

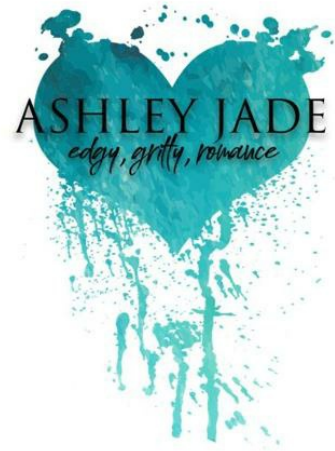
The background is a deep, dark purple and blue night sky. It is filled with numerous golden stars of various sizes and shapes, some with long, thin trails. Interspersed among the stars are several golden musical notes, including eighth and sixteenth notes. In the upper right quadrant, a shooting star or comet streaks across the sky, leaving a long, bright, golden trail that curves downwards and to the left. The overall atmosphere is magical and dreamlike.

the
Choice

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A. JADE

The Choice



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ISBN-13:

Cover by Lori Jackson

Editing by Ellie at My Brother's Editor

Editing by Kristy Stalter

Proofing by Rosa at My Brother's Editor

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If you're familiar with my books you know they're gritty, angsty, and contain dark-ish elements and characters that may be offensive and evoke a strong emotional response for some.

The Star Crossed Lovers duet is no different. This book deals with subjects that some sensitive readers may find upsetting, such as: SA and physical assault (*not* from the hero.)

I trust you to be aware of your personal triggers before proceeding.

Playlist:

[https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5QXwF3yYot1hQns4bo4vIC?
si=d8606602041d4db3](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5QXwF3yYot1hQns4bo4vIC?si=d8606602041d4db3)

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Dear Reader,

I've gone back and forth about writing this, but in the end, I decided it was important.

If you're in my reader's group you know I've discussed how each of my books are very personal to me for a variety of different reasons and real-life experiences.

The Choice and The Consequence are no exceptions, only this time, it cuts even deeper, and I'm way more nervous about it.

If you've read The Words, you've already met Skylar, the heroine of this duet.

In The Words, you've seen Skylar be strong, sassy, sensitive, independent, and resilient. All the qualities we love in our heroines.

However, she wasn't always that way.

It wasn't enough to tell you about Skylar's journey. In order to stay true to her and myself, I had to take you to the beginning and give you real-time glimpses into what shaped her. That includes the gritty, ugly parts. The parts that will undoubtedly make you want to throw your kindle out of frustration and vow to never read another Ashley Jade book again.

As much as I wish every woman was born strong and had a "take no crap from anyone" mentality from birth, that's simply not possible.

You can be born into the worst of circumstances, endure trauma that leaves you with scars, and survive horrors some could never dream of...and still be lured in by a monster when you least expect it.

So, this is me asking you to hang in there if you can. You don't have to agree with Skylar's choices or identify with them, but I do ask that you take a moment to try and understand before you rip her (or me) apart and slap a 'too stupid to live' label on us both.

If you've never been through what Skylar has been through, it's easy to criticize and cast judgment.

It's easy to be objective and make different (*good*) choices when you're on the outside looking in, but it's downright impossible when you're in the eye of the storm and you're just trying to survive.

Some of us weren't born strong...we had to survive things that would break others and find our inner strength.



Josh,

*The worst thing I ever did was stay.
The hardest thing I ever did was survive you.
And bravest thing I ever did was leave you.*

“Tell me every terrible thing you ever did, and let me love you anyway.”

— Sade Andria Zabala

Prologue

SKYLAR



Once upon a time, there was a little girl who gazed up at the night sky with teary eyes and made wishes on stars.

She wished she could join her mama in heaven...because her life had become a living hell.

She wished the demon that was destroying her mind, body, and soul would die, so she could feel safe again.

She wished she could close her eyes and fall asleep without enduring the sharp stinging sensation between her legs, feeling the weight of his body crushing hers, and hearing the sounds he made—the ones her aunt never seemed to notice—whenever he'd sneak into her bedroom and do things she'd never be able to forget.

Things she could never tell another soul about.

Once upon a time, a little girl made wishes on stars...

Only, she didn't wish for Prince Charming like so many other little girls.

She wished for someone ugly and broken...just like she was.

She wished for someone who'd love her so much it would take all her pain away.

She wished for someone to save her...

Before it was too late.

Part One: The Catalyst

Chapter 1

MEMPHIS



Age Thirteen

“This place sucks.”

Placing my duffel bag on the bed, I glance at Josh.

The dude is a pain, but he’s also the closest thing to a brother—*family*—I have.

I look around our new room. It’s small and basic, but what did he expect?

Rich people don’t take in strays like us. People who need money do.

“It could be worse.”

After being in the system for over six years, I could safely say this was one of the better places to land.

Hopefully, Josh doesn’t screw it up.

Huffing, he plops down on the twin bed opposite mine. “Knew you were gonna say that.” He makes a face. “This dump smells funny.”

“Nah. That’s *you*.” After making sure my most prized possession—the acoustic guitar my counselor got me last year—is safe and sound, I begin unpacking the few things I have. “Go take a shower.”

Sniffing his pits, his face changes from annoyed to nervous. “Can’t.

Haven't figured out if our new *dad* is a perv yet."

Fair enough.

We were supposed to arrive this afternoon, but our case worker got tied up with a few things and we didn't get here until late. Ergo, we've only exchanged a brief hello and a quick rundown of the house rules with our latest foster mom.

She seems fine, but given Josh's history with his piece-of-shit father, he has every right to be on edge about the husband we haven't met yet.

I open my mouth to remind him I've got his back, but there's a faint knock on the door before it opens.

"Hi," Vivian—or is it Cathy?—says before stepping inside. She's a tall redhead with a calm demeanor. While she doesn't look particularly young, she's not exactly grandma status, either. "Are you boys hungry? I can whip you up something to eat before my shift starts."

"You're going to work now?" Josh questions, his nervousness growing.

Gesturing to her scrubs, she nods. "Yeah. I work the overnight shift at the local hospital."

"Are you a nurse?" I ask at the same time Josh blurts, "Does your husband like to play with little boys when you're not around?"

Horrified, she places her hand over her heart. "What? *No.*"

Yeah...we're not gonna last long here.

I glare at Josh, although I can't bring myself to be angry with him. Compared to his, my life's been a walk in the park.

"He wasn't trying to insult you, ma'am. It's just..." I let my voice trail off because it's not my stuff to tell.

Josh shrugs innocently. "We're foster kids, lady. If you wanted perfect puppies, you should've made 'em yourself instead of going to the pound."

He's not wrong.

At that, her expression softens. “Archie is a real good man. You have nothing to worry about.”

“*Archie?*” Josh snorts. “What kind of—”

I elbow him in the ribs. “We appreciate you offering to make us some food, ma’am, but we ate before we got here.”

Truth be told, I’m starving, but Josh is already causing problems.

Just like he always does.

I’ll need to smooth things over so we don’t get kicked out.

My case worker—same one Josh has—mentioned that she specifically tried to get us in the same home since Josh’s behavior is better whenever he’s around me.

Despite being one week and one day older, she says he looks up to me and I’m a good influence on him.

Probably because I’m the only person who can tolerate him.

He’s what our caseworker, and a lot of other adults, call a *handful*.

But while he can be irritating as hell, he does make me laugh... sometimes.

More importantly, he loves rock music and is interested in learning how to play guitar...which is my favorite thing to do.

“You can call me Valerie,” the woman says. “And I’ll make y’all some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in case you change your mind.”

“Hope it’s the good kind and none of that store brand crap,” Josh mutters. “Since they’re cutting you a nice, fat check for taking us in.”

I have a lot of patience and it’s hard to get under my skin.

However, Josh is a level expert at pushing my buttons.

By the looks of it, I’m not alone.

Damn. We’ll be fourteen in two months. We just have to ride it out another five years.

“Halfway there,” I remind him because I know he wants to be free just as much as I do.

He falls silent.

Valerie turns her attention to me again. “I’m a CNA, but I’m saving up to go to nursing school.”

“Aren’t you a little old—”

This time, I slap the back of his head. “Shut *up*.”

Visibly exasperated, she takes several steps back. “My number’s on the fridge if there’s an emergency. Although Archie will be home from work soon if you need anything.”

I’m about to thank her, but I get another whiff of Josh. “Dude.”

“Can we take a shower?” Josh grunts.

“Not together,” I quickly add, and he smirks.

“Sure. Just be mindful not to use up all the hot water because Archie likes to take his before bed.” She hikes a thumb behind her. “It’s the door at the end of the hall and there are fresh towels in the cabinet.”

“Thank you.”

Another nod. “Sure thing.”

After casting another uneasy glance in Josh’s direction, she leaves the room.

“Go shower. They can smell you in Kentucky.”

He starts to head out but stops walking. “What if...”

“I got your back,” I reassure him.

Still unconvinced, he stares at the scar on his palm. It’s identical to the one I have because a few weeks after we met, the idiot decided to take a shard of glass and make us official *blood brothers*.

And I let him...because having each other was better than the alternative.

Nothing and no one.

“Promise?”

I take a seat on the edge of my new bed. “If you leave the door open, I can see down the hall.”

Which means if this Archie guy turns out to be a creep, I’ll be able to stop him.

Josh visibly relaxes. “Okay.”

I keep my gaze trained on the bathroom door as I mentally plan out tomorrow’s jam session.

Josh has been growing frustrated because no matter how many hours I spend trying to teach him the basics, he’s still having trouble mastering the guitar. I think he should try bass instead because it’s a lot easier to learn, but it’s not like I have one of those lying around.

That’s when I remember our new house is only a couple miles away from my favorite place—Guitar Galaxy. We can walk there first thing tomorrow morning—as long as it’s okay with the fosters—and then he’ll be able to get a feel for it.

The manager Ed is usually cool about letting people test out some of the guitars...as long as they don’t play Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven.”

Then he gets pissed and kicks them out.

Although he doesn’t seem to mind whenever I play it.

And just like that, my hands itch with the need to feel the strings beneath my fingers as I get lost in a trance...one where I have no idea where I’m going or where I’ll end up...but I don’t care because the journey is always worth it.

I’ll never forget the moment my music teacher placed a guitar in my hands and I strummed my first note.

It was like the first drop of a roller coaster.

Like being sucked into a vortex.

Like you've been reaching for the sky your whole life, and now you're finally touching it.

Like all the broken pieces inside me came together temporarily...and I was whole again.

A flash of light, along with movement in my peripheral, has me turning my head toward the window.

I freeze as I take in the girl peering out her own window.

She appears to be around my age with long shiny blonde hair and the most perfect face I've ever seen.

But it's her sad eyes and tearstained cheeks that make it difficult to breathe.

The longer she stares up at the stars with her palms pressed together...the harder she cries.

Like a broken angel praying for a miracle.

I lift my hand in an attempt to get her attention, but something hits the side of my head.

"You said you'd keep watch, jackass," Josh snaps.

Shit.

My focus turns to him. "My bad."

Popping open his suitcase, he roots around for a T-shirt and boxers. "What were you staring at?"

My chest recoils. *The girl.*

However, when I look out the window again...the light is off and she's gone.

"Nothing."

Only it didn't feel like *nothing*.

It felt like...

reaching for the sky and finally touching it.

Chapter 2

MEMPHIS



“Come on,” Josh whines. “Let me see it.”

Instinctively, I clutch the towel around my waist. “No.”

A few weeks back, Josh confessed his second biggest secret to me.

While he mostly liked girls...he liked guys a little, too.

He asked if his admission would make things weird between us and if it meant we were no longer family.

I told him the truth. *No*. Because whatever he’s into has nothing to do with me.

But now? *Now* it’s starting to get weird.

“Don’t be such a wuss,” he goads. “I’ll let you see mine.”

I pull a fresh pair of jeans and a T-shirt out of the dresser drawer. “I don’t want to see yours.”

His shoulders slump and he sighs. “Look, I just want to know if there’s something wrong with mine...if I’m defective or some shit because of what he did.”

“If you’re worried, go to a doctor.”

“Come on. We’re brothers.”

All the more reason he shouldn't be asking to see my junk.

However, the quicker I give him what he wants, the quicker we can do what *I* want and go to Guitar Galaxy.

Letting out a huff of irritation, I undo the knot on my towel. "There. Happy?"

His eyes go big. "*Dude.*"

My guts twist with dread.

Maybe there's something wrong with *mine*?

"What?"

Still staring, he blows out a breath. "It's big. Really big." He scratches his head. "And it's not even hard." He eyes me skeptically. "Are you a shower or a grower?"

The second. I'm not telling him that, though, because then he'll want to see proof.

I swiftly tug my jeans on. "Show's over."

Laughing, he ties his shoelaces. "You're such a prude. Guarantee you'll be a virgin until you're fifty." He juts his chin at my guitar. "Have fun humping that thing for the rest of your life since you're so obsessed with it."

I try to let it roll off my back, but the remark stings. Josh talks about sex all the time and aside from the occasional dream, I have no interest in it.

I'm starting to wonder if *I'm* the weird one because all I want to do is listen to music and play guitar.

Nothing else matters.

"Well, maybe if you were a little more *obsessed* with guitar, you wouldn't suck so bad at it."

His expression crumbles and I know I hit below the belt. Josh wishes he could play as well as I do. It's the only thing I've ever seen him put some actual effort into.

“You’re a jerk.” He kicks the dresser between our beds. “Go to Guitar Galaxy by yourself.”

Gripping the back of my neck, I exhale slowly. I guess I could apologize, but that would mean I felt remorse.

But I don’t...because what I said was the truth.

Besides, he started it.

“You’re not gonna say sorry. Are you?” he states after several minutes.

I shake my head which only makes him scowl.

“Sometimes I think you’re a psychopath, Memph.”

Sometimes I think that, too.

According to my counselor, while I’m well-behaved, I have difficulty processing emotions.

I prefer to think of it as—choosing not to think or talk about the bad stuff.

From what I’m told, a *traumatic* event happened when I was six, but I don’t remember any of it.

Or rather, I don’t *want* to remember any of it.

Therefore, I just stick to the facts.

I don’t know who my father is, and odds are I never will.

My mom was a drug addict who chose drugs over her son.

The end.

As for my polite *manners*, that’s just survival.

I learned from an early age that people will get off my back and shift their focus elsewhere once they realize I’m not a problem child.

Which is exactly what I want.

“I think you’ll like playing bass.” Instead of telling him it’s easier to learn, I add, “I have a feeling you’ll be really good at it.”

“You had a feeling I’d be *really good* at guitar, too, remember? Look how well that turned out.”

“Bass is a guitar, dumbass. Only it has four strings instead of six.”

His bitterness turns to intrigue. “Yeah?”

I nod. “That and most baselines are notes instead of chords.”

Which is what he struggles with most because while Josh has no problem playing a single note, he can’t seem to make the transition to playing chords easily, so he gets irritated and gives up.

I don’t mention that you *can* play chords on bass as well...they’re just a lot more infrequent.

He’ll tackle all that in time. As long as he sticks with it.

I can tell he’s still contemplating, so I hit him with something I know he’ll love. *Attention*.

“The bass line is what makes people bob their heads when they listen to music.”

His face lights up. “So, it’s cooler than a regular guitar?”

I wouldn’t go *that* far.

“To some,” I grit out.

“Okay, I’m down.” I’m halfway to the door when he adds, “On one condition.”

My steps come to a halt. “What?”

“Let me see it again.”

Narrowing my eyes, I glare at him. “No.”

Snorting, he punches my shoulder. “You should see your face right now. Relax. I’m just *joshing* you.”

The irony that his name is a term for joke isn’t lost on me.

Everything’s a joke to this kid.

Twisting the knob, I head down the hall. “We’ll need to ask Valerie for permission before we leave.”

It’s a little after ten a.m., so while I’m pretty sure she’s home from work, I

don't know if she's awake.

Fortunately, I hear clattering in the kitchen.

"Screw that," Josh mutters. "We're the ones paying the bills around here, rem—"

He stops talking when we enter the kitchen and encounter the biggest man I've ever seen.

Jesus. He looks like he could kill you with his big bare hands.

"I'll have the bills transferred to y'all's names then," he informs us as he sips a cup of coffee. "Since you're paying them now."

Josh and his big fat mouth.

"Sorry, sir," I say. "He didn't—"

"You're not what I expected an Archie to look like," Josh interjects, his eyes widening.

The man raises a brow. "How so?"

"Well, for starters you're...you know."

While Josh has pushed me to the point of wanting to snap before, he's never pushed me *this* close to the edge...until now.

I nudge him in the ribs with my elbow. "Shut up, dumbass."

The man, not looking the least bit offended, simply laughs. "Black?"

"And *ginormous*," Josh says before rattling off a series of questions in rapid fire. "How tall are you? How much do you weigh? How much do you eat? Why'd your folks give you such a bad name? Are you gonna kill us?"

I'm gonna kill him if he doesn't shut his trap.

To his credit, Archie appears to take this all in stride as he sits down at the table. I give the chair credit because it doesn't snap in half.

"I'm six feet, five inches. Three hundred and ten pounds. I eat four square meals a day...sometimes five. And I happen to like my name." His eyes narrow. "I'm also not gonna kill you...but I will send your asses packing if

you don't pull your weight around here."

"I guess it's a good thing we don't weigh as much as you then," Josh retorts.

So help me God.

"We have no problem doing chores, si—"

"Speak for yourself," Josh snaps. "I ain't doing shit."

The man's easygoing demeanor fades. "And I won't tolerate disrespectful little shits. Everyone pulls their weight around here and does their part. It's called responsibility."

I start to nod, but Josh places his hands on his hips. "Or what?"

"You can find another place to live, young man."

"Fine by me. This place is a dump anyway."

He storms off, narrowly missing a concerned—and sleepy—looking Valerie who's coming into the kitchen. "What's going on?"

"I told you this was a bad idea," Archie grunts.

Valerie looks between her husband and the hallway Josh is stomping down. "There's always an adjustment period, honey."

Although she doesn't look like she's thrilled with Josh's antics, either.

I have to fix this. Fast.

"He's been having a rough time, sir." I swallow. "I'll have a talk with him."

They both study me for what feels like an eternity before Archie speaks. "I think it will take a lot more than a talk to fix that attitude of his, but be my guest."

I start to walk away but pause. "After we do our chores, can we take a walk up to Guitar Galaxy?"

They exchange a confused look.

"What do you want to go there for?" Valerie questions.

“I...we...guitars are our thing.”

There are only two more weeks of summer left, and I’m hoping to teach him how to play bass before school starts.

“You’re a guitar player?”

I nod.

“Did you have lessons?”

I shrug. “Not really. Just a quick rundown of the basics from my music teacher at school. Everything else I learned on my own.”

They swap another look, and I can tell Archie’s mulling this over, unsure what to make of it.

Given we live in a shithole town in Tennessee, there are plenty of bad things two teenage boys could get into.

He must realize this because he sighs and says, “It’s fine with me, but be home by sundown.”

“Yes, sir.”

I start to walk away again, but Valerie halts me. “Since you two are planning on spending most of your time at this Guitar Galaxy, I’m gonna get y’all cell phones so we can keep in contact.”

It’s music to my ears because Josh has been wanting a phone. Which means I now have a bargaining chip.

Or not, because Archie makes an irritated noise. “How we gonna afford that?”

Valerie waves a hand. “We already have a family plan. It won’t cost all that much more.”

Archie looks at me. “If you want cell phones, it’s coming out of your allowance.” He stabs the table with his pointer finger. “An allowance you earn by doing chores.”

“Yes, sir.”

With that, I leave the kitchen and hightail it into the bedroom, where I find Josh packing his bags.

“I hate this place.”

“You haven’t even been here a full day yet.”

He grimaces. “I can’t believe that bastard thinks he can make me do chores. Screw that and screw him. He can get off his fat ass and clean his own house.”

“Every kid has to do chores,” I remind him.

Well, maybe not rich spoiled kids, but that’s not us.

“You know how much I hate chores.”

I know how much he hates doing *anything* an adult tells him to do.

“We’ll do them together. Then after, we can head out.”

He stops packing. “I don’t like doing dishes. Or cleaning toilets...that’s nasty.”

“I’ll do those then. You can take out the garbage. Deal?”

He’s still on the fence, so I sweeten the pot. “Valerie wants to get us cell phones.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, but in order for that to happen, we gotta do what they want.” I glance around. “There are worse places and people we could be stuck with, Josh.”

I *know* he knows this. However, he just shrugs.

“Come on. A cell phone and the freedom to go to Guitar Galaxy every day in exchange for doing a few chores is a sweet deal, and you know it.”

Especially since *I’ll* be the one doing the bulk of said chores.

“Fine, I’ll stay.” A shit-eating grin splits his face as he pulls some items out of his suitcase. “But only if you show it to me again.”

The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. “No.”

Cackling, he shoves a stack of clothes into a dresser drawer. “Chill. I’m just messing with you.” His expression turns serious. “I wasn’t actually gonna leave.”

Puzzled, I survey him. “Seriously?”

Because it sure seemed that way.

“Nah. You know I’d never ditch you. We’re family. I just wanted to rile them up and show them who’s boss.” His lips twitch. “Plus, I knew you’d fix things for me like you always do.” He throws a pair of rolled-up socks at me. “Thanks for agreeing to do most of the chores, though. That was a nice bonus.”

My hands clench with the need to pummel him. It shouldn’t come as a surprise, though. This is the type of shit he does.

I just hate that I fell for it...again.

Nostrils flaring, I throw the socks back at him. “You’re an asshole.”

“Says the psychopath.” Grinning, he wraps an arm around my neck, pulling me into a headlock. “Come on, Flea. Go do our chores so we can bounce.”

Maneuvering out of the headlock, I shove him. “Flea’s a *bassist*.”

Something he should know because while not my favorite rock band—that would be a three-way tie between Zeppelin, Nirvana, and System of a Down—we listen to Red Hot Chili Peppers regularly.

He waggles his eyebrows. “No wonder he’s everyone’s favorite then.”

I give him the finger before I slip out of the room...and do *our* chores.

Chapter 3

SKYLAR



I peer up at the clock above the mantel in the living room.

He'll be home in one hour.

My gaze drifts to the other end of the couch where my aunt is still curled up in a ball due to last night's drunken showdown.

Shane—because I'll never refer to that monster as my uncle—expects things to be done a certain way around here.

Things like a hot meal on the table when he gets home from work.

A clean house, despite always littering it with beer cans and cigarette butts whenever he's in it.

And me in my bed every night...so he can sneak inside and do things that make me sick to my stomach.

Last night didn't go according to plan, though, because my aunt didn't have supper ready on time.

I used to think she was oblivious to what was happening, but the older I got, the more I realized that wasn't the case.

She knows.

I scan the colorful bruise marring her cheek, thanks to her husband.

She just can't do anything about it.

My aunt Cheryl is just as much his victim as I am.

Since I don't want a repeat of last night and my aunt needs her rest, I take matters into my own hands.

Getting up from the couch, I press a kiss to the side of her head. "I'm gonna get dinner started, okay?"

I'm about to walk away, but she grips my hand.

She doesn't say a word, but she doesn't have to.

The remorse swimming in her eyes says it all.

Padding into the small kitchen, I take out a pan and pot from the cabinet.

It's the end of the week, so we don't have much in the fridge. Not that we have all that much at the beginning of the week either.

Rummaging around the cabinets and freezer, I manage to find two potatoes and a small package of chicken thighs.

Shane will complain because he *always* complains. But if the jerk wants better meals with bigger portions, he should quit wasting half his paycheck on beer.

After placing the package of chicken in the microwave to defrost, I preheat the oven and boil some water, so I can make mashed potatoes.

My mind wanders off as I wash and chop the spuds.

Why, Mama?

It's the same question I've asked myself since the day she died eight years ago and I moved in with my aunt.

Why did she have to leave me?

Why did she have to get cancer and die?

Why can't I be in heaven with her...instead of hell with him?

What did I do to deserve this?

Shane says it's because I'm so beautiful he just can't help himself.

But I certainly don't feel beautiful.

I feel ugly and dirty.

Like a hideous stain that can never be scrubbed away.

Shoving those thoughts down, I place the potatoes in the pot, then grab the chicken from the microwave. It's not fully defrosted, but I'm on a time crunch.

I'm seriously regretting not starting earlier.

To make up for it, I put whatever seasoning we have left on the chicken and hope for the best.

I go to place the pan into the oven but pause when I realize it's not hot. Heck, it's not even warm.

I'm positive I turned it on, but maybe I didn't? Frustrated, I press the button harder than necessary.

Horror fills me a few minutes later because I still don't feel any heat.

Ugh. This oven is always giving us issues. Since the stovetop is still working, it must be the same problem as last time...and the time before that.

A dumb mouse chewed the wire.

I told Shane the traps weren't enough, and we needed to get an exterminator, but he said it was *too expensive*.

Think, Skylar. *Think.*

No doubt Shane will be pissed and he'll take his anger out on my aunt, but it will be less severe if there's dinner waiting on the table and a few cold beers to wash it down with.

I pull out a frying pan and make quick work of cooking the chicken that way.

Then I swiftly set the table, put a can of beer in the freezer, and clean up the mess I made while cooking.

The clock on the wall tells me I still have fifteen minutes of freedom left before his car pulls into the driveway.

Treehome time.

“I’ll be back,” I yell before running out the rear door.

Our house is old, tiny, and falling apart, but the yard is my favorite.

Or rather, the expansive woods enclosing the treehome I built.

Although *treehome* is an exaggeration. It’s basically a fort.

And by fort? I mean a large poncho secured to two trees with some cord and stakes I made with a two-by-four I stole out of Shane’s garage last summer.

The craftsmanship is shoddy and it hardly qualifies as shelter...but it’s my sanctuary. Hence, I call it tree *home*.

Because home is supposed to be the place you feel safest.

Whenever I come out here, I like to lie down, close my eyes, and pretend my treehome is so tall it touches the sky.

So tall he’ll never be able to touch me again.

Only, I can’t do that today because when I reach my makeshift treehome, I see it’s been invaded by a boy.

“What are you doing in my treehome?”

The boy, who looks around my age with light-blond hair and blue eyes—eyes that grow bigger the longer he stares at me—turns his head from side to side, visibly confused.

“What are you talking about?”

I gesture to the poncho he’s sitting under as if it should be obvious.

“Hold up. *This* thing is your treehouse?”

“*Treehome*,” I correct, feeling all kinds of stupid.

And that feeling only grows when he laughs and says, “Who calls a treehouse a tree *home*?”

I do.

Placing my hands on my hips, I glower at him. “Don’t be rude.”

Amusement flickers in his expression. “What’s your name?”

My first instinct is to lie...because that's all I ever do.

I lie for my aunt.

I lie for Shane.

I lie to myself.

But there's something about this boy—and the way he's looking at me like I'm the most fascinating thing he's ever seen—that makes me want to tell him the truth.

“Skylar.”

He smiles, and wow. He has a really nice smile. It's what my aunt would call charming.

“Pretty name for a pretty girl.”

I nearly stumble back. Is he...flirting? *Gross.*

Only it's not, because unlike Willie Baker and Stuey Gardner, who give me the creeps whenever they flirt...I don't mind it so much.

I don't mind it at all actually.

“What's your name?”

“Josh.” He pats the empty space next to him. “Sit with me.”

I'm torn because he seems harmless, but I don't like being so close to people.

Especially guys.

Especially when we're all alone.

Bad things happen.

“I...uh. I'm okay over here.”

He frowns, and I hate myself for making that beautiful smile disappear, but I can't help it.

I'm broken.

He surveys me again. I'm beginning to feel like I'm under some kind of microscope...but he doesn't look repulsed by what's staring back at him.

It's the exact opposite.

He's looking at me like I matter. Like I'm important.

Like he accepts me.

"I won't hurt you, Skylar," he states, and both the sincerity in his voice and the earnestness in his eyes make it hard to breathe.

It's like I'm being seen for the very first time...ugly parts and all.

He pats the empty place next to him again. "Sit."

When I don't move, he shoots me another dazzling smile. "Come on. Don't be rude."

Despite the mocking voice he uses as he recites my earlier words, it's clear he's only teasing.

He wants to see me smile, too.

Ignoring my sweaty palms and racing heart, I plop down beside him and hug my knees to my chest.

"Who are you hiding from?"

I hug my knees tighter. "Where did you *come* from?"

I've never seen him before because I definitely would have remembered him.

He snorts. "Is that your house up ahead?"

I nod.

"Then I'm your new neighbor."

That makes no sense. The Turners live next door.

Unless they left.

"Oh."

"Why do you look upset?"

"I didn't know the Turners moved."

I'm sad I didn't get to say goodbye because while Archie looks super scary, he's actually really nice. He's given me a ride to school a few times

when I missed the bus and he never once tried anything.

He even made me take his lunch when he noticed I didn't pack one. I felt bad because I didn't want him to be hungry at work, but he *insisted*.

"They didn't." Josh sighs. "But me and my brother Memphis moved in with them...for now."

I open my mouth to ask a bunch of questions, but the next words out of his mouth make my chest clench. "We're foster kids."

"Oh."

"Do you always say *oh* when you don't know what else to say?"

Yes.

"No." I shrug. "Maybe." I shake my head, feeling all kinds of stupid yet *again*. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"You know. You being..."

"An unwanted stray?" he supplies when my sentence trails off.

I wince because that's *harsh*. "I wasn't...that's not what I meant."

He plucks a blade of grass from a small patch in the dirt and chews on it.

"Why? It's the truth."

My heart hurts. So much so I try to rub the ache away. "I'm sorry."

It's all I can seem to say right now.

"You live with your folks?" he questions, changing the subject.

I shake my head. "No. My mom died when I was four, so I live with my aunt and her husband."

"Gotcha. What are your aunt and uncle like?"

I cringe. "My aunt and her husband are...fine."

He studies me again. "Why don't you call him your uncle?"

Because that would mean he's my family...and family shouldn't do the kinds of things *he* does to me.

A queasy feeling fills my stomach and I have the urge to run away because I don't like talking about Shane.

Josh must sense my itch to escape because he grabs my wrist. "Is he who you're hiding from?"

The words are trapped in my throat...because I'm not allowed to tell anyone.

But even if I was, I don't *want* to.

"Curtis," he says after a minute.

I blink up at him. "Curtis? Who's Curtis?"

"My biological male parent."

I raise a brow. "You mean your father?"

He holds my stare. "He's not my father...for the same reason your aunt's husband isn't your uncle."

An unspoken bond develops between us as I process what he's telling me.

Josh is ugly and broken.

Just like I am.

Butterflies swarm in my tummy and my heart beats so fast it feels like it's going to fly right out of my rib cage.

My wish came true.

A loud rumble of thunder makes us both jolt. There's a storm brewing outside, but it doesn't matter because we're in my treehome...where nothing and no one can hurt us.

"Skylar!" Shane booms in the distance.

Except him.

I spring up. "Shane's home."

And he sounds pissed...because I'm *not*.

Nausea barrels into me and I force myself to take several deep breaths, so I don't puke.

I'm gearing up to run, but Josh grabs my hand and squeezes, like he's giving me all his strength.

Strength...and a lifeline.

"I won't hurt you, Skylar."

I believe him. Because he gets it.

In ways no one else ever will.

Which is why when he leans in and gently presses his lips to mine for two whole Mississippi seconds...I don't stop him.

"Skylar!"

Josh's grip tightens, like he doesn't want to let me go.

I don't want him to.

"Be strong."

Tears prickle my eyes because it's getting harder and harder.

Every day, Shane steals another piece of me.

Pretty soon, there won't be anything left but an empty shell.

He wipes the tear streaming down my cheek. "I'll be here tomorrow, okay?"

"Skylar!" Shane screams again, his tone even angrier.

Having no choice, I break contact and dart back to the house.

Another rumble of thunder assaults my ears...and then the drizzle turns into a downpour.

But no matter how hard it rains, it will never be enough to wash the sins out of this house.

Out of me.

I glance back at the woods one last time as Shane drags me inside.

But now there's a boy...

A boy who looks at me like I'm not ugly and dirty.

A boy who shares my demons.

Chapter 4

MEMPHIS



I trek into the kitchen, where I find Archie eating a bowl of cereal at the table. “Have you seen Josh?”

He pauses midbite. “Earlier, when he was taking out the garbage. Why?”

Josh doing chores without being nagged is...strange.

So is him dodging me. We’ve gone to Guitar Galaxy twice, and just as I suspected, he took an immediate liking to the bass.

However, it seems he likes some girl he met in the woods a few days ago a lot more because he ghosted me yesterday.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, last night I had to hear him drone on and on about how he’s gonna marry her.

I had to shove earbuds in my ears just so I could fall asleep.

But now? Now I’m reaching the end of my fuse. Not only am I still doing most of the chores, he’s not even making it worth my while anymore.

He’s too busy hanging out with some dumb girl.

Annoyed, I pull the cell Valerie gave me out of my pocket.

If he doesn’t answer, I’m pouring toilet water all over his bed.

It rings twice before going to voice mail.

“Dang it.”

“What’s got you so riled up, boy?” Archie questions.

“We had plans to go to Guitar Galaxy, but Josh is ignoring me. All because of some stupid girl.”

That makes him laugh. Which only makes *me* angrier.

“It’s not funny.”

He gestures to the chair next to him. “Come on and have a seat. Take a load off.”

I don’t want to have a seat.

I want to know why someone who claims to be my brother—my *family*—is choosing someone else over me.

What’s so special about her?

Bet she doesn’t listen to rock music.

Or know how to play guitar.

I’m going back to the bedroom when my phone vibrates with a text.

Josh: What’s up?

