salaway from the equation.

Aside from the three of us, no one else in the Elite knew he wasn’t coming back. And when Syn gave me the very brief explanation, I didn’t question it.

The decision was made by someone in a very small, very powerful, and very secret group. I may have been a member of that group, but if no one feels the need to tell me the details, I know not to ask.

The fewer people who know the least amount of information possible, the easier things become to control.

All my life, I’ve been left, mostly, to my own devices. Dad’s one of the richest people in the world, owning two separate hotel chains. There are only a handful of countries in the world where I couldn’t stay in one of our buildings.

As the youngest of four brothers, all of whom *want* to take over Dad’s empire, no one cared when I said I had no intention of joining that battle. The only interest in the hotels I had was in high school when I was hosting parties in several of the New York locations.

And then one day, dad released a press statement announcing I would be following his footsteps and attending James Keyingham University.

A fact he’d neglected to tell me at any point between then and my birth.

Ironically, at that point, I’d probably spent more time in one of his hotels than high school, but it’s amazing what

money can buy these days: a better GPA, glowing references from internships in the family business, certificates, and other shit from a whole bunch of extra-curricular activities my high school may or may not have offered.

The only thing that was the truth on there was my position on the basketball team. And I'm good at basketball. Despite the partying, during the game season, I don't drink and there's no recreational drugs. Same still applies.

Mostly...

It's not like the Keyingham Wildcats are a Division I team. You don't come to James Keyingham University for the athletic program.

None of my brothers went to JKU. None of them believed my grades were real either. They're not dumb. Which also means they know better than to question Dad.

And they say blood is supposed to be thicker than water.

The second that statement was released, each one of them banded together because they think Dad's putting things in motion to have *me* take over.

Which also means I avoid going home until Dad summons me, and thankfully, over the last three and a bit years, that has only been a handful of times.

Did I want to come here? No. But when I heard Syn and Gem were going to be here, I figured it wasn't the end of the world.

I should have known something was up when, in my sophomore year, my dad came to watch my game when we were in Boston. He'd never been to a game of mine before.

A week later, and I was a member of a society more exclusive than Skull and Bones, and more powerful than the Illuminati.

"We put up with Preston for three years, we can put up with Declan," Syn tells me as I start to scroll through Netflix.

Gemini's phone buzzes, and I automatically look over, but as I start to turn my attention back to the TV, I notice him frown. "What's up?"

"It's the notification from the camera on Tori's room," Gemini responds without looking up. Instead, he motions on his phone to zoom in. "She's doing laundry at this time?"

"You care?" Syn asks, dryly.

"It's like she's... Just look."

A second later, the CCTV image is on the television screen, the picture so clear that it's almost like I've selected a show. Tori is wearing a tiny pair of shorts that barely show beneath an oversize T-shirt. Balled up under one arm is the university issued comforter—she must be the only student using that—and in her other hand, she's carrying another sheet, only it looks like it's been stuffed with something.

"The fuck is that about?" I ask.

"Let me see if the other camera was online," Gemini mutters, more to himself than to us. A moment later, a slightly grainier image comes on the screen.

The room, I recognize. I've been in it before. But the fact that I can see it on our TV makes no sense. "Is that her room?"

"I want eyes on her," Syn says, as though it's completely normal.

"Wait." I turn to him in disbelief. "Is *this* why you had her do our assignments? I thought you just wanted access to her computer."

"I did. And with it comes the camera."

The image on the TV suddenly changes as Tori appears out of nowhere, sitting right in front of the camera, staring like she's looking right at me. "The fuck, Gem!"

"I'm trying to work out what happened." He rolls his eyes, but the image on the screen speeds up. For a while, Tori switches her attention between the laptop, her phone, and what looks like a copy of the Ledger—people still read that?

Eventually, she stretches, rubs her face, and then gets up, going into the bathroom. As she does, it's obvious that the bedding is still on her bed. When she comes back out, Gemini slows the playback speed to normal, just in time for us to watch her take off her clothes and hang her uniform over the back of the chair right in front of us, completely unaware her camera is on.

I've done some fucked up shit before today. A lot of it. But watching this is taking me to some whole other level of fuckery I'm not sure I want to go to... and yet my dick is getting hard. "Gemini, the fuck, man. Come on."

Gemini rolls his eyes. "Double standards."

"The hell is that supposed to mean?" I snap at him.

"Oh, is it only okay to watch when you're getting off too?" he asks. "Don't let me stop you if you want to knock one out."

"Fuck you." My response is more automatic than anything. I'm not angry. I watch porn. Who doesn't? Only this just feels... I look back at the screen in time to see her unfastening her bra.

Before my brain has caught up with my hand to work out what I'm doing, I've turned the television off.

"Come on, Royal. Sharing is caring." With a mischievous smile, Gemini looks down at my crotch and the tent that's appeared in my shorts. "You can't tell me you don't want to enjoy yourself another time."

At the same moment my brain works out what he's saying, Syn steps in front of us. "Yes, go on, Royal. Sharing *is* caring."

There's a seventy percent chance my tent is getting dismantled in the next sixty seconds.

"I found her in the security room at the Freshman Welcome Mixer, watching the festivities."

"And?"

“Made her keep watching as I fucked her.” I cross my arms. “Say what you want, Syn. A pussy is a pussy, and hers was already dripping when she bent over and stuck her ass in my face.” My dick is throbbing as I remember how it felt driving it deep into her cunt.

From beside me, Gemini moans.

I turn and look at him, and from just the look on his face, I know that he not only somehow managed to retrieve the video I deleted, but he watched it too. “You fucker!” I launch the remote at his head, but he manages to deflect it before it hits, laughing.

And then he turns the television back on. “Step aside, Synny.”

Eyes full of ice, Syn glares at Gemini, who continues to try to wave him to the side, and then at me. By the time he moves, Tori is already in the shorts and T-shirt we saw her wearing in the corridor.

Gemini goes to rewind it, but Syn whips his head to glare at him. “Just play it.”

That’s Syn’s *don’t fuck with me* tone, and this time, Gemini complies.

My attention is no longer on the screen, but instead, watching Syn’s emotionless face as he watches the television.

The only reason I found her in there that night was because Gemini got an alert to the door of the security room. He was selected in the raffle to watch that group initiation activity, so I did my due diligence to check on what was going on upstairs.

I found her on the first day because I was curious. How could the sister of a murderer just enroll in the same college where the murder took place? It felt like such a dumb thing to do, and yet, you couldn’t be dumb to get into James Keyingham... Even if we had a hand in that.

Well... no, I’m walking proof that grades aren’t everything. You can achieve anything on paper if you can

bankroll it. Unfortunately for her, Tori has about two cents to her name.

When I discovered she wasn't completely lacking in braincells, I was angry. JP was a better brother to me than the three of my real ones combined. She was smart enough to know better, but she hadn't acted that way.

I still am.

Fucking her then hadn't meant a thing. If anything, I kinda hoped she'd pine after me. I could get her worked up, lead her on, and then make her watch me fuck one of the initiates in front of her.

Except she didn't.

The stocks were my idea. I jerked off to imaginary scenarios where I'd get all the initiates in a line in front of me, all on their knees, all with their heads and hands held securely in place. I even found a guy who custom made them, just for that event.

And when it came to it, the *best* I could manage was jerking myself off, imagining it was Tori in the stocks as I fucked her face before I shot my load on whichever initiate I happened to have been standing in front of—I don't even remember who it was.

“Are they snakes?”

Gemini's question has me dragging my attention back to the television. Tori's got something pinched between her finger and thumb, but her back is to the camera, and it's hard to see clearly.

“No.” A smile appears on Syn's face. “They're worms.” He watches as she cleans up the bed, and slowly starts chuckling. “That's genius.”

It pains me to admit it, but I'm a little impressed. Not at the prank, although that is rather clever, and whoever did it deserves credit for that.

But her. I'm impressed with her.

I can't think of many girls who would have handled that so well.

Any of it.

And in that moment, I realize why my dick goes hard for her when I know it shouldn't.

I like her.

Glancing down at my dick, I frown.

Ah, fuck.

XXXII

Tori

My optimism at being able to handle anything Syn can throw at me is almost gone. So is the resolve at not allowing any tears to fall.

It's just after 4:30 in the morning, and I'm sitting on the toilet seat as I brush my teeth in an effort to save what little energy I have. I haven't had a proper shower in nearly two weeks. Despite constant emails to the university, trying to convince them they've not fixed the problem at all, my water remains ice cold.

I held off as long as I could when the blue started to fade, but eventually, I gave in and used the dye cube to redye my hair. Partly because my stubbornness is clinging on, and if my hair and appearance are fresh and neat, it looks like these bullshit pranks aren't getting to me. But because I need the personal pick-me-up.

Using the jug Penny left in my room, I rinsed the dye out over the sink—which was also how I was washing my hair—because a jug of icy water was less painful than standing under the constant stream in the shower.

The sink, soap, and a spare towel were also how I was washing my body and shaving. Smooth skin was another thing I was keeping up with. The faculty turned a blind eye to personalized and customized uniforms every day... except mine. My pants went missing from the laundry, which is a step up from my panties going missing, I guess.

But all I'm left with are skirts. The temperature is starting to drop, especially in the evening. And the heating in my room is set to a level the university also tells me is

acceptable, and yet, I'm wearing sweaters in my room—even when I'm sleeping.

Sleeping.

I should be so fucking lucky.

The university refuses to change my locks. Apparently, the only people with copies of the key are the custodial staff, and theirs have always been accounted for. It's also completely impossible for any of the students to have done something as ridiculous as putting dirt and bugs in a person's bed, and because I didn't think to take pictures, no evidence means no crime...

When I'm in my room, the desk chair gets wedged under the handle. When I'm not, I make sure my most important items are in my bag and always with me, while I return to my room each time, praying to whatever deity or demon is listening that no one has taken or destroyed anything I left behind.

But sleeping?

I'm so tired I can barely keep awake in any of my classes, and I've taken more naps in the library than I've had in my bed.

There's something in the air vent.

The front is screwed on so tightly that I can't get in, but the night someone put worms in my bed, they also put something in the vent. Between eleven and four, every twenty-three minutes, *something* plays a high-pitched beep that even sleeping under the pillow can't block. I'm already under my comforter because the temperature gets so low that my nose gets cold, and this helps keep me a little warmer.

At this rate, it will be a miracle if I pass any of my midterms. I can't even fuel myself on caffeine because all the vending machines require the stupid student card to activate. Of course mine doesn't work.

After finishing in the bathroom, I double check my bag for all my important belongings out of habit, then pick up my phone from the side. Cole's face smiles back at me. I changed

the photograph. Even though it hurts to look at it, some days, seeing his face is what keeps me going.

Tomorrow is Saturday. I'm hoping that after my morning shift, I can return to my room and get some much-needed sleep. And then, in the afternoon, I'm heading to the campus gates.

First, I'm walking into Keyingham to gorge myself on whatever the hell I want in the town's café. After I'm full, I'm grabbing some groceries, which I hope I can sneak into my room and hide in my closet.

And then, I'm going to try to find the place JP was killed.

It's years later, and I'm not expecting to find a shred of evidence, but that's not my intention. I want to work my way back to the church; the last place JP was seen alive.

Because barring that, the only other thing I can think of, is attending the party the Elite are throwing next weekend. Technically, I've not been told I can't go. I think everyone—Syn—doesn't think I'd be stupid enough to try to go.

I'm sure I yawn non-stop as I walk to the dining hall. Here, the kitchens are warm too, which I appreciate, as I settle into my routine of preparing the day's vegetables. My hands seem to move automatically now, quickly washing, peeling, or slicing. One of the meals on the menu tonight is lasagna, and I'm halfway through finely dicing thirty red onions, waiting for today's chef to arrive.

Every shift, I make a point of trying to make conversation with one person, starting by asking them how long they've worked here. There seems to be a high turnover of staff because very few people have been here longer than two years.

And when I find someone who was here back when JP was killed, they either clam up and find a reason to leave the room, or they tell me gossiping will get everyone fired.

The chef working today is one of the few who was here back then. Last time, he conveniently had to take inventory—

even though it's not his job—and didn't return. I'm hoping to try again, but before he arrives, Doris does.

“Ms. Tori, I need you out front for breakfast,” she tells me. “Ms. Lynette has called in sick. The chefs will have to finish what you're doing.”

Over the weeks, Doris has been keeping me in the kitchen or dish washing. She's not said anything since that day Syn announced who I was in the dining hall, but I'm almost certain this was deliberate.

I glance at the clock over the door. There are only ten minutes before the doors open for breakfast. “I'll clean up now,” I say, already scooping the few uncut onions back into the box.

Before I go out, I hurry to the bathroom to wash the onion oil from my hands, as well as quickly checking my appearance. While I would rather stay in the kitchen, going out front doesn't fill me with concern like it would have a few weeks ago. I'm too tired to really worry over it, and honestly, at this point, I'm expecting at least one person to complain about something I'm doing anyway.

Doris has me doing the same thing I used to; keeping the breakfast bar stocked. I manage to check the cupboards and heated cabinets so I can refresh my memory on what food is stored where, just before the doors are unlocked.

As usual, the number of students who come to eat start low for the first half hour, and then it picks up. I keep back, out of the way as much as possible, with my attention more on the food than the students.

Until a plate piled with fresh Belgian waffles are thrust in front of me. “Frigid?”

At the far end of my area, there's a section dedicated to waffles and pancakes. The batter is made fresh every morning, and instead of leaving students to cook their own, there's always someone assigned to that station to make the food for them. Right now, it's a lady named Nia.

I look up at the guy who's asked the question. I'm certain he's a sophomore named Fitz. I'm also certain his question has nothing to do with the waffles he's given me as the plate is warm and I can feel the heat radiating from them.

Biting back the response I want to give him, because the last thing I want is for Nia to get in trouble, I give him a fake smile. "I'm so sorry to hear that. Can I get you a fresh plate?"

"So you agree?"

"That's not my call to make," I tell him, keeping the smile plastered on my face. "But if they're clearly not to your liking, I'll get you some which will hopefully be more suitable for you. Where are you sitting? I can bring them to your table, so you don't have to wait here."

Fitz cocks his head and then shrugs. "Don't make me wait long. And I want bananas, chocolate chips, and strawberry syrup—the syrup separate."

