


PRINCES OF RAVENLAKE ACADEMY

CRUEL
EL
ELITE

NICOLE FOX

CRUEL ELITE

A DARK HIGH SCHOOL BULLY ROMANCE

NICOLE FOX

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Also by Nicole Fox

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**CRUEL ELITE: A DARK HIGH SCHOOL
BULLY ROMANCE**

Two years ago, Noah Boone broke my heart.

This semester, he's coming to break the rest of me.

Noah Boone is a cruel, gorgeous beast.

He's got a head full of darkness...

And a heart dead-set on revenge.

For two years, we've lived by a single rule:

Pretend the past never happened.

But with one semester left at Ravenlake Academy, that truce has come to a sudden end.

Our secrets are coming to light.

The twisted sins that bind us together.

I'm left with an impossible choice:

Submit to the bully who ruined my world...

Or watch in fear as he ruins what's left.

CRUEL ELITE is a full-length high school bully romance and Book 3 in the Princes of Ravenlake Academy trilogy.

The Princes of Ravenlake Academy is a series of standalones that all take place at the infamously cruel Ravenlake Preparatory Academy.

You can read any of the books as standalones, but they work best when read in order.

Book 1, CRUEL PREP, is Finn and Lily's story.

Book 2, CRUEL ACADEMY, is Caleb and Haley's story.

Book 3, CRUEL ELITE, is Noah and Penny's story.

NOAH

It's only mid-January, but it feels like early fall.

It's just a bonfire party in the woods, but it feels like Hell.

Caleb doesn't agree with me, though.

"For fuck's sake, you are dramatic." He rolls his eyes at me and nuzzles into his girlfriend, Haley. She giggles, and her dark brown hair slides in front of them like a curtain.

I can hear but—thank the fucking Lord—I can't see the way their tongues are tangling together.

"There's fire and sinners as far as the eye can see. Feels like Hell to me," I respond.

Usually, Caleb would take this opportunity to point out his many angelic qualities as proof we couldn't be in Hell.

But his mouth is too busy doing things God surely wouldn't approve of.

That is, assuming the Big Guy Upstairs isn't super into public displays of affection.

I sigh and go back to surveying the party.

Winter break is supposed to be exactly that—a break. A break from school, and more precisely, from my fellow Ravenlake Academy students.

Yet here I am, sitting in the woods with a horde of my shit-faced classmates. They're drinking and laughing and making out all around me.

If it had just been us Golden Boys chilling, maybe I'd be in a better mood. But there are too many other people here I'd rather not see.

A beetle lands on my shoulder, buzzing in my ear. I lean forward and flick it into the flames.

"Fucking bugs," I mutter.

More evidence that we're in hell: flying cockroaches. What kind of sick pervert invents something like that?

Only one answer: Satan.

An ice cube pelts me in the chest. I look up to see Finn staring at me, eyebrow raised.

"What?"

"You're being a buzzkill." He holds up a beer can. "Get a drink and lighten up."

Usually, Finn is on my side. At least, he used to be.

But that was before Lily.

Now, he's "happy," or so he says.

To which I say, *congratu-fucking-lations*.

On the other hand, at least he's not tonguing down his girlfriend a foot away from me. So he's at least one spot better than Caleb on my Shit List rankings.

"You know, Noah, three girls have already asked me if you're here with anyone," Lily says, tossing her platinum blonde hair over her shoulder. "It wouldn't take much more than a look for you to be having a better time."

Lily always had an artsy vibe, but she's refined it since she and Finn started living in New York. She wears loose, paint-splattered jeans with a tight, long-sleeved crop top and chunky leather boots.

Nothing like the girl I would have imagined for Finn.

Not to say I don't like Lily. I do.

I just assumed Finn would end up with a trust fund baby. A spoiled rich girl who said "wine o'clock" unironically and had

aspirations of being a “stay-at-home mom” with a full-time nanny.

You could throw a rock and hit ten women like that in this godforsaken town.

I spit on the forest floor. “I don’t need a girl to make me happy.”

Viktor throws up his plastic cup in a salute, liquid sloshing over the side. “That’s right, Miss Independent! You don’t need no one, nuh uh.” He snaps his fingers to complete the joke.

Everyone else laughs.

I roll my eyes.

“I don’t *need* a donut to be happy, but it helps,” Lily argues when the laughter subsides.

“Good idea,” Finn says, wrapping an arm around Lily’s hips and sliding her closer to him. “Maybe if you get a bite of someone’s cake, you won’t be such a drag.”

Lily gasps. “That is not what I meant!” She turns to me. “It was an analogy. I just meant you could talk to one of them. Maybe get to know them.”

Finn barks out a laugh before I can. He pats Lily’s head condescendingly. “Oh, sweet Lily. Naïve, idealistic Lily. That is never going to happen.”

Lily opens her mouth to argue, but I cut her off before she can. “It’s never going to happen.”

Her shoulders slump forward. “Why not? They seemed nice.”

“That’s exactly why! Because they seem nice!” Finn answers. “Does Noah look *nice* to you? Does it look like he wants a *nice* girl?”

Lily studies me.

I look away, tired of being under her magnifying glass.

Ever since she and Finn came back to Ravenlake for the holidays, she’s been watching me. I mentioned it to Finn last week, but he brushed it off.

“Lily just wants to help people,” he said.

“No shit,” I’d replied. *“Why else would she be with a charity case like you?”*

We laughed, and I let it go, but it still bothers me.

I don’t need help.

Not from him.

Not from her.

Not from anyone.

J.C. jumps over the log I’m sitting on with both legs, kicking up a cloud of dust, and flops down next to me. “Please tell me you aren’t looking to become monogamous. Because I just accepted the offers of a pair of very lovely, very naughty girls who want to meet the two of us in the woods.”

He hitches a thumb over his shoulder. I turn just in time to see a curly redhead and a box-dyed brunette strutting into the woods on their heels.

Who wears heels in the woods?

“Are you talking about Penny’s Dreadfuls?” Haley asks, top lip curled in disgust. “I saw you talking to them.”

Finn immediately asks the question we’re all thinking: “How did you do that with Caleb’s tongue down your throat?”

But apparently, Haley is capable of swapping spit with Caleb and eavesdropping on the party at the same time.

Talented girl.

Caleb shrugs. “She knows all. I’ve learned not to question it.”

“Penny’s Dreadfuls? Like the TV show?” Lily frowns at the group of our friends, waiting for someone to clue her in.

She went to Ravenlake Prep for a year before she and Finn moved to New York, but she somehow managed to avoid the finer points of drama that flow under the stream of everyday bullshit.

“Penelope LaFevre’s friends,” Finn answers.

Lily shakes her head. “I don’t—”

I turn to J.C. “I have no interest in taking a bite out of either of those donuts.”

J.C. groans. “Bro, you’re killing me. The only reason they were interested is because of you.”

“Then I’m doubly uninterested.”

Haley nods. “Those girls are horrible. Even you can do better, J.C.,” she says.

“Listen, whatever beef you have with the Dreadfuls, I’m not a part of it.” J.C. holds up his hands innocently, a joint simmering between his fingers. “Really, I’d love nothing more than to be the bridge that brings you three together. In fact, I’ve heard nothing brings women together like having sex with the same guy. Perhaps—”

“Finish that sentence and you’re dead.” Caleb swivels away from Haley, his feet planted flat on the ground, ready to propel him forward at any moment.

Of all the people at this bonfire party, Caleb is the last one I’d pick a fight with. No one in their right, sober mind would even consider it.

And J.C. is far from sober.

J.C. considers the threat for a minute, takes in Haley, who rolls her eyes and sighs, and then shrugs. “It was just a thought.”

“If you want to keep your dick attached to your body, never have it again.”

Caleb is simmering. Understandably so.

After everything that happened with Bumper and the Hell Princes recently, he’s still a little edgy when it comes to keeping Haley safe.

Haley drags a hand down his back to calm him down. She whispers something in his ear, and his features turn soft.

A second later, they’re tangled in one another again.

J.C. sighs. “Without underground fighting as an outlet, Caleb is far too pent up.”

“Not for long. He’s about to release,” Viktor cackles, making crude gestures.

Caleb returns them in the firm of a middle finger without once breaking his connection to Haley.

“Once you all are back in school, I’m sure Caleb will find someone to beat down,” says Finn. “He always does.”

I shake my head. “Doubtful. Now that the Hell Princes have been properly put in their place, I’m worried the next few months will be boring as hell.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot we haven’t discussed that. Noah pulled a fucking gun!” Viktor throws his head back in a drunken laugh. “I expect that shit from Finn or Caleb, but not you. How long have you been packing?”

“How did I not know you had a gun?” Finn asks, eyebrow raised.

“*You* have a gun,” I point out.

“I know, but I didn’t know *you* had one.”

I shrug. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

A series of *oohs* and *ahhs* move through the group as they tease me for being cryptic.

But I’m not joking.

Even though I’ve been a member of the Golden Boys for years, I don’t tell them everything. Not by a long shot.

Some secrets are never meant to be revealed.

NOAH

I lean back and watch the party for a while. Shadows move in front of the bonfire.

Laughter and music ring out, and the clink of vodka bottles sounds amongst the trees.

The Golden Boys' conversation goes on without me.

Until something catches my eye.

A wave of golden blonde hair disappearing behind the trunk of an oak tree.

Even without seeing her face, I know who it is.

And tonight, I'm just drunk enough to start some shit.

I stand up, throw my can into the fire, and jog into the trees. Finn says my name, confusion in his voice, but I ignore him.

They won't follow me. They know better than that.

I can see her path through the trees. I move past more than a few couples in various stages of undressing and fornicating until I've left everyone behind.

Everyone but *her*.

Just as I begin to wonder whether this was all nothing more than my drunk mind making shit up, I hear a rustle to my right and turn.

There she is.

Penelope LaFevre.

Penny is leaning against a tree, her face tilted to the canopy of brown leaves above. Her eyes are closed, and despite the fact I wasn't working to be quiet, she doesn't seem to have heard me.

For one second, I forget why I followed her.

For one fucking, fleeting second, I forget I threw her out of my life.

I forget how strange it is to even be this close to her.

Then, she sighs, opens her eyes, and sees me. She starts to scream in surprise.

I leap forward and slap a hand over her mouth.

"Shh," I reprimand. "You're loud."

I only remove my hand once I'm sure she's quieted down.

Penny's shock is replaced by dark suspicion in an instant. "What are you doing here?"

Her pink lips part as she lifts a plastic cup to her mouth. She wants to seem casual. Nonchalant.

But I know that she's feeling what I'm feeling.

Being this close again stirs up bad emotions. Bad memories.

It's been two years since I was this close to her. Now, seeing her face in detail again, I'm reminded of everything I've purposefully forgotten.

And how much I hate it. Hate her.

I hate those glossy lips. That deft pink tongue. The soft, creamy skin of her cheeks, her neck, her tits.

I step towards her and swat her drink to the ground. The liquid inside spills over the leaves and splatters on our legs.

"What the fu—?" she gasps.

When she sees the look on my face, the curse dies on her lips.

Now, she's scared.

Terrified, actually. As she should be.

I can see it in her gray green eyes. In the way they dart to my face and then the area surrounding us.

We are far away from the general party area.

And even if we weren't, there's enough debauchery out here that a couple shouts would go unnoticed.

No one is coming to save you from me, Penny.

"You fucked up," I announce.

She frowns. "What are you talking about?"

Her chin is raised defiantly.

But there's no mistaking the fear in her voice.

I give her a cold grin. "You knew the rules of our deal. And you broke it. There's a price to be paid for that."

She presses her back against the tree, even though there's nowhere for her to go.

I've had her in this position before. Years ago.

But this is different. Much, much different.

Penny swallows, her pale throat bobbing. "I didn't break any rules. I didn't do anything. Please just let me go."

I shake my head. "Not a fucking chance. Actions have consequences, Penny."

Her lip is trembling now. "You're the one who came and found me. I didn't do anything."

She presses a hand to my chest to push me back.

Bad move.

I wrap my hand around her wrist. In an instant, her arm is pinned above her head and our bodies are pressed together.

Her breath catches. I don't miss the way she leans towards me, rather than away.

Some habits are hard to break.

We haven't been this close in a long time, but her body remembers.

God knows mine does, too.

Shoving my face right in hers, I hiss, “For two years, I’ve been content to leave you alone. As long as you did the same for me. But you violated that truce. So I’m done keeping my distance. I’m going to be a part of your life again, Penny. But not in a good way. Not in a nice way. I’m going to make you hurt. Make you suffer. And I won’t quit until I’ve ruined you completely.”

Silence. The longest silence of her life, I’m sure.

I don’t blink. Don’t look away.

I want her to see how much I mean what I’m saying.

“Why are you doing this?” she whispers in a tight, choked voice. “What did I do?”

I sigh. My answer is a single word: “Haley.”

Caleb had come to me a few weeks ago when Penny’s campaign of bullying against Haley was at its worst. He wanted me to try and do something to help her.

“You know Penny,” he said. *“Tell her to back off.”*

I *used* to know Penny. I sure as fuck don’t anymore. I shut that door and locked it a long time ago.

I told him he was on his own.

But tonight, I’ve changed my mind. Caleb is my brother-in-arms, and Haley is his woman. That means protecting her is my responsibility, too.

That’s why I’m here.

To tell Penny to stay in her fucking lane.

Or else I’ll be forced to intervene in more damaging ways.

Penny’s jaw shifts to one side and she clicks her teeth in annoyance. Her breath huffs out, making her chest heave.

When she speaks again, she uses her usual sassy bitch tone. Her Queen Bee voice.

“Why do you care about her? I thought she belonged to Caleb. Is he sharing? Based on the stupid grin he has been wearing

and your perpetual frown, I'd guess not. Then again, you've never really been one for smiles."

She's trying to assert control of the situation.

But she's not in charge here. I'm not one of the stupid bimbos she calls friends.

I'm the one calling the shots now.

I ignore her question, mostly because I know it will bother her.

"When shit hit the fan between us, I told you to stay out of my life. Haley's part of my life." Her eyes narrow, but I continue. "Leave her the fuck alone."

I let go of her arm, and Penny spins away from me, brushing her hands down the front of her jeans as though she can erase the memory of our bodies touching.

When she stands tall again, her legs are spread and her arms are crossed, making her cleavage even more noticeable.

But I refuse to be distracted. I keep my eyes locked on hers.

"Is that why I don't hear any rumors about who you're with, Noah? Because you're slumming?"

Her voice sounds desperate, nasally and a bit higher pitched. The same way mothers have a *telephone voice*, Penny seems to have an *I'm being a bitch voice*.

"I knew you Golden Boys did everything together, but I didn't know you did *everyone* together, too."

"No one gives a shit what kind of rumors you try to make up, Penny. Trying harder will only make things worse for you."

Her eyes go molten. "I think you care a lot what people think."

We are only a few feet apart, the dark of the forest pressing in on all sides, making the distance feel simultaneously shorter and longer.

It feels like we are in a black hole, separate from the rest of the universe, being sucked towards one another.

And, fuck, it pisses me off.

I've spent two years purging my life of this bitch and all it takes is one conversation for all that work to be undone.

But what I want from Penny now is different from what I once wanted.

Now, I want to make her suffer.

To make her miserable.

To make her pay.

I want to make her feel the way I feel every time I see her swaying down the hallway, sneering and rude.

The time has come to do unto others as has been done unto me. It may not be the golden rule exactly, but it's this Golden Boy's rule.

"You're right about that, Penny," I say lightly. "I do care. About you especially." I lower my chin and move towards her, biting my lower lip. "You have no idea how much I care."

The cold mask slips. Her eyes are wide, long lashes batting against her flushed cheeks.

"You do?" she asks, confused.

Penny is used to being admired and worshipped. Men bend over backwards for her because she has a body that fits just right in your hands and a mouth that promises unspeakable things without ever saying a word.

So, of course, she thinks I still care about her.

She doesn't know any different.

But, oh, how she's about to learn.

"I care that you're happy," I say, my voice barely above a whisper. "Especially since you shouldn't be."

Her face falls.

"You don't deserve the grace I've extended the last two years by ignoring you," I spit. "All the pain you've caused other people, you deserve to have handed back to you ten-fold."

"I haven't done anything," she stammers. "Noah, you know I didn't do—"

I wave a hand to dismiss her. "I'll see you around. That's a promise." Then I turn and leave.

"Noah!"

My name on her lips is still enough to make me stop in my tracks.

But it isn't enough to change my mind.

Penny has had her fun.

Now, it's time for me to have mine.

PENNY

What the actual fuck just happened?

Two years.

Two entire years since Noah Boone has so much as breathed in my direction, and now he storms back into my life, pins me against a tree, and makes threats?

This has got to be a fever dream. Lord knows he still features in them from time to time no matter how hard I fight my subconscious on the matter.

Though, usually, he's younger in my dreams. So am I.

The way we were back when things were different.

In those dreams, we're young. Freshmen. I giggle and he wears a smile, and it's always innocent. Just sitting together and talking. And laughing.

I shake my head in a desperate attempt to clear it. Now is not the time for this.

I left the main party because I needed a minute. A minute to slouch against a tree, stop sucking in my stomach, and, honestly, fix the permanent wedgie my silk thong causes.

Did Noah see me do that?

My face burns with the possibility, but it doesn't matter. If Noah's threat is to be taken seriously, he's going to do a lot worse than tell people he saw me pull my panties out of my ass.

He's played it cool the last few years, but I know what Noah and the Golden Boys are capable of.

Everybody does.

If you cross them, you die.

I kick the cup Noah slapped out of my hands into the bush. I told Anika to bring trash bags, but she spent the afternoon getting a spray tan no one would be able to see in the dark woods and forgot to do it. Classic.

Noah walked off in the opposite direction of the party, but I still catch myself looking for him as I pick my way back through the maze of branches and human bodies.

A couple that clearly started beneath a tree to the right of the path have gyrated their way off the blanket they laid out to the center of the path. I actually have to kick the guy in the ribs to get him to move.

He curses in frustration before he looks up at my face. I don't know him, but he clearly knows me.

"Sorry," he mutters, wrapping his hands around the girl's back and sliding her back into the scarce coverage of the bush. Her shirt is gone and, even in the dark, I can see that her nipples are harder than diamonds.

It's warm for January, but it's not *that* warm.

"Put a fucking shirt on." I cover the girl's chest from my line of sight with my hand as I pass.

Yes, I'm being harsh, but I'm also giving her some good advice. Any guy who actually cared about her would not have her half-naked in the woods for the rest of the school to see. No dick is worth that.

I pass twenty feet from where the rest of the Golden Boys are sitting around a dying fire.

Finn and Lily are whispering to one another while Viktor tries to get the group going in a slurred drinking song.

Then, I see Caleb and his girlfriend.

I remember my mom pushing me to date him our first year at Ravenlake. “He’s a quarterback,” she’d said to me, raising her perfectly manicured blonde eyebrows at me like I was crazy. “You have to go out with him.”

It didn’t matter to my mom that I had no interest in Caleb.

Just like it hadn’t mattered to her that she had no interest in my birth dad.

His bank account and social status were what mattered. That’s the only stuff that ever matters to her.

“Penny!” Anika waves her arm in the air, flagging me down. “Where have you been? Come drink with us!”

Anika was on the hunt for some poor male to feel her up in the trees when I left, but now she has secured a sacrifice.

He’s an underclassmen with spotty facial hair and eager hands. Jordan or George or something like that—I can’t quite remember.

Whatever his name, he keeps an arm wrapped awkwardly around Anika like he’s afraid she might slip away.

“Actually, I think I might go.”

Anika gawks at me. “What? Why? We haven’t even lit the official bonfire yet.”

My mom’s ever-present lectures ring in my head like they always do. One of her favorites: *Stay in the public eye. If you disappear, you’re as good as dead.*

Unconsciously, I rub a tiny scar on my cheek. She slapped me one time when I came home from a party early with a stomach bug. She had a ring on, too, so it cut my face open.

But did she apologize? No.

Actually, make that *hell no*.

Instead, she applied some more foundation and sent me right back to the party. *I’m not raising a loser*, she’d hissed to me. *Get your act together.*

The lesson stuck.

So I can't just waltz away from the party tonight.

But I also can't stay.

Because, after seeing Noah, I can't stomach a few more hours of pretending.

Pretending I'm happy.

Pretending I have it all together.

Pretending I'm not the broken daughter of a broken woman.

If you can't have it, pretend it's beneath you. Another lesson from Momma.

"Who gives a shit about a pile of burning sticks?" I ask Anika with a sharp laugh. "Cavemen invented fire, like, thousands of years ago. I doubt anything groundbreaking in that department will happen here tonight."

Anika seems confused by my response, especially after how hard I rode her for paying more attention to her outfit than party prep.

But she begins to laugh along with me, anyway. Her barely legal date joins in, too.

"Maybe we can start a separate party?" Anika suggests.

I shake my head. "I don't think so."

"Come on, Penn, it could be fun. VIP only." She bumps her suitor's hip with her own. "We can round up the best guests. Meet back at your house? Your mom is always game for houseguests. She even lets us drink, which is ridiculously cool."

Your friends are supposed to be the people you confide in, the people you tell everything to. Anika and Jennifer should be those people for me.

But they're too busy cashing in all the social currency I provide to give a single fuck about my personal life.

The only person who knew what it was really like to live with Momma is long gone. And he's not coming back... ever.

I'm on my own.

I should never forget that.

“As if I’d trust you with the guest list,” I snap. “You couldn’t even manage the most basic shit today.”

Hurt flashes across Anika’s face.

I hate seeing that so fucking much. I hate hurting her. Why am I like this? Why am I doing this?

Anika stammers out an apology. “I’m sorry. I know I was kind of... scattered today, but let me make it up to you. You go home, and I’ll take care of everything.”

“Anika, no.”

“I have leftover alcohol in the back of my Jeep, and Jennifer has those Bluetooth speakers in her trunk from the party last weekend. It will be perfect.”

I sigh, losing patience. “I’m just going to go home.”

“You can’t sit home by yourself tonight.” Anika leans forward, her voice lowered. “This party is where everyone’s reminded that the status quo is still the status quo, remember? That’s what you said today. If you leave, people may think you’re slipping. Especially after that Haley girl hit you last month. You have to stay here and—”

Momma’s voice is still going in my head, drowning out Anika’s.

You have to stand up taller, Penny.

Put on some blush, you look anemic.

I thought yoga bodies were supposed to be toned. What’s this hanging over the sides of your jeans?

I think you’ve eaten enough, don’t you?

You have to—

You have to—

You have to—

“I don’t have to stay here and do anything!”

The words come out in a shout, grabbing the attention of a few people nearby.

I lower my voice and dismiss Anika with a wave of my hand.

“I’m not sure how much clearer I can make it: I don’t want to be here anymore, and I don’t want you following me home like a lost puppy. Stay here, grope your sophomore hook up, and leave me the fuck alone.”

Anika’s eyes well with tears, but I turn and stomp away before she can start to cry.

Not because I care whether I’ve made her cry, but because I feel my chest constricting in the familiar way it always does before I have a panic attack.

“Not here, not here,” I mutter under my breath as I try to regulate my breathing.

Stop being so dramatic, Penelope, Momma always says, looming over me like the Grim Reaper. Really, you can’t take any criticism.

A montage plays in my mind as I scratch and claw at my throat, trying desperately to breathe.

I’m eleven, dancing on pointe across the living room in my leotard and tights while Momma watches on, a smile plastered on my face.

As soon as the music cuts, I fall sideways and clutch at my bruised, bleeding toes.

The world is starting to darken at the edges. I still can’t breathe. It’s a full-blown panic attack now.

But the memories keep on coming.

I’m thirteen, being fitted for my first pageant dress. The gown is pale pink and gorgeous, flowing in layers of tulle and lace from the trumpet flare at my knees to the floor.

Except, my mom tells the seamstress to take it in another inch.

“She’ll lose it by the time of the pageant,” Momma says.

She’s right.

After the laxatives, diet pills, and starvation, my waist shrinks an inch and a half.

When I take third place in the pageant, she blames the weight loss. "You're too skinny. You look like a sack of bones up there."

"Get out of my head!" I press my fists into my temples, tempted to yank fistfuls of hair out of my head in hopes some memories will come with them.

Anika isn't my mom.

Anika was pressuring me to throw a party, not skip a meal.

She won't punish me for yelling at her or chase me through the house, screaming insults through my closed bedroom door.

So, why do I hear footsteps moving behind me?

Why do I feel a tingle on the back of my neck like someone is chasing me?

Is it Noah?

I shake my head. I'm alone, in the woods. I'm safe. Everything is fine.

Stop being so dramatic. Get up. Now.

It's Momma's voice that sends me spiraling, but it's also Momma's voice that keeps me moving.

Because if I stop for even a minute, the demons I'm running from will catch up.

I don't know what they'll do to me when they find me.

So I get up. And I move, even though I still feel like I'm drowning.

The makeshift parking lot isn't far ahead. My car will be there. I'll be safe in my car.

I'm almost there.

One step at a time.

One breath at a time.

Finally, after stumbling my way through the dark woods, I see a glint of moonlight off a car hood up ahead.

I've made it.

I pull my keys out of my back pocket and begin hitting the unlock button, looking for the flash of my car's headlights. They light up, illuminating the trees for a moment.

And something else.

A shadow perched on my hood.

I freeze a few feet from my car, halfway between the dirt lot and the mouth of the woods.

My voice sounds tiny and afraid when it comes out.

“Noah?”

NOAH

Texts from Finn and Viktor blow up my phone before I even make it home.

They're mad at me for bailing on their last night in town, but I don't care.

How could I when I have so many other things on my mind?

Really, it's just one other thing: revenge.

I don't see any lights on as I gaze through the eight-foot high windows that make up most of the first-floor of my house, so I assume my mom is asleep.

But as soon as I push open one of the double front doors, I smell the alcohol.

A trail of wadded-up tissues lead me through the white-tile entryway and into the sunken living room. I can see where my mom haphazardly kicked off her heels in front of the liquor cabinet.

The doors to the cabinet are hanging open, and the once-plentiful stash of booze is growing barer by the day.

My dad was the one to keep the liquor cabinet full, bringing home gifts from clients and expensive bottles he would buy in celebration of an anniversary or a new contract.

I suspect that's why my mom is resisting going out and buying her own.

Even after all this time, she's waiting for him to come back and do it for her.

I slam the doors shut. The bottles inside rattle ominously.

The living room is steeped in shadows, the massive sectional little more than a charcoal smudge in my vision.

Except, as I scan the room, I see something else.

A misshapen lump that separates itself from the sofa.

I pull the cord on the standing lamp next to me. Mom bought it at an antique store when I was a kid. Dad hated it—the green fringe hanging down around the shade especially—but Mom insisted.

Now, it casts a yellowy, aged glow across the room.

And across her.

But despite the sudden burst of light, she doesn't move. For good measure, I clap my hands twice.

No reaction.

My mom is still in her sleek black work pants and white button down, but the pant legs are bunched around her knees and the shirt collar is ruffled and smeared with her lipstick. Black mascara smudges dot her cheeks and a ruined tissue is wedged between her face and the arm she is laying on.

Usually at this time, she's still coherent enough to be awake and remember my name.

She must've gotten an early start on the drinking tonight.

I walk over to make sure there isn't a liquor bottle tucked somewhere that she'll push onto the floor and shatter in the night.

All clear in that department. Instead, there's something worse.

A picture frame.

The edges are gilded and fanciful. I recognize it from the mantle over the fire place. That's where it used to sit—before I took it down and put it in the basement.

Apparently, she found it.

I pluck the frame from her hands. Mom's arms fall limply into place, completely unresponsive.

I'm eight or nine in the picture, a mess of curly brown hair like a mop on my head and a lopsided grin on my face.

Penny is wrong about a lot of things, but she's right about the fact that I don't smile much.

Not anymore.

I have my mom's angular chin and my dad's caramel brown hair. In this shot, we look like the happy stock photo family you see inside of picture frames at the store.

The sky behind us is a bright blue. We are standing on the turned-over earth of what would become our house. Construction was just starting, and Mom and Dad took me to the lot to have a picnic.

"Our first family meal at our forever home," Mom said that day. All these years later, I still remember those words.

God, what I wouldn't give to jump into that picture.

To warn those smiling fools what's coming for them.

There haven't been very many family meals lately. These days, Mom is usually too drunk or too depressed to cook, so she swallows a few pills with her drink of choice while I order delivery.

I eat alone in my room more often than not. If we didn't have a cleaning lady, the dining table would be buried in a foot of dust by now.

Mom moves on the couch, pulling me out of my thoughts. For a second, I think she might be waking up.

Then she hiccups and lets out a small, pitiful whimper before settling back to sleep.

I sigh and look back down at the picture.

I should have destroyed it the way I did the others.

I got tired of Mom moping around the house and bursting into tears whenever she saw a picture of Dad, so I got rid of them all. I shredded and burned his memory from the house, doing what I thought was best for her.

But when I came to this picture, I couldn't find it in me to rip up the happy, eight-year-old version of me.

Right now, though, it's easy.

I shatter the glass on the brick interior of the fireplace, letting it scatter across the hearth, and pull the picture free of the frame. I don't even give it a second look before I rip it up.

There's no need to.

It's the ghost of a life that no longer exists.

Mom may fall asleep clutching old memories, but I can't. They slip between my fingers like wisps of smoke, intangible.

I slide my mom off the couch, tucking one arm under her knees and the other under her back, and carry her upstairs to her room.

She murmurs something under her breath as I settle her into her bed, but I don't bother trying to decode it. It's just a sleepy, drunken mumble. Meaningless.

Just like the life we used to have, it's better off forgotten.

It's not lost on me that everything changed when I hunted down Penny in the woods tonight.

Two years of frigid silence—gone.

Two years of pretending the past didn't happen—gone.

So it's time to do to Penny what I did to the photograph: rip her to shreds and feed her to the fire.

PENNY

“Noah, is that you?”

His name is out of my mouth before I can stop myself.

I can't tell if my voice sounds scared or relieved.

There's a dark chuckle up ahead, then a deep, unfamiliar voice. “Not quite.”

A flashlight shines in my face, blinding me. Then, like a scary movie, the person shines the beam directly underneath his chin, illuminating his face.

It takes a few seconds for my vision to clear, but when it does, I notice the tattoos on the stranger's neck, his shaved head, and then, the leather jacket.

The patch affixed to the shoulder is in shadow, but I know the symbol well enough to recognize it. The vibrant red devil with purple hair and a lopsided golden crown.

I was running through the woods to escape my demons.

But in doing so, I ran straight into the arms of a Hell Prince.

I've met my fair share of Hell Princes, usually at parties where everyone is too drunk or stoned to care about the mingling of sworn enemies.

But I've never seen this man.

Because he is a *man*, not a boy. He looks nothing like the thin, puff-chested boys who swagger around town in their oversized leathers.

No, this man fills out his jacket nearly to bursting.

His arms are wider than my thighs, and the bottom half of his face is covered in a thick beard, in stark contrast with his bald, veiny head.

I take a step back.

“No need to be scared,” he croons, his voice deep and smoky. He smiles at me. “I just want to talk.”

“About what?”

I don’t have any business with the Hell Princes. The kids at Ravenlake who do talk with them regularly are usually only doing so to score cheap weed. But I don’t smoke at all. Pot makes me hungry, and Momma always knows when I’ve been eating more than she portions out for me.

“I’m Tank.” He points to a patch of an army tank stitched over his heart. “Bumper’s older brother.”

A couple months ago, I’d laugh and ask why this dude’s family has such an affinity for vehicular nicknames.

Bumper. Tank. What’s your dad’s name—Sedan?

But thanks to the events of last semester, I’ve heard of Bumper.

He was Haley’s ex-boyfriend, the Hell Prince she dated before her family moved across town.

Bumper is also the Hell Prince that Caleb and the other Golden Boys beat the shit out of.

“Your little friends ganged up on him. Beat him up pretty good,” Tank says, as if he can read my thoughts.

That’s not how I remember the story going, but I don’t want to get into an argument with a man named Tank when I’m alone and much too far from the party to be heard.

“My friends?” I shake my head. “You’ve got it all wrong. They aren’t my friends.”

Tank narrows his eyes and slides off the hood of my car, ambling towards me slowly. “That’s not the information I

have, angel. According to my source, you are a friend of Noah Boone.”

“What kind of idiot are you getting your information from? I’m not Noah’s friend.”

Tank’s smile sharpens. Moonlight glints off his front tooth. “The source is me. I saw you talking to him in the trees earlier.”

“Oh.”

““*Oh*,”” he mimics in a high-pitched voice before his eyebrows drop. “I saw the two of you looking much closer than friends, actually.”

The mention of it brings back the heat and the burning itch beneath my skin that being close to Noah caused.

He had me pinned to a tree with his hips and his hands.

In another lifetime, it would have been hot as hell.

As it is, though, there has been a very big misunderstanding.

“He was threatening me,” I correct him. “That wasn’t sexual.”

Tank shrugs and grins wickedly. “I guess I don’t really know the difference.”

The comment makes my stomach flip.

I’ve got to get out of here.

I slide my keys between my fingers, ready to gouge an eye should the need arise, and start to walk past him towards my car, giving him a wide berth.

“Well, if you want Noah’s friends, there’s a whole group of them at the party. I’m not one of them.”

For a second, I think he’s going to let me go.

But just as I move to pass him, Tank sidles in front of me and blocks my way.

He is massive. So much bigger than I realized before.

His chest takes up my entire vision, and I stumble backwards with a yelp. He grabs my arms to keep me from falling... and

to hold me close.

“What do you want?” I ask again. My fear and desperation is hard to hide.

Tank grabs a strand of my hair and tugs on it gently, almost in a soothing way, though my body is on high alert.

“Calm down, angel. You’re not in danger with me.”

He lets me go and I back away again, putting a few feet between us.

“Not yet, anyway,” he adds. He shrugs and smiles casually, clearly comfortable with threatening people.

“Noah hates me. I don’t know what you want with him or what you think I can do for you, but he doesn’t care about me. You have a better chance of talking to him yourself than I do.”

Tank crosses his arms, making himself wide. “I’m not as dumb as you think I am, angel.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Stop looking like one.” Tank winks crudely. A shiver moves down my spine. “I know you and Noah have been friends for a long time. In fact, I know a lot about you.”

“Oh, yeah?” I arch a brow.

“I know you live in a big white house with lions out front.”

My entire body freezes. I can’t move or breathe. I just stare at him, eyes wide.

Based on the smile on Tank’s face, he loves it.

“I know which car you drive,” he says, turning around to slap the hood of my BMW. “I know when your parents leave for work and what your sister looks like.”

Delanie’s cherub-like face pops into my head. I clench my fists.

“Leave my sister out of it.”

“Don’t worry, angel. Delanie’s fine so long as you make yourself available to me.”

Hearing her name in his mouth makes me feel sick. “What does that mean?”

Tank approaches me. Blots out the moonlight.

He’s huge. Scarred. Intimidating.

And I’m too stunned to move or fight.

So I just stand there, praying he’ll disappear. Praying this is all some panic- and alcohol-induced hallucination.

Tank strokes a finger down my cheek. I try to turn away, but he grabs my chin and tilts my face up. His breath smells like alcohol and smoke.

“You’ll know soon enough. Expect me to be in touch soon.”

Just as quickly as he appeared, Tank leaves, and I’m left to stumble to my car, still unsure if what I just experienced actually happened or not.

PENNY

When I pull into my spot in the circular driveway, I switch the engine off and sprint to the front door.

Twice tonight, I've been surprised by someone with bad intentions.

I don't intend to have it happen a third time.

I hurl myself through the door, slam the bolt into place behind me, and take a few deep breaths with my back pressed against it.

It takes me a few long minutes to calm down.

When I do, I notice something.

The house smells different.

Momma scoffed when I said that a few months ago, but it does. Growing up, I'd walk through the front door of my house and smell citrus, clean linens, and sugar.

Now, there's a hint of spice to it. Something sharper, unfamiliar.

I open the coat closet to shrug out of my distressed jean jacket and leather mules and see the moving boxes still stacked there.

How long have they been sitting there unpacked, and I'm still not used to them? They still surprise me every time.

Probably because, in the same way my mom has convinced herself I'll one day be the perfect daughter she has always

wanted, I refuse to accept reality. Refuse to accept that things are permanently changed.

That there's no going back to the old days.

All the lights are off, but the hallway night lights set into the wall illuminate my path up the stairs and down the hall to my room.

I have my hand on my door knob, ready to slide inside and call it a night.

But instead, I turn back down the hall.

Delanie's door is cracked open the way it always is. That way, everyone can hear in case she needs anything in the night.

I can't stop myself from peeking inside.

She's a light sleeper. Always has been. Momma has warned me time and time again not to go into her room, but hearing a man like Tank talk about my baby sister has left me more rattled than I've ever been.

Even more rattled than my conversation with Noah left me.

I should hate Delanie. In fact, when my mom told me she was pregnant with a baby sister, I did hate her a little bit.

I hated her mostly because my mom didn't.

For as long as I could remember, I'd done nothing but bring my mother disappointment.

But she beamed when she told me she was pregnant with another little girl.

I hated Delanie for that.

Plus, I hated her for what she did to my life. For the chaos and destruction and upheaval her arrival brought.

I hated her so, so much...

Until I saw her.

And in that moment, every bit of anger and hatred I felt towards her changed immediately into love and devotion.

Her room is glowing pink from the unicorn nightlight perched on her dresser. I can see her laying on her back behind the bars of her crib.

Her pajamas are white, as are the ruffled blankets mussed around her chubby legs, and her caramel brown curls fan out around her face like a halo.

I'd rather deal with the full brunt of the Golden Boys coming after me than have a single hair on Delanie's head be moved out of place.

She was born from one of the worst things that ever happened to me.

But she is the best thing I've ever known. She's pure. Perfect. Innocent.

I'll do whatever it takes to keep her that way.

NOAH

Penny glows beneath me.

“What are you waiting for?” Penny purrs, dragging a nail down my bare chest. Her eyes are electric green now, hypnotizing. “Take me.”

My cock is throbbing between my legs, so hard it’s painful. But I don’t want to end it yet. Not like this.

Because this shit between me and her? It isn’t love.

It’s war.

I grab her wrists and pin them above her head. Her eyes widen in fear.

She strains against the hold, but her squirming body brushes my cock.

I hiss, “Don’t you ever try to tell me what to do.”

“Please.” Her glossy lips pucker around the word, tormenting me the way they always do. “Get inside of me.”

My self-control is slipping, but I hold on as tightly as I can. “I’m going to have to punish that smart mouth of yours.”

Penny stills. She lowers her pointed chin, her teeth tugging at her lower lip as she tries to hide her smile.

Then, she strains against my hold on her wrists, arching her back so her breasts are in my face.

But all I can think about is her lips as they whisper, “Fuck. Me. Now.”

That alone is enough to make me want to spill all over her chest right now.

But no. I can't.

Not when I've waited so long for this.

I run my thumb over her lips, trying to savor the moment. She slides her hands around my thighs and squeezes, trying to pull me closer.

She eyes my length and licks her lips, and I moan.

Then, she grabs me with her soft, warm hand, and opens her mouth...

My phone rings, waking me up from that fucked-up dream of Penny. It's loud as fuck and even more annoying than usual. It takes a second to realize that it's because my ringtone is different.

I grab my phone and swipe up, knowing who it is without even looking at the screen. "Stop changing my ringtone, J.C."

"You do something to me that I can't explain," he croons into the phone, continuing the song he set as my ringtone. *"Hold me closer and I feel no paaain."*

"If you sing another line, I'm hanging up and deleting you from my contacts."

J.C. laughs, clearly pleased with himself. "You're no fun. Everyone loves Dolly Parton."

"Not first thing in the morning."

And not when I was seconds away from getting to the good part of the hottest dream I can remember having.

"Anyways, what do you want?"

"It's a funny story," he assures me. "You'll laugh."

As it turns out, it isn't a very funny story. J.C. got drunk, hooked up with a girl in the woods, and then fell asleep. He woke up on the ground and can't find his keys to unlock his car and get home.

Point is, he needs a ride.

“I’ll be there in twenty,” I grumble, throwing back the blankets and sliding my feet to the floor.

“But you only live ten minutes away!”

“Feel free to call Caleb if you’re impatient.”

He sighs. We both know Caleb is impossible to wake, especially after a night with Haley.

She is the first girl he doesn’t kiss and tell with, but we’ve all noticed a pattern of excessive tiredness after they spend the night together.

I’m guessing they aren’t sitting up all night telling each other ghost stories.

I consider jumping in the shower real quick—once I’m out of bed, it’s impossible for me to fall back asleep—but I decide to make better use of my time.