Jackass.

Memphis: Where are you?

Josh: Woods.

That really clears things up.

Memphis: Woods where?

Josh: The woods in the backyard, dumbass.

He’s been in the backyard this whole time?

My irritation grows as I make a beeline for the rear door.

I knew there was a wooded area behind the house, but I had never paid much attention before now.

Not sure how I could have missed it, though, because it spans across acres.

I walk for a good quarter of a mile before I spot Josh near some weird tarp thing...doing God knows what with two pieces of plywood.

However, that's not what has my lungs locking up.

It's the girl sitting under the tarp.

Because it's not just any girl.

It's *her*.

The same one I saw in the window.

Only now, she isn't crying.

She looks happy.

I've been peering out the window before bed every night—hoping to spot her again—but I haven't.

I was starting to wonder if she was a ghost or a figment of my imagination.

But she's not. She's real and she's *here*.

Beaming at Josh while he hammers nails into plywood.

“What are you doing?”

“Building a treehome.”

I'm pretty sure he means *treehouse*, but I don't want to correct him in front of his girl.

A weird twist goes through my chest. *His girl*.

The one he swears he's going to marry one day.

They exchange a smile...and *Jesus*.

Her face is somehow even more perfect than I remember. Bright hazel-green eyes, a cute little nose that turns up ever so slightly, high cheekbones, and full pink lips.

Even her eyebrows are perfectly symmetrical...just like the rest of her features.

It's like God chose to make her his most flawless canvas.

And damn, did he succeed.

Suddenly I'm not nearly as pissed about Josh ditching me for her as I am

that she's here with him.

I saw her first.

Not that it matters...because she doesn't see me.

All her focus is on Josh.

After what feels like an eternity, they finally peel their gazes away from one another and spare a glance my way.

"This is Skylar," Josh says, looking between us. "Skylar, this is my brother Memphis."

I don't know whether to laugh or give God the finger because, of course her name is *Skylar*.

Tucking her legs underneath her, she mumbles a quick *hi* in my direction before averting her gaze.

I might have issues processing emotions, but I don't have a problem identifying the one I'm feeling right now.

Rejection.

And it stings like a bitch.

It's a strange feeling because usually I want to be left alone.

But I want her to notice me.

I don't want to come off as a creeper, though, so I turn my attention to the treehouse Josh is building.

Or rather, *trying* to because he's going about it all wrong.

I haven't built a whole lot of things, but I know he's missing two crucial steps.

I gesture to the two trees on either side of us. "Neither of those are strong enough to support a treehouse."

"*Treehome*," Skylar whispers.

I've never heard anyone call it that before, but *treehome* it is.

Josh points at the tree on the right. "That one might not, but—" He juts his

chin at the one on the left. “That one definitely will.”

He’s wrong. While it might look fine at first glance, there’s a big problem.

“The trunk is rotting.”

He shrugs. “So?”

“So even though it’s sturdy enough right now, it won’t last. Maple trees rot pretty quickly.”

Rolling his eyes, he looks at Skylar. “Told you he was a big nerd.”

I’m not a nerd. I just pay attention in science class and have common sense.

Something *he* lacks.

“You don’t have to build me a new treehome,” Skylar says, despite sounding disappointed. “It was sweet of you to try, but it’s okay.”

Josh places the hammer down and wipes his hands on his jeans. “No. I told you I’d build you a better one and I’m gonna.” He looks around. “We’ll just have to pick another area.”

Chewing her bottom lip, she shakes her head. “No. This spot is perfect because it’s far enough away that he can’t see me but not so far that I can’t make it back to the house in under a minute when he yells. It *has* to be right here.”

I don’t know who *he* is, but I don’t like the sound of it.

Or the frightened look in her eyes.

Josh drags a hand down his face. “Sorry, babe, but I need to make sure you’re safe. Pick a different spot.”

Babe? It’s all I can do not to gag.

“I *can’t*—”

“She doesn’t have to,” I cut in before I can stop myself.

Jaw clenching, Josh’s gaze swings my way. “Okay, Einstein, what do you suggest then?”

Something that will require a lot of time, resources, and hard work.

“Well, since you want a treehome...you’ll have to build one.”

“That’s what I’m doing, asswipe.”

No, he’s *not*.

“I don’t mean in a tree. I mean right here between the trees...exactly where that tarp thing is.”

“It’s a treehome,” Skylar utters. “Not a tarp thing.”

Duly noted.

Josh makes a face. “You mean...like an actual house?”

I nod. “A miniature one, but yeah.”

Skylar’s face lights up like a Christmas tree.

It makes me want to do whatever it takes to ensure she’s *always* smiling.

Rubbing his chin, Josh mulls this over. “I guess it’s not all that different from what I was go—”

“Skylar!” an angry voice booms in the distance.

She bolts up. “Shane’s home early.” Her frantic gaze falls to the tools scattered around Josh. She looks like she’s about to vomit. “I *told* you not to take them.”

Josh stands. “Don’t worry. I’ll put them back in the shed.”

“No. Just...forget it.”

With that, she walks away.

Only to stop a moment later...and puke.

What the hell is going on?

“I’ll tell him it was me, okay?” Rushing over, Josh holds up her hair...just in time for her to throw up again. “You don’t have to go back there.”

“Yes, I do.” Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she turns her head to look at him. “It’ll be worse if I don’t.”

“Skylar!” the man roars.

She sucks in a shaky breath...and then she takes off running.

“What’s going on with her?”

Because it’s clear something isn’t right.

Sulking, he walks back over to the plywood. “Same stuff my dad used to do to me. Only it’s her uncle.”

Christ. Now *I’m* the one who’s going to be sick.

“He...” My mouth can’t say the words. Because my brain can’t process how *anyone* could hurt a girl like Skylar.

That’s when it dawns on me. *He’s the reason she was crying.*

Josh goes back to hammering. “Yeah.”

How can he be so calm about this? Especially since he understands exactly what she’s going through.

“We have to tell someone.”

I don’t recognize my voice. It’s deeper. *Angrier.*

I have the sudden urge to break shit. Namely, her uncle’s face.

But I can’t because attacking him will only put me in hot water.

“We need to call the police.”

He snorts. “Why? So she can be in the system like us?”

“It’s better than what’s going on in that house.”

“No, it’s not,” he snarls. “Because then I won’t know where she is. Plus, she lives with her aunt and the asshole threatened to kill her if she ever told anyone.” His eyes lock with mine. “Which means *you* can’t tell anyone either, Memphis. If you do, he might...I can’t lose her.” He swallows. “Promise me you won’t say a word.”

I don’t like this one bit. But as much as it kills me, Josh knows more about this situation than I do, and if he thinks staying silent is the best way to protect her...I’ll have to take his word for it.

“Promise.”

He blows out a breath. “And don’t tell Skylar I told you. I’m the only person she’s told her secret to, and I don’t want her finding out I blabbed. She trusts me.”

Right.

He holds my stare. “I mean it, Memph. I only told you because we’re brothers and you’re the only person *I* can trust.”

A twinge of guilt knots my chest.

Josh has spilled all his secrets to me—including ones I wished he wouldn’t—but I can’t say the same.

Trust isn’t something I hand out freely. Because once you let someone in—once you give them access to those parts you keep hidden—it gives them leverage.

To use against you.

To manipulate you.

To hurt you.

I’ll never be able to trust someone that much.

Doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate that Josh does, though.

“I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

Just like I always do.

“Good.”

A moment later, he goes back to work.

I raise a brow when I notice him nailing the two pieces of plywood alongside one another. Not only is he creating a bump that people will trip over, it’s the wrong type of wood.

“Plywood isn’t strong enough for a foundation. Especially old plywood that’s warped. Four by fours would be a lot better.”

Although it’s expensive. However, Archie works at the local hardware store, and they have a lumber department. I bet he’d be able to get Josh some

supplies for cheap...if Josh would quit mouthing off to him and Valerie.

Josh blinks in confusion. "What foundation? I'm building a wall."

A laugh slips out. "You can't build a wall before you build a foundation."

"Watch me."

I *watch* him strike the hammer so hard he cracks his wall.

"What the hell? Plywood ain't supposed to crack."

"Warped plywood can," I inform him with a sigh. "Which is what I was trying to tell you."

If he would just listen to me every once in a while, he'd learn a thing or two.

Frustrated, he stands up, kicks the plywood, and throws the hammer.

"Screw this."

Before I can offer to help, he stomps off in the direction of our house.

Once again, I'm not surprised. This is what Josh does.

Makes a bunch of plans and promises...but hardly ever follows through with them.

Only, it's not me he'll be letting down this time.

It's *her*.

Gripping my neck, I look at the tarp, then at the plywood.

I shouldn't get involved. This is their thing.

But the way those hazel eyes sparkle whenever she says the word *treehome* makes it clear how important it is to her.

I don't want her to be disappointed when Josh goes back on his word...just like he always does.

I don't want him to hurt her.

Which is why after I collect the tools Josh left and sneak them back into that bastard's shed...

I head back to the house, draw up a blueprint, and ask Archie for a favor.

But after I finish building Skylar her treehome, I'm going to push her out of my head and pretend she doesn't exist.

Because she isn't my sky to touch.

She's his.

Chapter 5

SKYLAR



“Is it okay if I go outside?”

It’s the very last day of freedom before school starts tomorrow and I want to spend every moment of it with Josh.

After looking at the clock, my aunt nods. “Yes, but make sure you’re in this house before Shane gets home.” She rubs her temples. “I can’t...I want to have a good night.”

That makes two of us.

“I promise I’ll be back before then. I’ll even help you make dinner.”

Not wanting to waste another second, I sprint out of the house.

I see Josh every day, but we never run out of things to talk about.

Well, mostly we talk about him, but that’s fine by me because he’s my favorite subject.

Memphis—who’s already hard at work—tenses when I approach.

“Hey.”

As usual, he says nothing.

Despite working on my treehome every day for the past two weeks, I get the distinct impression that he doesn’t like me very much.

I just wish I knew *why*. We’ve hardly said five words to one another since we met. I can’t imagine what I could have done to piss him off so much.

The smile slips off my face when I notice Josh is nowhere to be found.
“Where’s Josh?”

“Sleeping.”

Make that six words now.

“Oh.” I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Do you think he’ll be up soon?”

He shrugs.

Talk about *awkward*.

But it shouldn’t be. Josh and I are going to get married one day. I *know* it. Which means Memphis and I will be family, too.

Even though they’re not biologically related, they’re very much brothers.

Josh said before I came along, Memphis was the most important person in the world to him.

Shoot. *That’s* why Memphis is so annoyed with me.

He thinks I replaced him.

But I want him to know it isn’t like that, and we can be friends.

Heck, we *should* be friends since we both care about Josh so much.

I look around. There are various tools he borrowed from Archie, along with scraps of wood. Every day he shows up with a new piece of wood and my treehome looks a little more finished.

Like a real home.

So far, there’s a deck—or *foundation*—as he calls it, and this week he’s been working on something called wall frames, which, judging by the looks of things, are being installed now.

I hate that he’s been doing this all alone, and I don’t want him to think I’m ungrateful, so I pick up a hammer off the ground. “I want to help.”

Memphis doesn’t look at me, but he does look down at my feet.

And frowns.

“Put shoes on.”

No way, José. I hate wearing feet prisoners. “I’ll be fine. What do you need me to do?”

“Put down the hammer, for starters.” He presses a button on the tool he’s holding and a buzzing sound fills my ears. “We’re screwing.”

My mouth drops open and I take several cautious steps back. Josh assured me Memphis was a good guy, but I’m not so sure about that. “Um.”

“Screws,” he grits out. “We’re screwing screws into the frame.”

God, I feel so dumb. Dumb and dramatic.

“Right.”

A furious blush creeps up his neck. It would almost be adorable if he wasn’t looking at me like he wanted to gouge my eyes out.

“Just stand on the opposite side of me and hold this. I’ll handle the rest.”

And that’s what we do for the next five minutes. I hold, he screws...in complete silence.

Until I can’t take it anymore. “Are you excited for school tomorrow?”

It’s the first day of eighth grade and we’ll all be attending the same school.

I can’t wait to show Josh around and sit with him on the bus and at lunch.

It’s been awesome having someone to confide in. *Someone who gets it.*

I’m really hoping we’ll have a few classes together, otherwise it’s going to suck big time.

“No.”

That’s all I get from him, but I’m not one to give up so easily, so I continue making small talk.

“When’s your birth—”

The sound of the drill cuts me off. *Rude.*

“My birthday’s February twenty-ninth,” I shout, thoroughly frustrated.

“But since it only comes around every four years, I have to celebrate it on the

twenty-eighth. Even though I'll be fourteen this year, *technically*, I'm only three...and a half."

A little smirk curls the corners of his lips before they flatten into a hard line.

"When's your birthday?" I repeat.

Once again, Memphis doesn't answer. He's too focused on the task at hand.

I find myself focusing on him.

He's not only the complete opposite of Josh personality-wise but looks-wise.

Unlike Josh, who has blond hair and blue eyes, Memphis has dark hair and dark eyes...*intense* ones that match the rest of his harsh features.

Like his sharp jaw that has a tiny little cleft in it.

He's really tall, too. *A lot* taller than me. And Josh.

He has weird lips, though. And by weird? I mean, they're *nice*...which is strange because he's a guy.

He not only has a full bottom lip but a full top one as well...kind of like a heart that's been stretched into the most perfect shape. They also look really soft...

Ouch.

I suck in a breath as piercing pain—caused by the nail I just stepped on—shoots up my foot. I freeze, hoping that maybe if I ignore it, it will go away.

But it doesn't. It only gets worse, and now there's liquid trickling out of it.

Memphis, who's already moved on to the next frame, makes an irritated sound. "If you want to help, don't just stand there."

Tears spring to my eyes. "Um...I...uh."

Suddenly, all those sharp features soften, and he rushes over to me. "Shit."

I look down and nearly faint when I see all the blood gushing out. "I

stepped on a nail.”

“I can see that.” His expression goes slack, like he’s annoyed he has to be the one to deal with me and my situation. “*This* is why I told you to put shoes on.”

That only makes me cry harder because not only is the jerk mad at me for getting injured, I should have listened to him. “I don’t like wearing feet prisoners.”

“I need you to sit so I can take it out.”

With me holding on to his shoulder for balance, he carefully guides me until I’m seated on the edge of the deck.

“I’m gonna go get a first aid kit. Stay right here.”

Gesturing to my foot, I scowl at him. “It’s not like I could go anywhere if I wanted to.”

My stomach drops as Memphis takes off.

I really hope Shane doesn’t come home early because there’s no way I can jog to the house right now. I can barely even hobble.

Memphis returns approximately three minutes later with the first aid kit, which means he must have run the whole way there *and* back.

Maybe he doesn’t hate me that much after all.

Or maybe he’d like me to stop bleeding all over his hard work.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him as he sits next to me. “I’ll clean everything up.”

A wrinkle forms between his brows. “Don’t worry about that.”

I start to smile because I like this side of him...until he reaches for my foot and places it on his lap.

Instantly, I flinch and recoil. “Stop.”

“I have to get it out.”

Panic sets in, wrapping around my lungs and pulling tight. I don’t know him well enough to let him touch me. Hell, we barely talk.

He could do anything to me out here.

He could be a monster like Shane.

Oh god. I can't breathe.

I can't...

Letting go of my foot, Memphis raises his hands as if showing me he means no harm. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have touched you without your permission."

Guilt flickers in my chest because not only does he look genuinely sorry, it's obvious my outburst freaked him out. "I'm sorry, too. I just..."

I'm broken.

Those intense eyes soften again. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Sky."

Sky.

Usually, I hate when people shorten my name, and I always correct them.

I don't have the urge to do that with Memphis, though.

To be honest, I'm surprised he even remembers my name since he withdraws whenever I'm around.

"Okay," he utters a moment later. "Here's what you're gonna do."

Say what now?

"What do you mean what *I'm* gonna do?"

"You'll need to take out the nail yourself, but I'll walk you through it."

I shake my head. "Nuh-uh."

A muscle in his jaw bunches and he drags a hand down his face. "It's not gonna magically fall out on its own." He winces. "It's pretty deep."

Hard pass. Because the only thing that will hurt worse than that nail going through my foot...is taking it *out* of my foot.

Memphis rubs his forehead and sighs. "Do you want me to get Josh?"

That's laughable.

"He's squeamish around blood, remember?"

Blood, scratches, cuts. The boy got a splinter the other day and you would have thought he'd been stabbed until Memphis finally managed to get him to calm down enough so he could take it out.

He shifts a little and his shoulder grazes mine. However, I don't mind the contact this time. "I know you're scared, but you can do this."

He doesn't understand. I legitimately won't be able to.

"I can't. My brain won't let me."

He blinks. "What do you mean your brain won't let you?"

"Me and my brain get along very well, so naturally, it also wants to protect me from pain. Therefore, it won't let me."

He looks like he doesn't know whether to yell or laugh. "In that case, you and your *brain* only have two options."

"Which are?"

"One—you can keep the nail in. It will suck to walk at first, but I'm sure you'll get used to it...before the gangrene sets in, and they have to amputate your leg."

Horror snakes up my spine. "What's the second?"

He holds my gaze. "You can trust me."

My heart races as I mull this over. I don't know Memphis.

Yet, here he is...coming to my rescue.

And building me a treehome.

Then again, sometimes guys do nice things before they hurt you.

A few days after my mom died and I moved in with my aunt, Shane came home with an ice cream cake and a teddy bear. Then he put my favorite cartoon on the TV and urged me to join him on the couch.

I was still sad and confused about my mom passing, but he was being so nice. We sat there, laughing as we watched television and gorged ourselves on sweets while my aunt was busy making arrangements at the local funeral

home.

It was one of the best days I ever had.

Until it wasn't.

But even though I can't get a read on Memphis...my gut tells me he wouldn't do that to me.

Plus, I don't want to lose my leg since I'm pretty fond of having limbs.

"Please don't hurt me," I whisper. "*Please.*"

Sorrow fills his expression, and he swallows thickly. "It might hurt when I take the nail out, but the second you tell me to stop, I will. Deal?"

I nod. "Deal."

He pats his thigh. "Put your foot up here."

I do, and he sets to work taking supplies out of the first aid kit.

"Did you say *feet prisoners* before, or was I hearing things?"

"You weren't hearing things. I don't like wearing feet prisoners."

He raises a brow. "What are feet prisoners?"

"You know, the things you put on your feet. Otherwise known as *shoes.*"

He thinks about this for a moment. "Shouldn't they be feet prisons? Because the feet are the prisoners."

I mean, if *Mr. Smarty-Pants* wants to be technical about it, I guess.

"I like feet *prisoners.*"

His mouth curves into a grin. "You might be the weirdest person I've ever met. And trust me, I've met some weirdos."

I mock gasp. "Holy cow. Is that a *smile*, Memphis Roland?"

He should do it more often because it does really nice things to his face.

"It's Payne. Me and Josh aren't biological brothers, so we don't have the same last name."

Uh-oh.

I pull my foot away. "I changed my mind. I'm not letting someone with the

last name *Payne* take a nail out of my foot.”

Visibly exasperated, he stares up at the sky. “You’ve got to be kidding me. I didn’t choose my last name.”

“Sorry, but I believe the universe has a way of giving us signs.”

And if that’s not a warning from the cosmos, I don’t know what is.

His expression turns sheepish, like whatever he’s about to say next embarrasses him.

“My middle name is Chiron.” A grimace twists his features. “And not even Josh knows that, so please keep it to yourself.”

And I thought *I* had a weird middle name.

“Your secret’s safe with me, but why are you telling me this?”

“Because it means *healer* in Greek.”

My eyes narrow into tiny slits. “Now you’re just messing with me.”

A laugh leaves him, and I think I might like it even more than his smile.

“I swear I’m not.” His face falls, and he averts his gaze. “My mom was a drug addict. I’m pretty sure she only named me *Memphis* because it’s the city we lived in, and it was the only thing she could recall.”

My heart pangs. That might be one of the saddest things I’ve ever heard. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” He places the tweezers back into the first aid kit. “Anyway, I’m not messing with you. Chiron really is my middle name. Apparently, the dude was an immortal centaur who got struck by a poisonous arrow one day.”

“Good thing he’s a healer then, huh?”

“That’s the thing. Just because he was immortal didn’t mean he wasn’t able to feel pain.” His chest rises on a deep inhale. “It meant his pain would last forever because, despite being able to heal everyone else, he couldn’t heal himself.”

That's two for two today. "That's heartbreaking."

"I guess, but it bodes well for you." The corner of his mouth tugs up smugly. "Well, *if* you'll let me live up to my legendary namesake."

Ignoring the rapid thud of my heart, I plant my foot on his lap again. "Okay, but if you're lying about this whole Chiron thing—"

"I'm not," he assures me.

I wince the second the tweezers touch the nail. "I need a second."

As promised, he stops. "No problem. Let me know when you're ready."

Nerves coil my belly.

What if there's a gaping hole in my foot after he pulls it out?

What if pulling it out causes me to bleed to death?

"I don't think I can do this."

I expect him to start yelling, but to my surprise, he doesn't. "What's your favorite song?"

I tell him the truth. "I don't have one."

His mouth drops open and he rears back in shock. "What? How can you *not* have a favorite song?"

I chew my thumbnail. "I don't know. I don't really listen to a lot of music."

Shaking his head, he mutters something that sounds a whole lot like, "I knew it."

"Okay, Mr. Judgypants. What's *your* favorite song?"

Instantly, his face lights up. "Easy. 'Purple Haze' by Jimi Hendrix."

Doesn't ring a bell. "Never heard of it."

His eyes close and he looks like he's in physical pain. "You're *killing* me."

I can't help but feel like I just lost major points with him. Not that I was looking to earn any. "Sorry I don't pass your cool test."

“Oh, you definitely pass my cool test,” he blurts out and a faint blush creeps up his neck again.

I’m pretty sure I’m blushing, too.

Clearing his throat, he gestures to the tweezers in his hand. “Ready when you are.”

“Okay, but only if you sing me your favorite song *and* tell me your birthday.”

I might be the weirdest person he’s ever met, but he’s shaping up to be the most interesting one for me. I can’t help wanting to know more about him.

He sighs. “Are you always so demanding?”

“Only when I want something.”

Yup. I’m totally blushing.

“November twenty-first.” Hesitation clashes with amusement on his face. “And I should warn you that I’m a much better guitar player than singer.”

I recall Josh once mentioning that Memphis was obsessed with his guitar... and that he was teaching him how to play bass.

Memphis’s voice isn’t nearly as bad as he thinks it is, though, because the second he starts singing, all my focus is on *him*.

Goose bumps break out along my skin and I fight back a shiver when he recites a line about kissing the sky.

Not because of the lyrics but because of how he’s *looking* at me as he sings them.

Like I’m the sky.

“What’s going on?”

We both jump at the sound of Josh’s voice.

Memphis clears his throat. “She stepped on a nail.”

As if on cue, Josh covers his eyes and turns around. “Oh, hell no.”

“Relax,” Memphis says. “You missed the worst of it.”

And so did I apparently, because he's already cleaning my wound.

I didn't even feel him take out the nail.

He wraps some gauze around my foot. "I'm no doctor, but I think you'll live."

In that case, I'm going to have to seriously rethink my stance on shoes.

I'm about to tell Memphis thank you, but Josh picks me up and I squeal. "Of course she will. My girl's a force to be reckoned with. Ain't that right, baby?"

I wasn't such a *force* a few minutes ago.

But Memphis got me through it.

"Thanks for taking care of my girl." Josh shoots his brother a rueful smile as I wrap my limbs around him so I don't fall. "I owe you one."

Memphis stands. His expression is closed down. *Withdrawn*. "I'm gonna bring the first aid kit back."

Not sparing either of us a second glance, he stalks off...

And doesn't return.

Chapter 6

MEMPHIS



Skylar's gut-wrenching sobs punch through my chest as I approach my bedroom.

Definitely *not* how I wanted to spend my fourteenth birthday.

I finished building her treehome a little over three months ago and I've been doing my best to forget about her ever since...just like I told myself I would.

But it's difficult...especially when I open the door and see her having a breakdown in Josh's arms.

I stifle the urge to ask what's going on because it's none of my business.

She's his.

Instead, I plop down on my bed, open a textbook, and focus on my homework.

Or rather, I *try* to, but my ears keep tuning into their conversation.

"Every girl in our class has gotten it except me," Skylar croaks. "Why is it taking so long?"

What is she talking about? Every girl has gotten *what*?

Josh kisses her forehead. "I don't know, but I'm sure code red will happen soon."

Oh...*that*.

The anxiety impaling my chest dissipates and I go back to my homework. Until her next words.

“What if it doesn’t? What if he *never* stops? What then?”

Cradling her face in his hands, he forces her to look at him. “Relax. It’s gonna be okay.”

Shaking her head, she pushes him away. “No, it won’t. It’s getting worse. The things he’s doing...*hurts*. So much that I can’t go to that place...and I...” Her voice cracks like glass and each shard slices through the wall I built. “I can’t take it anymore.”

“Come on, baby. Stay strong,” Josh urges, wrapping his arms around her again.

“I don’t have any strength left,” she chokes out. “He took it all.”

The crushing weight in my chest is back with a vengeance.

“Look at me.” When she does, he brings their foreheads together. “I promise I’ll always keep you safe.”

“You can’t,” she whispers. “No one can.” Blowing out a shaky breath, she removes his hands from her waist. “I have to go. He’ll be home soon.”

Leaning in, she kisses his cheek before whispering something in his ear.

Whatever it is, has him turning pale as panic spreads across his face.

He grabs her wrist. “Skylar, *no*. I love you.”

The sorrow etching her features deepens and her tears fall faster. “I love you, too. Thank you for making my greatest wish come true.”

Twisting out of his hold, she runs out the door.

I glance over at Josh. “What the hell is going on?”

Closing his eyes, he exhales sharply. “She’s upset because she still hasn’t gotten her period. She thinks the shit with her uncle will stop for good once she does.”

I slam my textbook shut. “Yeah, I figured that much out already. I wanna

know what she whispered to you.”

I expect him to tell me it’s none of my business, but he doesn’t.

He’s too distraught to argue...which only makes the gnawing feeling in my stomach worse.

“*Hara-kiri.*”

I have no idea what that is. “What’s hara-kiri?”

His eyes become glassy. “It’s a Japanese ritual. Warriors did it to restore honor when they were facing disgrace or execution.”

My insides twist with alarm as he continues.

“It’s our code word.” His stare locks with mine and what he says next makes my chest cave in. “It was her way of telling me she’s going to kill herself tonight.”



I peer over at Josh’s empty bed. He’s been gone for hours.

Which, I suppose, is a good thing because it means he’s still with Skylar.

Therefore, she’s still among the living.

Rolling over in my own bed, I force myself to close my eyes and go to sleep. However, disturbing thoughts from the dark corners of my mind come out to play.

What if Skylar’s not alive? What if Josh decided to join her?

Like some kind of murder-suicide pact.

Nausea barrels into me and I break out in a cold sweat.

What if I’m the one who finds their bodies?

Christ. Maybe I really am a psychopath since I’m lying here making up

worst-case scenarios in my head about two people who are probably off making out in their treehome as usual.

Get it together, asshole.

A quick glance at the clock on the dresser tells me it's already after eleven. Archie's gonna lose his shit if he catches Josh sneaking into the house this late.

Not my problem.

Besides, if Josh was in trouble or if something bad happened, he would call me.

Everything's fine.

I'm dozing off when my phone rings and Josh's name illuminates the screen.

I click the button and bring it to my ear. "Are you okay?"

"I need you," Josh utters, his voice shaky. *Scared.*

Shit.

I bolt up. "What happened? Is she..."

Bile burns up my throat and there's a crushing weight in my chest...one I don't think will ever go away if Sky no longer has a pulse.

"Meet me in the woods. About a mile past the treehouse."

And then the line goes dead.

I don't register getting out of bed, putting on shoes, or climbing out the window.

I don't think about how bad my lungs burn or how hard my heart pounds as I run faster than I ever have in my life.

The only thing I can focus on is getting to her.

Please don't be dead.

I'll never forgive myself if she took her own life. I'll never...

Shock roots me to the spot as I approach, and I see some man tied to a

chair with rope.

There's duct tape covering his mouth...and a gun pointed at his head.

A gun *Josh* is holding.

Holy shit.

“What the *hell*?”

“This piece of shit is never gonna stop, *Memph*. I had no choice.” He keeps his gaze trained on his hostage—who I'm now realizing is *Skylar's* uncle—when he speaks. “I can't lose her.”

That makes two of us.

I take a step and then several more until I'm standing next to him. “Where is she?”

“*Skylar's* safe.” Eyes narrowing, he digs the gun into the asshole's temple. “Or should I say, she *will* be once I unload a few bullets into this pervert's head.”

At that, *Pervert's* eyes go big, his frantic screams muffled against the tape as he struggles against his restraints.

Trepidation snakes up my spine when I notice the large hole a few feet away.

Jesus Christ. He dug a grave.

I know *Josh* wants to protect *Skylar*. Hell, I want to protect her, too.

However, murder isn't the answer.

“*Josh*.” I wait for him to look at me before I speak. “You can't *kill* him.”

“You know what he does to her.” His mouth twists into a sneer. “How he hurts her.”

Ignoring the way my guts churn, I place my hand on his shoulder. “Let's call the police, okay? We'll make sure—”

“No,” *Josh* shouts before his voice drops. “Monsters like him don't deserve to go to jail. They deserve to be punished.”

And now it all makes sense.

This isn't just about Skylar. This is about his own trauma and how shortly after his kindergarten teacher reported his father...the bastard took his own life.

He was never punished...and Josh never got justice.

I draw in a slow, deep breath. I know pain...but I'll never understand *this* type of pain.

But I know that despite all his damage, deep down, Josh is a good person.

And good people *don't* kill.

I just have to get through to him.

"There's still time for you to do the right thing."

His angry glare swings my way. "This *is* the right thing."

I know he thinks it is, but as usual, he's wrong.

"No, it's not. You have your demons, Josh, but you're *not* a murderer. You have your whole life ahead of you. In a few years, you can marry Skylar, run off and leave this shithole town for good. The two of you can be happy. But if you do this, you can't undo it. You can't control what the consequences might be after...what it might cost you."

"I love her."

My entire body grows rigid because, for the first time...I believe him.

"Then don't do something that might cause you to lose her."

A sharp exhale leaves him. "Fuck. You're right." I hold my breath as he walks around to the other side of the chair and begins untying him. "Let's call the pol—"

A loud crack cuts through the air and the smell of sulfur invades my nostrils.

"Jesus," Josh exclaims, but I can barely hear him due to the ringing in my ears. "What the fuck?"

What the fuck is right.

Panic spears my gut as I take in the man slumped over with a blank expression on his face as blood oozes from the hole in his head.

My throat closes as I look down at the gun in my hands.

I don't remember wrangling it from Josh.

I don't remember pulling the trigger.

All I could think about was her.

The tears streaming down her face as she looked up at the stars...praying for a miracle.

The way she recoiled the first time I touched her...even though I was only trying to help.

The fear in her voice as she pleaded with me not to hurt her...because it's all she's ever known.

Because of *him*.

And now he's dead...because of *me*.

"I'm gonna puke."

"No." Josh rushes over to me. "You can't. If you do, you'll leave DNA."

DNA.

Because I just committed a crime.

And just like that, I watch my life, my hopes, my dreams...go up in smoke.

I'll never know what it's like to be free again.

I'll never have a wife and family.

I'll never be a famous guitar player.

"Look at me, Memph," Josh orders, his tone eerily calm.

When I don't, he grabs my face, forcing me to. "It's okay."

No, it's not.

Nothing will ever be okay again.

“Repeat after me,” he instructs. “I didn’t kill him.”

I blink, not understanding because I *did* kill him.

“But I—”

“I didn’t kill him,” Josh barks. “Say it.”

“I didn’t kill him,” I whisper, even though it’s a lie.

He brings our foreheads together. “Good. Now say it again.”

“I didn’t kill him.”

“That’s right. You didn’t...I did.”

I stare at him in confusion. “No, you didn’t.”

His eyes lock with mine. “Yes, I did. And you know why? Because you’re my brother, and I love you.”

Because he’s my brother and he loves me.

“Which means I’m going down for this if we get caught. Not you.”

That’s crazy. He can’t take the fall for something I did. This isn’t breaking a lamp. This is fucking *homicide*.

“But—”

“You’ve always had my back, Memph. It’s time for me to prove I have yours. Because we’re family.”

Because we’re family.

“But it’s not gonna come down to that because no one will ever know about this. Right?”

My brain can’t process what he’s saying. “I—”

“I know you have a hard time trusting people, but you don’t have a choice now. Whether you like it or not, we’re in this together. I need you to promise me that you’ll never tell another soul. No matter what happens.”

I swallow, and it feels like knives going down. “Okay.”

“I need you to say it, Memphis. Promise me you’ll take this to your grave. No matter what.”

I force a breath past the anxiety crushing my chest. “I promise I’ll take this to my grave. No matter what.”

“Good. Now here’s what we’re gonna do.”

I listen as he rattles off a list of instructions.

We’ll drag the body to the eight-foot hole he predug and bury a trash bag full of dead animals he collected three feet above the corpse in order to throw the police off.

We’ll dispose of the gun—which belongs to Shane—in a nearby river with a rough current.

We’ll burn our clothes in a firepit sometime this week.

We’ll take the events that took place tonight to our grave.



By the time we get back home, the sun is already coming up, and I’m exhausted.