I don't wait for him to leave before I hurry over to Nia. She looks at me, then the plate, her eyebrows drawn together. "What's that boy complaining about?"

"Not hot enough. Can I have a fresh batch?"

"Not hot...? Girl, he took them from me and walked straight over to you."

That doesn't surprise me...

While Nia makes me a fresh batch, I dispose of the unwanted food, sighing as I toss it into the trash. The waffles could be as cold as the water in my shower, and I'd still rather eat them than the rice I'll have later.

As my stomach grumbles, I get a small jug and decant some of the strawberry syrup into it. Normally, students help themselves when they get their food, pouring it on there, rather than taking it to the table, but I don't want Fitz turning around and complaining that the waffles got too soggy to eat in the thirty seconds it will take me to carry them to his table.

By the time I come back out front, Nia is just serving the waffles up for me. “I hope he burns his tongue,” she mutters quietly.

Same.

After adding sliced bananas and chocolate chips, I take the plate and jug, and walk over to ‘the back’. His table is right next to Syn’s, who is of course there, drinking his coffee. Today he’s joined by Royal and Gemini, for once. Gemini is wearing a hoodie under his blazer, with the hood pulled up over his head as he drinks his coffee, eyes glued to his phone.

If I tried to wear a hoodie under my blazer, I’d—

My attention is on Gemini and not where I’m walking, and the next thing I know, I’ve tripped over something, and I’m falling. There’s no magical savior to stop me hitting the floor, and all I can do is let go of the plate and jug so I can stick my hands out to stop myself from faceplanting.

As my hands slam into the marble, there’s an earsplitting scream.

It’s not me.

I look up and find Lissa in front of me. She’s in her maid uniform, clearly the initiate in charge of serving Syn and the others today. The plate of waffles is at her feet, scattered all over the floor. Bright red strawberry syrup is dripping off her skirt, running down her bare legs.

Despite the fact that my hands are hurting, I look up, eyes wide. “Lissa, are you alright?”

“Murder.” She shrieks. “She’s trying to murder me. Like her brother.”

“With what?” I ask in disbelief. “I tripped. It was an accident. The plate didn’t even touch you.”

“It’s attempted murder.” She points to the syrup.

On my knees, ignoring the pain radiating from them too, I lean back onto my heels and roll my eyes. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, it’s syrup. It’s not the only sticky substance you’ve had running down your leg before.”

Was that the best response to come out of my mouth in this situation?

Not at all.

As Lissa's face goes as red as the syrup from everyone around us laughing, I know the audience is the only thing stopping her from becoming the murderer in the room. I'm one hundred percent going to regret this later.

"What's the problem here?" Doris asks from behind me.

"She *threw* the plates at me," Lissa tells her. "She was trying to kill me."

I glance over my shoulder, up at Doris. I can tell from looking at her that she knows that wasn't what happened, but if either of us suggest otherwise, the whole room is going to agree with Lissa.

"Ms. Tori, please apologize to this student and then clear the mess up."

Closing my eyes, I draw in a deep breath.

I hate this. I hate this whole shitty situation I'm stuck in.

"An apology? Is that it?" The sound of Lissa's heel striking the tile floor has me opening my eyes. "Do I need to get my father here?"

Doris doesn't say anything, but a smug smile creeps over Lissa's lips.

I have no idea who her father is, but I know what he is: a man with more money and power than what both Doris and I have combined. If this gets escalated to a parent, then the university gets involved. And it won't be just me losing my job.

Biting back the wince as I get to my feet, I turn and face Doris.

She stares at me, and then nods.

"I'm sorry," I tell her as I walk past.

Strangely, I don't feel upset as I walk into the back to gather my things. Considering how hard I've fought to keep this job, I'm almost surprised at how free I feel. I have no idea what I'm going to do when my savings dry up, but now I've got some time to dedicate to finding out what happened with Cole.

Doris is waiting for me when I step out of the staff room. "You didn't have to do that."

I find my smile and plaster it on my face. "Are you kidding? I was going to quit anyway. The amount you pay me isn't worth how much this cuts into my social life."

XXXIII

Tori

Of all the things I regret doing today, it's skipping breakfast. All through my morning classes, my stomach was grumbling loud enough to draw the attention of the people sitting around me.

After what happened this morning, I should probably stay away from the dining room for the rest of the day, but I'm too hungry to care. Instead, I march in, heading straight to my special table. Lissa and the other initiate, Peter, are already there, waiting, but both refuse to acknowledge me. None of the initiates ever do until Syn appears, so that's nothing new.

Thankfully, he doesn't have me waiting long before he and Royal come in, taking their seats like they're sitting down on a throne. Naturally, I have to wait for Lissa and Peter to bring them their lunch. Royal's got a sub, and even Syn's salad has my mouth watering.

Even though watching him eat is making my stomach hurt, I stare directly into his golden eyes. If he's going to make me sit here every day, I'm doing my best to put him off his food. Then neither of us is satisfied.

My stare is broken when Lissa drops the tray in front of me. I go to pick up my fork, but my hand hovers over the cutlery as I stare at the food in front of me.

Waffles.

Waffles, bananas, chocolate chips, a smear of something that looks like strawberry sauce, and something else that might be porridge. All of it is covered in dirt and hair.

Just like that, my appetite disappears.

“Eat it,” Lissa says.

“Hilarious.” There’s not a hint of humor in my tone.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Lissa presses a hand against her chest.
“Am I giving you the impression I’m joking?”

With no warning, she lunges at me, grabs the back of my head, and pushes my face straight into the food.

I can’t breathe without inhaling the food.

And then her hand and the pressure is off the back of my head.

When I sit up, coughing and spitting the soiled food from my mouth, I find Royal with his hand wrapped around Lissa’s wrist.

“When I say stop, I mean you fucking stop.” Royal snarls at her.

I don’t know if he’s expecting me to fall at his feet for that, but a switch has been flicked, and any hint of gratitude in me is drowned by rage.

Jumping to my feet, I pick up the plastic tray and swing it towards the side of Lissa’s head. Food flies everywhere, but the tray never hits Lissa.

With lightning reflexes, Royal shoots his arm up, blocking my attack. The tray bounces off his forearm, and as he swings his arm back, he knocks it flying out of my hand.

“Did you see that?” Lissa shrieks. “She tried to kill me. She really tried to kill me.”

Royal snaps his attention on her. “I said *stop*.” His voice is like ice. “Or do I need to make you?”

Lissa’s expression has gone from anger to disbelief to fear in the space of seconds. “Royal, you’re hurting me,” she whines, trying to break free of his grip.

I don’t care.

Although I’m shaking, my body is overloaded with anger and adrenaline, and I walk straight past them without

looking back. I get halfway to my room before a strange buzzing in my head I hadn't even realized was there, stops. When it does, it's like the switch is flipped back, and the first thing I'm hit with is the smell of banana, followed by the realization that there's waffles all over the side of my head and syrup dripping from my hair.

At the last minute, I turn my head, and throw up into the flowerless garden by the side of the path. My stomach is empty, and I'm not even throwing up more than bitter bile, but I can't stop retching.

Finally, although my stomach hurts and my head feels full of cotton, I'm able to hurry into the nearest building. Ignoring all the looks I'm getting as the students in the corridor part to avoid me, I practically dive into a bathroom.

With taps gushing water into the basin, not caring how much it splashes over me, I scrub at my face and rinse out my mouth, trying to get the lingering smell of banana off me.

My face is red when I look at my reflection. My efforts have made my mascara run, looking like I've been crying. Ironic, since that's exactly what I've been trying not to do. But there's no trace of food on my face anymore.

Just as I lean forward to turn the taps off, I catch someone else's reflection in the mirror. Whirling around, I stare at Dr. Wright. "What are you doing in here?"

Dr. Wright arches an eyebrow. "Me? You're the one in the men's room."

My gaze darts to the side... and the two urinals I can now see around a corner.

I wipe water off my cheek and then face the basin once more so I can turn the taps off. Even though I'm aware Dr. Wright's eyes are boring into the back of my head, I take my time, cleaning up the mascara smears as best I can.

After drying my hands, I walk towards the door, but Dr. Wright doesn't move. With a sigh, I look up at him. "Excuse me, please."

"Why are you here?" he asks instead of moving.

“The line for the women’s bathroom was too long,” I respond, dryly.

“At this university.”

Honestly, I’m starting to ask myself that question again. And then I remember my brother’s face, the last time I visited him.

But right now, I can feel a crack starting to appear in my resolve, and I know that this guy is ready to start antagonizing me with Cole and how he’s convinced he killed Lucy Barnes too.

I cock my head. “Can’t you tell? I have a degradation kink. All of this?” I shrug. “It gets me so hot and horny.”

The only movement from Dr. Wright is a single blink.

“So, I *really* need to head back to my room and take care of myself,” I continue, mouth charging ahead of my brain. “Unless you want to watch? Because that’s your thing, right?”

He still doesn’t move, and as my mind catches up, and I realize what I’ve said, there’s a moment where I’m wondering if he’s waiting for me to start right there, or if he’s about to haul me down to the dean’s office.

Finally, he moves aside.

I don’t look back, but I don’t run away. Instead, I keep my head up and walk to my next class, even though I’m nearly an hour early. Finding a nook, I sink into the corner, bring my knees up to my chest, and lean my head against the wall.

Despite everything, I still don’t regret coming here... although I have severely underestimated what I would be up against, and how hard it would be to investigate what happened. I never considered that even professors would be against me being here, or that my brother could be accused of other things.

But I am exhausted, and after today, I’m not even sure I have much time left here. I will go through whatever hell I have to in order to prove my brother’s innocence... I just don’t want this to have all been in vain.

Somehow, I make it through the rest of the day, although most of whatever my professors were talking about is a blur. There's a chill that's settled in me that I can't shake, and my stomach has been cramping all afternoon.

I'm hungry... so hungry that even thinking about food makes my stomach hurt more. Only, I'm back outside the dining hall, staring at the doors, and this time, I'm not sure I'm able to go in. Not after lunch.

Royal may have stepped in earlier, but will he do the same again?

Will he need to?

My stomach hurts from the lack of food, but the idea of those waffles—or worse—being on my tray again makes me want to throw up. Funds are limited, but maybe tonight, I need to head off campus and get something to eat in Keyingham.

With a sigh, I turn around and almost walk straight into Gemini. He still has his hoodie on, but the hood is down, and his chin-length hair is blowing freely in the breeze.

“Shouldn't you be at work?” He raises his chin at the building behind me before smirking. “Oh yeah, you were fired for trying to decapitate Lissa with a gluten-free waffle.”

I fold my arms and glare at him, too tired to come up with any form of comeback.

Gemini looks me up and down. “Don't tell me I've come too late and missed the revenge shot?”

He wasn't at lunch, but I'm surprised the news hasn't gotten back to him. Or does he mean there's something else waiting for me in there?

The decision to leave the campus is solidified for me. I go to move around him, but he steps with me.

“The dining hall hasn't been serving dinner long enough for you to have eaten yet.”

“I'm not hungry,” I say.

My stomach loudly disagrees.

“Is it me?” he asks, the smirk returning. “I avoid the dining hall because I know my presence means people just struggle to focus on their food.”

“When my choices are trash, rice which may or may not have been poisoned at this point, or not eating, I’m choosing the last option.”

The smirk slips from his lips as his eyes narrow. “What?”

“What?” I return. “Isn’t this your time to make some dickish remark about how skipping a meal won’t hurt me? That’s the whole point of controlling my food, right?”

The longer I stand here, the less likely it gets that I’m going to make the twenty-minute walk into Keyingham, and I might have told Gemini I’m not eating, but that’s really not my plan. I hoist my bag further up my shoulder and walk away.

Only, as I move away, Gemini grabs my bag, pulling it off my shoulder.

“Give it back.” Everything—*everything*—of importance is in that bag.

“What do you mean?”

“The bag in your hand,” I say, pointing. “Give. It. Back.”

Gemini shakes his head. “Poisoned rice?”

“Are you kidding?” I ask in disbelief.

“What do you mean?”

“After Lissa dug those waffles out of the trash and tried to force me to eat them, I’m not putting it past her to do something to my rice—assuming the waffles still aren’t waiting for me.” The thought has my stomach twisting uncomfortably again.

“What rice?”

“What do you mean, what rice?” I ask him, thoroughly exasperated. “Syn’s had me eating half a portion of unseasoned, barely-warm, plain boiled rice for *weeks*.”

He looks at me like, of all the things Syn's orchestrated, *this* is the worst thing. In fact, I'm almost certain he doesn't believe me. I know Gemini doesn't tend to eat at the same time as me, but surely, he's noticed this over the past few weeks?

"Just give me my bag back," I tell him, already tired of this.

Of course Gemini doesn't. Instead, with his other hand, he grabs my wrist and pulls me towards the dining hall doors.

"What are you doing?" I try to pull free of his grip. It's not tight enough to hurt me, but his fingers are locked around me.

He doesn't stop until we're at the top table. Neither Syn nor Royal are here yet, but Lissa is, watching me from her position at the back of the room beside Peter.

My heart is pounding, and there's nothing about this situation that has me trusting anyone in this room, least of all Lissa.

As I'm trying to work out if I can grab my bag from Gemini and make a run for it, Lissa walks over. She ignores me and smiles at Gemini. "Good evening, Gemini. It's been a while since you've been here. Would you like lasagna, Chana Masala, pizza, or yam woon sen?"

Gemini looks at me. "What do you want?"

It's a trick question.

There is no right answer to this, and even if there was, my throat is so dry that I can't speak anyway.

When I don't answer, Gemini looks at Lissa. "Pizza. She will have the pizza." He quickly glances back at me. "Pepperoni. I'll have the noodles.

Lissa nods at Gemini, but as she walks away, she shoots me a look that leaves me feeling faint.

Fuck the bag.

I get up, but Gemini shakes his head. "Sit."

Only because I seem to have lost all strength, I drop back down onto the cold metal seat, readjusting my legs so that if I need to try to make a quick exit, I'm not tangled up with the table legs.

Gemini goes to sit at his spot, taking my bag with him. He puts it on the floor beside his feet with his own, like it's an afterthought, and he doesn't really know he's got it at all.