My balls are still bursting. I have to get some relief.

I grab the lotion from my bedside table and pump into my hand.

And when I close my eyes, it’s Penny’s pink lips I imagine wrapped around my cock.

Her cheeks bulge with my size, and her eyes water, but she moans for more. More. More.

I pump faster, all of my self-control gone.

I imagine curling my hand in the golden waves of her hair and pulling her fully onto my length again and again.

It only takes a few thrusts for relief to come rushing out of me.

As the surge of serotonin fades, disgust begins to creep in. The same way it always does when I imagine Penny.

It’s a weakness, a high I can’t quit chasing no matter how much I hate her. And it only makes me hate her more.

More frustrated than before I came, I clean up, slide into some jeans and a sweater, and grab my keys.

J.C. better be grateful.



Turns out, J.C. did call Caleb, and even though I still had to come and pick him up, Caleb is meeting us at a diner on South Main.

“I didn’t sign up for breakfast.”

“*I didn’t sign up for breakfast,*” J.C. mimics, his voice high-pitched and whiny. He reclines the passenger seat and smiles. “Would you lighten up for five minutes? I’m buying you breakfast as a show of gratitude. Most people would be happy about that.”

I grab my phone out of the cupholder and toss it to him. “If you really want to thank me, change my ringtone back to normal.”

J.C. sighs and hums “Islands in the Stream” as he swipes around on my phone.

“Who did you sleep with? Was she at least worth all this mess? You’re going to have to pay for a locksmith.”

J.C. kisses his fingers like a chef. “Totally worth it. You’ve heard of Jennifer Oakley, I presume.”

He says her name like she is a world-famous porn star rather than an averagely pretty brunette. She’s also one of Penny’s Dreadfuls, which docks a few points, in my opinion.

J.C. must sense my lack of excitement, because he begins to defend himself. “I was drunk, but I remember it being wild. She isn’t the hottest thing going, obviously, but a lot of that can be made up for by what they’re willing to do to you, and Jennifer was willing to do a lot.” He whistles, long and low. “It was hot. One down, two to go.”

I turn onto Main Street and end up behind an Oldsmobile going ten miles under the speed limit. “What does that mean?”

“Until I make my way through their group. I’m a third of the way there.”

I remember what Penny said last night about J.C. trying to sleep with her. My knuckles tighten on the steering wheel. “Whose group?”

“Penny’s, obviously. Penny’s Dreadfuls. More like Head-fuls, though, am I right?!” He turns to me with a huge smile on his face. “Get it? Like getting head? As in a blowjob? Tell me you get it.”

I get it, but I’m not laughing. Not just because it’s a horrific joke, even by J.C.’s standards.

But mostly because I’m so mad I could fucking stab him right here and now.

It’s a miracle I manage to stay on the road because my vision goes red. My teeth grit so hard I think they might ground to a powder.

“Don’t touch her.”

“Who?” J.C. glances at me nervously. “Penny? I thought you were done with her. You said you didn’t care about her, so I thought—”

“Don’t fucking touch her!” I slam my foot on the gas and careen around the Oldsmobile in front of us.

The driver honks their horn as I pass, offended by my speed, but I don’t know how else to get rid of the energy coursing under my skin.

I feel like I’m going to catch flame.

“God, Noah. Fine! Fine, okay. Whatever you want, all right?”

I swerve back into the right lane in front of the Oldsmobile, though they are far behind me now, and I feel my blood pressure returning to normal.

J.C. lets out a sigh of relief. “Goddamn, Noah. What the fuck?”

I don’t bother answering.

NOAH

By the time we pull up in front of the diner, J.C. seems to have let my outburst go.

Out of all of the Golden Boys, he is by far the most laid back. He doesn't take offense to much, and he lives in the moment.

Must be nice.

Caleb is already sitting at a booth, black circles under his eyes and his hair mussed.

J.C. ruffles it as we sit down, earning a punch in the arm from Caleb.

"You couldn't at least brush down your sex hair?" he asks, snickering as he grabs the coffee carafe on the table and pours himself a mug.

"I ordered you coffee. Show me some respect."

J.C. gives a small bow of gratitude and promptly dumps four packets of sweetener into his cup.

Then he launches into the details of what he can remember of his escapades with Jennifer—even though no one asked.

If J.C. is to be believed, Jennifer all but hung upside down from a branch and sucked him off. Obviously, he's exaggerating, but so long as he is satisfied, I'll let him have it. I'm still cooling off after my outburst in the car.

When he finally runs out of steam, he flips the conversation to Caleb. "What about you? How was your night, big fella?"

“Nuh-uh,” Caleb grunts, shaking his head. “Not gonna happen.”

J.C. pushes, but Caleb once again refuses to say anything about his night with Haley.

“The two of you claw at each other like animals in heat in front of us all the time, but you aren’t going to give any details? That’s low, man.”

Caleb wags a finger at him. “After what you said last night about having a foursome with her, you’re lucky I’m talking to you at all.”

J.C. presses folded hands to his chest, his lower lip pouted out dramatically. “And I do feel oh-so lucky, Caleb. You know how I treasure our talks.”

It’s obvious Caleb is annoyed with him, but that’s the magic of J.C. No matter how much of an idiot he is or how many times he pisses you off, he can always make you laugh.

Right on cue, Caleb cracks a smile and chucks his menu at J.C.’s head.

The waitress, a middle-aged woman with pink curly hair and a smoker’s voice, takes our orders. They both get giant stacks of pancakes, but I opt for toast and eggs.

My stomach is uneasy this morning. I can’t imagine adding sugar to the mix.

When the food arrives, we eat in silence for a few minutes, letting the food soak up the leftover alcohol from the night before.

Finally, J.C. slaps his hand on the table. “Best pancakes ever. These are the bomb.”

“They’re burnt and taste like sausage,” Caleb says. “But I’m hungover enough that I don’t care.”

J.C. looks around the diner and shakes his head. “I’m going to miss this place, aren’t you guys? Once school starts back up, we won’t have much time to come here anymore. And after graduation, we’re all out of here. Right? Do you all know where you’re going?”

“No way. Stop it. We aren’t discussing graduation before we’ve even started the semester,” Caleb says. “You can’t talk to me about leaving until I’ve recovered from Spring Fling.”

“Spring Fling.” J.C. wags his brows suggestively. “I can’t believe we’re seniors now. I’ve been dreaming about Spring Fling for years. It’s going to be fucking rad.”

“Rad?” I snort.

“He speaks!” J.C. claps me on the back. “I’m a bit offended the first thing you’ve said since we got here was to make fun of me, but I’ll take it as a sign you’ve forgiven me for what happened in the car.”

“What happened in the car?” Caleb asks.

J.C. shakes his head at him and then winks at me, like we have some big secret.

I roll my eyes and brush his hand off of my shoulder. “I just think ‘rad’ is a bit of a tame descriptor, don’t you think? Spring Fling is going to be the biggest party of our lives.”

In most towns across America, *Spring Fling* is the moniker for a standard high school dance. Tame, lame, boring as hell.

But in Ravenlake, it’s the exact opposite.

It’s the biggest blowout of the fucking year.

All the members of the graduating class pool money to rent out a massive cabin in the woods for an entire weekend of drinking, drugs, and general debauchery.

So yeah—more than “rad,” if you ask me.

“Think about it,” J.C. says, leaning in and whispering. “All the girls have nothing to lose. They’re going to be out of Ravenlake after this year, so why not give in to their most base desires?”

Caleb snorts. “And you think their ‘most base desires’ involve you in some way?”

J.C. puffs out his chest. “Obviously. Why wouldn’t they?”

They two of them start ragging on each other the way they always do.

I let them have at it. My thoughts turn to something else.

After this year, I'll be out of Ravenlake. Away from everyone I grew up with.

Including Penny.

For some people, that would mean I should let this vendetta go and move on.

For me, it means there's nothing left to lose.

Spring Fling is going to be Penny's Armageddon.

There are just so many options for how to humiliate her—in front of the entire graduating class. Image after image flashes through my head.

Penny participating in the Spring Fling wet t-shirt contest, her breasts visible through sheer white fabric.

Strip poker. Ruthlessly stripping her of one layer at a time until she's blushed and bare for all to see. For everyone to mock. For everyone to laugh at.

I want to be the one to do that shit to her.

It hasn't even been an hour since I rubbed one out, but my cock is twitching.

I try to push the thoughts from my mind. But thoughts of Penny spread-eagled beneath me or on her knees in front of me or with her hands around my shaft keep appearing.

And I can't stop them once they've started.

"Hello?" J.C. waves a hand in front of my face. "Earth to Noah, you in there?"

I blink away an image of Penny on all fours in front of me, her round ass in my hands, and look up at J.C.

His face is much less appealing.

"What?"

“I asked who’s on your bang list?” Caleb says. “For Spring Fling. Just curious which swamp rat you’ll be balls deep in while I hang out with my cool, attractive girlfriend.”

J.C. wrinkles his nose at Caleb’s obscene monogamy and turns to me. “Yeah, who’s on your list?”

One face appears in my vision.

One name at the top of my list.

There is only one girl I have any desire for. Not just a desire to fuck.

A desire to ruin. To destroy. To humiliate.

But that’ll come later. I won’t reveal my plans just yet. Not even to my best friends.

“No one,” I say with a shrug. “Or anyone. Either way.”

Caleb smiles and claps me on the shoulder. “That’s the spirit. Keep your options open.”

NOAH

Caleb offers to take J.C. home, so I have an entire solo car ride across town to keep brooding on the fantasies cropping up in my mind.

I'm not a sex-starved thirteen-year-old kid. I should not be this out of control.

I thought our closeness last night was only getting Penny riled up, but now it's obvious it had an effect on me, too.

And I don't like it. Not one bit.

By the time I park and walk up the drive, I've decided to go upstairs and watch some porn—find someone else to fantasize about for a bit.

I just need to cleanse the system.

To purge Penny.

Except, as soon as I walk through the front door, my mom calls my name from the living room.

Her voice is hoarse, throat dry from her alcohol intake last night.

When I turn the corner, she has a tall glass of orange juice in her hand.

I'll bet my left nut there's vodka in it. Or champagne, at the very least. Though her demons usually demand something stronger than just the bubbly stuff.

“I didn’t notice you come home last night,” she says, running a hand through her bed-flattened curls. Her eyes are rimmed in smudgy black liner, though she must have cleaned up the mascara running down her cheeks at some point.

I want to tell her she also must not have noticed me carry her up the stairs and tuck her into bed, but I don’t bother her with those facts.

Not knowing how she got to bed at night isn’t exactly a new experience for my mother.

Being sober enough to get into her bed on her own is the rarity these days.

“I came home around midnight. You were asleep.”

Technically true, though a white-washed version of the story.

She chews on her lip and tips her head towards the fireplace. “A picture frame broke. Did you do that?”

Most parents would ask a question like this as a ploy to see if their child would confess.

My mom, however, is trying to remember if she broke it herself.

It wouldn’t be the first time. In the height of her grief, before she came to depend on the bottle, she took to breaking china.

Dad’s mom left him a cabinet full of dishes that had been passed down in the family. I’d already told them both from the time I was ten I would never have an interest in displaying the family heirlooms in any home I ever owned.

So, after everything that happened two years ago, she shattered them.

In the sink. On the patio out back. In the basement over dad’s empty safe.

One at a time. Like breaking the plates was the same thing as destroying her grief. Her past. Our family trauma.

She tried to clean up the evidence, no doubt because she was ashamed of her coping mechanism.

But I always found the shards.

And truth be told, I never judged her.

I know how it feels to crave breaking fragile things, too.

“It fell.”

“And what happened to the picture?” she asks.

I’d kicked the pieces under soot in the fireplace. Unless she got down on her hands and knees, she’ll never find them.

I wonder if she remembers falling asleep holding the picture at all.

I shrug and cross my arms. “No idea. I didn’t touch it.”

Mom sighs and takes a long drink of her “orange juice.” She’s wearing a long, blush pink dressing robe and slippers, but I know she must have changed into them this morning *after* she woke up in her work clothes.

She wants to keep up appearances for me, but I see everything.

The only person she’s fooling is herself.

“You seem stressed, Noah. Angry. And I just can’t help but feel like...” Her voice drifts off before she takes another drink and looks up at me, her brown eyes washed out by her dilated pupils. “Is this about your father?”

I groan. I’ve had more than enough heart-to-hearts today. If you can count me telling J.C. to leave Penny the fuck alone as a heart-to-heart.

Most people wouldn’t.

But then again, most people aren’t me.

My mom has enough shit to deal with that I don’t need to add mine to the pile. Besides, she can’t handle her own grief. How does she expect to help me?

“Not everything is about him. I’m fine, just hungover.”

At one time, I’d lie to my mom about my drinking.

But now, Miss Screwdriver-Before-Ten-In-the-Morning doesn’t really have a leg to stand on.

She lowers her chin and pinches her brows together. “But if something was wrong, you’d talk to me about it?”

“Probably not,” I answer. “But like I said, nothing is wrong.”

Before she can try to psychoanalyze me with her alcohol-soaked morning brain, I give her a brusque wave and shuffle down the hallway to my room.

A minute ago, a quick jerk off to a set of porn star tits would have solved all of my problems.

Now, the thought is depressing.

I hesitate at the stair landing, debating heading up the stairs to my room.

Before I can overthink it too much, I take the other option and head downstairs.

The basement used to be where I hung out the most.

But I haven’t spent much time down here the last couple years. I moved all of my gaming gear up to my room and placed storage boxes of old clothes, CDs, and baseball cards where the TV used to sit.

Part of it is because I got a car.

As soon as all us Golden Boys were mobile, we didn’t want to sneak weed in our parents’ basements or try to get to second base with a girl while people walked across the floor upstairs. We moved to backseats and abandoned boat docks and dark park benches.

Now, Finn’s house is the spot. His dad is dead, and he’s in NYC with Lily, so he gave Caleb the key to keep watch over the place.

My basement full of childhood memorabilia and a lumpy pull-out couch doesn’t exactly compete with a full mansion for us to do whatever the fuck we want in.

I walk past the boxes, the now-empty safe, and the dusty couch to a door on the back wall.

No one but me ever went into this little room.

It was more private. Off-limits to everyone else. A place I could guarantee no one would bother me.

When I flip on the light, the bulb flickers to full brightness. My body shifts into autopilot.

Without thinking, my left hand reaches out to grab the guitar hanging from a hook on the wall.

I throw the strap around my neck.

Tuning it feels like second nature. My ear remembers what my mind has forgotten.

My fingers stumble over the notes at first, but the movements come back to me faster than I would have guessed after so long.

“Music is an instinct,” Dad had said years ago when he was first teaching me to play. “If you have it, you can feel it in your bones. Like a part of you.”

I never knew what he meant until I learned to play more than a few nursery rhymes and “Smoke on the Water.”

As soon as I could read music and play the songs I liked, the music that meant something to me, I was drawn to my guitar. It felt like a missing limb, like a part of my body I’d lost at birth, but found years later.

I couldn’t imagine my life without it.

Back then, I didn’t have much of an imagination. I never could have guessed how many things I’d have to live my life without one day.

PENNY

I'm in the woods again, the trees pressing in all around me.

As I walk, branches become lower and closer until they are scraping at my skin with every step.

Then, I feel something wrap around my upper arm. I move to brush it away.

Except, it isn't a branch.

It's a hand.

I follow the hand up a toned, tanned arm to his face.

Noah's.

God, he's beautiful.

He always has been, ever since we were little. His mouth is wide but gorgeous, matching the proportions of his dark eyes and heavy brows.

Even in the dark, I can see the flush of red on his cheeks that appears anytime he is too cold or too hot or worked up.

Everything else about Noah is a mystery, so God had to give him one weakness.

Suddenly, I remember we aren't friends anymore. I haven't spoken to him in years, and he shouldn't be here.

Before I can scream or react, Noah claps a hand over my mouth and pushes me against a tree. His hand slides between my legs, cupping my heat.

I try to squirm away from him, but it only makes the sensations stronger.

I shouldn't want this.

So, why does it feel so good?

"Because you're sick," Noah hisses, his breath warm against my ear.

No. No, I'm not.

Noah used to be my friend. My best friend. No matter what has happened between us, some deep part of me still cares for him.

That doesn't make me sick.

It makes me human.

His knee slides between my legs, holding most of my weight, while his hands unbutton my jeans and slide my zipper down slowly. Painfully slowly.

"Caring for me makes you a fool," Noah says as he slides his hand into my panties, his finger circling over me. "It makes you weak. Though, that's not a surprise. You've always been weak."

His voice is starting to change. The words morphing into something different, but equally familiar.

I grab his wrist and try to pull him away, but he slips a finger inside of me, and I moan, releasing the tension in my legs and letting myself fall further onto him.

"I'm not weak..." I protest.

Noah leans in and licks my ear. "You're pathetic. You can't do anything right."

His voice is high-pitched now, almost feminine. Something is wrong with him, but I'm so lost in a haze of carnal lust that I can't see straight.

"You screw everything up. Without me, you'd be nothing. Nobody."

"Stop it." My breath is ragged as his hand slides inside of me.

“No, Penelope.” At the sound of my name, my entire body goes stiff.

I know that voice. I’ve heard it my entire life.

Noah pulls his fingers out of me and steps away, and I stare at him.

It’s him. It’s Noah.

But his voice... his voice belongs to...

“Penelope!”

My mom’s voice echoes down the hall, shriller than any alarm ever could be. “Wake up right now or we’ll be late to yoga!”

I blink my eyes open blearily.

I gasp and pull my finger out of my panties. My entire body heats with embarrassment, and I sit bolt upright in bed and check my door, calming myself with the fact my mom hadn’t come in and seen me touching myself in my sleep.

It’s weird, but I can’t decide whether I’m more disturbed at the thought of my own fingers doing it or Noah Boone’s.

One interaction in the woods after two years of radio silence and suddenly he is starring in my slightly traumatic sex dreams? Not cool.

“Penelope, NOW!” Mom screams.

“Coming!” I shout before I realize the irony.

I can still feel the heat between my legs, the ball of tension low in my belly that even yoga won’t be able to cure.

Mom is yelling for me to get going now, but she doesn’t expect me to go to yoga with bedhead and a fresh face.

No, it’s an event. As always. A public event where I’m expected to make my best impression.

I check the clock. The first class at the studio doesn’t start for another ninety minutes.

For any normal person, that would be plenty of time to take care of the itch.

But my mom is not a normal person. So, I start in on my daily ritual.

I shave in the shower, tweeze my eyebrows in the bathroom mirror, blow dry and curl my hair only to pull it back into a high pony, and do my makeup.

I can't look like I've done my makeup, though. That would be ridiculous.

Nobody wears makeup to work out, Penelope.

So it needs to look natural.

Concealer hides the dark circles under my eyes and the small blemishes on my jawline and near my nose. A sheer powder gives me an airbrushed look. Pale pink blush adds a little color.

It's more understated than I would ever dare wear to school, but for the yoga studio, it's just right.

Hopefully, it passes Momma's inspection.

By the time I shove myself into my purple leggings and matching sports bra and grab my coat, Momma is tapping her foot at the base of the stairs, purse slung over her shoulder.

"About time," she snaps, turning on her heel and marching out to the car.

I'm ten minutes early. Early enough we have time to stop and get lattes in the drive-thru, but she never apologizes. I'd fall over dead with surprise if she did.

At the studio, I do "the circuit."

As if I'm the princess at a royal ball, Momma expects me to move around the room before the start of class and talk to everyone.

I do as I'm told. Even though I want to scream, tear my hair out, have a meltdown in the middle of the empty room.

I smile and inquire about their kids or, in the case of some of my classmates, the upcoming semester. I work the room like a career politician, even though there is no election.

Just like my mother taught me.

“Oh, to be young,” Maryann Thomas says, admiring me with a twinkle in her eye.

She is an older woman with children closer to Momma’s age, though yoga has kept her remarkably trim and toned. She has been a member of the class since my mom and I joined.

And she’s the only person in Ravenlake who can compete with my mother in the Obnoxiously Vain Olympics.

“I remember when my skin was tight and my chest was perky, and I could wear a sports bra around town without worrying someone would call the authorities.”

“I’m sure no one would call the police,” I say with a bright chuckle, eyeing the rest of the room to see if I can make a quick escape.

I know Maryann is just trying to relive what she believes are her glory days, but I wish she could do it without talking about how attractive she finds me.

It’s a bit creepy.

She steps closer and lays a hand on my shoulder. “They would, believe me! Not everyone is like your mother, bouncing back to that gorgeous body of hers so soon after your baby sister was born! No one wants to see a wrinkled old woman like me half-dressed. But a pretty young thing like you? People would pay for it!”

I’ve only been talking to Maryann for a few minutes—my tolerance is usually much higher—but I’m already losing patience.

Maybe it’s because Noah (real and dream version) has stolen all of my patience today.

Maybe it’s because I’m running on shitty sleep and half a latte. Skipping breakfast is a recipe for disaster.

Either way, I’m low on patience and high on angst, so I can’t stop myself before I respond.

“Do you really think so? I’ve been considering exotic dance work, but I’ve been nervous about taking the plunge. But you and I both know I won’t look like this forever. Might as well make a few bucks on it while I can.”

To say Maryann is horrified would be an understatement.

Her eyes go wide, her mouth gapes, and small bursts of air are coming out of her nose.

She truly can’t tell whether I’m joking or not, and I don’t blame her. It wasn’t a very good joke.

Technically, it was more of a sarcastic “fuck off, you witch.”

Based on the way she is slowly backing away from me, I think I made the message nice and clear.

And for one shining moment, it feels good. I feel proud.

I said what I wanted. Not what Momma wanted me to say, or what my friends expected me to say, or any of the shit that normally clamps down on my actions like a steel vise.

I said it for *me*. For Penny.

It feels good... right up until I glance over and see Momma staring at me. She looks fucking livid.

She heard what I said, and she isn’t pleased.

PENNY

Sami claps her hands and announces the start of the session before my mom can say anything to me.

By the child's pose at the end of class, I'm almost relaxed enough to forget I'll have to answer to my mom later.

Almost.

Yoga is yet another thing my mother forced me into when she thought I was beginning to gain weight.

I told her it was just my boobs growing, but she disagreed.

In the end, though, it worked in my favor. I actually love yoga.

I'd never let on, of course. Having attachments to things make you weak, according to Momma.

If she knew for even a second I enjoyed yoga, she'd take it away from me. She'd find a new, worse way to punish my body for its curves and imperfections.

So I have to hide it.

There's something so calming about using my body for what it was meant for—strength, movement, and balances—rather than as a tool.

My mom believes my body is for public consumption.

It's a status symbol, separating me from those less conventionally attractive.

An ornament for a rich boy's arm.

One day, this body will make you wealthy.

Unlike Maryann, my mom didn't have exotic dancing on the brain. She wants me to stay fit and on top so I can marry rich and live the same life she lives—as if her constant struggle to stay atop the social heap is something to aspire to.

I don't know what I want my life to look like.

But whatever it is, it won't look anything like hers.

Everyone claps after the meditative music clicks off and begins rolling up their mats. Maryann is far across the room from me.

Unsurprisingly, she leaves without sticking around to chat more.

My mother, however, is somehow at my shoulder instantly, her mat tucked under her arm.

“Let's go,” she says, gritting the words out between thin lips.

As soon as I stand up, she leans in close and pinches me in the side hard enough I let out a small whimper. “Ow!”

“Shut up. That's what you get for making your mother look like a fool.”

In the next instant, she lets me go and waves to the other yogis gathered in a circle near the door, a megawatt smile plastered across her face.



The lecture is the same as always.

I'm a reflection of my mother.

My behavior is a reflection of my mother.

My appearance is a reflection of my mother.

Everything I do is directly connected to my mother.

Therefore, she has to be in full control of my life.

Or so the story goes.

“Do you think we live the life we do because I walked around like a slob, making rude comments to people, and being friends with losers?” she asks, not actually expecting me to respond. “No, I worked for it. Every day. I should be relaxing now. I should be able to sit back and enjoy what I built. But instead, I have to kill myself to make sure you don’t ruin everything.”

How Maryann’s opinion of me plays into my mother’s master plans, I don’t know.

What I do know is that my tiny slip up is going to be held up for at least a week as an example of why I’m the biggest disappointment a parent could ever hope to have.

Momma is still raving about my attitude and lack of appreciation for everything she has done for me.

Until the moment we walk through the front door.

“Ooh, that smells good!” she sing-songs, bouncing into the kitchen where Delanie is sitting in a high chair next to the island, flinging milk and cereal across the floor with her spoon.

My stepdad is at the stove top making scrambled eggs.

Stepdad Steve. It sounds like a joke when I call him that, to my friends or whatever. As in, *Stepdad Steve was being a total fucking buzzkill last night* or *Stepdad Steve gave me his credit card to go shopping at the mall.* Like this is all fun and games.

But it’s not. Nothing about it is fun. Nothing about him is funny.

I shiver.

The title will never be natural. Just like the change of scent in the house, it will never quite fit in the way I want.

His eggs, however, are more than welcome to be part of the family.

I’m starving.

I toss my yoga mat in the coat closet and kick off my shoes.

I hear Momma's lips smacking in a sloppy kiss as I pad into the kitchen.

I open the fridge to block the sight and take a long drink from a glass bottle of water.

"Shut the fridge, Penny. Are you trying to cool down the whole house?"

She's using her pleasant, 'other people are around' voice.

But I can hear the tension underneath it.

Why do you have to ruin every single moment of my life?, it says. Why can't you just disappear?

If I wasn't so hungry, I'd do just that. Head straight up to my room and stay there until school starts on Monday.

Unfortunately, my body requires sustenance.

"Sorry."

I spin around and reach for a plate sitting in a stack on the island.

Before I can even touch it, though, my mom clears her throat. I look up and see her green eyes narrowed to slits. She reminds me of a snake eyeing with a mouse before she swallows the poor creature whole.

"I don't think you need to eat anything, do you, honey?" she coos, her lower lip pouted out innocently. "You ate that whole breakfast sandwich from the coffee shop."

Vile bitch.

My stomach growls in protest. But there's nothing to say.

Stepdad Steve is never around during the worst of mom's behavior. He isn't an ally of mine, anyway. He made that clear when he showed up despite my many protestations and ruined my life.

And Delanie is two, which makes her an adorable, but ultimately useless, ally.

Even if I call my mom out as a liar, it won't change anything.

Not in a meaningful way, at least.

Sure, maybe I'll get to eat some scrambled eggs and toast right now. But as soon as my mom and I are alone again, she'll dream up an even worse punishment for making her look ridiculous in front of my stepdad.

She'll be ten times angrier than she was with Maryann. Because Maryann doesn't pay her bills.

Maryann doesn't ensure she gets her quarterly botox and her hair dyed and her body waxed smooth and hairless.

Today at the yoga studio, I threatened a microscopic section of my mom's social life, and she's taking away a meal.

How much worse will it be if I threaten her male-shaped coin purse?

I swallow down my pride and smile, pulling my hand back. "Right," I wince. "Guess I forgot."

I go upstairs, shaking from hunger. Then I shower off the sweat and shame.

Long after I'm clean, I stand in the stream of water and take deep, shaking breaths, waiting for them to even out.

Waiting for the air to fill me up and take away the gnawing ache in my stomach.

Looking back at my life, I can't pinpoint the exact moment things changed.

Had they always been like this? Certainly not.

If they had been, I'd be dead by now. No way I would have been able to survive it.

As it is, I only have one more semester left of my demons. Of Momma, the Hell Princes, and Noah Boone.

One more semester, and then I'm gone for good.

If I can survive that long.

NOAH

The first day of a new semester school pep rally.

Yet another pointless Ravenlake Prep tradition.

“My mom already sent them a check. What more do they want from me?” I ask, flopping down on the front row of the bleachers.

Usually, I’d choose a seat towards the back, but I want to make a clean exit at the first possible moment.

These things suck. I avoid them whenever possible.

Sophomore year, I skipped the spring semester rally in favor of making out with Krista Sanders on the tennis courts.

Last year, Finn and I smoked a joint in the parking lot

The only reason I’m here now is because of Caleb and Haley.

“It’s our last one,” Haley says, making puppy dog eyes and squeezing Caleb’s arm. “Gotta enjoy high school while it lasts, right?”

Principal Coopridier taps her hand on the microphone and calls order before I can respond.

The students milling around rush to their seats.

And as the crowd parts, I see her.

It’s almost cinematic the way the room seems to divide in a straight line that points directly to her.

But I don’t know why I’m surprised. It has happened before.

All of this has. Like this exact moment is on replay from three years ago.

So much has changed since then.

But two things are still the same.

Penny.

And me.



Three Years Earlier

“If I have my mom donate some extra money, can I skip this pep rally?” I joke, taking a seat between Finn and Viktor on the front row of the bleachers.

“Not the fall one, but better luck in spring,” Finn says with a wink.

Finn and Viktor are a grade ahead, so they know everything about Ravenlake already. Thanks to them, the other Golden Boys and I have been going to high school parties all summer long, making friends and connections.

Still, I feel more like a lost freshman than I’d like to.

Finn’s dad speaks, then Principal Coopriider. I ignore them both.

Halfway through the assembly, I look up.

And there she is.

Penny LaFevre.

I realize with a start that the last time I saw her was the last day of eighth grade. I was so busy chasing high school parties all summer that I forgot to check in with her and see how she was handling all the stuff with her dad.

By the looks of it, she’s doing just fine.

She was always pretty, but in a kiddish kind of way. A cute way.

Now, she’s... hot. Sexy. Curvy.

Can all that really happen over one summer?

She looks up quickly, almost like she felt me looking, and our eyes meet.

I should probably look away, but I can’t seem to divert my eyes. Penny lowers her chin nervously, tucks a strand of blonde hair behind her ear, and smiles up at me.

And I’m gone.

Somehow or another, we end up at the same party that night. It's at Finn's place, of course.

The place is packed to the rafters with grinding Ravenlake Prep kids. Alcohol is flowing, music is thumping, hormones are surging through the roof.

I see her and make my way over.

"Long time, no see," she says, leaning in close so I can hear her over the music thumping through the speakers.

"I was... a bit busy this summer."

She narrows her green eyes at me, a suspicious smile on her lips, but she doesn't press.

We both know I forgot about her, but that doesn't seem to matter now.

Instantly, it's like no time has passed at all.

I grab Penny a drink—a beer can from a mini fridge under the kitchen island—and we wander around the party together.

We talk about nothing in particular, but it feels important. Momentous.

"It's too early to start pairing off," J.C. whispers in my ear as we pass by the pool table where he is trying to teach three freshman girls how to chalk a pool stick as graphically as possible.

I elbow him in the stomach and keep moving.

Eventually, we wander into the downstairs living room. The furniture has been pushed to the edges of the room and a group of people are sitting cross legged in a circle like they are about to perform a séance.

Finn waves me over and nudges people so they make room for me and Penny.

She has on a tight pair of jeans with a white crop top that slips up to reveal most of her stomach as she sits down. I try not to obviously stare at the indent next to her hip bone and the way her body curves gracefully up to a trim waist, but God, it's hard.

She's worth devouring.

"Welcome, welcome," Finn says, addressing the whole circle.

Everyone quiets so all I can hear is the bass of the music from upstairs. Then, Finn throws his arms into the air like the ringleader of a circus. "To Truth or Dare!"

Penny covers her mouth with her hand and laughs. "Oh no. What are we getting into?"

"It's just an excuse for everyone to make out," I scowl, rolling my eyes.

The air is thick with a tension I can't quite explain, and I think it has a lot to do with the curves visible under Penny's crop top.

My hand is itching at my side, desperate to reach out and touch her, any part of her. To claim it as my own so everyone at this party knows who she belongs to.

For a time.

Finn spins a bottle in the middle of the circle to determine who gets to go first.

A sophomore girl dares a junior boy to kiss her. Someone else gets groped over their jeans. A top comes off, a shot of tequila gets poured and thrown back, and before I know it, more and more of our inhibitions are falling to the wayside with every spin of the bottle.

"Are these parties always like this?" Penny asks, chewing on her full, pink lower lip. "You've been hanging out with these people all summer, right?"

I turn to her, eyebrow raised. "How do you know that?"

"Okay, so maybe I asked around about you," she admits, twirling a strand of hair around her finger. "You disappeared, and I wanted to know where to. Now I know."

We're still looking at one another when Finn gives a shout. "My turn!"

So far, everyone else has used their turn on themselves, but Finn turns to me with a wide grin. "I dare Noah Boone to take

a body shot. Off of her.”

His finger jabs in Penny’s direction.

I reach out and swat his hand out of the air without thinking.
“You didn’t even ask Truth or Dare first.”

“That’s because I assumed you weren’t a coward,” Finn says, wagging his eyebrows.

This is the giddiest I’ve ever seen him. I’m guessing he’s more than a little drunk.

“I’m not.”

“Then do it,” he challenges.

I glance over at Penny, and she lays a hand on my shoulder.
“It’s fine. I’ll do it.”

An electric current seems to radiate from where her hand is touching me.

Finn sets the entire thing up. He has Penny lay down on a coffee table, pours salt in a line on the flat expanse of her stomach, and then puts a lime wedge in her mouth.

Then, he hands me a shot.

“Lick, shot, lime.”

“I know how to do it,” I snap, yanking the shot out of his hand.

Penny shimmies her hips, readjusting her position on the table.

The tension tightens.

I place my hands on either side of her hips and lean over her. She smells like cinnamon and citrus.

I take a deep breath before swiping my tongue along the salty line on her stomach.

Her midsection clenches, holding in a laugh, and I linger there for another second, savoring my nearness to her.

Then, at the crowd’s prompting of “Shot! Shot! Shot!”, I stand up and toss back the shot.

It burns down my throat, making me wince, but before the pain can set in, I move up to Penny’s head and lean down.

This time, our eyes meet.

Her irises are almost as green as the lime in her mouth, and as I dig my teeth into the lime wedge, our lips brush. Just barely.

But it's enough.

Her eyes widen, and I feel myself begin to harden.

I suck on the lime and grab Penny's hand to help her up.

She slides off the table and bumps into me, our hips colliding—which does nothing to help the situation brewing in my jeans.

We sit down, watching as the game devolves into wilder and wilder dares, none of which involve us.

The entire time, I feel heat rolling off of Penny's body next to mine. A few times, I glance over and catch her watching me, her long lashes batting against her cheeks, her full lips slightly parted, almost expectant.

By the time the crowd begins demanding Seven Minutes in Heaven, the tension between us is a physical thing.

Pairings are selected, and no surprise, Finn pairs me with Penny.

I don't wait to see what happens with the others.

I just grab Penny's hand and pull her towards the storage room in the back corner.

A nightlight plugged into the outlet casts the two of us in a red glow.

Penny tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and looks up at me, her eyes impossibly large and probing.

"We don't have to do anything if you don't want."

I lean down and press my lips to hers, silencing her.

A second later, she presses onto her toes and kisses me back.

My hands slide down the length of her spine to her waist and around to her hips. I let myself touch her in all the ways I've been imagining all night.

She feels even better than I thought she would. My hands seem to have been made for this very purpose.

Penny curls her fingers in the curls at the base of my neck and drags her fingers down my neck. She rolls her body against me, driving me absolutely wild, and swipes her tongue across my lower lip.

I have no idea if other couples are still going at it out in the other room or if the party is over or if the world is ending.

I can't think about anything beyond Penny in my arms, her breath in my mouth, her taste on my tongue.

Slowly, I work my hands higher and higher on body, sliding from her hips to her waist, then up to her ribs, until finally, I'm holding her breasts in my hands.

I can feel the lacy fabric of her bra through the material of her shirt—I've also been able to see the outline of it all night—and as I circle my thumb over the supple flesh, I feel her nipple begin to rise.

Feeling the evidence of her arousal makes my own all the more painful. I've never wanted to satisfy my own desires more in my entire life.

Which is why I'm more confused than anyone when Penny slides her hand down my stomach to the front of my jeans, and I stop her.

She pulls back, her lips red and swollen from kisses. "Don't you want to?"

"Fuck yes," I breathe, chuckling a bit at how much I desperately *want to*. I tip my head in the direction of the Santa Claus nightlight. "But maybe, not like this."

"I don't mind." Penny draws closer to me, the front of her jeans brushing across the bulge in mine.

I groan and take a deep breath. "I don't want our first time to be me taking you standing up against a rickety shelf of Christmas decorations."

She licks her lips, her breathing coming in ragged bursts. "If that's not what you want, then please stop making it sound so

appealing.”

I smile, then I find her lips again and slide my tongue into her mouth, massaging hers with my own. It feels as natural as breathing. Like we were designed to fit together this way. How much more perfect will it feel when we are perfectly fit together?

“I want to be able to lay you down and taste every part of you,” I whisper. “I want to have the time and the space and the lighting to enjoy every single second. To make it count.”

Penny hands her head in disappointment for a second and then sighs, bringing her hand to rest on my chest. “Fine, I’ll admit, that sounds pretty magical.”

She leans back against the shelving, her hips thrust slightly forward, and her curves on full display.

My eyes trace the smooth lines of her waist up to the curve of her breasts, and my breath catches.

“We better get out of this closet before I change my mind.”

She laughs and takes my hand as I lead her back into the party.



Present Day

Penny is flanked by her Dreadfuls. But when I catch her eye and tip my head towards the exit a few minutes before the assembly is over, she whispers something to each of them and then follows me out.

Good girl.

The student body is cheering along and shouting insults as the dance squad and marching band put on a performance at the far end of the auditorium.

No one pays much attention as I slip through the double doors of the auditorium and into the hallway.

I walk to the end of the hall and wait. Penny comes through the doors a second later, looks around, and then sees me.

As soon as she does, I take a left and head down a deserted hallway lined with windows.

I march down the hallway and take another right into a small alcove beneath a stair well, not visible from the hallway.

I'm not surprised when Penny slinks into the dark space across from me.

We've always been drawn to one another. It's a force beyond our control, one that makes no rational sense.

Even when I've threatened to ruin her, she cannot make herself stay away.

"What do you want?" she asks, her voice high-pitched and nasally. "Is this to apologize for your drunken behavior the other night? If not, I'm not interested."

She has on a pink suede mini skirt with buttons down the front, thigh-high boots, and a shirt that falls off of both shoulders, pooling around her arms.

She is dressed like an actual doll. Like she's headed to a runway rather than to school.

Who is she working so hard to impress?

“I just like knowing that you do what I tell you. This was a test. Congratulations, you passed.”

Her glossy lips part in a huff. “You asshole. You’re so smug. I didn’t follow you because of *you*, I followed you because I wanted to tell you that I’m not going to spend my last semester in this town afraid of you. You don’t scare me.”

“No?” I ask, eyebrow arched.

She crosses her arms and shakes her head.

In a flash, I move across the small alcove so I’m standing half a breath away from her.

Penny, for all her posturing, gasps in surprise and throws her hands out to protect herself. Her palms land on my chest, her manicured fingernails digging into my flesh.

“Hmm.” I smile and shrug. “I guess I got a different impression from you.”

She grunts and slaps my chest, but I don’t budge. I hold my ground and tower over her.

“Oh, look at the big guy intimidating the short girl,” she mocks, rolling her eyes. “How tough you are, Noah Boone. How brave. Is this your plan? To beat up a girl who doesn’t stand a chance against you? Go ahead. Let’s see how that storyline plays out for you. I think we both know who will win.”

I chuckle. “You think I want to hit you?”

She stares up at me, unblinking.

I can smell the trademark cinnamon and citrus smell of her skin, and I make an effort not to breathe through my nose.

“I want to destroy you, Penny, but I won’t do it with my fists,” I say, leaning down to whisper the words against her skin.

“What are you going to do?” She shivers, her body trembling against mine.

I realize all at once how close we are.

I pull back, flashes of my dream over the weekend coming back to me.

I bat them away.

Now is not the time to be distracted.

“I don’t want to ruin the surprise.” I turn away and move out of the alcove.

Penny calls after me. “This isn’t you, Noah. You aren’t this guy.”

Even after all these years, Penny thinks she knows me.

She thinks the kid she made out with in Finn’s close is still who I am.

She thinks, despite all the shit she has put me through, that I remained the same wide-eyed, optimistic little boy.

Oh, how wrong she is.

I’ll show her how wrong she is.

I lift a finger over my shoulder in a terse wave as I walk away, throwing a warning back to her. “You’ll be better off doing as I ask as we move forward. Otherwise, you’ll only make things worse.”

PENNY

I followed Noah because I wanted to tell him about my run-in with Tank over the weekend.

Well, partly, anyway.

I also followed him because I can't seem to help myself.