However, unlike Josh, who falls asleep the moment his head hits the pillow, I toss and turn until the alarm goes off and it’s time to get up for school.

They say life is a series of choices, and a single one can change the course of your life forever.

Last night, I had to make a choice between good and bad.

Right and wrong.

I chose her.

Part Two: The Denial

Chapter 7

MEMPHIS



Age Sixteen

I go to turn the doorknob, but the sounds of heavy breathing mixed with Josh’s moaning assault my ears.

According to the late-night *discussions* I’m subjected to—thanks to Skylar crawling through our window every night so she can sleep next to her boyfriend—they’ve recently taken the next big step in their relationship.

The one that requires a lot less clothing.

Gritting my teeth, I amble down the hall and into the kitchen.

I find Archie parked at the dining room table with a fork in his hand... digging into the apple pie his wife made yesterday.

His expression turns sheepish when he spots me. “Don’t give me that look, boy. It’s only meal number three of the day.”

Laughing, I walk over to the sink, grab a glass from the cabinet, and pour myself some water. “Valerie’s gonna kill you.”

She’s been harping on him about his cholesterol lately.

Grumbling, he places his fork down. “You’re right.” His lips purse. “How about I split it with you?”

I fetch a dish and a fork from the drawer. “Deal.”

“No work today?” he questions as I plop down in the chair across from him.

“Nope. I’m on the schedule for tomorrow and pulling doubles this weekend, though.”

A few months ago, Ed—the manager of Guitar Galaxy—asked if I wanted a job.

Since I spent most of my free time after school there anyway, getting paid to be at my favorite place seemed like a no-brainer.

The weekend doubles are brutal, but soon I’ll have enough saved for a car.

Nodding, he takes another bite of pie. “What’s Josh doing?”

His girlfriend.

“He’s…”

Archie isn’t a stupid man. I’m fairly certain he knows Skylar spends the night in Josh’s bed.

Just like I’m *also* fairly certain he’d prefer to remain peacefully oblivious to the fact that they’re having sex under his roof.

“Talking?” he supplies a moment later.

“Yeah…talking.”

My grip tightens and the fork in my hand bends. *Lots and lots of talking.*

“Good, because I’ve been wanting to talk to you about something.”

It’s like a brick to the head.

Did the police show up?

Did he go for a walk and stumble upon something?

Josh and I swore we’d never tell another soul and we’ve both kept our mouths shut, but it doesn’t mean we’re out of the woods.

Figuratively and literally.

Inhaling a few deep breaths, I allow myself to relax. If the police showed up, Archie would have told me, and he wouldn’t be acting so calm.

The man also doesn't go for walks, so there's that.

However, the next words out of his mouth do little to put me at ease.

"Your caseworker called the other day. She wanted to know how everything's been going."

Whatever appetite I had vanishes. "Okay."

I should have known this would happen soon. We've been here for a while now; it was only a matter of time before they sent us packing.

A weird, unfamiliar feeling—one I'm always quick to tamp down the second it hits—swamps my chest.

Sadness. Unwanted. Dispensable.

Dammit. I know better than to get attached to places—or *people*—because it never lasts.

Sooner or later...everything I love goes away.

I push my chair back. "I'll pack my things."

Josh will take the news hard. Not because he likes Archie or Valerie, but because it means he'll no longer be able to see Skylar every day.

I won't either.

"Whoa there, boy. Hang on a minute. Let me finish."

I've never seen the man look so nervous before.

"Me and Valerie have been talking a lot lately and we want to adopt you." He clears his throat. "Not to get all sappy, but Valerie adores the hell out of you and I'm..." He averts his gaze. "Pretty fond of you, too."

It's clear emotions aren't a strong point for him either because he looks about as uncomfortable as I feel. "You're a real good kid, Memphis. We'd like to make you an official part of the family. What do you say?"

I want to say yes...there's just one problem.

He never said anything about adopting Josh.

"What about Josh?"

His eyes squeeze shut like whatever he's about to say will be hard for him. "We like Josh...mostly. But he's got a lot of issues and requires more attention and guidance than you." He swallows. "It's a big undertaking."

He's right.

But there's no way I can agree to be a part of his family...and leave mine behind.

Fortunately, since I'm sixteen and neither of my biological parents is in the picture, I have to consent to be adopted.

"We might not be blood, but Josh is my brother, sir. I'm sorry, but I can't abandon him. I *won't*."

Archie nods slowly. "I reckoned you'd say that." Leaning back in his chair, he surveys me. "Valerie and I know you and Josh are a package deal, so we're prepared to adopt you both. If you'll have us."

"Really?"

He nods.

I grin. "Then it's cool with me."

All the worry drains from his face, and a rush of air leaves him in a big whoosh. "Hot damn. I haven't been that nervous since I asked Valerie out on our first date." Shaking his head, he chortles to himself. "I wanted to impress her, so I saved up for three whole months so I could take her to an expensive steak house."

I snort. "Man, I should have held out. All you offered me was half a pie."

He makes a face. "Wiseass." His expression turns serious. "You better start eating your half of that pie before I change my mind, boy."

"Yes, sir."

"None of that sir business anymore. We're family now."

This is awkward. "What should I call you then?"

"Call me whatever you want. Except late to dinner."

Something tells me Archie's never been late to dinner.

Or should I say *dad*?

And just like that, I feel like I'm suffocating.

Archie's a good guy and I'm grateful he's taking me in, but I need to know he has staying power before I hand over that kind of trust.

That he won't leave.

Digging into his own piece of the pie, he chuckles. I don't think I've ever seen the man so happy, except when he looks at Valerie. "At least when I tell people you're my kid, no one will question where you got your good looks from."

That gets a laugh out of me. "Because we look so much alike."

"Yeah, you have a point." He winks. "Anyone with a pair of eyes can see I'm way more handsome."

I let him have that one because even though I can't bring myself to call him dad...the man just gave me something I've always wanted.

Chapter 8

SKYLAR



A boulder of sadness lodges in my throat and my eyes prickle.

They should have called by now.

“Still thinking about my dick?” Josh’s eyebrows dance as he stares down at me. “No worries, I’ll give it to you again in another five.”

If I thought Josh was obsessed with sex before we started having it, it’s nothing on *now*.

Then again, I guess it’s a good thing. Especially since I was nervous that the new shiny apple—you know, doing it—might not hold the same shine after I finally gave in three weeks ago, and we lost our virginities to one other.

But while my boyfriend is still very much interested in me, it’s clear Charlotte and her little cohorts aren’t.

Which sucks because I’ve wanted to be a cheerleader for so long and I *know* my tryout was the best one they saw.

“I don’t think I made the squad.”

The hand caressing my back stills. “Who cares? You don’t need to be a cheerleader to be cool.”

It's all I can do not to roll my eyes because he doesn't get it.

Wrapping the sheet around me, I sit up. "It wasn't about being cool. It was about being able to do something I love. Having a sense of community and belonging. Teamwork...*exercise.*"

Being seen as more than the poor girl or Josh's girlfriend.

Laughing, he pulls me into his arms. "Relax, babe. You're having a meltdown for no reason." He nuzzles my neck. "Besides, if you want exercise, I can give you *plenty* of that."

I close my eyes when his mouth finds mine and he presses me against the mattress.

I was scared to take our relationship to the next level. Afraid my past will ruin it. But Josh guided me every step of the way and is teaching me how to manage my feelings and my trauma.

How to have fun, be a woman, and take charge of my sexuality.

Because my body is Josh's...not Shane's.

I don't want sex now, though. I want cuddles. *Connection.*

While Josh has shown me how empowering it can be to not let my abuse get in the way of my biological needs...our sex life feels a lot like...scratching an itch.

Which is cool and all, but right now I'm sad and I just want my boyfriend to hold me while I cry and tell me it will all be okay.

"Josh."

He palms my breast. He never pays much attention to them and they're pretty sensitive.

"These are so adorable," he murmurs in a mock cutesy voice. "Like two itty-bitty mosquito bites."

The previously warm buzz he was creating now feels like a vat of ice water being dumped over my head.

My boobs—if you can even call them that since I’m barely an A cup—are small.

I hate it.

Even though Josh assures me I have nothing to be worried about, sometimes he makes comments—or *jokes*, as he calls them—that make me think otherwise.

“Seriously?”

He groans. “Jesus, baby. Calm down. It was a joke.”

“Jokes are supposed to be funny.”

If you know your girlfriend is insecure about something, you shouldn’t make her feel worse about it.

But no matter how many times I tell him this, he doesn’t listen.

I try to shove him off, but he refuses to budge. “Look at me.”

I turn my head. “No.”

“Baby.”

In my peripheral, I see him pout. “Please.”

Damn him. “What?”

“You know I love you, right?”

I scowl and his pout turns into a full-on puppy-dog face.

“Will you forgive me for being an idiot?”

I pretend to think about it for a second. “Maybe.”

“Don’t be like that.” He touches his forehead to mine. “I think you and your tits are beautiful. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, but...” I wrap my arms around his neck. “Please don’t make jokes about them anymore. It hurts my feelings.”

He rubs his nose against mine. “Promise.” He dips his head. “Now let me make it up to them.”

Normally, I’d be down for that, but I can’t seem to get rid of this dark

cloud hanging over my head.

I wanted it so much.

“Sorry, I’m not in the mood.”

“Then let me get you in the mood.”

“You can’t. I’m too bummed about not making the squad. Plus, we *just* had sex twenty minutes ago. Can we cuddle and watch a movie?”

Sighing, he rolls over. “Fine, but it will need to be a short one. I have plans tonight.”

I swallow hard. “Oh.”

About a year ago, Josh told me something he’d never told anyone else before.

He was attracted to guys. He said it was because his head was all fucked up on account of what Curtis did to him.

At first, I was shocked. And then confused. And then hurt...because Josh needed something I couldn’t give and I was scared I’d never be able to satisfy him.

However, he assured me it wasn’t like that. That he was in love with me, and no one could ever take my place and we were soul mates.

He just wanted to be open and honest with me about it...and have my permission to explore that side of himself.

My first impulse was to tell him no because the thought of sharing him with anyone else kills me, but then I realized I was being selfish.

After everything Josh has done for me...the least I could do was give him this.

So, I agreed.

“You know,” he says with a coy grin. “You can always join us.”

Josh has been asking me to join him for a while now, but I’m not sure.

The thought of having sex with anyone who isn’t my boyfriend feels

wrong.

“I don’t think so.”

“Come on, babe,” he urges. “I want to share this with you. And it doesn’t have to be all the time...just once in a while.”

I fold my arms around myself. As usual, I feel like Josh is already on level ten and I’m still struggling to get my bearings on level one.

“I don’t know.”

He pulls me in for a kiss. “Do you have any idea how much it will turn me on to watch another dude screw what’s mine...right before I steal you away and we *all* fuck?”

God, I want so badly to be everything he wants and needs. I hate feeling like a loser who doesn’t have the first clue what it takes to please her man and make him happy.

But screwing two guys is a little *extreme* when I’ve only recently started having sex.

I open my mouth to tell him I need to crawl before I run a marathon, but Josh’s phone starts vibrating...with so many messages, it falls off the dresser.

“You’re awfully popular,” I tease as he bends over to pick it up.

He winks. “What can I say? I’m a wanted man.”

I ignore the twinge in my heart. *Right.*

Frowning, he peers down at his phone. “I think I got caught up in one of those group texts from some multilevel marketing company.”

I blink. “Group text—oh my god.” Excitement rushes through me and I dive for his phone. “Give me that.”

“Holy hell, woman. What’s going on?”

A huge smile stretches my face as I read the texts welcoming everyone to this year’s varsity cheerleading squad.

“Oh my god! I did it!”

“Did what?”

I jump up and down like a maniac, unable to contain my exhilaration. “You’re looking at a varsity cheerleader.”

“Why’d you give them *my* number?” Josh snaps as I make a mad dash for my clothes and get dressed. “And why are you putting your clothes on?”

I shimmy into my jeans. “I had no choice but to give them your number to contact me because I don’t have a phone.”

Things have been tight at home, and even though my aunt’s had a few boyfriends who pay for things here and there...most of the time, we barely make ends meet.

Cell phones aren’t a luxury I can afford.

“Dammit, Skylar. I don’t want my phone blowing up constantly with a bunch of messages about clothes, makeup, and tampons. You should have asked.”

My face falls. This is the second happiest moment of my life—aside from the day I met him—and he can’t even tell me congratulations?

“I’m sorry I gave them your number, but can’t you even be a little happy for me? Or at least say, ‘*good job*’ before you rip into me. You know how badly I’ve wanted this.”

Sighing, he drags a hand down his face. “Of course, I’m happy for you.” Opening his arms wide, he beams. “Come here, beautiful. I wanna hug my new favorite cheerleader.”

I don’t waste another second. The moment I’m in his arms, I slam my mouth against his and lock my legs around his waist.

“Hell yeah. That’s what I’m talking about.” His hands clamp my butt as we fall back into bed. “Grind on it, baby girl.”

Ugh. I should have known it would turn into this. A kiss is never just a kiss

with Josh anymore. He always takes it as an invitation to screw.

We can't right now, though, because I have things to do.

Breaking the kiss, I climb off his lap. "Can't. I have to go to the store."

He deflates like a popped balloon. "For what?"

Kneeling, I tie my shoes. "The first practice is tomorrow and I have to get a few things."

"You don't need that shit right now. It's like the first day of school. The teachers might give you a list of supplies, but they don't actually expect you to have them by then."

As usual, he doesn't get it. The fact I was even considered is a miracle. It's well known around Oak Creek High that Charlotte isn't my biggest fan. "I have to be prepared. I don't want to give Charlotte or her *momager* a reason to change their minds."

I need to do everything I can to fit in.

I head for the door but freeze when I realize there's no point going because I spent my last dollar on lunch today.

Stupid hunger growls.

"What's wrong?" Josh questions.

My shoulders slump as I turn around. "I don't have any money. My aunt's latest boyfriend dumped her last week and..." My voice trails off because I don't need to explain the rest.

He already knows the deal.

I've been hoping to get a job. I even submitted a few applications this month, but I'm not sure how that's going to work now with cheerleading.

They made it crystal clear it's a full-time commitment.

Josh swipes his wallet off the dresser and pulls out a five-dollar bill. "Here."

My chest clenches with guilt because I know money is tight for him, too.

Granted, not as tight as it is for me, but still.

“Thank you. I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.”

I go to take it, but he snatches it away. “Promise me you’ll think about it.”

For the love of God.

“Josh.”

I know he wants this threesome thing, but I’m not ready yet.

What if the other guy hurts me? Josh swears he’ll always keep me safe and I believe him. However, sometimes bad things happen that are out of your control.

Glancing up at the ceiling, I exhale. I love him—so much—and I want to do everything I can to make him happy.

I just need a little more time to work my way up to running these *marathons*.

“I promise I’ll think about it, okay?”

“Attagirl.” Fastening his hands around my waist, he pulls me in for a kiss.

“You know I’d do anything in the world for you, right?”

My heart somersaults as I wrap my arms around him, breathing him in. “I know.”

Not only do we have an unbreakable bond, he’s my real-life hero.

Because he killed my monster.



I mentally run down the list of stuff I’ll need to get as I run into the local drugstore.

Socks, bobby pins, hairspray.

“Need any help?” a male voice questions as I reach for a pair of white ankle socks.

When I turn around, I come face-to-face with a short guy who appears a few years older than me. I assume he works here due to the drug store emblem on his polo shirt.

“I’m good. Thanks.”

He gives me a crooked smile. “Okay, but if you change your mind, I’ll be right over there.” Walking backward, he saunters to the other end of the aisle. Or rather, *attempts* to because he collides with a nearby display. I give him credit, though, because he plays it off like he didn’t send a bunch of pantyhose scattering everywhere. “My name’s William, by the way.”

I nod politely as I take the socks off the hook. I’d offer to help clean up the mess, but I still get nervous around the opposite sex unless I know and trust them.

Wandering down the next aisle, I spot some bobby pins and grab them. Then I peruse the various bottles of hairspray nearby.

Whoa, mama. I don’t use hair products because, just like cell phones, it’s a luxury I can’t afford. It’s way more expensive than I thought.

Math isn’t my greatest subject, but I know how to add.

And subtract since I have no choice but to put something back.

Dammit. If only I didn’t eat lunch today.

It’s not often I throw myself a pity party, but I’m tired of being poor. I’m tired of always having to choose between what I want and what I need...like food.

I’ve never stolen a thing in my life. One—because it’s wrong, and I believe in karma. And two—because I don’t want to get in trouble.

I want this so bad, though. I know what Charlotte and her little cohorts say about me behind my back. They think I’m trash.

It's why I didn't make the team last year. Or the year before.

They didn't want someone like me ruining their image.

I just want to fit in.

After doing a quick look around to make sure no one's nearby, I pick up a can and stuff it under my shirt.

"Hey."

Shit. Shit. Shit.

When I turn around, I come face-to-face with the same guy from before.

"Hi."

Did he see me steal? Is he going to arrest me?

He can't arrest you, dummy. He's not a cop.

"My shift ends at nine," he drawls, invading my personal space a little too much. "Wanna catch a movie?"

I put several feet of distance between us. "Um...I..."

A flash of movement in my peripheral snags my attention.

My teeth meet with a clack as the tall figure comes into view because, of course, it's *him*.

Ever since the nail incident three years ago, Memphis won't so much as breathe in my general direction. But there are times I catch him watching me...like he's not only secretly plotting my murder, but where to bury my body after.

I don't know why he hates me so much, but I've long since given up wondering or caring.

I thought we could be friends. I thought...

It doesn't matter.

Those dark eyes narrow on the guy before resting on me.

I feel like I'm being dissected. *Dissected and judged.*

"Sorry, I have a boyfriend."

I fight the urge to shoot Memphis a look that says, “*There. Happy?*”

It’s ridiculous. He knows damn well I’d never cheat on his brother.

The guy’s face collapses. “Yeah, I kind of figured that, but I wanted to shoot my shot anyway. Have a good night.” He does that walking backward thing again. Luckily the displays stay intact this time. “If you and this boyfriend of yours ever break up, though...holla at your boy.”

Holla at your boy?

I swear I see Memphis’s lips twitch.

I wait until after the guy meanders down another aisle before addressing him.

“Are you part ninja?”

I’m convinced he must be since he’s always popping up out of thin air at random.

Silence.

I whirl around, but he’s already gone...just as quickly as he appeared.

Asshole.

I’m sweating bullets as I make my way up to the line at the checkout counter. Since the hairspray is on the house, it leaves me with a dollar extra.

“I can help the next customer,” the woman at the register states.

After placing my socks and bobby pins on the counter, I grab my aunt’s favorite candy bar.

And that’s when I hear a loud thud.

Shit on a stick.

I freeze, hoping if I don’t draw attention to the hairspray on the ground, then no one will notice.

No such luck, though, because the woman *definitely* notices. “Come with me, young lady.”

I’m so screwed.

“Oh, good. You found the brand I wanted,” a feminine voice says behind me. “Thank you, darlin’.”

I don’t think she’s talking to me until the cashier utters, “You know her?”

“Of course I do.”

I blink in confusion when some old lady comes to stand beside me. She’s wearing a fur coat, bright-red lipstick, stiletto heels, and the giant diamond ring on her finger probably costs more than most people’s homes. I have no idea what someone like *her* is doing in a dump like Oak Creek.

However, the only thing more shocking than her appearance...is what she says next.

“She’s my niece.”

I raise a brow at my *long-lost aunt*, but she simply smiles. “Why don’t you get yourself another candy bar?”

I do as she says because something tells me this isn’t the kind of woman you want to argue with.

The cashier must feel the same because she mutters a quick, “My mistake,” before ringing up my items.

Auntie follows me out of the store, but she doesn’t say a word until we’re outside on the sidewalk. “You are a terrible thief, young lady. The bobby pins and socks would have been much easier to conceal.”

And here I thought she was going to reprimand me for pilfering...not for screwing it up.

“I’ve never stolen anything before.”

And I never will again after this.

Lighting a cigarette, she scoffs. “Clearly.”

I blow the smoke out of my face with one hand and give her my five-dollar bill with my other. “Here. It’s all I have. Thank you for helping me.”

With that, I brush past her because she’s even weirder than Memphis. And

that's saying something.

“Do you know how to clean?” she calls out.

Say what?

I turn to face her again. “Yeah. Why?”

“Do you attend church on Sundays?”

I consider myself more spiritual than religious. However, if she's about to ask me if I can spare a moment to talk about our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, I'm out of here.

“Have a good evening.”

She grabs my arm. “Ex—”

“You're wasting your time, lady. I believe in a higher power, but I'm not interested in joining a cult run by corrupt, hypocritical assholes.”

Her eyes go big, and she hands me my five-dollar bill back, along with a Post-it Note. “Good, so you're free on Sundays then. Be at my house at nine a.m.”

“For what?” I question when *she* walks away this time.

“I'm hoping you'll make a better cleaning lady than you do a thief.” Suddenly, she stops walking. “Oh, and a word of advice?”

“What's that?”

She summons me over with a flutter of her fingers and I begrudgingly obey.

“The young man in there would have gladly handed over both his testicles for a date with you. Should you ever find yourself in a position of needing money in the future, use those looks of yours to your advantage. Trust me, they won't last long. Soon enough, you'll be an old shriveled-up prune like me.”

I don't have a retort because I have no idea how to respond to that.

She juts her chin at something behind me. “Ah, suitor number two is back

to try his luck. Fortunately for you, he's far more attractive and doesn't look like a pussy. See you on Sunday."

Suitor number two? What in the world is she talking about?

I find out when I twist around and spot Memphis standing fifteen feet away...with a menacing glint in his eye.

I want to laugh because he's definitely not a *suitor*, more like a jerk with a serious staring problem.

I'm guessing he overheard my exchange with the old woman because when our gazes collide, he raises an eyebrow in question.

I shrug. "I have no idea what that was."

There. I broke the ice. Now it's his turn.

Talk to me. Say something.

But he doesn't. He merely turns and heads down the sidewalk.

Ugh. He's the worst.

Yet, there's an ache in my left foot as I watch him walk away.

We could have been friends.

Chapter 9

MEMPHIS



“Up and a little to the left,” Skylar breathes. “Yes—”

“Your left or mine?” Josh interjects, his voice muffled.

I stifle the urge to tell them to shut the fuck up because then they’ll assume I’ve been listening, and it will make shit awkward.

I told Josh I didn’t mind Skylar sleeping here, but they need to quit their late-night hookups because this is my room too, and voyeurism isn’t my thing.

He said no problem, but as usual, that was a lie.

Because it’s a problem. *A big fucking problem.*

Skylar whimpers and the sound goes straight to my dick.

“Right there. No...don’t move.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

Skylar must be as frustrated as I am because a moment later, she fake moans and I hear the rustling of bedsheets.

Thank fuck.

The only thing worse than hearing them messing around is hearing her actually orgasm...because of *him*.

It’s a brand of torture I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.

Fortunately, it doesn’t happen all that often because the idiot doesn’t know

how to follow instructions.

“Did you get off?” Josh whispers.

No. When she does, her breathing gets all staticky...then she makes these tiny little whimpers right before she lets out a moan. For *real*. Not like a porn star.

It’s something he should know.

I fucking hate that *I* do.

“Yeah,” she fibs.

Bullshit.

“Are you sure? Because it doesn’t feel like you did.”

“Okay, fine...no. But it’s—” Skylar starts to say before a sharp breath leaves her. “That feels good.”

“Hell yeah, it does. I know how much my baby girl likes this.”

Kill me now.

“By the way,” he murmurs. “I talked to Willie Baker after class. He’s down.”

Her breathing grows heavy...and so does my cock.

“Down for what?”

“Our threesome.”

I freeze, hoping I’m delirious from lack of sleep and therefore misheard him.

I didn’t, though, because Skylar hisses, “What? I told you I would *think* about it, Josh. I never agreed.”

Dumbass. They just started having sex, why the fuck is he arranging threesomes?

I mean, on the one hand, I get it. Our guy brains are hardwired to think about fucking all the time. Including mine, because while I never used to be interested in sex, I think about it even more than music now.

However, Skylar's not a piece of meat. The idea of him pushing her to do shit she doesn't want and allowing guys to *sample* her doesn't sit well with me.

Not that it's any of my business.

"Come on, babe," Josh whines. "Don't be like that. It'll be fun. Not only is Willie down, he's excited as hell. Dude's had a crush on you since the second grade."

I add Willie Baker to my long list of people that I fucking hate.

Judging by her next words, Skylar isn't too fond of him either. "I wouldn't sleep with Willie if you paid me."

"Why not?" Josh protests. "He's good-looking."

He's a mediocre jock with an overinflated ego.

"He's not my type."

"Well, if he's not, who is?"

She huffs. "*You, dummy.*"

Grinding my molars, I will myself to fall asleep. But as always, Josh keeps running his mouth.

Maybe if he talked less and paid attention to his girlfriend's pussy more, she'd get off.

"I meant, *aside* from me, who's your type?"

I regret leaving my headphones in the back room at work because this isn't a conversation I want to hear.

"I don't know."

"How about Stuey Gardner?"

"Nuh-uh. He has bad breath."

"Gary Lee?"

"He's cute, I suppose, but he screws everything in a skirt. Plus, he bullies people."

He exhales audibly. “Doug Allen?”

Her response is immediate. “God no.”

“Oh, come on. *Everyone* wants Doug. He’s the captain of the football team.”

“Sorry, but he doesn’t do it for me.”

Josh lets out a long sigh and it gets quiet. So quiet I drift off...

Then I hear it.

“What about Memphis?”

Instinctively the fucked-up thing in my chest goes into overdrive...just like it always does whenever I let myself think about her in all the ways I shouldn’t.

I don’t move a muscle. I *can’t*.

As much as I hate being subjected to this conversation...there’s a question that’s been gnawing at my insides ever since I built her that damn treehome.

If she had met me before Josh...would she have chosen me instead of him?

“What? No. He’s...”

“He’s what?” Josh prompts.

The muscles in my chest constrict to the point of physical pain.

“Your *brother*, for starters,” she exclaims. “And he’s kind of...a freak. He never talks to anyone except you, and when you’re not around, he’s alone or with his guitar. He’s just...weird. Plus, I don’t even think he likes girls.”

Christ. It feels like my heart just got run over by a semitruck...and then took a nosedive straight into a barrel of acid.

Only to be fished out so Skylar Meadows could spit and stomp all over it.

The mattress creaks, followed by the sound of the window opening. “I’m gonna go.”

“What? Why?” Josh exclaims. “Don’t leave. I thought we were gonna bang?”

“Sorry, but this is getting...too much. I’m not in the mood.”

That makes two of us.

She’s not only earned herself a spot on the list of people I hate...she’s at the very top of it.

Fuck you, Sky.



I stir when I feel my mattress dip, but I’m so out of it I fall back to sleep.

Or rather, I try to, but I have this unsettling awareness that someone’s *watching* me.

Unable to shake the feeling, I open one eye.

“Jesus Christ,” I grunt when I see Josh sitting on my bed.

Annoyance surges through my system, but then I remember he used to have bad dreams sometimes and needed assurance that he was safe.

“You’re safe,” I mumble. “Go back to bed.”

Leering, his gaze falls to my dick. “You’re definitely a shower *and* a grower.”

Ever since Josh asked to see my junk when we were kids, I’m used to him joking about the size of it. I tend to ignore him, but something about the way he’s ogling it is making me uncomfortable as fuck.

I know he’s into dudes, and I don’t care. I, however, am not. He knows this. Not to mention we’re family. This is past the point of weird.

“What the fuck, dude? Stop staring at my shit.”

He doesn’t look the least bit remorseful, though. If anything, he seems pleased with himself. He also doesn’t look away.

“Is that big boner for my girlfriend?”

My big boner is nothing more than morning wood...even though it's still dark out.

And maybe a brief dream involving Skylar. One I had no control over on account of me sleeping.

“Fuck off.”

He licks his lips. “You know, I might be willing to share her with you.”

I've never confirmed my feelings for Skylar to anyone, but Josh knows me a lot better than most.

He knew how I felt about her the second I pulled the trigger.

Which is why he should also know that I'd never share her.

Fuck that.

“Nah. I'm good.”

He runs a finger down my stomach, stopping just above my boxers. “Come on, man. It could be fun. She'll be all ours.”

That's not an option I'm willing to consider.

I want her to be mine. *All mine.*

However, Skylar's made it perfectly clear that—Josh or no Josh—she's not interested in me.

She thinks I'm a freak.

And the worst part is...she's not wrong.

I swat Josh's hand away. “Hard pass.”

“Oh, it's definitely hard.” Before I can stop him, he grabs my cock with his other hand. “Let me have some fun and give you your first blow job.”

My response is automatic. I swing my fist into his jaw. “I told you *no.*”

Still not getting the message, he tries to grab me again. “Don't be such a prude. I know you want it.”

That's when my long fuse snaps and I lose my shit.

I punch him again. So hard he falls off the bed. “No, I don’t.”

“Fuck, Memph. Okay.”

It’s *not* okay.

Crawling on top of him, I slam him against the floor. Then I wrap one hand around his throat and sock him in the eye with my other.

I hate him for having the one thing I want and taunting me with it.

I hate her for choosing him.

But mostly? I hate myself for letting a girl screw me up so much I murder men in the woods and beat the shit out of someone I consider family.

Someone who knows my darkest secret.

I launch my fist into the mouth he likes to run so much. “I don’t want you and I don’t want her.”

I just want her out of my head for good.

Coughing, Josh spits blood on the floor. “Jesus. Got it.”

Good.

Without sparing him another glance, I get up and march out the door.

I can’t stay in that room with him any longer. I need space.

I head into the kitchen so I can grab some water and cool off.

I stride past Archie, who’s sitting at the table with a glass of milk and a package of cookies in front of him.

“Meal number five,” he declares, but I don’t laugh.

“What happened?”

He’ll figure it out when he sees Josh’s face. However, I’m not about to divulge specifics.

I’ll sleep on the couch tonight, but it’s only a temporary solution.

I need a permanent one. *Fast*. Problem is, there isn’t a whole lot of space in this house.

That’s when an idea hits me.

It's a long shot, but I'm hoping he'll be cool with it.

"Can I convert half the attic into a bedroom?"

Reaching for another cookie, he studies the knuckles of my left hand. "I had a feeling this was gonna come to a head soon. It's gotta be hard on you."

I don't know what he knows, so I keep my mouth shut.

He downs the rest of his milk. "The attic's gonna need some insulation and electricity, but we can probably have it done in about a week...maybe less. In the meantime, sleep on the couch and let the dust settle between you two."

Pushing his chair back, he stands. "I think it's a good idea, though." He gives my shoulder a squeeze before walking over to the freezer and taking out a bag of frozen peas. "It'll be easier to get over her when it's not right under your nose all the time."

I'm counting on it.



Thanks to Archie's assistance, six days later, I'm putting the finishing touches on my new room.

It's not fancy, but it has everything I need. A large dresser, a queen-size bed that I got at the Goodwill store, my amp so I won't wake everyone up when I play at night, and my guitar.

I even have my own entrance...as long as I leave the ladder outside the window.

I'm putting the final coat of paint on the partial wall we built to separate my room from the storage on the other side when Josh enters.

We haven't spoken since the other night, and I have no desire to right now.

As per usual, Josh doesn't take the hint. "Need any help?"

I suppress the urge to laugh because Josh's definition of *help* is to sit around while you do all the work and then disappear when he gets bored.

"No."

He walks around uninvited. "It looks good in here." Hands stuffed in his pockets, he stops in front of my mattress. "You got a bigger bed."

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

I open my mouth to kick him out at the same time he says, "I'm sorry."

Embarrassment floods his features. "It was fucked up of me."

"Yeah. It was." I glare at him. "Why'd you do it?"

I'm still pissed as hell, but I need to know the motivation behind it before we continue this conversation.

If it was an impulsive mistake driven by hormones, I can forgive that as long as it doesn't happen again.

But if his goal was to intentionally manipulate and hurt me? That I can't forgive.

Because I'll never be able to trust him again.

He plops down on the bed. "You want the truth, or do you want me to feed you some bullshit so we can sweep this under the rug and be cool again?"

"What do you think?" When he gives me a look, I grunt, "Give it to me straight."

His eyes squeeze shut. "I'm in love with Skylar."

Just hearing her name makes the muscles in my chest draw tight.

"But," he adds. "I love you, too."

Fucking hell. I seriously regret asking now.

"Not like that, asshole," he quickly says. "It's not the same kind of love."

Well, not exactly...it's hard to explain."

I'm about to tell him to do us both a favor and *don't*, but it's too late. "Before Skylar, you were my best friend, you know? *My person.*"

I get it. We're opposites, but we formed a bond back when we were kids. Everyone else thought he was annoying, and while that was true, I was willing to look past it and appreciated him for being authentic.

Josh didn't try to act like shit didn't faze him or like he wasn't completely fucked up in the head.

I have trouble processing emotions, but Josh doesn't.

His ability to be vulnerable and show his scars to the world—scars that are a lot worse than mine—is something I envy...because it's something I'll never be able to do.

Josh clears his throat. "You always had my back, even when I didn't deserve it." His voice drops. "It's why you did what you did in the woods that night. You know how much I love her...that I can't live without her. So, you stepped in and protected me."

I swallow.

I was protecting someone that night...but it wasn't him.

"Anyway, Skylar's the only good thing I have. Probably the only good thing I'll ever have." He shrugs. "I guess in my fucked-up head, offering to share the thing I love most with you was my way of trying to repay you for always having my back and taking care of me."