I feel all kinds of sick as I wait, and the dining hall is quieter than usual. If Gemini missed the lunchtime show, it seems everyone else didn't, and they're waiting to see what will happen now, like me.

Although it feels like an eternity, Lissa returns, Peter at her side. He's carrying Gemini's yam woon sen. Lissa has the familiar blue plastic tray, which she brings to me. I brace myself, expecting her to use the tray as a weapon like I tried, or at least to dump the food over my head.

She drops it on the table in front of me with a clatter, the cup of water spilling straight away—over me, the table, and the rice.

Rice.

Aside from the pool of water around it, the rice doesn't look any different than usual, but there's no way I'm eating it.

"Lissa?" Gemini's voice carries over to us.

"Yes?" she asks, giving him a sweet smile as she steps back.

"Are you stupid?" he asks.

Lissa blinks.

"Or blind?"

"I..."

XXXIV

Tori

Barely missing Peter, Gemini pushes his chair out and gets up. His long hair starts to fall from behind his ears, but he doesn't move it as he walks over to us.

He stops in front of my table, his attention on Lissa. The irises in Gemini's eyes are dark brown. Here, the light just behind him and his face tilted down to look at Lissa, the shadows making them seem completely dark.

Demonic, almost.

The look he's giving Lissa is enough to make *me* shiver.

To my side, Lissa straightens her back and shuffles back slightly. "Did I do something wrong?"

Gemini tilts his head. "You tell me. What did I ask for?"

"The noodles— yam woon sen," Lissa quickly replies.

"And?"

"And...?" Lissa glances at me. "Pizza?"

Raising his hand, Gemini points to the tray in front of me.

"But Syn said—"

"And *I* said, get Tori the fucking pizza."

Lissa reaches over, picking up the tray. "Sorry, Gemini," she says, quietly.

As she starts to walk away, Gemini stops her. "If you wouldn't put that pizza in front of me, then you don't put it in

front of her. Understand?”

“Yes.” Lissa hurries off.

Gemini gives me the same glare he gave Lissa and then he returns to his table.

Trying to keep my composure, I release my breath. I have no idea what’s happening now, what game Gemini is playing, and beneath the table, I’m gripping onto my cold knees to try to stop my hands from shaking.

As if nothing happened, Gemini picks up his cutlery and starts eating his noodles.

It doesn’t take long for Lissa to return, this time, carrying a plate with three large slices of peperoni pizza. The meat is glistening, and the food is still warm enough that the cheese is starting to slide off the crust.

My god, the smell is incredible. My mouth is watering so much, I’m swallowing to stop myself from drooling.

But there’s *nothing* I trust about that pizza.

There has to be a catch.

Something that Gemini would eat?

Rice. Small portions of barely warm, unseasoned rice is all that Syn has allowed me to eat—until lunch when he seemed perfectly happy for me to eat the waffles.

“Is there something wrong with it?” Gemini asks.

Before I can answer, Lissa shakes her head. “It’s fresh. You... you can try it, if you want?”

Gemini’s gaze switches to me, then he looks back at Lissa and nods.

Lissa picks up the plate and walks over, stepping up onto the raised area so that she can offer Gemini the plate.

He picks up a slice, folding it slightly as he handles the crust, then he takes a bite.

The slice of pizza is dropped on the plate, and from the way Lissa flinches, I’m certain I was right, and she had done

something, but Gemini merely swallows and wafts his hand.

Lissa brings the pizza back to me, refusing to look at me as she sets the plate down.

I stare at the slice with the missing bite. The delicious smell makes my stomach grumble. Whether it's the lack of food or the fact that my body seems stuck in fight or flight mode, I'm starting to feel light-headed.

Fuck it.

Picking the slice Gemini ate, I take a small bite. Heat and flavor explode on my tongue. The pepperoni is juicy, the tomato sauce is tangy, and the cheese is soft and gooey. The pizza is hot and fresh, and tastes exactly as a pizza should.

The voice in the back of my mind is warning me that Lissa could still have done any number of things, but the growls of my stomach are drowning it out. I fight the urge to eat the pizza as quickly as I can, taking small steady bites—just in case.

And then, out of nowhere, the pizza is ripped from my hands as I'm about to take another bite.

Syn.

Instantly, the half of the slice I've already eaten turns to lead in my stomach.

Squeezing the pizza so hard that oil is dripping on the floor, Syn's attention is locked on Lissa and Peter, both of whom had returned to their positions behind the table.

“Would someone care to explain why, after giving very explicit instructions, *she* is eating this?” Syn's voice is low and dangerous.

The whole dining hall seems to have gone silent.

“Who gave her this?”

As Peter points at Lissa, she steps forward. “Gemini told me to.”

Syn focuses his attention on his friend. “You?”

Gemini lowers his fork. “Yes.”

Without looking at me, Syn marches over to the table, slamming his hand—and the pizza—down just in front of Gemini, making the plates and cutlery on the table bounce. “Why the fuck would you do that?” He keeps his voice low as though he’s not wanting the other tables to overhear the conversation, but I’m close enough to catch what he’s saying.

“Fuck with her however you want, but food—small portions and fuck all calories? Not happening, Syn.”

“Since when did it become your choice?”

“Virgo.”

“This is not the same.”

Biting at my lip, I lean forward as though the extra inches will help me hear the conversation that’s dropped to a whisper. What is Virgo? The star sign? I’m a Leo. Syn’s birthday is December, and Gemini’s is February...

Syn spins around, lips twisted into a grimace. In his hands, instead of the pizza, he’s using a napkin to wipe away the mess. “You will no longer have the privilege of being waited on. Get your own food and bring it to the table yourself.”

I have no idea what happened, but I nod anyway.

Syn walks around to the other side of the table and sends Peter to get his food while Lissa clears the smeared pizza away. Neither he nor Gemini are talking to each other, but as neither are focused on me, I don’t really care.

The little I know about Syn, he’s volatile enough that he could change his mind again tomorrow, but, for some reason, with this, I don’t think he will. Whatever Gemini said to him, it seems to be enough.

Even if it means Syn’s probably sitting there, devising other ways to torment me, I pick up a new slice of pizza. The knots in my stomach are easing off, but this is the richest food I’ve eaten for weeks. Despite Syn’s presence in front of me

and the desperate urge to get out of there as quickly as I can, I eat slowly.

When I'm finished, I stand, hesitating for a moment before walking up to their table.

Syn looks at me without raising his head. "What?"

Ignoring him, I hold my hand out to Gemini. "My bag."

Frowning, Gemini looks at me. Then what I'm asking seems to dawn on him, and he reaches down beside his chair and picks my bag up before handing it over.

"Thank you." My gratitude is actually for the meal, and I don't know if he realizes that as he nods, but I'm not about to clarify anything. Instead, I hoist the bag over my shoulder and leave.

By the time I get back to my room, I'm exhausted. But before I can allow myself to relax, I check every inch of my room. Only once I'm certain that there's no hidden 'presents', that nothing is damaged or missing, do I finally sink onto my bed.

It's early, but I don't care.

I have no energy or drive to do anything else, and finally feeling full, all I want to do is sleep. If I'm lucky, I might even get a solid five hours before the stupid beeping starts up again.

Only because the room is still so cold do I even bother to change into a pair of joggers and a sweater, otherwise, I'd have crawled straight under the comforter. As it is, I manage to fall asleep easily.



When I wake, it's not because of the beeping.

Sleep has made me groggy, and my throat is dry, but there's a sensation that has settled over me and something

doesn't feel right.

Rubbing my eyes as I try to shake the sleepiness, I roll over and stare at the light coming in through the door.

Bolting upright, I'm awake, adrenaline and panic mixing together to fuel my actions, ready to reach out and turn the light on.

But as I sit up, I find myself staring at a hooded figure, their face hidden behind a mask.

I take a deep breath to fill my lungs, ready to scream, ready to fight back, but the figure raises their arms, I'm drenched in something cold and wet.

Instinctively, I bring my arms up to protect my head, even though I'm already drenched, leaving a small enough gap to keep an eye on my attacker. But as I cough out whatever was thrown on me—my brain not yet registering taste—I scream, sending the person bolting from the room, dropping something that crashes to the floor.

Before I can reach for my lamp, a figure is back in the doorway.

I scream again and then the room is thrown into light, and I can't see a thing.

“Holy shit... Tori, it's me. It's Penny.” Hands are on my arms, trying to stop me from hitting. “It's Penny, I'm here to help.”

Penny...

Recognizing her voice, I stop fighting, squinting between the light and whatever is covering my face. Through a red haze, her face comes into focus.

“Where are you hurt?” she asks me. “Where is the blood coming from?”

“Blood?” I look down at my hands; they're covered in red liquid. Beneath them, the blue comforter is soaked, that the liquid still looks red there too. “I don't think it's mine,” I tell her as I run my hands over myself. “It was thrown over me.”

Laughter from the doorway has both of us looking over at the crowd of girls who are watching, their phones out and recording.

“You can all fuck off.” Penny leaves my side to storm over to the door and slam it shut in their faces. As she turns around, she spots something on the ground and picks it up.

A bucket.

But as she looks back at me, her gaze drifts over my head, and her lips part and her complexion pales.

Slowly, I turn. On the wall above my bed, written with the same blood, is one word:

Murderer.

XXXV

Tori

Closing my eyes, I take in several deep breaths. There are a dozen things I should be doing, starting with getting myself out of this blood-soaked bed, but right now, I can't move.

If I do, I'm going to cry.

And if I start crying, I'm not sure I'll be able to stop.

"Tori?"

"Mmmm?"

"Where's your phone?"

I turn to my dresser, but it's not there. And then I remember I pretty much crashed when I walked in, and the phone is still in my bag. "My bag. Why?"

"To call the police. I left mine in—"

"No," I say, shaking my head. "Don't."

Penny's face contorts in anger. "Fuck that. You were attacked. The police—"

"Won't do shit," I tell her. "I didn't see who it was, and we both know *nobody* saw anything. Besides, they don't really have a great track record of finding the truth."

Carefully, I wipe my face to remove the blood dripping from my eyebrows and nose. Then, with a weary sigh, I finally pull back the covers and step out of my bed. Blood drips everywhere, but I just stare at my open bathroom door rather than move through it.

"I can clean this up. You go shower."

“I just need to psyche myself up,” I mutter. The air in the room is freezing, and now seeping through my wet clothes, making me shiver. But I still have no desire to take an ice-cold shower, even if I am covered in blood.

“For what?” Penny asks. She walks past me into the room, frowning as she turns the light on. Glancing back to me, her expression is more relaxed. “It’s clear. You’re okay.”

“There’s a problem with my hot water.”

Penny glances back at the shower then turns back to me, her eyes widening in understanding. “Yeah, I’m done with this shit. This ends now.”

“Penny, stay out of it.”

“No, us.” She moves her hands to her hips and glares at me. “You. I get what you’re doing, and I get why you think you need to do it, but enough is enough. Unless you want to look me in the eye and tell me you don’t want to be my friend for any other reason than Synclair Keyingham, we’re done with this bullshit.”

“You had to go through this when you were in high school,” I tell her.

Penny arches an eyebrow. “At no point did anyone come close to going full Carrie on me.” When I don’t get the reference, she rolls her eyes. “What I went through sucked. It was one of the worst points in my life.”

I give her a pointed look.

“Except I didn’t do it alone, because Jake and Nicole didn’t ditch me. And the fact you’re going through worse? Yeah, you’re not doing that alone.” She glances around the room and shivers. “Why the hell is it so cold in here.”

“Cold-blooded killers must be kept cold.”

Pursing her lips, Penny stares at me. Then she walks over to my desk to grab my bag resting her weight briefly back against the wooden surface to wrestle the bag clasp open. Once done, she moves briskly over to my drawers and pulls out some clean underwear, pajamas, and a few items of

clothing, then stuffs them into the bag. Once closed back up, she walks up to me, ignores the blood, and grabs my hand.

Once I'm on my feet, she's leading me towards the door.

“What are you doing?”

“You're sleeping with me from now on.”

Just as she's about to open the door, I stop, pulling her back. “Syn put a camera outside my room.”

“Good. We can point it out to the police to look up who did this.”

“Penny!”

Turning back, Penny's expression softens. “Okay, we're not going to the police. You're right. It's a waste of time. But you can't stay here. Your bed is ruined, and all this?” she gestures to the blood. “It's bad enough. No one needs a cold shower in a cold room on top of that. Syn can do what he wants, but if you're still here, and you're still fighting despite all of this, your best friend is staying with you.”

“Best friend?”

“If you have another one, you'd best give them a call and tell them to show up.” She looks at me, and I'm not sure if she's ready to fight an imaginary person or not.

“I've not spoken to you for weeks.”

Penny whips her head back with an exaggerated sigh. “Because of some bullshit noble bullshit. Which was bullshit, by the way.”

Despite everything, a grin starts to form on my face. “Was it bullshit?”

“Bull. Shit.”

The smile slips from my face as I look back at the writing on the wall. “I'm sorry. I am. I just—”

“Nope.” Penny holds a hand up. “We're done with this discussion. Now, we're going to my room, you're having a hot

shower, and then, if you're still awake, I'm whipping up some hot chocolate, and you can tell me everything I've missed over the last few weeks. Okay?"

"Okay."

Penny finally opens the door. There are people lingering in the hall and doorways, and the phones are up before I'm even out of my room. Although I want to keep my head up and act like this wasn't the most embarrassing and terrifying experience of my life, I duck my head and scurry after Penny, following her into her room.

Little has changed. It's still like a set from the Barbie movie. And right now, it's a welcome sight. As is the warmth, even though I'm still shivering. I walk through her room to her bathroom, trying not to drip anywhere, not stopping until I'm in the shower.

Moments later, Penny appears in the bathroom, replacing the towels hanging up with fresh ones. They're hot pink too. She disappears into the bedroom and then reappears again, this time, with my bag and a giant paper bag from Alexander McQueen. "You can put those..." She points to the clothes I'm wearing. "In here." She sets the paper bag down beside the shower and then leaves, shutting the door behind her.

Carefully, trying not to splatter the white tiles, I pull the sodden clothes off me, ringing them out before I drop them in the bag Penny left me. I've barely glanced in any mirror as I've passed them, and I have no desire to start now. Instead, I turn on the water, sighing in the bliss of taking my first warm shower in weeks.