If I'd ignored his summons, I would have spent the entire day wondering what he wanted to say to me. What he wanted to do to me.

But the Hell Princes were the main part.

Whatever Tank wants with Noah, it doesn't sound good, and surely, I should warn him, right?

Surely, we still mean enough to each other that I should want to protect him from imminent danger?

Maybe not.

Noah scares me. This version of him, angry and stone cold and threatening, is foreign to me.

But still intoxicating. I can't be in his presence without losing my head just a little.

He has always had that effect on me.

Looking across the gym at him today took me right back to the start of high school. It feels like a lifetime ago now, the party and the closet.

It has been so long since his hands have been on me in that way, but I can still feel the ghost of them, grabbing my waist,

drawing me near.

Back then, his touch was tender, gentle.

Now, it's dangerous.

I should stay away from him and keep my distance. I'm just not sure if I know how to do that.

In my entire life, Noah has been the only person who knew me. He understood the hard parts about my life. Knew how to make me feel better.

Without him, I've been treading water.

And these days, the waves are getting dangerously choppy.

Maybe that's why I should just play along.

If I let him feel like he's winning, maybe he'll get bored. Then, in a few months, I'll be out of this shit town, away from my shit mom, and getting on with my shit life.

I'll never have to see Noah again.

The thought curdles in a way I don't expect.

We haven't been close in years, but at least when I came to school, I knew I'd see him. In the hallways, talking with his friends, eating lunch.

I got to be a tiny part of the fabric of his life, watching as his jawline sharpened and he grew several inches taller and chopped off the mass of his curly hair.

So long as I saw him every day, I could pretend he was still mine. That I was still his.

Once I'm out of Ravenlake Prep, though, our connection will be severed.

And I'll be nothing to him.

I press my folded hands against my empty stomach and chuckle humorlessly.

At least he talks to me now, right? I'd rather be the object of Noah's hatred than nothing.

That sounds so pathetic. I wish it wasn't true.

But it is.

Maybe Momma was right about me.



The hallways are still empty and quiet, so I know the pep rally is still going on, and I'm not sure what to do now. I don't want to go back, but I also don't want to loiter in the hallways and run into Noah or a teacher.

Momma would not take kindly to me getting in trouble on the first day of school.

She wants me to run with the right crowd, which often involves a decent amount of deviance, but I'm never to be caught.

You want to be popular, not a delinquent.

I'm debating where to go...

When the door to the girl's bathroom opens next to me.

A hand plunges out, wrapping around my elbow.

I yelp in surprise, assuming it's Noah again.

But when the door closes behind me, I hear female giggling and see my friends.

"There you are!" Jennifer says, swinging her legs off the bathroom counter she's sitting on. "We followed you when you left, but couldn't find you."

"Well you've found and assaulted me now. What do you want?"

"Sorry," Anika grins, the harsh words I spewed at her at the bonfire already forgotten. "Mr. Thomas has been lurking around out there, and I didn't want to get caught."

"Get caught peeing?"

I walk to the mirror and fix a few stray pieces of hair.

I almost expected to look different, as though my encounter with Noah would have left behind a physical change.

But I look the same as I did when I left my house this morning.

I had my hair pulled back into a ponytail when I came down the stairs, but my mom wrinkled her nose and shook her head the instant she saw me.

“No, come here.”

She ripped the hair tie out of my hair so hard I could hear strands snapping from the force. She ignored my cry of pain and began primping me.

When she was finished, she stood back and smiled. “There you go. Guys like hair they can hold onto.”

“I’m going to school, not on a date.”

Her eyes narrowed. “In high school, there’s no difference.”

Then, either in punishment for my snarky comment that morning or for the way I treated Maryann at the yoga studio, she sent me off with a travel cup of coffee and no breakfast.

“If you buy breakfast with your debit, I’ll know,” she whispered in a vicious warning. “And I took the cash out of your center console last night.”

My stomach is growling, and I clear my throat to hide the noise as I turn to face my “friends.”

Jennifer is wagging a flask in the air, her tongue pinched between her teeth in a smile. “First day of our last semester celebration?”

Anika grins, but keeps her response measured until she can see how I’ll react.

I narrow my eyes on Jennifer. “Shots before first period is a little alcoholic, don’t we think?”

Both of their faces fall. Jennifer drops the flask and chews on the corner of her lip. “Only if you make it a routine. Today is a celebration. Our last semester together before we take on the world.”

Her enthusiasm for the future is foreign to me.

At this point, the only thing I know for sure is that I want out of Ravenlake.

Beyond that, I have no plans. Certainly no “take on the world” plans.

I, for one, would be happy if I could just eat a meal whenever I wanted.

My stomach churns again, begging for food. I suppose I’d rather have some alcohol to numb the feeling than nothing at all.

So, I sigh and hold out my hand for the flask. Jennifer and Anika practically squee with pleasure.

It’s tequila, my least favorite. I wince as the liquor burns down my throat.

“God, Jen. Who drinks tequila straight from a flask?”

“A wannabe alcoholic,” Anika says with a stifled laugh.

Jen shoots her a look. Anika shrugs apologetically before looking to me for approval.

That’s the kind of power I have over my friends and other people in this school. They’ll sell out their own friends to earn my favor. That’s the kind of control my mom has been pushing for me to have.

I have it. Just like she wanted. Just like she demanded.

Still, it isn’t enough for her. Nothing ever is.

I laugh and wink at Anika, sending her to cloud nine, and then take another swig from the flask.

I’m tempted to keep drinking, but straight tequila on an empty stomach on the first day of school is a real recipe for disaster.

“I also brought some of the leftover beer cans from the party,” Anika says, unzipping her leather backpack and flashing us the contraband.

One beer on an empty stomach will be fine.

We all huddle in the corner of the bathroom with our drinks. The conversation quickly turns to gossip about the upcoming

semester.

“Caleb and Haley were the big story last semester,” Anika says. “Who do you think will be next?”

Jennifer smirks and looks at us both meaningfully, clearly waiting for us to say something.

“What? Are you going to barf?” Anika asks, poking Jen’s stomach. “What’s wrong with you?”

She slouches forward like we’ve dragged the information out of her. “Well, I thought maybe you guys would have heard who hooked up at the bonfire the other night.”

We both shake our heads, and her lower lip pouts out. “I’m sure the news will make the rounds soon, but... J.C. and I spent the night together!”

Anika claps a hand over her mouth. I raise my brows, dubious. “You fucked J.C.?”

Jennifer’s chest puffs out with pride as she nods.

“In his bed?”

Her confidence falters. “Well, no.”

“In his car?” Anika asks.

“No,” she says, more annoyed. “We were making out in the woods and things progressed pretty quickly from there. We were both so into it that there wasn’t really time to go anywhere else. We just—”

“You slept in the woods?!” Anika’s expression is horrified.

I’m sure mine isn’t much different. “That’s nasty, Jen.”

“It wasn’t nasty. It was...”

“Wild,” Anika finishes for her with a snicker.

This time, my laughter isn’t fake. That really was funny.

“You two don’t get it,” Jen says. “J.C. has been the perpetual bachelor of The Golden Boys, but I think I might be able to change him. He said the ‘L-word.’”

I wave my hands in the air to draw all attention to me. “Speak clearly. Did he say ‘I love you’?”

Jen’s cheeks flush. “No, not exactly.”

“Then, what exactly did he say?” Anika asks.

“He said... ‘I love the way you do that.’”

Anika and I both erupt in laughter, falling over each other.

“What were you doing at the time he uttered those momentous words?” Anika asks, making a vulgar gesture with her hand and mouth that, based on the way Jen’s face reddens, is probably very accurate.

“Whatever. You guys suck.” Jen takes a long drink from her beer can and crumples it before throwing it in the trash. “He seemed into it.”

Anika nods condescendingly and continues. “Okay, aside from the fated stars that are J.C. and Jennifer, who else do we think will hook up this semester?”

“What about Noah?” Jen asks, eager to get the focus off of her. “He hasn’t been with anyone for a while.”

Both girls turn to me, eyes hungry and expectant.

Very few people know the full story behind our falling out. I’d like to keep it that way.

They play the parts of my friends, but we all know they’d eat me alive like wild animals if they thought I had a secret they could sell to the rest of the student body.

I have no intention of making my private life public.

So, even though I want to inform them Noah is newly horrible and to be avoided at all costs, that response would raise too many eyebrows. I’d have to tell them about too many things I’d rather keep buried.

So, I fall in line with the rest of the female population of Ravenlake Prep and fawn over Noah Boone.

“He must be single of his own choice. Every girl in school wants to get with him,” I say.

Jen frowns. “Haven’t you already? I mean, that’s what I heard.”

“Ancient history,” I say with a dismissive wave.

“But did you two...?” Anika hums a sexy song while shaking her hips.

I stare at her with mild horror. “What was that?”

“My sexy dance!”

“You looked like one of those hula dancers people stick on their dashboards.” Jennifer vibrates her whole body aggressively and then dissolves into laughter.

My friends are like goldfish. It doesn’t take much to change the topic of conversation.

For a change, I’m glad about that. I can’t talk about Noah like we don’t have a long, painful history looming behind us.

My stomach feels queasy. I’m not sure if it’s because of Noah or the mixture of alcohol with my empty stomach.

Probably both.

Suddenly, the bathroom door bangs open and heavy footsteps bang across the tile floor, echoing off the ceiling.

Anika and I both hurry to toss our beer cans in the trash can just as Mr. Thomas rounds the corner.

“What is going on in here, ladies?”

Anika gives a yelp. “You can’t be in here! You’re a man!”

Mr. Thomas crosses his arms over his plaid short-sleeve t-shirt and glares. “I can enter any room in the building if I believe students are in danger. Since everyone else is at the pep rally, I mistook your laughter for a cry for help.”

Jennifer nudges Anika in the arm. “Way to go, banshee.”

“And since I see a visible flask and beer cans in the trash can, I can now write you all up for drinking on school grounds and order a round of detentions.”

Mr. Thomas is one of the younger teaches on staff at Ravenlake Prep. He only graduated a few years earlier, putting

him in his mid-to-late twenties.

But he grew up in Ravenlake, attended Ravenlake Prep, and his parents still send hefty donations to the school every year.

When he applied for the open history position, I'd be surprised if they even looked at other candidates.

He's young, but his hairline is already beginning to crawl backwards and the body he kept lean playing soccer in college has gone soft, especially around the middle.

None of that ever stops him from staring down my chest when he stands by my desk in his U.S. history class.

Time to use that to my advantage.

"We're sorry, Mr. Thomas," I say, twirling hair around my finger and walking towards him, one foot directly in front of the other so my hips sway back and forth with each step. "It was a stupid way to celebrate the fact that we're all graduating and becoming adults."

I lick my lips. His eyes slide down to my mouth helplessly.

"Technically, I'm already an adult. I just turned eighteen a few months ago." I lift a bare shoulder in an innocent shrug. "It seems silly that I can do almost anything I want to with my body now except buy alcohol, doesn't it?"

Mr. Thomas swallows. "Well, laws are laws."

I can see in his eyes that he's regretting several different laws as he takes me in.

I feel dirty—sticky, almost.

Like my teacher's gaze is leaving behind a physical residue on me, dirtying me in a way that will be hard to clean later.

But I'm not sure how else to get what I want out of men. It's all Momma ever taught me.

Your body and your looks will get you what you want. If you stop eating like such a cow, that is.

He clears his throat suddenly, blinking, and backs away, holding an arm out towards the door. "Since it's the first day,

I'll let it slide. Our little secret. But you all need to get back to the assembly right now."

Anika and Jennifer grab their bags and hurry to the door.

But I stay behind, feeling too nauseous to move.

The room is starting to spin slightly like a top half a second before it clatters down. I can feel the emptiness in my stomach roiling dangerously.

"Penelope," Mr. Thomas says, his voice low and hoarse. "What aren't you leaving?"

It sounds like he's asking a simple question.

But I've dealt with men long enough to be able to interpret the dark look in his eyes.

All it would take is a little more pushing and he would pounce. One curl of my finger, and he'd close the distance between us and touch me in ways that would see him fired.

Maybe even arrested.

The realization sends a chill down my spine.

"This is still a bathroom," I snap, pointing to the stall. "I have to pee."

He continues to stare at me, disappointment and relief warring over his expression.

I open the stall door, clinging to it so I don't fall over. "Did you plan to watch, or...?"

At that, Mr. Thomas snaps to attention, turns on his heel, and marches out of the bathroom.

The second the door is closed, I drop to my knees and dry heave into the toilet.

I wish there was someone to tell about the interaction.

Someone I could confide in who would get it.

Who would understand the invisible lines Mr. Thomas crossed and teach him a lesson about doing so again.

For a brief flash, I imagine Noah storming into the bathroom, fists at the ready, to teach Mr. Thomas a lesson.

But it's gone before the edges can solidify.

Noah Boone wouldn't come to my aid. Why would he ever bother protecting me?

He's the one I need protection from.

NOAH

Mom tries to have family dinners over the next week.

I'm not sure you can call two people sitting around the table a "family" dinner, but so be it.

My biggest question is, *Why?*

It could be because of the ripped up family picture she may or may not have found in the fireplace.

Or simply because she feels rightfully guilty for being too drunk to be a parent.

Either way, I'm not a fan.

She gives herself a heavy pour of red with dinner, and every night, the wine mixes with the Valium she sneaks in the kitchen to the point she is practically falling asleep in the middle of the conversation.

Family bonding at its finest.

"I thought I heard you playing the other day," she mumbles, stabbing awkwardly at the dry chicken she cooked for dinner. "You haven't played your guitar in so long. How was it?"

"Fine."

Her eyelids grow heavy, and she rests her chin on her hands. "I know you and your dad used to play, so it can be hard, but—"

"It's not hard. It's fine."

"Noah, I only wan..." Her words drift into unrecognizable garble.

That's my cue. I take my plate up to my room.



The next night, I skip family dinner in favor of a drive-thru hamburger and head to J.C.'s house.

He lives in a gated neighborhood less than five minutes from mine. The houses all look the same—imposing brick or stucco exteriors with large windows, big double doors, and aggressively landscaped lawns.

I don't realize what I'm seeing until it's too late.

Until I've slowed to a crawl on the road.

Until the door of Penny's white Mini Cooper opens in front of her house and she gets out.

She doesn't look up at she grabs her bag from the passenger seat. Doesn't see how I've unconsciously taken the long route to J.C.'s, driven past her place, looking for... what? A glimpse of her?

Fuck no. I've had plenty of those.

She has on a pair of high-waisted jean shorts that show off her long, toned legs. When she lifts her arm to free her hair from under her backpack strap, her shirt lifts to reveal a stripe of her tanned midsection.

She goes up the stairs. She doesn't look back once.

As soon as she's gone, I slam on the gas pedal and peel down the road.



J.C.'s room is a mess.

His family hires a maid, but he requests she doesn't clean his room.

“Because I'm not good at hiding my weed, and my mom doesn't know her little boy is a rascal,” he explained when I

first asked why he doesn't have someone come in and take care of the pig sty if he's not willing to do it himself.

Clothes are draped over the backs of his chairs, piled on the floor in front of the closet, and shoved behind his television, for reasons I'll never understand.

Then, as if that isn't enough, there are bottles and empty cans and sticky glass cups everywhere.

It's foul.

"Are there any cups left in the kitchen?" Caleb teases, sweeping aside a small sea of cups so he can roll a joint on the coffee table."

"Shut up. You two are smoking my weed, so I demand respect."

I hold up my burger. "I'm not smoking yet. Can I still make fun of your room?"

"Only if you want to lose your weed privileges."

I consider it, bobbing my head back and forth as I weigh the pros and cons, but I could really use a nice high right now.

This week has been shit.

It's the first week of my last semester of our senior year.

In other words, school is supposed to be a joke.

But Mr. Thomas has already assigned several study guides and a pop quiz.

Plus, I'm shit at math, and we are moving into pre-Calc.

I've been so busy keeping up in class and attending the bizarre family dinners with mom that I haven't had much time to think about Penny since the first day.

In fact, I hadn't even seen her until I caught a glimpse of her in the driveway. If I had to guess, I'd say she's trying to lay low at school, which I'll give her credit, is a good idea.

Unfortunately, I have other plans for her.

"What are your plans?"

My head snaps up. “What?”

Fuck, did I say that out loud?

“For college?” Caleb asks, pounding his thumb on the controller to take out an enemy sniper in the game he and J.C. are playing.

“I’ve applied a few places, but I’m hoping for Columbia,” J.C. says.

“Brown for me,” Caleb says. “I want Ivy League, but, like, chill Ivy League. I’m not trying to become a fuckin’ rocket surgeon.”

“As if that is a possibility, anyway.”

The two of them wrestle for a minute, trying to knock controllers from each other’s hands.

After the squabble is over, Caleb repeats his question. “What about you, Noah?”

“I haven’t applied anywhere yet.”

Immediately, the din of bullets and shouting stops. I look up and see that Caleb has paused the game. Both of my friends are staring at me, mouths slightly open.

“What?” I shrug. “It’s not a big deal.”

Yes, it is.

I know that, and they know that.

It has always been assumed that the Golden Boys would go to undergrad somewhere good, somewhere prestigious. Our families demand nothing less.

Or, at least, *their* families demand nothing less.

My family, in case they haven’t noticed, has imploded.

My mom can barely ask me how my day is, let alone query where I’m headed for college.

“Bro, the deadlines are coming up,” J.C. says. “Everywhere. Like, even community college has a deadline. You have to get your apps in.”

“I can help if you want. Haley insisted we do our applications together, and she has given me a mountain of unrequested tips for how to impress.”

I almost laugh. It must be nice to have someone to bank your future on.

The thought appears before I can really inspect it, and it surprises me.

I don't want anyone to tie me down. Haven't for a long time. I'm just as confident that Caleb and Haley will break up before college as I am that the sky is blue and my mom is an alcoholic.

It's nothing personal. Just statistics.

Once upon a time, I thought about getting out of Ravenlake, making my way out East, and joining a band.

My dad taught me the guitar, but he would have shit himself if he knew I wanted to live the struggling artist life. That was part of the appeal.

Everyone has all of these expectations about me, ideas about who I am and where I'll be one day, and I like the idea of surprising them all. Maybe even disappointing them.

That would show them to expect anything from me again.

I'm not their fucking dancing monkey.

“No, thanks. I'm fine,” I say with a tight smile. “My uncle can basically get me in anywhere I want. I'll be good.”

“Okay,” Caleb says, his brow lower and more solemn than normal. “But Haley wouldn't mind helping you out, either. She's really good at this stuff.”

“Just apply to Columbia with me,” J.C. says, pulling the hood on his sweatshirt up and slouching down in his chair, his eyes glued to the screen now that Caleb has hit resume. “We would be absolute lady killers up there.”

Caleb shakes his head. “If women start going missing on Columbia's campus once you arrive, I'm turning you into the police.”

“They’ll be calling the police themselves, wondering who stole their self-control.” J.C. lifts an arm in the air and points down at himself, cocky as ever. “They won’t be able to resist.”

Caleb jumps all over that opportunity to rip into J.C. Usually, I’d join in, too, but I’m not really in the mood.

Too busy wondering what life after Ravenlake might look like.

PENNY

Old movies are playing on the television, I have a glass of iced tea, and the house is empty, except for Delanie sleeping in her bed upstairs.

I couldn't be happier.

Momma and Stepdad Steve went out for the night—a Barber Engineering Company function, which is basically the most important function happening anywhere in Ravenlake.

Anyone who is anyone in town works for Barber Engineering or has some connection to them.

Stepdad Steve is some kind of engineer, though I don't know the specifics. I don't really care to know.

My real dad used to work there, too. He was the Chief Financial Officer. Mom actually met Stepdad at a few of the events when she attended with my dad.

At the wedding, she claimed it was love at first sight.

When I later reminded her that she was still married when she met Steve, she hissed for me to shut up.

It's not like it was some big revelation or anything. She and my dad weren't exactly lovey-dovey with one another.

They never kissed or touched that I saw. I caught her rolling her eyes at his stories more times than not.

Even when he got sick, mom barely paid him any mind.

She hired a nurse to take care of him and a driver to take him to and from his chemo and radiation appointments.

I've always resented that I didn't get to know my dad until he was sick.

When he was healthy, I was busy being social and he was busy working.

But when he got sick, he sat at home in his wide chair in the living room for hours at a time, napping on and off.

We began to talk.

He told me about growing up in the seventies and eighties, sneaking into rock concerts and stealing t-shirts from the merch table.

When his own parents tried to put the clamp on his partying, he just started sneaking out right under their noses.

"I don't know if you're supposed to tell your daughter things like this," I whispered one day towards the end after he told me the story of getting high in a bathroom with a Playboy Bunny.

"Who else am I going to tell?" he asked. "I'm dying, and someone should know who I really am."

Two days later, he was gone.



Three Years Earlier

I stand back from the door, slightly confused.

I'm not sure if I'm really here.

If I really just knocked on the door.

There seems to be a haze between me and the rest of the world, a kind of veil I can't lift.

Then, Noah opens the door, and the veil shreds to pieces.

The reality of my day—the tragedy of my life—comes into stark focus, and I practically collapse at his feet.

“Penny?”

Noah catches me and hauls me inside the entryway. I’m too upset to care if his parents are home.

He’s still wearing the same black pants and sweater he had on at the funeral, and he smells so good. I bury my face in his shoulder, not caring if I get makeup on his clothes, and grab a fistful of his shirt.

“I was at the wake,” he says, smoothing a shaking hand down my back. “I came to see you, but I couldn’t find you. Where were you?”

I saw Noah walk in my front door, dressed head to toe in black, and immediately tears sprang to my eyes.

I didn’t want to cry.

Not today.

Not in front of all these people.

Not in front of him.

But when I was with Noah, it was so easy to forget my dad was wasting away at home.

Easy to forget he was slipping away, day by day.

Being with Noah was the only respite I had. It was the only time I wasn’t depressed looking at my dad or angry looking at how little my mom cared. At how much she loathed me.

When Noah came to the wake, there was no more pretending. The two realities I’d built for myself had collided in a way I wasn’t ready for.

So, I’d artfully dodged him, keeping at least one room of distance between us at all times. As if that would bring my dad back to life. As if that would make Momma love me.

Then, when he left, I went up to my room and stared at the wall.

I waited for the tears to come. For any kind of emotion to surface.

But there was nothing.

I couldn't access it.

That emptiness was much worse than crying would have been, so I walked to Noah's house, knocked on his door.

That's where I am now. Weeping openly in his arms like a crazy person.

"You aren't crazy," Noah whispers.

I'm not sure if I've spoken out loud or he is reading my mind, but I cling to his words like a raft.

We sit there for a while, tangled in each other's arms, before I hear a car door open outside.

Noah stiffens.

"My parents are back," he whispers, leaning in close so his lips brush against my cheek. "Do you want to go upstairs? They won't bother us up there."

I'm not in a state to see anyone else or go home, so I nod and let Noah lead me upstairs.

My black dress was pressed and crisp when I left the house, but the hem is rumpled now. I run my fingers along it as I sit on the edge of Noah's bed, waiting. He goes downstairs to talk to his parents, to ensure they wouldn't come up to his room to check on him.

I think about how I don't have "parents" anymore.

I have a parent—singular. One who doesn't even like me very much.

The thought brings a fresh wave of tears.

When Noah comes back into the room, my gaze is watery and unfocused.

"I'm so sorry, Penny." Noah grabs my hand and massages his thumb over my knuckles. "I want to help."

"You are," I manage, my throat thick with tears.

Eventually, we lay down on his bed. Noah pulls his comforter over me, but he stays on top of the blankets, close enough that I can reach out and touch him when I want.

I know he must be bored, sitting with me while I cry off and on, but I'm too selfish to get up and leave.

I don't want to go home. I don't want to see my mom.

By now, she's probably wondering where I am, and she'll be angry when I get back.

She'll find new ways to insult me and kick me even when I'm already down.

I can't handle that right now.

For as long as possible, I want to stay with the only person still living who has ever made me feel worthwhile.

I must doze off because when I open my eyes, the room is dark.

I sit up quickly, the blankets falling around my waist, and look around, blinking into the darkness.

Noah's hand lands on my shoulder and traces a line down my arm. "Are you okay?"

"Did I fall asleep?"

He nods. His curly hair is flattened on one side from where he has been laying on it. "For a couple hours. I didn't want to wake you. You seemed like you needed it."

I push my fingers through my hair, trying to tame the mess of tangles, and swipe under my eyes. I'm sure I'm covered in mascara and blanket creases.

"Do you need to get home?" he asks. "I can give you a ride."

"Oh. Yeah, right. Probably. I can go. I'm sure you have better things—"

His warm hand wraps around my wrist and pulls me closer to him. "There's nothing else I'd rather be doing, Penny. I just don't want you to get in trouble."

I blink at him and my chin wobbles, but no more tears come. I don't think I have any left.

"I want to stay with you."

“Then stay,” Noah says, opening his arms. His dark eyes are drawn together in concern and sympathy and care. I want to drown in his kindness.

I fall into his arms and breathe in the warm scent of him.

Except, it doesn't feel quite as innocent as it did before.

Before, I was a weeping, collapsing mess of fabric and tears. I barely knew where I was, let alone who I was throwing myself at.

Noah's arms around me had felt necessary, nothing more.

Now, there's more.

A *lot* more.

I turn in his arms, our chests pressed more firmly together, and I slide one of my legs over his to accommodate the position.

Noah shifts again, and I slide my other leg over.

Before I know what's happening, I'm straddling him.

My dress is a bundle of fabric between us, but he's between my legs, and the thumping I've felt in my head all day has moved to a new location between my legs.

I tilt my head up, nuzzling my cheek against his, and then press a kiss to his cheek. From there, his mouth is only one small jump away.

The kisses start tenderly, gently, but they gain heat quickly.

Noah's chest is like a thrashing animal beneath me, but the rest of his body is perfectly still.

His hands don't move from where they are on my shoulder blades, and he doesn't react at all when I roll my hips over his. It's like he's frozen.

Finally, frustrated, I pull back. “Are you okay? Is this not—? Are you not—? Do you not want this?”

“I do,” he says breathlessly. “So much. But not if you'll regret it tomorrow. Your dad just died, Penny, and I don't want to take advantage of you.”

“I'm sad.”

“I know.” Noah pulls his hands away and leans back. “I shouldn’t—”

I grab his hands and hold them between mine like a prayer. “I’m sad about my dad, but this isn’t about him. This is about you laying with me all day while I slept. And about you being the kind of guy who has stopped me not once, but twice, from having sex with you because you want it to be the right time.”

His mouth pinches up in a half smile. “You are trying to have sex with me?”

Despite the terrible day and my eyes swollen with tears, I laugh. “Yes, I am.”

Noah’s arms come back around me, his hands clasping together behind my back. “Then keep trying. My resistance is crumbling.”

“You’re good to me, Noah,” I whisper, leaning close to press my nose to his. “You make me feel special, and I want this moment to be special. Forever.”

Rather than trying to find the words, Noah tips his head up and brings his lips to mine.

We’ve had a lot of practice with the kissing, but the undressing is new.

We fumble and giggle and then grow serious as more skin is exposed.

We muddle through it, but when it’s over, and I’m lying next to him, nothing has ever felt more perfect.

“You know I’ll always be here for you, right?” Noah asks, his hand on the bare skin of my lower back.

I lay against his chest and breathe in the spicy smell of him. “I’ll be here for you, too.”



Present Day

A knock at the front door pulls me out of my reverie.

I set aside the college applications I'd been working on and pad across the tile entryway.

I don't know what time it is, but I assume it's Momma and Stepdad Steve home early. They didn't take any keys with them since they planned to drink and take a rideshare home.

Except, when I open the front door, there's no one there.

I frown and look around, stepping out onto the porch to look down the sidewalk.

There's no one around. No cars. Nothing on the porch.

Confused and a little freaked, I pull the door shut and bolt it.

My phone is sitting on the ottoman in front of the couch. Maybe I should text someone and tell them about what happened.

That way, if I end up dead, at least the police will have a lead.

I chastise myself for immediately jumping to murder as a possibility.

Though, when I walk into the living room, I realize it may not have been such a crazy thought, after all.

Standing at the base of the stairs is Tank, The Hell Prince.

He's got a wide, cocky grin on his face. "Surprised to see me?"

I open my mouth, considering screaming or running, but I can't.

Delanie.

If I scream, she'll wake up and make the entire situation worse and more stressful.

If I run, she'll be left behind with a Hell Prince.

I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to her.

My eyes dart to where my phone had been sitting on the ottoman, but it's no longer there.

Tank holds it in his hand, waving it back and forth to taunt me.

“Don’t worry. So long as you’re helpful, nothing bad will happen,” he says, sliding my phone into his back pocket.

“What are you doing here? How did you get in?”

“Not important,” he says. “What’s important right now is that you agree to help me out.”

“With what?”

“Revenge.”

I shake my head. “Whatever your little vendetta is, it’s not mine, okay? I have nothing to do with it.”

“Maybe that was true before. But not anymore.”

Tank looks even bigger in my living room than he did in the woods. He also looks far more out of his place. His worn black leather and sleeves of tattoos have no place amongst the buttery creams and soft whites of my mother’s décor.

I’m not sure what he means, but then he turns his head towards the top of the stairs, and I follow his gaze.

He isn’t alone.

Another Hell Prince is standing on the second-floor landing, just outside of Delanie’s room.

I lurch forward, prepared to...do something. I’m not sure what.

But Tank blocks the stairs and shakes his head. “Like I said, nothing bad will happen so long as you help me out.”

There’s no other option. I can’t let something happen to Delanie. I have to do whatever Tank wants of me, at least until I can get him out of my house and ensure my sister is safe.

“What do you want?”

“It’s simple. Spring Fling, you lure Noah Boone away from his friends.”

I frown. “You know about Spring Fling?”

“Wherever there is sex and drugs, the Hell Princes aren’t far away. We know all about it.”

“What do you want with Noah?”

Tank raises a brow, and I notice he has a line shaved into his brow. If he did it to make himself look tougher, it was unnecessary.

Even without it, he looks like the scariest person I’ve ever seen.

“It doesn’t matter. You just do as you’re told, keep your mouth shut, and we’ll take care of the rest.”

“Don’t I at least deserve to know what he did?”

Tank considers it for a moment and then sighs. “The Golden Boys have been a pain in my ass for years, but Noah Boone pulled a gun on me and my guys and he interfered with club business. For that, he will pay.”

I heard about the showdown out at the camping spot. Everyone did. Noah pulled a gun on the Hell Princes and sent them packing when they came to claim Haley.

Was something so trivial really cause for all this?

Based on the fire burning in Tank’s eyes, I assume the answer to that question is “yes.”

“Are you going to cooperate or do I need to send my friend in to check on your sister?”

“No!” I shout, lowering my voice as soon as I have control over myself. “No, that won’t be necessary. I’ll do whatever you want.”

Tank smiles at me, the glint in his eyes betraying his expression, and hands me my phone.

At the same time, he motions for the Hell Prince at the top of the stairs to come down.

When I grab my phone, Tank wraps his hands around both of mine and bends low, his nicotine breath wafting over my face.

“You’re making the right choice, angel.”

They turn and walk into the kitchen. I hear the patio door close behind them.

My knees give out beneath me.

PENNY

I've got to get out of this town.

Any other person who was at home babysitting their little sister when two motorcycle club members broke in would call the police. They would report the incident to the proper authorities and watch as justice was carried out.

But me?

I let my mom and stepdad inside after their rideshare pulled up in the drive way, locked all of the doors, and went to bed.

Now, the morning after, I'm sitting at school.

Less than twelve hours after being confronted in my own home and threatened by men I barely know, I'm at school.

Like everything's fine.

Like that didn't happen.

All because I have no idea if anyone would believe me.

I could go to the police, but in order for anything to be done, my mom would have to be on my side. More likely than not, she'd assume I was making up a story for attention.

Or she'd want to sweep the whole thing under the rug as quickly as possible to avoid any damage done to our family's public image.

Then, Delanie could be in serious danger simply because I have a shitty relationship with my mom.

I can't let that happen.

So telling Momma is out. And Stepdad Steve is useless, so he's out, too.

Outside of my family, there's no one else to tell.

Anika and Jennifer are useless blabbermouths who would have the whole story all over the school before I could even finish telling it.

Then, same as the first scenario, Delanie could be in danger.

Tank told me to stay quiet. I assume that means to everyone.

Including Noah.

Honestly, the more I've thought about it, the more it seems possible that this could solve all of my problems.

Tank wants Noah and is willing to hurt Delanie to get to him. I care about Delanie's safety way more than I currently care about Noah's.

So, I'll go along with the plan.

I'll do what Tank asks to keep Delanie safe, and then once Noah is busy dealing with the Hell Princes, he'll forget about whatever weird situation is going on between us right now.

Then, I'll be free to coast through the last few weeks of the school year, graduate, and get the hell out of Ravenlake.

"Penelope?"

I look up, blinking as I try to remember where I am.

Who I am, even.

I was so lost in thought I forgot I was in the middle of class.

Mr. Thomas and the rest of our history class is looking at me expectantly.

"I'm sorry?"

He sighs. "I asked you which American president was in power during the 'Black Thursday' Wall Street crash?"

I know the answer. *Herbert Hoover.*

"I don't know."

He frowns, no doubt remembering the A+ quiz he'd handed back to me at the start of class.

But I cross my arms and slouch down in my seat like I couldn't care less.

No one fantasizes about being with the nerdy girl from class. Keep your head down and play dumb. Guys like a dumb blonde.

Momma's voice has been in my head for so long that I don't even have to work to remember her rules. They come second nature now.

No matter how much I hate her methods, I have to admit she gets results.

After my dad died, I spent months mourning his absence.

I was only just getting to know him and then he was snatched away. I felt alone with my grief, especially since my mom started going out in the evenings.

At the beginning, she reveled in her many suitors.

I was only fifteen and still grieving the loss of my dad, but she would show me the endless string of texts in her phone from men who wanted to spend time with her.

She'd show me the flowers and notes they sent to our front door, remarking on their "memorable" or "unforgettable" nights together.

At the time, I was too naïve to understand exactly what that meant, but the horror hit me later.

My mom wasted absolutely no time hitting the dating scene after my dad died. If he hadn't died of cancer, I would've assumed she killed him for the insurance money.

And the insurance money did begin to run out rather quickly.

That's why she settled on Stepdad Steve.

I didn't meet him for a long time. The only reason I knew he existed was because I'd see his car pull into the driveway to pick her up, and I'd see the gifts she came home with when he dropped her off.

At first, I was hopeful a new boyfriend would at least keep her focus off of me for a while. Anything that acted as a buffer between me and my mom would be a good thing, right?

Wrong.

Very, very wrong.

My phone vibrates in my back pocket. I lift my hips out of my chair to keep it from buzzing against the hard plastic of the chair.

Phones are forbidden in Mr. Thomas' class. If he finds them, he keeps them until the end of the day, and I have no desire to leave my phone with my creepy professor or be alone in his class at the end of the day to pick it up.

I have enough toxic men in my life without adding in another.

I pull it out of my pocket just to turn it to silent, but then I see the name on my screen.

I considered deleting his contact information a few different times over the last two years, but I never did.

Now, Noah Boone's name has appeared on my phone.

Along with a message.

Bathroom. Now.

PENNY

Apparently, I'm a glutton for punishment.

Despite every instinct in my body screaming at me to stay in class, I ask Mr. Thomas for a bathroom pass.

I swallow back a grimace when his finger brushes against mine during the exchange, and head for the bathroom.

I scan the halls looking for Noah, but don't see him anywhere. When I get to the bathroom, I think he might be inside, but it's empty, too. I pull out my phone and text him.

Where are you?

Go in a stall, he writes, the ellipses flashing under his message as he immediately types out another. **Take a picture.**

I go into a stall only because that's the normal thing to do in a bathroom. I don't want to be standing in the middle of the bathroom if anyone else comes in.

I know what he wants, but I hold out my phone, tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, and bite my lower lip.

It's a suggestive picture, but perfectly innocent.

His response is immediate.

No. I want to see your tits.

He can't be serious.

Except, he is.

Noah doesn't joke or kid, especially not with me.

Not anymore.

I want to ask him what he'll do if I refuse. But the idea of him actually answering is terrifying.

I'm considering taking my chances and just going back to class without doing what he's asking, but then Tank's threats echo in my mind.

Whatever Tank wants with Noah, he's expecting me to be the bait. I'm supposed to be the person to lure Noah out to The Hell Princes.

If I fail, they'll hurt Delanie.

There's a real possibility Noah is going to try and show my picture around or hold it over my head, but I'm not entirely sure I care.

Every celebrity has a sex tape or nude photos that leaked online. If anything, it increases their popularity.

As I unhook my bra and pull my shirt up, I wonder what it would be like for Noah to want me again.

To look at me—even if it is just my boobs—with desire.

I keep my face out of the picture and make sure my clothes aren't visible—if the picture does end up online, I'd like plausible deniability—but my chest is front and center. I take two pictures from two different angles and then, before I can second guess what is obviously a terrible decision, I attach the photos to a text and hit send.

With this, my fate is sealed.

I've tied myself to Noah's runaway train.

All I can hope for now is to work my way to the controls.

NOAH

I didn't know if Penny would send the pictures, but I wanted to gauge how much control I had over her.

How scared she was.

If she'd taken my threats seriously, she'd send them, in hopes to satiate my sick desires.

If she didn't, then I'd know how much harder I had to work.

What I didn't expect was how much control the photos would have over *me*.

Even the first picture—the one of Penny's heart-shaped face, bright green eyes, and full pink lips—set my heart racing. No one should look that good under fluorescent bathroom lights.

I want to see your tits, I hammered into my phone.

I wanted faceless body parts, objectively sexual images so I could explain away the ball of heat forming in my stomach.

Then, the pictures came, and even with a pair of glorious, faceless breasts on my phone screen, my brain couldn't help but fill in the rest of the image.

I imagined golden blonde waves tumbling over her shoulders, grass green eyes peering up at me suggestively, and pink lips puckered into a pout.

I adjusted in my seat, willing myself to stay calm. I couldn't walk out of class with a boner.

“Shiiit.”

The hiss in my ear made me jump, and I turned to see J.C. peeking over my shoulder. “That’s why you got so mad in the car the other day. Penny is yours.”

“Shut the fuck up.” I click my phone screen off and shove it in my pocket.

“It’s fine,” J.C. whispers, his eyes at the front of the room where our math teacher is doing her best to keep us all engaged in her math problem by using celebrities and hip lingo.

Needless to say, it’s not working.

“No, it’s not. Because it’s bullshit. She isn’t mine.”

J.C. snorts. “I don’t get those kinds of pictures from girls who aren’t getting something from me.”

I scramble, trying to think of a lie. J.C. doesn’t really deserve one.

Usually, I’d ignore him and let him think what he wants.

But when it comes to Penny, I want things to be clear.

Not only is she off limits for fucking, but she’s also off limits for conversation.

“I get it, man. I’d betray my friends to lick those tits, too. No shame.”

“I’m not licking anything,” I snap. “It’s an audition.”

The lie comes to me in an instant, and I cling to it. J.C. frowns.

“For the Spring Fling,” I continued. “For The Sacrifice. It’s an audition. An application.”

J.C.’s eyes go wide with possibilities—several of which I’m sure would give me no choice but to knock him out if I could read his mind. He moans. “Oh, yes. Genius. God, yes. This will be the best year ever.”

My throat goes dry.

Penny isn’t *mine*. Not in that way, at least. I don’t want to be protective over her the way Caleb is over Haley.

I don’t want to be beholden to her the way Finn is to Lily.

I don't want that.

But I do want her.

In the most carnal way possible, I want to claim her.

Now.

“This Spring Fling would go down in the history books. If history books kept records of dope high school parties. I mean, look at this pictures.” J.C. pauses, waiting for me. When I don't move, he nudges my shoulder. “Let me see them again. As the organizer of the event, it's my right to—”

“Keep it in your goddamned pants. Could you please act like you've seen tits before?”

J.C. holds up his hands in surrender and rolls his eyes, but I can't sit here anymore.

Not when Penny is out there without her top on.

Not when J.C. still has the image of her chest in his head.

It's not a competition, but I'm going to get the real thing. Right now.

I text her again: **Stay there.**

NOAH

Mrs. Frye says my name as I storm out of the room, but I don't respond. I don't slow down or ask for a bathroom pass or make an excuse.

I leave and march towards the girls' bathroom.

Penny has history in the afternoon, so I know which bathroom is closest.

She'd better be where I told her to be.

No one is in the hallway to wonder why Noah Boone is flinging the girl's bathroom door open and storming inside.