A snort leaves him, and he scrubs a hand down his face. "Man, did I get it wrong though, huh? Skylar's not attracted to you at *all*...and you're not into her either."

I force my expression to remain impassive. *Force the thing in my chest to go numb.* "Yeah."

He stands. "I'm sorry, Memph. I can't blame you for hating me. I'd

probably hate me, too.”

He starts to walk out, but I halt him. “So that’s all it was? A warped token of appreciation?”

“Yeah...mostly.” A grin spreads across his face. “I mean, I kind of wanted to suck you off. But only because I’ve never met *anyone* who needs to bust a nut and get laid more than you do. Figured I’d be doing you a huge favor.”

My eyes narrow. “You’re an asshole.”

Laughing, he holds up his hands. “Hey, you wanted the truth, and that’s it.”

He starts to leave, but I halt him. “I don’t hate you.”

His stare falls to the floor. “I know. Just like I know Archie and Valerie are only adopting me because of you.”

I keep my mouth shut because I won’t feed him bullshit either.

“You could have told them not to after the other night.” He laughs without humor. “It’s what I would have done if I were you.”

I know.

His eyes turn glassy. “Look, what I did will never happen again. You have my word.”

It better not, but I’m willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. “In that case, we’re cool.”

“Cool.” Apprehension crosses over his face. “If I go in for a hug, are you gonna be weirded out?”

“Yes. Because I don’t hug.”

He knows this.

“Not even your family?”

Goddammit. “Two seconds, dipshit.”

I stand still as he wraps his arms around me...

Until the next words he whispers into my ear.

“I guess we both finally trust each other now, huh?”

I look down at him. “What do you mean?”

“You trust me to keep your biggest secret...and I trust you to keep your hands off what’s mine.”

A mixture of wariness and trepidation coils my gut and I take a step back. “It wasn’t a token of appreciation...it was a test.”

A setup.

“I prefer to think of it as an assessment, but hey, you passed with flying colors. I know now that you’ll never betray me.” He holds my gaze. “Because we’re brothers.”

Brothers with a secret.

Part 3: The Fall

Chapter 10

MEMPHIS



Age Eighteen

I close my eyes, getting lost in the rhythm and melody. I don't think about anything as my fingers move across the strings...because I don't have to. The notes decide where I go next. I'm just a conduit for the music flowing through my veins.

Tingles zip up and down my spine as I strum the final notes of "Purple Rain." Most people recognize Prince for his voice and ability to entertain, but the dude was an incredible guitar player.

The fact I'm playing this on the new fender Stratocaster we just got in makes the experience that much better.

When I open my eyes, I notice that a small group of customers have gathered around us.

Us meaning me and Josh. He's gotten good at playing bass over the past two years. I'm honestly proud of him for sticking with it.

"We take cash only," Josh informs the crowd as he takes off his baseball cap. "And if you have a request, it's an extra ten bucks."

Too bad he can't learn to muzzle that mouth of his.

The cluster of people grumble before going their separate ways.

Except for a tall brunette. Most of our customers tend to be regulars, but I've never seen her here before. "Wow, you're *amazing*."

Grinning, Josh takes a step forward, even though she's regarding me. "If you think he's amazing at guitar, you should see the way he fucks. The dude has a literal anaconda in his pants. Hope you don't want kids because he'll fuck your uterus up and rip you in half."

I'm about to *fuck* his face up if he doesn't close his big fat mouth.

The brunette's eyes widen with horror, and she hikes a thumb in the direction of the door. "My friends are waiting for me in the parking lot."

I glare at him as she takes off. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

I'm not looking for a girlfriend, but the fact that she was in a guitar store was enough to pique my interest where there'd ordinarily be none.

"What do you mean?" Josh slaps his chest. "I was being your wingman."

"A *wingman* isn't supposed to make the girl run away like her ass is on fire."

"Think of it as thinning the herd. Trust me, you can tell that chick don't know shit about riding dick. I'll find you someone better to hand your V-card to."

I've told him countless times that I'm no longer a virgin, but the dipshit is either going deaf or losing too many brain cells from all the weed he's been smoking.

A man nearby snickers and I shove Josh into a far corner of the store.

"I already told you, I don't need your help getting laid. I've had sex before."

"Yeah? With who?"

None of his fucking business.

I open my mouth to tell him that, but my manager Ed comes out of the

back room.

“How’d you like the new Strat?”

My irritation evaporates as I think about the metallic purple beauty that was in my hands before. “It’s sick. I envy the son of a bitch lucky enough to take her home.”

Because it sure as shit won’t be me. It’s a little over eight-hundred bucks—with my employee discount—and my bank account is in the single digits thanks to the pickup truck I bought recently.

It’s ten years old and a gas guzzler, but it gets me where I need to go.

And Josh, because half the time I’m schlepping his ass around.

“You know,” Ed says while rubbing his chin. “Hendrix’s favorite was a Fender Strat.”

I like Ed, but he has this annoying habit of telling me shit I already know.

“I know.”

“Can you spot me ten?” Josh cuts in while looking at his phone. “I’ll give it back to you next week.”

No, he won’t. Besides, I don’t have it.

“Can’t. I’m broke until payday.”

Josh looks at Ed. “Mind giving your favorite employee an advance?”

Ed looks like he wants to reach over and wring his neck and I don’t blame him.

Last summer, I got Josh a job here. He lasted two weeks before it all went to hell. Ed caught him drinking out back with a few of his friends instead of doing what he was getting paid to.

I talked Ed into giving him another shot, but a few days later, the same thing happened.

I don’t think Josh is cut out for the workforce. Hell, I don’t think he’s cut out for much of anything. Except partying. He excels at that.

Ed points to the door. “Out.”

Josh lifts his hands. “Chill, old man.”

“Why don’t you have any money? I thought you were Mrs. Landrum’s new handyman?”

It’s the job *Skylar* recently got him. She goes there every weekend to cook and clean.

“Yeah...about that.” Wincing, he looks around the store. “I didn’t show up last weekend...or the weekend before that, so I’m pretty sure I’m canned.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “We graduate in four months. You need to learn how to hold down a job.”

“Some people aren’t meant for the typical nine-to-five grind. Even Einstein had a problem getting hired.”

Josh is no Einstein.

And his problem isn’t getting jobs. It’s *keeping* them.

He peers down at his phone. “I gotta split. Skylar’s still pissed that I missed the final football game, and I promised her I’d be at the first basketball game tonight. Can I borrow your truck?”

“Depends. Are you planning on smoking and drinking tonight?”

“Hell yeah. There’s always a party after the game. Something you’d know if you spent a lot less time here and a lot more time having fun.”

Having fun won’t get me any closer to my goals.

I received my acceptance letter to Berkeley College of Music this week. It’s one of the most respected music schools in the country and I worked my ass off for it.

There’s no way in hell I’m gonna fuck *that* up.

I’m so close to getting out of this town and pursuing music full time.

So close to my dream.

So close to touching the sky.

“You’re not driving my truck if you’re getting wasted.”

“Come on. Don’t be such a—”

“I don’t want to get a phone call in the middle of the night that my truck is wrapped around a tree and you’re dead because your drunk ass got behind the wheel. The answer’s no.”

He sulks. “How am I supposed to get there then?”

The school’s a mile away. Not twenty.

“You have two legs. Walk.”

I can tell he wants to argue, but his phone rings. Bringing his cell to his ear, he heads for the door. “I told you, baby, I’m coming. Chill.”

“That brother of yours is trouble with a capital *T*.”

Once again, my boss tells me something I already know.

I head over to the purple Strat and pick it up. It’s goddamn perfect. Almost like it was made for my hands.

Unable to stop myself, I strum the first few notes of “Stairway to Heaven.”

I can’t wait to get the fuck out of this town.

“You know, Hendrix was a leftie, too,” Ed calls out.

I snort. “I know.”

“Did you know we offer special payment plans for employees?”

Confused, I look up. “Since when?”

“Since now.” He expels a long sigh. “Hell, Memphis, you’re just as good as Hendrix. Maybe even better. You shouldn’t be stocking guitars. You should be on a giant stage *playing* them. Blessing the world with your gift.”

That’s the dream.

Chapter 11

SKYLAR



Irate brown eyes narrow on me as I straighten my spine, refusing to back down.

Rumor has it Mrs. Cox—the school principal—used to be a smoke show back in the day, and honestly, not much has changed.

With her long legs, auburn hair, a little Botox, and a body that could rival a twenty-year-old’s—despite recently celebrating her fortieth birthday—she’s still got it going on.

But while she’s beautiful, she’s also a certified bitch with a capital *B*.

“What do you mean you’re not going to apologize?”

I stand my ground. “I’m not going to apologize because I didn’t do anything wrong. *You* did.”

Or rather, the administrators of this school are at fault. However, Mrs. Cox has the power and influence to do the right thing and it’s clear she’s not going to, so fuck her, too.

Rubbing her forehead, she takes a seat at her desk. “Skylar, I know you meant well, but your actions painted the school in a terrible light.”

“I prefer to think of it as informing the public that the administrators of Oak Creek High are transphobic tyrants.”

Which is exactly what the protesting sign I held up in the middle of our last

game said.

I love cheerleading. So much. However, I can't stand Charlotte—and her mom's—way of running things. Or their discrimination against anyone who doesn't fit the perfect image of what they think a cheerleader should be.

Arabella is an amazing athlete and there's no reason she shouldn't be one of us.

"We are not transphobic," Mrs. Cox grits through her teeth. "Your little stunt was not only uncalled for, it crossed a line."

I stab her desk with my pointer finger. "If you're not, then prove it by letting her join the squad. Once you do that, I'll not only take down the video, I'll issue a public apology and sing your praises."

The video I posted online only received a thousand likes this week, but it was enough to make a few people call the school in support of Arabella.

And for me to get called into Mrs. Cox's office.

She rubs her forehead again, like I'm a nuisance she doesn't know how to handle.

Good.

I'm going to continue being a thorn in her side until she makes this right.

"Peter—"

I stop her right there. "It's *Arabella*. Stop using her dead name."

Steepling her fingers, she glares daggers at me. "Look, Arabella didn't *not* make the squad on account of her being transgender, she didn't make it because she lacks the skill to be a varsity cheerleader."

That's straight-up bullshit.

"Are you insane? Her toe touches are on point, her kicks are the highest I've ever seen, she can tumble circles around the rest of us, and her back handsprings are to *die* for."

Not only should she be on the squad, she should be the one coaching us.

Confusion spreads across her face. “There must be a mistake, Charlotte said she wasn’t good.”

Charlotte’s just jealous because she’s better. *Way better.*

“The only mistake is not letting her join because Charlotte’s lying.”

Her eyes flick up to the ceiling. “I know you’re trying to be a good friend and it’s commendable, but the cheer coach agrees with Charlotte’s assessment.”

Of course she does. There’s a reason Charlotte’s such a bitch.

“That’s because our coach is her mom.”

“I understand—” Something behind me snags her attention. “Hello, Memphis. You’re here early. I’ll be with you in one moment.” Her gaze snaps back to me. “I’m sorry, Skylar, but there’s nothing I can do. Decisions regarding members of the varsity squad are up to the coach and captain. In the meantime, I’m going to kindly request that you stop causing issues. Otherwise I’ll have no choice but to suspend you not only from tonight’s game but from school.”

I lurch out of my seat with so much force it nearly tips backward. “You should be ashamed of yourself.”

With a toss of my hair, I storm out of her office, nearly colliding into a stunned Memphis barricading the door.

“Move.”

Amusement flickers in his gaze and he takes one small step to the right.

Asshole.

“Hey, babe,” Josh says as I march into the hallway. “What’s wrong?”

“Mrs. Cox is a good-for-nothing jerk,” I inform him. “Also, I’m not talking to you today.”

He’s been partying a lot lately, and once again, he blew off Mrs. Landrum.

Granted, she’s not the most *pleasant* woman to work for, but she pays well.

So well, I'm able to afford a cell phone and groceries.

I thought Josh would be thrilled to get a job that would not only give him money but only require him to work one day a week.

But nope. Hanging out with his friends and getting wasted took precedence.

"Hey." When I ignore him, his hands go to my waist, and he pulls me closer. "I'm sorry, okay? Truth be told, being a handyman isn't really my thing anyway."

"If you weren't interested, you should have let me know that. I would have helped her find someone else for the job instead of convincing her to hire you."

He shrugs helplessly. "I didn't want to disappoint you. It seems to be all I ever do these days."

My heart clenches because I have been riding him extra hard lately. I know he has issues feeling like he's inadequate, and my harping on him isn't exactly being a supportive girlfriend. "You're not disappointing me."

He grins. "Does this mean the silent treatment is over and my baby girl forgives me for being an idiot?"

And just like that, my insides feel all warm and squishy. "You're not an idiot."

He's just...a little lost. But I know with my love and encouragement, he'll get on the right track.

We're in this together.

"Tell you what, how about I give this handyman thing another shot?"

"Okay, but only if you promise to be there on Sunday. Mrs. Landrum will kill me if you're a no-show again. I might too, because the dishwasher has been broken for three weeks now and my hands could use a break."

"Promise." Closing the distance between us, he kisses my lips. "I love

you.”

“I love you—” In my peripheral, I spot Arabella running to the bathroom... with tears in her eyes. “I have to go.” I start to walk away but pause. “Aren’t you supposed to be in class right now?”

“It ends in fifteen minutes. Besides, you’re not in class either.”

That’s because I got called to the principal’s office.

I shoo him down the hallway. “Go to History before Mr. Chavez gives you detention again.”

“Fine,” he calls out. “But only because my superhot girlfriend is making me.”

I blow him a kiss before sprinting to the girls’ room.

Where I discover Arabella blowing her nose into a tissue while standing at the sinks.

We haven’t been friends for long, but I’m fiercely protective over her.

Josh says it’s because I’m a *bleeding heart*, but I can’t help that I’m sensitive to other people’s emotions and pain.

I rush over. “What happened?”

She snuffles. “Nothing.”

I give her a pointed look.

“Charlotte’s just being a bitch like always,” she mumbles before holding up a crinkled piece of paper.

I flinch when I see “*put your dick away*” scrawled on it.

A rush of guilt floods through me. I was the one who encouraged Arabella to try out, and ever since then, she’s been on Charlotte’s radar.

“I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” Another tear runs down her cheek. “I just wish everyone would stop hating me.”

I know it feels like that’s the case, but it’s not true. There are people who

like her...a lot. As they should, because she's awesome.

I grab some paper towels from the dispenser and wipe the smudged mascara under her eyes. We might be a small town in the South, but not everyone shares Charlotte's viewpoint. Times are changing for the better.

Fishing around my purse, I take out my tube of mascara and some lip gloss. "Half the students in the school signed my petition demanding that you be allowed on the squad, so trust me, you have people in your corner. I know it's a lot easier said than done, but don't let Charlotte and her little cronies make you feel like you don't belong...because you do."

A small smile peeks through. "Thank you, Skylar. I appreciate you always being so nice."

"You don't have to thank me." I swipe the wand over her lips. "But here's what you *are* gonna do." After smoothing her hair, I spin her toward the mirror. "You are going to go out there with your head held high. Because you're a better woman than Charlotte will ever be."

She squeezes my hand. "Thank you."

There she goes again. "Please, *stop* thanking me. This is what comes with the Skylar friend package."

The bell rings and I link arms with her as we walk out of the bathroom.

"What's your next class?" she asks as we enter the hallway that's now littered with students.

I inwardly cringe. "Chavez."

History is boring enough, but his monotone voice and dull lesson plans border on unbearable. The only reason I don't fall asleep is because he gets off on doling out detention slips like candy.

Arabella makes a face. "My condolences."

We quickly exchange goodbyes since our classes are on opposite ends of the building.

I do a quick look around for Josh while I make a pit stop at my locker to grab my history textbook, but he's nowhere to be found.

However, I do see Memphis coming out of the school office. I study him as he walks to his locker...which happens to be directly across from mine.

I'm not sure what the cause of it is, but lately, there's a confidence about him that wasn't there before.

He's still reclusive, only now it's more of a "*leave me the fuck alone*" vibe.

However, I do catch him talking to a few people from time to time. Namely, Isaac Singer, who's on the basketball team.

It's a shame he doesn't talk more, though, because he's incredibly good-looking. I've overheard tons of girls referring to him as hot and sexy over the years...and yet he's never dated any of them.

As far as I know, he's never dated *anyone*.

I once told Josh that I didn't think Memphis was into girls, and the more time passes, the more certain I am.

It makes so much sense.

Briefly, my eyes drop to his lips before I look away. I have no doubt the guy who lands him will be *very* happy with those.

I'd ask why he got called into the principal's office—given he's *Mr. Perfect*—but it's not like he would tell me.

Even though he's slightly more social than he was, he still avoids me like the plague.

And I avoid him right back.

Chapter 12

MEMPHIS



Opening my locker, I swap out a few folders. I'm about to shut it when a familiar voice calls out my name.

"Memphis, my man. What's up?"

Isaac is probably the only person in this school who doesn't annoy the shit out of me. Which is a good thing on account of us being locker neighbors for the past four years.

I've also tutored him on occasion to help him keep his grades up so he can stay on the basketball team.

"Hey."

"Have any plans tonight? There's a party after the big game."

Isaac's been trying to get me to go to a party for as long as I've known him.

I slam my locker shut. "Can't. I'm working."

"Bruh, you're always working."

I start to leave but then realize I grabbed the wrong folder.

"Goddamn," Isaac says under his breath as I open my locker, his attention pulled to something across the hall.

When I look over my shoulder, I see what's got him so hypnotized.

Skylar.

Long, silky blonde hair falls down her back in soft waves and since it's Friday, she's wearing her blue-and-white cheerleading uniform. It molds to her tight little body like a second skin.

I'm guessing she was called into Mrs. Cox's office because of the protest she did midcheer during last Friday's game. Evidently, someone took a video of it on their phone, and it's gone viral online.

And by someone? I mean Josh.

I have no doubt it's ruffling the admin's feathers, but Skylar's not in the wrong.

She's standing up for her friend.

Isaac nudges me. "Man, she is so fine I'd sell my kids for one night with her."

"You don't have kids."

He snickers. "Shit, I'm willing to sell my future ones. And my kids' future ones. Hell, I'll trade the whole Singer line for a taste of that." He grabs his textbook. "Your brother's a lucky motherfucker."

I'm about to walk away for a second time, but his voice drops and he gives me an inquisitive look. "Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

He moves closer. "I overheard Doug and a couple other guys talking about how Josh lets them fuck her. Is it true? If so, how can *I* get in on that action?"

And just like that, Isaac's gone from someone I could tolerate to someone I want to beat the shit out of.

While Josh is getting off—literally and figuratively—on offering his girlfriend up like a prized show pony just so he can partake in his own sexual desires, I don't think Skylar is fully aware of the effect it's having on her reputation.

People are starting to talk.

And while Josh is being praised as *the man* in the locker room, Skylar's silently being branded *the whore*.

It's not fair, but very few things in this world are.

"I have no idea," I tell him. "I—"

I stop talking when Charlotte—the pretentious *Karen* of Oak Creek High and our cheerleading captain—struts up to Skylar like she's gearing up to start World War III.

Everyone's eyes are on Charlotte except Skylar, who's oblivious to the impending hurricane heading her way because she's too busy typing something on her phone.

I tamp down the urge to walk over there and run interference.

This is Skylar's battle. She's a big girl.

Only problem is...Skylar's a lover, not a fighter.

Hell, I once heard the girl apologize to a chair for bumping into it.

Although her claws *did* come out while she was in Mrs. Cox's office. Then again, she's a hellcat when it comes to standing up for others...just not herself.

An obnoxious throat clear has Skylar's head snapping up.

For the briefest of moments, I detect a flash of fear in her expression.

Unfortunately, Charlotte caught it, too. Her lips twist in a snarl and she swivels her head like the snake she is. "Hand in your uniform by the end of the day, Meadows. You're off the squad."

A few mouths drop open in shock, but not mine. It's no surprise the vindictive witch would make a public spectacle of giving her the axe.

It's the ultimate power move designed to put Skylar back in her place on the food chain.

It works because Skylar's face falls faster than a penny being thrown off a

building. Even a blind man could see how crushed she is.

Skylar loved being a cheerleader. Probably because it was something that didn't involve Josh and enabled her to have her own identity.

Too bad Charlotte's a heartless bitch.

Murmurs fill the hallway as Charlotte turns on her heel.

I hope Skylar keeps it together because if she so much as sheds a single tear, they'll jump on her like a hungry pack of wolves and eat her alive.

"Oh, Charlotte?" Skylar calls out, surprising everyone.

Charlotte whips around.

My mind whirls and my blood rushes to all the places it shouldn't as Skylar proceeds to take off her clothes.

Guys from all directions cheer as she strips down to her white sports bra and a pair of tiny booty shorts that accentuate her curvy little ass and hips.

Isaac bites his knuckle. "Fuck me."

With a cute little snarl of her own, Skylar throws her uniform at Charlotte. "You can have it back now." Leaning in, she gets close to her face. "I don't associate with prejudiced cunts who torment others because doing so makes them feel better about having to live up to their mommy's standards. Grow up and stop sucking on your mom's teat, scumbag."

The cheers quickly turn into, "Oh, shits."

Head held high, Skylar forges ahead, shoulder-checking her in the process.

Good for her.

Until Charlotte opens her mouth. "At least I have a mom instead of a trashy aunt who fucks every man in Oak Creek. Then again, I guess it runs in the family, huh?"

There are cheap shots...and then there are low blows that cut so deep it leaves a welt.

Skylar keeps walking, though, only stopping briefly to tug down the back

of her tiny shorts...exposing her pert, round ass to Charlotte.

And the rest of us.

“Lord, I don’t know what I did to deserve this, but *thank you*,” Isaac exclaims.

I can’t share his sentiments, though. Because while everyone else thinks Skylar let that shit roll off her back and came out of this the victor, I know the second she’s alone she’ll fall apart.

And he’ll be the one to pick up the pieces.

Chapter 13

MEMPHIS



Glancing out the window, I shove my dick inside my jeans. We're parked in a secluded area down at the creek, but there's still a chance someone might spot us.

"You should come to my house next weekend," Danielle says as she adjusts her skirt.

Fuck that. The last thing I want or need is for her kids to catch me sneaking out the front door and wondering if I'm going to be their new stepdad.

"No."

"Memphis."

She levels me with a look. The same one she gives the students she calls into her office whenever they're in trouble.

Only right now, she's not Mrs. Cox, the principal. She's Danielle, the woman I've been fucking for the past year who's becoming increasingly attached.

It's almost comical, given she was afraid *I'd* be the clingy one after finding out I was a virgin.

But there's no risk of that happening. While I enjoy the sex and appreciate the get-out-of-jail-free card that comes with screwing my principal, I'm not looking for a relationship.

Especially with a recently divorced woman with two kids under her belt.
I want a family one day, but not at eighteen.

Not with her.

Danielle's easy on the eyes, and there's a certain thrill that comes with our *illicit* arrangement, but I don't feel a connection with her.

Hell, I don't feel a connection with anyone, but I'm hoping when the right girl comes along, that will change.

She already did, asshole. She's just not yours.

Typically, I don't allow myself to think about Skylar, but there's an issue I need to take care of.

"How are you planning on handling the Skylar situation?"

I ran interference and distracted Mrs. Cox shortly after the showdown on Friday, but that was just a temporary fix.

Come Monday morning, I have no doubt she'll suspend Sky before her first sip of coffee.

It's clear my question's thrown her for a loop because her mouth falls open and her gaze sharpens. "That's none of your business."

Her authoritarian stance is both amusing, given her mouth was open for a different reason earlier, and annoying as fuck because Skylar is my business.

"Cut the shit, Danielle. This isn't school and I'm not sitting in your office. Answer the question."

"Expulsion," she answers dryly.

Fuck that.

"Less than four months before graduation? A little harsh, don't you think?"

Shifting in the passenger seat, she turns toward me. "Hardly. Not only did she cause a ruckus after I specifically told her not to, she removed her clothing in front of the entire student body. She's lucky I'm not having her

charged with indecency.”

This time, I’m the one who levels her with a look. “Says the principal who just rode her student’s cock.”

A furious blush fills her cheeks. “Why are you concerning yourself with how I’m choosing to discipline Ms. Meadows?”

Because I give a fuck. *Despite all the reasons I shouldn’t.*

“Because she’s my brother’s girlfriend and life hasn’t exactly been easy on her.”

I won’t divulge Skylar’s abuse because it’s no one’s business, but Danielle knows she doesn’t have parents...or money.

She crosses her arms. “Then perhaps she should make things easier on *herself* by using better judgment and making wiser decisions.”

“Are you transphobic?”

Visibly offended, she snaps, “Of course not.”

“Then why the hell are you expelling her for doing the right thing?”

“It’s the principle,” she exclaims. “Skylar’s heart might be in the right place, but she painted the school in a bad light, disobeyed me, and ran around the hallways nude. If I don’t punish her, it will set a bad precedent and the superintendent will give me a hard time.”

“Jesus Christ. She stripped down to a sports bra and shorts. And she only did it because Charlotte demanded she turn in her uniform, took a cheap shot at her for being motherless, and declared to the entire school that she was a slut just like her aunt. If anyone should be punished, it’s her.”

Her mouth opens and closes like a fish. “I wasn’t aware of that.”

“Of course not. Because Charlotte and her mom have you wrapped around their bitchy bigot fingers.”

“Charlotte’s mom and I go way back, Memphis. Tracy and I used to be on the same cheerleading squad.”

“I’m left-handed.”

She blinks. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“My bad. You just told me something pointless, so I thought I’d reciprocate.”

Rubbing her temples, she makes an irritated sound. “You made your point. I’ll have a talk with Charlotte and Tracy and let them both know their behavior toward Skylar and Arabella won’t be tolerated either.” She studies her red nails. “Skylar will receive three days’ suspension and then two weeks of detention after she returns.”

It’s better than being expelled, but I still don’t like it.

“One week of detention.”

“This isn’t up for negotiation. If I don’t punish her accordingly, the super will be breathing down my neck. Two days’ suspension and two weeks’ detention. That’s as low as I’ll go.”

I know for a fact she can go lower. My cum drying on her stomach is proof enough that she’ll bend the rules as long as it aligns with her own interests.

“Two weeks of detention and *no* suspension.”

I can tell she wants to argue, but the glint in her eye makes it clear there’s something else she wants more.

“Come to my house on Saturday and spend the night. John will be taking the kids for the weekend.”

And there it is.

“I’ll think about it,” I grit out because I hate feeling like I’m cornered.

“Then I’ll have to *think* about what you want.”

I’ve always been a *pick and choose your battles* person.

We usually meet up once during the weekend anyway. Only difference is we’ll be screwing in her bed instead of my truck.

At the end of the day, I’m still getting my dick wet. The rest is just

semantics.

“Okay.”

A smile breaks free. “Two weeks’ detention it is then.”

I start the engine so I can drive her back to her car.

“Not so fast.” Her eyes fall to my crotch. “I want to ride that big cock of yours again.”

I’m still pissed Danielle was going to expel Skylar for a bullshit reason, but I did her a solid and talked her down to detention.

Now I can go back to pretending she doesn’t exist.

“Yes, ma’am.” Smirking, I undo my zipper. “But first...you’re gonna suck it.”



I’m pulling up the driveway when my phone rings. Assuming it’s Danielle, I go to hit the ignore button...but then I see *Sky* flash across the screen.

She’s never called me before. I wasn’t even aware she had my number.

The only reason I have hers is because I stole it out of Josh’s phone in case there’s an emergency and I can’t reach him.

Not because I wanted it for myself.

I pick up after the third ring. “What?”

“*That’s* how you answer the phone?” she exclaims.

My grip tightens at the sound of her voice. It’s equal parts sweet and sultry. She could recite the entire goddamn phone book twenty times a day and I’d never get tired of hearing it.

“It is when I don’t want to talk to the person on the line.”

The little gasp of surprise tells me my insult caught her off guard. *Good.*

“You’re a real asshole, you know that? Forget it.”

“What’s wrong?” I bark before she hangs up.

I want her out of my head, but the sucker in my chest disagrees.

She wouldn’t be calling me unless she had no other choice.

“Josh promised me he’d be at Mrs. Landrum’s today, but it’s almost noon and he hasn’t shown up.”

I’m not surprised. “Have you tried calling him?”

“Do bears shit in the woods? Of course, I’ve tried calling him. About a hundred times today. *At least.*”

I grip the steering wheel, willing myself not to give a shit. “No one likes a clingy girlfriend, Sky.”

“I’m not...*ugh.*” I bite back a laugh until her voice cracks. “Look, I know you don’t care, but can you please wake him up? *Please.* Mrs. Landrum’s been waiting for the handyman I promised her for a month now. If Josh doesn’t show up, she might fire me and...I really need the money, Memphis.”

Dammit.

“You’re right, I don’t care.”

I promptly hang up and head inside the house.

I pass Archie sitting at the kitchen table as I stroll to the sink.

“Meal number one,” he tells me, but I’m too busy rummaging through the cabinets.

“How was your run?”

For a moment I’m confused, but then I remember I told him I was going for a jog by the creek.

Technically, what I did still counts as exercise.

“Vigorous.”

“I’ll say, on account of how parched you are.”

I tell myself this isn’t my problem as I stride out of the kitchen.

I tell myself not to get involved as I make a beeline for his room.

I tell myself she’s his girlfriend and not *mine* as I pour the entire pitcher of water over his head.

“Wake the fuck up, asshole.”

The shithead barely even moves. “Go away.”

“You promised Skylar you’d be at Mrs. Landrum’s today.”

Rolling over, he mumbles, “So?”

“So, it’s now past noon, and she’s calling *my* phone, wondering where the hell *you* are.”

He burrows under his drenched covers. “I had a rough night.”

“You had a drunk night.”

He’s been having a lot of them lately.

No response.

“You’re gonna get her fired, motherfucker.”

He doesn’t care about a lot of things, but I *know* he cares about Skylar.

Just not enough to keep his promises, apparently.

Disgusted, I kick his bed so hard it shakes. “Hey!”

“Why don’t *you* go then?” he roars. “Goddamn.”

Selfish piece of shit.

“All this partying you’ve been doing ends now.” I kick his bed again. “You hear me?”

I want to throw the idiot through a wall right now, but I won’t let him ruin his life.

“Whatever.”

It takes everything in me not to wrap my hands around his neck and squeeze. But I can’t because, once again, I have to clean up his mess.

Archie makes a face as I grab my keys off the counter. “I’ll be back later.”

“I’ll tell Valerie to wrap up your dinner plate,” he calls out. “And Skylar’s.”

Chapter 14

SKYLAR



Relief spirals through me when I hear the doorbell ring. Not wasting any time, I rush to the front door and open it.

“Thank Go—”

Words jam in my throat when I see *Memphis* standing there. Looking like he wishes he was anywhere else.

That makes two of us.

“What are you doing here?”

“Josh isn’t coming.”

Disappointment punches me in the heart. *He promised.*

Our gazes clash, and for the briefest moment, we aren’t two people who dislike one another but two people who share a mutual frustration.

And fear. Because Josh has been partying more and more.

Just like that, my disappointment turns to guilt. I used to only work on Sundays, but recently Mrs. Landrum asked me to work on Saturdays as well.

Which means I’m no longer around to look after Josh on the weekends.

With a grunt, Memphis brushes past me. “What do you need?”

“Oh, um—”

I stop talking when his steps come to a rapid halt. “Christ.”

I know exactly what he’s thinking because it’s the same reaction I had the first time I came here.

Mrs. Landrum is loaded and her home—or should I say, *mansion*—reflects that. It’s all big and Gothic, with winding staircases and arches.

And exotic dead animals in every room. Stuffed ones.

She’s currently single, but rumors around town claim she offed all three of her former husbands and it’s why she’s so wealthy.

I don’t believe it. Although there are times I think it might be true.

Like right now.

Donning her extravagant and quintessential “*my rich husband died under mysterious circumstances*” pink robe, she glides down the staircase with a fancy cigarette holder in hand. “Where is my mimosa?”

I’m about to respond, but her stare snags on Memphis, who’s staring at the giant lion mounted in the foyer, looking equal parts fascinated and horrified.

“Ah. I see suitor number two is still hanging around in the background.”

Memphis raises a brow, but her focus returns to me.

“Thank heavens you finally wised up and got rid of that useless *vagrant*.”

I could stand here arguing with her about Josh all day, but it wouldn’t do anything but make me upset. I had hoped that his working for her would change her opinion of him, but it only made it worse.

Given he’s never shown up.

I gesture to the one who did. “This is Memphis.”

“The useless *vagrant*’s brother,” he supplies.

Not much surprises the woman, but this does. Sweeping her cigarette holder through the air, she studies him with a baffled expression. “That lazy cretin is your brother?”

Irritation swells in my chest. “He’s not a cretin.”

I have no argument regarding him being lazy, though.

Memphis's lips twitch. "Yes, ma'am."

Her face scrunches in dismay. "But he's...and *you're*..." She gapes at me. "I don't see it." With a dramatic flap of her robe, she heads back up the stairs. "Mimosa, darling. Preferably before I croak and they stick me in the ground."

"I'll bring it up to you in a few minutes."

I gesture for Memphis to follow me into the kitchen so I can give him the rundown while I make Mrs. Landrum's drink.

"Jesus," he grunts when we enter the kitchen. "Is that an alligator?"

Laughing, I walk over to the long table he's set on. "Crocodile actually. I named him Louie." I pat his head. "Don't tell the others, but he's my favorite."

Probably because I spend so much time here.