I stay in long past the water runs clear, waiting for the heat to take the chill away from my bones. It takes about that long for my heart to finally slow, and my thoughts to stop spiraling.

When I leave Penny's bathroom, I find her in bed, typing furiously on her phone, but she puts it down when she sees me. "The hairdryer is out." She points to her desk.

As I'm drying my hair, she's up and moving to the small bookshelf she has on the other side of the room. Although our rooms have the same design, she's got so much furniture and appliances compared to mine that it's hard to tell. She has a small fridge and a fancy hot drinks machine that she uses to make us mugs of hot chocolate.

What I don't realize until I've finished drying my hair and take a drink, is that she's also got alcohol stashed away. If I could afford it, and I knew it wouldn't be stolen or reported, I'd probably have my own stash.

"Irish," Penny says, smiling after taking a sip of her drink. "Although I don't know if anything becomes Irish if you add alcohol, or if it's supposed to be a specific type."

"Can't say I care." The alcohol warms the inside of my stomach, and I finally start to feel warm inside as well as out.

We drink in silence for a while before Penny sets her cup down and folds her arms. "Look, don't take this as me telling you to leave, but is it really worth it, being here? I'm sure I don't know half of what you've been put through, but the little I've seen and heard?"

"I get why Syn hates me, and hate it with a fiery burning passion, but I also get why he's got everyone targeting me." I cup the mug in my hands, enjoying the warmth. "I went to see my brother a few weeks ago, and I'm absolutely convinced he didn't kill anyone. Which means, someone else did, and Cole's taking the blame for some stupid reason I can't even understand."

"But anyone who was here then would have graduated last year." Penny points out. "How can you find who did it if no one is here?"

I shrug. "That's not changed since the beginning of the semester. I came here because if you look online and try to find out any information, there's nothing with any sort of details. No descriptions of suspects, no location of exactly where it happened, no witness statements or interviews from others in the school at the time. Absolutely fucking nothing! I figured a murder on campus would be like an urban legend

and everyone would know what happened.” I let out a dry laugh. “I’ve walked past so many people and heard them whisper—or not—about how I’m the sister, or a murderer, and yet no one seems to be able to say *anything* about it other than that. I don’t know what else I’m supposed to do. Where else I can look when everything has been covered up to the point people don’t even seem to have any memory of the event happening at all.”

Pursing her lips, Penny nods. “The last few weeks, I’ve been digging too. As much as I can when most people aren’t talking to me.”

“I’d like to say I’m surprised, but I’m not. They barely say anything to me at all but are more than happy to allow me to hear their opinion on me like they can’t find anything else to talk about.”

“People don’t seem to like it when I tell them to fuck off if I hear them talking shit about you.”

Guilt floods me, and I bite my lip. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“Isn’t it just the opposite side of the coin to what you were doing?” she asks. “But anyway, I was trying to find out anything, and you’re right. There’s nothing.”

“Actually, I found something,” I tell her. I get up to grab my bag, pulling out the now dog-eared newspaper. “This is the first edition.”

Before I can show it to her, there’s a knock at the door.

Penny rolls her eyes at me then marches to her door, yanking it open. “Fuck off...”

As the venom in her voice dies, I step to the side for a better view. My mouth drops open as I see Dr. Wright at her door. Over her shoulder, he stares at me. Even though I’m wearing clothes, the way he looks at me makes me feel like I’m still wrapped in my towel.

Mouth still pressed into a thin line, he drops his gaze to Penny. “Your greetings need work.”

“What are you doing here?” Penny asks him, finding her voice again.

“Someone reported a student—Ms. Anderson—had vandalized her room.”

“Vandalized? She was attacked.”

As Penny’s hands settled on her hips, squaring up to the professor towering above her, I walk over and put a hand on her shoulder. In the doorway I can see that the audience is still present in the hallway.

“If Ms. Anderson was attacked, why was security not informed?” Dr. Wright’s gaze drifts back to me and he looks me up and down.

I sigh. “Because people like you either won’t believe me, or will say I deserved it.”

“Show me your room.”

“Do you have a search warrant?” I ask.

“I don’t need one.”

As I start to turn so that I can get my key, the newspaper is taken from my hands. When I look back, Dr. Wright is reading the front page. “Give that back.” I don’t care how rude I sound, that newspaper is the only thing close to a piece of evidence that I have.

Dr. Wright looks back at me. “Your room.”

My hands are shaking as I pick up my keys. Hoping that my compliance will get the newspaper returned to me, I do as he says and go to open my door. I step inside and flick the light on. The blood—or whatever the red liquid is—is still wet and glistening.

Still holding tightly to the newspaper, the professor follows me into my room. He looks around, then down to the floor where red footprints lead around the bed to the door, their print getting fainter as they get closer to us.

Rolling up the newspaper, he looks at me. “I want you in my office at 8 a.m. tomorrow morning.” Still holding onto

the newspaper, he steps out into the hallway and looks around. “This incident is now being dealt with. You can all continue with whatever you were doing.”

A few people lower their phones, but hardly anyone moves. Dr. Wright walks off, taking my newspaper with him.

“Tori?” Penny says, gently.

I don’t respond, because if I open my mouth now, I’m sure a scream is going to come out.

XXXVI

Tori

I skip breakfast, so I have no idea how pissed Syn is. Given the videos circulating social media, and the camera outside my room, I'm certain he knows I spent last night with Penny.

As it's early on a Saturday, the campus is deserted. After spending most of the night ranting with Penny, I'm feeling a little calmer. While I am with the professor, she's going to look for the guy who wrote the article.

Standing outside of Dr. Wright's office, I take a moment before I knock on his door. The damage to my room wasn't caused by me, and if he's bothered to watch any of the videos, he can tell that, but this professor has it out for me too. Last night, we looked at the university rules and the last drop of hope rides on the fact that if he decides it's my fault, I'd at least need a hearing before being expelled.

I knock on the door and then enter.

Dr. Wright is standing behind his desk, staring out of the window. I close the door behind me and walk over, but he doesn't turn around straight away. When he does, his expression is unreadable. He moves and sits down in his large leather seat then points to a less comfortable one on the other side of the desk. "Sit."

In silence, I do as he says.

"Why don't you tell me why you're here?"

"I didn't do it," I start.

He raises his hand. "I didn't ask if you did or didn't do it. I asked you to tell me why you're here."

Trying to keep my emotions in check, I place my hands on my knees and take a deep breath. “Is there any point when you’ve already made your mind up?”

Pursing his lips, Dr. Wright clasps his hands together and lowers them to his desk. “Ms. Anderson, why are you here?”

Since being here, it feels like I’ve been stuck on a rollercoaster in the dark, not knowing where the ups and downs are, or when I can get off. After last night, I’m already exhausted, but having to explain myself again, to someone who clearly doesn’t want to listen, has me slumping back in the chair. “Do you think my answer has changed from last time?”

He says nothing, just staring back at me.

“Because I don’t believe that my brother killed James Patrick Keyingham despite his confession. I have spent the last two years trying to find out what happened that night, and all I find is nothing. My brother won’t tell me what happened, my mom won’t tell me what happened in court. I’ve requested the official documents and transcripts, yet despite proceedings lasting days, the papers are almost blank. There are no witnesses. Cops involved in the case all seem to have retired at the same time. I swear, it’s like someone is trying their best to wipe the whole thing out of existence. So, I’m here. I’m here because this was the last place JP was seen alive, and somewhere on this campus is where he was killed.”

“What happens if you find all this evidence and it just confirms that your brother did kill someone?” Dr. Wright asks.

Glancing out of the window, I sigh. “Then at least I get a reason behind it. Cole wouldn’t kill someone. If he did, it would have to be an accident, and if it was an accident, why didn’t he say so?” I look back at the professor, but his face is still expressionless. “He just confessed...”

One of the things I regret most is not asking questions sooner.

Why?

If he hated JP, or if he felt JP had wronged him in some way, that would make sense. Hell, even psychopathic serial killers who showed no remorse are able to say they did it because they wanted to.

Cole didn't even say that.

“And what happens if you discover your brother killed more than one person?”

“Are you talking about this Lucy Barnes again?” Dr. Wright's cold brown eyes don't flinch as glare back at him. I throw my hands in the air. “Then I accept that too.”

Finally, the professor decides to end his strange staring competition and stands. “Very well. Come with me.”

“Where?”

Dr. Wright doesn't answer, instead grabbing his jacket from the back of his chair before he starts walking towards the door. This is the first time I realize he's not wearing the more formal clothes I'm used to seeing him in. Today he's wearing a pair of dark jeans, running shoes, and a cream, knitted sweater.

I stand and hurry after him. In the hallway, he stops to lock his office door behind us, but he then continues to walk out of the building.

“Where are we going?” I ask when we don't head in the direction of the dean's office. I'd assumed his plan was to report me and have me expelled, using what had happened to my room as the reason.

We reached the edge of the parking lot and I slowed, looking around. There was no one else around. The lights on an SUV a few feet away flashed, and I stopped. “Where are you taking me?”

Dr. Wright kept walking until he got to the door, then he looked over the hood at me. “Do you think I'm going to drive you to the middle of the woods and kill you?”

I'd be lying if I said that thought hadn't occurred to me.

Resting his hand on the top of the vehicle, he let out a long breath. “Text Penny.”

My hand was already wrapped around my phone, ready to call her as I ran. “And tell her what?”

“That you’re going to Manhattan with me and you’ll be back tonight. Feel free to take a picture, though you might want to head to the back of the vehicle for the license plates.”

The mental brain power it took to understand this man was ridiculous. I pull out my phone, and while I don’t bother to send a picture as he suggested, I do send Penny a text. Ignoring the barrage of texts I suddenly get in reply, I slip my phone back into my pocket and then get into the SUV.

“I’m fairly certain I’m losing my mind,” I mutter as I fasten my seatbelt.

The words are loud enough to be heard, but Dr. Wright doesn’t respond. Instead, he gets in, fastens his seatbelt, and starts the car. The radio comes on and Beyonce starts playing making this whole situation seem even more bizarre.

It’s not until we’re off the campus and on the highway that the professor finally turns the volume down. “I’m here looking for answers too.”

I turn my head and look at him. “Lucy Barnes?”

“You hear of people disappearing without a trace, but in this day and age, that’s virtually impossible. Everyone has a digital footprint, even if they’re not actively leaving it.”

“Then why do you think my brother killed her?” I asked. “What makes you think she’s dead and that she didn’t just decide she’d had enough and gone off the grid?”

He doesn’t answer.

I stare at him, but when I realize he’s not going to say anything, I roll my eyes and focus on where we’re driving.

Despite his earlier comment, I don’t really think he’s going to murder me. But I also have absolutely no clue what this little road trip is about.

Eventually, the familiar sight of New York City appears, growing as we get closer. As he said, he takes the exit for Manhattan and we navigate through the streets which are surprisingly busy for a Saturday morning. Eventually, he pulls into a spot and parks up.

I remain silent, following him as we walk down the street and into a coffee shop where he buys us both breakfast. Although I'm both confused and nervous, this is the first meal I've had in a while that I fully trust to eat, so I'm not missing out.

Dr. Wright sips on his coffee, eating his food slowly.

By the time I'm nearly finished, he's still halfway through his bagel. "Are you going to tell me why we're here, Dr. Wright?"

"Payne."

"Excuse me?" I say before I realize he's saying his name.

"We're off campus. Call me Payne."

Setting my fork down, I sit back. "Is this a date? Because if so, you really need to work on your flirting game."

Payne doesn't crack a smile. "Lucy Barnes."

Without vocalizing the word "stop", I hold up both of my hands before bringing them back down to rest in my lap. If he thought that I was flirting with him...?

But that would mean Lucy was his girlfriend?

"I am trying to find her, or what happened to her. And I think your brother has the answers."

"And this is?" I gesture to the empty plate in front of me. "A bribe to get me to convince my brother to speak to you?"

"While I would like to speak to him, no, this is not a bribe. This is exactly what it looks like: breakfast." He takes a sip of his coffee.

I roll my eyes. “Why does it have to be so difficult to get answers to anything?”

“Like you, I’ve been looking for information. And like you, I’ve found nothing. Neither have the P.I.’s that I’ve hired. Nothing until this.” He leans forward so he can pull something from his back pocket. He unfolds a piece of paper and sets it on the table beside our plates. It’s the front page of the newspaper he took from me last night.

Before he can stop me, I snatch it up, quickly folding it and putting it in my own pocket.

“Last night I was able to track down the author of the article. I messaged him and he agreed to meet me, today.”

Excitement rips through me and I sit up, leaning forward. “You did?” Then I frown. “And you brought me along?”

“I found Arthur after speaking to his sister. She gave me his number, but warned me to stay away.”

That was reassuring. “Why?”

Payne nods. “Last night was the first time I’ve ever seen that version of the paper. The updated version was written by another student. If I hadn’t seen that, I would never have connected any of this. The original author, Arthur Willsberg, was a sophomore working on the Ledger at the time of the murder. A few weeks later, he was expelled.”

“Really? What did he do? Everyone seems to get away with...” I stop myself before saying murder, the phrase more automatic than intentional. The various activities beneath the church come to mind. “A lot of things that should probably get them arrested, not just expelled.”

“According to the college records, he had been caught cheating.” Payne points in the general direction of the pocket containing the article. “That had much more significant consequences.”

“What do you mean?”

“His mother was the Chief of Staff in the Department of Education. Or she was. After he was expelled, the scandal hit the news and his mother had to resign.”

Strangely, I didn't care. Arthur was in college with my brother, and he was willing to talk to us about what happened.

I can feel the hope growing inside of me and I try to smother it. There have been too many dead ends that I can't allow myself to get excited about this. Not yet.

“Where are we meeting him?”

Payne shrugs, taking another sip of his coffee before answering. “He refused to give me a time or location, other than he would be in touch before lunch with a more specific meeting place in the city.”

We sit in the coffee shop for two more hours before Payne receives a text message. “Weird,” he mutters as he picks up the phone and reads the message.

“What's weird?”

He hands the phone to me.

Withheld number: LOCKER 414. CODE 1203.

It's followed by an address on 2nd Ave. I read the short message again and then look at Payne. “Let's go.”

Taking his phone back, Payne rolls his eyes. “I don't think Arthur is going to be waiting in a locker, Tori.”