I close the door and slide the bolt into place.

We won't be disturbed.

I hear Penny gasp when the door slams open.

Good girl. Very good girl.

"Noah?" she asks, her voice a low whisper. "Is that you?"

The bathroom is small, just three stalls opposite a line of white sinks with a mirror above, so it's easy to spot Penny's feet under one of the stalls. I pull on the handle but it's locked.

"Open it."

"What are you doing here?" I hear fabric shifting, and I know she's putting her clothes back on.

As if that will stop me.

"I'm sure you can guess."

All movement and sound stops on the other side of the door.

Penny is thinking, considering. I'm sure she knows if she doesn't open the door, I'll break it down.

So, after a few seconds, the lock slides back, and the door cracks open.

Penny is standing against the stall wall, her white henley crop top back on. The buttons are undone so I can see the dark red lace of her bra peeking out from under the collar, as well as ample cleavage.

And, just like my imagination, her hair falls over her shoulders and curves around her breasts on either side, almost framing them.

"I did what you asked," she says, standing up and facing me, defiant.

"Why did you?"

"Why do you think?" she shoots back. "You've made it quite clear you'll make my life hell if I don't do what you say."

"So, you're willing to give me these pictures to post online? It doesn't quite track."

I step into the stall with her and close the door behind me, locking it.

Penny follows my movements with her eyes, her throat bobbing nervously.

But she tries to hide it.

As if I'm not noticing every single thing about her right now.

She lifts her head and straightens her shoulders. "I'd rather take them willingly than be forced into it."

"Or..." I suggest, taking another step closer. Penny doesn't have anywhere to go. The toilet is behind her and the stall is built for one. She's trapped. "...Maybe you wanted to take them for me."

She snorts and rolls her eyes, flipping her hair over her shoulder. "Please. Don't flatter yourself."

“You’ve taken pictures for me before.”

Her gaze snaps to mine at the mention of our past, and her cheeks heat. “That was different.”

“I disagree.”

I close in on her, and Penny shifts, pressing her back against the stall wall again.

This time, I follow her, enclosing her body with mine, one hand on the wall, the other stroking the side of her blushing cheek.

When I lean in close to whisper in her ear, I can see goosebumps rising across her chest.

Penny is silent, perhaps for the first time in her life. Speechless.

My goal with Penny is selfish. There’s no grand meaning or purpose.

Simply put, I want her to feel the ache I feel.

The hurt.

I want her to see the good things in her life spoiled, stripped away, and disregarded.

She took everything from me, and now, it’s time to take some things away from her.

“Noah, what are you doing?”

Her voice is quiet when she finally speaks. It’s not the nasally voice she uses with everyone else.

It’s Penny, unfiltered.

I smooth my palm over her breast and down her rib cage, squeezing her waist before I flick the button of her pants open.

She gasps, and I shush her quietly, calmly.

“You left class and took pictures for me,” I remind her as my palm skims over the hot skin of her stomach. “You waited for me when I asked, and you unlocked the bathroom door for me.”

My hand dips under the delicate lace of her panties and slides into her womanly curls. Heat radiates from her center, warming my cool fingers.

Penny stiffens and grabs my wrist. “You forced me.”

“You were alone in the bathroom. You could’ve left. You could’ve gone back to class. You even could have turned your phone over to someone and charged me with harassment. Yet, here you are.”

I still and pull back, looking down at her.

“Tell me to stop,” I say, inching my fingers further down.

Her hand is still around my wrist, squeezing tightly.

“Tell me to leave, and I will. Say the words, and I’ll go. Or...” I grab her hand and peel it off of my wrist, letting it drop to her side. “Stay here and let me give you what we both know you want.”

Penny blinks, her dark mascaraed lashes fanning quickly.

Then she closes her eyes.

She tips her head back against the stall, spreads her legs a bit more to make room for my fingers, and nods her head.

As soon as I touch her, my fingers are soaked.

Penny can lie, but her body can’t. She wants this.

Desperately.

I slide my fingers down the length of her lips a few times before I focus on her center. As soon as I do, Penny tenses.

I curl my fingers up, flicking over her sensitive area again and again, watching as Penny’s mouth parts, feeling her exhale on my skin.

“Is this enough or do you want more?” I ask, circling my fingers over her relentlessly. “Answer me.”

Penny presses her lips together and squeezes her eyes closed even tighter.

I grab her chin with my other hand, and her eyes pop open.

“Answer me,” I repeat. “Do you want me inside of you?”

I slide my fingers down, poised at her opening, waiting for her response.

Penny licks her lips. “You’re already inside of me, Noah.”

Before I can guess at what her true meaning is, Penny shifts her hips forward and takes the tips of my fingers into her.

It’s my turn to be surprised.

Penny grabs my hand and pulls it more firmly against her, fucking herself with my fingers.

It is unreal. Mindblowingly hot.

My cock twitches in my pants, and I watch in a daze as Penny rides my hand, seemingly with no help from me at all.

She bucks and rolls her hips, slides herself to the tips of my fingers and then plunges them back inside of her. It is a wanton display of desire and pleasure.

I realize all at once that I’m losing control here.

So I press a forearm across her chest, pinning her to the stall, and reclaim the upper hand.

I add a third finger, giving her a moment to stretch to size before I plunge in. All the while, my thumb is drawing circles over her clit.

Penny begins to thrash, her jerking shaking the stalls and making the doors rattle.

“Shit,” she moans, wrapping her long fingers around my elbow for stability. “Noah. Oh, God.”

I feel her insides clench around my finger. A second later, her stomach clenches, too. Her mouth falls open, her eyes roll closed, and Penelope LaFevre rides the wave of pleasure I’ve sent her way.

I forgot what it felt like to watch her come.

To be the person responsible for making her feel good.

Though, in this case, the pleasure will be temporary.

I slide my fingers from her still-convulsing pussy and wipe them on the inside of her jeans. Penny doesn't move. She stays leaned against the stall, eyes closed, breathing heavy.

"Did I force you into that, too?" I taunt.

Penny gives me a lazy smile and then lifts her middle finger in a crude gesture. "Fuck you."

"You wish."

She zips up her jeans and adjusts her shirt, setting herself right after all the wrong we just did.

"No, I don't."

Penny goes to move past me, but I block her with my leg and corner her against the stall.

"Yes, you do. Do you want to know why?"

"Please, Noah. Enlighten me. Tell me," she says, rolling her eyes.

I lean down close, my lips only an inch from hers. "Because you're so fucked up, you'll accept affection even if it isn't love."

The color drains from her cheeks, and I know I've hit a sore spot. I tap on it again.

"No one at home loves poor Penelope, so she takes it wherever she can get it. Even if it's in a bathroom stall in the middle of the school day from a boy who fucking hates her guts."

Her lower lip trembles once, and then she stiffens it and shoves at my chest with both hands. It's not hard enough to hurt or actually move me, but I play along.

I've had my fun with Penny today.

It's time to let her go and think about what she's done.

"You're an asshole, Noah."

"Maybe," I shrug. "But you'll keep coming back for more. Because you can't help yourself."

Penny has her back to me, but I can see her face in the mirror. She looks exactly how I want her to look: dejected, cast aside,

broken.

As she should be.

PENNY

Fuck.

Noah.

Boone.

For the last hour of the school day, I can feel what he did to me between my legs. My body is swollen with pleasure, and I'm sure everyone can tell what I've done.

Everyone must know what I let Noah do to me.

They don't, of course.

It's only my shame talking.

And it *is* shame. A deep, gnawing shame that eats away at what little self-worth I have left.

Mostly because Noah was right about my parents.

No one at home loves poor Penelope.

I have daddy issues *and* mommy issues, and I throw myself at guys because I can. Because they don't refuse me.

Because, if only for a few minutes, they tell me I'm beautiful and worthy and wanted.

Then, they slide out, leaving me behind, and the hole in my chest yawns open again.

It used to be that Noah filled it.

Now, he's the one chiseling away at the edges, making it deeper.

Mr. Thomas is mad about how long I was in the bathroom, but he doesn't ask any questions.

Anika and Jennifer sneer at Haley Cochran as she passes us in the hallway, but I don't even glance over.

They ask what my problem is, but I blow them off.

I hate myself far more than I could ever hate Haley Cochran, and I'm not in a mood to pretend otherwise.

After snagging my bag from my locker, I head out to the senior parking lot to get my car, but I'm only halfway across the lot when a car pulls up in front of me, blocking my path.

It takes me a second to realize it's Momma.

She rolls down the window. "Get in."

"What are you doing here?" I ask. "I drove to school. My car is here."

"We'll come back for it. Get in," she snaps. "We're going to yoga."

I climb into the passenger seat. After the day I had, yoga might actually be nice. Usually, after an orgasm, I'm loose.

But Noah left me feeling more tense than ever.

"I don't have my yoga clothes or mat. I didn't know we were doing this."

My mom smiles over at me, her expression a bit too forced. "Don't worry. I brought you some clothes."

I'm suspicious, but hopeful. Maybe this is just an impromptu mother-daughter yoga date.

Maybe she's trying to make amends.

It doesn't take long to realize how wrong that thought was.

As soon as we step into the studio, I wince. The air is stifling and humid. It has to be at least a hundred degrees.

"Hot yoga?"

"To sweat out our toxins," my mom says, handing me my bag and mat. "Go to the bathroom and change before class starts."

I head into the locker room at the back of the studio and unzip the bag to reveal my clothes.

My *winter* clothes.

The leggings my mom packed are fur-lined, and the shirt is long-sleeved with a thermal layer on the inside.

If I wear either of these things into that hot box of a studio, I'll drown in my own sweat.

I open the door to find my mom and tell her what happened, but she's already standing outside the door.

"What is it, dear?" she asks, her voice sweet enough to give cavities. "Class is about to start."

"These clothes are too warm. They're my winter leggings. I can't wear them to hot yoga."

"At least this way, no one will mistake you for a stripper." She smiles tightly and walks away.

That's when it becomes clear.

This is a punishment.

Days later, and my mom hasn't let it go.

I feel sick. Noah was even more right than he realized.

Even after everything my mom has done and said, I had hope. I was so desperate for any kind of love, or even a small sign that she cared, that I fell for her trap.

I expected something of her that she has never once shown me, and it's all because I'm desperate.

I'm desperate, and today, I'm far too tired to fight.

Despondent, I bundle up in the cold-weather workout gear and head into the class.

People in the room look at me like I'm crazy, including my mom.

"Honey," she says, loudly enough that the women around us can hear. "You're going to pass out in that outfit. Why didn't you bring shorts?"

“I have a lot of toxins to sweat out.”

She gives me a faux worried glance and then turns away as class starts. In the back of my mind, I wonder if you can sweat out toxic people, too. That would be handy.

The class is even worse than I imagined.

The exercise I usually find calming and centering is now suffocating. I feel like I’m being swallowed in heat.

My head is foggy, my limbs feel swollen, and no matter how many times I blink, my vision feels blurred.

Sweat pours down my forehead and the back of my head, drenching my ponytail. In a few positions, I swear I can even feel my saturated clothes squelch and drip sweat onto the floor.

When the routine is finally over, I’m ready to run to the locker room and peel out of my clothes, but my mom stops me and points to Maryann on the other side of the room.

I’ve been so focused on not passing out that I didn’t even notice Maryann.

“Go apologize to her.”

“Mom.” My voice sounds weak and raspy. “I don’t feel good. I don’t think—”

“I think I’m going to take your change of clothes and leave you to walk home if you don’t do as I say.”

If my legs didn’t feel like Jell-o, walking home wouldn’t be so bad. The temperature is in the mid-fifties and at least I’d be by myself.

As it is, I can barely walk across the room.

I need the ride.

Maryann is rolling up her mat when I walk over on trembling knees. She looks up and smiles, concern flashing in her eyes. “Penelope! You and your mother aren’t usually at hot yoga, but we’re happy to have you.”

I swallow down a rising lump in my throat. “It was fun. A different experience.”

“I enjoy it. I can’t keep up with some of the vigorous exercises you young people do, so this is how I get a good sweat in.”

Maryann dabs at her neck with a towel and seems to take a good look at my outfit for the first time.

Her brow wrinkles. “I might suggest wearing a few less layers next time you come, though. I’m surprised you didn’t faint.”

I open my mouth to respond, but no words come out.

My tongue feels dry and swollen, and everything seems to turn on an axis.

Faintly, I hear someone shout something, but the sound comes to me as if I’m underwater. I don’t even try to swim to the surface. I close my eyes and sink readily into darkness.



I feel a hand on my face and open my eyes to see Noah standing over me.

Not the Noah from the bathroom today.

Young Noah.

The Noah who held me while I cried and tenderly brushed tears from my face.

He’s cradling me now, a hand cupping my cheek. “You’ll be okay, Penny.”

I sink into his embrace, ignoring the dark part of my mind that warns this could be a trap.

Even in my own head, I’m afraid of being tricked, fooled. I can’t even trust my own hallucinations.

“Why are you here?” I ask.

“Because you needed me. I’ll always be here for you.”

His words echo ones he’s said before.

Promises he has made that he hasn’t always kept.

Though, I haven’t kept mine, either.

Noah has been angry with me for years. Angry with me about things I can't change or control, but still, he has been hurting, and I kept my distance.

I never tried to reach out or make things right. I distanced myself from him, hoping he'd come back eventually.

It was easier to blame him for our falling out and put the onus on him to fix it, but I could have fixed it.

At least, I could have tried.

Noah needed me, whether he'd ever admit it or not, and I stayed away. I broke my word.

"How did you know I needed you?"

Noah smiles, an expression I haven't seen from him in years, and winks. "Because I made you a promise, Penn. I said I'd always be with you."

The words feel both comforting and ominous, and I'm too tired to parse them out.

Instead, I close my eyes and sink into the hallucination, clinging to this version of Noah for as long as I can.

Even if it isn't real.

NOAH

I look around and realize I'm in the music room in the basement.

It's like I blacked out and woke up here.

Like I went into autopilot, so my feet carried me down the stairs I never go down.

Into the room I never go to.

To pick up the guitar I never touch.

My brain is still fixated on Penny. How she felt under my fingers, so soft and wet, and fuck, the way she sounded was incredible, those low whimpering moans and how she grinded herself against my hand like if I pulled away she'd come undone completely...

No.

I need to remind myself of something.

I'm not doing this for Penny's pleasure. I'm not even doing it for my own pleasure.

I'm ruining her life because she ruined mine. Eye for an eye. Simple as that.

But does that mean I can't enjoy it while it happens...?

Whatever. Fuck the questions swirling in my head.

I need a different kind of release.

My body knew I needed to play music today. To burn off some of the nervous energy in my fingertips.

When I pick up my guitar and start to play, it feels like the notes are being pulled out of me the way a magician pulls colored scarves out of their sleeves. An endless reservoir.

I'm not sure how long I'm down there. All I hear, all I sense, all I feel, is the music.

No Penny. No dad. Nothing.

It's bliss.

I'm still playing when I hear a shifting by the door.

I startle and look up to find my mom watching me.

Her brown eyes are surprisingly clear. Clearer than I've seen in months, in fact.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I thought I heard you playing, and I wanted to see. It's been so long."

I lean the guitar against the chair next to me and rest my elbows on my knees. "I'm out of practice."

"You're wonderful. You always have been." Mom winks at me and then her smile grows sad. "I only wish you hadn't stopped playing for so long. I could tell you missed it."

I want to point out that it's surprising she noticed much of anything through her near-constant haze of alcohol.

But I bite my tongue. I don't have any true desire to hurt my mom.

She has been hurt enough.

"I've missed a lot of things."

I blurt that confession before I can stop myself. It's a weird feeling—saying something both vulnerable and true. Not my usual style.

I cough, clear my throat, and add, "But it's fine. I'm sure I'll pick it up again in no time."

"I'm sure you will. You have always been so talented."

Mom smiles and turns away, almost heading back for the stairs before she stops and looks over her shoulder.

“Would you want to do something fun tonight?”

“Fun how?” I ask.

She thinks about it for a minute, and I can tell she doesn't have a plan. “Maybe a movie? At that drive-in place we used to go to?”

With Dad. My mind fills in the gap my mom artfully avoided.

Dad had a BMW convertible he liked to roll the top down on so we could watch a movie under the stars with Chinese take-out and trash food from the concessions stand. It was a regular ritual in our family.

We haven't been once without him.

There are a lot of things we haven't done without my dad. Mostly because my mom was too far gone every night to stand up, let alone make mother-son plans.

But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try now.

I'm making strides to fix the shit in my life. Maybe taking a risk with my mom could fix a few things with her, too.

“Sure, yeah. Why not?”

Mom beams. She must've expected me to turn her down.

“Let me change into warmer clothes, and I'll be ready in five.”

She hustles up the stairs, a new pep in her step. I can't help but smile softly.

Not my usual style, either.

But it feels good.

NOAH

Drive thru hamburger wrappers and fry containers litter the floorboard of Mom's SUV. We each have a box of movie candy from the concessions stand in our hands.

If it was football season, I know I'd be regretting all the junk food at practice the next day.

But it's not football season.

It won't ever be football season again.

That phase of my life is over.

Caleb and J.C. have been nostalgic all semester so far, talking about everything they'll miss. Until now, I didn't have anything to add to the list.

But I will miss football.

And I'll miss my mom.

You can't say that out loud without being roasted into oblivion, but it's true. Mostly, I'll miss knowing she's okay.

For two years, I've loathed seeing her cry and get so drunk she passed out.

But at least I knew she was alive.

At least I knew she was able to get out of bed and go to work before she crumpled into a ball all night.

Once I'm gone, who knows what will happen?

Right now, for instance, I can look over and see that my mom has snuck a few glugs of whatever is in her flask into her large

soda.

But she's trying.

For the first time in as long as I can remember, she's genuinely trying to keep her shit together and have a nice time with me.

That is fucking progress.

“Donald O'Connor did this scene so many times and with so much passion that he actually broke some ribs and had to go to the hospital right after filming,” she informs me.

Mom is lip-syncing along with the old musical numbers and sharing trivia facts with me when she remembers one.

She used to watch them a lot when I was growing up, turning TCM on the television and letting it run all day while she cleaned.

She hasn't done that in a long time, though.

I can't blame her.

I gave up a lot of things, too—my guitar being one of them.

“What do you think about performing as a career choice?” I ask before I can stop myself.

“I think it's a hard industry to crack into,” she says. “Though maybe not quite so much these days. The Internet has opened everything up. Why?”

I've never told anyone about wanting to perform.

Even when I was learning to play guitar, I said it was just a hobby.

I never told my dad I imagined standing on a stage in front of a crowd.

I never told anyone that was the only future I'd ever imagined for myself.

They probably wouldn't have believed me even if I did admit it. I never auditioned for a musical, I never joined band or orchestra, and I hardly ever spoke in front of crowds.

But, for me, there's a difference.

I don't want to simply perform. I want to play guitar. In a band. A *real* band.

"No reason."

I hold out my box of Milk Duds. Mom steals a few, chewing on them for the next ten minutes as the movie plays.

As one musical turns to another, she adds a few more glugs of alcohol to her drink and slouches a bit further down in her seat.

She isn't making quite as many comments about the movie, and when she does, her words are a little slurred.

I know our time together is running short.

By intermission, her eyes are closed.

I reverse out of the lot and start heading home.

It was fun while it lasted.



The drive-in is in the middle of nowhere. Aside from a few extra street lights they put directly across from the entrance to the drive-in, the rest of the roads are pitch black. The only illumination comes from the few cars that may pass by.

So, I don't notice the Hell Princes until they flip on their headlights and appear a few car lengths behind me.

After Caleb shut Bumper down last semester, the Hell Princes have kept their distance.

We thought that maybe we'd finally succeeded in putting this ridiculous feud behind us.

As motorcycles surround my mom's car, however, I'm fairly confident that isn't the case.

Two bikes are in front of the car, their brake lights lit up, several more are on my left, and another two are right behind me.

They're herding me towards the side of the road.

My options are limited.

I could play along and hope they only want to chat.

I could run the Hell Princes in front of me over and speed off, but going to prison for manslaughter isn't the most appealing choice for my future.

Or, I could call the cops, but while it takes them twenty minutes to reach me, I'll have to decide between one of the other two options.

And considering one of the options involves manslaughter, I start to pull over, following the path the motorcycles make for me.

It's obvious I'm outnumbered. And because I'm with my mom in her car, I don't even have my gun.

Though, that wouldn't help me much in this situation. The Hell Princes probably have guns, too.

And more Hell Princes equals more guns. I'm shit at math, but even I can work that problem out.

For the first time all night, I'm grateful my mom has been sneaking drinks. They've put her into a restful sleep, so she doesn't stir even as I drive over the rumble strips along the shoulder of the road.

When I shift into park, the Hell Princes turn their engines off.

What the fuck is happening?

What do the Hell Princes want with me?

Why did they follow me to a drive-in movie with my mom?

I'll only get answers once I step out of the car, so I do.

I keep the engine running, but I open the driver door, slide out of the seat onto the sandy shoulder, and take in the motorcycle gang surrounding me.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" I ask, trying to sound casual.

"Beautiful night." One of the bikers pulls down a black bandana around his mouth and neck, revealing neck tattoos that look like they blend into chest and shoulder tattoos, too.

His head is shaved, but he has a thick beard.

“Is that what you ran me off the road to tell me?”

The large man sucks on his bottom row of teeth and spits on the ground. A few of the other Hell Princes follow suit, like this is *West Side Story* and their movements have to be coordinated.

“No, I ran you off the road to send a message.”

“Ever heard of a phone? They’re great for sending messages. Much less work, too.”

He smiles, but there is no humor in it. “You Golden Boys think you’re so fucking smart.”

A retort about the graduation rates of Ravenlake Prep students versus the kids from Public comes to mind, but I decide it isn’t in my best interest to repeat it.

I don’t feel like getting killed tonight.

“I’m here to tell you that the little truce we had going there for a minute—”

“Which the Hell Princes broke when they attacked my friend,” I say, interrupting him.

“No, which you Golden Boys broke when you pulled out a gun and stopped us from taking what is ours.”

And there it was.

Why they were following me.

Because I was the one who pulled the gun.

The Hell Princes showed up to our campsite to take Haley with them, and I pulled a gun on them.

They left, and I thought that was the end of it

Or, at least, when Caleb knocked Bumper unconscious, I thought that was the end of it.

Apparently not.

“You were coming to kidnap someone,” I remind him. “Someone who was with a Golden Boy. You broke the truce

first.”

The man growls. “I’m not going to play *he said, she said* with you. I’m here to tell you the truce is over. Watch your back.”

The other bikers are all standing casually by their bikes, though their eyes are on me. It doesn’t seem like they are about ready to start a fight.

So, I say what’s on my mind.

“Spoiler alert: maybe this is why the Hell Princes are constantly on the losing side of our encounters. It’s not customary to give your target a forewarning of what your plan is.”

The man smirks. “You have no idea what’s coming for you, kiddo.”

“Maybe not yet, but I’m sure you’ll send a fruit basket with all the details before you pull off your plan.”

At that, the man cracks his knuckles and steps away from his bike.

Again, as though choreographed, the other Hell Princes follow suit.

Shit.

I took it too far.

That’s the problem with fighting these battles alone.

As a unit, the Golden Boys have a nice balance.

By myself, I always seem to push too hard in one way or the other.

This time, I channeled a bit too much Caleb and have found myself in a fight I certainly won’t win.

The bikers are approaching. I’m trying to decide if I can jump back in my car and peel out of here without getting caught or waking my mom up.

But before I can move, sirens blare.

The bikers freeze, their surprised expressions washed in red and blue lights.

The police car pulls into the lane just next to where our little powwow is happening on the shoulder.

He climbs out of his car, his arms resting casually on the hood. “What’s going on here, fellas?”

I make the decision easily.

I could turn these fuckers in for harassing me...

But I’m no snitch.

“Car trouble.” I smile and tip my head towards my car, which...is still running. “These fine gents just assisted me.”

The officer is young, mid-twenties with a thick mustache that shows how hard he’s trying to appear older than he is.

But he isn’t stupid. His brow quirks up.

“I’m a mechanic,” the lead biker says, pointing to a white, rectangular patch on his jacket that looks like it was ripped right off of a mechanic’s uniform.

The name “Tank” has been stitched in the center.

The officer licks his lower lip, his mustache rippling, clearly not buying the story. Finally, he waves his hands.

“Well, if the car is working, clear out. All of you.”

I nod in thanks to him—how thankful, he’ll never really know—and hop back in the car without a backwards glance at the Hell Princes.

Thankfully, my mom is still asleep.

I shudder to think how much worse things could have been if she’d woken up.

The rest of the drive home, I glance in the rearview mirror, expecting to see shadows following me.

But either the officer scared them away or they already delivered their message.

Because no one follows me home.

In the driveway, I shake my mom’s arm to rouse her. She isn’t drunk enough to be black out drunk, but she’s still difficult to

wake.

When she finally does rouse, she stretches and laughs sleepily.

“I had fun tonight. It was good to spend time together, wasn’t it? I like knowing what’s going on in your life.”

I almost laugh in her face. She wants to know what’s going on in my life? She doesn’t know the half of it.

She lost her husband.

But I lost my dad, my best friend, and my mother in one fell swoop.

And my mom was too busy nursing her own heartbreak to ever notice mine.

So if she thinks all it takes is one night out to fix our problems, then I’m happy to be her rude awakening.

She is still talking, slurring on about something in the movie. But I get out of the car and shut the door behind me, leaving her inside.

When I reach the front door, I hear her say my name, but I don’t turn around.

Tonight, she can escort herself into the house and to bed. God knows I’ve done it enough times already.

Tonight, I’m worrying about myself.

I’m the only one who can.

NOAH

Pre-Calculus has become a trigger.

Mrs. Frye is standing at the front of the room reading a word problem where she has clearly just inserted Cardi B into a pre-written sentence.

“Cardi B is a rapper. She receives a salary of \$45,000 per year. In addition, she receives 7% of her royalties for the year. What amount of royalties would allow her to earn more than \$56,900 per year...”

...And all I can think about is Penny squirming against a stall door.

Now, the time feels ripe to make that happen again.

Maybe it's because of what happened this weekend.

Because of my past coming back to haunt me in the form of tattooed bikers with a vendetta.

So why shouldn't Penny's come back to haunt her?

After what she did to me and to my family...

I pull out my phone, hiding it behind my propped up calc book, and text her the same thing as before.

Bathroom. Now.

Then I close the book, leaving my phone shut between the pages, and stride out of class.

When I get to the Eastside girl's bathroom and reach for the handle, I hear voices on the other side.

I hesitate, listening.

“Wow, even demons have to pee. The bathroom really is the great equalizer, isn’t it?”

“I’d suggest you wash your hands—who knows where they’ve been or what they’ve been doing—and get moving before I have to break a promise.”

I recognize Penny’s voice, the nasally one she uses when she’s being pissy.

“What promise?” The other voice is muffled by the sound of running water.

“Do you really think I’d divulge any details about my life *to you*? The bathroom isn’t that great of an equalizer. Just fuck off, okay?”

“Oh, I see,” the other girl says. “You’re waiting until I clear out so you can drop to your knees and spew your lunch. An eating disorder—how original.”

Penny doesn’t answer.

“Well, don’t mind me,” the other girl finishes. “I’ll be going now.”

I hear footsteps across the tile. I just have enough time to spin away from the door and lean lazily against the brick wall when the door opens and Haley steps out of the bathroom.

She jumps when she sees me and then narrows her blue eyes.

“Noah?”

I give her a casual nod, but I can feel my face warming. “Hey.”

“What are you—” Haley looks back at the bathroom, suspicion in her eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“Avoiding pre-calc. I’m shit at math.”

“Okay, but why—” She starts to ask the question and then stops, shaking her head. “I have to get back to ceramics before my clay dries out. I’ll see you later.”

I lift my hand in a wave and watch as she walks down the hallway, looking back once before she turns the corner.

Even then, I wait another thirty seconds before I go into the bathroom.

Penny is sitting on the white counter, her back against the mirror, her legs dangling over the edge.

She has a high-waisted mini skirt on—this one maroon corduroy—with black sheer tights, black high-heeled boots, and a deep v-neck white sweater tucked in.

Her hair is pulled back in two braids with the long, curled ends spilling over her shoulders.

She looks fucking perfect.

Like a teenage boy's schoolgirl fantasy.

"Before you say anything, Haley was the one harassing me," she says, smoothing a finger over her bottom lip to smooth her lip gloss. "I did as you asked."

I did as you asked.

The words shouldn't turn me on as much as they do, but with her outfit and the way she's perched on the edge of the counter, one leg crossed over the other, it's nearly too much for me.

"What else will you do if I ask?"

She arches a blonde brow and then shakes her head. "No, Noah. Not today. Not again. Last time was a mistake. I can't be caught doing anything like that in a school bathroom. My mom would... well, she'd be pissed."

Penny never liked to talk about her mom, even back in the day.

I knew there were issues, but a lot of girls don't get along with their moms. It's not so unusual.

Classic Penny, playing the victim, making sure she's the center of attention.

"I'm not going to be your personal escort, living at your beck and call, helping you get off whenever and wherever, okay?"

“As I recall, I’m the one who got you off.”

Heat rises up her neck, turning her fair skin pink.

I reach my hand around my back and bolt the bathroom door closed before cutting a path across the bathroom to Penny.

“Is that why you came to meet me again? Because you wanted me to make you feel good like before?”

Penny angles her body away from me and uncrosses her legs, pressing her knees together tightly.

“You made me feel like shit, Noah. That wasn’t fun for me.”

I plant my hands on the edge of the counter on either side of her hips and lean forward, forcing her to tuck her chin in to keep some distance between us.

My next words are spoken in a high-pitched falsetto.

“Noah. Oh, God!”

Penny slaps my chest. I grab her hand out of the air and pin it to the tiled wall.

Immediately, her entire body stills. The fire in her green eyes dulls, and her lips part.

Putty. Penelope LaFevre is putty in my hands.

“Admit it,” I whisper, curling her fingers down and kissing the tip of her middle one. “It felt good.”

“Just because it felt good, doesn’t mean it was right,” she says, voice shaky.

“So, you’re saying it was fun, after all? Before you said you didn’t have any fun, but now you’re saying it felt good. Which is it?”

Penny turns her face away. “I know why you’re doing this, Noah.”

I suck the tip of her finger into my mouth and swirl my tongue around the end. “Because I like that you like it.”

“No.” Her legs part slightly, allowing me to move in closer. “Because you want to hurt me.”

“How could I hurt you?” I say innocently.

I grab her other hand and press her palms together in a prayer. Then, I lower my head and lift her arms over my neck.

Immediately, her hands cup my head, her fingers slipping into the hair at the base of my neck.

Penny looks at me, eyes wide, like she can't believe what's happening, but she's helpless to stop it.

I'm right there with her.

I feel like I'm floating above my body, watching myself seduce her, incapable of stopping.

“You're trying to make me want you so you can make me hate myself for it later,” she says, voice barely audibly. “It's obvious.”

I press my hips forward, spreading her legs even further. Her butt slides to the edge of the counter and her skirt rides up, revealing the lacy tops of her stockings.

The sight sends blood rushing downward, making it even harder to keep my thoughts straight.

“So, stop me.”

My nose brushes against the tip of hers.

Penny leans into the touch, the smooth skin of her cheek sliding over mine, her breath warm on my neck.

“I can't. Because I want to hurt you, too.”

I follow the length of her arms around my neck until my fingers interlace with hers.

As soon as they do, I jerk her arms up, pinning them to the mirror above her head. She gasps, but hooks her legs around the backs of mine.

I pull back and admire her, stretched in front of me, legs hooked around my waist, eyes lidded, cheeks flushed.

This is about revenge.

This is about settling the score.

Nothing else.

Even I barely believe myself.

But I'm too far gone to stop now.

I let her arms go and step out from between her legs, stepping backwards. Confusion flickers across her face, but I hold my arms out wide, welcoming.

“You want to hurt me? I'd like to see you try.”

Whatever thread of self-control had been holding Penny back snaps. I see it happen, the way her expression turns wild and she practically lunges off of the counter at me.

She cups one hand around my jawline and threads the other into my hair like it belongs there. Then, she presses onto her toes and kisses me.

I challenged her to hurt me, but I'm still surprised by her attempt.

At least, by the ferocity in it.

Penny's mouth is soft, but demanding against mine. Her full lips part mine, sucking on my bottom lip and then my top.

Her teeth nip at me and her tongue tastes me, and I don't think I'm breathing.

I'm not new or unexperienced, not by any stretch of the imagination, but it never felt like this.

There is only one person who has ever made my head swim and my heart stop.

There is only one girl who has ever been able to bring me to my knees with her mouth.

But today, I want to bring her to her knees.

I grab Penny's shoulders and pull her away.

“What?”

Without another word, I unzip the front of my pants and wait, wondering what Penny will do.

She licks her lips, considering, and the anticipation is painful.

Finally, she places her hands on my hips for balance, drops to her knees, and reaches her small hand into my jeans.

Everything seems to be happening in slow motion. The moment I've fantasized about for years is playing out in front of me.

But I'm frozen as Penny strokes my length with her soft hand and looks up at me in anticipation.

I watch, mesmerized, as she parts her pink lips, exhales warm air over my sensitive tip, and then takes me into her mouth.

The sensation is powerful and immediate, sending a shiver up my spine, but I do my best to hold still.

If I don't, I'm not sure what will happen.

Penny can't know how much I want this. What this is doing to me.

Except, she has to know. I'm rock hard in her hand, practically twitching.

She starts with shallow sucks at first, an inch, then two. Back and forth, moving forward and then retreating.

Her plump lips pucker at my tip, pressing a kiss there, before taking me in again.

Deeper this time than the others.

With each pass over me, I'm growing more impatient, more desperate.

My hips begin to thrust gently in time with her movements. Penny digs her fingers into my hips and pulls me towards her, encouraging me when I don't need any encouragement.

I should have found a wall to lean against because my legs are growing weak.

This whole plan was meant to bring Penny down.

But I'm the one finding myself on shaky ground all of a sudden.

I reach down to grab her head for no other reason than to steady myself, and I find one of her loose braids. An idea

forms, and I reach down and grab the other, holding one in each hand. Then, like reins, I give them a tug.

Penny's mouth slides further onto me. I groan, possessed by the sensation and my power over her.

Rhythmically, I pull on her hair, guiding her down and back on my cock until she is sucking all the way to the tip before taking me all the way to the base.

Again and again, she sucks me off, swirling her tongue around my length, varying the amount of pressure and sucking.

It's unlike anything I've ever felt, and I'm positive the heat building in my belly is going to consume me.

I'll burn up with it.

Damn, what a way it would be to go.

I let go of Penny's braids, content to let her finish in her own way, and she immediately rises up on her knees, finding a slightly new angle. She wraps one hand around my base and begins working me from both ends, her hand and mouth meeting in the middle.

"Fuck," I moan, placing a hand on the back of her head, stroking her silky hair as she works. "I'm going to come."

It's a warning, a chance for her to pull away. A small act of mercy from me to her.

But Penny seems to take it as a challenge instead. She works faster, harder.

Soft moans build in the back of her throat, vibrating against my length.

Until I can't hold it back anymore.

The embers inside of me catch fire and explode.

My entire body jerks forward, and Penny stills, her lips suctioned against my base, her nose pressed to the curls just below my belly button.

Pleasure fills me and overflows in a near endless wave, radiating warmth to the very edges of me and beyond.

My body feels light, tingly. Contentment washes over me in wave after wave.

And Penny takes it all.

When it finally stops and Penny lets me slide out of her mouth, I stand there, staring at the ceiling, lost to the bliss of an unbelievable orgasm.

She wipes her mouth with her sleeve and stands up, straightening her stockings.

“Well,” she asks, turning to the mirror to fix her lipstick. “Did I hurt you?”

I shove myself back in my pants and laugh scornfully. “Never.”

And it’s true. She didn’t.

She fucking killed me.

PENNY

Mr. Thomas gives me detention for giving Noah a blowjob.

Well, he doesn't know about the blowjob.

But it's the second day in a week that I've missed a significant part of class "going to the bathroom," and he "couldn't let it slide."

Really, what he can't let slide is the fact that I refuse to play along with his creepy game when he asks me what was taking me so long in the bathroom.

I don't know if he has a fetish for people's bathroom habits or if he hopes I'll admit to getting myself off in the stall or something.

But I tell him it's inappropriate to ask people, especially students, and especially female students, questions like that.

Therefore, detention.

Just one more thing for my mom to be upset about. They're really racking up lately.

First, my comments to Maryann.

Second, passing out in the hot yoga class, causing a scene, and nearly having the paramedics called.

Third, detention.

Be cool, not a delinquent.

That's what she always wanted. But thanks to Noah and the Hell Princes, I'm well on my way to delinquent territory.

Sex in a public place is definitely a misdemeanor charge, right?

The memory of what we did—what *I* did—comes back to me. I bury my face in my folded arms on top of my desk.

Why did I do that?

I mean, I know *why*. I wanted to.

But why did I want to?

Noah gave me every out, every opportunity to walk away, but I stayed.

So, stop me, he'd said.

I can't. Because I want to hurt you, too.

In my mind, I was saying it because of the Hell Princes.

Because Tank wants me to lure Noah to some location to be jumped, and they'll most definitely hurt him.

But was there more to it?

I took the topless pictures and sent them to Noah because I wanted him to want me.

I wanted him to desire me the way he once had.

The idea of him looking at me with lust was better than him looking at me with hate.

And Noah nailed that one on the head: parental issues.

I need to be adored. It's the reason I've spent years following my mom's rules, manipulating people around me into practically worshipping me.

Because at least they aren't being mean. At least they like me...

I think.

But this, a blowjob on the floor of the girl's restroom, spoke to something different.

Something deeper.

Noah all but admitted he wants to hurt me, and I played right into his hand.

Maybe the hard truth is that I've been searching for the self-destruct button for years, and Noah has finally revealed it to me.

When Noah looked me in my eyes and told me he never wanted to see me again, that he hated me, I didn't try to win him back.

For so long, he had been the only person holding me together. I knew if he roundly rejected me, I'd fall apart.

Now, he's come back to finish the job.

I can't help but feel like I deserve it.

"What about you, Penny?"

A hand taps me on the shoulder from behind. My eyes are fuzzy and sensitive to the light from being closed for so long, but I turn and see a girl with shaggy bangs and mussed hair looking at me.

"What about me?" I ask.

"Are you going to Spring Fling?"

There are two other girls sitting in the desks next to the girl with the bangs. I recognize one of them from an art class I took sophomore year.

The other is Andrea Nguyen. We went to elementary school together, but I haven't spoken with her since then.

"Everybody goes, don't they?"

"Everybody like *you* goes," Andrea says with a nervous smile. "The rest of us aren't guaranteed."

"You should go."

Andrea's unplucked brows raise. "Really?"

She's a pretty girl. The kind of pretty that will only get more refined as she ages, but isn't always appreciated in the teenage years.

"Absolutely, why not?"

Punk girl snorts. “Because of ‘The Sacrifice.’”

Andrea frowns. “I don’t know what that is.”

“I think it’s a myth.”

That’s what I heard, anyway. Every year, people spread rumors about Spring Fling, and they’ve gotten wilder every year I’ve been at Ravenlake.

The guys came back talking about all the wild sex they had, and the stories snowballed into tales of a “Sacrifice,” a senior girl who volunteered to have sex with anyone who wanted her.

“If it is a myth, it won’t be for long,” bangs girl says. “Do you know Ciarra Klemson?”

“The girl with the bar in her nose and the chest tat?”

Punk girl nods. “She is volunteering as the Sacrifice this year.”

My mouth falls open. “Willingly? She wants to do it?”

“I’d hope she wanted to,” Andrea remarks. “If she didn’t, it would be a horror story.”

“Still.” I wrinkle my nose. “It sounds like a horror story regardless. Who would want to do that? Have you seen some of the cretins who go to this school?”

“Have you seen some of the hot guys who go here, too?” Andrea asks. She shrugs apologetically when we both look at her. “I’m just saying, maybe Ciarra is thinking she’ll suffer through a few duds to get with someone like Noah.”

“Noah Boone?” Bangs girl waves a dismissive hand.

“What’s wrong with him?” I ask before I can stop myself.

“Boring white dude. So last season.” She looks at me and tips her head to the side, intrigued. “Do you disagree?”

I imagine a flashing neon sign is hanging above my head, broadcasting the dirty deed I committed less than two hours ago for all to see.

“I mean, I think he’s cute.”

Cute is a hilarious understatement. Andrea calls me out on it.

“Puppies are cute. Noah Boone is a god.”