Memphis doesn't look amused. "I'll be sure to file that under shit I couldn't care less about." His eyes dart around the kitchen. "What do you need me to do?"

Be less of an asshole.

"Clean the gutters and fix the dishwasher." I jut my chin at the small window above the sink. "I suggest the gutters first since it will take you a while and you're burning daylight."

And it requires him to be far away from me.

Expression impassive, he strides out of the kitchen.

"Wait," I call out.

"What?" he snarls.

He's doing you a favor—I remind myself.

"Is there anything in particular you'd like for dinner?"

"You're cooking?"

I take the champagne and orange juice out of the fridge so I can prepare her mimosa. “Yeah. I do every weekend.”

I also make extra meals, so she’ll have enough to last her the rest of the week.

The muscles in his back tense. “In that case, I’d like to starve.”

I look at Louie as he stalks off. “I wish you were still alive so you could take a big chomp out of him.”



I peel off my gloves and wipe the sweat off my brow. So far, I’ve cleaned two bathrooms from top to bottom, vacuumed, and dusted four bedrooms, the living room, and the library. Now I’m gearing up to make dinner.

I click a few buttons on my phone and “Smells Like Teen Spirit” by Nirvana fills my ears.

Josh hates the band, but I dig them. Which is pretty funny considering music was never my thing.

However, Josh really started getting into playing bass a couple years ago, and I ended up developing an appreciation for every new song Memphis taught him.

Now, I find myself always listening to all sorts of music whenever I’m alone.

Listening and dancing.

Wiggling my butt, I take the marinated steak out of the fridge and place it into a frying pan.

I’m not sure why I love this song so much since the lyrics are nearly

intelligible, but there's something about music that lifts my spirits and sends the dark cloud hanging over my head into hiding.

Immersing myself in the beats and rhythm, I continue dancing like a fool as I peel some potatoes.

Giving my boy Louie a wink, I drop it down low and thrust my hips. I don't think Nirvana ever envisioned anyone *twerking* to one of their songs, but I'm killing it...

Until a deep throat clear makes me jump out of my skin.

I'm so startled I drop the knife in my hand, narrowly missing my foot.

Fortunately, I've learned my lesson about wearing shoes.

I bend over and pick it up. "I..."

I've got nothing. Because what the hell can you say after someone caught you shaking your booty in the air?

A little wry smirk stretches Memphis's mouth as he ambles over to the dishwasher. "I thought you didn't like music?"

Huh. So he *does* remember that day.

I toss the knife in the sink and grab another. "Things change."

Memphis begins tinkering with the dishwasher and I busy myself with chopping up some onions and carrots...in complete silence.

Until I can't take it anymore.

"Josh listens to music a lot. Although he hates Nirvana."

He makes a grumbling noise in his throat. "Josh is an idiot."

Glaring, I toss the chopped veggies into a separate pan. "Wow. *Shocking* you don't have any friends."

I try to ignore the stab of sadness those words produce, but it doesn't work.

We could have been friends.

"So," he drawls. "I hear you're not a cheerleader anymore."

Asshole.

I stir harder than necessary. “Charlotte and I had a difference of opinion.”
Because she’s a stupid cunt.

I watch the tendons in his forearms and wrist flex as he works. Most girls fawn over biceps, but a guy’s forearms and hands are my weakness.

Memphis—the jerk—happens to have really attractive ones. A collection of thick veins and lean muscle under smooth and lightly tanned skin.

I avert my gaze when he catches me staring because I don’t want him getting the wrong idea...not that it would matter.

I’m with his brother, and Memphis is gay.

It’s a shame we’re at each other’s throats all the time because I could totally find him a boyfriend. Heck, it wouldn’t even require any effort on my part because he’s freaking *gorgeous*.

He just needs a major attitude adjustment. Then again, some people are into assholes.

I’m contemplating extending the olive branch once again when he speaks.

“What she said about your aunt was fucked up.”

A bolt of pain squeezes my chest and the words are out of my mouth before I can stop myself.

“Yeah, well, she’s not really *whoring around* much lately...on account of her having cancer and all.”

I found out three weeks ago, and I’m still processing.

My relationship with my aunt Cheryl is...complicated.

When I was younger, my first instinct was to defend and protect her. Now that I’m older, however, there are times I find myself feeling resentful...because she didn’t do the same for me.

But then I feel guilty for blaming her because she was being abused in a different way.

And now she has cancer. *Just like my mom.*

Memphis blows out a sharp breath. I don't think I've ever seen him look so uneasy. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. It's just...life."

Placing the screwdriver on the counter, he looks at me. "How advanced is it?"

"Stage three ovarian cancer. Same stage my mom was when they caught hers."

And seven months later, she was gone.

I wipe my hands on a dish towel. "Mrs. Landrum's paying for her treatment."

Among other things. Like mortgage and utilities.

I don't know why because she certainly doesn't have to, but I'm incredibly grateful.

A muscle in his jaw tics and he crosses his arms over his chest. "Does Josh know?"

I swallow the lump rising in my throat. "He was the first person I told."

He's always the first—and usually only—person I tell everything to.

A peculiar look crosses over his face. "You calling me freaking out makes a lot more sense now."

"Sorry." Embarrassed, I reach for the tongs and turn over the steak. "I'd like to think Mrs. Landrum wouldn't fire me, but you never know. Sometimes..." My voice trails off because it's not like he would understand.

Memphis is an impenetrable wall. Nothing gets through. Nothing gets in.

However, what he says next steals the air from my lungs.

"The people you trust are the ones who hurt you the most."

It's like he just reached inside my chest and found the secret password to peel back the hidden layers of my beating, battered heart.

Shane never should have touched me.
My aunt never should have let him.
And Josh should have been here.
My gaze collides with his. “Exactly.”



I was hoping our conversation meant we were turning over a new leaf, but no such luck because we ride home in uncomfortable silence.

It sucks.

“Mrs. Landrum wanted me to ask if you’d be available every Sunday,” I tell him as he pulls into his driveway.

He cuts the engine. “I work.”

Right. If I was smarter, I’d leave it at that and inform her Memphis turned the offer down, but I don’t.

On the surface, he’s cold, but I got a glimpse at a different side of him once.

“She said she’d be willing to make it worth your while.”

Rubbing his jaw, he mulls this over. “How so?”

“Five hundred.”

“A month?”

“A day. Well, for Sundays.”

He sucks in a breath. “What kind of shit would I be doing?”

“Anything, really. Obviously, you won’t have to cook and clean since I handle all that stuff. But lawn work, various repairs around the house...things like that.”

I figured he'd be elated about the money, but a resigned sigh leaves him. Almost like he's doing *me* a favor instead of the other way around. "This isn't permanent. I'm going to Berkeley in the fall."

I know Memphis plays guitar, but I've never actually heard him. According to Josh, he's amazing. However, Josh also thinks *Dr. Seuss* is a renowned and gifted poet, so there's that.

Memphis getting into Berkeley is huge, though. It's sad that this is the first time I'm hearing about it.

Archie and Valerie must be so proud of him.

"Holy cow. Congratulations."

He grunts.

I get that Memphis is a loner, but I want so badly to be his friend. I want him to know he can confide in me.

That he doesn't have to stay in the closet.

Heck, I've watched my boyfriend get his dick sucked by half the basketball team before they fucked me, so I'm the last person to throw stones.

Not that being gay is something to condemn. It's not.

I just want him to know he has an ally.

"Listen, I know our relationship is...strange. But if we're gonna be coworkers, I don't want things to be so strained between us." I peer up at him. "I'd like to think I'm not a judgmental person, so you don't have to hide who you are around me."

I can't decipher his expression. "What are you talking about?"

Darn it. I don't want to push him to admit something he's not ready to.

Suppressing the urge to wrap my arms around him, I reach over and squeeze his hand instead. "Your secrets are safe with me."

He rips his hand away like the contact burns him.

My heart sinks in defeat as I open the door and climb out.

I feel so stupid for forcing him to be my friend when he so obviously doesn't want to be.

Except when I glance back, he doesn't look angry...he looks tortured.

Tortured and lonely.

That alone gives me the fortitude to keep trying.

You can't get rid of me, Memphis Payne.

Sooner or later, I'm going to break down those walls.

Chapter 15

MEMPHIS



I'm going to fucking kill him.

"Your dinner is in the fridge," Archie tells me when I walk through the front door.

"You can have it."

She knows.

"Where's Skylar?"

She. Fucking. Knows.

"Home."

He says something else, but I don't hear what because I'm charging down the hall to the traitor's bedroom.

The lights are off when I enter and the big lump on the mattress tells me he's still sleeping. Grinding my molars, I stalk toward his bed.

Three seconds later, I'm ripping the motherfucker out of it.

"What the fuck?" he sputters as a lamp crashes to the floor.

I body-slam him into the nearest wall. "You told her."

He tries to squirm free, but I trap him by pinning my forearm over his throat.

"Told who *what*?"

I'm not in the mood for his games. "You told Skylar what happened in the

woods.”

Shock crosses over his features. “What the hell are you talking about? No, I didn’t.”

I scan his face for signs he’s lying, but there aren’t any, so I release him.

It makes no damn sense.

What the fuck did she mean when she said my secrets were safe with her?

Josh rubs his throat, appearing equally perplexed. “What makes you think I told her?” He pales. “Wait a minute, you didn’t tell her anything, did you?”

“Of course not.”

“Then why the hell are you turning into the Hulk?”

I have to choose my next words wisely.

Telling a boyfriend that his girl grabbed another man’s hand while spewing a bunch of shit about keeping secrets isn’t going to sound innocent. I don’t want him accusing her of doing something wrong until I know what prompted it.

Rage creeps in again.

Even though he has no problem letting the entire basketball team fuck her.

“She offered me a job,” I say instead. “Well, technically, Mrs. Landrum did, but it was through her.”

That only makes Josh more baffled. “Okay. And?”

Here goes nothing.

“Why would she do something nice for me when we don’t like each other?”

“*That’s* why you lost your shit?” He laughs. “Fucking A, Memphis. She didn’t drop to her knees and offer to blow you, she got you a job.” Shaking his head, he walks over to his bed and sits. “I know you have trust issues, and interacting with females isn’t exactly your forte, but goddamn.”

“I guess I overreacted.”

He swipes his phone off the dresser. “Ya think, psycho?”

Squeezing the back of my neck, I exhale. “I should probably take the job. It’s not like I can’t use the extra money.”

Shrugging, he types something on his phone. “Do you, bro.”

A sick sense of satisfaction surges through me as I exit his room and close the door.

I should turn it down.

But I won’t.

Because even though she’s not mine...she’ll be there.

Without him.

Chapter 16

SKYLAR



Sweat soaks my skin and my heart races so hard it hurts.
I try to close my eyes and block it out, but it doesn't help.
I see his face.

I feel his hands on me.

I smell his scent.

He's everywhere.

Bolting out the front door, I flee to the only place I'll ever be safe.

To the only person who understands.

"Hey," Josh says as I crawl through the window in his bedroom. "What—"

"I can't get him off me." Nausea swirls in my stomach and the walls start closing in. "I can't make it stop."

The urge to rip my flesh off my bones—to make him go *away*—is so strong I dig my nails into my skin.

Josh wraps his arms around me. "Look at me, Skylar."

I can't. Because it's not Josh's face I see. It's *Shane's*.

"He's not here. It's me...just me." He clutches me tighter. "You know I'm never gonna let anyone hurt you."

I draw in a gulp of air as Josh's voice breaks through all the ugly.

"I'll always protect you." I nuzzle his chest as he gently rocks me in his

arms. “You’re the most important thing in the world to me, baby.”

A wrinkle in his forehead appears as he stares into my eyes. “You’re safe now.” His fingers clasp my chin. “You know why?”

“Because you protected me,” I choke out, my voice thick with tears.

“That’s right.” Wiping my cheeks, he kisses my temple. “I killed him for you.” His hands grip my face. “That’s how much I love you.”

I cling to him like a lifeline as the ugly fades away.

This is why I stay.

Josh has his faults, and he isn’t a perfect boyfriend, but he understands me in ways no one else ever can.

He protects me.

He loves me.

He saved me.

“I’m sorry I woke you up.”

He kisses my cheeks, my forehead, my lips. “Don’t be.”

A wave of shame engulfs me. “I’m so fucked up.”

My aunt started chemo today, so I spent the night hanging out with her. We watched a movie on the sofa while munching on snacks.

Well, I munched, she was too queasy.

After the movie was over, I grabbed the remote and flicked through the channels...

And then I saw it.

The same cartoon I watched with Shane that day.

I didn’t even realize I’d stopped moving until she reached over and shook me.

I tried to play it off like I was fine, and I thought I would be.

Until I woke up in the middle of the night and he was there.

“I’m fucked up, too, baby,” Josh murmurs. “It’s why we’re soul mates.”

I start to smile...but then he's back.

Reminding me it's not over. *That it's never over.*

Because dead or not, it doesn't erase what he's done.

It doesn't wash away all the ugly.

Panic sets in because I know it's going to be one of those exceptionally brutal nights where he keeps taunting me.

I need more protection.

"Can we go to my treehome?"



"These hash browns are the shit. You want some?"

Valerie's a wonderful cook and it smells delicious, but I'm late for work.

"No thanks." I climb out of Josh's bed. "I have to get ready."

Today's Sunday, which means Memphis is my coworker.

I wonder if it would be weird to ask him for a ride...given we're headed to the same place and all.

Then again, knowing *Mr. Perfect*, he's already left.

Plucking a piece of bacon off his plate, Josh shoves it into his mouth.

"Smart move, babe. Especially since you're no longer cheerleading."

I root around the bottom drawer of his dresser where I keep a few of my clothes since I'm here so often. "What do you mean?"

Chewing, his shoulders lift in a shrug. "Nothing...just you know."

"No, I don't know."

He shovels a forkful of hash browns into his mouth. "You don't want to gain any more weight is all."

My spine stiffens as I take in his words.

A size zero used to be loose on me, but only because I didn't have access to food regularly. Mrs. Landrum changed all that, though.

Now that I'm no longer starving, my body's settled into a perfectly content size five.

I look down. Sure, my stomach isn't as flat as it once was and I've got some curves going on, but I didn't think it was a bad thing.

Evidently, my boyfriend does, though.

"You think I'm fat?"

"Of course not." I start to smile until he adds, "I just wanted to give you a heads-up that you should probably lay off the cobbler and fried chicken because you're heading to heifer-ville."

His words feel like a slap. My face must give me away because he rolls his eyes and says, "I knew I shouldn't have said anything. You're too sensitive."

I hate that he's right because if I could change any quality about myself, it would unequivocally be *that*.

God, it stings.

So does having to undress in front of your boyfriend who just made a dig at your body, but I don't have a choice.

I wriggle into a pair of jean cutoffs. *It's fine*. I'll just do a few more crunches. I inwardly sulk. *And cut back on the cobbler and chicken*.

"Look at me," he says.

I don't want to.

"Skylar."

I turn my head. "What?"

"I think you're beautiful, baby. You know that, right?"

It's hard to believe after his last remark.

Then again, maybe he really *was* just trying to be helpful.

Josh is blunt and tells it like it is. It's not his fault that I require a *handle me with care* filter.

I wince when I check the time on my phone. I'm seriously late. "Do you think Memphis would give me a ride?"

He goes back to eating his breakfast. "I don't know, but you should do yourself a favor and steer clear. He flipped the fuck out last week."

That's...weird. While Memphis isn't exactly *Mr. Pleasant*, he doesn't strike me as the type to lose his cool. "Flipped out about what?"

"You getting him a job at Mrs. Landrum's."

I peel off my pajama top. "What?"

That doesn't make any sense.

"Baby, look, I love the guy, but..." He taps his skull. "There're a few faulty wires up here."

I'll say.

I search around for my bra. "I was doing him a favor."

"I know. You're a sweetheart." He takes another swig of his orange juice. "Trust me, baby girl. This is a Memphis issue. Anyone else would be grateful."

Agreed. Although it still doesn't sound like him.

Then again, I don't actually know him.

But I want to.

I suspend the hunt for my bra momentarily. "I wish I knew why he hated me so much."

Josh makes a face. "Don't waste your energy. Memphis hates everyone."

My heart squeezes. "Can you really blame him for being so miserable? His secret must be eating him alive."

Josh blanches. "What are you talking about?"

I resume the bra search. “Memphis being in the closet. It’s heartbreaking because Archie and Vivian would totally support him. So would you, seeing as—”

“I’m not gay,” he interjects. “We’ve gone over this, baby. I experiment and have a fuck-ton of fun, and last I checked, so do you. Let’s not put labels on it.”

“Right.”

Because if we did, a *fuck-ton of fun* wouldn’t be it.

At least not for me.

“Just because you eat a few vegetables doesn’t make you a vegetarian. Know what I’m saying?”

I so don’t have time for this conversation right now. “Have you seen my bra?”

“No.” His eyes fall to my exposed breasts. “It’s not like you need one.”

I glare at him, but then another thought slams into me with the force of a freight train.

Oh. My. God. I can’t believe it never occurred to me before.

Josh inhales another slice of bacon and licks his fingers. “Relax. It was just a joke.”

My heart sinks as I throw on a T-shirt, but it has nothing to do with his *joke*.

It’s because I just figured out why Memphis hates me so much.

He’s in love with Josh.

Chapter 17

SKYLAR



My muscles ache from scrubbing the floors all morning, so I make my way out to the pool deck for a much-needed break.

After toeing off my sneakers, I place a towel down and lie on it.

A sigh passes my lips as the knots of tension throughout my body ease under the heat of the sun.

I'd kill for a massage, but this is the next best thing.

I'm beginning to drift off when a shadow eclipses my sunshine.

"It's sixty-four degrees out," a gruff voice states.

Using my hand as a visor, I squint up at Memphis. "It's *perfect*." I pat the spot next to me. "Come join me."

I'm surprised when he takes me up on the offer and sits.

Wanting my stomach to catch some rays, I push my shirt up. "Would you like me to get you a towel so you can lie down?"

His upper lip curls as he looks me over. "I'm fine."

Okay, then.

"How do you like the job so far?"

"It's fine."

Jeez. It's as if hanging out with me is the equivalent of facing an execution.

Grabbing the elastic band from around my wrist, I pile my hair into a messy bun on top of my head. "I love being out here."

Silence.

A few minutes later, I flip onto my stomach. In an effort to avoid tan lines, I maneuver out of my shirt and toss it on the deck.

When I look over, I find Memphis glaring daggers at me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think it would be a big deal."

I honestly didn't even give it a second thought. I suppose I should have asked if the sight of my bare back would bother him.

Although I don't see *why*. Then again, some people are uncomfortable with nudity, regardless of their sexual preferences.

"I can put my shirt on if you want."

His nostrils flare on an indrawn breath. "It's fine."

Those must be his two favorite words.

A contented moan leaves me as the sun beats down on my shoulder blades. "This feels so good. I love spring."

"Me too."

That baritone voice sounds even deeper. *Rougher.*

Since he seems somewhat receptive now, I continue making small talk. "Bikini season will be here soon. I seriously need to step up my crunch game."

Nothing.

"Maybe we can work out together sometime."

Memphis visibly swallows. "Yeah."

I nearly bust out into a happy dance because we're making progress.

Not wanting to lose the ground we've made, I conjure up some other

things we can do together. “How do you feel about manicures?”

And he’s gone radio silent again.

“I’m thinking about getting a Brazilian wax soon. I usually shave everything off, but ingrown hairs are a bitch, so I’m open to trying other options.” I grin at him. “Wanna come?”

His jaw hardens. “No.”

“I guess you prefer things au naturel, huh? I personally appreciate a little manscaping down there, but hey, whatever tickles your pickle.”

Perhaps Memphis prefers the big and burly lumberjack type. Though that’s definitely *not* Josh.

“What’s your—”

“Would you quit talking so fucking much? Jesus.”

Yikes. His irritation is coming off him in waves.

And now that I finally know why, I feel like the worst person ever.

I can’t help that I love Josh, but I don’t want to be his enemy.

Maybe if I build up his confidence and offer to help him find another guy—one who doesn’t have a girlfriend—he’ll stop loathing me with the fire of a thousand suns and we can finally be friends.

Tilting my head, I prop myself up on my elbows. “You know, you’re *really* attractive.”

Those daggers are back with a vengeance.

“I’m serious.” Shifting, I block the sun from my face with my hand so I can look at him, but Memphis averts his gaze...focusing elsewhere. “I mean, you’re an asshole, but there’s this aura about you...”

It’s *magnetic*. Men are going to flock to him in droves once he finally gives himself permission to be free.

“Aura?”

“Yeah.” Giving him my best smile, I rake my gaze over his dark, fitted T-

shirt and jeans. His style is laid back, but it suits him. “You’ve got this whole mysterious vibe going on. It’s incredibly sexy.”

A small part of me thinks he knows this about himself, but he prefers not to draw attention to it because he hates being in the spotlight.

It’s the complete opposite of Josh.

Clearing his throat, he angles his body away from me. It’s like he’s putting a wall up between us.

Ouch.

Since tiptoeing around the issue and complimenting him isn’t doing me any favors, I decide to come right out and address the elephant in the room.

“I’m sorry you’re hurting, Memphis. I can’t imagine how hard it must be for you to see me and Josh together.”

The muscles in his broad back pull tight.

“I’m not saying moving on will be easy, and I’m not trying to downplay your feelings when I say this, but you shouldn’t spend the rest of your life pining over someone who doesn’t feel the same. You deserve better.”

I curb the impulse to reach for his hand because the last time I did, it didn’t end well.

My heart clenches because he must be feeling humiliated right now.
Vulnerable.

“You don’t have to say anything. I’m not trying to embarrass you. And for what it’s worth, I’m not judging you for being in love with Josh.” *How could I?* “I love him to—”

“What the fuck?” He whips around. “Are you high off your boyfriend’s stash?”

Whoa. “No. Why?”

Anger tightens his features as he rises to his feet. “Because you’re talking about me being in love with my brother like it’s normal. Like it’s *factual*, so

you must be. Either that or you're in the middle of a psychotic episode and having delusions."

My mouth opens and closes a few times, but no words come out.

I tend to have a sixth sense when it comes to these kinds of things. Bleeding heart and all that...but maybe I got it wrong?

No. There's no way. Memphis might not be in love with Josh, but I know there's something going on with him.

Something he's hiding.

"I'm sorry, I thought..." I draw in a breath, relieved because Memphis not being in love with my boyfriend makes shit way less complicated between us. "Okay, so you're not into Josh."

"Fuck no," he bites out.

At least we're getting somewhere now. *I hope.*

Perhaps if I just put the truth out there for him, he'll realize he can trust me.

"Got it. But just so you know, being gay is *nothing* to be ashamed of."

There. Now he knows it's safe to come out to me.

An array of emotions scatter across his face. "First, you accuse me of being in love with Josh, and now you think I'm gay?"

I'm about to point out that I actually thought the latter first, but Memphis looks like he legitimately wants to tear my head off.

"It's okay. I know it's hard—"

"I'm *not* gay." His features twist in bewilderment. "Why would you think that?"

My mouth hangs open. I can't believe he's still denying it...

And that's when it hits me like a Category 6 hurricane.

"Oh my god. You're not gay."

"No fucking shit, Sherlock," he grits through his teeth.

But if he's not—which he clearly isn't—that means I'm lying here topless...in front of a straight guy.

Who happens to be my boyfriend's brother.

And this perverted jerk *let* me.

Once the shock wears off, the anger begins. And holy hell, it's strong.

"You are such an asshole," I growl as I spring up, cupping my breasts with my hands.

He points to himself in disbelief. "*I'm* the asshole? How am *I* the asshole here?"

"You let me lie there topless the whole time."

His jaw goes so tight I'm surprised it doesn't snap in half. "That's because straight guys don't tell naked chicks to put their clothes on. No matter how crazy they are."

Screw him. "I am not crazy."

Those brown eyes darken as he sweeps his gaze up and down my body. "You're giving me shit for *allowing* you to take your top off, yet you're still standing here without one." The ground beneath me sways when he leans in...so close we nearly touch. "If you don't want me looking, either tell me to stop or put your fucking shirt on."

Humiliation plows through me as I pluck it off the ground. "Turn around, creeper."

Arms stretched wide, he does what I ask. "See how easy that was?"

Jerk.

I'm pulling it over my head when another thought occurs to me.

I'm standing here topless, vulnerable—and all *alone*—with a guy who's not Josh.

But while I'm pissed at Memphis...I'm not scared.

Maybe I won't be fucked up forever.

“Are you decent?” he snaps a moment later.

“Yeah, asshole.”

His lips curve into a smug smirk as he turns around. “I think you mean *incredibly sexy* asshole.”

My cheeks heat and I wish the ground would open up and swallow me whole.

I can’t deny I told him that, but like hell am I going to give him the satisfaction of rubbing it in my face.

“I said that under false pretenses. It doesn’t count.”

An indignant sound leaves him. “False pretenses would be me telling you I was gay, not the other way around.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “It’s what I thought.”

Clearly, my gaydar had a malfunction.

Memphis looms over me like a big tree. One I have the urge to take a chainsaw to. “What the fuck would make you think *I* was into dudes?”

“I don’t know, maybe because you’ve never had a girlfriend. Hell, I’ve never even seen you *interact* with a girl before. It’s freaking weird.”

The icy glare he sends my way chills me to the bone. “*Freaking weird* is being cool with every guy at school running a train on you while your boyfriend watches.”

It would hurt less if he punched me.

I hear the things girls say about me when I’m hiding out in the bathroom stall.

I know what all the guys whisper about me behind my back.

I just didn’t realize Memphis did, too.

“That’s not...it’s not like that.” No train has been run on me. *Yet*. However, I don’t want to think about that—let alone talk about it—so I flip it around on him. “But wow, way to kink shame.” I fix him with an icy glare of

my own. “Then again, it’s not like *you’d* know what sex is.”

Seething, I turn and march toward the house.

There’s a sharp tug on my elbow seconds before I’m spun around. “Kinks are supposed to be something you like, Sky.” There’s a softness in his expression that I’ve never seen. “And I don’t think you do.”

I hate the way those prying eyes are filleting me wide open...uncovering things I don’t want to acknowledge.

Like how watching my boyfriend coax a straight guy into sucking his dick because he knows how much that guy wants to fuck *me*—so much he’ll do anything Josh asks—is no longer enjoyable.

At first, it was kind of exciting. I liked being part of his sexual explorations and how it brought us even closer. But somewhere along the way...it stopped.

And the worst part is, Josh knows I’m no longer into it.

Which only makes him want it that much more.

Because his kink isn’t having threesomes or watching another guy fuck me...it’s debasing and degrading others for his own enjoyment.

It’s taking back the power and control.

It’s feeding the demon inside him...the one Curtis created.

But none of that is Memphis’s business, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to stand here and let him judge me for making the man I love happy.

“I like pleasing my partner.” I crinkle my nose. “Maybe you should try it sometime. Oh, that’s right. It would require you having one.”

His voice drops to a gravelly rasp, and the look he gives me is downright penetrating. “Trust me, I know how to please a woman.”

A rush of warmth floods my insides. It’s so unexpected—so *wrong*—my immediate instinct is to shove it as far away as I can.

My hand flies to my chest and I laugh. “Says the antisocial virginal

prude.”

I want to take the words back the second I see the flash of pain on his face.

This isn't who I am. I don't hurt people.

I'm about to apologize, but what he says next cuts off my oxygen supply.

“At least the guys at school don't think I'm a worthless slut.”

He spits the last two words out like they taste rancid.

Like it's what he thinks about me.

And for reasons I can't explain, that hurt worse than any insult ever could.

My throat burns with impending tears. “You win.”

I run away before he can see the first one fall.

But not fast enough because Memphis catches up to me seconds later.

“Damn it. I—”

“You what?” Whipping around, I give him a suggestive smile. “You want to fuck me?” His abs spasm as I trail a finger down his torso. “Cash in on your ticket to ride the *worthless slut*?”

He snatches my finger before I reach his zipper. “I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.”

My heart twists as I back away. I wanted so badly to be his friend, but now? I don't even want to look at him.

“Says the guy who has none.”

Chapter 18

MEMPHIS



I'm walking in the door after work when I hear it.

"You need to cut this crap out," Archie booms. "You're staying out all night, sleeping all day, skipping school, failing classes—"

"It's just math and science," Josh argues. "It's not like anyone uses algebra or biology in the real world."

I make my way into the kitchen where Josh, Archie...and Skylar are seated at the table.

Something that feels a whole lot like guilt snakes up my spine. This Sunday will mark two weeks since our blowout and we haven't spoken since.

It shouldn't bother me, given I've made it a point to avoid her for years... but it does.

Her comments stung—which was not only surprising but unsettling—however, mine cut deeper.

"Josh, please," Skylar says. "We're not trying to attack you. We're worried."

Seething, Josh leans back in his chair. “It sure fucking feels like an attack.”

“It’s not.” Skylar and Archie exchange a forlorn look. “We’re just scared. We love you.”

Josh cuts a look my way as if waiting for me to read him the riot act, too, but I keep my mouth shut.

He knows damn well where I stand when it comes to his excessive drinking and partying.

I refuse to pander to him like an infant, though. At the end of the day, Josh is going to do what Josh wants.

Sulking, his eyes ping-pong between Skylar and Archie. “I’m just having fun. I can quit anytime.”

Famous last words.

“Prove it,” Skylar counters.

Dragging a hand down his face, he puffs out a breath. “I’ll scale it back.”

Her pretty face lights up. “Promise?”

Leaning over, he grips her chin. “Promise.”

Appearing satisfied, she gets up from the table. “My aunt had chemo today, so I told her we could have a movie marathon, but after work tomorrow, I’ll help you study and catch up on all your assignments, okay?”

I have no doubt she’ll end up doing all his work for him.

Because while we’re vastly different from one another...we both have one thing in common.

Cleaning up messes. *Namely Josh’s.*

He returns her smile. “It’s a date.”

I get a whiff of her as she passes me on her way out. It’s an addicting blend of vanilla, mandarin, and something distinctly Skylar. It smells like pure fucking sex.

“I didn’t realize you were home from work already,” Archie says when he notices me.

I have a seat at the table. “I wasn’t on the schedule, but Ed asked if I could do him a favor and cover for a few hours.” I glance around the kitchen. Usually, Valerie makes us dinner before her night shift. “Did you guys eat already?”

“No, Valerie’s working a double, so I told her I’d take care of supper.”

Josh and I exchange a cautious glance. While the man loves food...he’s the worst fucking cook in the world.

I’m about to make myself a sandwich when he says, “Relax, you two. Pizza should be here soon.” Frowning, he checks his watch. “I hope.”

As if on cue, the doorbell rings.

“About damn time,” he gripes before exiting the kitchen.

Walking over to the fridge, I grab a can of soda. “Want to jam tonight?”

“Can’t,” Josh mumbles while scrolling through his phone. “I have plans.”

“Didn’t you just promise Sky—”

“Jesus Christ, Memph,” he snaps. “Not you, too.”

“Pepperoni and extra cheese,” Archie announces. “Get it while it’s hot.”

“I’m not hungry,” Josh mutters before plowing past him.

The front door slams shut a few seconds later.

Archie’s face falls. “I thought he was staying in tonight?”

I place my soda on the table. “I’ll have a talk with him tomorrow.”

I didn’t want to get involved with this bullshit, but he’s hurting Archie and Valerie. They don’t deserve that.

Neither does she.

“I’ll be back later.”

“Where are *you* going?” Archie grumbles. “I got us pizza.”

I pull my keys out of my pocket. “I have to take care of something.”



There's a small bakery in town that's known for its peach cobbler...which happens to be Skylar's favorite dessert.

Valerie makes her one for her birthday every year and—much to Archie's dismay—Skylar wolfs it down before the rest of us can have any.

Same when it comes to fried chicken. Josh was dangerously close to getting stabbed with a fork one time for stealing a drumstick off her plate when she went to the bathroom.

I'm not stupid enough to believe that showing up at her house unannounced on a Friday night with her favorite foods will fix shit between us, but I'm hoping we can call a truce.

Mrs. Landrum is...fucking weird, but the extra money in my pocket is worth it.

Not only do I need to save up for Berkeley, but thanks to my new job, I'll be taking home the purple Strat in a couple days.

I knock on the front door a few times, but there's no answer.

I'm contemplating giving the food to Archie—because I know it will make his night—when it swings open and Skylar steps out.

My pulse rises as I take her in. Her hair is wet—presumably from a shower—and she's wearing a pair of tiny cotton shorts and a matching purple tank top.

“What are you doing here?”

I gesture to the cobbler and bucket of fried chicken. “Peace offering.”

There's a hint of a smile on her face, but then she scowls. “Wow. You must really want to ride the worthless slut, huh?”

Fuck. I've never been good at apologizing. Probably because I don't feel sorry for a lot of shit.

"You're not a worthless slut."

I stifle the urge to tell her that I do, however, want her to ride *me* harder than a jockey riding their champion horse when they're approaching the finishing line.

She eyes the food with keen interest, but her stubbornness prevails. "Is that your way of apologizing? Because you seriously suck at it."

No argument here.

I break eye contact, unsure how to proceed. The only thing I can offer her is honesty. "I would never call you a worthless slut."

Those hazel eyes narrow. "No, you'll just throw it in my face that *that's* what every guy at school thinks about me."

"Fuck those guys," I growl, harsher than I intended.

She laughs without humor. "I already do."

But the anguish peeking through makes it clear it's not for her own enjoyment.

"Sky—"

"You didn't get any ice cream." Retreating, she opens the door. "Stay here. I'll be right back."