“One way to find out.” I pull out my own phone. The battery is already half dead, but I'm able to pull the address up on a map. It's only about a twenty-minute walk. “Come on.” I grab my jacket off the back of my chair and pull it on as I hurry to the door.

Payne follows just behind as I weave through the crowded street. Just before we get to the address from the message, he grabs the back of my jacket and pulls me back. “Just slow down, Tori.”

Considering he was the one who reached out to Arthur and decided to bring me along, I can't help but arch my

eyebrow at him. “Why? Payne, regardless of what he tells us, this is more than I’ve had in... ever.”

“I agreed to meet with him, not take part in a scavenger hunt.”

He glances up at the sign above our heads, and for the first time, with his hesitation, he actually seems like a human.

Lowering his head to look back at me, he frowns. “This is a random locker warehouse. Not a coffee shop or a café, or even an art gallery. Just a very questionable looking store where I wouldn’t dare leave any of my belongings.”

“You think this is a waste of time?” I ask him. “You’re the one that messaged him.”

“Yes.” Payne pulls her phone back out, brows furrowed as he scrolls through something on his screen. “His sister gave me his number. I sent a WhatsApp message saying I had read his article and I wanted to talk. Arthur—assuming it is Arthur—replied on a different number and said he would only be willing to talk if we did it on his terms.” He shakes his head. “Maybe I was too eager. I think he—or someone else—is fucking around with us.”

At the last moment, I stop myself from punching his arm in frustration. We might be on first name terms, but we’re not that close. With my fists still clenched, I close my eyes and count to ten before opening them. “Maybe it is, but we’re not going to know until we go inside.”

He stares at me instead of responding.

Taking a step back, I sweep my arm to the side. “Then if you want to go, go. I’ll take it from here, because this might be nothing. But it could also be *something*.”

“You want me to just leave you?” he asks in disbelief.

“It’s a public place and it’s the middle of the day. I don’t think going in there will end in me being kidnapped, if that’s what you’re worried about?”

Payne lets out a long sigh. “There’s no need for the dramatics.”

That's rich, coming from him.

“Whatever. The point is, I might only have one shot at this, and this could be it. I have to try. If you don't feel right about this, I completely understand. You can go and I'll make my own way—”

“You can stop talking now.” Payne looks at me like I am annoying him. He walks into the building, and I follow him.

XXXVII

Tori

The storage facility is on the ground floor. The room is long and narrow, and feels more like a laundromat but with various-sized lockers instead of washing machines. Near the front is a small terminal that Payne walks over to. He types in the locker number and then the code.

Moments later, halfway down the other side of the room, a door pings open. Over there, the lockers are small, and the one that opens looks like it would just about fit a shoe box in it.

“Well, I don’t think there’s a body in there,” I joke as I walk over.

There isn’t.

There’s just a large brown envelope with something in it that’s big enough to make a bump. I pull the envelope out and then carefully open it. Inside is a cell phone and a piece of paper.

TAKE A SELFIE AND SEND IT TO THE SAVED NUMBER.

“Really?” Payne rolls his eyes but takes the phone from me.

“What are you doing?”

He points at the note in my hands. “I’m the one who messaged him. He’s going to expect my face.” Payne turns the phone on and waits for it to let him to open the camera. He holds the phone out, and then raises his other hand in front of him, flipping off the camera.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” I ask.

Payne shrugs. “He didn’t say to smile.”

He sends the message, and then we wait for a response.

When none comes, I arch an eyebrow. “Maybe you shouldn’t have done that.”

“If the guy is jerking us around, he’s never going to reply anyway.”

Maybe he’s right about that, but I’m hoping if that’s the case, that was the decision all along, and he really hadn’t just pissed him off to change his mind.

I double check, making sure there’s nothing else in the envelope, and then I stick it back in the locker and close the door.

As I turn back around, the phone in Payne’s hand beeps.

Together, we read the response.

40.726241, -73.982806. 2 HOURS. TURN YOUR PHONES OFF. DO NOT USE FLIGHT MODE. USE THIS PHONE FOR NAVIGATION.

“Coordinates?” Payne says.

I take the phone from him and quickly search the coordinates. They lead to a spot in a park, only a ten-minute walk from where we are now.

Although I wouldn’t exactly say alarm bells are ringing, the idea of turning our phones off and waiting around in a park does leave me feeling uneasy.

Before I can walk away, Payne starts typing again. He’s already hit send before I can stop him.

Not unless you can give me a good reason why.

WHAT YOU THINK YOU ARE LOOKING FOR IS SCRAPING THE TIP OF AN ICEBERG. THIS IS FOR YOUR PROTECTION AS MUCH AS MINE. I WILL EXPLAIN EVERYTHING SOON.

OK. But I am not waiting two hours. I will call when I arrive, and you will answer then.

“You think he’s going to agree to that?” I ask.

Payne shrugs. “Contrary to what you believe, it’s not my wish to lead you into a dangerous situation. It’s not just me, but he doesn’t know that.”

This time, it’s me that doesn’t say anything. Despite what he said, he *did* bring me along.

The response doesn’t come instantly. Just as I’m considering whether we should go anyway, the phone finally beeps again.

VIDEO CALL. CLICK THIS LINK.

“Now?” I frown at the screen.

“I think he means from the park,” he replies. “Let’s go.”

“Are you turning your phone off? He’s not going to know, right?”

“Not a chance,” he tells me.

From where we are, the route is almost a straight line, and it doesn’t take long to get to the park. Although the weather is bright and sunny, there’s a chill to the October air. I haven’t seen many people without a coat or jacket while we’ve been here. Consequently, the park is quite empty when we arrive.

Payne navigates us to as close to the coordinates as he can get, standing under a large tree off the path. Then he looks at me. “Are you ready to do this?”

When I nod, he lifts the phone and clicks the link from the message.

I stand to the side, out of sight.

The phone doesn’t ring long before it connects.

“You’re going to make me have my camera on, but not you?” Payne asks, his tone dry.

“Flip the camera and then slowly turn around,” a voice responds.

Payne glances up at me, irritated. Then he taps the screen.

“Who is that?”

“That’s Tori,” Payne tells him. “She’s needs to talk to you too.”

When there’s no response, I look over the top of the phone at Payne. “Did he hang up?”

Payne shakes his head. “I don’t think so. The call is still connected.”

“Continue turning around,” the voice from the call instructs.

Payne does as he says, turning slowly on the spot until he’s back to facing me again.

“You can flip the camera back.”

I hurry over to join Payne’s side. The screen is still black. “How do we know you’re who you say you are?” I ask.

Another moment passes, and then the screen bursts into color. The image is of a guy not much older than me. Behind him is a white wall with nothing on it.

“What’s with all the games?” Payne asks him.

“Who is your friend?”

“My name is Victoria Reynolds. My brother is Cole.”

Arthur turns his head to the side, closing his eyes. “Fuck.”

“Don’t hang up,” I cry. “Please. You obviously know who Cole is. He’s in prison, and I don’t think he did it, only I can’t find any details about what really happened. You reported it, and I just need someone to tell me what happened. You knew why we wanted to talk to you, and you still agreed, so please talk. *Please.*”

Arthur looks back to the camera. He rubs at his temple and then sighs. “I will tell you this once. I will not go on record, I will not be swayed to go to the police to make a statement, and I will deny all knowledge of this call, which, for the record, cannot be traced back to me.”

“That’s fine,” I quickly tell him, trying to stop myself from snatching the phone from Payne.

“But you also have to understand that this is bigger than you can begin to comprehend. The newspaper that the article was in—the original article—had the print run stopped, the article amended, and every copy snatched up before classes had officially been cancelled. When I found out and complained to the editor, they told me the decision was out of their hands.”

“It didn’t occur to you that you’d printed an article without referencing your sources, or that your *facts* were circumstantial at best?” Payne asks.

Arthur’s eyes narrow. “I reported the truth, and when I did, they didn’t print a retraction, they completely wiped all existence of it. *Then* I got an anonymous phone call telling me that if I knew what was good for me, I’d let it go. It might have only been the Keyingham Ledger, but I was a journalist, and knew there was a story. So, I started my own investigation. Three days later, I got another phone call telling me I had been warned and now I’d suffer the consequences. The next thing I knew, I was being kicked out of college for cheating.”

“You didn’t cheat?” Payne asks.

“No,” Arthur responds with a touch of venom in his voice. “Never. I was set up. And when I was about to do something about it, I got the third and final call telling me that if I continued to pursue this, my mom wouldn’t just be resigning because of my scandal, she’d be facing a public enquiry and prison time for abusing her position.”

Before Payne can say anything else and make Arthur hang up on us, I elbow him in the side. “They had dirt on your mom?” I ask Arthur.

“My mom is the most by-the-book person I know. They had as much *dirt* on her as they did on me. They hacked into my computer and planted evidence.” He sits back in his chair, ruefully shaking his head. “My life was ruined. I’ve got no college education, and nowhere will hire me because of that scandal. My family won’t speak to me, and my friends turned their backs on me before I even packed up my things.”

I could relate to that. “I’m sorry, I am. But if that happened, surely it means you were onto something?”

Glancing away, Arthur runs a hand over his face, his stubble scratching against his palm loud enough for us to hear. “Something... The timelines, the statements, and the little evidence I did manage to see—they didn’t line up. JP’s body was found by the campus gates, but according to a doctor I spoke to, the headwound would have produced a lot of blood. There was almost nothing there.”

“So he was killed somewhere else?” I ask.

“He had to have been, and he was already dead when he was put there.”

I take a deep breath to keep myself calm before asking my next question. “Do you think my brother—Cole—do you think he killed JP?”

Arty goes silent, pursing his lips as he stares at the camera.

“Arthur?” Payne says.

Finally, he shakes his head. “That night was the Elite’s Inaugural Ball, which is their ridiculous name for the night they fully welcome their pledges into the organization, which is obviously a fraternity, but they’ve gotten out of the title because it’s co-ed.” He rolls his eyes. “That’s the last place JP was seen. He was partying and drinking with everyone that night. Literally no one could tell me when he left, or who with. Hours later, he was found at the gate.”

“And my brother?”

“I was at that party—everyone was. I remember talking to your brother and his girlfriend—”

“Girlfriend?” A bad feeling hits me. “Lucy Barnes?” I ask, unable to look at Payne.

Arthur nods. “He was there like I was. To party. There was a point where we were joking about not being good enough to be a member. Your brother knew JP from sight only. They weren’t friends, but they weren’t enemies. I couldn’t think of a reason for him to kill JP. Besides, when I saw him a little while later, he was so drunk, I was surprised he was still standing.”

“At the time of the murder?” I ask.

Taking a deep breath, Arthur shakes his head. “Here’s the thing. When I saw your brother, it was maybe one in the morning. JP was found a little after five. In theory, he could have sobered up enough to attack him, but I doubt he’d have been able to move the body, especially without attracting attention.”

“So someone else killed him, and Cole took the blame?” Payne suggests. “Why would he do that? And what about the girlfriend?”

“I don’t know.” Arthur admits. “You’d need to ask him that.”

“If Cole didn’t do it, who do you think did?” I ask instead.

Sucking in a long breath through his teeth, Arthur sits back in the chair again. “And that’s the million-dollar question.”

“You must have some suspicions,” Payne says, the frown back on his face. “There must have been something specific that got you expelled.”

The speed at which Arthur’s expression changes is so fast it gives me whiplash, and there’s now fear in his eyes. “I think I’ve said enough.”

“Arthur, please,” I say quickly, before he has a chance to hang up. “Just tell me what you know, and I’ll do the rest.”

“The rest?” He laughs, but it sounds empty. “The *rest*, whatever you think that is, is a short list. Whoever did it was most likely a member of the Elite. The only members of that group I managed to get reliable alibies from were Pippa Rushmore, Collette Highgroves, Preston du Pont, and Phillippe Wentworth. The rest all had the same responses. *Exactly* the same. The answer lies in the Elite, and you...” Through the screen, he looks me up and down. “You are not Elite material, even if your brother wasn’t in prison. And even if you could get close enough that you could be trusted, you’d be looking at people who’ve since graduated, and good luck getting near them.”

“What if I could?” I ask.

Arthur laughs again, but it sounds more hysterical. “I suspect the answers you’re looking for would bring them all down. And they’re going to do everything they can to stop that from happening.”

“All the more reason to try.”

His laugh turns into a cough, but he grows serious and looks at the screen. “Getting into the Elite would be signing your life away.”

“Synclair Keyingham is already doing what he can to destroy it,” I tell him. “Which is why I’m going to go in there and get the answers I need. And if it destroys them in the process, so be it.”

Tilting his head, Arthur stares at me. Finally, he leans forward and starts typing on the computer he’s sitting in front of. Moments later, the phone in Payne’s hand beeps. “You have one shot, and this might help. Use it well.”

Payne clicks on the message, and a video starts playing. There’s no sound, but the image is clear enough, even though it seems to have been taken from behind something as a part of the screen has a black shadow to it.

On his knees, his face completely visible, is JP. He’s naked, completely erect, with his hands tied behind his back. A figure comes into view, although his head is cut off so he’s

not identifiable. JP's grinning, his eyes wide as the guy walks over.

Then the guy starts to urinate all over him—over JP's dick, his chest, and into his open mouth. When he's done, he steps even closer to him until JP's almost hidden, but it's obvious he's busy giving the guy a blowjob.

I glance at Payne who looks as shocked as I do. Returning to the call, I frown at Arthur. "How did you get this?"

"You have it," Arthur says. "It didn't come from me, and I'm not telling you how I got it."

"What are we going to do with this?" Payne asks him. "JP's dead, and so what if he's gay or bi, or whatever? No one is going to care if we out him."

Arthur shrugs. "You know everything I know. What you do next is up to you. Personally, I'd say get the fuck out of James Keyingham University while you can still be accepted into another college, and stay as far away from anyone associated with the Elite as possible. Do not contact me again."

And then he hangs up.

As Payne lowers the phone, I let out a long breath. "I guess that's it."

Turning, he shakes his head. "Not yet."

I look at him, my eyes growing wide. "You're not suggesting..."

"Yeah, you heard him. He doesn't think Cole killed JP, but he thinks the answer lies with the Elite." He puts his hands on his hips, glancing back up at the trees above us. When he looks back to me, I can see the determination. "That's where we go next."