“Keep it in your pants, Andy.” Bangs girl elbows Andrea’s arm, who covers her face with both hands.

“If either of you tell anyone what I said, I’ll die.”

“He probably doesn’t even know who you are. But don’t look at me, my lips are sealed. Penny is the one with the direct line to the Golden Boys.”

I do a double take. “What? Me?”

“*Me?*” she mocks. “Yes, you. Out of the three of us, you’re the only one who has actually spoken to Noah Boone. Didn’t you two even hang out for a while?”

To put it mildly.

Noah and I were in love, regardless of what he may claim now, but we didn’t really tell anyone.

We kept it quiet because it wasn’t anyone else’s business.

The trouble with that, I’m realizing now, is that no one but me will ever know or remember the whole story.

It will almost be like it never happened at all.

I shrug casually. “I hang out with a lot of people.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard,” Bangs girl says in an odd tone.

I’ve been a bitch long enough to recognize the trait in someone else.

She’s making fun of me.

“You’ve been Ravenlake’s willing sacrifice for a long time now,” she finishes.

I narrow my eyes at her and slowly lift my middle finger.

When I turn around, I hear her laughing quietly behind me.

Andrea doesn’t say a word.

PENNY

By the time I get out of detention, it's almost five and the winter sun is already starting to set. My car is one of only a few left in the parking lot.

I've been too afraid to check the texts on my phone to see if my mom has been looking for me, but I probably should.

If I can text her my excuse before I get home, she might have time to calm down before she sees me.

Hopefully.

I fumble in my backpack for my phone, digging through a mess of books, papers, and loose pens before I find it. I unlock it, slide into the driver's seat, and check my messages.

None. Not a single one.

In a way, that's worse.

Momma either hasn't noticed I'm late or she's too busy dreaming up punishments to text me.

Whichever it is sucks. A lot.

I decide not to bother texting and just see what I find when I get home. It will be a surprise.

I drop my phone in the center console and am about to start my car when the passenger door suddenly opens.

Tank slides into the seat next to me.

I'm so surprised I just stare at him. He smiles, revealing a gold tooth on the right side of his mouth, and plucks my keys out of

my hand.

“Good to see you again, angel.”

The deep rumble of his voice shakes me out of my stupor, and I shrink back, my hand on the door handle. “I told you to stop calling me that.”

“I call ‘em like I see ‘em,” he says with an unapologetic shrug.

I clench my fists. “What are you doing here?”

“Don’t bother running,” he says, pointing out the windshield towards a black truck with two men sitting in the front seat. “They’ll catch you.”

Pay attention to everything.

Not one of my mother’s rules, but one of mine. A very important one.

Whether it’s people at school or Momma or strangers, it’s important to be aware of my surroundings.

Who I’m with.

What’s expected of me.

I have to be a different person at school than I am at home or when I’m alone, so I’ve trained myself to read a room and respond accordingly.

Today, I didn’t pay attention.

I got so wrapped up in whether I’d be in trouble with my mom that I didn’t realize I was walking into much more serious trouble.

That oversight is about to cost me.

“I’ve been doing what you said. I’m staying close to Noah and luring him in. I’m doing exactly what you wanted.”

Tank leans towards the console, hand extended, and I can smell the cigarette smoke and dust rising off of his vest.

I try to keep my distance, but Tank grabs my chin between his thumb and forefinger and twists my face towards his.

“I know, angel. You’ve been a very good girl.”

Once again, it's like there is a flashing neon sign above my head.

Let the Whole World Know That I, Penelope LaFevre, Gave Noah Boone A Blowjob In the Girls' Bathroom (And I Liked It).

Is there anyway Tank knows about that?

No, definitely not.

Tank is scary because he's large, not because he's smart.

It's not like he's capable of surveilling the Ravenlake Prep girls' bathroom waiting for exactly this particular event to occur.

Still, I feel the heat of shame prickling at my chest and neck.

"I just don't want you losing focus." Tank shifts his eyes from my face to my hair and grabs the end of my pigtail. He tugs on it and then lets his hand drift a little further, barely brushing against the swell of my breast. "I want to make sure you're properly motivated."

"You threatened to hurt my little sister," I snap, swatting his hand away. "That is plenty of motivation."

In an instant, Tank swells up to twice his height before, almost like a Macy's day parade balloon filling with air.

One second, he's in the seat next to me.

The next, he's hovering over me only a few inches away.

"If not motivation, then maybe you could stand a refresher in respect," he growls. "I'd be more than happy to teach you how to be obedient. We're all alone in this parking lot, after all."

I look around to see if he's right.

And my blood goes cold.

We really are alone. My car is the only one left in the lot, and I'm parked behind the Student Activity Center. The lot isn't visible from the road.

I'm trapped.

“I’m sorry,” I breathe, pulling my arms in tight, trying to make myself as small and insignificant as possible.

I’ve had a lot of practice with that at home.

If I stay out of my mom’s way, she might not seek me out.

She might not hurl insults at me.

She might not notice me grabbing a snack from the pantry or eating an entire plate of dinner.

So I treat Tank like I’d treat Momma. If I shrink down and apologize now, he might feel powerful enough that he doesn’t need to cow me in another way.

A much worse way.

His presence over me shifts, softens, and he strokes a calloused hand over my cheek. “Don’t worry, angel. I’d make sure you liked it.”

He lifts my face to his, forcing me to look in his eyes, and then smiles.

“It’s hard not to imagine what you must be doing with Noah to earn his trust.”

I don’t say anything, not sure what he wants.

“I find myself a little jealous at times,” he continues, stroking my hair again. “Do you think you could ever forgive me for scaring you like I have?”

He wants to know if I could ever sleep with him willingly, and the thought is enough to make me sick.

Of course not.

Never in a million fucking years.

He’s also toying with me. He’s trying to mix fear and seduction in a confusing cocktail to keep me on my toes.

But just because I realize what he’s doing doesn’t make it easier to follow.

Before I can answer, he lets go of my hair and falls back in the seat, throwing his arms out in defeat.

“Women are all the same. Sex is too emotional for you. For men, it can be physical, all about release. But women can’t help but fall a little bit in love with whoever they fuck.”

He turns back to me, eyes narrowed to slits, his forehead wrinkled. “Can I trust you won’t fall for him?”

“For Noah?” I ask, trying to track his side of the conversation. “We haven’t slept together.”

Recently, my mind clarifies silently.

He taps a fat finger on his chin. “But you might, and if you do, I need to know it won’t screw with your head and make you useless to me. I need to know you can still do the job I’ve assigned you.”

“I can, I definitely can,” I say quickly. “It won’t be a problem. I’ve already told you, Noah is nothing to me.”

Tank frowns. “I’d feel better if I had some proof.”

“Proof of what?”

“That you can remain objective during sex. That you won’t fall in love.” His pupils seem to swallow his eyes, and he leans towards me. “Should we test it?”

My stomach bottoms out, and I can’t remember ever being so scared in my life.

“You have a big backseat, and I’ve got time,” he hisses, reaching over the console to squeeze my leg.

His hand climbs higher, moving up my stocking, but I grab his wrist before he can gain any more ground.

“I have to go,” I say, trying not to sound as disgusted as I feel. “I’m supposed to go meet Noah right now.”

“Where?”

“His house.”

He pulls his hand away. “I told you to gain his trust, not become his girlfriend.”

“What’s the difference?” I gently take my keys back from his hand, feigning a confidence I certainly don’t feel. “You want

to get revenge on him. Well, so do I. What better way to do that than to make him fall in love with me only to betray him?”

Tank rolls the idea around in his head for a moment before his mouth quirks up into a smirk. “Angel, you’re more ruthless than I ever imagined. I love it.”

“I want to make sure he hurts.”

“Oh, he will. Believe me. You won’t be able to recognize him when we’re done with him.” Tank laughs and then raises one brow. “Can you handle being part of that?”

I swallow down the apprehension creeping up my throat and smile back. “Of course.”

Tank leans across the car again, and I freeze.

Then, he presses his dry lips to my forehead and climbs out of my car. “Until next time, angel.”

He clambers out.

I pull away as soon as he’s gone.

As I leave the lot, hands shaking around the wheel, I can see Tank waving goodbye in my rearview mirror.

PENNY

I didn't really have plans, but I'm afraid what will happen if I don't go to Noah's house as soon as I leave the school.

Is Tank or one of the other Hell Princes following me?

Will they drive by Noah's house to see if I'm there?

What would happen the next time Tank sprang up out of nowhere if he knew I'd lied to him?

So, I drive to Noah's.

Partly to not get caught in a lie...

And partly because I'm having doubts.

Serious doubts.

The rivalry between the Hell Princes and Golden Boys goes back years and some serious shit has gone down between them, but I didn't think they'd really hurt Noah. Not in a serious way, at least.

Now, I'm not sure.

Tank is older and bigger and much crueler than I ever imagined.

I should have guessed when he threatened Delanie, but my denial was a protective instinct. I didn't want to think I could have really found myself and my sister in so much danger.

I took the threat seriously, but I didn't really let myself imagine what Tank would do if I betrayed him.

After his advances in the parking lot, I'm confident Tank is a man of his word

He'll do anything, regardless of who it hurts.

Maybe if I warn Noah about the Hell Princes, tell him about the deal I made with Tank, and explain the threats they made against Delanie, he'll be able to figure out a solution that can keep us all safe.

After all, he may not care about me anymore.

But he has to care about Delanie.

When I pull up in front of his house, I'm relieved to see his car parked in front of the garage. I hadn't considered what I'd do if he wasn't at home.

I don't get nervous until I knock on the front door.

Will his mom recognize me? It's been a long time, but I'm sure she remembers me.

If Noah hates me for what happened, she must hate me, too.

I wouldn't even blame her.

The door opens.

It's Mrs. Boone.

She looks older than she did the last time I saw her. There are more lines around her mouth, circles under her eyes, and she looks mussed. Less put together than she used to.

But she still looks like Noah. The same caramel waves in her hair.

"Hi, Mrs. Boone. I'm—"

"Penelope," she finishes, saying my name with neither warmth nor scorn. I have no idea how to read her.

This was a dumb idea.

A terrible idea.

The worst idea in the history of ideas.

I have no idea what to say, and I'm about to run back to my car and speed away when she opens the door even wider and

steps aside, beckoning me in.

“Are you here to see Noah?”

I nod and step into the entryway.

The same entryway I collapsed into the day my dad died.

That day, Noah was there to catch me.

Today, I’m on my own.

The house looks the same. White and cozy with eclectic antique furniture and curtains, pillows, and ottomans in rich, jewel-toned fabrics.

I used to imagine their sunken living room was the inside of a genie’s bottle. It felt secluded and protected from the rest of the world.

At the Boone’s house, I could forget everything—for a time.

There are fewer pictures, I notice, spotting a few bare spots on the wall where frames used to hang.

I can imagine the pictures that used to hang there. My belly flips with nerves.

“He’s downstairs,” Mrs. Boone says, pointing to the stairs. “Just head on down. I’m sure he’ll be happy to see you.”

If I wasn’t so nervous, I’d laugh.

I’m fairly positive he won’t be pleased in the least.

I smile at her and walk towards the stairs. Halfway there, Mrs. Boone calls after me. “It’s good to see you, Penny. It’s been a long time.”

I only realize now, with a little distance, that her words are slurred.

She’s drunk.

“It’s good to see you, too, Mrs. Boone.”

I don’t know if she’s telling the truth, but I’m glad to hear it. Noah’s house always felt like home.

I’ve missed it.



When Noah's parents were home, the basement was where we hung out. They believed it was public enough that we wouldn't dare try anything down there.

But boy, were they wrong.

Walking through Noah's basement is like walking through a museum of my sexual awakening.

Our first time together was up in his bedroom, but everything else happened in the basement.

More than sex, though, we got to know one another down here.

We watched movies, cuddled together on the couch, and talked about the stuff that mattered, while ignoring the stuff that didn't.

His dad set up a music room for him in the basement, but it was for fun. Someone had to carry on the family legacy at Barber Engineering and pick up the family trade—making exorbitant amounts of money.

Noah wanted to be a musician.

I encouraged Noah to tell his parents the truth about what he wanted. His parents weren't like my mom. They'd love him no matter what.

But he never did.

He never even played for me. Every time I asked, he was working on a new piece and would "play it for me soon."

But "soon" never came.

So, when I hear guitar playing coming from under the door of his music room, I don't open it right away.

I stand outside, silent, listening as the notes filter out to me, muffled slightly by the door, but ringing out true nonetheless.

I've always thought it was bullshit when people would say they truly *heard* someone when they spoke through their art.

But hearing Noah play the guitar—even a song I've never heard before—makes me feel like I'm hearing him for the first time.

It's like studying a painting your entire life, searching for meaning, only to have it flipped upside down once you think you've figured it out.

Suddenly, everything seems different.

Noah wants me to think he's a beast. That he hates me. That he's determined to break me.

But that's a lie.

Here, now, I know it's true.

Noah is the same gentle, sweet person he was before.

He's learned to hide it. To sneer in my face and force me to bend, to strip, to kneel.

But he can't hide it in his music.

Just like my body revealed my desire to Noah, his playing reveals to me what's in his soul.

The playing is so intimate, I begin to feel guilty, standing on the other side of the door, eavesdropping.

So I take a deep breath and knock quietly on the door.

The playing doesn't stop, so a few seconds later, I turn the knob and open it.

The hinge squeals, loudly enough anyone would have heard, but Noah plays a few more notes, unbothered. He stops and looks over his shoulders, his expression open and relaxed.

Until he sees me.

As soon as his eyes land on me, it's like he's been electrocuted.

Noah jumps up from his chair, eyes wild, and gapes at me, unable to find the words.

“I’m sorry,” I stammer. “Your mom—”

“What the fuck are you doing in my house?” He rips the guitar off his head and throws it a bit too roughly on the sofa behind him. “Who let you in?”

“Your mom did. I knocked, and she said you were down here.”

“Why did you knock? What are you doing here? Why were you—” He frowns at me and then looks over at the guitar, realization hitting him. “Were you listening to me play?”

I swallow down nerves.

Maybe this was a bad idea. I should have texted him first. As a warning.

That would have been smart.

But then he probably would have told his mom not to let me in, or he would have left to avoid me.

I would have missed his playing and the peek it offered into his head.

So I can’t really bring myself to regret dropping in unannounced.

“Only in the sense that I have good hearing and the music was coming under the door. I wasn’t, like, eavesdropping... much.”

Noah grimaces and hurls a point at the door. “You need to leave. Now.”

He starts moving towards me, ready to grab me and shove me out, so I quickly duck under his arm and hurry around him, moving further into the room. “I have something to tell you.”

“Oh, really? Me too. Here it is: fuck off.”

I roll my eyes. “Would you calm down? It’s just guitar playing, okay? I didn’t walk in on you having a wank.”

His perfectly straight nose wrinkles. “Having a wank?”

I lower my hand and make a suggestive gesture that, given what we did only a few hours earlier, feels a little too suggestive.

“I know what it means,” he spits, running a hand through his wavy hair. “It’s just...British.”

“It sounds more proper than ‘masturbating.’”

Noah scowls. “Would you stop saying shit like that? What did you come here to tell me?”

“I came here to tell you all the various slang terminology for the act of self-pleasuring.” I hold up a hand and begin listing them off. “Wank, jerk off, jack off, touch your—”

“Penny!”

I let my hand drop. “Sorry. I’m nervous.”

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“Why not?”

“You know why.”

There’s venom in his voice, poison that confirms how much the mere sight of me bothers him.

It hurts.

I cross my arms and stand tall, squaring off with all five feet, ten inches of Noah.

“No, I don’t. I really don’t. Why do we have to hate each other? Why can’t we even be in the same room without wanting to tear each other apart?”

Noah’s eyes snap up at that.

Only then do I realize what I’ve said.

“I mean in a violent way, not in a sexy way... but we’ve been doing that, too!” I sigh and shake my head, frustrated with this confusing game of push and pull. “You were my best friend, Noah.”

“And my favorite television show used to be a cartoon cat and dog fused together at the waist. We all outgrow things.”

I shake my head. “You don’t outgrow love.”

Noah spans the space between us in two strides, wafting his spicy forest scent over me. He smells so much better than

Tank.

Tank.

The thought reminds me why I'm here, that there might be more important things at stake than whether or not Noah likes me.

But he grabs my arm before I can speak. "Get. Out."

I pull my arm away. "No, I won't. Not until you give me a good reason."

"Because I don't want you here."

"That's not what you said in the bathroom today."

His eyes narrow. "That was different."

"Why? How is seeing me there and doing... *that*—how is that different than here and now? Is it because we're in your house again? We're in a place where we have memories and history? Is this making it all too real for you, Noah?"

"Stop," he says, his hands shaking at his sides. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh no. You got to psychoanalyze me the other day. Well now, it's my turn." I step forward and stab a finger into his chest. "You run from your feelings, Noah. You're so afraid of being hurt again—by me or anyone else—that you shut it all off. You act like you don't care about anyone or anything, but someone who doesn't care wouldn't be as angry as you are right now. Someone cold and unfeeling can't play guitar like you were playing earlier."

He snorts, rolling his eyes dismissively, and I stab my finger into his pec again, hard enough he winces.

"That's another thing. Your music. Do you remember how many times I asked you to play something for me? You always claimed you needed to practice the piece more, but the truth is you were terrified. Afraid I'd think you were bad or laugh. Afraid your dream wouldn't pan out. Why take a risk and expose yourself when you could just hold it all in your head and imagine, right?"

“I think we both know I’ve exposed myself to you.”

I shake my head. “What we’ve been doing is another façade. It’s just another way you convince yourself you’re being vulnerable, when really, you’re only revealing the things you feel confident in. You know you’re gorgeous, so you seduced me, but you won’t let me into your head. I think because you’re afraid of what we both might find there.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

I grab fistfuls of his cashmere sweater, holding him close to me, refusing to let him turn away.

“I do know what I’m talking about because I’m talking about you. I know you, Noah. We’ve always understood each other, even when we didn’t speak. You always knew what I needed, and I knew what you needed. Right now, I know you need someone in your life to tell you the truth.”

I release his sweater, smoothing down the wrinkled material with the palms of my hands, feeling the rapid beat of his heart beneath his rib cage.

“You may hate me now, and that’s fine. It’s your choice. But we both know I didn’t do a damn thing to deserve any of this. Not you leaving me or hating me or whatever the hell has been going on between us the last few weeks. None of it. What happened wasn’t my fault. You just needed someone to blame, and I was the person who tied your old life and your new life together. I reminded you of what you lost, so you cut me out.”

My frustration with Noah seeps away with my energy, and I step away from him.

I’m tired.

Physically. Emotionally.

Exhausted to the soul.

Noah is staring at me, his dark brown eyes blank, his square jaw clenching and unclenching.

I have no idea what he’s thinking or if he has even been listening to a word I’ve said, but it doesn’t matter.

For too damn long I've been doing and saying things for the benefit of other people. I've become who they wanted me to be and played a part.

But I'm not going to do it anymore.

Not with Noah, at least.

He can continue thinking I'm the monster who ruined his life, but he'll have to wage this war on his own.

I won't be a participant in it anymore.

"I can't do this anymore," I say, gesturing back and forth between us. "You may have spent the last two years hating me, but I've spent them missing you. Desperately. So, go ahead and do what you have to do to make things right for yourself, but I'm not going to participate in it. Make my life hell if you have to, but you should know, someone else already beat you to it a long time ago."

Noah is still watching me, unmoving. I figure that's all I'm going to get out of him. He's spent so long pretending he's made of stone that he's convinced himself he is.

Even I can't crack him.

I take a deep breath, feeling a weight I didn't know I'd been carrying lift off of me, and walk past him.

I think he's going to let me go. I reach the door and grab the knob, pulling it open.

But before I can open it even a few inches, Noah reaches around me and slams the door shut.

I freeze, hand on the knob, feeling the heat of him on my back, unsure what's happening.

Then, Noah's hand moves slowly from the door to my hip.

Carefully, he tugs on my hip, turning me towards him, and then backs me against the door.

We've been in this position before—recently—but it felt predatory. The look in Noah's eyes in the bathroom today was dark and hooded.

Right now, his gaze is clear.

He's looking at me, studying me with an intensity I haven't felt in a long time.

I'm afraid to move, worried I might do something to scare him away, like he's a wild animal I'm trying to lure closer.

But I take a risk and reach my hand up to stroke his jaw.

His chest stops mid-inhale, his breath catching in his throat. He leans into my hand as he releases a shaky exhale, his shoulders relaxing for the first time since I arrived.

Noah lays his hand over mine, drawing his fingers down my knuckles and over my wrist. His other hand wraps around my lower back and pulls me flush against him.

The connection is the most intimate thing we've done in years. It's not like our interactions at school, frantic and tinged with shame.

There's an innocence in the way Noah is touching me, outlining my shape like he wants to make sure I'm real.

I'm not so sure I am.

I'm not sure any of this is real.

For years, I've buried my feelings for Noah. My mom taunted me with the break in our friendship, convincing me he must have learned the horrible truth about me, too.

That I'm not worth it.

Not worth anything.

I was alone without him. And I was certain I had pushed away everyone in my life. That they left because of me.

So I changed.

I morphed into the kind of person who couldn't be hurt.

I did what my mother demanded, despite it never being enough to satisfy her, and I promised myself I could get through my time in this town without anyone being on my side.

I didn't need a friend. I didn't need an ally.

Now, however, as Noah pulls me closer and presses his face against the soft skin of my neck, as I feel his lips brush against my body, whispering words I can't hear, I feel my heart crack.

Heartbreak for all the years we lost.

For all the friendships and opportunities and days I gave up believing I wasn't enough.

In Noah's arms, with his tenderness wrapped around me, I feel worthy.

I also feel terrified.

I'm scared this is going to be taken away from me, that I've somehow lured Noah into a trance that he could wake up from any second.

To keep him with me, I pull away from him, grab his face, and bring my lips to his.

I feel it—the same stomach bottoming out connection I felt in the bathroom today.

I kissed Noah, and it felt like taking my first breath of fresh air in years.

He'd pulled away then, but I think now it's because he felt it, too. Even when he was playacting as the boy who hates me, he'd felt it.

I want him to feel it again.

Immediately, Noah responds.

He moans, deep down in his throat, and crushes me closer to him. Our kisses are messy, growing more hurried by the second, but it's only because we can't get enough of one another.

Because kisses aren't enough for the feeling in the air.

Kisses don't express the degree to which we've come home to one another after so, so long.

I push on his chest, moving him further into the room.

Noah obeys, stumbling over a chair and his guitar before falling back onto the couch.

He takes me with him, pulling me on top of his body. I feel his excitement beneath me, hard against my leg, and I roll my hips.

Noah squeezes my ass, grinding me harder against him until I slip my hand between our bodies and into his jeans. He stills, breathing heavily, as I stroke him, moving in slow, deliberate thrusts.

He grabs the collar of my sweater and jerks it down, exposing my bra before that, too, is pushed aside. His mouth is warm over my nipple.

He gives my breasts the attention they've been missing, moving back and forward between them, massaging, flicking his tongue over my sensitive center, sucking until I moan.

I could stay in this moment for hours, taking the time to explore each other and reintroduce ourselves to our bodies, but there's a sense of urgency.

Not only because his mom is somewhere upstairs.

But because my mother is still at home waiting for me.

Eventually, no matter how much I wish it wasn't so, someone will come looking for us, and I don't want to be caught with my literal pants down.

"Do you have—?" I start to ask, breathless against his lips.

He freezes, his eyes going wide. Then, he shifts me off of him, gets off of the couch, and walks through the door.

I'm confused for a second, embarrassed for another.

Did my question break the trance?

Is he just going to leave me down here, with my breasts hanging out and an ache between my legs that I'll never be able to satisfy on my own?

God, I hope not.

Then, before I can panic too much, I hear a cabinet open, a box rattle, and Noah appears in the doorway with a condom between his fingers.

His hair is mussed and sticking up on one side from my hands running through it. His lips are red and swollen with kisses, and his eyes are bleary from being closed.

He looks like a boy who has been thoroughly ravished.

Though, not quite thoroughly enough for my taste.

I smile up at him as he tears open the condom with his teeth. “I still have a box hidden down here from before.”

Before.

That’s a good way to describe it.

Our relationship and lives have a hard dividing line straight down the center—before and after.

Before things went to shit.

After our lives went in completely opposite directions.

I wonder how much different I would be as a person—as a daughter, student, friend—if there hadn’t been a *before*.

What if there had only ever been a present?

What if we’d been coming down to this room to be together for years?

What if we never stopped?

A kind of sad nostalgia fills my chest, but I try my best to beat it away. I don’t want anything to change how I feel right now.

Knowing Noah wants me...

Knowing I’m with the loving boy I used to know...

That’s enough for now. That’s all I need.

Noah slips out of his pants, and I pull my sweater over my head. We undress quickly, hands trembling.

When he goes to roll the condom on, I touch his hand lightly and take over, pushing the latex down his length with shaking hands.

He hisses between his teeth and pulls me up to standing. I wrap my arms around his neck, curling my fingers in the curls at the back of his neck I love so much, and kiss him.

His hand moves between my legs, but it's not fast and frustrated like before. His fingers are tentative, worshipful.

He massages pleasure into me, sending reverberations of it into my chest and outward. I gasp against his neck, nip his earlobe with my teeth, and cling to him, begging for more.

More.

Eventually, we fall to the floor, and I crawl over him, my knees on either side of his hips, and it's the first time I'm frantic.

I want him.

Now.

I position him at my center and push.

My body is ready, aching for him, and it's easy to take him in all at once.

Our bodies connect, and Noah moans, tipping his head back, showing me the sharp cuts of his jaw and the bobbing of his throat as he swallows down his pleasure.

I'm full, physically and emotionally.

Noah is large, and I feel myself stretching around him, but my heart is stretching, too.

This is what I've been missing. Having someone who knows me and still cares.

With Noah inside of me, it feels like I've been given a piece of myself back.

A piece I've kept locked away for too long.

"Noah," I gasp, sliding down his length, our bodies slapping together. "More. Please."

He stills for a minute, his hands freezing against my lower back, his body going quiet.

Then, his movements turn hurried.

He lifts me off of him, moves around behind me, and grabs my hips.

When he thrusts into me, I let out a pleased cry and have to dig my fingers into the floor to keep from collapsing.

Noah tilts my hips, giving himself better access, and I lay on my chest, my arms extended in front of me.

I'm close, painfully close, and when Noah increases his rhythm, slamming into me again and again, it's all I can do to keep from crying out.

Little moans escape my lips, forced out of me with each thrust, and I can feel Noah tensing.

His fingers dig into the soft flesh of my hips before, suddenly, his thrusts become more purposefully, holding himself in me longer.

I feel his pleasure pulsing deep inside, and I clench myself around him, drawing out every second of this.

When he's done, he slides out.

I fall onto the floor in a spent heap, a smile on my face.

I sigh and roll onto my back, expecting to see him behind me.

Instead, he has already stood up.

Noah is throwing the condom away in the trash can and grabbing his clothes, roughly shoving his legs in his jeans.

"That was amazing," I say, feeling self-conscious that I'm still naked with legs too wobbly to stand up.

He pulls his sweater over his head. "It was sex."

My heart flops in my chest. I can't breathe.

"What does that mean?"

Noah scratches the back of his head, turning his face away from me. "It means we're done here. You should go."

His words are like a knife slashing my emotions into unrecognizable shreds.

I don't know what's what anymore.

Is sadness causing the dry feeling at the back of my throat?

Is embarrassment making my face heat?

Or is the hammering in my chest anger?

Disappointed hopes?

Shame?

“I thought—”

“You thought you’d surprise me at home, fuck me, and fix everything between us?” Noah asks, throwing my clothes at me as he walks by. “Nice try, and my cock certainly appreciates the effort, but I’m afraid not. Better luck next time.”

Without another word, Noah walks out of the room and upstairs, leaving me to get dressed and show myself out.

PENNY

The text from Noah is short and final.

We're going to the party together. I'll pick you up.

In another time, I would have seen it as a good sign that he wanted to spend time with me.

Now? I don't know what to believe.

"When will you be at the party tonight?" Anika pulls out a compact mirror to readjust the bangs she cut over the weekend—a move I would have advised against had I not been so distracted thinking about Noah.

"I don't know if I'm going."

Anika and Jennifer both turn to me, mouths open. "What? You have to go."

"Do I? Where is it written?"

Jen laughs like I've told a joke. "It's going to be one of the biggest parties of the year. You have to be there. Everyone is planning to hook up."

"Are you and J.C. going to find a bush somewhere to get wild in?" Anika asks sarcastically, nudging Jen in the ribs.

Jen does not find the constant teasing about her night in the woods with J.C. very funny, but Anika won't let up.

Especially because Jen is still under the impression that J.C. is promised to her now.

As if having sex bonds you together.

I know better than anyone that isn't true.

I thought Noah and I were sharing something special.

The sex in his basement felt good, obviously. It felt...healing.

As though we were sorting through all of the shit in our pasts and finding our way back to one another.

It was a spiritual experience for me, but Noah practically ran from the room afterward.

In the days since, I've had time to go through all of the stages of grief. Or, at least a few of them.

I wish I could be at Acceptance, but I also know that if Noah showed even the tiniest hint of wanting me, I'd throw myself at him again.

If only to feel the way I did in his basement for a few more minutes.

When I got home, my mom was pissed I was home so late. She sent me to my room without dinner.

Over the weekend, I managed to grab a few granola bars from the pantry and eat a few bites of lunch, but otherwise, she told me it was about time I went on a fast.

"You're looking a little bloated," she said, taking my sandwich away. "Maybe no more bread."

Even knowing Noah was right about me—about how I'm desperate for acceptance and love—doesn't make it easier to stop looking for it.

So, the easiest thing to do is steer clear of him and hope the memories fade with time.

But that's hard to do when he wants to escort me to parties.

Why does he want to go with me, anyway?

He didn't want to see me after I had sex, so why now?

What's his plan?

"J.C. is free to do what he wants, and I'm free to do what I want," Jen says. "We aren't exclusive."

“Or in a relationship at all,” Anika snickers.

Jen glares at her and turns to me. “Have you heard about who might be The Sacrifice at Spring Fling this year? I heard a girl from Public might do it. Like, is that even allowed?”

“Only a girl from Public would have so little self-respect. Maybe it’s going to be Haley Cochran!”

“She goes here now.”

“I know,” Anika says, rolling her eyes. “But she used to go to Public. Maybe the story got garbled along the way. That would explain why Caleb has been hanging out with her. Maybe it was all a rouse to convince her to put out for everyone.”

Jen cackles. “She probably didn’t need much convincing.”

They both turn to me, expecting me to toss in an insult or laugh along with them.

But I can’t find the energy. Or the motivation.

For years, I became the person my mom wanted me to become, the head bitch in charge who everyone either loved or feared.

And where has it gotten me?

My own mother barely tolerates me, Noah still hates me, and the more times goes on, the more I hate myself, too. I’m miserable.

“I can’t do this.”

“The party?” Anika asks.

“Any of it.” I grab my purse and keys out of my locker and slam the door shut. “I have to get out of here.”

Before they can say anything else, I sling my purse over my shoulder and head for the front doors.

As soon as I walk into my house, I hear Delanie giggling in the other room. I drop my backpack on the floor and go looking for her.

She’s on the floor of the living room with her nanny and an assorted stack of puzzles, blocks, and stuffed animals around

her.

The nanny, Samantha, turns around when I walk in. “Oh, hey, Penny. I didn’t expect anyone to be home for a few more hours.”

“I cut school,” I admit.

Samantha is a part-time nanny and part-time student at the community college. Mom hired her to sit with Delanie a few afternoons a week while she gets happy hour drinks with her friends or a manicure or her hair done. She’s actually pretty cool.

“Bad day?”

I answer by loading a pretend gun and aiming it at my temple.

“Woof.”

I nod, but I can’t focus on my issues for too long.

Delanie finally realizes I’m home and runs over to hug my legs. Her light brown hair is in a mess of curls held back by one pink bow that is trying its best but can’t quite tame her mane.

“Play with me?” she asks in her tiny voice, dark brown eyes wide and innocent.

“Duh,” I say, tweaking her nose.

“Yay!” She squeals with delight, and I ruffle her hair.

“You can go if you want, Sami. I can take over.”

Samantha twists her mouth into a knot. “Do you think I should ask your mom first?”

“I babysit Delanie all the time. It’s not a big deal.”

I can tell she’s hesitant, but considering. “I have a massive paper due tonight and a few extra hours could be the difference between a B and an A.”

I wave her on. “Go. Get.”

Samantha folds her hands into a prayer and bows, kisses Delanie’s head, and hustles out of the door.

“Well, kiddo?”

Delanie looks up at me, her tiny eyebrows drawn into a ferocious frown. Then, for no reason at all, she laughs and darts into the kitchen.

We play hide and seek around the kitchen island—she always hides under the bar stool, and I repeatedly pretend I can’t see her—and then run up the stairs to her room to play in the pretend swimming pool on her rug.

Around snack time, I grab her spare car seat from the garage, install it in my car, and load her up.

As we drive, Delanie yells for me to change songs she doesn’t know, but jabbars along to the songs she does, nodding her head and kicking the back of my seat to the rhythm—or, at least, to her best approximation of the rhythm.

Life with Delanie is easy.

There are tantrums, sure, and she is still in diapers because she refuses to even attempt potty training, but her fears and desires are easy to track.

She likes music, playing pretend, and ice cream.

She’s afraid of the robotic vacuum cleaner and slides that are too high at the park.

Her problems are easy to solve, and I like being able to kiss her scraped palm or hand her a gummy bear and make everything in her world bright again.

I wish solving my own problems was so easy.

I get a large cup of frozen yogurt with strawberry slices in it for us to share, and Delanie delights in pretending the strawberries are sharks she has to spear with her spoon—her imagination is a little dark like mine.

All in all, it’s a good day.

Until we get home.

Momma’s car is in the driveway when I pull up.

Before I can even turn the car off, she storms out of the door, frantic.

“Where have you been? Where did you take her? Why didn’t you call me? What happened to her?”

She runs to the backseat and jumps inside like this is a hostage exchange.

“Samantha had a lot of homework, so I told her I could watch Delanie.”

Delanie starts relaying everything we did in the last few hours, though her words get jumbled from her excitement.

Regardless, it’s obvious she is perfectly healthy.

Still, Momma strokes her hands down my little sister’s face and kisses the end of her nose.

I can’t imagine her ever being that way with me. Even when I was small.

It’s almost impossible for me to picture my mom being... a mom.

For as long as I can remember, she has been my harshest critic, my personal trainer, and my dietician.

Never a nurturing figure. Not even once.

“She’s fine,” I say, jealousy biting at my heels. “We got frozen yogurt.”

She turns on me, her nostril flaring as she cradles Delanie close to her chest. My little sister reaches out an arm for me, but Momma tucks it back in, as if she’s protecting Delanie from me.

“Go to your room,” she grits out. “And stay there. I don’t want to see you for the rest of the night.”



Fine by me. I didn’t have plans anyway.

Sweatpants, a romantic comedy movie, and a king-size chocolate bar I keep perpetually taped under my desk in case of emergencies.

The perfect night.

Stepdad Steve called up the stairs for me at dinner time, but Momma quickly told him I wouldn't be joining the family.

I don't miss family dinner, though the smell of steak wafting up the stairs makes my mouth water.

I suck on my chocolate bar, savoring it, and watch as Tom Hanks types his way into Meg Ryan's heart, even though she actually hates him.

That's an enemies-to-lovers storyline I can get behind.

There are a few misunderstandings, some bumps along the road, but in the end, they realize love is bigger than their differences.

If only real life was so simple.

I'm halfway through the movie and burrito wrapped in my blankets when my phone starts buzzing.

I ignore it at first, assuming it's Anika or Jennifer messaging me about the party.

But then, it keeps buzzing. Call after call after call with no break.

When I look. It's Noah.

I click the phone on, say "I'm not coming," and hang up before he can respond.

Ten seconds later, the vibrating starts again.

Noah requested my presence twice before, I listened, and I'm worse off because of it now. I won't go willingly again.

If he wants me to go with him, he'll have to come in and drag me out of my house.

I let the phone vibrate for a while, counting the number of times he calls: three, four, seven.

Finally, it stops, and I ease back under my fleece blanket and into my movie, finally able to relax.

The second I do, the phone starts to ring again.

I jump, startled, and grab the phone.

“Leave me alone!”

“Watch your mouth, angel.”

My breath catches in my throat, and I pull my phone away to look at who I’m talking to, though I already know the answer.

The number is unidentified.

The caller’s voice, however, is not.

It’s Tank.

“How did you get my number?”

“The same way I know you’re tucked up in your room for the night, watching a chick flick.”

I spin around and look through my window. It’s dark outside, so all I can see is my reflection. I yank the curtain closed, and Tank laughs on the other end of the phone.

“That won’t keep me out.”

A shiver runs down my spine, and I pull my blankets up to my chin. “What do you want?”

“Word on the street is you left school early today.”

I sigh. “Can I not have a sick day? Does that put me in danger of voiding our contract?”

“We don’t have a contract, angel. We have a promise. A promise from me that you’ll regret not keeping me happy.”

Delanie’s face appears in my mind, her chubby cheek resting on her arm as she sleeps in her bed.

“I’m just calling to make sure you’re keeping your mouth shut,” Tank says. “You’re getting close to this asshole, and I’m calling to remind you of what’s at stake. Delanie’s counting on you.”

“Keep my little sister’s name out of your mouth, you motherfucking—”

“Ah ah ah,” he tsks. “Keep me happy, Penny. Or else.”

I bite my tongue so hard I’m sure I’ve drawn blood. “I remember what’s at stake.”

“Great. So long as we’re clear.”

He hangs up, and I stare at my phone, wondering if Tank has hacked it. I doubt the Hell Princes are capable of that kind of sabotage, but you never can tell.

I pull back my blinds again, and put a hand to the window, trying to see out.

Going back to watching the movie feels weird now when I know Tank is out there monitoring me somewhere. It feels like trying to pee when someone is listening under the crack of the door. *A little privacy, please!*

And then I see something else.

A sickeningly familiar car.

Noah is out front, waiting for me.

My door flies open behind me, and I jump so hard I smack my forehead on the window pane. I spin around and see my mom standing in my doorway.

“What are you doing in here?” she asks.

I rub my forehead, wincing. “Getting a concussion. You scared me.”

She hitches a thumb over her shoulder. “Noah Boone is sitting outside of our house.”

I shrug innocently, as if my heart isn’t pounding in my chest. “So?”

“So,” she retorts. “Why are you still in your room?”

“How do you know he’s here to see me?”

She raises a brow, giving me an exasperated look. “Get real, Penny. Who else would he be here to see? What does he want?”

“There’s a party tonight, but—”

Before I can even finish the sentence, she grabs my remote and turns off the tv. “You’re going.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Who are you in this town if you sit at home in your room, watching movies and avoiding nice guys who want to take you out?”

“You mean rich guys? Because he isn’t nice.”

“Neither are you,” she says with a humorless smile. “Which means you can’t afford to pass up opportunities like this.”

She throws me a sheer black top with a bralette attached to the inside and a pair of black jeans. Then, with one final warning glare, she leaves me to get dressed.

Guess I’m doing what Noah wants after all.



“I knew you’d come around,” Noah says by way of a greeting when I get into the passenger seat.

His car smells like him, woody and spicy.

It’s clean, too. Spotless.

I’m not surprised. He never was the messy teenager type.

Noah has a place for everything and everything has a place, his emotions included. He sets aside what isn’t currently serving him in favor of whatever best suits the moment.

When I’m around, it seems cold displeasure is his baseline.

“What changed your mind?”

The three most vexing things in my life converged on a single issue, is what I want to say.

I don’t, of course.

Because that would break my deal with the Hell Princes.

And my mom's plan of marrying me off to the first rich boy who comes along, regardless of how gross the whole arrangement feels, would probably fall through if I told the boy in question about the plan.

Men don't often like being taken advantage of. Though, Noah sure enjoys taking advantage.

Unfortunately, for him, he's fucked with the wrong girl.

Whatever he has planned for me, I can endure.

I know how this is going to end.

"I need a drink." I buckle my seatbelt and lean back in the seat. "Drive."

NOAH

Penny's lemon and cinnamon scent fills my car. It makes me want to roll down the windows.

It's only been a day since she came to my house and we had sex in the basement, and *what the fuck was that?*

Not part of the plan, that's what.

My schoolboy crush on Penny is over, done. This party tonight is the way to show her that, once and for all.

I'm a man of my word. I promised her misery.