I should go. I came here so I'd have a less hostile work environment on Sundays, not to talk.

Yet, I make no move to leave...because I can't seem to say no to this girl.

Skylar comes back out holding two spoons and a pint of vanilla ice cream. "I'd ask you to come in, but my aunt is sleeping on the couch and I don't want to wake her. She needs her rest."

Nodding, I sit down on the front stoop.

I become aware of how small the space is when Skylar joins me a moment

later and her leg brushes mine.

“How is she?”

That anguish is back. “Dying.”

A heavy weight fills the air between us.

“I’m sorry.”

Not just for taunting her with the vile shit others spew about her...but that I can’t fix this.

She turns her attention to the bakery box. “How’d you know peach cobbler was my favorite?”

Because I know almost everything about her.

Like another similarity we share...pretending everything’s fine when it’s not.

She digs her spoon into the ice cream and places a heaping *dollop* of it on the cobbler.

I force my dick not to react when she brings the spoon to her mouth and moans. “So good.”

I should have known she’d go for the cobbler right away. “You always eat your dessert first.”

That cute little nose crinkles. “I don’t like to waste an opportunity to have the best part first.” She motions to the chicken. “Don’t you worry, though. I have every intention of going to town on that next.”

I’m well aware.

Suddenly she stops eating. “Why aren’t you having any?”

Unlike her, I prefer not to indulge in the best part at all...because good things never last.

However, Skylar doesn’t give me a choice. She shoves a spoonful of cobbler in my face. “Take a bite.” I’m about to decline because it’s hers, but her lips twist into an adorable pout. “For me.”

Fucking hell.

She waggles her eyebrows as the crispy, crumbly sweetness fills my mouth. “Good, right?”

It’s fucking delicious.

“It’s fine.”

She pokes me in the ribs. “You are such a liar. It’s the best thing in the world and you know it.”

Second best.

Unwilling to concede, I mutter, “It’s all right.”

That’s not good enough for her, though, because she thrusts another helping into my mouth. “*All right?* Who says cobbler is *all right?*”

I repress the urge to laugh. The girl takes her cobbler very seriously.

“It’s tasty...I guess.”

Those hazel orbs are blazing with fire now. “Admit it, asshole.”

“Or what? You gonna beat me up?”

I’d like to see her try. I’m six-three and a buck eighty-five. She’s all of five-three and *maybe* a hundred and twenty-five pounds.

She mulls this over a bit before declaring, “No, but if you don’t admit it, then you’ll no longer be the most honest and upstanding person I know.”

My appetite vanishes. *If she only knew.*

According to Josh, Skylar and her aunt are under the impression that Shane took off because he found another woman. Given he was such a vile piece of shit, neither of them was broken up about it.

“But hey,” she adds with a wry look. “It’s cool if you want someone else to hold that title.”

I concede, because while I don’t deserve the title, I want her to know that—apart from murder—I’d never lie to her.

“It’s delicious.”

Triumph blazes in her eyes. “Finally.” She pushes the box toward me. “I need to stop pigging out so much, so have the rest.”

I don’t follow. “Why?”

She places the spoon down. “I gained a few pounds.”

Still not understanding. “So?”

A wrinkle forms between her brows. “Some guys aren’t into that, you know?”

I mull this over. Everyone has their preferences, sure, but no two people are the same. What one guy finds attractive, the next could find hideous and vice versa.

However, Skylar could be five hundred pounds and it wouldn’t matter.

She’s perfect.

“Sky?”

“Yeah?”

I tamp down the itch to kick Josh’s skull in because he doesn’t use the thing it contains.

“*Some guys* are fucking idiots.”

Idiots that don’t deserve her.

The smile she gives me punches straight through my chest. “You’re right.” She takes another bite of cobbler. “But man, you totally screwed yourself because I’m going to inhale every last crumb.”

Good.

I go to pluck a piece of chicken from the bucket since she’s married to the rest of that cobbler, but she smacks my hand. “Hey.”

“What the hell?”

Baring her teeth, she snatches the bucket. “You can’t show up with apology chicken and then take the first piece. It’s against the rules.”

Christ. This girl is un-fucking-believable. “What rules?”

“My rules.” A dramatic sigh leaves her, and she rolls her eyes. “Ugh, fine. You can have one, but *I* get to have the first bite.”

“Do I at least get to pick which one, *Chicken Little*?”

She turns this over for a bit. “That depends. Are you a breast, thigh, or leg guy?”

I pry the bucket she’s holding hostage out of her hands. “I enjoy devouring it all.”

Her gaze drops to my mouth and a faint blush creeps into her cheeks.

Recovering, she casts me a dirty look. “Of course you’d take the biggest piece.”

I hold the thigh up to her mouth. “Quit bitching and take your bite.”

Watching her eat shouldn’t turn me on so much, but as soon as her lips part, all I can picture is my dick stuffed between them.

She wipes the grease off her chin with the back of her hand. “Why are you looking at me like you hate me?”

Because I can’t fucking have you.

“I should go.”

“What? Why? I thought...” Pained eyes search mine. “You’re doing that thing again?”

I have no idea what she’s talking about. “What thing?”

“That thing where you make me believe we’re friends...and then pretend like I don’t exist.”

“I...”

Wasn’t aware she noticed. *Or cared.*

“You know why it hurts so much?”

No. *But I want to.*

Her voice is whisper soft. Wounded. “Because I always have this crazy, strong realization beforehand.”

My lungs lock up. “What realization?”

She looks so vulnerable right now. *So pliable.*

“That I can trust you.” Tearing her gaze away, she looks up at the night sky. “But then that guy is gone, and the one in his place is an asshole.”

“I get it.” I place the chicken down because my appetite’s long gone again. “I felt that way when you told Josh I was a freak.”

Because I knew without a doubt that she was not only his but that the inexplicable connection I felt between us didn’t exist.

“What are you—” Recognition, followed by shock, steals over her pretty features. “Oh god. You heard that? You...” She clutches her chest. “You heard *us*?”

“I was trying to sleep, but you two made it impossible.”

She looks positively mortified. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. I...” Her voice trails off.

“If you didn’t mean it, then why did you say it?”

Her mouth opens and closes a few times, like the words are right there on the tip of her tongue.

Words she wants to say but can’t.

“I don’t know,” she utters instead. “I’m sorry.”

I stand up, intending to walk away, but what she says next gives me pause.

“I really want to be friends with you, Memphis.”

Friends.

It’s the equivalent of tearing my beating heart out of my chest and handing it to her so she can stomp all over it.

But for some foolish reason, I’m willing to sacrifice my own happiness for hers.

“Meet me at my truck Sunday morning. We can ride to work together.”

A hopeful glint enters her eyes. “Does this mean we’re pals?”

I nod once before leaving.

During the short walk home, I try not to let myself think about the words she looked like she wanted to say but didn't.

The ones that would validate this intense awareness I get whenever we're alone.

If we had met first...she would have chosen me.

Chapter 19

SKYLAR



I find myself grinning ear to ear during the ride to work Sunday morning.

Memphis is still grumpy as ever, but we're *friends*.

It's as if something I wasn't even aware I needed has clicked into place.

Reaching over, Memphis turns down the volume on his stereo. "Why do you keep staring at me?"

His grouchiness only makes me grin wider. "I like being friends with you."

His grip on the steering wheel tightens, causing the tendons in his forearm to flex.

I quickly look away because while ogling him was fine back when I thought he was gay. Now it feels...wrong.

He's my boyfriend's brother.

"We've only been friends for a day, Sky."

"Tonight makes two days," I point out.

He gives his head a small shake, but I see a hint of amusement on his face.

I wonder what it would take for him to grace me with an actual smile.

"You know you're the only person I'll allow to shorten my name."

The faintest trace of a dimple peeks out of his cheek. It's every bit as alluring as the tiny cleft in his chin.

That's when I realize.

Clutching my chest, I gasp dramatically. "Oh my god!"

The truck swerves. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"Are *you*? Because, Memphis Payne, you are most definitely smiling."

Or rather, he *was*.

Now he's mean mugging.

"Sky?"

"Yeah?"

"If you want me to keep giving you rides, do not, under any circumstances, scream '*oh my god*' unless we're about to fucking hit something. Got it?"

Whoops. "Sorry."

Grumbling under his breath, he turns the volume up on the stereo. "Heart Shaped Box" by Nirvana bleeds through the speakers.

Another grin breaks free when I hear one of my favorite lyrics.

"You know I'm a Pisces, right?"

"What's that?"

Seriously? Who the hell doesn't know what a Pisces is?

Evidently Memphis.

I turn the volume down. "It's my astrological sign."

"Like space shit?"

"Well, kind of...but not exactly."

His brows furrow. "That really clears things up."

"It's basically the belief that the stars and planets have an influence on our lives."

"Oh," he says with a stroke of his chin. "You mean complete and total bullshit?"

I try not to take offense, but it's difficult. "It's not bullshit."

Well, not exactly. While I don't believe the crap in the newspapers, I've

always believed that the universe has a way of giving us signs.

Smirking, he looks over at me. “All right, Miss Cleo. I’ll bite. Tell me my fortune.”

“That’s not what astrology is. And I have no idea what your future holds... but I do know mine.”

This intrigues him. “Oh, yeah? What’s that?”

“I’ll spill, but only if you promise not to laugh.”

“I promise I won’t laugh...” His lips twitch. “In front of you.”

Jerk. “That’s rude.”

Although I can’t deny that I’m enjoying this side of Memphis. I didn’t think he knew how to loosen up...or tell a joke.

He cuts me a wry look. “I’m just being honest and living up to the title you gave me.”

Damn him. I cannot believe I’m about to disclose this. “Okay, so my aunt once mentioned that my mom went to a fortune-teller a few weeks before she gave birth to me.”

Memphis begins the voyage up Mrs. Landrum’s never-ending driveway. “And?”

Here goes nothing. “She told my mom that she would give birth to a healthy daughter, but...” I try to swallow the lump in my throat, but it keeps growing. “She would die shortly before my fifth birthday.”

His dark eyes fill with sorrow. I never realized just how expressive they were before now.

Maybe I wasn’t looking hard enough.

“Sky.”

There’s so much compassion in his voice. *Too much.*

While I appreciate it, I don’t want anyone to pity me.

Stealing a page from his book, I utter, “It’s fine.”

The look he gives me makes it clear he knows it's not, but he doesn't press me on it.

Shoving the pain down as far as it will go, I carry on. "She also mentioned that I was going to survive an apocalypse."

Memphis's lips pull into a firm line, and I know he's trying his hardest not to laugh. "As in the *zombie* kind?"

"I don't know. I was a fetus." Exasperated, I huff a breath. "Anyway, after this apocalypse, I'm going to marry a dark knight who's an incredibly gifted musician and a Scorpio."

It's why I begged the universe for him every night.

I knew he'd save me.

Memphis cuts the engine. "And you believe that bullshit because..."

"Because it's true." Something sharp and ugly lurches inside my chest. "You know about Shane."

It's not a question. Memphis was in the room that day when I was at the end of my rope, and I told Josh our secret code word. I was so determined to end my life I didn't care what Memphis might have overheard.

"Yeah," he says softly. "I put two and two together. But you don't have to talk about it."

I'm grateful he isn't pushing for details because I hate thinking, let alone talking, about that monster.

My stare finds his. "I survived my apocalypse, Memphis. He's gone now."

Because of Josh.

I unfasten my seat belt. "And Josh's birthday is November thirteenth, which makes him a Scorpio. He also plays bass."

I can't decipher his expression. "Right."

I'm about to get out of the truck when my cell phone rings. I dig through my purse but can't find it.

“Have you seen my phone?”

“No.”

“Wait.” My fingers brush against my cell that’s stuck between my seat and the console. “I got it—”

My jaw hits the floor as I pull out my phone...and a pair of red lacy panties.

Memphis’s eyes widen briefly, and then he gestures to the front door. “We’re late.”

Nuh-uh. He does not get to act like these are invisible panties.

Although, I can’t imagine *who* they’d belong to. As far as I know, Memphis is a virgin and doesn’t have a girlfriend.

Which can only mean one thing.

“You didn’t have to plant these, silly. I no longer think you’re gay.”

Jaw clenched, he reaches over and snatches them. “I didn’t *plant* these.”

Oh.

“Who do they belong to then?”

Glowering, he shoves the mysterious panties into the center console. “None of your fucking business.”

Then he slams the driver’s side door.

This is so not fair. “But we’re best friends.”

He snorts as he heads up the walkway. “Now we’re *best* friends?”

I hop out of the truck and chase after him. “Yes. And best friends tell each other everything.”

“Good thing we’re just regular ol’ friends then.”

Even still, as his friend—regular or otherwise—it’s my duty to make sure *Ms. Red Panties* is worthy of him.

I just have to get him to tell me who she is first.



“Who is she?”

We’re currently sitting by the pool, taking a break.

And this time, I’m fully clothed.

I’ve been trying to get the dirt on Memphis’s girl all day, but it’s proving to be even harder than I thought.

“What part of *none of your fucking business* is hard for you to understand?”

Digging into his pocket, he pulls out a pack of cigarettes.

That’s...unusual.

“Since when do you smoke?”

He brings one to his lips and lights it. “Since you started annoying the shit out of me.”

Giving him a dirty look, I tie my hair into a messy bun. “Maybe I should take up smoking then too, because you’re annoying the shit out of *me*.”

The asshole merely smirks.

I try again. “Seriously, who is it?”

A trail of smoke leaves him in a harsh exhale. “You’re wasting your time.”

I try a different tactic. “Do I know her?”

He goes radio silent.

Hmm. I examine the spot on my leg that I missed while shaving last night as I contemplate this.

“Is your refusal to answer my last question your way of not wanting to lie to me?”

Sometimes the key to unlocking the truth is asking the same thing in a different manner.

Memphis is too smart to take the bait, though. “It’s my way of not wanting to talk to you about this.”

“Is that because she’s just a booty call?”

He stubs out his cigarette. “It’s because it’s none of your business.”

Frowning, I cross my arms over my chest. “Memphis.”

“Sky,” he taunts mockingly.

“Why won’t you tell me?”

His nostrils flare. “Why the fuck do you care so much?”

“Because we’re friends—” I start to tell him, but a sharp burning pain pierces my foot. “Ouch.”

“What happened?”

My heart plummets as I take in the lifeless insect. “I got stung by a bee.”

“Shit.”

A moment later, he’s hoisting me into his arms.

Tears threaten to spill as he sets me on top of the patio table and plunks down in the seat in front of me. “That bad?”

Sniffling, I nod. “Poor honeybee.”

He blinks, appearing thoroughly confused. “You’re upset about the bee?”

“Of course. She just *died*.”

His fingers fasten around my calf. “Because the damn thing stung you.”

“You don’t know her life,” I blurt. “Maybe it was an accident.”

Muttering something I can’t decipher, he digs in his pocket...

And pulls out a knife.

“Whoa there, buddy. Is that necessary? Can’t you just use tweezers?”

Tightening his grip, he examines my foot. “That will release more venom into your skin.”

Yeah, I definitely don't like the sound of *that*. However, I'm not really loving the idea of him using a knife, either.

"Nuh-uh."

"You don't have a choice, Sky. The longer the stinger stays in, the more venom enters your body."

My foot *is* looking pretty swollen.

"Christ, you're a pain in the ass." Digging in his pocket again, he takes out a purple guitar pick. "I'll use this instead."

I flinch when he begins scraping my left foot.

Go freaking figure. It's the same one that was injured in his presence last time.

"Stop moving. I'm almost done."

I scowl at him. "Why am I always hurting my foot around you?"

A slow grin unfurls. "Because of your aversion to wearing *feet prisoners*."

I fight back a grin of my own. *He remembered*.

"That was back when I was a little girl," I protest. "I'm all grown up now."

My heart pounds when he scans the length of my bare legs.

We both are.

"It's out," he states a moment later, although he makes no move to release me.

I don't want him to.

A traitorous flutter thrums between my thighs when he grazes the bottom of my foot with the pad of his thumb. "You have a tiny scar here."

"I know."

I don't recognize my own voice. It's raspy. *Breathy*.

Our gazes collide and it's a struggle to take air into my lungs.

Goose bumps break out over my skin as he gently circles my scar.

His touch is featherlight and innocent...*but I feel it everywhere I shouldn't.*

I become acutely aware of my nipples puckering. *So does he.*

A sharp breath leaves me when he abruptly stands up and leans in. So close I feel the heat emanating from him. Smell his orangey scent. Hear the thud of his pulse.

My stomach dips when his lips brush the shell of my ear. "I have to get back to work."

I feel like a rubber band that's been snapped. "Right."

One thing's for sure, though. Memphis Payne is definitely *not* gay.

However, it's my next thought that makes my stomach bottom out and my heart stop cold.

But he is a musician...and a Scorpio.

Chapter 20

SKYLAR



I grab the empty seat across from Arabella in the cafeteria. “Hey.”

Her smile doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “Hey.”

Ugh. I really hope Charlotte and her cronies aren’t messing with her again.

I didn’t choose violence when I woke up today, but I might have to make an exception.

I gesture to the chocolate milk on my tray. “I grabbed you one.”

The girl chugs the stuff religiously, so I’m hoping it will brighten her spirits.

No such luck, though.

“Okay, whose ass am I kicking?”

Truth be told, I’ve never thrown a punch in my life, but I’ll go down swinging to defend my friend.

“I have to tell you something.”

Whatever it is, it must be bad because she looks like she’s about to puke. Which is alarming, considering she hasn’t even taken a bite of her food.

Immediately, I go into crisis prevention mode. I know it might feel like the sky is falling for her right now, but whatever it is, we’ll figure out a plan to deal with it.

“Breathe, Arabella. It will be okay.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispers.

Reaching over, I squeeze her hand. “Relax. You have nothing to be sorry for. Just tell me what happened—”

“Josh is cheating on you,” she blurts out.

Oh, boy. I feared this would happen sooner or later.

While I know it might be difficult for most people to understand our *open relationship*, I’m hoping Arabella will.

“It’s not what you think.”

She blinks. “What do you mean?”

I take a deep breath and lower my voice. “I’d really appreciate it if you’d keep this to yourself, but I gave Josh permission to explore his sexuality—”

“With *Charlotte*?” she whisper-shouts.

My heart compresses against my chest, and the room begins to spin. “What?”

Her outraged expression morphs to one of confusion...and then pity.

“I was at Doug’s party this weekend and Josh was there.” She looks down at her tray. “I saw him go upstairs with her.”

She must be mistaken. “No, he didn’t.”

He wouldn’t. Josh experiments with guys occasionally, but he’d never sleep with another girl. Least of all, *Charlotte*.

“Skylar, I’m telling you he went upstairs with her. I saw it with my own eyes.”

Then she should get a better optometrist because it’s not true.

Josh would never do that to me. *Ever*. “Look, I know you think you saw ___”

“I don’t think. I *know*.”

She’s wrong. Dead wrong.

“Stop lying.”

Hurt splashes across her face. “Why would I lie about this?”

Flustered, I grab my purse and stand up. “I’m not sure, but Josh didn’t cheat on me.”

There’s no way. *We’re soul mates.*

And yet, I can’t stop the tears from falling as I run out of the cafeteria.

I can’t breathe. I can’t...

I pass Memphis, who’s walking out of the administration office on my way to the bathroom.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Everything.



Maybe Josh did go upstairs with Charlotte...but not to have sex.

Maybe she was drunk, and he was helping her up the stairs so she could sleep it off.

Maybe she needed help finding her contact.

Maybe she found his wallet.

I don’t know. The only thing I do know is that Josh would never sleep with another woman.

But I need to confront him about it and look him in the eyes while I do.

Then I’ll know for sure.

“Hey there,” Archie greets me when he opens the front door. “Is the window broken?”

Normally I would laugh at his joke, but my heart feels like someone took a dull razor blade to it.

“Is Josh home?”

I was so distraught I ended up leaving school early and haven’t seen him.

Concern washes over his face. “He’s in his room. Is everything okay, honey?”

I manage a small nod.

My legs wobble as I make my way down the hall. I tell myself to be strong, but it’s futile.

Just the thought of him being with someone else is enough to make me break.

We’re supposed to spend forever together.

I try to quell the tears and put on a brave face before I turn the knob, but fail. *It hurts so bad.*

Composing myself, I open the door. I find Memphis sitting on one end of the bed holding a purple guitar and Josh on the other end with his bass.

I almost feel bad for interrupting their jam session. *Almost.*

Immediately, I zero in on Josh, who’s smiling...like I didn’t just have the rug pulled out from under me during sixth period.

“Hey, babe. What’s—”

“Did you cheat on me?”

Blue eyes widen in bewilderment. “What?”

“Did. You. Fucking. Cheat. On. Me?” I repeat, my voice gathering strength I don’t quite feel.

Josh leaps up. “Are you crazy? Of course not.”

I want to believe him, but I’m having trouble understanding why Arabella would tell me he did.

“Arabella saw you go upstairs with Charlotte when you were at Doug’s

this weekend.”

I search his face for signs he’s lying—because I know when he is—but don’t see any.

“Baby, no. That didn’t happen.”

“But—”

Josh turns to Memphis. “Did I cheat on Skylar?”

Memphis holds up his hands. “Don’t involve me in your bullshit.”

My stomach churns. “Did he?”

Not only is Memphis always honest, he *knows* Josh. Plus, we’re friends, which means he’s obligated to tell me.

His eyes ping-pong between us. “I mean, I didn’t see anything, but I wasn’t —”

“See?” Josh cups my face in his hands. “Why would I *ever* cheat on you? You know how much I love you.”

Relief washes over me until I think about Arabella. She looked so certain about what *she* saw.

“Why would Arabella say you did then?”

His eyes squeeze shut. “Look, I didn’t want to tell you this, but she came on to me at the party and I turned her down.”

My heart hurts all over again. “*What?*”

“The only reason I didn’t tell you was because she was drunk as fuck, and I didn’t think it was intentional. I know how close you two are.” His jaw works. “I can’t believe she lied about me cheating on you with Charlotte because she was butthurt over being rejected. As if I’d ever fuck that bitch.” He kisses my forehead. “As if I’d ever do that to *you*.”

He wouldn’t.

I just hate that I lost someone I thought was a true friend.

He tips my chin. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” I go to give him a kiss, but my phone rings. “It’s my aunt. I told her I wouldn’t be gone long.”

Her cancer is progressing, and I want to spend as much time as I can with her while I still have the chance.

Josh nods. “Call me later.”

I blow him a kiss. “Have fun.”

Chapter 21

MEMPHIS



“Love you, babe.” After the door closes, Josh looks at me. “Thanks.”

I have no idea why the fuck he’s thanking me. I didn’t do shit.

“For what?”

He plops down on the other end of the bed. “For having my back.”

I eye him skeptically. “Why would I need to have your back if you didn’t do anything wrong?”

Face pinched, he reaches for his phone. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

Skylar obviously believes that, but I’m not convinced.

Huffing, he tosses his phone on the dresser. “Could you blame me if I did, though? *You* spend more time with her than I do these days.”

I know him well enough to grasp that this is his way of feeling me out.

If I play along, he’ll confess. If I don’t...he won’t.

“She has been busy lately.”

A snort leaves him. “Tell me about it, bro. It’s always *Mrs. Landrum this* and *my aunt needs this*. It’s never about me anymore. It’s been over a week since we fucked.”

I curb the impulse to rock his jaw. “Her aunt is dying.”

My austere tone betrays my true feelings, but fuck it. I'm not gonna sit here and act like Skylar neglecting his needs because she's caring for an ailing family member warrants him a free pass to cheat on her.

His eyes narrow. "You mean the bitch who stood by and let that piece of shit touch her every night? Forgive me for not mustering up any sympathy."

He's got me there.

In fact, what little compassion I afforded the woman vanishes.

Even still, what either of us thinks doesn't matter. Skylar has the right to feel however she feels.

I pick up my guitar. "If you wanna fuck around on the girl who loves you, that's on you."

"Damn it, Memph. I didn't cheat."

When I give him a look, guilt flashes across his face.

Motherfucker.

"Fine. You want the truth?"

No. Because then I'll have to tell Skylar and it will break her heart.

Then she'll be mad at me.

There's a reason people say you shouldn't shoot the messenger. I don't want to get involved.

"It's none of my—"

"I was going to." Scrubbing a hand down his face, he exhales. "I was pissed after Skylar staged that little intervention with Archie, and I wanted to get back at her...so I took Charlotte upstairs." He looks at me. "I couldn't go through with it, though. Skylar's my endgame. Always has been, always will be."

"Right."

I should be relieved, but a small part of me isn't.

She has no reason to leave him now.

Although, odds are she wouldn't anyway. Skylar was devastated, but it seemed like she was more pissed at Arabella than Josh.

That's when it hits me.

"Arabella told Skylar that she saw you go upstairs with Charlotte."

It's clear he doesn't see where I'm going with this. "I literally just told you I did, dumbass."

"But you told Skylar that Arabella was lying, asswipe."

Seeming to catch on now, he exclaims, "Only because he kept trying to fuck me the whole night. Skylar doesn't need friends like him."

"Friends like *her*," I correct through clenched teeth.

"Whatever, man. Point is, I didn't cheat. Why would I?" His gaze finds mine. "Skylar's pussy is the best I've ever had. There's no way I'm giving that up for a piece of side snatch."

Jealousy surges through me, but I shove it down.

"Tell that to someone who actually gives a shit."

"Weird," he muses while rubbing his chin. "It sure seemed like you gave a shit a minute ago."

"*You're* the one who dragged me into this, remember?"

"Yeah, I guess I did." Shaking his head, he laughs. "Bitches, amirite?"

"Yeah." *Bitches.*

"Are we gonna jam now or talk about my girl some more?"

I'm strumming the intro to "Lonely Day" by System of a Down when another thought occurs to me.

Josh said Skylar's pussy was the best he's ever had...

Not the only.

Chapter 22

SKYLAR



A warm hand settles between my thighs. “Who does this body belong to?”
“You.”

Staring into Josh’s blue eyes, I open wider, desperate to feel that spark I used to whenever he touched me...but it doesn’t come.

It’s been three days since Arabella falsely accused him of cheating—and while I know he didn’t—I can’t stop thinking about it.

It’s an uninvited fungus growing and poisoning my mind.

Pulling his hand away, Josh licks his fingers before plunging them back inside me. “No one wants to stick their dick in sandpaper, baby.”

I’m trying.

He speeds up his movements. “Doug and Eric will be here in a bit. I need you nice and ready.”

I blink up at him. “What?”

Archie and Valerie are out on a date, so I was under the impression we’d have the entire house to ourselves tonight.

He didn’t say a damn thing about Doug *and* Eric joining us. I know Josh’s recent fantasy has been to watch me with two guys, but you’d think he would have discussed it with me before making arrangements.

Then again, that’s what Josh does.

I push his hand away. “Why am I just hearing about this now?”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

A surprise is flowers and chocolates.

A surprise is being whisked away so you can spend a romantic night under the stars.

A surprise is breakfast in bed.

Not your boyfriend inviting two guys over so they can plow you senseless before making them suck him off as *payment*.

That’s an ambush.

Maybe it took hearing that Josh cheated to make me realize that our sex life isn’t doing it for me.

That maybe I deserve to have my needs met every once in a while.

“I don’t want to.”

Frustrated, his face scrunches. “What do you mean you don’t want to?”

I was waiting for the right moment to broach this topic with him, but I guess that moment is now.

“Why can’t we ever just...”

“Just what?” he prompts when I lose my nerve.

“Why can’t it ever be just us?”

Why am I not good enough?

He looks positively baffled. “What are you talking about? There are plenty of times when it’s just us.”

“But it doesn’t...it’s not...”

Blue eyes narrow. “It’s not *what?*”

I clamp my mouth shut because I’m not trying to hurt him. But then I realize that Josh isn’t a mind reader and if I want things to be different, I have to open my mouth and tell him that.

“It’s not what I want.”

He's visibly offended. "What the fuck do you mean it's not what you want?"

"I'm not saying it's bad. It's not." Like scratching an itch...only less satisfying. "But sometimes I wish you would just..."

"Would *what?*" he grits through his teeth.

"I don't know, make love to me? Our bond is so strong, but whenever we have sex, I don't feel it."

It's mechanical. Routine. *Void*.

There's no connection. There's passion for the act, but not for the woman he's inside of.

Sometimes it feels like I'm not even there.

Like I'm just an orifice for his cock.

A laugh flies out of him. "Did you seriously just say *make love*? Who the fuck actually says that?"

My cheeks heat with embarrassment. On some level, I've always been a bit of an old soul, while Josh has always been...well, juvenile.

Nonetheless, asking an eighteen-year-old guy to *make love* is not only impractical but ridiculous.

No wonder he's laughing.

I draw my knees to my chest. "Sorry, bad choice of words. I guess I just wish it was a little...slower, maybe?"

More intimate. Which is ironic considering it's such an intimate act to begin with.

I'm just craving something deeper.

Something I can't explain but desperately need.

Rolling his shoulders, he lets out a heavy breath. "Okay. I can do that."

Shocked, I tilt my head to look at him. "Yeah?"

"Of course." His face twists with sadness. "Do you really think I don't care

about what you want?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes it feels like that.”

Moving closer, he wraps his arms around me. “You have no idea how much I love you.”

That’s the thing. I know *exactly* how much he loves me.

I love him just as much.

“I just want to be enough for you.”

He grabs my face. “You are, baby.” His lips skim my cheek. “How about we get a hotel room after prom? No parties and no one else. Just me and you. This way, I can spend the entire night making love to you.”

Pure joy flits through me. He knows how much I’ve been looking forward to prom. “Really?”

“Yeah.” He presses his lips to my forehead. “I want my baby girl to be happy.”

She’s happy now.

I slant my lips over his, kissing him with everything I feel for him. “I love you.”

“I love yo—”

The sound of his phone ringing cuts him off. “That’s Doug and Eric.”

My good mood pops like a balloon. “Oh.”

He grabs his cell off the dresser. “They’re outside, but I’ll let them know there’s been a change of plans.”

Guilt churns my stomach. Our conversation went so much better than expected. I’m grateful that he not only listened but that my happiness matters to him.

I’m even more excited for prom now, because I know without a doubt it’s going to be the best night of my whole entire life.

Like a fairy tale.

I want to do something that will make him feel good because his happiness is important to me, too. “Tell them to come in.”

Chapter 23

MEMPHIS



“Sky, do you know where the—”

Never mind. She’s not in the kitchen.

I bite back a laugh when I look over at Louie, who has a bright-pink dish towel draped over his head...along with matching pink nails.

For a girl who came close to tears over a deceased bee, she sure makes the most out of our boss’s bizarre taxidermy fixation.

“Memphis!” Mrs. Landrum screeches from upstairs.

Shit.

I take the steps two at a time. Stuffed dead animals aside, she doesn’t have an infestation problem, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t a mouse or two roaming around.

There’s also a possibility she’s injured.

The woman’s well into her seventies. Broken hips aren’t exactly unheard of.

I charge into her room, but she’s not there.

I’m about to walk out, but a high-pitched squeal rings out from the giant walk-in closet.

I promptly barge inside...

And freeze.

It's not a mouse or an injured old lady like I expected.

It's Skylar...standing in front of a mirror wearing a long, sparkly purple dress.

"Isn't she an angel?" Mrs. Landrum—who's sitting in a nearby chair—coos.

No. She's a fucking seraph.

I've heard the expression "took my breath away" tons of times, but I've never actually experienced it.

Until now.

She's so goddamn gorgeous it physically fucking hurts to breathe.

Realizing I'm in the room, Skylar twirls around. "What do you think?"

It's difficult to speak when there's no air in your lungs. However, two sets of eyes are staring intently, waiting for my reaction.

"It's fine."

Mrs. Landrum swats my arm. "Are you blind? She's flawless."

I know.

Shooting me a grin that makes my heart stop, Skylar lifts the hem of her dress, showing off a pair of sparkly heels. "See? I *love* wearing feet prisoners now."

I suddenly feel bad for my future wife because seeing her walk down the aisle in a wedding dress will pale in comparison to seeing Skylar Meadows in a fancy purple dress...smiling at me.

"I told you I had the perfect gown for you," Mrs. Landrum drawls. "You hardly need any alterations."

That's when I remember prom's coming up.

Skylar chews her bottom lip, appearing unsure. "Do you think it's too much?"

That depends on her definition of *too much*. If it's causing every male in our graduating class to pass out from lack of oxygen...then yeah.

"Nonsense, darling," Mrs. Landrum says with a motion of her hand. "You're going to be the belle of the ball."

However, Skylar's still focused on me. "What do you think, Memphis? I want your honest opinion."

You're the most beautiful thing I'll ever see in my life.

Leaning over, Mrs. Landrum cups a hand over her mouth. "So help me God, if you don't tell her she looks stunning, I will fire you."

"You clean up well."

The old lady swats me again. Harder this time.

"Christ. You look nice, all right?" Dodging another swat, I glare at them both. "Can I go back to work?"

Mrs. Landrum waves me away before turning to Skylar. "So what hotel is the vagrant taking you to? And is he renting a limo, or will he be stealing one?"

I head out as Skylar starts gushing about their plans.

She's usually in a good mood, but she sounds like the happiest girl in the world right now.

And even though I should be bitter that my *vagrant brother* is the cause of it, I'm happy for her.

It's what she deserves.



Sighing, Valerie regards me from across the table. “Can you go knock on your brother’s door and let him know dinner’s ready? He seems to have selective hearing when it comes to me.”

She aims a dirty look at her husband. “Same goes for this one whenever I ask him to paint the living room.”