Inside my head, my thoughts are going a million miles a minute. When did this suddenly become a *we* situation? "The answers might be there, but they're not just going to start talking, Payne."

“But we have this.” He holds up the phone. “We use this; tell them we’ll release the footage if they don’t start talking.”

Much as I want answers, JP was already the victim. As far as I was aware, the world wasn’t aware of his sexual preference, and it seemed unfair to out him.

I also wasn’t sure that was going to work. “The only people the Elite will talk to is the Elite. This isn’t just going up against the Elite. It’s going into them. *Become* one of them. Arthur’s right. You are never going to become one of them. Hell, I can’t be. Members are legacy and legacy only.”

“So you’re saying it’s impossible? You’re giving up?”

My thoughts start to slow down and a strange calmness sets over me. “Nearly impossible.” I reach for the phone, taking it from him.

Payne shakes his head, his hand gripping mine and the phone before I can put it in my pocket. “That’s the only leverage we have.”

“Exactly.”

Confusion slowly washes over Payne but he doesn’t let go. “Huh?”

“I have one shot. The smallest of possible chances. And you’re going to need to trust me.”

Still holding onto me, Payne takes a step back and looks me up and down. “You want to join them? You think, after what you just said, they’ll accept you?” He raises our hands and the phone. “This is our only card. You think this is the best way to play it?”

“Yes.”

Honestly, I don’t think his way is any better.

His grip starts to loosen, and then he shakes his head. “I need to know what happened to Lucy. How do I know you’re not going to lie about what you find to protect your brother?”

Because at this point, I know there is something bigger at play. It had seemed too ludicrous to even consider it before, but after talking to Arthur, I'm sure someone was making things—evidence... people... the truth—disappear. Going in is crazy and probably dangerous, but somehow everything is connected and it all seems to start with the Elite.

I look directly into Payne's dark, narrowed eyes. "You're going to have to trust me."

XXXVIII

Tori

The moment I return to my dorm, I'm pounced on by Penny.

My room, as I expected, is exactly as I left it. As I tell Penny everything, she helps me flip my mattress over, then I strip the bedding. I replace it with a spare set Penny had brought with her. By the time I've finished, I've clearly stunned Penny into silence.

"Tori, are you even thinking clearly?" she finally asks. "I mean, really thinking of the consequences. Let's say for one moment that *somehow* you get them to accept you into the Elite, you would literally be walking into the belly of the beast."

I'm sitting at my desk diligently doing my makeup. "I know," I tell her, feeling strangely calm. "But there's no teeth or claws inside a beast's belly."

"No, there's just stomach acid," Penny blurts out. "Stomach acid that will break you down until you're literally shit out of the other end in some unrecognizable pile."

Unless I can find something to cut my way out of there and destroy the beast in the process...

Despite Penny's reluctance, and her attempts to get me to change my mind as I make an effort to style my hair, my decision had been made. I change into some clean clothes, promise her that I'll be okay, and then leave.

This is the last weekend before midterms, but while the parking lot is full, there's little movement as I walk across campus. The dorms are split. Mine, on one side, and on the other, the exclusive dorms where only the members of the Elite live.

I explored the campus the first week I was here, including the dorms over here, but I've not been back since. Even so, I know exactly which building I'll find Syn in. Syn, Royal, and Gemini live in a house—the only one on campus. It used to be the one the dean lived in, but now he lives in Keyingham, where most of the faculty live, from what I can gather.

There's a strong possibility that at some point, I actually lost my mind, but right now, I'm the most determined I've ever been. As I walk up the three steps to the porch and ring the doorbell, there's no fear. Only calm.

The door opens, and I find Declan staring at me, looking as confused as I feel. He's wearing the same uniform he wears when he's serving in the dining hall. "What are you doing here?"

"I want to speak to Syn."

Declan snorts and then shuts the door in my face.

Irritation burns through me as I ring the doorbell again. Declan doesn't come back. My plan was to do this privately, but if I need to try to speak to him in the dining hall, I will.

Just as I get to the bottom of the steps, the door opens again. I whirl around and look up at Declan. "He'll see you," he tells me.

I bound back up the steps before he can change his mind and walk into the house. While Declan is still standing there, I look around the hallway. The place is gorgeous. Even though it's obviously designed by a male for a male, and lived in by males, there was clearly no expense spared.

The floor is black marble, streaked with silver. There are two stairways made from the same marble, curving from opposite sides of the wide entrance to join at the top. A wrought iron handrail curves up with it. The walls in here are painted a light gray. And in the center, hanging above me, is a chandelier that matches the ironwork of the stairs.

Declan steps in front of me, scowling. "This way."

I follow him through a door beneath the stairs. Declan moves past it to the door on the right, knocking before he pushes it open.

The inside of this room feels impressive, but truthfully, my attention is on one of the three occupants in the room. Sitting in an armchair on the far side of the room, is Syn.

“What do you want?” he asks. His hazel eyes are as cold as ever, locked on me beneath a frown.

“I want to talk to you.”

“While your low intelligence doesn’t surprise me, your assumption of mine does,” he tells me, dryly.

“You,” I tell him, my tone just as dry. “I want to talk to *you*. And I think you would also prefer it if I only talk to you.”

Syn glares at me, lips pressed together. Then, without moving his head, he looks at Declan. “Get out.”

I hear a soft huff of breath behind me, but moments later, the door closes. Only then do I take my eyes off Syn to glance at the other two members of the room: Royal and Gemini.

“Whatever you have to say can be said in front of these two.” Syn waves at them.

This time, I do hesitate, but only because I made a promise to Penny.

“Your presence here is only mildly entertaining, and my interest is quickly disappearing, so say what you have to while you still have the chance.”

“I wish to join the Elite.” I’m not wasting any time getting to the point, and I’m rewarded by seeing Syn caught off guard for the first time ever.

That’s surprisingly satisfying.

To my side, Gemini starts laughing, but I keep my attention on Syn.

Syn quickly regains his composure as he hides his surprise with a sneer. “The Elite is just that. Elite. You are not

elite. You are, at best, one of the dregs of society. What on earth possesses you to think you could ever be one of us?”

“I know how this works,” I tell him, not missing the sideways look he gives Royal. “I know that once you’re in, the Elite own you. That your initiations are tough. And that not a single past member has ever had anything bad to say about it, which means you have the ability to silence people.”

Syn cocks his head, giving me a sly smile. “What makes you think you need to be a member of the Elite before I can silence you?”

The look he gives me is unnerving, but I refuse to let him distract me. “Can you?” I ask him. “Only if I’m a member could you guarantee if you could silence me.”

This time Syn laughs. “You? Who are you? Who do you think is going to listen to *you*?”

I reach into my pocket and pull out the burner phone Arthur supplied earlier, quickly bringing the video up. Silently, I hold it out to Syn. Syn glowers at me before taking the phone and pressing play.

For the first time, I see real emotion in his face—and there’s a mixture of it. Sadness, confusion, disbelief... and then it circles back to rage. “Where the fuck did you get this?” His voice is low and dangerous.

“What is it?” Royal asks.

Syn showing the video to Royal or Gemini is not the same as me outing JP, but I speak before he has the chance. “Agree and all copies of that disappear.”

I can feel the rage radiating from Syn as his fingers curl around the phone in his hand. I’m almost certain he’s wanting to do the same thing to my neck.

Right now, I’m giving him the opportunity to do anything to me, and murder is probably foremost planted in his mind.

“Syn?”

Ignoring both Royal and Gemini who are still trying to get his attention, Syn suddenly gets to his feet, moving in front of me. Tilting his head, he stares down at me. “The initiations end next week. If you want in, you’re doing it alone, and if you thought the initiations were *tough*, it’s nothing compared to what you’ll have to go through alone.”

“I can handle it.”

Syn leans down, close enough that I can feel the warmth of his breath on my cheek. “Can you?”

“Yes.” My voice is strong, but there’s the smallest of doubts in my mind as I stare into Syn’s eyes.

He’s going to do everything in his power to make me fail. Ultimately, joining or not is irrelevant. I just need to survive long enough to access the information hidden away in this society.

He straightens and cocks his head again. “If you decide to go through with the initiation, you should know that lies are unacceptable.”

“That’s fine.”

“Syn, really?” Royal asks. “You know you can’t accept her.”

“Then let’s start now.” Syn folds his arms, his annoying smirk reappearing. “Why do you want to join the Elite?”

I could tell him that I want the opportunities that come with being one of the Elite. That I’d be able to escape my life and make a new one for myself using the connections of the members. But I would be starting things with a lie, and I’m certain this is a test.

And yet, I’m also certain telling him the truth also won’t work in my favor.

Honestly, I’m not sure there even is a right answer.

Raising my chin so I’m able to look right at him without hiding my face, I mimic his stance and fold my arms.

“I’ve never lied about why I’m here. Things haven’t changed. I believe my brother isn’t the one who killed yours. And I think the proof of that lies somewhere within the Elite.”

Syn grinds his teeth together, and I can see his shirt sleeves straining as he tenses.

The last time I told him something similar, I ended up pinned against a wall with his hand crushing my throat.

“If I’m wrong,” I quickly continue, hoping to stop that from happening again. “Then you have nothing to lose. In fact, I will leave the country if you want me to. But if I’m right, then the person who did kill your brother has been walking around, free, for all this time.”

“Joining the Elite means you must carry out every one of the commands set by the leaders.” Syn’s voice is strangely calm. Even Royal and Gemini have gone still. “*Every* one of them.”

“Very well.”

Reaching out, Syn takes a lock of my hair between his fingers and thumb, rolling it in front of us. “How far would you be prepared to go?”

“I am more than aware of what goes on beneath the church,” I tell him.

If he thinks he can scare me with sex and drugs, he’s underestimated me. And if he thinks he can destroy my life by having me kicked out of school for cheating, he’s clearly not realized my life now means I don’t have that far to fall again.

“So I’ve heard,” Syn mutters.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Royal shift his weight, and Gemini’s face lights up in amusement.

“And what if I ask you to kill?”

My eyes widen before I can stop them. For a moment, I’m not sure if he’s being serious or joking. And then I shrug. “Then I would say I’m on the right track.”

Like my hair suddenly has a voltage, Syn drops it, inhaling sharply. He turns and stalks back to the armchair to sit back down. When he looks up at me again, there's a strange look in his eyes.

“I will have documents sent to you: a contract, an NDA, and a set of instructions. If you agree with what you read, follow the instructions exactly.”

That's it?

He agreed?

Synclair Keyingham *agreed* to let me join the Elite?

This seems too easy, and I'm sure the terms he's going to set out are going to be completely ludicrous or impossible, but I know this is all I will get from him tonight.

Giving him a polite nod, I turn on my heel and start to walk to the door.

“Don't you want your phone back?” Syn calls as I'm about to open the door.

With my hand on the handle, I glance over my shoulder and shrug. “I have copies.” Then I walk out, closing the door behind me.

Declan is waiting outside, the same sneer on his face as there was when I went in. I'm not sure if he heard the conversation, nor do I care. I follow him out of the house.

Outside, out of view of the house, I let out a long breath.

There's no other copy of that video—at least, not in my possession. Regardless of what happened tonight, I was going to delete that video anyway, because if it hadn't worked here, keeping it felt too dangerous.

Now I just have to wait and see what Syn wants from me...

XXXIX

Syn

“**Y**ou think she’s going to come?”

I can barely hear Royal over the sound of the music. It’s nearly midnight, and the Inaugural Ball is in full swing. Most of the campus is here, packed into the church. The DJ has been playing great music, and our supply of alcohol and party favors means everyone is enjoying themselves.

The initiates are now all full members of the Elite, their acceptance ceremony completed in private before we formally introduced them to the rest of the student body.

“She’s not coming. She’ll never accept those terms.” I’m smug about that. But there’s also a twinge of regret—even though I’ll never admit it to Royal or Gemini.

The proposal I sent to her is intense. Essentially, we own her. Every hour of the day is mapped out. Her accommodation, her clothes, her *free time*. Even her body.

Everything every initiate has experienced so far, focused on one individual.

Victoria Reynolds won’t find answers within the Elite.

Only pain, humiliation, and regret.

And hidden beneath an NDA and an ironclad contract, I’d be able to do anything I wanted. *That* is the part causing my regret.

“Then maybe she’s here to turn you down in person,” Gemini says, grinning like an idiot.

I look up towards the door. Walking down the center of the room where the aisle would be if the pews hadn’t been

moved to the side for a dancefloor, dressed in white like the instructions stipulate, is Tori. Her hair is the brightest blue I've seen it, the flashing party lights bounce off it as she moves.

The crowds are parting to let her pass, all of those close to her, staring. Half are confused and half seem annoyed. Under normal circumstances, she wouldn't be welcome here.

She walks with her head held high, like she really is a bride on her way to meet her groom. Only, she won't find love here.

I watch her. Curious to see how far she will get before she changes her mind.

But she doesn't stop until she's in front of me.

Arching an eyebrow, I look down at her.

"I read your terms. I accept. However, I wish to add a single clause of my own." She raises her arm, offering me the large envelope I had the papers delivered to her in.

Silently, I take the envelope from her, pulling out the documents from inside. The NDA is signed and unaltered. The contract, although signed, has a single hand-written addition to my list of terms.

"And if I refuse, does that mean you won't accept?" I ask.

She hesitates, and then shakes her head. "No, but I don't think you'll find my request unreasonable."

"You assume I'm reasonable."

Neither agreeing nor disagreeing, I tuck the papers back inside the envelope and then walk towards the locked door in the corner of the church. She's following me, as is Royal and Gemini, but I don't need to look back to know that.

Leaving the party, the four of us head into the back, then down the stone steps to the middle level. At the end of the hallway, in front of the door to the Crypt, I stop and finally turn back to face her. "Your addition is accepted. I assume you read the instructions carefully?"

There's a flutter of relief on her as I agree to her request, but almost at once, it's replaced with a steely determination. "I did."

Turning, I face the lock, typing in the code. The lock flashes and beeps, and then I push open the door. "This is your last chance to change your mind."

Her eyes narrow a fraction, but she straightens her back and proceeds to walk past me without looking back.

I let the door swing close and then look at Royal and Gemini. "This will be interesting."

"You're really going to do this?" Royal asks me, *again*.