And I *will* deliver.

The house is on the edge of town, a renovated barn house with two giant wings added on to each side and a two-story addition on the back. Massive floor-to-ceiling windows reveal our classmates drinking and dancing inside.

"Whose house is this?" Penny asks, leaning forward to look out the windshield. "Not great in terms of privacy."

"Are we going to need privacy?"

She glares at me. "I meant in case the cops get called."

I pull the key out of the ignition and twirl the keyring on my finger. "We're covered if that happens. This is Brian Murphy's house."

"The sheriff's son?" Penny gapes. "Are you fucking serious?"

"He's out of town, and I doubt his house is on the officer's patrol routes. Even if it is, do you really think they'll cite the

sheriff's son for throwing a rager? 'Cause I sure don't."

Penny seems satisfied enough with the answer, though she looks nervous as we walk inside.

I let her go in front of me. I want to take a moment to examine her.

She has on a tight pair of black jeans with a sheer top you can see her bra through. Her waist is slim and toned.

I can practically still feel it in my hands, feel the way her abs contracted under my fingers as I pulsed behind her.

A junior from the football team—Braydon, if I remember right—walks up to her before we are even through the entryway. His eyes are bloodshot and hungry, obviously liking what he's seeing.

"Cool shirt," he says, grabbing the sheer hem between his fingers.

Penny smiles and opens her mouth to respond, but I swat Braydon's hand away before he can.

"Cool shirt? Really?"

He looks startled and ready for a fight until he sees it's me. "Oh, Noah. Hey, man. Sorry, I didn't know you two were together."

"We aren't." Penny nudges me aside and smiles at Braydon. "Thank you. Your shirt is cool, too."

Braydon's shirt is not cool. It's a cotton polo that hasn't been in fashion for at least ten years, though no one appears to have told Braydon.

Now that Penny has complimented it, he'll probably wear it every day for the rest of eternity.

Braydon looks nervously from me to Penny, and I feel for the kid. He doesn't want to blow his change to talk to Penny, but he also doesn't want to piss me off.

He may be horny, but he's not as dumb as he looks.

“She’s right—we aren’t here together,” I say, clapping Braydon on the shoulder and raising my voice. “You called dibs, so you can have her first. Just make sure you let me know when you’re done. I’m next in line.”

A chorus of *oohs* echo through the crowd around us.

Penny’s face flushes red.

Braydon, once again proving his intelligence, decides to bail, disappearing back into the crowd.

I’m sure Penny is going to slap me or go on a rampage, her voice high-pitched and nasally, her mean words as sharp as razors.

In fact, I’m counting on it. Cool and detached, waiting for her to explode so I can put her right back in her place while everyone watches.

To my utter surprise, she doesn’t do any of that.

Instead, Penny tips her head to the side, smiles, and walks towards me.

She grabs the front of my gray t-shirt in her fist and tugs me forward, her eyebrow arched suggestively.

“Why wait in line when you can have me right now?”

Again, the crowd audibly reacts.

We’ve just arrived at this party. It is customary to at least grab a drink before you pair off and head upstairs, but Penny is dragging me through the parting crowd with purpose.

I don’t stop her. Mostly because the sway of her hips as she moves up the wooden stairs to the second floor is mesmerizing.

The first two rooms she checks are occupied, but the third is empty.

Clearly, it’s a guest room. The bed is perfectly made with a mountain of throw pillows on it, and there are even small mints in dishes on each of the bedside tables.

Penny shuts the door and leans against it, her hands behind her back. "I hope I didn't ruin your plans."

I shrug out of my bomber jacket, suddenly too warm for it, and sit on the edge of the bed. "What plans?"

She reaches behind her and locks the door without looking, her green eyes looking me up and down

"Your plans to humiliate and belittle me all night."

The sound of the tumblers sliding into place is like a gavel dropping.

Like a judge tolling out my prison sentence.

I condemn you to one or more hours of hard physical labor...

She crosses the room slowly, one foot in front of the other until she's standing between my legs.

I rest my hands on her hips, unable to help myself.

"That's what you had planned, isn't it?" she asks, sliding her body closer to me, her lips only a few inches away. "You wanted to humiliate me in front of the school the way you think I humiliated you?"

Her words surprise me, but not as much as I surprise her when I spin her around suddenly and wrap my arms around her midsection, pulling her back flush against me.

I slide my hand down her stomach, teasing along the top of her jeans as I bring my lips to her hear. "You didn't humiliate me."

Penny laughs and rolls her hips, grinding against my cock. "According to you, I did. That's why you're doing this now. It's revenge. Right?"

I can see her pulse fluttering in her neck like a trapped bird, and the fruity smell of her skin draws me in closer.

I press a kiss to her pulse, feeling the rapid beat against my lips.

"Does this feel like revenge?"

She stills, though her heart thunders even harder. "I'd say so."

I tug on her earlobe with my teeth. "And this?"

“Torture,” she sighs, gripping my thighs.

I finally let my hand slide lower, cupping her center through her jeans and massaging her with the heel of my palm. “What about this?”

Penny doesn’t answer, but her hips shift forward, asking for more.

“That’s what I thought,” I whisper. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone how much you enjoy my revenge. It will be our little secret.”

She thrusts against my palm, grinding herself on my hand, and tips her head back to rest on my shoulder. “Well, you know what they say about secrets?”

“What?”

“Best to keep them in the family.”

I shove Penny off of me in a horrified hurry.

She catches herself on the door, spinning around, a smile on her face, a grating mocking tone in her voice.

“Oh, dear! What’s the matter, *step-brother*? Is something wrong?”

PENNY

TWO YEARS EARLIER

When I park my car under the Red Oak Tree, Noah's car is already there.

He's had his driver's license longer than I have, so this is the first time I've ever been able to meet him at our spot rather than have him drive.

I'm grateful for the timing. I didn't want to sit at my house and wait for him to get there.

Our spot.

That is all I had to text. I knew he'd come.

And he did.

"Noah."

I say his name before I even see him, almost like a prayer or a meditation. It calms me down, takes the edge off my thrumming nerves.

If I can just see him, everything else will make sense.

Everything will be fine.

I walk down the grassy slope, push aside the rusted metal gate with the "Private Property" sign, and run for the tree line.

"Our spot" is, legally speaking, someone else's spot. We don't know whose. Nor do we particularly care.

There's an old barn on the property and a few silos, though they're falling apart, having been abandoned for years. Old

farming equipment is hidden in the brush, rusted out and overgrown with plants and vines.

On nice days, we explore.

On the best days, we lay on a blanket in the grass and kiss, tangled in each other's arms.

"Noah," I say again.

I'm surprised he hasn't walked out of the trees to meet me yet. The road just outside the fence is gravel, so it's easy to hear if anyone else is coming. Another feature that makes our spot perfect.

If we are ever getting it on in the shrubbery, at least we'll have a bit of forewarning to pull our pants on and look presentable.

Finally, I see him sitting in the shade beneath a tall tree, his back towards me.

His hair is longer than it's been in a while, in desperate need of a cut by most people's standards. I like it long, though.

"There you are," I breathe, relieved at just the sight of him.

I've had a shit day, and he is the only person who could make it better. Who can help me make sense of it all.

He turns towards the sound of my voice.

As soon as I see his face, I stop in my tracks.

"Noah, what's wrong?"

His eyes are red-rimmed, like he's been crying, though I don't see any tears now.

His cheeks are flushed a maroon color, but the rest of his face is pale white.

He looks like he's seen a ghost.

I run to him and drop to my knees. "What is it, Noah? What's wrong?"

"My parents are getting a divorce."

He speaks the words with no emotion, though I can see the pain of it in his eyes.

They are black, midnight black. Darker than I've ever seen them.

“Oh my God.”

I sink down so I'm sitting on my ankles, too shocked to care about the rocks biting into my skin.

Noah's parents are happy.

They love each other.

His dad makes scrambled eggs and toast on the weekends—double portion for me when I join them because he knows how much I like them—and his mom fresh squeezes orange juice.

Occasionally, she even sneaks a little bit of champagne into each of our glasses with a wink, never letting on that we're having a boozy brunch.

When my house becomes too much to bear, I escape to Noah's house.

To his cozy sunken living room and his warm family and his loving parents.

Sometimes, I imagine what it would be like to have his parents.

I never let myself dwell on it, of course, because that would make Noah my brother, which would be a nightmare.

Still, I envy his parents, and now... they're separating.

“Why?”

Noah's cheeks flush a deeper red, and he stands up, his hands fisted at his side.

The emotion he'd been hiding before is revealing itself now, a simmering storm just below the calm surface.

He paces back and forth, too angry to speak for a while.

I'm on the edge of my seat, but I wait, letting him process everything at his own time.

At long last, he grits out, “The son of a bitch cheated on her.”

“He cheated on your mom?” I clap my hand over my mouth.

“Oh my God.”

“And his whore is pregnant.”

“Noah, I’m so sorry. Wow, I—I can’t believe it.”

“Neither can my mom,” he says, his top lip curling in disgust.

“She’s been crying all day. He’s packing up his stuff now so he can move in with the other woman. Apparently, they’re going to start a little family. His first one is worn out, I guess.”

I blink—once, twice.

A thought comes to me, but I dismiss it almost as soon as it enters my mind.

I need to focus on Noah and comforting him, not on my own problems.

Besides, what I’m thinking can’t be true.

This town is small, but it’s not that small.

That’s impossible.

“It’s not you, Noah.” I curl my hand through his hair, trying to soothe him. “It has nothing to do with you.”

“He’s leaving. It has to have something to do with me.”

Noah closes his eyes and shakes his head.

When he opens them again, his face is curiously blank, the emotion buried deep within.

“Sorry, this isn’t about me. You’re the one who asked to meet here.”

I wave him away, suddenly not wanting to tell him my news.

“It’s nothing.”

“Please. It will distract me.”

Even though I’d just convinced myself there’s no way Noah’s family’s deterioration could have anything to do with me, my stomach turns.

I feel shaky, nervous—and Noah can tell.

“What is it?” he presses, grabbing my hand and twining his fingers through mine.

I take a deep breath. “My mom is pregnant.”

His head snaps towards me, eyes wide. “What? I didn’t even know she was dating anyone.”

“Me neither,” I say with a breathy laugh. “Apparently, she had to keep it quiet... because the guy was married.”

I don’t look up.

Noah’s hand stills.

I want to shake him.

I want to slap the thought right out of his head because it can’t be true.

It can’t be.

“Who is he?”

My mouth is cottony as I shake my head. “I don’t know. She didn’t trust me to keep her secret, so she wouldn’t say. The only thing she said is she met him at a party when my dad was still alive. I think he works at Barber Engineering.”

I still can’t look up.

Noah bolts up and spins towards me, his pale skin turning a sickly shade of green. “Penn.”

“No.” I slice my hand through the air, refusing to entertain the theory. “No, okay? It’s not possible.”

His brow furrows and then relaxes. He takes a deep breath. “You’re right. My dad is moving in with his girlfriend today. I think you’d know if someone was moving into your house.”

I feel dizzy.

Do people faint as often as they do in old movies?

If so, I think it’s about to happen to me.

My blood is pooling in my feet. My throat is swollen with unshed tears.

“Penny?”

Noah says my name like a warning. He takes a half-step towards me, but then stops, like he's afraid to get too close.

"What aren't you telling me?"

"It's nothing."

"Don't fucking lie to me."

His voice is loud now, almost a shout.

Noah doesn't shout at me. We don't shout at each other.

There are a lot of couples that fight and make up, but Noah and I get along. Our love is the kind that's easy, natural.

We are better together than we are apart, and we complement each other in every way.

So, hearing his voice raise sets me off balance.

"Penelope."

My full name. Another rarity.

"When my mom told me she was pregnant, she also mentioned the father would be... bunking with us for a while."

Noah exhales, his shoulders slouching forward, and drops to the ground, his face in his hands. "I'm going to be sick."

"It's a coincidence, okay? Everything's fine. We'll figure this out, and then we'll feel so stupid for being worried at all. Okay?"

Noah doesn't look up at me, so I cradle his head, threading my fingers through his hair.

I kiss his temple and his forehead, and when he finally pulls his hands from his face, I grab his cheeks and kiss him with everything I have in me.

But he barely moves. It's like kissing a CPR dummy.

I pull away and cup his jaw, looking deep into his dark eyes. "We'll figure this out."

Noah follows me home.

I check my rearview mirror over and over again, worried he'll turn off and go a different way, but he doesn't. He stays behind

me the entire way.

Even as I pull into my driveway behind the gray car my mom's secret boyfriend drives.

It was the only thing I ever saw of him. The gray car in the dark driveway, coming to pick her up for dinner or a weekend away.

I never saw his face, never caught a glimpse.

But I can tell that the car is empty today.

Meaning he must be inside.

My heart pounds as I get out of my car and turn away, waiting for Noah to get out, too.

He doesn't.

He's sitting in the driver's seat, his hands frozen on the wheel, his mouth hanging open.

I think he's looking at me, but I realize he's looking past me.

At the car.

Terror has its hooks in me now.

I jog to his car and open the driver side door. It's unlocked.

"I think he's inside. Let's go in and meet this asshole and—"

"That's my dad's car."

His words are hollow, lifeless. He's staring straight out the windshield, unmoving.

My stomach drops out of my body. I want to fall to my knees, but I can't move. "What?"

Suddenly, Noah is anything but still.

"That's my fucking dad's fucking car!" he screams, slamming his hands on the steering wheel, the entire car shaking. "That's his! That's his fucking car!"

"No. No."

"He's leaving me and my mom for you." Noah let's out a sharp laugh. "He always said he liked you. I never realized

how much.”

“Me? This has nothing to do with me. I didn’t even know.”

“But he knew,” Noah spits. “He knew whose mom he was fucking, and he didn’t care. Now, he’s leaving.”

I’m holding onto the reins of a runaway horse, desperate to stop it, but ultimately powerless.

The harder I pull, the more dire the situation seems to grow.

I don’t know what to do.

“Get out of the car,” I beg. “Just get out, and we can figure this out. You’re upset, and I get it. I’m upset, too. We can—”

“*You’re* upset? About what?”

He turns to me, and his eyes are ice. The warmth and concern I’ve always associated with Noah has disappeared, frozen over. In its place is a frigid tundra, devoid of life.

“You lost your dad, and now you’ve got a new one. Fucking hooray for you.”

“Hey! That’s not fair.”

“None of this is fair,” he sneers. “Life isn’t fucking fair.”

“Noah.” I reach for him, but he swats my hands away, his nostrils flared.

“Don’t touch me. It will be illegal soon enough.”

I frown, confused by what he means, but then it hits me. “They aren’t getting married! Even if they do, we aren’t really related, Noah. Nothing has to change. This is all so out of control. We don’t even know what’s going on yet.”

Noah shakes his head. “I know what’s going on.”

“No, you don’t.” My words are spoken between gritted teeth. I’m clinging to this situation with everything I have in me, trying to stay calm so I can be here for Noah.

But he isn’t letting me.

He’s slipping away.

“I don’t want to see you anymore,” he says, his eyes fixed on some distant point out his windshield. “I don’t want to talk to you anymore. I don’t want you to text or call me. Lose my number and forget my name. Okay?”

His words are sharp as I knife. I actually glance down to see if there is some physical evidence of the blow, because I feel like my heart is being ripped out.

“You don’t mean that.”

He turns to me, his movements fast and robotic. “I’ve never meant anything more.”

“Noah, please.”

He pulls his car door shut before I can say anything else. Beyond jumping on the hood of his car, I have no other means to stop him.

Even if I did, I’m not sure it would matter. Right now, he looks like he might actually run me over.

So, I stand frozen in the driveway as Noah drives past without looking at me.

I wait for a long time, thinking he’ll come back. Certain he’ll regret what he said and come back, but after a few hours, I have no other choice but to go inside and “meet” my mom’s boyfriend.

Three months later, with my mom seven months pregnant, they get married.

Momma and Stepdad Steve Boone.

PENNY

PRESENT DAY

“Don’t call me that.”

Noah’s cheeks are red and splotchy, his lips pressed together so hard they’re white.

“Why not? Isn’t that what we are? That’s what you said.”

“We aren’t related.”

“But, that’s what you—”

“I was wrong.”

He looks like the words taste bad in his mouth.

I’m sure they do. Noah has never been one to admit when he’s wrong, so the admission takes us both by surprise.

He rolls his eyes and lets out a sharp breath. “Clearly, I don’t think of you as my sister.”

“Stepsister?” I ask, being cheeky.

His tongue runs along his bottom teeth, and he scowls at me.

“No.”

“Hmm. Wow. If only one of us had considered this possibility. If only we’d slowed down long enough to realize our whole lives weren’t over.”

“Mine is!” Noah pushes off the bed and moves towards me, though he seems to think better of it, keeping his distance. “My mom’s life is still a mess. I can’t help but notice you’re doing fine, though.”

I choke on a laugh, pressing a hand to my chest to keep from wheezing. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“You have your mom and you dad and your little sister.”

“*Your* little sister, too. She’s the only legitimate connection between us.”

Noah ignores me and continues. “Seems pretty cozy from the outside looking in.”

“Considering I’m on the outside, too, I’ll have to take your word for it.”

“Yeah, right,” Noah scoffs.

“Yeah. Right!” I cross my arms over my chest and lean back against the door.

I used to tell Noah everything... except the worst parts about my mom. It was easy to forget how bad things were when I was with him because he didn’t know the truth.

I was afraid if he did, he’d treat me like a wounded puppy.

I didn’t want that.

“Stop playing the victim!”

“The fact that you don’t know how much my mom hates me is proof that I haven’t been,” I snap back, too angry to keep it to myself.

Noah’s brow furrows, but I keep talking before he can say anything. “Why do you think I always wanted to be at your house? Why do you think I never let you meet my mom? Because she was a bitch. *Is* a bitch. An abusive, manipulative bitch.”

Noah chews on the corner of his lip. “Abusive?”

“Don’t pretend you suddenly care. I don’t want to waste my breath because it won’t matter, anyway. Your dad’s been living with us for two years, and even he doesn’t know it’s going on. She’s very good at what she does.”

Noah sits back down on the edge of the bed. “Why don’t you tell someone?”

“Who would I tell? Your dad?” I shake my head. “I’ve spoken maybe six sentences to him since he moved in that weren’t strictly required. This may come as a surprise to you, but we aren’t exactly close. He sort of ruined my life.”

I can see Noah taking in the information, but I keep my expectations low.

We get quiet for a while, the only sound in the room coming from the party raging just downstairs. The thump of the bass vibrates the floor, sending small jolts through my body, though in a relaxing way. A grounding way.

It feels good to finally tell Noah a little bit of the truth.

It isn’t the way it used to be, but it’s something.

Finally, Noah stands up, stretches his arms over his head, the sleeves of his shirt sliding down to his forearms.

Then, he sighs and nods to the door. “Let’s go.”

“Back to the party?”

If he wants to take me back to the party, I have to assume it isn’t for wholesome reasons. It would mean that everything I’ve just said has changed nothing for him.

He won’t want to be seen with me all night and have us be talked about for days if it does nothing to benefit him.

Noah shakes his head. “No. Somewhere else. Let’s go.”

He opens the door and ushers me out, closing it behind us.

People walk up as we move through the party, but Noah gives them a terse nod and keeps going, not slowing down at all.

Amazingly, we make it through the entire house without talking to anyone.

When we get to the car, he opens the passenger door before walking around to the driver’s side.

The night is dark, especially out in the country, and I’m not sure where we’re going.

I know I should be paying more attention. I can’t trust Noah.

No matter how much I wish things were different, I don't know what's part of his plan and what isn't.

What's a trap and what's real.

I have to keep my guard up.

But the late hour, the dark, and the unexpected relief that comes from finally revealing even a tiny scrap of what life at home is like has me exhausted.

I stare blankly out the window, watching the trees along the edge of the road blur into a single gray-green mass.

Until the car slows, and I see a familiar rusted metal gate.

The roads this far out of town are all gravel, so that wasn't a giveaway.

But I recognize the gate and the dark shape of the abandoned barn further down the hill. The trees, red and brown and full the last time we were here, are mostly bare now. Spiderweb-like branches tangle across the midnight sky.

“Why are we here?”

Noah turns off the car. “It's the only place I could think to come.”

He wants to toy with my emotions. He wants to take the things I love, the things I hold precious, and pervert them.

That's his goal. He's made that clear since the night of the bonfire.

Still, when Noah gets out of the car, I follow him.

I pick over the dry grass and rocks, and I run my finger along the flaking metal of the gate, moonlight illuminating a shower of rust as it slams closed behind us.

Noah walks ahead of me, leading the way. I notice there is a groove worn into the grass, as though feet have tread this path many times before.

I wonder if other people come out here, too.

Then, I realize the path leads directly to the tree where I found Noah that day two years ago.

Does he still come out here?

I haven't been back in two years because the thought of coming here alone, of being here with Noah, was depressing.

It was "our spot," not mine.

I didn't want to sit in the grass and contemplate what life could be like if he didn't hate me.

But if Noah has been coming here without me, what does that mean?

Noah sits down against the base of a tree, his knees folded in front of him, and sighs.

"What are we doing here?" I ask.

He closes his eyes. "Stop asking so many questions."

"Stop dodging so many questions."

He opens his eyes and lolls his head towards me lazily. "Would you rather I take you home?"

I think about home, my mom waiting up for me, no doubt, waiting for a recap of the evening. It's almost sick how concerned she is with my social standing.

After she stole Mrs. Boone's husband, word spread that she couldn't be trusted.

No one wanted her to come to their home and be around their husband.

No one wanted to associate with a husband thief. A homewrecker.

She's been clawing her way back up the social ladder ever since, dragging me along with her.

Whether I like it or not.

"No," I tell him. "I don't."

"That's what I thought," Noah answers. "So be quiet."

He closes his eyes again and rests his head against the tree trunk, a smirk on his face—not quite a smile, I still haven't

seen one of those—and it's so close to the old Noah, to the playful Noah I used to know that it takes my breath away.

Then, I slap him.

Just in the arm and not that hard.

But he still lunges from his resting position right into me, knocking me back in the dirt. His eyes are dancing with starlight and darkness.

“What the hell was that for?”

“For telling me to be quiet.” I squirm, but his hold on my arms is iron, and I can't break free. “Get off of me.”

He raises a brow and pins my legs down with his knees. “Apologize first.”

“Ha! Make me.”

Noah looks down at me, and I realize how close we are. Chest to chest, his legs over mine, our breath fogging up ever so slightly between us.

The night is chilly, but I feel heat moving over my skin, claiming me inch by inch.

Then he's kissing me.

It's happening before I can stop him or even realize what's going on.

When I do realize what's going on, I curl my hand around the back of his head and hold him closer.

His body is heavy over mine, but it feels like a warm blanket, like a favorite sweater that is well worn and broken in. It feels natural. Comfortable.

It's not lost on me that we are reliving our past, clawing at each other on the ground beneath trees that have seen every inch of us over the years.

It feels like old times.

Like, for a few minutes, we can forget about everything that has happened with our families and just be “us” again.

That's what I thought last time, though, and Noah had other ideas.

But I don't want this to end.

Noah moans against my mouth, his hand slipping under my shirt, his fingers sliding over my ribs.

I want him to touch every part of me. Now.

The memory of Tank's voice rings in my ear. *Women can't help but fall a little bit in love with whoever they fuck.*

What if I'm already in love with Noah?

Does that make this more or less responsible?

Does it change anything?

I know this probably means nothing to Noah. Somewhere down the line, sleeping with him now is going to bite me later. He's going to make me regret it. Still, that doesn't stop me from wanting it.

And it doesn't have to change my plans.

I know what's at stake: My little sister.

Our little sister.

I have to be able to turn my back on Noah later, betray him to the Hell Princes, and walk away without a second thought.

Can I really do that?

"Penn." Noah whispers my name and slides down my body at the same time he pushes my shirt up. He kisses his way up my stomach while his hands undo my bra.

Everything is happening so fast—too fast.

I don't have any time to think before his mouth is over my nipple, his tongue lashing against me.

I moan and arch my back. Giving him more. Asking for more.

Whatever happens later, it will be worth it. Of that I'm sure.

I grab Noah's face and bring him back to mine, sucking on his lower lip and slipping my tongue into his mouth.

I've kissed my fair share of high school boys and it can go wrong very quickly.

Not now. With Noah, it's sensual, tantalizing. He strokes the inside of my mouth and my tongue.

He tastes and teases, but he doesn't try to choke me with it.

He's practiced, and I wish I knew who he'd slept with over the years.

I pull away and look up at him. His eyes open, bleary. "What?"

"Who have you slept with?"

His face screws up. "Are you serious?"

"I want to know. Why does no one talk about it?" Then a thought occurs to me. "Have you slept with someone since...?"

"God, yes," he laughs. "Do I look like a monk to you?"

Considering I can feel his hard length pressed against my inner thigh, the answer to that would be a firm, considerably large *No*.

"I worked hard to be discrete."

"Why?"

He sighs and rests his forehead on my shoulder, clearly frustrated. "Why are we talking about this now?"

I gently bite at the thick muscle of his shoulder and up his neck, the bites turning to kisses before I reach his ear and suck the lobe into my mouth.

"Because you're really good at this, and I plan to send thank you letters to the girls who helped you practice."

Noah lifts up onto his arms, his mouth screwed up in a twist, suspicious of my motives.

I can't deny how beautiful he is.

Or how much I love this boy.

How much I've *always* loved him.

I also can't deny how much trouble I'm in.

When he makes me regret this moment later, it's going to hurt.

"The girls I fucked were...average. It was good for releasing some steam, but they lacked some desirable qualities."

"Like?"

His eyes rake over my face, and I imagine him saying, "*they weren't you.*" Instead, he shakes his head. "It hardly matters."

That's all the answer I'm going to get, it seems.

So I just let it go.

For better or worse, the past is the past.

Living in the present is the only option we have.

I arch towards him and press my lips to the base of his throat, trailing kisses up the length of his neck and over his jaw.

He cradles my head and lets his fingers play in my hair. He kisses my nose, my jaw, my eyelids. His touch is tender and sweet.

I savor every single second.

Eventually, his hands slide between us, fumbling with the button of my jeans.

I lift my hips, helping me slide the material down my legs, his fingers trailing fire along the sensitive skin of my inner thighs.

He kisses just above my knees and then moves higher, nipping his way towards my panties. When he finally reaches his destination, his breath tickling my center, I gasp and grab a handful of his hair.

Noah's kissing skills are just as good down there. He sucks on me, flicking his tongue torturously over my most sensitive spot.

I breathe his name, squirming from the sensation, desperate for more.

And Noah delivers.

Without pause, he adds a finger to the torture, slipping one and then another into my wetness.

My body is ready.

More than ready.

He adds a third finger that almost undoes me.

I seize his wrist to stop him from continuing. I never want this feeling to stop, but I also can't handle anymore.

I need *him*.

Now.

I tug on his shirt collar, growing more aggressive when he ignores me, instead thrusting his fingers into me faster.

"Noah," I moan. "I'm going to come. Wait. I want—"

It doesn't matter what I want. My body wants release more.

Noah pushes three fingers into me and sucks on my center, and I can't hold back anymore. The wave that has been swelling inside of me finally crests and washes over me, drowning me in warmth and pleasure.

My stomach contracts, my legs clench, and the hands that were trying to pull Noah away only a second ago turn vice-like as I hold him in place, grinding my hips against him.

When I'm done, the last waves of pleasure ebbing away, I expect to be spent.

But I want him even more than I did.

I want to make Noah shake and quiver.

I want him to beg me to stop and to keep going and for more and for none of it to ever be enough.

When I grab his collar next, there isn't an option. He moves over my body, and I pull his shirt over his head, surprised it doesn't rip from the force.

I drag my fingers down his trim, muscled chest. I can feel his heart hammering in his chest.

Before I even get to his pants, Noah undoes them for me and kicks them off.

And before I can slide my hand in his boxers, he grabs my hand and wraps it around his length, hissing like I've burnt him.

"You make me so hard," he whispers against my ear, thrusting gently into my hand. "All the time. Even when you aren't trying."

It's not an admission of love or even like, but it is attraction.

That's something, right?

For me, for now... it's enough.

"I want you inside of me," I say in response.

Noah groans and kisses my neck before he spins around and grabs his jeans, pulling the condom from his wallet.

I push Noah to the grass, straddle his hips, and slide onto him with one thrust. Our bodies connect, him buried to the hilt, me as full as I can imagine.

It feels right.

My hands are flat on his chest. Noah reaches up and palms my breasts, his fingers stroking my nipples and sliding down my body to grip my waist.

He alternates rocking me against him with lifting me up so I slide to the very edge of him before pulling me back down.

Neither of us close our eyes.

I admire him, the way his abs tense with each thrust and the way he bites his lip when I roll my hips over him.

I notice the way the moonlight turns our skin blue and silvery, and the way he keeps glancing up at my face, making eye contact with me to be sure I'm enjoying myself.

As if there was any doubt.

Noah is ruining me, just like he promised.

Truth is, he ruined me a long time ago.

The first time we ever did this.

I've been chasing that high ever since.

I arch my back and rest my hands on his thighs. Noah sits up, wrapping his arm around my lower back, and we find a new toe-curling rhythm.

"Fuck, Penn," he grits out, pumping into me harder. "I'm close."

It's a warning, but I don't take it.

I've already had my turn.

Now it's his.

I ride him harder, faster, desperate to see him fall apart beneath me.

Aching to see the way his brows will draw together and his mouth will open because of me, because of what I'm doing to him.

Then, I feel Noah's hand slide from my waist to my center.

His thumb brushes over me. I'm so sensitive I have to bite back a cry.

"There's no one to hear us," Noah grunts, circling his thumb faster. "Scream, baby."

I hold it in as long as I can, trying to make him come before I do, but there's too much.

"Noah, Noah," I moan, grinding on him and against his thumb. "I can't—I can't—"

"Then don't," he breathes. "Come."

And I do.

Harder than I've ever come before.

My body clenches around him so hard I'm afraid it might hurt, but Noah groans.

"So good."

I feel him thrust once more and then he's gone.

We still, our bodies moving only enough to ride out the remainder of our orgasms, our thrusts growing more and more shallow until I collapse forward on his chest and Noah wraps his arm around my back, kissing my temple.

The air should be cold, but I don't feel it.

I don't feel anything.

It's like we are encased in a bubble that shields us from the world and, perhaps, our troubles.

Because while we're lying together, my mind is blissfully empty, blank.

On the drive home, the bubble bursts.

PENNY

The troubles I set aside to enjoy my mind-blowing orgasm with Noah have returned like a dark cloud over my sunny demeanor.

I should tell Noah about the Hell Princes.

There's every chance that what we just did, what we shared, will mean nothing to Noah in the long run.

But it meant something to me.

I care about Noah, and if being with him has taught me anything, it's that I don't want him to hurt.

I want him to feel good.

Preferably, I'd like to be the person to make him feel good, but I'm not an idealist. I know the chips may not fall in our favor.

Regardless, I don't want him to be in pain.

And Tank and his guys want to bring him pain.

I can't let that happen.

"Do you want any gum?" Noah reaches across the car and pops open the glove compartment just as we pass under a streetlight. The yellow light fills the car and reflects off of what looks like a gun.

Noah shuffles through the compartment for a few seconds until he returns with a pack of cinnamon-flavored gum.

I shake my head. I'm not ready to lose the taste of him in my mouth.

He pops a piece in his mouth and closes the glove box.

It's so normal. So natural.

Driving around, chewing gum, being together.

It feels so right that it's almost hard for me to remember there were years where we didn't do this.

Where we didn't even talk to one another.

We'll go back to that if I do what the Hell Princes say.

If I lure Noah into their trap, he'll never forgive me.

I'm so lost in my own head that I don't realize we are in my neighborhood until Noah shifts into park in my driveway.

The lights inside are off. Even the porch light is dark. My mom must have been hoping I wouldn't come home tonight.

Unlike most moms who actually care about their teenage daughter's wellbeing, she'd rather hear I fucked a future millionaire.

I'm going to tell her the night was a bust. She doesn't need to know a thing about Noah.

"Fun night." I can't tell if Noah is being sarcastic.

No matter if he is or isn't, it's not exactly the way I'd choose to describe what happened.

I look over at him, trace the profile of his face against the ambient light coming through the window, and consider my options, which feel achingly few.

Then, a light flicks on behind him.

It's faint, but enough to cast him in silhouette. I lean forward and see the light in Delanie's room is on.

Not her night light, but her overhead light. The one she requests be turned on after she has bad dreams in the middle of the night.

To scare the monsters away.

Delanie's talking about imaginary monsters, of course.

But I know better than she does there are real ones out there.

And unless I do what I'm asked, they could come after her.

No amount of light can keep them away.

In that moment, my decision is made. No matter how much I want to protect Noah, Delanie needs me more.

My only hope is that Noah will understand.

No matter how he may feel, she's his little sister, too.

Noah glances up at the window and then back to me, eyebrows raised. "Are you waiting for a goodnight kiss or something? Because I think I more than handled that earlier."

Maybe if it was love. Real, genuine love.

Maybe then I could risk my sister's safety by bringing Noah into the fold.

Maybe then I could trust him to help me protect her, to figure this out together.

But this? This constant push and pull, give and take?

It isn't worth the risk.

I can't trust Noah.

And he sure as hell doesn't trust me.

I open the door and step out, turning back to look at him before I close it. "Goodbye, Noah."

Before I've even reached the porch, he's driving away.

NOAH

Fuck, she feels like a dream.

Silky smooth and warm over me.

And so fucking tight.

When she moans my name, I feel like I might explode.

Fuck it—that'd be a good way to die.

If this sex is poison, I want to drink a gallon of it.

I want to drown in it.

I want to drown in her.

“Noah!”

I'm jerked from my thoughts by the sound of J.C.'s voice.

Not the best way to emerge from a daydream. Especially not a daydream like *that*.

I glare at him. “What?”

“I'm trying to plan the biggest party of our lives, and you two are acting like you don't even care,” J.C. complains.

I look at Caleb, who's smiling at his phone, no doubt at a message from Haley. He waves J.C. off with a dismissive middle finger.

We're in Finn's house. A high schooler's dream come true. It's parentless and stocked with food and alcohol that Finn has delivered every two weeks.

What more could you ask for?

“Can you stop sexting for five minutes?” J.C. pleads. “There will be plenty of time for that this weekend. Unless, of course, Spring Fling doesn’t happen because I’m planning the entire thing by myself.”

Caleb shakes his head. “If you knew what she was saying to me right now, you’d understand.”

“Go ahead. Enlighten us. Lord knows I could use a little stress relief.”

That finally catches Caleb’s attention.

He glares at J.C., a warning etched in the lines of his face. “That’s your second warning, asshole. Stop trying to have sex with my girlfriend.”

J.C. rolls his eyes, obviously just kidding, and turns to me. “What’s your excuse, pendejo? You’re just staring out the window.”

“It’s a party. Cabin, alcohol, drugs. How much planning is really involved?”

“You’d know if you were paying any attention!”

J.C. begins to ramble off a list of things he is in charge of as “Master of Ceremonies” for Spring Fling.

Apparently, there are competitions and games to organize, cups and ice to buy, and food to procure.

He mentions other things too—none of which sound particularly complex.

But I can’t stay focused.

It’s been almost a week since I’ve seen Penny. Since we hooked up at our old spot.

What was I thinking taking her there?

Since we parted ways two years ago, I’ve been going back there regularly.

It’s the place where everything went wrong.

But it’s also the place where I was happiest.

I thought going back would return some of that happiness to me...

But it never did.

Not until I was there with Penny.

She told me she missed me and that she cared about me. She told me that her mom is abusive and she and my dad—now her stepfather—aren't close.

Basically, Penny told me the opposite of everything I thought to be true.

For years, I've convinced myself that Penny was living the perfect life. She was popular with a mom and a dad at home who adored her and a cherub-like little sister who has my same caramel brown hair and Penny's green eyes.

Now, I know the life I imagined for Penny was a lie.

It was a lie constructed from my own bitterness and jealousy and insecurity.

And even now that I realize it was a lie, it doesn't change how angry I am.

It doesn't change how bitter I am that my life is different. Shattered beyond repair.

It also doesn't change how much I want her.

No matter what has happened, that yearning deep inside me has never gone away.

And now that I've tasted her again and felt her body clench around me, that yearning has only grown.

"For fuck's sake!" J.C. shouts. "Is anyone listening to me?! I figured The Sacrifice would get your attention, but you two are hopeless."

I get up from the couch and grab my leather jacket, slipping my arms into the well-worn sleeves.

"Do what you want, okay?"

"You don't want to help make any decisions? I thought you wanted to be part of the interview process. I have pictures

here, and we can decide together—”

“Nope,” I wave him away. “You do it. We trust you. Don’t we, Caleb?”

Caleb is grinning at his phone, his pupils dark and wide, clearly very into whatever Haley has just sent him. When he looks at me, he looks like a man half-possessed. “What? Yeah. Sure. Whatever.”

J.C. curses under his breath. “You two suck.”

“Text me a list of what to bring, okay? Everything will be fine. And if it isn’t, everyone will be too drunk and having too much sex to care.”

As I leave, I hear J.C. mutter some more curses. “I fucking hope so. It will be your fault if this sucks. I’m not taking the blame.”

NOAH

I drive around for a while, not sure where to go or what to do.

I want to see Penny.

Now.

Yesterday.

The day before.

I want to reverse these two years of wasted days and relive them one at a time—but with her.

I've wanted to see her for days now, but I've kept my distance.

It didn't feel safe to see her.

Not until I know what to do.

The problem is, it has been a week, and I still don't know what to do.

And she hasn't reached out.

I stayed away, but I also assumed she'd come to me at some point. If she missed me the way she said she did and cared about me like she claimed, she'd reach out.

But she hasn't. So now I'm frustrated in more ways than one.

Every morning, I've woken up with a raging hard-on between my legs.

I pump my frustration out, imagining it's Penny around my cock instead of my hand.

But the second I'm finished, the frustration returns. It's an itch I can't scratch, a thirst I can't quench.

Not without Penny.

And *fuck*, if that isn't maddening.

The worst thing of all is I've done this to myself.

I thought if I got my revenge on Penny I'd be happy again.

If I could ruin her life, I'd finally be able to move on.

Except, I haven't ruined her life, and I'm more obsessed than ever.

I'm a block away from Penny's house when I realize what I've done.

As though sleepwalking, I drove towards her house without realizing it.

Just before her house comes into view around the corner, I pull into a driveway, reverse, and speed away. I'm not this desperate.

My mom is working late, so she isn't home when I get there. I go immediately down to the music room.

This room contains the only solace I've found from thoughts of Penny.

I haven't been down here for a couple weeks, but when I grab my guitar and sit down, it feels like no time has passed at all.

A song pours out of me before I can even consider what to play, the music finding me rather than the other way around.

I'm halfway through the song when I realize the last time I played it.

When Penny came over.

She admitted listening through the door, so this is the song she heard. The song I played before we had sex on the floor, less than two feet from where I'm sitting.

Did she recognize the song?

Did she know what it meant?

No matter how hard I've tried, I haven't been able to root out the part of me that cares about Penny.

She's been under my skin like a tumor, growing all the while without my knowing until, one day, it's debilitating.

I can't eat, can't sleep.

I can't do anything without thinking about her.

And all I want is for it to end.

Now.

The song cuts off abruptly, and I rip the guitar from around my neck, tearing the strap my dad bought me.

It feels good, destroying it. Better than I thought.

I want more.

So, I grab the guitar like a bat and swing it against the chair.

It dents and splinters, shards of wood flying, but I don't stop.

Another swing.

CRASH.

Another.

CRUNCH.

I don't stop swinging until my chest is heaving and the guitar is a pile of rubble at my feet.

Destroyed—just like me.

I don't feel better, but then again, I don't know if I ever will.

Penny has infected me, body and soul.

I'm not sure there's a cure.

NOAH

The mistakes start Friday night.

That's when I took my first shot.

I drink until I fell asleep, ignoring J.C.'s frustrated text messages, and then wake up with a raging headache and drink again to ease it.

J.C. gave up texting me around two in the morning, though he starts again at nine.

If you aren't here to help me set up in an hour, I'm locking you out.

I'm not sure if I even care.

Spring Fling has been this distant, magical event we all talked about for so long that I almost can't believe it's actually here.

More than that, I can't believe I'm not more excited.

I didn't realize how unexcited I was until I slid my fingers into Penny's pants in the bathroom and made her come in my hand.

That alone was better than anything I'd done in the two years prior.

Better than anything I'll do in the next two years, too.