Archie—who’s fixated on his plate of meatloaf and mashed potatoes—points to his ear. “Did you say something, honey?”

She gives me a helpless look. “See?”

Snickering, I push my chair back. “On it.”

Moments later, I’m knocking on Josh’s door, but he doesn’t answer.

Assuming the lazy fucker is sleeping, I turn the knob...and that’s when I hear it.

“Take it, you nasty little slut.”

I’m confused because I distinctly remember Skylar mentioning she was spending the night with her aunt.

Evidently not.

I start to close the door but catch a flash of dark hair in my peripheral.

Not blonde.

Hoping I’m mistaken, I shoot my gaze past Josh’s bare ass and take a closer look at the girl he’s fucking from behind.

Nope. Definitely *not* Skylar.

Although she does look vaguely familiar.

I’m walking down the hall when it hits me. *Son of a bitch.*

It’s that brunette Josh scared away at Guitar Galaxy a couple months back.

Valerie glances up from her plate when I enter the kitchen. “Is he coming?”

Not yet.

“No, he’s...busy.”

Archie gives me a knowing look as I take a seat at the table. “Talking?”
I reach for the bowl of mashed potatoes. “Yeah...talking.”
But not with his girlfriend.

Chapter 24

SKYLAR



It's been a week since Arabella and I last spoke, and now that I've cooled down, I'm ready to hash things out.

I find her sitting in the cafeteria alone in our usual spot—the one I've been avoiding—ever since she accused Josh of cheating on me.

“Hey.”

She doesn't look up. “Hi.”

“Can I sit?”

She gives me a half shrug. “Go for it.”

I'm not sure why she's so upset, given she's the one who hit on *my* boyfriend, but I really want to fix things between us.

Slipping into the seat across from her, I place my tray on the table. “I got you a chocolate milk.”

A frown mars her face. “Thanks.”

I push my pasta around the plate with my fork. “So, prom is only nine days away. Did you still want to get together beforehand and do each other's hair and makeup?”

She peers up at me. “That depends.”

“On?”

“Whether you're going to bite my head off again for trying to be a good

friend.”

Appalled, I drop my fork. I loathe confrontation, but she seriously has some nerve. Here I am, willing to put this whole thing behind us, and she’s acting like I’m the one in the wrong.

“Your definition of being a good friend and mine are very different. Good friends don’t hit on your boyfriend at a party and then lie about him cheating on you with your enemy because she’s upset he rejected her.”

Her green eyes go big. “What in the world are you talking about? I never hit on Josh.” A weird look crosses over her face. “Wait a second, is that what he told you?”

Standing, I hike my purse up my shoulder. “You know, I was willing to forgive you because we all make mistakes, but if you can’t even admit it…” I shake my head. “I don’t want to be friends with a liar.”

“You have no problem dating one, though.” She glowers. “Who even are you right now, Skylar?”

My heart drops to my stomach. Once again, she seems so convincing. But if she’s not lying… it means Josh is.

And he wouldn’t. We’ve shared the ugliest, dirtiest parts of ourselves with one another.

“Who are *you*?” I toss back before I storm out of the cafeteria.

Because the Arabella I know wouldn’t do something like this.

Then again, maybe I didn’t really know her.

Or maybe she’s telling the truth.

Dread spreads throughout my stomach as I make my way to the girls’ room.

I try to shove it down as I push open the door and head over to the sinks, but it only gets worse.

Leaning over, I splash some cold water on my face. *Get a grip, Skylar.*

“Well, well, well...” Charlotte sneers as she saunters to the sink beside me. “If it isn’t Oak Creek’s favorite little whore.”

I’m not a violent person, but the urge to snatch her hair and bash her head into the wall is so strong I’m about to give in.

Until she says her next words.

“By the way, I didn’t sleep with your boyfriend.” Pulling a tube of lipstick out of her purse, she applies some in the mirror. “Not only is he not that cute, I heard he has a small dick.” Her eyes find mine. “In other words? He’s not my type, and I’m not that desperate.”

Despite her nasty words, relief surges through me. Charlotte is a grade A bitch, but I have no doubt that if she slept with Josh, she wouldn’t waste the opportunity to gloat and throw it in my face.

Plus, she’s right. Josh isn’t her type. Namely, because he’s poor, and God knows her mother would never allow *little miss goodie two-shoes* to screw someone with an income under six figures.

Arabella’s lying. It hurts because I really cared about her, but at least I know Josh is faithful.

I can put the whole thing to rest for good...after this.

“I know my boyfriend didn’t fuck you.” I straighten my spine. “A guy doesn’t go after a cubic zirconia when he already has a diamond.”

Head held high, I turn on my heel and walk out.

And then I find my loyal, honest boyfriend and give him a kiss that lets him know how much I love him.



Sweat runs down my skin like a river, and panic rises up my esophagus.

I try to remind myself that it's not real and Shane isn't here, but it doesn't help.

Every breath I take, I smell him.

Every time I move, I feel him touching me.

Every time I close my eyes, I see his face.

Heart thrashing a mile a minute, I sprint out the door, running as fast as I can toward the only person who understands.

The only person I'll ever feel safe with.

Thunder booms above and the heavy rain soaks my T-shirt as I race to his house.

I need him.

Breathless, I pry the window open so I can crawl through it, but it doesn't budge.

Convinced it's a mistake, I try again...but the same thing happens.

It's never locked.

I knock on the window several times. "Josh."

No response.

I can feel Shane closing in once more...taunting me.

Reminding me I'll never be safe.

Nausea plows through me in violent waves.

"Open up," I plead, hoping he'll hear me. "*Please*. I need you."

But he doesn't.

And Shane's claws are sinking deeper, pulling me under.



“What the fuck?” someone who sounds a lot like Memphis grunts. “What are you doing?”

Huh?

Bewildered, I look around. I don’t remember climbing up the ladder. I don’t remember sneaking through his window.

But I must have because I’m standing in his room—wet, cold, dazed...and petrified.

“I’m s-sorry.”

Memphis is saying something, but I don’t register what.

My demon surrounds me like a viscous fog. A heavy weight I can’t fight off...trapping me beneath him.

No.

His hands are on my body and there’s pain between my legs.

I. Need. To. Make. It. Stop.

Digging my nails into my skin, I scream for him to go away.

I don’t want him to do these things to me.

I don’t want him to make me ugly.

“Jesus Christ, Sky,” a deep voice barks. “*Stop.*”

Sky.

Memphis’s voice breaks through the haze of terror. Desperate, I throw my arms around him. He’s the only lifeline I have right now, and I need it.

“It’s okay,” he says. “You’re okay.”

No, I’m not.

“Hold me,” I choke out as tears clog my throat. “Don’t let me go.”

If he does, Shane will come back.

Memphis hesitates a beat before wrapping his arms around me. “Like this?”

“Tighter,” I whisper. “Hold me tighter.”

“I don’t...” He audibly swallows. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t.”

It’s why I’m here.

Constricting his hold, he crushes me against him. “Is this okay?”

I breathe him in. He smells like Irish Spring soap and oranges.

Like safety and shelter.

“It’s perfect.”

And that’s how we stay for the next fifteen minutes...until Shane fades into the shadows.

Embarrassment courses through me as we break apart. He must think I’m positively certifiable and I can’t blame him. Not only did I creep through his window in the middle of the night, I had a full-blown mental breakdown.

“I’m sorry.”

There’s so much concern swimming in his eyes my heart squeezes. “Don’t apologize for something that isn’t your fault.”

Memphis will never understand like Josh does, but those words are enough to let me know he isn’t judging me.

“Thank you.”

Taking a small step back, he grips the side of his neck. It’s only then that I realize he’s shirtless and wearing a pair of black boxers. Partially wet ones, thanks to me.

“You good now?”

Not entirely, but I nod, taking the hint. “Better.”

I gesture to the still-open window. “I’ll see myself out.”

A peculiar look crosses his face as he slips into his bed. “Where’s Josh?”

“Sleeping, I guess? His window was locked.”

It’s never locked.

Memphis seems equally surprised by this. “Oh.”

I suppose I could walk downstairs and to his room, but I'd rather go to my treehome since it's the best armor against Shane.

I make my way over to the window and Memphis shuts off the light.
"Good night."

I start to leave, but an overwhelming impulse triggers me to turn around...
And crawl into Memphis's bed.

I expect him to get mad and kick me out since it's weird and I have no right being here, but he shifts, making room for me.

His body is warm, and I can't help but snuggle closer because I'm freezing.

As if sensing what I need, he wraps his arms around my frame, providing insulation.

Protection.

His skin is soft, but his chest is firm. I close my eyes as his heartbeat thumps against my cheek like a steady drum, keeping me grounded.

"Don't let me go," I whisper, burrowing into the sanctuary he's created for me.

Because for reasons I don't understand...

This feels like home.

Chapter 25

SKYLAR



A stream of sunlight floods the room, rousing me from sleep. As my grogginess fades, I become conscious of the warm body spooning me and that all-too-familiar nudge poking the curve of my ass.

Only it's much bigger. *Thicker.*

My pulse races as the events from last night come rushing back in one giant swell. *Memphis.*

I glance down. My T-shirt is pushed up past my navel, and his hand is splayed across my lower stomach.

An unsolicited vibration goes through me as I study the long veins in his forearm and hand.

Good god, his *hands*. They're large and strong, with long sinewy fingers that are rough with calluses.

A low groan—so low I almost think I imagined it—tickles my ear and the arm around me constricts.

Last night I begged him to hold me tighter, and now? Houston, we have a problem.

Especially when that beautiful hand begins moving upward.

“Memphis.”

The rise and fall of his chest, combined with his deep breathing, clue me into the fact he’s still sleeping. *Awesome.*

“Memphis,” I hiss, louder this time.

No dice. The only thing rising is the thing jabbing me because, somehow, it’s gotten even bigger.

Holy crap. Who knew *Memphis* was packing?

I bite back a laugh. The prude has a huge cock. Go freaking figure.

Although, he may not be such a prude after all on account of *little miss red panties.*

I don’t have time to reflect on that, though, because *the hand* is traveling up my rib cage and if I don’t do something, he’ll be full on groping me soon.

Using all my might, I lift his arm and roll out of bed.

My stare bounces between the window and him, unsure of what to do next. It’s Sunday and the clock on his nightstand tells me we have to be at work in twenty minutes.

Provided Memphis ever wakes up.

Grabbing a pillow off the bed, I raise it over my head, preparing to strike him with it.

I find myself drinking in the cut lines of his body instead.

I wasn’t aware Memphis worked out, but he must because even though he’s on the lean side, his arms and torso are sculpted.

My focus shifts to his face. *He’s so attractive it should be outlawed.*

Dark hair, sharp jaw—with that sexy little cleft—and a smattering of stubble, angular features, sensual lips, intense and expressive brown eyes...

Eyes that are currently looking at me like I’m insane.

“I’d think twice about hitting me with that pillow, Meadows.”

I curtail the urge to goad him with, “*Or what?*”

“Relax, Payne. I’m just getting in an arm workout.”

“Right.”

His eyes drop down, and I become painfully aware that I’m only wearing a T-shirt and panties. Panties he’s getting a full view of thanks to my arms-raised-overhead stance.

The corners of his lips quirk. “Who wears underwear with their astrology symbol on it?”

Dropping the pillow, I tug down my T-shirt. “I do.” *Wait a minute.* I eye him skeptically. “I thought you had no idea what a Pisces was?”

He opens his mouth to speak, but the sound of the attic door opening, followed by footsteps approaching, has our eyes widening in alarm.

I’m about to dive for cover under the mattress, but he doesn’t have a box spring.

Grabbing my arm, Memphis quickly yanks me on the bed and throws his comforter on top of me.

It’s a good thing he’s quicker on his feet than I am because I hear Valerie’s voice seconds later. “Just came to bring you your lau—” There’s a sharp intake of breath. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you had company.”

Dear God, I want to die.

Memphis doesn’t say a word, but it doesn’t stop Valerie from talking. “Would your lady—or gentleman—friend like some breakfast?”

I bite my lip to stop from laughing. At least I’m not the only one who suspected he might be gay on account of him never having a girlfriend.

Well, aside from *little miss red panties*, that is.

“No,” Memphis bites out. “*She* will be leaving shortly.”

“I see. Well, holler if you change your mind.”

The moment the door closes, Memphis rips the covers off me. “Not a fucking word.”

And that's all it takes for me to break out in a fit of laughter.

Glaring, he points to the window. "Out."

Hands raised in surrender, I climb off his bed. "Fine, but you better not leave without me."

I'm crawling through the window when I remember.

Memphis lifts a dark brow. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Sky."

My chest tightens. "His window was locked."

It's never locked.

He appears deep in thought before giving his head a shake. "Be at my truck in ten."



According to Josh, the window was locked due to the storm last night.

Which would make total sense, except we've had worse storms before.

Ugh. It shouldn't bother me so much. It's a perfectly valid excuse and I have every reason to believe he's not cheating.

Freaking Arabella. She planted that stupid seed of doubt, and now it's festering like a pus-filled wound and consuming all my thoughts.

"I'll take a look at the dishwasher again later," Memphis says. "I want to mow the lawn before it gets dark out."

Tightening my grip around the knife handle, I chop up another carrot. *Chop. Chop. Choppity chop.*

"Cool."

He looks like he wants to say something but then decides against it and walks out.

I place another carrot on the cutting board. I have no idea what I'm going to do with all these carrots since the recipe only called for two and I've chopped three entire *bags*' worth, but at least it takes my mind off things.

"I'm not sure how it works in the crocodile animal kingdom, Louie, but in the human one, relationships are a lot of work."

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Memphis's cell phone on the counter.

Josh and Memphis aren't only brothers, they're best friends. Which means Memphis would know for sure if Josh was being unfaithful to me.

I go to town on another carrot. It also means that even though Memphis would no doubt disapprove, he still wouldn't tell me because his loyalty lies with Josh.

I hack the last bit of carrot. *Stupid bro code.*

Wiping my hands on a dish towel, I mosey over to his cell.

"Don't look at me like that, Louie," I grumble as I swipe it off the countertop because I can feel his judgment.

Or maybe it's my own guilt coming through because I have no business going through Memphis's phone.

Screw that. Sometimes a woman has no choice but to play detective in order to get the truth.

Unfortunately, I hit a major hurdle in *operation dig for dirt.*

His lock screen requires a passcode.

Dang it. I have no clue where to even start. Not to mention, there's only a certain amount of tries you get before it locks you out for good. In which case, Memphis will know for sure that I attempted to be a dirty little spy.

Think, Skylar. *Think.*

I mean, there's the obvious—his birthday, but who actually uses their

birthday as their passcode?

Evidently Memphis does because after I punch in the numbers, it's *open sesame*.

Not wasting any time, I go straight to his text messages and click on the thread with Josh's name.

There are a lot of texts about jamming. A few asking Memphis to come to a party—as if he ever would. Loads of messages from Josh asking for rides. *Tons* of him asking to borrow money.

However, aside from two texts where Josh teases Memphis about needing to get laid...there's barely a mention of sex.

It's rather uneventful. Heck, a little *boring* even.

A smile stretches my mouth. "See, Louie? I knew my man was loyal."

I'm about to place the phone down because I got what I needed, but it vibrates and a text flashes across the screen.

I miss your big dick.

Whoa.

"Don't look at me like that, Louie," I mutter as I tap it.

Some might consider this prying, but I'm doing my due diligence as a good friend and making sure the chick he's involved with is a keeper.

Evidently, her name is Danielle. There's only one Danielle in our graduating class, and she doesn't strike me as Memphis's type. Then again, she might not attend Oak Creek High.

Maybe he met her at work. Found himself a cute, virginal good girl.

A girl who doesn't bang half the basketball team while her boyfriend watches.

I drum my nails on the counter as I scroll through their exchanges.

On second thought, this chick doesn't seem all that virginal, given how explicit most of her texts are.

Not that Memphis responds to any of them. Well, aside from telling her he's busy...or that he's on his way.

Then again, I'm not surprised. Memphis doesn't have a dirty bone in his body. The guy is basically a step below priesthood.

I pause when I come across one that reads: *John is taking the kids again next weekend.*

My jaw drops. It seems Memphis snagged himself an older woman with children.

I waggle my eyebrows at Louie. "How scandalous."

Making myself comfortable on a nearby stool, I munch on some carrots as I scroll through the rest of their exchanges, thoroughly engrossed in their torrid love affair.

I nearly choke when I stumble across a text from a couple months back.

I gave her detention like you wanted. You better be at my house by 8pm because you owe me...and you know what I do to bad boys.

Detention?

Wide eyed, I look over at Louie. "Holy fucking shit."

Memphis is screwing a *teacher*.

He's also having her do his bidding by giving detention to whoever he doesn't like in exchange for his *big dick*.

That's so messed up.

Mostly on her end, though, because what kind of teacher has sex with a student? That's revolting, wrong, and...

Oh. My. God.

Disgust barrels through me as I come across one of their very first exchanges from well over a year ago.

I bet that was the most fun you've ever had being called to the principal's office.

Turns out Memphis isn't fucking a teacher. He's fucking Mrs. Cox.
That's...he's...*she's*...

“What the fuck are you doing?”

My head snaps up at the sound of his deep voice. I'm not even going to pretend like I didn't just get caught with my hand inside the cookie jar. However, it's nothing compared to me catching *Memphis* with his cock inside Mrs. Cox.

“Pro tip? If you're sleeping with the principal, you might want to try a better passcode than your birthday.”

For the briefest moment, trepidation flashes across his face, but it's quickly replaced by anger.

Storming over, he snatches his phone. “Do you have any idea what an invasion of privacy this is?”

“Do you have any idea how *criminal* sleeping with an underage student is?” I clutch my stomach. “And gross.”

His features harden. “It's not what you think. Danielle—”

“Don't you dare defend that molester. Because *that's* what she is, Memphis.” A sharp pain radiates throughout my chest, squeezing my lungs. “Trust me, I know.”

Those brown eyes soften. “It's not like that. I'm eighteen and—”

“It started over a year ago,” I counter. “You weren't eighteen then.”

Exhaling sharply, he glances up at the ceiling. “I know it's hard for you to be objective about this given what you've been through, but she didn't do anything I didn't want her to. She didn't force me or coerce me.”

I grab his phone. “Oh, yeah?” Scrolling through his messages, I pull up the one I need to make my case and read it aloud. “*I gave her detention like you wanted. You better be at my house by eight p.m. because you owe me...and you know what I do to bad boys.*” Appalled, I toss his phone on the counter.

“Sounds like extortion to me...or are you extorting her?”

His nostrils flare. “That was about *you*. She wanted to expel you after you stripped down in the hallway, but I talked her down to detention.”

That only makes it worse.

Hand over my heart, I mock gasp. “Gee, thanks. You fucked her for me. How noble.”

A muscle in his jaw tics. “You said my secrets were safe with you.”

“That was when I thought you were scared to come out of the closet, not fucking a married pedo principal.”

“She’s *not* a pedo,” he snarls. “She’s also divorced.” Irritation contorts his features, and he leans in. “Not that it’s any of your fucking business.”

God, I can’t stand how he keeps defending her and their *relationship*. “Do you have any idea how you sound right now?”

His ruthless stare burns through me. “Do you have any idea how *you* sound?”

I have no idea what he’s implying. Anyone in my position would be horrified.

“Whatever, asshole. Have fun with your red-panty-wearing predator.”

I’m about to head upstairs to tell Mrs. Landrum I came down sick—in other words, the truth—but he catches my elbow.

“I thought we were friends.”

I glance down at my feet, unable to look at him. “We are.”

“Then, as my friend, I’m asking you to keep this to yourself.” His voice drops to a whisper. “Please, Sky.”

Damn him. And me for wanting him to trust me.

“I won’t tell anyone.”

But it doesn’t mean I have to accept or like it.

“Where are you going?” he calls out when I storm off for a second time.

“Home.”

I don't want to be anywhere near him right now. I *can't*.

I should be thrilled to have additional confirmation that my boyfriend isn't cheating on me.

Yet, for reasons I don't fully understand...it feels like a knife's been plunged into my heart.

Chapter 26

SKYLAR



Last night I tossed and turned, trying to figure out the best way to tackle this situation.

I promised Memphis I'd keep his secret, but that doesn't mean the bitch doesn't deserve to pay.

Memphis was right yesterday, it is hard for me to be objective about this... because it's wrong.

Just because he likes screwing her doesn't mean she isn't abusing her position of power.

There are plenty of men who aren't students that she can mess around with.

She can't have Memphis.

It's Tuesday, which means there's a faculty meeting after school.

Placing the hood of my black sweatshirt over my head, I do a quick look around and head for the parking lot.

Given classes ended well over an hour ago and nearly all sports are over for the year, it's virtually empty.

Slipping the knife out of my pocket, I amble over to Mrs. Cox's black Lexus.

I didn't think I was capable of hating anyone other than Shane—and

maybe Charlotte—but god, how I hate this woman.

Pure satisfaction surges through me as I plunge the knife into the first tire.

Take that, bitch.

Grinning like the Cheshire Cat, I move on to the next one. Gripping the knife, I raise it in the air before bringing it down.

Two things happen at that moment.

One—a strong arm wraps around my waist.

And two—my hand slips and the blade nicks my palm instead.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I kick my legs, struggling against my assailant as they tug me back with so much force my sweatshirt rides up my torso. “St—” I glance down at the familiar hand splayed across my stomach.

Memphis.

“What the hell are you doing, asshole?”

In one fell swoop, he picks me up and tosses me into the passenger seat of his truck like I’m a rag doll. “What the hell are *you* doing?”

His voice is lethal, and the sharp angles of his face twist in vexation. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so mad before.

“I’m...” I swallow. “Protecting you.”

“From *what?*” he booms.

And then he slams the door.

Eyes darkening, he climbs into the driver’s seat. “You know there are security cameras in the parking lot, right?”

I do *now*.

The hand around the steering wheel clenches as he speeds off, causing the veins and tendons in his arms to flex. “What the fuck were you thinking?”

I tell him the truth. “I hate her.”

Seething, he looks over at me. “You sound like a brat.”

That does it. “And you sound like a fucking asshole.”

My heart slams into my ribs when the tires screech and he veers off the road.

“What are you doing?”

I have my answer when he pulls into a heavily wooded section of the creek and cuts the engine.

“Dammit, Sky.” He punches the steering wheel. “I fucking *trusted* you.”

Is that why he’s so irate? He thinks I betrayed him?

“I didn’t tell anyone.”

“You slashed her tires!” he roars.

“It’s what the bitch deserves!” I scream back.

“No, she doesn’t.”

“Yes—”

“You don’t get a say in who I fuck.” Face contorted in frustration, he snatches my arm. “Let me see your hand. You’re bleeding.”

I don’t care about the blood. I care about him yelling at me and defending her.

Choosing her.

Tears prickle the back of my throat. “I was trying to be a good friend.”

“Destroying someone’s property isn’t being a good friend—where are you going?”

Out of this truck and far away from him. This way, I don’t have to sit there while he berates and scolds me like a child, all in the name of defending his gross *girlfriend*.

I pick up my pace when I feel him gaining ground. “Go away.”

Wrapping his fingers around my wrist, he spins me around. “Why are you acting like this?”

Because he shouldn’t be with her.

“She’s not good for you.”

His gaze traps mine, sending a rush of heat to all the places it shouldn’t.

“Why?”

My heart thuds painfully against my chest. I open my mouth to deflect, but the truth slips out.

“Because I don’t want you with her.”

He steps closer. “Why?”

I try to back away, but my spine meets a tree.

Memphis takes the opportunity to corner me like a killer trapping their shiny new victim.

“Why?” he repeats, harsher this time.

His stare is calculating. Determined.

Like he already knows.

My lower belly clenches and I force some much-needed air into my lungs.

“Stop,” I whisper, hoping it will put an end to this interrogation.

But it doesn’t. If anything, my refusal spurs him on. “Not until you tell me why.”

My heart kicks into high gear. “Because she’s a freaking pervert.”

A shiver runs through me when his lips brush my ear and he bites out. “Try again.”

My stomach flips. “I already did.”

His throat flexes and he places both of his hands on either side of my head, ensnaring me. “Sky.”

There’s something ominous brewing in the air between us. *A warning.*

The ground beneath me sways and my knees grow weak.

His mouth is a mere inch from mine, and I want to close the distance more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my entire life.

However, the moment he starts to, I press a hand to his chest.

“Don’t.”

It will change everything.

His sharp exhale dances across my lips. Our bodies tremble with restraint.

I know this is killing him just as much as it’s killing me.

“I’m sorry.”

Slipping his impassive mask back into place, he steps to the side...letting me go.

I try to shake off this feeling—this *connection*—as I walk away, but it’s impossible. Like telling my heart not to beat.

Without warning, he grips my arm, pulling me back to him like a powerful current I can’t swim against.

“I’m not.”

And then his mouth is on mine.

Electricity buzzes through me, and the moment our tongues touch, the spark between us becomes an inferno. My heart explodes and he swallows my gasp, backing me against the tree.

Skillful, calloused fingers grip the side of my neck, holding me in place as he tastes every inch of my mouth...like he’ll never get enough of it.

A hungry groan rips from his chest and he takes me deeper, alternating between fervent strokes and little teases that make my mind spin and my body hum with need.

It’s wrong.

It’s reckless.

It’s *perfect*.

He’s like quicksand pulling me under. I’m sinking.

Tumbling.

Falling.

Josh.

His name is a deafening alarm bell blaring through my head.

Less than two weeks ago, I accused him of cheating on me, and now here I am...kissing his brother.

Guilt claws at my chest. I'm the worst kind of person.

The kind that hurts people she loves.

I slap Memphis's cheek, putting an end to our treachery.

Confusion mingles with the lust in his eyes as he peers down at me.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. There are choices...and then there are mistakes.

Cheating on the man I love is, without a doubt, the latter.

"Don't *ever* do that again."

He *can't*.

An arrogant smirk curves his lips as he rubs the red mark I left on his skin. "Because you feel guilty for liking it? Or because you felt the same thing I did, and it scares the shit out of you?"

Both.

However, there's another—more important—reason.

"Because I love him."

The truth hangs in the air between us like a dense smog, and the smirk wipes clean off his face.

Emotions collide in my chest as I watch him walk back to his truck.

This is exactly why I didn't want him to kiss me.

But he did it anyway...

And now, nothing will ever be the same.

Chapter 27

MEMPHIS



Meeting Danielle at her house at the ass crack of dawn is the last thing I want to do.

I don't have a choice, though. She was planning to expel Skylar for stripping in the hallway, so there's no doubt in my mind that she'll want to have her arrested for slashing her tires.

Black heels clack against the wood floor of her living room. "Why the hell would that little bitch vandalize my car?"

Crossing my arms, I stare her down. "She's not a bitch. She was...upset."

Jealous.

The muscles in my chest draw tight.

Sky made it perfectly clear where we stood after I kissed her yesterday.

She chose him.

Danielle pinches the bridge of her nose. "You have got to be kidding me. Is this about the Arabella crap again? For Christ's sake, the school year is nearly over."

"It's not that." The only way I can get Sky out of trouble is by informing Danielle that Skylar has the upper hand. "She knows about us."

Her eyes widen with shock. “What do you mean she knows about us? How?”

Not going there.

Skylar snooping through my phone is between me and her.

“Doesn’t matter.” I rise from the couch. “She promised she wouldn’t say anything, but I think we need to cool it.”

With those parting words, I round the corner so I can slip out the front door and bounce.

Unfortunately, Danielle chases after me like a stray dog begging for scraps. “A girl who goes around slashing tires doesn’t seem like the most trustworthy person.”

Digging my cigarettes out of my pocket, I shrug. “All the more reason for us to end things.”

Her eyebrows shoot up to the ceiling. “Now we’re *ending* things?”

Apparently, I didn’t make that clear. “Yes.”

I’m putting this on Skylar, but the truth is, she gave me the excuse I needed to cut the cord.

I’m leaving for Berkeley soon and all my focus needs to be on music.

Danielle was getting too clingy, and I have no doubt it would only get worse once I’m gone. Calling me at all hours of the night, showing up at my dorm uninvited...bitching that we never see each other enough.

I don’t need that shit.

I’m chasing my dreams, and there’s no woman in the world more important than that.

“Take care.”

She follows me out to the porch.

“It’s awfully convenient that three weeks before graduation, she just so happens to find out about us, and now you’re breaking up with me.”

“Christ.” I laugh, but there’s not a drop of humor. “We weren’t in a relationship, so this isn’t a breakup. This is me telling you that I don’t want to fuck you anymore.”

Therefore, I don’t owe her shit.

She studies her nails. “I don’t need an explanation, Memphis. You made it quite easy for me to draw my own conclusion.” Her eyes narrow. “It’s pitiful how obsessed you are with your brother’s girlfriend. And it’s downright pathetic the way you swoop in to be her knight in shining armor all the time...hoping she’ll notice you.”

I bring a cigarette to my mouth and light it. “Fuck off.”

Stepping forward, she runs her nails down my chest. “Does your brother know you’re screwing her yet?” She gives me a saccharine smile. “Perhaps someone should take pity on the poor guy and tell him.”

I push her hand away. “You’re a trip, you know that? Your career and reputation are on the verge of going up in smoke, and here you are butting your nose in my shit.”

If anyone’s obsessed, it’s her.

My statement hits the intended mark because the color drains from her face. “Is that a threat?”

“Nah, it’s a guarantee. Go near my brother or fuck with Skylar, and I’ll be the one to ruin you myself.” I blow a stream of smoke in her face. “Don’t worry, though. You’ve still got a couple more miles before you reach the *washed-up* stage. I’m sure you’ll have no problem finding another teenager with a big dick.” I drop my cigarette and step on it. “There’s always a new batch of freshmen in the fall, right?”

“You’re an asshole.”

I flash her a sinister smile. “And you’re a desperate, clingy bitch. No wonder your husband left you.”

With those parting words, I jog down the steps and to my truck.

On some level, I get why she's upset.

Rejection sucks.

Especially when the person you want is in love with someone else.

Chapter 28

MEMPHIS



I scan the empty store as I finish off my burger. The clock on the wall tells me I still have an hour left until I can lock up and go home.

Usually I prefer solitude, but not tonight.

Tonight the silence forces me to be alone with my thoughts...and they all circle back to *her*.

I laid my cards out on the table and it didn't do shit. Aside from validating that our being friends was a terrible idea.

Hence, I've avoided her all week and will continue doing so.

The only silver lining to all this bullshit is that I'll never look back and wonder, "*what if?*"

I can leave for Berkeley without any regrets and move the fuck on.

I'm tossing the wrapper into the trash when my phone rings. I typically don't pick up numbers I don't recognize, but I welcome the brief distraction.

"Hello?"

"Yo."

It takes me a second to register who the voice belongs to. "Isaac?"

I hear a bunch of people conversing in the background. "Yeah, man. What's up?"

“How’d you’d get this number?”

Less than a handful of people have it.

There’s a brief pause before he says, “Tutoring, bruh.”

Shit. He’s right. I forgot I gave it to him last year.

“Hold up, you didn’t save mine? That hurts, man.”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I lean against the counter. I have no idea why the fuck he’s calling me. Especially tonight.

“What do you want?”

“I didn’t see you at prom, but there’s a killer after-party happening at Doug’s. A bunch of us are getting ready to head over there. You gotta come,” he shouts above the noise.

For one fleeting moment, I consider taking him up on the offer. But then I remember there’s a chance Josh and Skylar might drop by before retreating to their hotel room for the night.

Watching her have the time of her life with *him* isn’t going to help me forget about her.

It will only make it worse.

“Can’t. I’m at work.”

“Come on, ma—”

I promptly disconnect the call and make my way over to the wall of guitars.

A few Strats came in this week, and they’re in need of tuning.

While it’s easier and quicker to use a pedal tuner or an app—I prefer my own ears.

Not only does it help condition and train, it’s more personal and gives me a sense of control.

After strumming a few notes, I determine it needs to be lower, so I loosen the string and test it out. It’s still off, so I mess around a bit before moving on

to the next one.

It's good to go a few minutes later. However, the best way to know for sure is to play it. I'm gearing up to do just that when the bell on the door chimes and some flustered guy wearing cargo pants and a button-down rushes inside.

"I need an Ibanez twenty-two fret," he fires off. "Right the fuck now."

Placing the guitar down, I turn my attention to the entitled asshole barking orders at me.

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him to go fuck himself, but it's obvious he's also having a shit night, so I do him a solid.

"We don't carry a lot of Ibanez's, but I'll check what we have in stock."

"It *has* to be a twenty-two fret," he stresses as I begin the search.

"Heard you the first time."

Making a face, he looks around. "This shithole is supposed to be a *Guitar Galaxy?*"

I suppose, to someone like him, this would be considered a *shithole*.

While at first glance he doesn't appear to be particularly wealthy, both the expensive watch on his wrist and the mustang symbol on his key fob tells me he's got money.

What he *doesn't* have is the right to waltz in here, issue commands like a drill sergeant, and then insult the place that's been my second home the past six years.

I halt my search. "You're welcome to try another store."

Although the next place that sells guitars is over two hours away and it's already closed for the night.

Eyes narrowing, he places his hands on his hips like he's fixin' to have the world's biggest tantrum. "I'm willing to pay you double if you find me the damn thing in the next two minutes."

I riffle through a few more guitars before spotting it. “You’re in luck. We have *one* twenty-two fret.”

Visibly relieved, he follows me to the register. “Thank fuck. I have less than ten minutes to haul ass back to the venue.”

Normally I keep conversations to a minimum, but he’s piqued my curiosity. “You play guitar?”