He's been asking me this all week, and it's getting annoying now. "I've already told you—"

"And you never thought she was going to go through with it. Syn, the entire membership is going to be pissed at you for this. She's not a legacy."

"The Elite have allowed new members over the decades," I point out.

"Yeah, from families who have been vetted and have something to contribute to the membership." Royal shrugs. "Look, I get it, and I get you wanting to have your fun, but you can do that without allowing her to join. Because it's not just the Elite. The others will be upset too, and you *know* they have the power to make you regret it."

"They take away my shot at the White House?" I roll my eyes. "How will I survive?"

"Gem, will you tell him?" Royal turns to Gemini.

Gemini looks from him to me. "Cameras are ready. You want me to get the rest of the seniors? I think there might be a few alumni still here, too."

I shake my head. "This one will just be us."

Gemini's lips part, but it's Royal who speaks. "You? *You* are going to initiate *her*?"

“What’s the matter? I thought you would be dying to get on that altar with her.”

Royal starts to say something, but I raise my hand and silence him.

“In or out?”

“In,” he mutters.

I’m already breaking tradition with initiation: holding it now... her...

The original proceedings have the initiates split up into four groups of four—where numbers allow—and led to the Crypt to perform various sexual acts. Underage drinking, drug use, and orgies, filmed with their knowledge, to ensure future compliance. Seniors, hidden behind masks and long robes allow those that want to, to *enjoy* themselves while they watch, dictating what happens in front of them.

Although I was so sure she would never have accepted my terms, the initiation is just one of the things covered in the contract. In the back of my mind, there must have been doubt.

As she said, she has nothing to lose.

Sex, drugs, and alcohol can only ruin a reputation if you have one to start with.

But Royal is right about her initiation. It will never be accepted. She isn’t one of us.

Of course, she will never make it as a full member of the Elite. But they won’t see it like that anyway.

Act first and ask for forgiveness later.

And if they decide I’m not the person suited to be president, I’ll take that as a win.

Royal, Gemini, and I enter the upper level of the Crypt. Up here, there are two locker rooms. One for initiates, the other, for seniors. With festivities finishing tonight, neither have been properly cleaned down. While that was going to be a final task for the freshmen, I think it will make a nice chore for the new initiate.

Messy though the room is, there are clean robes and masks for us. For the second time tonight, we put on the robes, only this time, we're not wearing clothes underneath. I pick up my mask, tying the ribbon behind my head. Once my hood is up, I turn to see that both Royal and Gemini are also ready.

"She was instructed to attend the campus health center and undergo a full sweep of tests, as well as obtain a prescription for birth control. Tonight, I suggest you use a condom, seeing as we only have the sexual history of one person." I give Royal the side eye.

Royal rolls his eyes as he flips me off. "I didn't fuck her without protection. I don't fuck anyone without it. Asshole."

"You want another drink before we go down?" Gemini asks. "Or if you'd prefer to do a few lines?"

The buzz I had from my drink earlier is wearing off.

Both Gemini and I have a line of coke each, whereas Royal declines, citing the basketball season starting back up after the break.

I haven't taken the stuff for months, but the drugs hit just as I need. Gemini always knows where to get the good stuff.

Leaning my neck side to side, enjoying the crack, I take a moment to enjoy the blood surging around my body. When I first heard she was applying to James Keyingham University, I never dreamed I would be able to ruin her like this.

Apparently, dreams do come true.

"Let's go have some fun," I tell my friends, smiling like a maniac.

XXXX

Tori

I can't stop shivering, but I don't know if it's because I'm standing on the middle of an altar completely naked, or because I'm nervous.

Cold.

Between witnessing the orgy my first night here, and reading over Syn's contract, I'm sure I have a very good idea of what's in store for me. Which means I can't possibly be nervous.

Over the last few months, I've witnessed what some of the initiates have been through, and honestly, I can't say I think it's any worse than what Syn has already done to me.

My food, my job, my clothes, my room—even doing their assignments. The contract eloquently put it as *performing all tasks asked of me*. I call it hazing, even though the NDA explicitly states I'm never allowed to use that term. And I've already endured that.

All Syn is doing is adding sex, drugs, and alcohol to my *tasks*.

I got drunk for the first time when I was fourteen. Since leaving high school and losing all my friends, I've not done any drugs, but I'm no stranger to them.

Even sex.

Although, while the idea of being watched feels more thrilling than terrifying, I can't say I'm excited about the prospect of certain members of the Elite being my partners.

And even if I was feeling even the slightest hint of apprehension, I can see little red dots all around the room:

video cameras all recording me. I've tried my best to not show any fear the whole time I've been at this college. There might have been some occasions where I failed, but it won't be now, with these cameras on me.

Above me, I hear a door open, and I start praying that Lissa isn't one of the people coming down the stairs.

Three hooded figures come into view.

Three?

There were around twenty last time. I watched them climb up the stone steps into the recesses in the wall. From the little I saw, I couldn't tell if they were all occupied, but I counted the recesses while I've been waiting.

Are these the people I'll be having sex with?

As they get to the bottom of the staircase, I realize I can't tell. They're wearing masks and their faces are hidden beneath deep shadows because of the oversized hoods.

Resisting the urge to cover my body, I keep my hands behind my back and make sure I'm not slouching. I'm past the point where embarrassment could be an issue.

Instead of walking towards a recess, the three figures walk single file up onto the altar in front of me.

That tells me what their purpose is then.

Now they're in front of me, I'm certain they're all guys though. They're all tall, and although one is slimmer than the other two, they don't feel like the build of a female—at least not one of the members of the Elite.

“On your knees.”

The voice belongs to the guy on the right, and I instantly recognize it: Royal.

Which means the other two are Gemini and... Syn?

Synclair Keyingham?

The guy who hates me?

At *no* point have I ever considered that Syn would come near me like this.

My surprise seems to wipe my brain, and it takes a moment for me to realize that I've been given an instruction. I lower myself down onto my knees and look up at the figures in front of me. From this angle, I can make out Syn's chin.

"I was wrong when I called you a worm," the middle figure says, confirming my prediction that it's Syn. "Worms stay hidden. But begging for attention is what dogs do. The question is, are you an obedient dog, or will you require putting down?"

The way the robes fall over them hides everything from the neck down, but Syn moves forward, lifting his hand. As it frees from the fabric, I see there's something in his grip, but by then, he's moved behind me.

My heart is racing with him being behind me, but I don't turn my head.

There's a flash of black, and I realize it's a collar. Before he can wrap it around my neck, I grab my hair, pulling it out of the way. The movement makes him hesitate, and then the collar is around my neck, and he's buckling it up.

It's tight, like a choker, but it's not uncomfortable. Just as I think he's done, his hands are back on the back of the collar, and I hear the smallest of clicks.

As Syn walks back to join Royal and Gemini, I let go of my hair and grab the collar. There's a small padlock on the back.

"The collar does not come off unless one of us unlocks it."

Strangely, *this* has heat flooding my cheeks.

"Now, come over here."

Syn doesn't need to tell me not to stand. I already know if I try to get up, he's just going to yell at me or worse. So, I lower my hands to the ground and crawl over on all

fours, stopping just in front of him. I sit back onto my heels and stare up at them.

As I look up, the three of them pull back their hoods, revealing their masks. Last time, they were cream and gold. This time, they're black and silver. Although they cover most of their faces, I can still tell who is behind them, even if I hadn't heard them speak.

Syn holds out his right hand. From the depths of his robes, Royal pulls out a bottle and hands it to Syn. The bottle is clear and decorative with no label, like the liquid inside. Without taking his eyes off me, Syn unscrews the lid. "Open your mouth."

Tilting my head back, I do as he asks.

The bottle is raised above my head and then Syn slowly pours it into my mouth, not caring that he's splashing my face or that it's running down my cheeks and dripping all over my chest.

Tequila.

I *hate* tequila.

But it doesn't stop me from swallowing.

Three or four healthy shots later, Syn stops and hands the bottle back to Royal. My head is spinning already, but I watch as he holds out his other hand. This time, whatever Gemini gives him, I can't see.

With a smile that isn't fully hidden behind his mask, Syn leans forward and grabs my throat, forcing my head back further. He doesn't grip me hard enough to stop me breathing, and strangely, I'm certain my heart isn't racing through fear.

"Open your mouth."

I do as he says, and he drops something—a pill—into it.

Whatever it is, I swallow this too.

Syn leans close to my ear, still holding my throat. "I wonder how much this little pet is going to be begging

tonight.” His thumb strokes the side of my neck. “Begging because you want more, or begging because you can’t take any more?”

Heat shoots between my legs.

As if he knows, Syn smirks and lets go, stepping back. Then he nods at Royal.

Without removing his robe, Royal separates the front, revealing his erect cock.

Logically, I know that I shouldn’t be turned on. Syn’s presence alone should be enough to make me want to keep my legs clamped together. Maybe it’s the alcohol, or whatever the pill was that Syn gave me, or maybe it’s remembering how good Royal made me feel, but I can feel the wetness between my legs, and it didn’t come from the tequila.

“Be a good girl and do something about this,” Royal tells me.

Like those were some magic words, I shuffle forward, taking the tip of his cock into my mouth. As I run my tongue around the head, I wrap my hands around his shaft. All I can taste is tequila, and it makes my mouth feel hot.

Syn stands motionless beside me, eyes fixed on me, but my attention is on Royal. His fingers twist through my hair, and he moans as I start moving my head back and forth, taking as much of him in my mouth as I can.

When I sense movement behind me, his grip on my head tightens, making me continue with what I’m doing. Then I feel two hands on my hips, and my own legs are being nudged apart before Gemini settles between them.

He presses up against my back, hands sliding up to cup my breasts. Gently at first, then becoming firmer, he massages them, finally pinching my nipples between his fingers and thumbs.

I moan, although the sound is muffled by Royal’s cock.

“Sounds like someone likes that,” Gemini murmurs against my neck. One hand releases my breast, skimming

down over my stomach then curls over my mound. As his fingers on my nipple become rougher, he pushes a finger between my folds. “Someone *really* likes that. You’re wet already.”

His finger teases my clit. Each time he rubs over it, he twists my nipple.

As my body jerks, Royal’s hand keeps hold of the back of my head, like he refuses to let his cock leave my mouth.

Then, Gemini’s lets go of me. Moments later, there’s something cool pressing against my asshole. Gemini leans back against me, resting his chin on my shoulder. “Three dicks and three holes.”

My eyes go wide, and I jerk back. This time, Royal lets go of my hair. As I try to catch my breath, Gemini’s other hand wraps around me, holding me against him.

“You’ve not done anal before?” he asks me, one finger swirling my asshole.

Biting my lip, I shake my head.

“Called it.” Gemini laughs, his body vibrating against me. “You owe me ten thousand.”

“Whatever,” Syn mutters. He sounds like he doesn’t care, but his eyes are narrowed and focused on me.

Still chuckling to himself, Gemini slides his hand down my stomach, back to my clit, rubbing it in a way that has me arching back against him. “Don’t worry,” Gemini tells me, his other finger still teasing my ass. “Despite Syn’s desire to just impale your ass on my dick, if it’s not good for you, it’s not good for me.”

“I can help with that.” Royal drops to his knees, his robe billowing out around him. He moves forward, lowering his mouth straight to my nipple. He replaces Gemini’s hand, the heel of his thumb rubbing my clit as he dips two fingers into my pussy.

Gemini’s finger is back at my asshole, and I can feel a cool liquid. Slowly, but firmly, he starts to push his finger

inside me. As he does, Royal moves his mouth to my other nipple, taking the tip and grinding it between his teeth. The pinch hurts, and yet I like it.

The finger in my ass goes deeper. It's uncomfortable, but not painful. Especially not as Royal's hand in my pussy has me curling my toes from the orgasm, I can feel building. Slowly, Gemini moves his finger in and out, finding a rhythm to match Royal.

"Oh god," I moan. The sensation is unlike anything I've ever felt before, and I like it.

Then Syn is beside me. He grabs my chin, turns my head, and pushes his cock in front of me. I open my mouth, taking him in, tilting my head as he forces himself deeper.

He's still wearing his robes. It seems pointless for them to be wearing them, but at this point, I don't really care. I reach into the fabric, one hand grasping the little of his shaft that isn't in my mouth, the other, cupping his balls.

I can't help the smug feeling as he groans.

Beneath me, the fingers inside of me are moving faster, and I'm starting to struggle to concentrate on Syn's cock. At the sound of my muffled moans, Syn grabs my head, holding it in place as he starts to move.

I can barely breathe as lightheadedness washes over me.

And then Royal's fingers start to curl inside me as he changes what he's doing to my clit.

Practically choking on Syn's cock, the orgasm hits me.

As it does, Gemini forces another finger inside of me.

Blinding pleasure, sharp pain... thoughts are leaving my body. Just as I'm sure I'm about to pass out, Syn pulls out and steps back.

Whether it's the tequila, the pill, or the lack of oxygen, I don't know, but the orgasm is one of the most intense I've ever experienced.

Pulling his fingers out of me, Royal sits back. He grabs my hands, wrapping them around his erection. Happily, I oblige, rubbing the pad of my thumb over the damp head before stroking the length of his cock.

Royal dives a hand into the robe he is wearing, pulling out a condom. Then, after finally pulling off the robe and tossing it to the side, he thrusts it at me. “Get it on, then get on my cock like a good little girl.”

Remembering how good his cock felt in me last time, I happily oblige. My pussy seems to be simultaneously pulsing from the orgasm, and throbbing with a need to be filled. It doesn't help that Gemini is still working his fingers into my ass, the sensation building to a steady level which while, feeling good, is yet extremely unfulfilling.

I open the packet and slide the condom down his length. Royal moves his hands to my hips, pulling me towards him, helping me line his cock up with my pussy. Just as I start taking him in, Gemini stops finger fucking my ass. Before I can stop myself, I'm sliding straight down over Royal's cock, taking him deep inside me.

“Oh, fuck, yes,” I cry.

“You like that?” Royal's gray eyes are locked on mine. As I nod, he lowers himself back, propping himself up on his elbows. “Show me exactly how much you like it.”

I feel like I'm on fire, a deep heat burning from the inside. My skin feels like electricity is dancing over it, and everything is buzzing. Maybe I had been a little apprehensive earlier, but right now, I feel alive.