So, now, the thought of sleeping with any girl I want to at Spring Fling rings hollow.

Because I don't want just *any* girl.

I want Penny.

And I don't think I can have her. Not if I want to maintain my sanity.

She's tearing me down, brick by brick. Soon enough, there won't be anything left.

I have to protect myself—even if that means letting go of my crusade to ruin her life.

After J.C.'s second threatening text, I take a shower and slide into a worn pair of jeans, a heather gray sweatshirt, and my dark gray bomber jacket.

A bag I packed in my drunken stupor last night, complete with the list of essentials J.C. suggested I bring—condoms, a water bottle, more condoms, a change of clothes, and a few more condoms just in case—is sitting by the door. I grab it on my way out.

“Have fun on your camping trip,” my mom says, bent over the island with her hand on her head.

She was drinking last night, just like I was. The difference is, she's so hungover she doesn't even notice I don't have a sleeping bag or hiking boots with me.

Fast forward a few hours and now, I'm lugging alcohol into a rented cabin in the middle of absolute nowhere.

“People are already showing up,” J.C. says, sounding miffed. “It's not supposed to start until noon.”

“I don't know if the attendees of this party would be considered rule followers under normal circumstances.”

“Still,” he huffs, “have some class.”

I help him cart a keg through the back door of the kitchen, where we stumble upon a couple making out in the kitchen, legs intertwined and hands exploring aggressively.

“Excuse me.” J.C. taps the guy standing up on the shoulder and waves him away.

The guy raises a bleached eyebrow. “It's a bit too early in the weekend for a threesome.”

“It’s a bit too early in the weekend for you to even be here. Move!”

The couple walk away hand-in-hand, headed for the stairs, and J.C. continues setup.

By the time we have the beer unloaded and half of the alcohol rolling around in the back of J.C.’s truck, the cabin is full.

Cars are parked all over the grass in the front and around the sides, and people are stumbling in, half-dressed and drunk and looking for a good time.

“Where are the naked girls?!” one guy yells.

J.C. grimaces. “Does he think we just hired naked girls to walk around?” He leans through the kitchen door and shouts back. “You have to convince one of them to let you get them naked, idiot!”

The guy yells something back, but it’s lost in a chorus of cheers and toasts, and J.C. rolls his eyes.

I lay a hand on his shoulder. “Dude. Relax. It’s fine.”

“I didn’t realize this would be so stressful.”

“Have a drink.” I hand him my flask. It’s already half-empty, and my head is fuzzy.

He narrows his eyes at me as he tips back the flask. “Are you drunk?”

“Yep.”

“I figured,” he says. “You’re never this nice to me.”

NOAH

After J.C. has a few drinks in him, he loosens up.

As Master of Ceremonies, he stands up with a blow horn every time a new event is starting, but they still seem to blend into one another.

The gist is the same no matter what: drink, get naked, drink some more.

Senior girls, including Penny's Dreadfuls, stand on a long bar and dance as buckets are poured over their hands

J.C. joins them, and despite being surrounded by a crowd of very visible breasts, he gets the loudest cheer.

He beams, and I'm happy for him.

Then, I look for Penny.

It seems that's all I'm capable of now.

Wet t-shirt contest? *Look for Penny.*

Strip poker? *Look for Penny.*

Body shots? *Look for Penny.*

I stand against the kitchen door and watch as my classmates have the time of their lives.

And all I can think about is why Penny isn't here.

I want to text her, but I'm resisting the urge. Anyways, my thoughts are jumbled from the toxic combination of being drunk and fucking whipped.

When J.C. announces the next event—something to do with a slip and slide, alcohol, and, you guessed it, getting naked, the crowd starts to boo.

They're ready for something bigger.

J.C. drops the blowhorn and runs over to me. His clothes are still damp from having a bucket of champagne poured on him, but he's hit his stride now.

He's earned the adoration of the crowd, and he is not about to lose it by denying the people what they want.

"Your fans want you," I say, tipping my head towards the large living room. The ceilings are vaulted, but the room still feels too small with so many aimless drunk people shoved inside. "What are you doing over here?"

"I think we're going to introduce," J.C. leans in, places a hand next to his mouth, and whispers, "The Sacrifice."

"Great. Go for it."

He seems nervous and vaguely surprised. "I know we already talked about it, but I just wanted to double check you were fine with this. You weren't as much a part of the application process as I wanted, so—"

I clap J.C. on the shoulders and shake him. "Bro. It's fine. Go master these ceremonies."

J.C. visibly brightens, hitches up his damp jeans, which are sagging low on his hips, and jogs back into the middle of the room.

There's a shuffle as he gets things ready, and I silently pray he hurries. This crowd will eat him alive if he doesn't deliver.

But in the middle of all of it, my attention is drawn to the far corner of the room.

Penny.

I don't know when she came in or how long she has been there, but she's standing between Anika and Jennifer, a drink in her hand.

And she's watching me. Has been for a while, it seems, because it takes her a second to realize I'm looking back at her and react.

She looks away for a second, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear before she looks back and smiles, lifting two fingers in a wave.

She's in a pair of tight jeans with an oversized cropped sweater that reveals a thin strip of her stomach. It's understated compared to her normal attire. Especially since her hair is pulled back in a thick ponytail and, even from across the room, I can tell she doesn't have much makeup on.

She looks different. Still radiantly beautiful, but different.

I'm cutting my way through the crowd, moving towards her before I consciously make the choice.

When she realizes I'm moving towards her, Penny says something to her friends and then tips her head towards the back door, gesturing for me to follow her.

I change course and meet her outside.

"Hey." The word feels like a well-deserved exhale. "I've been looking for you."

Penny's green eyes narrow in surprise. "Are you drunk?"

"Oh my God. Would everyone stop asking me that? I can be pleasant."

She laughs so hard she almost snorts. "No, you really can't."

God, her laugh. *Her.*

Everyone is inside waiting for J.C.'s announcement, so we're alone on the deck, and I decide to make good use of it.

I haven't seen her for a week. I've had six long days to consider how I want to rectify my feelings for her now with my plot for revenge, and it was an easy choice.

One made even simpler by the sight of her standing in front of me.

Grab Penny and kiss her or make her miserable?

There's no competition.

I wrap an arm around Penny's back, my hand sliding under the loose material of her sweater and over her warm skin, and dip her back in a kiss.

She's surprised, gasping against my lips, but collects herself quickly.

She's more intoxicating than the alcohol in my veins. In just a matter of seconds, I feel myself losing control.

I don't know how to pull away from her.

I don't know how to hit the brakes.

Penny, however, does. She presses her palms to my chest and backs away, gently disentangling from the kiss.

"We have to talk, Noah."

I sigh. "I know, I know. I fucked things up."

"No," she says, waving her hands. "It's not that. There's something I need to tell you."

"You've said enough," I assure her. "You confessed a lot to me, and I needed time to process it all. I'm not the best at dealing with my emotions, as you may have noticed. Instead of dealing with my shit, I blamed you for it. I was convinced you stole my dad away from me because... because yours was dead."

She grabs my hand. "I never would have done that to you, Noah. Never."

I run my thumb over her knuckles. "I know. Saying it out loud makes it sound even more ridiculous. Of course, you didn't."

"Well, now that we have that sorted, I do have to tell you—"

"No, please. I'm a little drunk right now, so I think it's a good time to get this all out." I wince. "I know that sounds bad, like I can only be vulnerable when I'm drunk, but you know what I mean."

Penny smiles at me, her glossy pink lips pinched at the corners, tiny dimples visible in her cheeks.

It gives me the confidence to keep going. I feel like a blathering idiot, but if she's smiling, something must be going right.

"Penny, the deal is, I'm—"

A roar erupts from inside, loud enough the deck shakes beneath our feet.

"What the—?" Penny opens the back door to try and figure out what's going on and immediately, a guy just inside the door points at her and shouts.

"Here she is! I found her!"

Just like that, Penny is pulled through the back door into the party.

I scramble after her, trying to figure out what is going on.

When I get inside, she has disappeared into the crowd, but a group of guys are pushing and shoving into a line near the bar where J.C. is standing, a piece of paper held in his hands.

"Thank you, one and all, for your applications. It was very difficult to make the decision, though I had a wonderful time pouring over your messages, photos, and very enlightening videos." He winks at a buxom brunette in the front of the crowd. "But in the end, there was no competition."

Penny is pushed into an opening on the floor in front of J.C., her eyes wide and confused. I see her lips mouthing words, but I can't hear her.

No one else seems to, either, because they don't answer her.

Instead, they lift her up so she's standing on the bar next to J.C.

J.C. grabs her arm and lifts it into the air like she's just won a heavyweight title. "Introducing, The Sacrifice!"

At the same moment the words come out of his mouth, I finally look at the paper in his hands.

It's a picture.

The picture.

The one Penny texted me that day from the bathroom.

J.C. has placed some tasteful emojis over her nipples, but he has also photoshopped her face from another picture she sent onto the topless one, making it all too clear who it is in the photo.

I have no idea how he got ahold of the pictures or how exactly I'm going to remove his head from his body for doing this.

But I can't think about any of that right now.

All I can think about is how pale Penny looks standing up there on the bar, a wave of guys yelling and cheering and calling "dibs" on her like she's an amusement ride rather than a person.

Then, she looks at me.

And my heart breaks.

Her green eyes go glassy with tears, her cheeks flame red, and she grabs the picture from J.C.

J.C. looks startled, and I know why.

In his mind, Penny volunteered.

That's what I told him, after all, that day in pre-calc. I told him the picture was Penny's application.

For the Spring Fling," I told him. For The Sacrifice. It's an audition. An application.

He has no idea she didn't actually want this.

No one knows.

They all think Penny signed up to be passed around like a cheap blunt.

She rips the picture in half, dropping the pieces like confetti over the crowd, and then jumps down and sprints from the room.

A few guys try to stop her, blocking her path and grabbing at her, too drunk to realize she wants to leave.

But she makes it through.

By the time I make it to the front door, all I see is a white blur disappearing into the tree line on the edge of the property.

I lower my head and run full-speed after her.

I have to fix this.

PENNY

Humiliation fills me, heavy and shameful. It weighs me down, making it hard to keep moving, but I do.

I have to get away.

Far away.

For days, I've wanted to see Noah. I've wanted to talk to him, figure out what's going on between us.

To know how he feels.

To tell him how I feel.

Now, I don't ever want to see him again. I can't.

How could he?

How the fuck could he?

I knew it was coming—the moment when he would make me regret everything.

I just didn't realize it would be so public. So degrading.

I didn't realize he was planning to pass me around to every guy in our grade.

Just the thought of what those drunken horny idiots wanted to do to me makes my stomach turn.

Actually, I feel like I might be sick.

I stop running and grab a tree for balance, bending over. My breath is coming too quickly. I can't seem to get enough air into my lungs.

The harder I try, the worse it gets.

My pained wheezes are so loud, I don't hear Noah coming up behind me until his hand lands on my back.

"Penny."

I spin away from him, tripping over a tree root and catching myself hard on the trunk of another tree.

It knocks the wind from me, but that actually seems to help.

I gasp, filling my lungs with air, and then make the conscience decision to exhale and inhale slowly, calming my body down even while my mind races on.

"Penny, I didn't—"

"You sure made great use of that picture," I say, cutting him off. I don't have the energy to hear whatever bullshit excuse he's going to make.

I'm not even sure why he's still trying to make excuses. Wasn't this his grand finale? I hope so. If it wasn't, I can't imagine what else he could have planned.

"Very creative."

"That wasn't me!"

"Enough, Noah, okay? You've made no secret that you planned to ruin my life. I'm not an idiot. I sent that picture to *you*. How would anyone else have gotten it?"

"I don't know." He runs both his hands through his hair, tugging on it. "J.C. must have taken it off my phone and—"

"If J.C. did that, it would have been because you told him it was okay! I know how things work in your group. He wouldn't have done anything to me unless you told him he could."

"I didn't mean to!" Noah moves towards me, his steps clumsy because of the uneven ground and how much he's had to drink. "J.C. has been pestering me for weeks about Spring Fling, and I've been ignoring him, telling him to take care of everything. He probably brought it up, but I was too distracted to pay any attention. I know this looks bad, but I didn't mean

for it to happen, and J.C. didn't know. I'm still going to kill him for it. But he didn't know."

I don't want to trust him. I've been burned too many times before, and I don't want to be caught off guard again.

But Noah seems sincere.

I can't understand why he would be going to such great lengths to explain away this prank unless... it wasn't a prank.

Maybe it was a misunderstanding.

I take a deep breath and shake my head. "I just... I don't know if I can trust you."

He takes another step towards me, and I don't retreat this time, but I wrap my arms tightly around myself.

Noah's arms fall to his sides. "That's what I was trying to tell you before."

"You mean, before the entire school saw me topless?"

He clenches his fists. "Yes. Before that. I was trying to tell you that I'm sorry for taking out my anger on you. It wasn't fair. I haven't been fair to you."

I stare at him, trying to decide if this is really happening or if, when I fell, I hit my head.

The latter would certainly make more sense.

"What?"

"I'm sorry," he repeats, moving closer, his dark eyes sorrowful. "My family was fucked up, and I didn't realize it. Rather than admit my dad abandoned me and my mom, I blamed you. It was easier to think you caused it. It was easier for me to believe that no one can be trusted and everyone is out to get me than to think that my own dad didn't love my family enough to stay. I know that doesn't make sense, but—"

I shake my head. "No, I get it."

"You do?"

I wish like hell I didn't, but isn't that what I've done with my mom?

She treats me like shit. Rather than blame her and admit she doesn't love me, I blame myself.

I've spent years morphing myself into the kind of person she wants me to be—the kind of person everyone expects me to be—rather than being myself.

“It's easier to blame your problems on something you can control. You could blame me and choose to end our relationship, and I can blame myself and choose to believe my mom might one day care about me.”

His mouth turns down in a sympathetic frown. “Exactly.”

I look down at the ground and kick a tree root with the toe of my shoe. “You didn't sign me up to be The Sacrifice?”

Suddenly, Noah's hands are on my arms, and he's pulling me against him, cradling my head against his chest.

“God, no, Penny. No. I didn't. I'm...I'm so fucking sorry.”

Tears fill my eyes once again. I try to blink them back, but they come anyway.

Noah feels me shaking and holds me at arm's length, worried eyes scanning my face.

“What is it?”

I give him a soggy laugh and wipe my nose with my sleeve. “We've really done some damage to each other.”

He bites his lower lip and nods. “Yeah, we have.”

“I think this relationship might qualify as toxic.”

He nods and then freezes, one dark brow lifting. “Relationship. You said relationship.”

Maybe it would be smart to be done with Noah.

To start over and try to forget any of this happened.

But when I picture my life, I can't seem to imagine one without Noah in it.

When I try, there's a yawning blank space where he should be, a Noah-sized black hole that eats away at everything else until there's nothing left.

I'm not sure I'll ever be able to have a life without him.

"That's what I'm saying," I say. "Or, that's what I want, at least. Is that what you—"

Before I can get the question out, Noah crushes me against him in a kiss. Underneath the alcohol, he still tastes like cinnamon.

He runs his hands under my sweater and up my waist, squeezing like he's afraid I might slip away.

I curl my arms around his neck, fingering the curly waves at the back of his head, and pressing every part of me against him, trying to get rid of any blank space between us.

"I'm sorry," he gasps between kisses, "about the picture. I'll make J.C. delete it."

"There were copies. I'm sure someone else has one by now, too."

"I'll make them delete it, too," he growls. "And after that, I'll delete it from their minds. With my fists."

Surprisingly, I laugh.

It feels too soon to think anything relating to this day is funny, but I can't help it. It is.

"Honestly, I don't even know if I'm that mad about the picture."

Noah stops kissing my neck to look down at me like I've gone mad. "Excuse me?"

"I mean, I don't want anyone to have it, except for you, but my mom will hate that it got out. I kinda like that idea."

"Are you going to start rebelling against your mom by doing things she'll hate?" he asks. "Because I think that is destructive behavior, but depending on what you have in mind, I'd be more than happy to participate."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Definitely," he says, cupping my ass in his hands and pulling me against him. "For instance, sex in the woods? I'd be down

to help you with that. Also, a sex tape. It would be for my own private consumption, of course, but we could make sure your mom knew it existed.”

I laugh and lightly slap his chest. “You’re gross.”

“And you’re incredible,” he whispers, growing suddenly serious. “I mean it, Penny. Whatever you want from me, you got it.”

The crunch of footsteps behind me makes me jump.

I spin around, my back against Noah’s chest.

But when I see the leather-clad group moving through the trees, my heart stops.

Tank steps into the small clearing and grins at me. “I told you to lure him into the woods, not make him fall in love with you. But A+ for going the extra mile.”

My heart sinks as I realize what I’ve done. What I forgot to do.

I stayed away from Noah for a week because I couldn’t look him in the eyes knowing what I was going to do. Tank kept texting me, warning me to stay quiet and go through the plan or else Delanie would be hurt, and I was torn.

Until this morning. I woke up with the realization that I couldn’t do this. I’d call the police and tell them about the Hell Prince’s threats, I’d tell Noah the truth, and I’d get myself out of this whole mess.

That’s what I was trying to tell Noah when J.C. announce me as the pick for The Sacrifice. Then, everything just... happened.

When I ran out of the house and into the trees, I wasn’t thinking.

I had nothing in my mind except getting away

I didn’t know Noah would follow me. I figured he’d stay back at the cabin and rejoice in his victory over me.

But he didn’t.

He followed me right into the trap I’d set for him.

I spin around and grab his shirt. “Noah, I—”

“Stop.” His voice is ice cold, and he tears my hands away, backing up. The look on his face breaks my heart. It’s utter and complete betrayal.

“But Noah. Please—”

“Really, Angel,” Tank says, gently brushing past me. “You’ve done more than enough. Go ahead and skedaddle. Unless you want to stay and see what just desserts looks like.”

Then, before I can do anything to stop it, Tank and two of the Hell Princes grab Noah and pull him further into the woods.

PENNY

The run back to the cabin seems to take three times as long as the first time.

I'm panicked, crashing through branches and stumbling over roots and rocks in my hurry to get back to the cabin.

To find help.

From someone. Anyone.

I have no idea what Tank has planned for Noah. I don't know if they're going to keep him in the woods or drive him somewhere else.

If they do leave with him, what chance do I even have of finding him again?

I push the thought away and keep running.

The cabin comes into view. The windows are steamed over from how many people are inside.

No one sees me running through the grass.

And the music drowns out my screams.

I save my breath and run even faster.

Inside the cabin, the air is thick and warm. In the short time since I've left, the party has devolved into a sex club.

Couples are grinding against each other on the makeshift dance floor, other people are making out on the couch and heavy petting on the floor to a ridiculously loud soundtrack of bass-heavy hip hop.

I scan the room, looking for J.C., but I don't see him. His blow horn is sitting on the bar unattended.

I move out of the main room and go up the stairs.

The cabin is massive, way bigger than it looks from the outside. There's a basement with a few bedrooms, a main floor with a hallway of bedrooms, and the second floor which wraps around the back of the house and hangs over a large patio that looks out on the lake.

In the tangle of bodies and people, it could take me twenty minutes to find him.

Noah doesn't have that long.

I open one door and shout J.C.'s name. The people inside, all in various stages of nakedness on a bed, yell for me to get out.

None of them are J.C.

I do the same thing in a second room and then a third.

Finally, as I'm about to open the fourth door, it opens...

And Haley Cochran steps out.

She bumps directly into me. As soon as she realizes who I am, she holds up her hands.

"Look, I don't want to deal with this today, okay? Sorry. Have a good one."

"No, wait." I grab her arm and cling to it for dear life.

Finally, someone who will care about Noah.

Someone who will want to help.

"I need your help. It's Noah."

"Is he okay?" She looks around, scanning the floor like she expects to find him passed out on the ground. "Where is he?"

"In the woods with the Hell Princes. I don't have time to explain, but—"

She curses under her breath and spins around.

"Where are you going?" I yell, following after her.

“To find Caleb!”

I run after Haley as she turns the corner into another hallway and unlocks a door. I don't consider where she's going until I'm in the room with her and Caleb is naked on the bed in front of me.

His eyes are hooded, a wide smile spread across his face at the sight of Haley.

Then, he sees me and blanches.

“Fuck, Penny! Get out of here!”

Haley grabs his clothes off the floor and throws them to him on the bed. “No, we have to go. Noah's in trouble with the Hell Princes.”

Caleb, to his credit, pivots quickly. He's dresses fast and doesn't bother asking questions.

He trusts Haley.

I admire that. They really are good together.

“J.C. is two doors down,” Caleb says, the order implied.

I go to get him.

Two doors down, I find a similar scene, except this time, J.C. and Jennifer are naked, coupled on a bed.

Unlike Caleb, however, J.C. wags his eyebrows when he sees me. “Care to join?”

Jennifer gasps and slaps him in the chest.

Maybe under different circumstances I'd find it funny, but right now, nothing is funny.

“Noah is in trouble. We have to go.”

J.C. throws Jennifer off of him with one shove and slides into his jeans. I do my best not to look, but it's hard not to look at what's between his legs. I mean, my God.

I have never and will never have an interest in J.C., but I suddenly understand Jennifer's infatuation a little bit more.

“Sorry, Jen,” I wave as J.C. and I run out of the room to meet up with Caleb and Haley in the hallway.

“Where are they?” Caleb asks, game face on.

“I left them in the woods, straight south, but I don’t know where they are taking him.”

“How did they know we’d be here?” J.C. growls. “I swore everyone to secrecy.”

There will be time for me to confess my sins later, to admit to everyone how badly I sold Noah out.

But right now, we just have to focus on finding him.

“They’re going to beat him, maybe worse. I don’t know what they have planned, but it’s not good. We have to go.”

Caleb turns for the stairs. J.C. follows.

“What do I do?” Haley asks.

“Stay here,” Caleb yells back. “We’ll take care of this.”

J.C. and Caleb run down the stairs and head for the door.

It takes all of thirty seconds for Haley and me to look at one another and shake our heads.

There’s no way I’m staying here when Noah is out there fighting the Hell Princes off alone because of me.

This is my fault.

And I’m going to fix it.

By the time we get outside, J.C. and Caleb have already taken off into the trees. There’s no way to know which direction they’ve gone.

“What do we do?” Haley asks.

“Do we call the cops?”

“It will take too long,” she says. “We’re in the middle of nowhere. There isn’t time.”

I take a deep breath and try to think. “The Hell Princes were dragging Noah further south. What’s directly on the other side of these trees?”

“The road. The driveway is a mile long and wraps around the trees to connect with the road there. They were dragging him towards the highway.”

Jennifer and Anika picked me up at my house, so I don't have my car, but I see Noah's car parked off to the side of the house.

I run for it, praying he has his keys inside.

I yank on the handle.

It's locked. “Shit!”

I cup my hands around my face and peer in the window, and I can see the keys in the cupholder. “The keys are inside, but the door is—”

Before I even get the words out, Haley calls for me to get back.

I step away just in time to see a massive rock from the cabin's garden fly towards the back windshield.

It shatters. Haley scrambles inside.

She unlocks the doors for me and crawls into the passenger seat and retrieves the keys from the cupholder.

“Sometimes, coming from the wrong side of town has its advantages.”

I, for one, am not going to argue with her.

She just saved my ass.

I turn the car on and gun it through the grass, navigating through the maze of cars parked haphazardly around the cabin.

Noah is going to have a few more dents and scratches on his car, but I hope there will be time for me to make it up to him later.

We reach the gravel driveway, and I press the gas to the floor.

I can feel the road slipping out from underneath me a few times.

I barely slow down. There isn't time.

Caleb and J.C. are on foot in the trees, but there's no guarantee they'll catch up to them in time.

If Haley is right and the Hell Princes are taking Noah back towards the road, they probably have a car there waiting.

We may not find him again until it's too late.

The thought makes me grip the steering wheel tighter, and I fly around a curve in the highway, slowing down only slightly once the road comes into view to make sure no one is coming before I drive around the corner.

Haley grabs the handle attached to the ceiling and curses.

But she doesn't tell me to slow down. I think she knows she would be doing the same thing if it was Caleb in trouble.

Time feels both impossibly slow and like it is passing much too quickly.

The road is deserted, and with every hill we navigate, I keep praying we'll see another car.

I keep praying the Hell Princes were walking him to the road. If I'm wrong, then this may be a wild goose chase in the wrong direction.

It would mean we wasted time getting the car.

I'm not sure if it's a mistake we'll recover from.

Just as hope begins to wane, Haley points at something through the windshield. "A car! A black truck!"

We're still far away, but I recognize it as the same truck I saw in the senior parking lot the day Tank surprised me at school.

It's their car.

I'm thrilled for one second.

Got you, motherfuckers.

Until I realize I don't see Noah.

"Where are they?"

"Pull over. Pull over." Haley lightly touches my hand on the wheel, comforting me as we pull onto the shoulder of the road,

thirty yards away from the black truck.

“What do we do now?” I ask. “Do we wait?”

Haley shakes her head. “No, we don’t fucking wait. We go in there and we get our men.”

She jumps out of the car, leaving the passenger side door open, and runs into the trees.

I make to follow her, but stop and dive back into the car.

I open the glove compartment and see Noah’s gun tucked away there.

Grabbing it, I flip the safety off and run into the trees to get my man.

NOAH

The betrayal almost hurts worse than the beating.

Almost.

Tank laughs as the Hell Princes take turns throwing punches at me, encouraging the men to get creative.

“We’ve got all the time in the world out here, fellas. Have some fun with it.”

Unlike other encounters with the Hell Princes when they overestimated their own strength, Tank didn’t take any chances this time.

He showed up with seven other bikers, and they all either have a personal vendetta against me or are in desperate need of some catharsis.

They certainly don’t hold back.

“The least you could do is give me a chance to fight back,” I say, spitting blood onto the ground.

“Not a chance in hell, fucker. We’ve got plans for you.”

The Hell Princes dragged me away from where Haley and I had been standing, but the walk through the woods has been a slow one, punctuated with long breaks to kick me in the ribs, make my nose bleed, and knock the wind out of me.

Whatever they have planned for me, it isn’t going to be pleasant. They aren’t offering me a warning.

This is a punishment.

Perhaps, the final punishment.

The possibility that I might die washes over me as one of the Hell Princes, a small guy with a face tattoo and a nose ring, slams his fist into my jaw.

I'm scared, obviously, but I also can't help but notice the irony.

I thought Penny ruined my life, so I set out to ruin her.

In doing so, I made her so mad that she decided to *actually* ruin my life.

Oh, what a tangled web we weave.

I grimace. That's a J.C. kind of joke. The bastard is getting inside my head.

I should have apologized to Penny sooner.

Maybe if I had, things would have been different.

Maybe there would have been time for me to make things right with Penny and have her call off this plan.

Then again, maybe not.

She seemed genuinely hurt when she thought I'd offered her up as The Sacrifice. Her relief at finding out I hadn't seemed genuine, as well.

Is there any way she didn't mean to do this?

Tank is walking just ahead of me, but he stops walking suddenly, turns around, and punches me in the stomach.

I groan and double over.

He laughs before facing forward again and carrying on.

It doesn't matter. Whether Penny meant to do this or not, it's happening.

I have to figure out a way to get out of here.

I have to try and escape.

Not only for my own sake, but for my mom's. I'm the only family she has left.

Without me, what's stopping her from drinking herself to death?

And Delanie.

I told Penny I didn't care about Delanie, but it's not true.

I've wanted to know her since the moment I saw a picture of her birth announcement. Her green eyes the same color as Penny's, her curly head of hair.

She's my blood, and I want to be in her life.

I want her to know me.

She won't have that chance if I'm killed by these Hell Prince assholes.

Looking ahead, I can see more light coming through the trees.

If my sense of direction hasn't been knocked loose from the beating, I think we're walking towards the road.

Which means they're going to load me into a car. If there's anything I've learned from years of watching true crime shows with Caleb, it's that you should never go to a second location if you can help it.

My chances of escape are much better now—before they take me to wherever the fuck they have in mind.

The two guys holding me have loosened their grip the longer we've been walking. They are growing complacent. They think I'm too beat down to try anything.

I'm going to fully take advantage of that stupidity.

I sag down like I'm losing consciousness, my legs in a crouch.

Then, before they can regain their grip, I push off with all the power in my legs and throw myself backwards out of the hold of the two guys on guard duty.

My head is spinning from all the drinking, but adrenaline is working to cut through the fog.

There are shouts and scrambling to catch me as I stumble backwards and fall.

I roll over my shoulder, jump to my feet, and take off running.

I haven't even made it twenty feet before I slam into a tree.

When the tree curses at me, however, I realize it's not a tree at all.

It's Caleb.

"Caleb?"

"Noah? Fuck!" He grabs his nose and then looks around, eyes wide. "We were coming to get you. We were sneaking up on you all."

"So much for that," J.C. says, pointing over Caleb's shoulder.

We spin around, and the Hell Princes are on us again.

Tank's joy is unmatched.

"Three for one. My lucky day."

"Is that what you'd call the day I kill you?" Caleb asks. "I'd call it *my* lucky day, but I'd call it your funeral."

Tank spits in our direction. "You Golden Boys are a little too cocky for your own good. I, for one, don't think you are so tough without your guns. What do you think?"

I look at Caleb and J.C., hoping beyond hope they've brought something more than just their fists with them.

No such luck.

J.C. shrugs. "We were both having sex when Penny came to get us, so you're lucky we're here at all."

Penny came to get them.

I have bigger things to worry about right now, but I still cling to those words.

She went for help.

She tried to save me.

No matter what happens, that counts for something. She cared enough to not let me be beaten to death, and I'm grateful.

Except now we all three might be in deep shit.

Tank circles a finger in the air. "Let's grab them all, boys."

The Hell Princes circle around us.

Just like that, the fight is on.

Caleb is the fighter, so he takes the lead, going for the biggest attackers, but J.C. and I can hold our own.

Correction: we can hold our own better on days we haven't been drinking since dawn.

Caleb knocks one guy out, but more are on him in a second.

J.C. and I rush from behind to try and help, but we're blocked by two more Hell Princes.

J.C. launches himself at them both, going for their middle, but no sooner does he knock the guy down than another grabs him and pins him to the ground.

They kick him in the ribs.

I yell for my friend and try to fight my way to him, but there are simply too many bikers.

Eight on three is hardly a fair fight, especially when I've already taken more than my fair share of the punches.

All it takes is one swift kick to my knee and a second jab to my knees to knock me to the ground.

The dirt is cold against my cheek. I try to see where my friends are, but there's too much movement.

I think J.C. is on the ground next to me, but a Hell Prince is in my way. Caleb is still on his feet from what I can tell, but he's surrounded.

It hits me all of the sudden that I can't remember a time when we all fought together and lost.

Every time we joined together as a group, we won.

And now, all together, we're going to lose.

Maybe even die.

I don't want to think it's a possibility, but I have to. The Hell Princes have done far worse for far smaller infractions, and after how much we embarrassed them last semester, they are angry.

I'm just sorry J.C. and Caleb got wrapped up in this mess, too.

I wish it had only been me.

"Take me!"

I press up onto my arms, and a Hell Prince takes the opportunity to kick me in the stomach again.

I drop flat, groan, and then lift up again.

"Just take me."

Tank whistles and his guys stop fighting, though they keep a hold on J.C. and Caleb.

He narrows his eyes at me. "What?"

"You came for me, so take me," I say. "Only me. Let my friends go."

"Noah, no." Caleb shakes his head. "We aren't leaving you."

"You all don't need to fight this for me. It was my gun. That's what you're mad, right, Tank?" I wipe blood from my nose and spit on the ground. "You're mad that I scared you all away with a gun? Then it sounds like your problem is with me."

"They came for my girlfriend," Caleb grits. "I should be here fighting."

"No, you shouldn't. Neither of you should."

"I know that's right. I should be back fucking a girl senseless, but instead I'm here fighting to protect my friends." J.C. sits up and shakes his head like he's trying to clear stars from his vision. Then, he grins at me, his teeth bloody. "And I wouldn't have it any other way."

"You all have been good friends to me, and I can't let you go down for something I did."

Caleb opens his mouth to argue, but Tank interrupts with a deep belly laugh. "You all talk like you have a choice. Do you really think I plan to look this gift horse in the mouth? You all three landed in my lap, and I'm going to make the best of it. You aren't leaving."

Suddenly, I hear the click of a gun and a voice from the darkness.

“Yes, they are.”

NOAH

Everyone turns to see Penny standing with her legs spread and a gun outstretched in her arms.

Haley is just behind her, her eyes locked on Caleb's, scanning him for injuries.

"Fucking badass," J.C. says, clapping softly. "You girls really brought it full circle. Bravo."

The Hell Prince standing behind him kicks him in the back, making J.C. groan.

Penny fires off a shot in the trees overhead. Everyone ducks instinctively.

"I'm not playing with you," she says. "Let them go. Now."

"Angel," Tank croons, taking a step forward, angling himself towards her, "what are you doing? You know this invalidates our deal."

"And you know if you take another step, I'll blow your brains out." Penny tightens her grip on the gun, her finger hovering over the trigger.

She's stone. Not trembling or quaking in fear.

She's solid and determined and protective, and she has never looked hotter.

"You can't shoot all of us," Tank says. "There's only so many bullets in that gun, and I'm guessing your aim isn't perfect."

“Probably not,” Penny says with a shrug. “But I’m sure to take at least one of you down with me. Are you willing to wager it won’t be you?”

Tank pauses, and Penny turns to the other Hell Princes.

“What about the rest of you? Are you willing to risk your life for this revenge plot? If you are, I’m happy to oblige. If not, walk away. I won’t shoot you in the back.”

The two guys holding Caleb let go one after the other and step back. The Hell Prince next to J.C. steps back, too.

Tank looks at them like he’s going to rip them apart.

“Fucking traitors,” he growls. “My little brother is sitting in jail because of these guys.”

“We didn’t call the police on him,” Caleb says. “I knocked him out and left him.”

“And I helped.” Haley raises her hand.

Caleb winks at her.

“Then who the fuck did call?” Tank asks. “I know it wasn’t any of my guys.”

Looking around at the way “his guys” are backing away from this fight at the first sign of trouble, I’m not sure Tank’s guys are quite as loyal as he thinks they are.

Whoever called the cops on Bumper, it wasn’t one of the Golden Boys. Tank’s got a rat in his ranks.

“We didn’t do it,” Caleb repeats. “Just let it go.”

“We can all walk away from this,” Penny says.

Tank looks around at the gathering of people and then, finally, lets his eyes fall on me. When they do, I see something in them I recognize.

Hurt.

Betrayal.

And, worst of all, the deep need for revenge.

I've looked in the mirror and seen the same expression on my own face.

For years, I held onto hurt I should have let go of, no matter that it was hurting me worse than anyone else. I can tell Tank is making the same mistake.

His hand brushes along his waistband and there's a flash of something just before he lunges towards me.

Voices rise up, shouts of surprise and calls to action, a flurry of chaos.

But then there's the clear ring of a shot.

And blood.

PENNY

The vibration of the gun moves up my arms and through my body, shaking in my bones.

I can't believe what just happened.

I smell gunpowder, and I see blood pooling on the ground. But I can't connect the violent scene with myself. With anything I've done.

All I did is move my finger.

Just one flex of some of my smallest muscles.

And now Tank is lying on the ground, a pool of blood spreading around his middle.

Warm hands settle over my arms, and I flinch, startled until I realize it's Noah.

All of my focus and attention shifts to him.

To the open cuts along his cheek bone, his brow, and his lip.

To the purple bruises that are already appearing along his square jaw.

"Oh my God, are you okay?" I reach out for him, becoming more gentle when he flinches in pain. "I'm so sorry. Noah, oh my God, I'm so sorry."

I don't realize I've dissolved into tears until Noah pulls the gun from my hand and pulls me into his chest.

"It's okay."

“This is my fault. I did this. It’s my fault that—you and Caleb and, oh my God.”

“We’re fine,” Caleb says behind us. He’s holding onto Haley, and she’s running her fingers along the cuts on his face, shaking her head. He winks at her with his unswollen eye. “Just a few cuts and scrapes.”

Noah turns back to the Hell Princes.

With Tank losing blood and consciousness, it doesn’t take much encouragement to send them on their way. They grab their leader by the arms and drag him from the woods.

None of us fully relax until we hear their car peel away on the gravel road.

“This Spring Fling activity was not on my list,” J.C. says, standing up and dusting dirt and leaves from his pants. He applies pressure to a swollen lump on his forehead and winces. “Do these wounds make me look more or less fuckable?”

Caleb rolls his eyes. “That implies you were fuckable before.”

“Ladies love scars, not open wounds,” Haley says. “Maybe clean yourself a bit first before you try to bang anyone.”

Their mood is surprisingly light. Maybe they’re used to this kind of thing.

But I’m sure as hell not.

I just shot someone!

Noah grabs my arm and pulls me further away from the group. He grabs my face and looks into my eyes, his voice low and soft. “Are you okay?”

“Are you?” I ask. “You were being attacked. I’m sorry I grabbed your gun and broke the back window of your car, but I had to get here to help, and I didn’t know where you’d be or where they were going to take you. And I’m so sorry. This is all my fault. I wanted to tell you about Tank’s plan earlier, but I got distracted and then—”

Noah gingerly presses his lips to mine, quieting me, his thumb running down my damp cheek.

Our foreheads touch, and he takes a few deep breaths.

I follow his lead and do the same, feeling tension drain away with each exhale.

“It’s okay,” he whispers, holding my hands in his, his fingers squeezing my knuckles. “Are you okay?”

“You don’t even know the whole story yet. And I shot someone. Are you okay with that?”

“You came back for me. That’s enough.”

I take another deep breath. This one seems to get rid of the last bit of panic, but with the absence of adrenaline, the delayed fear starts to kick in.

My chin wobbles and my chest tightens. Before I can help it, I’m in full-on tears, clinging to Noah with both arms.

“I’m so sorry, Noah. They threatened Delanie, and I didn’t know what to do.”

He smooths down my hair and whispers comforting words in my ear, but I barely hear them.

I can’t hear him until I get it all out.

Until I tell him everything and know he won’t change his mind later.

“I stayed away from you this last week because I couldn’t look you in the eyes and lie to you, knowing what Tank had planned. But then I saw you today, and I was going to tell you the truth, but you kept talking, and then J.C. made his announcement, and...I forgot.” I press a palm to my forehead and shake my head. “I fucking forgot that a biker gang was coming to attack you. How self-absorbed am I?”

Haley laughs behind us. “She said it, not me!”

“Haley,” Noah warns, his tone biting. He squeezes me tighter. “It’s all okay, Penn.”

His face already looks worse than it did two minutes ago, and I feel nauseous. “How can you say that? Look at your face!”

“Ouch,” he says, chuckling softly. “That cuts deep.”

“I meant... your face is perfect, except they hurt you.”

Noah grows serious and grabs my shoulders. “I hurt you, Penny. So many times and for so long. I hurt you, and I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay, really. What I did is so much worse.”

“Tank threatened our sister. I understand.”

Our sister.

I’ve never heard Noah refer to Delanie that way.

It takes me by surprise, but in a nice way.

“Our family dynamic is beyond fucked up. I mean, we have a sister.” He shakes his head and laughs. “But it sort of tracks, doesn’t it? We are a little bit fucked up, too.”

“Especially you,” I say, touching a cut on his face.

He winces and grabs my hand, pressing my palm to his lips for a kiss. His warm breath eases some of the cold from my fingers.

“I know I don’t deserve you, and we both know the Universe has tried everything to keep us apart, but somehow, we come back to each other. No matter how much it hurts, we come back. And that’s everything to me, Penny. *You came back.*”

I stroke the skin at the back of his neck and run my thumb over his square jawline.

I know this pain.

Our entire relationship crumbled because Noah’s father’s left.

Because he didn’t come back.

But I will never treat Noah that way. Seeing him in danger today made me more certain than ever that I’ll do everything in my power to protect Noah, body and soul.

I know he’ll do the same for me.

“Of course, I did. I’ll always come back.”

He tips his head down and kisses me, and the coppery taste of blood fills my mouth. “You’re bleeding.”

“I know.”

“Does it hurt?”

His eyebrow arches. “That depends. Are you going to nurse me back to health?”

“Yes.”

Immediately, he groans and sags on his bones. “Then I’m in miserable, terrible, horrible pain. It may take many days of nonstop care before I’m well again. Lots of long nights.”

I laugh and Noah smiles at me. A genuine, true blue, Noah Boone smile.

It’s so big the cut in his lip splits a bit further and blood drips down his chin.

Before I can reach up and wipe it away, he doubles over in a cough and grabs his rib with a grimace.

I help Noah back over to where everyone else is standing.

Haley is pushing Caleb’s shirt up so she can see the bruises forming on his midsection, and Noah is leaning on me more and more heavily with every passing second.

He’s putting on a brave face, but I know he’s hurting.

“What a raw deal,” J.C. grumbles. “Not a soul here to tend to and kiss my boo-boos.”

Caleb puckers up and waves J.C. over. “I’ll do it.”

“You joke because you have someone,” J.C. says bitterly. “You both do.”

Noah pulls me closer against his chest and presses a kiss to my temple. “Is he right? Do I have you, Penn?”

I nuzzle into him and nod. “Always.”

EPILOGUE

Three Months Later

The gymnasium is a sea of black caps and gowns. It's impossible to tell anyone apart.

Caleb texted everyone to meet under the score board, so I wade in that direction and hope for the best.

People stop me along the way to say hello and reminisce.

I try to look unapproachable—a look I had mastered for years—but going with Penny has ruined that part of my reputation.

We are the “it” couple, according to Anika and Jennifer, and even though we are done with school and moving on with our lives, they are still trying to become part of the in-crowd.

To what end, I can't pretend to understand.

Still, I do my best to be pleasant.

To a point.

Where's Penny?

She wanted to meet at my house, but I warned her away.

Ever since Mom decided to sober up, she's been waking up early in the mornings to make a full breakfast, and she would have had Penny at the table for an hour, filling her with pancakes and eggs and fruit.

I barely got here on time as it was.

I'm thrilled my mom likes my girlfriend—a sentence I never thought I'd say—but occasionally I catch them whispering to

one another and looking in my direction.

I'm not sure I like the women in my life joining ranks.

Part of it is that I'm worried what my mom will do when we're both gone.

She's newly sober. It's only been a couple months.

I took her car keys away from her one night when she was too drunk to walk to the garage, let alone drive, and she remembered it in the morning.

It was the wakeup call she needed, she said, and she hasn't had a drink since. She goes to meetings and has a sponsor, but Penny and I have been hanging around the house recently.

I'm worried what my mom will do when the big house is quiet.

Will she take me leaving the same way she took my dad leaving?

I plan to come back and visit regularly, so I hope not.

Still, the thought weighs on my mind.

"You can't frown on graduation day."

Penny is standing on the free throw line in her shapeless black gown, her golden hair tumbling down the front of it, mashed down on top by the cap.

I've never seen anyone more beautiful.

How could I ever think everyone looked the same in these gowns?

"Noah can always find a reason to frown," Caleb says, tossing his cap in the air.

Haley snatches it out of the air and plunks it on his head. "You're supposed to wait until the end of the ceremony to celebrate."

"Practice," he says, taking it off his head and tossing it again.

J.C. dribbles a pretend basketball and then makes a jump shot complete with fadeaway. "Forget throwing caps. The real

celebration is happening at Finn's house. He gave us the okay for a party tonight, right, Caleb?"

Caleb gives him a thumbs up.

"It's going to be wild."

"Not as wild as the last party, I hope?" I ask, eyebrow raised.

As if the memory itself is upsetting, Penny wraps her arms around my waist. I curl an arm around her shoulders and hold her close.

It's been three months, and I haven't been to a party since Spring Fling. As far as I'm concerned, we can keep that streak going.

"You aren't looking to get beaten to a pulp?" J.C. laughs. "I still have a few lingering bruises."

"It's been three months! That can't be right. Let me see!" Haley reaches for J.C.'s robe, trying to unzip it, and Caleb pulls her back with a warning look at J.C.

He holds up his hands innocently. "She was trying to undress me. I had no part in it."

"Bruises shouldn't last that long," Haley whispers to Caleb.

He tells her J.C. is probably just exaggerating, which sounds right to me. Ever since I started dating Penny, I've noticed him being a bit more dramatic than he already was, like he's trying to get attention.

Usually, I'd call him out on it, but I actually feel bad for him. No one likes to feel like the fifth wheel.

"It's just going to be a chill affair," J.C. says. "Nothing wild. Finn made me promise we wouldn't destroy his house the way we destroyed that cabin at Spring Fling. He told me he won't write another check like that."

"Finn paid for the damages?" I ask.

"Do you think I had ten thousand dollars lying around?" J.C. exclaims. "And I couldn't exactly ask my parents for the money, could I? They thought we went camping, and they

were mad enough they had to take me to the dentist to get a veneer put in after Caleb broke my tooth.”

“What? Me?” Caleb asks.

J.C. shrugs. “I had to come up with a plausible story.”

“You could have told them you fell, you asshole.”

Caleb shoves him, and J.C. laughs.

“My mom doesn’t like you, so she didn’t even question my story. She totally bought it.”

I’m going to miss this.

It’s the only thing I’m going to miss about Ravenlake, to be honest. The proximity to my friends, how easy it is for all of us to get together and hang out.

That will be more difficult from here on out.

Everyone is headed in different directions, and there’s no saying when we’ll all be in the same place at the same time anymore.

We might grow apart.

Penny nudges me. I think she might be telling me to stop frowning again, but when I look down her green eyes are wide, worried.

She points to the side door of the gym.

I immediately understand why she’s worried.

It’s my dad.

When I look up, he waves.

We haven’t spoken since he left our house that day two long years ago.

Even when I’ve gone to Penny’s house to pick her up, I stay outside.

Our paths don’t cross, and that suits me just fine.

But if my dad wants to come and try to clear the air, then I’ll hear him out. Life’s too short to hold grudges forever.

I've learned that lesson ten times over.

I kiss Penny's temple and walk towards my dad, head held high.

I forget how much he and I look alike. We have the same light brown hair and waves, and we're built the same. I never realized that before because I was only sixteen when he left, but now that I'm almost nineteen, it's easy to see the similarity in our proportions.

It's the only way we're similar.

"Noah," he says with a nod of his head. "It's good to see you."

"Dad. I'd say the same, but I don't want to lie."

He bites his lower lip and nods. "I suppose I deserve that."

"I didn't say it to hurt you. I said it because it's the truth. My new motto these days is to be more honest about how I'm feeling."

"That's a good motto," he says, obviously nervous. He shifts from his heels to his toes, hands shoved in his pockets. "I came today because... well, it seems like this might be my last opportunity to apologize to you for everything. I don't like the way we left things, and I don't want you leaving town with this unsettled between us."

"Okay."

My dad looks at me, expectant. "Well?"

"Well, what?" I ask.

"Do you accept my apology?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't actually hear one. You said this might be your last opportunity to apologize, but you never actually apologized."

"Noah, be fair," he says through gritted teeth.

"Standing here and listening to anything you have to say is more than fair," I say. "If you don't recall, I found out about your affair and your child and that you were moving through

my bedroom wall. You never even came and spoke to me. And I didn't find out who you'd cheated with until Penny told me."

"And I'm sorry for that. It was a tough situation and—"

I wave him away. "You don't need to apologize. I'm not angry any more. I used to be, but I'm not anymore. I don't need to hear your excuses or rationalizations. You made your choice, and now I'm making mine."

My dad lifts his chin. "What decision is that?"

"I'm letting you go," I say simply. "I do not respect you, and I don't want or need you in my life."

He scoffs, his brows pinching together in anger. "That's hardly fair. Every boy needs a man's influence in his life."

"A real man stands by his woman," I say. "A real man protects his family and cherishes them, and you didn't do any of those things. You aren't capable of them. You abandoned a good woman and your son to live with an abusive, manipulative bitch, and that's all I need to know about you."

"That's my wife you're talking about."

"And God help you for that."

I extend my hand, and, surprisingly, my dad takes it.

I look into his eyes, shake his hand, and say the last words I'd ever care to say to my father: "Now fuck off."



The party at Finn's is an all-out rager.

J.C. insisted it would be a small gathering of people, twenty or thirty, but there are at least one hundred people in Finn's house.

Caleb spent twenty minutes taking pictures to send as proof to Finn.

"You're such a snitch!" J.C. says.

“I’m the one who’s supposed to be house-sitting,” Caleb argues. “I don’t want to be held responsible for your ridiculous party.”

Penny twines her fingers with me. “They fight like a married couple.”

“I don’t understand that phrase. Is that supposed to be a good thing? Should we be fighting more?”

Penny shakes her head. “No, I think we fought enough at the beginning of our relationship that we can get along for the rest of it and be fine.”

I notice her take a long drink after that, clearly not wanting to elaborate on how long “the rest of it” might be.

The question of what we’ll do now that high school is over has been hanging over us ever since Penny got her acceptance letter to Northeastern.

But Penny hasn’t dared ask the question. She doesn’t want to pressure me.

“I’m going to go find Haley. I need to pee,” she says, spinning away from me and disappearing into the crowd.

Despite their past differences, Haley and Penny have grown closer the last few months.

J.C. suggested they could be having an affair, and I shut it down. That’s just his wishful thinking.

Spank bank material, as he would say.

As soon as Penny is gone, J.C. pulls me into a game of beer pong, the soundtrack to which is Caleb complaining about rings from the cups being left on the table.

We win two matches before I finally pull myself away and go to find Penny.

“This is our last party together,” J.C. shouts. “Can’t you forget about Penny for five minutes?”

I ignore him and head downstairs.

The party in the basement is more subdued than upstairs. The music is a distant thumping, and everyone is sitting around in a circle, chatting and drinking.

A few people wave to me, but I make it clear I'm not here to chat. I scan the room, searching for Penny.

Then, I see her, sitting with a few other girls on an L-shaped couch drinking a bright pink wine cooler.

May in Texas is already blazing hot, so Penny's in a long, flowing sundress with two high slits up the front of both of her thighs. The neckline is low, revealing her perfect cleavage, and the whole thing is tied up with a cute bow right between her breasts.

She's gorgeous. The most beautiful girl I've ever seen.

Every time I see her, it feels like the first time.

But this moment really takes me back.

Especially when Penny turns to me, her eyes searching before she even finds me, like she can feel me watching her.

Our eyes meet, she smiles, and it is freshman year all over again.

I walk towards her, purposefully, and she excuses herself from her friends and meets me halfway. "Sorry, I got caught up talking. Did you need something?"

"You."

She flushes, and I pinch her chin between my thumb and forefinger and press my lips to hers gently.

It's not lost on me that the basement of Finn's house is where Penny and I took the first baby steps of our relationship.

Being here again, with her, feels like coming full circle.

"Truth or dare?"

Penny pulls back and looks up at me, a mischievous smile tugging at the corner of her pink mouth. "Dare."

"I dare you to go with me into that storage closet."

I don't need to point out which one. Penny grabs my hand and pulls me across the room into the closet.

The light that illuminated the space four years ago is still there.

With the door shut, blocking out the noise of the party, and the red mood lighting, I feel just as giddy as I did back then.

"What now?" Penny asks.

"I suppose it's your turn to ask me."

"Truth or dare."

I consider it for a second. "Truth."

Penny looks disappointed for a second before she chews on her lip nervously and glances up at me. "Are you going to come with me to Boston?"

I knew what she'd ask me if given the chance, and I already have my answer planned.

"No, I'm not going to go with you to Boston."

Her face falls, and I wrap my arms around her.

"Don't be sad, Penn."

"I knew there was a chance you might not, but... I never let myself think about what that would mean."

"And what does it mean?"

She pushes away from me and crosses her arms, her eyes going misty. "Well, do you want to be in a long-distance relationship?"

"God, no," I wince and stick out my tongue. "That would be miserable, wouldn't it?"

Her chin wobbles, and it nearly breaks me.

"You deserve someone who can be there for you, Penn. You deserve someone who has their own dreams, not some little puppy dog who follows you around wherever you go."

"You aren't a little puppy dog," she snaps. "You do have dreams."

“I know, which is why I’m not going with you to Boston.”

Finally, Penny breaks.

A tear streams down her cheek, but she isn’t sad.

She’s angry.

She slaps my chest. “How can you be so cruel, Noah? Don’t you care about me at all? Don’t you want to be with me?”

“I’m not being cruel. I’m being practical.”

She slaps me again. “I should be thrilled to be getting out of this godforsaken town, but all I can think about is how you won’t be there with you. You know, part of me thinks I’d be happier staying here with my nightmare of a mother if it meant I could be with you.”

I smile and have to bite back a laugh.

That’s the last straw for Penny.

She pummels my chest with both hands, giving Tank and his biker bros a run for their money, and forces me up against the concrete wall.

“Why are you acting like this?”

I grab her fists and pin them to her sides. “Because I’m not going with you to Boston. I’m driving up a week later by myself.”

She frowns for a second, confused before the information has a chance to sink in.

When it does, her eyes go wide. “You’re coming with me?”

I shake my head. “I’m going for me. I sent in an audition tape for a band up in the Boston area, and they got back to me two weeks ago that they’d like to have me. There will be some touring here and there, but for the most part, we’ll be in Boston. I’m going to be in a real band and—”

Penny throws herself at me, wrapping her legs around my waist and her arms around my neck as she pulls me into a deep, sensual kiss.

The moment starts sweet enough, but it quickly grows hot.

Penny can't seem to get close enough to me, rolling herself against me with each kiss, her fingers tugging at my hair.

"I assume this news pleases you?"

"You're such an asshole," she whispers, biting my neck. When she pulls back, her green eyes are shimmery with emotion. "We're going to Boston."

Two years ago, I never would have imagined this moment could be possible.

I thought Penny and I would go our separate ways and never cross paths again.

It made me sick.

Even then, in the midst of hating her, I loved this girl more than anything in the world.

Only now can I let myself feel that love in its entirety.

"Truth or dare?"

Penny rubs her nose along the length of mine and whispers against my lips. "Dare."

"I dare you to let me take you against a rickety shelf of Christmas decorations." I tip my head towards the shelf behind us.

Penny giggles when she sees a box of "X-mas decorations" on the shelf behind us, remembering our encounter in here years ago.

"I thought you wanted to have the space and time to lay me down and taste every part of me. Isn't that what you said last time?"

"Yes, but that's before I knew."

"Knew what?" she asks, pulling back to see my face.

"Before I knew we had forever."

Penny beams at me, happiness radiating out of her, and then she kisses me.

I walk the three steps across the room to pin her against the shelf.

To my surprise, it's sturdier than it looks. The shelf is the perfect height that I can rest Penny on the edge of it, freeing up my hands to slide into the slits of her dress and find the heat between her legs.

Her panties are a dainty lace and absolutely soaked. I push them aside and swipe my finger through her wetness.

She bucks against my finger, ready, begging.

We have time for slow love making later. Tonight is about doing what I wish I could have done four years ago.

So, I slip my finger inside of her up to the second knuckle.

Penny arches her back, thrusting against my hand, and I add a second finger.

She moans my name and then reaches down between us to undo my pants. Her movements are clumsy and frantic.

But when she wraps her small hand around my length and strokes me, I'm positive she's the single most graceful person on the planet. It feels exquisite.

"Reliving my freshman fantasy apparently gives me the endurance of a freshman," I hiss, pumping gently into her hand at the same time I pulse my fingers into her. "This feels incredible."

"Has this been a fantasy of yours?" she asks.

"For years," I admit. "The things I wanted to do to you..."

Penny lets go of me, slides off of the shelf, and holds her arms out to the side. "Do them."

"What?" I ask, feeling the sudden desire to pinch myself.

"Whatever you want to do," she says, licking her lips. "Do it. Now. Let me be your fantasy."

The words alone are almost enough to send me over the edge. The most beautiful girl I've ever seen telling me to do whatever I want to her?

God, help me. I'm a bad, bad man.

I look at the Santa Claus night light next to the door. “Avert your eyes, Santa.”

Penny laughs, but the sound stops when I slide the straps of her sundress off of her shoulders.

She isn't wearing a bra underneath, so her breasts are perfectly bared before me, and I lean forward to take one in my mouth, lavishing it with kisses.

Then, I push Penny to her knees.

She wastes no time, wrapping her hand around my base and taking me into her mouth. Her lips are full and soft around me, and the sight of me sliding between them is beyond even what my imagination could have conjured at the tender age of fifteen.

I want to stay like this for hours, but I won't last another ten minutes.

Not with the way her tongue is swirling around me and the way her mouth makes a popping sound as she slides off the end of me just before plunging back on.

Much too soon, I grab Penny's hand and help her stand up.

Then, I turn her around, take both of her hands in mine, and wrap them around the support beam of the shelf.

I hook my fingers in the delicate lace material of her panties and slide them down her toned, tanned legs.

Her back arches, and I can see the small dimples on either side of her back, just above her round ass.

Every inch of her is beautiful, perfect.

I told myself this would be fast, but it's hard to have sex with Penny without admiring every inch of her.

It's like going to Rome with your eyes closed.

You can't help but stop and look around a bit.

Penny reaches behind her and takes my length in her hand again, stroking me, and it doesn't take long before the pressure inside of me is near to bursting.

I grab my condom out of my jeans and then kick them off.

I don't want anything coming between us now.

Penny presses her hips out to meet me, and I position myself at her opening and shove in to the hilt.

"Fuck," I moan, squeezing her hips and holding her tightly against me. "You feel so good."

"I'm so full."

I pull out of her slowly, savoring every single sensation, and then plunge back in.

Again and again, our bodies slap together, and Penny arches her body more and more to meet me, opening herself for me.

I slide one hand up her stomach and flick my finger across her pointed nipple. She gasps and tips her head back in a moan.

There is nothing sexier than knowing what I'm doing to her.

Knowing she enjoys the way our bodies move together.

Being inside of Penny is bliss. Her body squeezes around me in the best kind of embrace.

I don't want to leave, but I can feel the release building inside of me.

I slip my other hand between her legs and find her clit immediately. It's swollen, practically throbbing against my finger, and Penny cries out at the faintest touch.

"Noah, yes," she whimpers. "Touch me."

I pump into her from behind while circling one finger over her center with my other hand wrapped around her breast, using it like a handle to pull her against me.

It's the teenage boy's fantasy trifecta.

Penny's cries grow louder and louder, to the point I'm worried the people outside the closet are going to hear us, though I can't find it within me to give a single fuck.

"Fuck me, Noah," she says, knowing how much I like it when her pretty mouth talks dirty. "I'm going to come. Come with me, Noah. Come."

Her body tenses, and I feel her pulse around my cock. Her body squeezes me, and I'm helpless to hold back. I groan and thrust into her, finding a trembling release as Penny finds one of her own.

In the end, we're left standing, shaking, holding onto one another and the shelf for support.

And it's everything I could ever hope for.



Thanks for reading CRUEL ELITE...

But don't stop now!

*Check out the exclusive **Extended Epilogue...***

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*Or turn the page to start reading a free sneak preview of my bestselling mafia romance novel, **CORRUPTED ANGEL.***

**SNEAK PREVIEW OF CORRUPTED ANGEL: A
DARK MAFIA ROMANCE**

**I found my angel.
Then I broke her wings.**

Alexis should've never set foot in my world.

Men like me stain girls like her. We take their innocence and tear it to shreds.

She thinks she's tough. She thinks she can handle me.

But she doesn't know just how deep my darkness goes.

It was for the best that I claimed her for a night and left her behind.

Anything more than that would have been cruel.

I thought I'd seen the last of Alexis Wright.

So imagine my surprise two years later when the door to my office opens...

And *she* walks in.

The girl I ravaged. The girl I devoured.

Now that's she's in front of me again, I have just two questions for her:

First—what is she doing here?

And second...

What does she mean, "our baby"?

2

Alexis

It is getting dark outside.

I flick on the lamp at my desk and stretch up in my chair, trying to avoid the inevitable end-of-the-day hunch. My stomach grumbles and I slide open the bottom drawer of my desk, eyeing the goodies inside. Ah, yes, the good ol' secret snack drawer. It's a secret not because I'm ashamed of how much I snack, but because Vicky Oberman in the cubicle across from me will pop over the divider like a meerkat if she hears the tell-tale crinkle of a bag of chips.

I pull out a packet of Twizzlers and slide the drawer shut. I stare at the blinking cursor on my computer screen while I gnaw on the end of a stick of strawberry licorice. I told my fiancé, Grant, that I would be home late tonight because I wanted to finish up this story, but I'm not sure I can be bothered.

It's just a fluff piece—the unlikely story of how a community center caretaker found the exact skates he used to wear when he visited the center as a child. Mr. Finkel spent half of the interview reminiscing about how much everything used to cost in those days (a can of soda—a nickel; a hot dog—a quarter; two scoops of ice cream—ten cents), and the rest of the time talking about how kids these days have no appreciation for the luxury of having a community center to go to.

Now, it is my job as the dedicated local news journalist to turn that pile of boring jelly into a thought-provoking article examining the role of community centers in empowering the youth of tomorrow.

Or at least, that's how I've decided to spin it. My editor, Debbie Harris, just wants me to write the story. In fact, her exact words were, "Nobody's going to read it but that caretaker, so just make sure you don't misspell the guy's name."

Debbie makes no bones about how she doesn't expend time or energy on the puff pieces when there are bigger stories to tell. I just wish she would give me one of those bigger stories. My work at the *New York Union* so far has involved precious little in the way of substance.

"Wright!" comes a clipped voice from the entrance to my cubicle.

Oh, boy. Speak of the devil.

I spin to face Debbie, a Twizzler still hanging out of my mouth. She is a stern-looking Scottish woman with perfectly coiffed blonde hair, black-lined eyes, and lipstick that is never out of place. She has a commendably infinite selection of bold-colored pantsuits. Today's number is a fuchsia blazer and slacks with a bright white top underneath. She looks about forty-five, but in my two years of working for the paper, I have never heard her discuss her age. I heard a rumor that someone in the office tried to throw her a birthday party once and the person was never heard from again.

"How's the story going?" she asks in her thick Glaswegian accent.

"Good." I bite off the end of the Twizzler. "I was just—"

She waves a hand. "Nope, all I need to know. I'm just here to give you your assignment for tomorrow." She grins. "You'll like this one."

My heart picks up. Debbie's finally going to give me something meaty to sink my teeth into.

"It's a dog show!" she announces.

"Oh."

"Don't look so disappointed." She leans against my cubicle wall. "You haven't heard the best part."

I cock a brow, waiting.

Debbie leans in a little. "All the dogs are celebrity impersonators."

“Debbie!” I groan, letting my head fall back in frustration. “That’s just more of the same crap I always get. Why would you get me all excited?”

She kicks the bottom of my chair, startling me upright, then folds her arms and glowers at me.

“You and your lack of patience again,” she scolds. “Do you know how lucky you are to even have this job? I’ve got a dozen résumés in the drawer who would love to write a story about a parade of dogs in wee outfits.”

“Yes,” I sigh. “You’re right. I’m sorry. Thank you.”

She smiles and leaves.

I know Debbie’s right, but I can’t help my frustration. As cute as the dog show does actually sound, I want to write stories that make a difference.

The clock hits five-thirty and I start to pack up. I don’t feel like staying late today. I just want to curl up on the sofa with Grant and a big glass of red wine and watch some mindless TV. In fact, that sounds exactly like what the doctor ordered.

It takes nearly forty minutes to get from the newspaper offices in Manhattan to our loft in Brooklyn. Grant is lucky—he was just made junior partner at a commercial law firm in downtown Brooklyn and his walk to work is less than ten minutes.

It’s an unseasonably warm evening for November, but there’s still a bite in the air that makes me draw my coat closer around myself as I walk from the subway to our apartment building. I walk up the front steps and into the waiting elevator, dreaming of a full-bodied pinot noir.

The apartment door is unlocked, which is surprising. As close as his office is, Manhattan law is no joke, and Grant works tough hours. He’d said he wouldn’t be too late tonight, though, so I wonder where he’s gotten off to. I drop my keys in the bowl and walk into the living room, expecting to find him there, but he is nowhere to be seen.

“Grant?” I call. The aged floorboards whine under my feet as I walk toward the bedroom, dropping my bag on the sofa on the

way.

Squeak. Squeak.

I've been arguing with Grant since we first moved in together about the mattress in our bedroom. He loves it, but I can't stand the creaky springs. The thing is, though, that the springs only make noise whenever he and I get down to some adult business. Seeing as how I'm standing out in the hallway, I start to realize with growing horror that that means...

Oh, Jesus.

When I push open the bedroom door with fingers that suddenly feel pale and trembly, I'm greeted with something I never, ever wanted to see.

The first thing I see is Grant's pale ass, clenching as he thrusts.

The second thing I see is the horrified face of the woman beneath him, who has just locked eyes with me and realized—way, way too late—that she's made a big mistake.

My jaw hits the floor.

The woman tries to push Grant off of her and cover up with the comforter, but it takes the big oaf a second to realize what's happening. When he finally does and looks up to see me standing in the doorway, his face falls.

"It's not what it looks like!" he yells. He's leaping out of bed, pulling on a pair of boxers—the ones I got him for his birthday last year, I notice—and gesticulating wildly.

Looking at him makes me feel nauseous, so I look at the girl instead. She's huddled beneath the comforter. Her bottle-blond hair is in wild disarray and her eyes are wide with shock.

"It's not what it looks like!" Grant repeats, like I hadn't heard him the first time.

For a second, I want to believe him. It would be so much easier to drink down his lies than to accept that my fiancé, the man I've spent every Sunday cuddled on the couch with for the past two years, has betrayed me in the worst way.

But there's no denying that it is exactly what it looks like.

Anger fills my veins like kerosene. All I need now is a match.

"Then what is it?" I demand, eyes widening. "Were you inspecting each other for lice? Did she lose an earring down your pants?"

Grant rushes over. His sandy hair is standing up in wild tufts and there is lipstick smudged around his mouth. "Baby, let me explain!"

The sight of those lips—the lips that I thought were mine alone to kiss—sets fire to my blood, singing my skin from the inside.

He's got big, soulful eyes. I remember falling for them, for him. They looked good in the candlelight at the Italian place he took me for our first serious date. Even now, part of me wants to soak up the emotion there and forgive him.

I put that part of me in a box, lock it, and throw away the key.

"Get out," I demand coldly, jabbing a finger toward the front door. "Both of you need to get out right now."

My heart is trying to climb up my throat. I feel like I'm going to throw up. How could he do this to me? I am two seconds from completely breaking down, and like hell am I going to let Grant be here to witness that.

Grant frowns. "But it's my apartment."

"I said get the fuck out before I throw you out!" My raised voice does the trick. With a yelp, the woman runs past me toward the front door.

Grant turns and reaches for a pair of pants. I must not've been clear; maybe he needs me to repeat myself one last time.

"Did I stutter? I said, *Get. The. Fuck. Out!*"

Hearing the venom in my voice, Grant abandons the pants and bolts out the door. Two seconds later, I hear the front door slam closed.

I collapse in the hallway, like a puppet whose strings have been mercilessly snipped.

The room seems to ring with the echo of my pounding heart. I am still and silent for a long time, my mind blissfully blank. I just stare at the wall, listening to my ragged pulse.

I remember picking out the paint for the hallway. The color is called Gray Steel. After I moved in, I wanted to make it feel more like our home, rather than just his, but Grant liked everything the way it was. He wouldn't let me move furniture around, or redecorate the living room, or reorganize the closet. He eventually relented and allowed me to paint this one hallway, where the walls had been scuffed in a few places already. I was given a few square feet to make my own. At the time, I was grateful for it.

How could I not see back then that Grant wasn't willing to make room in his life for me?

My eyes sting with tears. I throw my head back against the wall. We were supposed to get *married*. After all the sacrifices I made for him, all the times I put him first, and now I find out that our life together meant fuck-all to him?

I break out into wretched sobs. Fat tears roll down my cheeks, shoulders shaking, chest heaving as I struggle to breathe. I'm not sure whether I'm mourning the loss of my fiancé or the loss of the life I'd planned with him—marriage, babies, a family of my own.

Whatever it is, I lost something today. And goddamn it, it hurts.



I have not the faintest desire to get out of bed in the morning, but I know that work is the only thing that will remove the image of Grant's lipstick-stained grimace from my mind. So I slog my way to the office and finish up the community center piece. Then it's time to check out the dog show.

It feels good to do nothing. For a change, I'm actually grateful that Debbie loves handing me the nonsense assignments. I don't have the brain capacity for legal drama or deep

investigative reporting. A dog show of celebrity impersonators is about the most I can process right now.

As predicted, it is very twee. My favorite is a greyhound dressed like Ziggy Stardust, who howls into a microphone on command. He doesn't end up winning anything, which is disappointing. The winner of the best costume category is a poodle with a laconic grin who goes by "Pawl Newman." Second place goes to a weiner dog in a sparkly jumpsuit and a ginger wig who the owner would have us believe is Elton John. I leave thinking that Ziggy was robbed.

I head back to the office to start writing up the piece, wondering if this is it for me. Am I doomed to spend the rest of my days writing articles that nobody will read until I eventually retire to become a childless, angry cat lady? There has to be more than this.

During the day, I text my best friend, Clara Fitzgerald, to update her on the latest in my love life. She tries to call me several times during the day, but I don't answer. When I finish work at five-thirty on the dot, I call her back.

"Finally!" she groans. "I was beginning to worry about you."

"Sorry. It's just been a busy day." I fish a chocolate bar out of my purse and start munching on it on my way to the subway.

"I can't believe Grant. What an absolute pig."

"I know." I sigh. "Look, I'm going to lose you in the subway soon. Can I call you later?"

"No need!" Clara says brightly. "I'm on my way over to your place now."

"Clara ..."

I really don't feel like company tonight. It's Friday, which means there will be a movie on TV and I can be as hungover as I want in the morning. There's a bottle of wine on the rack that Grant's boss got us for our engagement that we were supposed to wait until the wedding to drink. That bad boy's getting cracked. I've also got a pint of Ben and Jerry's in the freezer. My evening is set.

“Oh—I’m losing you,” Clara hisses into the phone. “Can’t—cutting out.”

“Clara!”

“See—soon!”

She hangs up and I curse under my breath. Clara is very kind, and wise, and unbelievably forgiving, but she’s also the pushiest person I’ve ever met. She seeks to control everything in her environment, which I know is something that has come out of two hard years of sobriety but still frustrates me sometimes.

Still, I guess it will be nice to spend some quality time with my best friend. I’ll need to move out of Grant’s apartment soon, so it could be fun to do a little damage to it.

Clara is waiting in front of my building when I get home. She is holding two big shopping bags and bounds up to me, throwing her arms around my shoulders. One of the bags smacks against my spine.

“Ouch,” I complain. “What is that? A bag of bricks?”

Clara chuckles. “Just you wait.”

We head up to the apartment and Clara sets the bags on the kitchen island, then throws herself across the sofa. Her mass of golden curls spills over the armrest and she tilts her head back to look at me.

“How are you feeling?” she asks.

I sigh and slump into the armchair opposite. “Weird.”

“Maybe a little free?”

“Nope. Just weird.” My head lolls to the side and I meet her gaze. “We had a plan, Clara. Grant and I had a plan. After we got married, we were going to travel, and then we were going to start our family. Grant wanted a girl first, but I wanted a boy, a little fella I could dress up as a sailor and teach to always be polite. He’d be the kind of kid that would call adults ‘ma’am’ and ‘mister,’ and everyone would fawn over how cute he was.”

“Were you planning to have a child in the 1950s?” she asks skeptically.

I frown. “Well, it doesn’t really matter now, does it?”

“You can still have all that,” Clara says. “You’re only twenty-six. You’ve got your whole life ahead of you, and it’s better to start fresh now than spend the rest of your life tied to a man who was never going to put you first.”

“You’re right.” I look back to the ceiling. “I’m just scared to start over.”

“If life didn’t scare you, it wouldn’t be worth living.”

“I’m sure that will be comforting in a couple of weeks, but at the moment, I just ...” I look over at her. “I don’t know. I’m hurt.”

Clara sits up, green eyes twinkling with something I can only describe as mischief. “You know what I hear when you say that?”

“What?”

“That you need a distraction,” she says. “Let’s go out tonight.”

My eyebrow raises skeptically. “Out?”

“Yeah. Like to a club.” She folds her legs under her, looking every bit the yoga instructor she is. “Yes, let’s go dancing! I’ll tell you the same thing I told my students today: if all else fails, feed your soul with deep stretches and heavy bass.”

“You did not say that to your class.”

“I did, too.”

I chuckle. “Okay, sensei. All the same, I think I’ll nama-stay home.”

“Please come out with me?” She pouts her pink lips. “It’ll be good for you. Now that you’ve kicked Grant to the curb, you can actually have a little excitement in your life.”

Clara always thought of Grant as boring, with his long monologues and predictable patterns. He was the sort who adhered to a weekly schedule like his life depended on it—

CrossFit three times a week, his favorite cop drama on Tuesday nights, fish for dinner every Friday. It's ironic that after years of being able to tell the time based on his movements, he would throw me a curveball so unexpected that it would knock me on my ass.

"Grant was boring, wasn't he?" I realize out loud.

Clara nods. "An absolute snoozefest. A pretty face, but very little going on upstairs."

"Very little going on downstairs either," I remark. "I can't imagine that floozy was with him because of his commendable ability to fall asleep almost immediately after ejaculating."

She snickers. "That's the spirit!"

"Ugh. Why was I even with him?" I scrub a hand over my face. "I think on some level I always knew I was settling. I'm just annoyed that it took this happening for me to realize it."

Admittedly, I was always curious about the concept of having a spark in a relationship. It was something I never felt that Grant and I had. I presumed that what we did have—comfort and security—was better. Stronger. More stable.

Clearly, Grant didn't think so. With my blinders off, I realize I shouldn't have thought so, either.

"Your dad likes him," Clara points out. "I think you've always been a little blind where your dad is concerned."

"Dad only likes him because he's also a lawyer," I reply. "He just likes having someone around he can talk torts to."

I haven't even told my dad the news yet. In fact, I've hardly spoken to him lately. He's been busy defending the innocent, and I've been busy looking for new ways to describe canine outfits. I always worry that my dad judges me for not living up to my potential. I hate the thought of disappointing him.

Clara shoots to her feet and goes to the island, grabbing the bags she brought before setting them down on the coffee table.

"Let's do something fun. You remember fun, right?"

"I just don't know if I'm in the mood, Clara ..." I eye the bags suspiciously. "Plus, don't you think a club will just be a den of

temptation to you?”

She waves dismissively. “Please. I am so Zen these days that the thought of alcohol doesn’t even faze me. I just want to dance with my best friend and help dig her out of the misery spiral she’s about to sink into.”

“Who said anything about a misery spiral?”

“I see you glancing over at the freezer.” She flattens her lips. “If I don’t get you out of here, you’ll end up watching terrible romcoms until you pass out in a puddle of melted ice cream.”

I am annoyed that she has anticipated my evening plans so astutely.

“Fine,” I sigh. “Let’s go dance.”

She squeals and perches on the coffee table, pulling items out of the bags. She has brought her entire makeup kit, as well as enough hair-styling tools to supply a pageant.

“What’s all this?” I ask suspiciously.

“This is your future.” She pulls a sparkly dress out of one of the bags with a flourish. “Gaze upon it with glee, for I am going to give you a makeover.”

I eye the dress. “That’s not going to fit me.”

Clara is petite, with toned everything and an ass that defies gravity. I run on the curvier side, with a flat stomach but flaring hips, thick thighs, and generous cleavage. I have the kind of body that looks great in pencil skirts and form-hugging jeans, but I’m dubious about the slinky number that Clara has picked out for me.

“It absolutely will fit,” she replies. “You can trust me. I’m enlightened.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Ridiculously wise.” She fans out a selection of makeup brushes. “Now... Where to begin?”

Clara pokes and prods at me for the next hour. By the end of it, my face is so caked with makeup and my hair so full of spray that I question whether I will be able to keep my head upright.

Clara announces in a singsong voice that she is finished and somehow goads me into the sparkly dress. Then she guides me to the mirror, and the first thing I see is her hopeful expression.

And then... Wow.

Clara has coaxed my normally curly hair into silky waves that cascade over the tops of my breasts. My blue eyes pop under thick black false lashes, with gold and purple eyeshadow and thick black liner on the upper lids. My lips are light pink and shiny, and my skin is flawless, like creamy marble.

And the dress... Damn, the dress. It clings to me in all the right places, with a deep V accentuating my cleavage and a fringe at the bottom that tickles the tops of my thighs when I move.

“I don’t even look like me,” I comment, turning my face from side to side, entranced by my own reflection.

“That’s not so bad, is it?” Clara brings the makeup to the mirror and bumps me out of the way while she starts on her own face. “Tonight you can be anyone you want to be.”

She’s right, I realize. I am transformed.

Maybe going out is a good idea after all.



Clara and I hit up a few bars on the Lower East Side before making our way to what she claims is the best club in all of New York City—Fiamma. Once we get inside, it is a veritable buffet of sights and sounds. Loud dance music pulses through the speakers and ultra-glam revelers pack the dance floor and wave their arms above them as neon lights slash through the crowd.

I had a couple drinks in the earlier bars, but I never drink to excess when I’m around Clara. She says it doesn’t bother her, but it doesn’t seem fair. I’m working with a bit of a buzz, so Clara and I skip the bar and head straight for the dance floor.

I don't know the song playing but let the beat flow through me as I start to dance, winding my hands toward the ceiling and rolling my hips. It feels good to dance. I lose myself in it, swaying and twisting and tossing my hair. Clara and I make eye contact and break into giggles. It is the first time all day that I have felt truly alive.

I look over my shoulder to see how crowded the bar is, and my eye lands on a man cutting through the crowd a few feet behind me. My breath catches.

I'm just drunk enough to have one crystal-clear thought amidst the chaos: *That is one fine specimen.*

He must be around 6'5" as he towers above the crowd of high-heeled glamazons. His dark hair feathers around his face and the nape of his neck. It's the kind of hair that looks silky to the touch, and my fingers twitch at the thought of running my hands through it. His full lips are set in a hard line, as though annoyed at having to swim through the sea of bodies. He glances over, and for a second, our eyes meet.

My heart skips a beat and I go still, like a deer in the headlights. His eyes are dark pools that draw me in until I feel as though I'm drowning. He looks away, and I snap back into the present, realizing that for the past few seconds, I've forgotten to breathe.

The man disappears without so much as a backward glance. Maybe he wasn't looking at me at all.

Clara pokes my shoulder. "You okay?"

I nod and go back to dancing. "Sorry. Got distracted."

"By that hunk of man meat?" She licks her lips. "I don't blame you."

I dance until my feet ache, and sweat shimmers on my chest. I even indulge in a little bump-and-grind with a few guys who come my way, but the second any of them start asking too many questions, I grab Clara and we scoot into another part of the crowd. I just want to have fun, and at the moment, the idea of chatting up any guy is the opposite of that.

Clara and I hit the bar and I order drinks. She starts to drift off in the direction of a sexy guy with a very impressive afro and I have to wrangle her back to my side as she has my wallet and phone in her purse.

We hit the dance floor again and the guy comes over, performing silly dance moves like some sort of mating ritual for Clara's approval. It works. One second I'm shimmying with my best friend, the next I'm sipping a drink next to her while she and the hot rando paw at each other like teenagers.

I scan the club, my vodka cran tasting increasingly bitter with every sip. I don't even realize what I'm looking for until I see him—the hot guy I maybe made eye contact with earlier. He's leaning against the wall near the VIP area, scrolling through his phone.

I don't get him. He doesn't seem to belong here. He's too serious, and he looks too bored. He's wearing a slim-fitting black suit, with a black shirt and a red tie. It's bold, but he's not peacocking. He's just... being.

As though he can feel my gaze, the man looks up from his phone. His gaze skewers through me from across the room. A blue light splashes across my face, and I have no doubt that this time he is looking at me. Everything seems to slow down around me and my pulse races. His mouth lifts ever-so-slightly in a smirk. My mouth is dry, and I down the rest of my drink in one gulp. When I look back up, he is already walking up the stairs into the VIP area.

I turn back to Clara and grimace. She and her new friend look as though they're trying to eat each other, but at least she's having fun, I suppose.

Clara breaks away and whispers something in the guy's ear, then comes to talk to me.

"Hunter and I are going to get out of here," she says. "You'll be okay to get home, right?"

I nod, forcing a smile. "Sure."

She smooches my cheek and grabs Hunter's hand. The two of them disappear within seconds. It's almost impressive, or

rather, it would be if it weren't so annoying.

I heft a sigh and glance down at my empty drink. I'll grab one more for the road. There's a bottle of wine waiting for me at home, and if I'm remembering correctly, I've got a big bag of Doritos in one of the cupboards.

I squeeze my way to the bar and order another drink, swaying to the music. The bartender, a gorgeous redhead covered in tattoos, hands me my drink, and I take a sip absently as she keys it into the till.

Only then do I realize that my wallet disappeared from the club at the same time that Clara did.

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