Carefully, I move into a better position, and then I start to bring myself up and down on Royal's cock. My hands trail over his abs, but Syn's hands are on my neck, pulling my head back. I open my mouth, expecting his cock, but instead, he pours tequila in.

Much as I hate the taste, I love the burn in my throat. Every time I swallow, my body tenses, and below me, Royal starts cursing.

Syn takes the bottle back, releasing me so he can take a long shot.

As he does, I reach out for his cock. The tequila is making me feel like any inhibitions I have are floating away.

Riding up and down on Royal's cock isn't enough.

I reach out for Gemini, and he comes beside me, letting me stroke his cock.

He takes the bottle of tequila and takes a drink. "Harder."

His eyes are roaming over my body, watching my hands as they work him and Syn, lowering to watch where Royal's cock sinks deep into me.

I'm not sure who he's talking about, but I know I need more of Royal. So, I change my angle, and as I go down, he slides deeper into me.

"You like that?" Syn asks. He reaches for my neck, but this time, grabs the collar.

"Yes," I reply, though it sounds more like a hiss.

"You want more?"

More than I want to admit to him, but the words fly out of my mouth. "I need more."

Stepping back, Gemini moves out of sight. I hear the rip of foil and then the slurp of what I assume to be more lube being squeezed out of a tube. Even though it's probably going to hurt, the excitement trills through me.

Gemini places a hand on my back, pushing me forward. At the same time, Syn's using the collar to pull me. I place a hand on Royal's shoulder to keep my balance as he also lowers himself.

"I didn't say stop." Royal chides.

Instantly, I start moving myself up and down, moaning as this new angle has his cock hitting another part of me.

"Good girl," Royal mutters.

I'm not sure why but my heart seems to flutter at that.

He reaches down between us, his finger seeking out my clit.

My hand releases Syn's cock, too lost in how good I feel to be able to keep up with jerking him off.

"You want to stop?" Although their masks obscure most of their faces, I can see the twisted smile on Syn's face.

"No," I gasp as Royal rubs my clit. "Please, no."

Syn cocks his head. "Then show me how much you like Royal's cock, and maybe you can have Gemini's."

The thrumming in my body is already getting stronger, and I can feel another orgasm. But the idea of not having Gemini's cock in me has me grinding on Royal's. He speeds up, and then my cries of pleasure are leaving me as another orgasm rips through me.

Breathing heavily, I slump forward, resting my forehead against Royal's shoulder. His skin is glistening, and I can't stop myself from running my tongue over his collarbone as my pussy pulses around his cock. I have no idea how he's got the stamina he has, as he lies there, barely moving.

Then I feel something poking my asshole. Gemini places one hand on my hip, then he pushes himself into me.

My body is at war with itself. Exhausted, yet ready for more. Numb, yet buzzing. Pain from Gemini, yet pleasure from Royal.

His cock goes deeper, not stopping. Slowly the pain switches to discomfort. "You feel so fucking good," he tells me, holding me still.

I lift my head, and the tequila hits me again. Dizziness mixes with everything. I can feel both of them deep inside of me, and somehow, more heat rushes between my legs. Carefully, I move my hips, clenching my insides as I do.

"Holy fuck," I cry. There's more pain, but it's exquisite. I like it, as much as it hurts.

Syn looms in front of me, glaring down. “What do you want, Tori?”

My mouth is dry, but it’s speaking words that don’t feel like they’ve come from my own thoughts. “Fuck me.”

The request is as dangerous as the look in his golden eyes. There’s going to be nothing soft and gentle from this man in front of me. But I’m craving the pain.

“Beg me.”

Beneath me, Royal bucks his hips.

I slide up his cock, landing heavily, sending both him and Gemini deeper into me.

“Fuck me,” I yell, though this one is a curse. “Please, Syn, I need…” I don’t know what I need. “Oh, God, I… Please.”

“Move, Royal. It’s my turn to fuck that cunt.”

“Just give me two more minutes,” Royal tells him through gritted teeth.

“Move.”

Gemini leans back, lifting me off Royal’s cock, but making sure his never fully leaves my ass. While Royal moves out of the way, Gemini repositions us, bringing his legs between us and using them to spread mine further apart.

The movement has me impaled on his cock, and the pain is back. I bite my lip, looking up and catching Syn staring between my legs. My pussy is completely exposed, and it feels like the pulsing is visible.

“Please,” I beg. “I need you to fuck me.”

The smirk is back as Syn removes his robe and rolls a condom over his cock. He drops to his knees in front of me, lines his cock up, then looks me in the eye. “Your cunt is dripping.”

He’s thicker than Royal, but he doesn’t care, driving his cock into me.

As he pulls out, I drop down onto Gemini.

“Fuck, yes,” Gemini grunts over my cries. “That feels good.”

Syn sets his hands down on Gemini’s thighs, but behind the mask, his eyes are locked on mine. “What about Royal?”

My mind and body feel like they’re being pulled in all directions, but I turn, opening my mouth.

Royal rips off his condom then feeds himself into my mouth, hissing as he wraps his fingers back around my hair.

Then, with no warning, Syn starts thrusting into me. Over and over, harder and harder. His movements are dictating all of mine. He forces himself deep inside me, and as he pulls out, I’m forced to take Gemini. Meanwhile, Royal’s hands are wrapped tightly in my hair.

I’ve no way of making them stop, and I’m not even sure Syn would listen at this point. And yet, I don’t want to stop.

But I don’t think that’s my choice anymore, either.

“I’m gonna come,” Royal blurts out, the only warning I have before hot liquid hits the back of my throat.

Somehow, I manage to swallow it down, then Royal pulls his cock free. I barely have a chance to catch my breath as Syn’s somehow managed to go faster. If I had any ability left to think, I’d be impressed, but he’s about to make me come again.

Behind me, Gemini curses, and his fingertips dig harder into my hips. He jerks twice, and it’s enough for me to orgasm.

I come hard, and this time, any pain I’ve been feeling is gone.

But Syn doesn’t slow.

I catch his gaze from behind the mask, and under the hair that’s now falling over his forehead, his golden eyes look

almost black.

Fueled by whatever's possessing him, he continues to pound into me, until suddenly, he stops. He pulls himself out, but he's straight onto his feet, pulling his condom off with one hand, the other working his cock just as furiously as he'd been thrusting into me. Then he grabs the collar, pulling my head up to look at him as he covers my face in his cum.

Breathing heavily, he glowers at me. He looks like he's about to say something, but instead, he turns and jumps off the altar before marching up the steps.

I stay frozen in place until Royal crouches down to help me off Gemini.

The feeling of my orgasms is quickly fading, but the drugs and alcohol seem to be keeping my body numb to all the aches and pain I should be feeling. My legs feel like they're going to give out on me, but it's not from anything that's happened.

"You okay there, little perv?" Royal asks me. He's all grins and puffed chest, completely oblivious to the fact that I'm still frozen in place.

From the way Syn dresses, and from his future goal of being the next president, I always assumed he didn't have any tattoos.

He does.

Hidden behind his robe, then unnoticed as he was fucking me.

But he has one. One just above his cock, and I saw it clearly before he walked away.

Six letters, each barely a centimeter in height:

XXXVII

Thirty-seven.

I sink to the ground, my heart pounding, but it's panic that's surging through me.

Thirty-seven reasons. Is that what my brother meant?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My first thanks need to go to my real-life Penny, Sarah. Sarah, I love you. The fact you're still here when you have to listen to me is nothing short of a miracle, but joke's on you because you're stuck with me for life now. Thank you for all the hours you've spent helping me through some *interesting* writing times, for brainstorming plans, plots, and trackers. For the non-writing related things that basically boil down to helping me to keep functioning! You're the foundation in my writing.

My next shout out of thanks goes to my girl Katie. I lucked out when I met Katie in Heathrow Airport on the way to a writer's conference in Vegas. There are few people I've clicked with as quickly as I have Katie, but the incredible bonus is being able to bounce ideas and talk business with someone like her. Girl, we're going back to Vegas next year—we've got this. I'm so glad I met you, and thank you for everything!

And now I need to make a send thanks far, far overseas to two Thai actors: Ohm Pawat Chittsawangdee and Tu Tontawan Tantivejakul. While in an apartment in Chiang Mai, I was watching a drama and it was the conversation that these two characters had that sparked a little idea in my brain. One that eating far too much on a Food Tour of the city grew like my stomach did. By the time I got back to my apartment, far too full to do anything else anyway, I started putting fingers to keyboard and let the idea out. Before I knew it, I had characters, a setting, a plot, book titles... and now a completed first book in this series. (At this point, this story has zero resemblance to the show, but if you're interested it's called **หนังรักเรื่องที่แล้ว** or Ten Years Ticket. And fun fact, yes, I can read/write Thai—or enough to actually be able to know the direct translation of the title doesn't match the English title! Not enough to be translating my books to Thai!)

Back in the real world, I need to say thank you to my editor, Caia. Ever since Caia started editing for me, I have seen an improvement in my writing because she not only edits my

work, but she teaches me at the same time. My manuscripts are far from perfect when I send them to her, but they're certainly starting to come back with less TCs and comments. Thank you for bringing out the best in this story (especially with it not being your cup of tea)!

Once I've worked through my edits, I send my book out to my amazing beta team, convinced *this time* no one will find any typos. I'm always wrong. But Melissa, Angela, Sara, Noel, and Tory, you all have my sincere gratitude and appreciation for all your help. The speed at which you read is amazing—a superpower I wish I had, but thank you for casting your keen eyes over my words and finding all those typos. But you're also the first 'real' people to XXXVII: The Elite and your comments mean so much to this nervous author.

A special thank you goes to the members of my Facebook group who suggested dozens of names for the character that would become Penny (and honestly, it took me ages to settle on that name), but especially to Sue H who made that suggestion. I hope she's the character that fits the name for you too.

Somehow I've managed to get this far without saying thank you to the incredibly talented Natasha Snow of Natasha Snow Designs for creating the gorgeous covers for this series. I know I can give you vague ideas and vibes, and have complete trust and faith that you can create a masterpiece for me. You've captured Tori and Royal (did everyone work that out?) perfectly for me. I can't wait to have a physical copy on my shelf!

And, as always, thank you to you reading this. You picked up this book, took a chance, *and* made it this far. I hope you did so enjoying the story! Book two, XXXVII: The Initiation is coming soon!

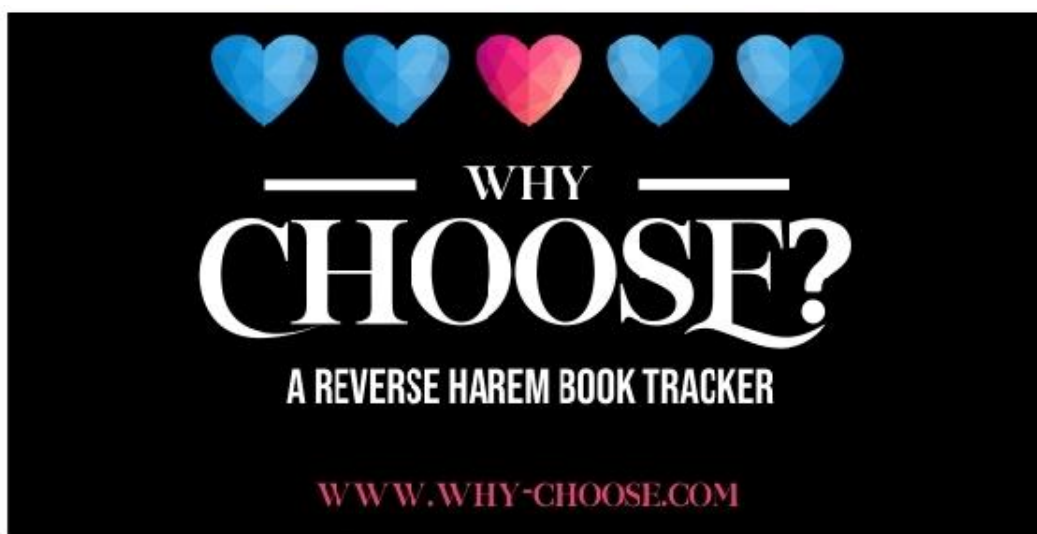
Serenity xx

Don't forget to pre-order *XXXVII: The Initiation* so that it delivers straight to your Kindle Reader on release day!

<https://geni.us/XXXVII2>



WHY CHOOSE?



- *Wondering what to read next?*
- *Love Reverse Harem books but struggle to find them easily on Amazon?*
- *Think you've read them all already?*

I had the same problem too. Then one day, I had an idea. What if there was a site that was dedicated to reverse harem books? What if each book had a link to Amazon to easily buy it? What if each book was tagged so you could search for exactly what you wanted?

So I made it.

As of writing this, there are over **14,000** reverse harem (and only reverse harem) books listed on there, with over 300 tags to narrow down that book you're looking for.

Oh, and we gave you read / tbr lists, random book picks, a glossary for all those terms AND a release calendar you can download to your device so that you never miss a release.

www.why-choose.com

NEWSLETTER

Want to read Chapter VI from Royal's point of view?

Sign up to my newsletter and receive a free short story with all the smutty goodness, as well as Royals thoughts.

<https://BookHip.com/QXJZNVN>



Facebook has a terrible habit of suppressing posts, and as for notifications, I don't get them half of the time either!

While I will post occasionally on FB, and I will try to be active in my group, you can guarantee an email from me once a week.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author Serenity Ackles writes both contemporary and paranormal romance stories. With a long-standing inability to choose a book boyfriend, and always rooting for the 'second lead', she mainly writes reverse harems.

As such, Serenity's stories contain a lot of men, just as much cock, and a liberal sprinkling of profanities.

More importantly, they contain (eventual) happy endings, where, if the girl doesn't want to choose between the men who like her, she damn well doesn't!

WAYS TO CONNECT

Facebook:

Page: www.facebook.com/SerenityAcklesAuthor/

Group: www.facebook.com/groups/SerenityAcklesRebels

TikTok:

<https://www.tiktok.com/@serenityacklesauthor>

Bookbub:

www.bookbub.com/profile/serenity-ackles

Amazon:

www.amazon.com/Serenity-Ackles/e/B081F8D5FK

**Newsletter (and get an alternate POV chapter from
Royal):**

<https://BookHip.com/QXJZNVN>