If so, it would explain a lot. We’re notoriously picky motherfuckers. No pun intended.

He digs his wallet out of his pocket. “No. I manage a band. However, my obtuse guitar player is the reason *I’m* currently running around like a chicken with its head cut off.” Huffing, he adds, “Approximately twenty minutes ago, my drunk drummer got into a fight because he slept with his sister.”

Yeah, I’m gonna need a little clarification here. “The drummer slept with his own sister?”

Another huff. “No. The *guitarist* slept with his sister.”

That doesn’t make it any less disturbing.

“Damn. That’s a lot of incest for one band.”

He thrusts his credit card at me. “Christ Almighty. The guitar player slept with the *drummer’s* sister.”

Ah. The asshole should have made that distinction from the jump.

“Let me guess. The drummer wanted to retaliate, so he smashed all his guitars.”

“No.” He grimaces. “He *pissed* on all of them.”

Jesus.

Taking pity on the guitarist, I toss a pack of picks in with the sale.

“What band is this?”

“The Resistance.”

“Holy shit.”

His expression turns smug. “I take it you’ve heard of them?”

Not only have I heard of them, I’m a fan. They’ve been a big hit in the UK for a while now, but they recently got signed by Phantom Rock Records, which is a huge label.

I have no doubt they’ll be globally famous in no time.

I hand him back his credit card. “They’re pretty awesome.”

“Yeah, they are. When they’re not blitzed out of their minds and fucking each other’s family members.” He pulls a hundred-dollar bill out of his wallet and hands it to me. “I appreciate your assistance.”

I give it back to him. It feels wrong to accept payment for helping out the guitarist of a band I like.

“It’s cool. Have a good night.”

Nodding, he ambles in the direction of the front door. “Do me a favor and keep that sister shit to yourself.”

Laughing, I return to the Strat I was tuning. “No problem.”

After I pick it up, I begin playing the intro of “Sweet Child O’ Mine” by Guns N’ Roses.

It’s not only one of the best riffs ever written, it’s one of my favorites.

Concluding it’s good to go, I start to place it back on the shelf.

That’s when I notice the guy from before is standing at the front door with a flabbergasted expression.

“Did you need something else?”

“Yeah.” Placing the guitar he just bought on the floor, he marches over. “I need you to play that again. Right the fuck now.”

At least this demand is one I can get on board with.

Losing myself in the music, I play it a second time.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he mutters. “Let me hear something else.”

Since he didn’t request anything specific, I go with one of the first songs I

taught myself.

“Iron Man” by Black Sabbath.

The whole time this dude just stands there—staring at me with wide eyes while grinning from ear to ear.

At one point, he even pulls out his phone and starts recording me.

It’s a little strange. And by strange? I mean fucking creepy.

“I have to get back to work,” I tell him after I finish the song.

“Give me your number.”

Should have known that was coming. “Sorry, dude. I’m straight.”

Snickering to himself, he whips out his cell phone. “That works out well then because once Vic hears you, you’ll be drowning in pussy.” Studying me, he rubs his chin. “How old are you, kid?”

This guy is giving me whiplash. “Eighteen. Why?”

Relief flickers across his features. “Good. I’d rather have a root canal than deal with pesky parents.” Growing impatient, he snaps his fingers. “Number.”

I rattle it off and he types it into his phone.

“What’s your name?”

“Memphis Payne.”

Another creepy grin splits his face. “This is too fucking perfect.”

“What’s yours?”

I’m not entirely convinced that this guy isn’t a deranged lunatic and I’d like to be able to give the cops more than just a description.

“Chandler Dicky,” he deadpans.

As far as names go, he got the shit end of the stick.

Chandler heads for the door but pauses. “I assume you’re already in a band?”

“No.” I shrug. “But my brother Josh plays bass and sometimes we jam

together.”

Not nearly as much as we used to, though.

“Interesting,” he muses. “Is he as good as you? Hell, is he even *half* as good?”

“Yeah, he’s pretty decent.”

When he’s not drunk and high off his ass.

“We’ll be in touch,” he calls out.

Then he’s gone.

And that’s when it hits me.

If this Chandler Dicky guy isn’t pulling my leg and really is the manager of The Resistance, then the Vic he was referring to is *the* Vic Doherty.

Holy motherfucking fuck balls.

Not only is Vic the founder and CEO of Phantom Rock Records, the dude is a fucking *legend*.

A rush of adrenaline spikes through my veins—because *this* is my dream—but then I force myself to get a grip and snap back to reality.

While playing guitar is more innate than breathing for me, it doesn’t mean Vic Doherty will deem me worthy enough.

Sure, Ed claims I’m better than fucking *Hendrix* and—according to Archie—I have B.B. King’s blood pumping through me, but it doesn’t mean they’re right.

I might be the best guitarist in this middle-of-nowhere town—hell, even the state of Tennessee—but Vic’s been around the entire goddamn *world*.

There’s a reason I worked my ass off to get into Berkeley. It’s so I can have legitimate musical training, hone my craft, and learn the tools to eventually become one of the best.

I don’t want to blow my one and only shot.

Then again, I might not even get one. This Chandler Dicky guy seemed

interested, but who knows?

The odds are far greater that he won't call.

Gripping my neck, I force a few deep breaths.

I hate how much I want it.

Because wanting something with this much hunger means it has power over you.

That it can control and manipulate you.

That it will destroy you once it's gone.

The sound of my phone ringing snaps me out of my haze.

Assuming it's Isaac again, I go to hit ignore, but Archie's name flashes across the screen.

I tap the answer button and bring it to my ear. "Hey."

"Have you seen Josh?"

Both the question and his exasperated tone throw me.

"Isn't he at prom?"

Or rather, the *after-party*.

"He was supposed to be."

I grip the counter so hard my knuckles turn white. "What do you mean *supposed to be?*"

"No one's been able to get in touch with him, and Skylar's a mess." My chest coils as he continues. "God help me, Memphis. It was the saddest thing I ever saw. That poor girl sat in our living room in her pretty dress with those big hopeful eyes glued to the front door for *hours*...just waiting for him to walk through it." He puffs out a breath. "I had no choice but to go out there and tell the limo driver that Mrs. Landrum hired to leave. When I came back, she was gone—"

I hang up because I don't need to hear any more.

I just need to get to her.



Skylar's sobs are so loud I hear them the moment I step foot in the woods.

Breaking into a run, I charge in the direction of the treehome.

The muscles in my chest pull tight when I open the door and find her huddled up in the corner...bawling her broken heart out.

I never thought I could hate Josh.

Sure, he's done some messed-up shit before. Not to mention he's lazy, unreliable, annoying...and an overall pain in the fucking ass.

Despite all that, though, he's still my brother. *My family.*

But right now? He's the piece of shit who hurt Skylar.

It's a good thing he's not here because I'd beat the living hell out of him.

He knows how much she was looking forward to prom.

It's all Sky talked about for months.

The treehome is a lot smaller than I remember, but I manage to squeeze myself inside.

It's pitch black, so I pull my phone out of my pocket and turn on the flashlight.

I immediately regret it when I see the mascara streaks running down her tearstained cheeks.

She's that little girl in the window all over again.

Only sadder.

Those forlorn hazel eyes find mine. "He should have been here."

Christ. It's a goddamn punch to the gut.

"I know."

The motherfucker better be dead in a ditch somewhere.

Sniffing, Skylar brings a bottle of champagne to her mouth and takes a big swig.

“It was supposed to be for the hotel,” she whispers.

Judging by what’s left, I’d say she’s already killed more than a quarter of it.

“How could he do this to me?”

Her voice is fragile, like cracked crystal.

“I don’t know.”

I can’t wrap my brain around how—or why—he’d hurt the girl he loves.

Then again, I don’t understand half the shit Josh does.

But his motives aren’t my concern right now. The devastated girl sitting next to me is.

I’m not the guy she chose, but tonight I can be her friend.

Because fuck knows she could use one right now.

I sweep my thumbs over her cheeks, wiping away some of the black crap.

“What do you need?”

Whatever it is, I’ll find a way to make it happen.

Because Skylar Meadows doesn’t deserve to be sitting in a treehome bawling her eyes out over a shithead who isn’t worthy of her.

My question only makes her cry harder. “Memphis.”

Fuck. I’m not good at comforting people. Probably because it involves shit I’ve always struggled with...like emotions and empathy.

However, I do know that sitting in the dark guzzling champagne isn’t going to help.

I make an executive decision and haul a distraught Skylar into my arms. “I got you.”

Her tears soak my shirt and her sobs grow louder during the walk back to

my house.

“He should have been here.”

“I know.”

He should have...but he's not.

I am.

We're approaching the house when her sobs finally diminish...as if her body has no more left to shed.

She buries her face in my neck as I open the front door. “Do you want something to drink?”

She gives the champagne bottle she's still clutching a little shake, indicating she brought her own refreshments.

Right.

I pass Archie on my way to the staircase.

Frowning, he glances at Skylar. Then at me.

While it's not outright disapproval I detect, it's clear he's not ecstatic about me bringing her up to my bedroom.

But then his stare rests on Skylar again and his frown deepens.

“Lock your door,” he drawls with a definitive sigh.

With a shake of his head, he pads out to the living room and I trek upstairs.

Once I'm inside my room, I deposit her on my bed and grab a clean T-shirt from the drawer.

Kneeling, I wipe the black streaks off her cheeks with it while she takes another swig of her champagne.

“This isn't my area of expertise, but I think I got most of it.”

I go to stand, but her fingers circle around my wrist, keeping me there. “Home.”

“You want me to take you home?”

I'd like her to stay, but tonight isn't about me.

Shaking her head, she winds her arms around my neck. "No. I am home."

I'm trying to process what she's saying when she leans forward...

And kisses me.

Chapter 29

SKYLAR



He tastes like home and faith.

Like loyalty and sincerity.

Like affection and security.

Craving more, I press against him and brush my tongue along his.

A familiar jolt of electricity runs through me and once again, I'm sinking.

Falling...

And he's stopping.

Unfastening my arms from his neck, he stands. "You're drunk."

"Only a little."

There's a nice buzz going through me, but I'm still fully aware of what I'm doing.

And what I want.

It's clear we're not on the same page, though, because Memphis backs up, putting several feet of distance between us. "Not happening."

I'm confused. I thought he brought me to his bedroom so we could continue where we left off that day at the creek.

"You don't want me anymore?"

His lips form a firm line and he takes several more steps back...like he wants to be as far away from me as possible.

A knot forms in my chest all over again.

That's *twice* now that I've been rejected tonight.

Swallowing back tears—and my pride—I dig my phone out of my purse and send another text to Josh.

Skylar: Where the hell are you?

My heart squeezes and a swell of emotion grips me by the throat.

He should have been here.

He should have burst through that door wearing a tux and holding a corsage.

He should have taken me to prom like he promised.

He should have spun me around on the dance floor and told me how pretty I looked. Not because I'm conceited but because I spent *hours* shaving, curling my hair, and applying makeup...hoping to take his breath away.

He should have been here...because he knew how happy it would have made me.

But he's not.

And what I thought was going to be the greatest night of my life...has turned into one of the worst.

Reaching for the champagne bottle, I take another sip.

And then another.

“Can we listen to music?”

The silence is killing me. I need a diversion. Something to take my mind off my shithead boyfriend. And since Memphis won't alleviate my pain with his lips, music is the next best thing.

He scrolls through his phone. “What do you want to hear?”

A warm, tingly feeling envelops me, and I can't tell if it's because of the alcohol...or because of him. “My song.”

“Which is...”

I find myself smiling as the memory of him singing it to me flits through my head. “The purple one.”

His throat works on a swallow. “Purple Haze?”

Biting my lip, I nod. “Yeah, but I want to hear *you* play it.”

For a moment, I think he’s going to turn me down—again—but then he picks up his purple guitar. “I’m not singing this time.”

I’m about to protest, but the playful smirk he aims my way renders me speechless.

He should be forced to register that smirk as a lethal weapon because it’s dangerous.

Same goes for his lips. That little chin cleft. That tiny dimple in his cheek that makes a rare appearance whenever he genuinely smiles.

Those dark eyes.

On second thought, every inch of him is dangerous.

My heart skips several beats when he begins strumming the guitar, transforming from dangerous...to downright *fatal*.

I don’t know what separates a good guitarist from a bad one...all I know is that my world has stopped.

Memphis has always had this quiet confidence about him, but the moment that thing is in his hands, it’s no longer subtle...

He turns into a shooting star.

One I can’t take my eyes off of.

I can’t tell whether he’s being possessed by the instrument or if he’s the one possessing it. *And me.*

Because whatever I’m witnessing right now is something otherworldly.

I’ll admit, I presumed he was good, given he got into Berkeley and all, but I had no idea he was...*this*.

“I’m...you’re...” I can’t form words...because there aren’t any that would

even come close to doing his talent justice. “Incomparable.”

That sexy grin is back with a vengeance. Dimple and all. “You going all fangirl on me, Meadows?”

I totally am.

And now I am *totally* blushing.

Recovering, I straighten my spine. “There’s a fine line between confidence and cockiness, Payne.”

A rush of heat floods my body when his gaze lands on my mouth. “Too bad I’ve never liked coloring inside the lines.”

Holy hell. Memphis is, without a doubt, the most puzzling person I’ve ever met.

He’s looking at me like he wants me...yet he rejected me.

I’d be lying if I said it didn’t sting.

Here I am—ripe for the picking—but he won’t even sample me.

It’s perplexing because when he kissed me, I felt something I’ve never felt from anyone before.

Passion.

Like something inside him snapped, submerging us both in white-hot hunger.

I wonder what it would take to make him crack like that again.

Because this time? I won’t stop it.

Liquid courage mingled with lust has me feeling far more daring than usual.

Memphis pushed my buttons at the creek because, deep down, he knew the truth.

It’s time for me to do the same to him.

Arching my spine, I twist and wiggle until I locate the zipper on the back of my dress and tug it down.

He keeps his expression impassive, but I can see the wheels in his head turning, wondering what I'm up to.

He'll find out soon enough.

“Keep playing.”

The intro cues up again and I get off the bed. Holding his stare, I remove the straps of my dress and let it fall to the floor.

His nostrils flare on an indrawn breath. My heart races as his eyes roam over every inch of my body, taking in my purple satin bra and panties.

I'm glad all my effort didn't go to waste after all because Memphis is looking at me like I'm the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

And yet, he's still standing by the window...playing that damn guitar.

Since he's giving me a show, perhaps I should return the favor.

I debate picking up the champagne bottle again because what I'm about to do requires the kind of bravado—and *vulnerability*—I'm not sure I can muster.

But god, how I want to see Memphis Payne come apart at the seams and smash that impassive mask slipping back into place to freaking smithereens.

With that motivation spurring me on, I sit on the edge of the bed and slowly trail a fingernail down my stomach.

“You don't like coloring inside the lines, huh?”

If I had any doubt about not being able to capture his attention, I don't anymore. He's watching me intently with hooded eyes...all but challenging me to keep going.

Butterflies rage a war inside me as I tease the waistband of my panties. “I'm not so sure about that.”

My stare drifts to his hands as I move mine lower. They're so skillful...nearly hypnotizing as they slide over the strings, causing the tendons to stretch and contract with the movement.

I wonder what those talented fingers would feel like inside me. If they'd move with the same expertise and agility.

Without warning, those talented fingers fumble a note...and I realize I've been rubbing myself through my panties all while imagining him touching me.

"You don't have to stay over there."

Those eyes darken beneath lowered lashes, and he not so discreetly adjusts his guitar.

I can feel the tight band of his self-control weakening, so I push the envelope even more.

Smiling coyly, I lie down on his bed. "Usually when a person wants something...they take it."

Take me, Memphis.

"But not you." My hand dips below the waistband of my panties. I'm like a feline in heat. "The only thing you're interested in *touching* is your guitar."

A sharp breath escapes as I slip a finger inside. "You claim not to like coloring inside the lines, but you always do when it comes to me."

His jaw goes tight as his gaze rakes down my body, stopping between my legs.

My chest rises and falls with quick pants, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

"It's probably for the best. We both know you'd never be able to make me come anyway."

I'm going to, though, right here on his bed.

This way, he'll have no choice but to sleep in these sheets, tormented by the fact that he could have had me but was too stubborn to take me.

I barely have time to register that the song has stopped before I feel his presence.

When I open my eyes, Memphis is kneeling in front of me...looking like

he wants to consume and murder me at the same time.

“Move your fucking hand. *Now.*”

It’s not a request. It’s an order.

One I’m not stupid enough to disobey, so I do what he says.

A sharp tug on my ankle makes me squeak, and then he’s moving between my parted thighs until his gorgeous face hovers a few inches above my pussy.

“Stay still.”

His voice is raw silk and the intensity in his expression elicits a hot shiver.

My body tenses, awaiting his touch, but it doesn’t come.

“What—”

A tingle zips down my spine as he gently drags a purple guitar pick down the length of my body.

His face goes tight with restraint and he changes direction, now gliding it up my quivering frame.

All my senses are heightened, and my heart hammers like a drum with each enticing stroke.

Memphis goes a little farther down with every sweeping pass, winding me up. *Making me his instrument.*

And then my nerves decide to crash the party.

It’s ridiculous. I’ve let two guys fuck me while my boyfriend watched, but *this* makes me anxious?

He’s not even touching me.

And yet, it’s the most intimate and sexiest experience I’ve ever had.

Because I’m here in this moment with him.

Not disconnecting myself from where I don’t want to be.

My heart flutters as he holds my gaze, leisurely drawing the pick along the sensitive skin of my inner thighs.

Down and up.

Up and down.

Every time he passes over a new section, goose bumps break out and I shiver.

I wanted to make him crack, but I'm the one who is.

Whenever he finds a new spot that makes me extra responsive, he goes over it *again* when I least expect it.

And *again*.

And *again*.

It's as if he's learning my body. Memorizing all the things I like so he can use them against me in the most tantalizing ways.

My eyes squeeze shut and I clench and unclench my hands, struggling to keep still.

"Memphis."

He traces the edge of my panties—building my anticipation—and making my want for him swell to frightening levels.

A whimper of frustration leaves me when the bastard changes course at the last second and trails it across my hip bone...intentionally avoiding the place that's beginning to throb.

"Please—"

I bite my lip so hard it hurts when I finally—*finally*—feel it where I'm aching.

My thighs tremble as he outlines the shape of my pussy. I'm so wet my panties stick to my skin.

Without warning, Memphis's movements come to a rapid halt.

Embarrassment courses through me and I'm about to apologize for being so *damp*, but he brings his face closer and *inhales me*.

The deep groan he emits has my nipples puckering and my heart racing.

“Mem—” I squirm when he trails the pick down the length of my slit.

Eyes fixed on me, he does it again, causing an unintelligible sound to pass my lips.

I grip the sheets when he shifts directions and moves it along my rib cage in slow, torturous circles.

Damn him. I equally love and hate his brand of torture.

I exhale through clenched teeth when the pick makes its way back *down, down, down...*this time stopping on my clit.

A small quirk lifts his lips...and then he blows a stream of air on my panties.

My entire body ignites and a shiver rips through me.

The shiver turns to a full-blown riptide when he begins strumming my clit with such proficiency I writhe and whimper.

Pleasure lights me up, building and building. “Oh god.”

A helpless moan cuts the air as he sends me over the edge. My orgasm is so strong it takes several minutes for me to recover.

When I do, I find Memphis watching me.

His stare is predatory. His expression unequivocally arrogant.

“I don’t even have to touch you to make you come, Sky.”

I can’t deny it since, technically, he’s right.

“Now put your finger back inside your pussy.” His voice is a low rasp. “And show me the mess I made.”

He can’t be serious.

Oh, but the look he’s giving me makes it very clear he is.

Taking a deep breath, I slip my hand under the waistband of my underwear, collecting my wetness like he instructed. I’m so slick it’s audible.

As soon as I’m done, he snatches my hand. My cheeks heat when he runs his nose along the length of my glistening finger before closing his mouth

around it.

Memphis was right, he doesn't like coloring inside the lines.

He likes crossing them.

Now he knows my scent.

What I taste like.

The sounds I make when I come.

The look he gives me tells me he's thinking the same exact thing.

I sit up. "Kiss—"

His lips are on mine before I can utter the last word.

The second he parts my mouth with his tongue, I melt against him.

Heaven help me, this boy is quicksand.

And I'm sinking.

Falling.

Until a knock on the door makes us both jolt.

"What?" Memphis grinds out, not even bothering to hide his annoyance.

"Valerie just called," Archie says from the other side of the door. "Josh is in the hospital. He was in a car accident."

My heart stops for several agonizing seconds...and then a slew of questions zip through my mind like rapid fire.

Is he okay? Car accident? Where? With who?

I leap off the bed. "We'll be right down."

Frazzled, I pick my dress up off the floor and maneuver into it.

What if he's seriously hurt? I mean, he must be since Valerie was the one who called instead of Josh.

I'm so worried I can't get my hands to stop shaking long enough to do up the zipper.

Memphis slips behind me. "I got it."

Unable to look at him, I sweep my hair to one side. "Thank you."

His breath tickles the back of my neck as he tugs it up and fastens the little clasp. “All done.”

Neither of us moves. Almost like we both know the moment we do it will break the spell and catapult us back to reality.

A reality where my boyfriend and his brother are the same person.

Which means we’ll have no choice but to avoid each other since neither of us can resist *coloring outside the lines* whenever we’re alone.

My heart rate kicks up and I squeeze my eyes shut when he presses a tender kiss to my shoulder.

Emotions tangle in my chest, but the strongest of them is *guilt*.

I was so livid with Josh for standing me up, but he didn’t do it intentionally.

He’s been lying in a hospital bed. While *I* was tearing off my clothes and begging his brother to make me come.

I’m not just a terrible girlfriend. I’m a terrible person.

I’m the whore everyone says I am.

“We have to go.”



My heart stammers in my chest as I run down the hospital corridors. Memphis and Archie follow close behind.

Given Josh still isn’t answering his phone, I can’t help but assume the worst.

“Valerie,” I yell when I spot her coming out of a room, donning a pair of

blue scrubs.

She turns at the sound of my voice and rushes over.

“Is he okay? Is he conscious? Can he talk? Can—”

“He’s all right, honey,” she assures me. “He needed a few stitches, but the doctors think it’s just a bad concussion. They’re doing more tests to be sure, though.” Her eyes flick to Memphis. “You can both go in and see him. He’s in room thirty-five. It’s at the end of the hallway.” A frown mars her face, and she looks at her husband. “We need to talk.”

Memphis and I exchange a glance because that doesn’t sound good.

However, I’m too focused on Josh to ruminate on it any further.

Memphis places his hand on the small of my back, guiding me in the direction of the room.

Maybe he lost his phone in the accident?

Maybe he was on the phone with emergency services for so long it died?

Maybe the concussion made him drowsy, and he’s been sleeping?

For a moment I think we stumbled into the wrong hospital room because the first thing I see—and smell—are two guys around my age with dazed expressions who reek of weed. A tall, pretty brunette stands next to the shorter of the two.

“Hey, baby.” Josh’s slurred voice has me turning toward the hospital bed he’s lying on. “Damn. You look beautiful.”

It takes my brain less than a second to figure out that he’s high off his ass.

All my concern morphs into disappointment as I take in his bloodshot eyes, dopey expression, and the bandage above his eye. “Are you okay?”

It’s a stupid question. Bandage aside, he looks just fine.

A sluggish grin stretches his mouth. “I’m great.”

I bet.

I open my mouth to ask what the fuck happened, but one of the guys slaps

his shoulder. “Yo, *this* is your girl?”

Josh waggles his blond brows. “She’s hot, right?”

“Hot as hell,” he agrees. “How the fuck you land a girl like her, bruh?”

In my peripheral, I notice the brunette stiffen.

She must be that *bruh*’s girlfriend.

I clear my throat, vying for my high-as-a-kite boyfriend’s attention. “Where were you tonight?” I gesture to his *new friends*. “And who the hell are these people?”

They definitely don’t go to our school, and I’ve never met them before now.

“I’m Big Moe,” one of them informs me.

The guy next to him juts his chin. “I’m Big Joe.”

Looks like we have something in common then because I’m big *mad*.

The brunette averts her gaze, staring down at her shoes. “Holly.”

She seems decent at least. Maybe she can give me the rundown on what happened since the *big*s and my boyfriend are currently too high to count to ten correctly.

“Hey.”

She keeps her gaze trained on the floor.

Why won’t she look at me?

An eerie, unsettling feeling slams into me with the force of a tsunami.

The room begins to sway as an awful sinking sensation expands inside my chest to the point of pain.

My boyfriend was supposed to take me to prom and make love to me tonight.

But he didn’t.

Because he was too busy getting high...and fucking her.

Chapter 30

MEMPHIS



Skylar didn't say a word during the car ride home.

Not to me. Not to Archie. Not even to Josh.

The second we pulled up the driveway, she grabbed her purse, ran out of the car...and hightailed it to her house.

Josh—the dipshit—was too high to notice, but there was this moment back at the hospital where she was staring at the brunette from the guitar store. I don't know what the hell happened, but something must have because Skylar shut down soon after.

A surge of exhaustion pummels me as I fall onto my bed. By the time we got home, the sun was starting to rise and the birds were chirping.

I'm putting my phone on the nightstand when a sea of purple comes through my window.

Sky.

She's still wearing her prom dress. And once again...she's crying.

Just like when I found her in the treehome.

Anger races through my veins.

He breaks things. I fix them.

Then he turns right around and breaks them again.

"Can I sleep in here?" she croaks out. "I'm supposed to be at the hotel, and

my aunt is still sleeping and...”

Another cluster of tears cuts her off.

I shift on the bed, making room for her, but she doesn't join me. Instead, she pulls out her phone and brings it to her ear.

My eyes flick to the clock. It's just after six a.m. on a Sunday.

I'm wondering who she'd be calling at this hour when I hear it.

“I'm so sorry, Arabella. I should have believed you.” Her tears fall faster, and she makes a choking sound in her throat. “I really hope you can forgive me.”

Shit. I don't know how she figured it out, but it's clear she did.

After hanging up the phone, Skylar looks at me. “Josh—”

That's when her phone vibrates with a text.

I hold my breath as she reads it.

Josh is cheating on you.

A cynical laugh leaves her, and she throws her phone across the room. “You're a little late, whoever you are.”

“It was me.”

Keeping it from her for this long has been hell. However, I had my reasons.

She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. “What was you?”

I sit up in bed. “I sent that text.”

She blinks in confusion...and then she scowls. “Wait, you *knew*? Why didn't you tell me?” Hazel eyes narrow with accusation. “I get that there's a bro code, but we're supposed to be friends. You could have given me a heads-up.”

That's exactly what that text was.

“You didn't believe your other friend who told you Josh was cheating,” I remind her. “I didn't want...” To hurt you. To make you hate me. *To watch*

you choose him over me again. “I didn’t think you’d believe me either. And then I’d have to put up with even more of your detective bullshit.”

Her mouth opens and closes like she wants to argue, but she can’t... because she knows I’m right.

“I still wanted you to know, though, so I downloaded an app and sent the text from a different number.” I run a hand along my scalp, debating my next words because it will only make her ask me shit I don’t want to answer. “I would have sent it sooner, but I knew how much you were looking forward to prom. I wanted you to enjoy it.”

Safe to say that didn’t fucking happen.

An array of emotions scatter across her pretty face. Shock, embarrassment, sorrow...and anger.

“How long has he been cheating on me?”

There it is.

“No idea,” I tell her honestly. “I only found out a few weeks ago.”

I know Skylar felt guilty about our kiss—and for what happened last night in this room—but she shouldn’t.

The piece of shit was already fucking Holly.

It’s why I couldn’t let her walk away that day at the creek.

It was different when I thought Josh made her happy. That was enough for me to keep my distance and do the right thing.

But he doesn’t.

Something tells me he hasn’t in a while.

Skylar’s jaw hits the floor. “A few weeks?” Suspicion twists her features. “And what do you mean by found out? Josh told you?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Then how do you know?”

Whoever said *don’t kill the messenger* was a cold-blooded asshole.

Because this messenger would gladly choose death rather than having to answer this question.

It will only break her heart even more.

“It doesn’t matter.”

She glares hate fire at me. “The fuck it doesn’t, Memphis.”

Christ. “I know because I saw it with my own eyes.”

“What do you mean you saw it with your own eyes? Did he introduce you to her? Did you see them around town?”

“No.” I rub the knot forming in my neck. “It’s really not—”

“I swear to God, if you’re seriously about to tell me that my boyfriend cheating on me is *not important*, I will punch you in the nuts,” she exclaims. “Tell me everything. Right now.”

I don’t want to, but she’s not giving me much of a choice here.

It seems all her anger is directed at *me* instead of her cheating boyfriend.

“Valerie asked me to get Josh for dinner one night. He didn’t answer when I knocked, so I opened his bedroom door. I assumed he was sleeping, but I heard him having sex. I thought it was you. However, when I took a closer look, I realized it wasn’t.”

Gasping, she clutches her chest. “He had sex with her in his *room*? In his *bed*? The same bed *we...*” A wounded sound leaves her. “How were they having sex?”

I have no idea what she means, given she knows all about the birds and the bees.

“I don’t—”

“Was it slow and gentle? Was he saying stuff to her? What position were they in?”

Once again, these are questions I don’t want to fucking answer.

But she needs me to. Because her shithead boyfriend won’t.

“It wasn’t slow. He...” No. Fuck this. She’s forcing me to become a goddamn terrorist. I’m done. “Sky—”

“Tell me!” she screams.

“He mentioned something about her being a slut and it was doggy style,” I snarl. “There. Are you fucking happy?”

A guttural sound pierces my ears, and she collapses on the floor in a fit of sobs.

Fuck.

The muscles in my chest draw tight as I rise to my feet, pick her up, and place her in my bed.

There’s nothing I can say or do to make any of this better and I fucking hate it.

Josh is a lying, cheating bastard who doesn’t deserve someone like her.

I wrap my arms around her waist, and she burrows her head against my chest, soaking my skin with her tears. “I...fuck. I’m sorry, Sky.”

I’m sorry you’re hurting.

I’m sorry I can’t fix it.

I’m sorry I didn’t meet you before he did...because I’d never break your heart.

“Tighter,” she chokes out. “Hold me tighter.”

Chapter 31

SKYLAR



There are bad days, and then there are days that are so brutal you want to bash your head in with a hammer so you can put a stop to it.

Today is one of those days.

Not only did I find out that my aunt's cancer was nonresponsive to treatment, but it spread.

She'll be starting hospice care tomorrow.

As if that wasn't terrible enough, now I'm fighting with my boyfriend because he's a lying, cheating douchebag.

"I didn't fuck her!" Josh screams for the tenth time in five minutes.

Liar.

The fact Josh keeps denying it only makes me that much angrier.

Crazy thing is, he's so convincing that if all I had to go on was my hunch, I'd believe him.

However, *Memphis* told me.

That combined with his responses to my questions—and my intuition—is all I need to know.

"Your refusal to admit it only further proves why we need to break up."

Circling his bedroom, he pulls at his hair. "Fucking hell. You're acting

crazy, Skylar. *Why* would I cheat on you?”

I don't know.

Actually, I do.

Because I cheated, too.

It would be wrong—and hypocritical—of me to stand here ripping into him about being unfaithful when I've been far from a saint myself.

Perhaps if I come clean about my transgressions, he'll do the same and we can talk about our problems, make some changes, and grow together instead of growing apart.

Because our issue isn't love—God knows we love each other—it's that we're no longer the same people we were at thirteen. Maybe what we needed from one another back then isn't what we need now.

“I kissed someone...twice.” Wincing, I swallow hard. “Actually, the second time went a little beyond kissing.”

Shock mars his face and he stumbles back. “What do you mean you kissed someone?” Indignation colors his features. “You cheated on *me*?”

Nope. I refuse to let him set up shop on this moral high ground when he can't even manage to tell me the truth.

“Are you freaking kidding me? You cheated, too. Only unlike me, you had sex with someone else.”

Crossing his arms, he stares me down. “Who the fuck did you kiss?”

A lump of anxiety rises in my throat.

On second thought, what I did was worse because of *who* it was with.

My heart twists with sorrow. This is going to kill him. *So fucking much.*

About as much as hearing that he fucked another girl killed me.

“Look me in the eyes and admit you cheated. Then I'll tell you.”

It's only fair. Once he confesses, so will I. Then we can start the process of repairing the mess we created.

Build a stronger foundation.

Only that doesn't happen because Josh grinds out, "I didn't cheat."

Disappointment courses through me, followed by a swell of despair.

I was hoping we'd come out of this stronger, but there's no way we can when he refuses to take the first step.

It's clear that we not only want different things but that we *value* different things.

"Since you're incapable of being honest with me, I'm under no obligation to tell you shit."

A deep frown twists his lips, and he reaches for me. "Skylar."

I back away. "I *know* what you did."

"You don't know anything about what I do!" he shouts so loud I jump. "This is the first conversation we've had in weeks." Sadness seeps into his tone. "The first time I've seen you for more than five minutes in God only knows how long."

Guilt is a heavy brick in my stomach. Between my aunt, studying for finals, and working for Mrs. Landrum, we haven't spent a lot of time together. Our relationship was always my first priority, but the last few months, it's been placed on the back burner.

It's why I was so excited for him to take me to prom.

I wanted to spend the night having fun. *Reconnecting.*

"You could have seen me at prom."

"I'm sorry, baby. I was hanging out with my friends, and I lost track of time." He shrugs helplessly. "Then we got into the accident."

An accident that never would have happened if I had been his priority that night.

I don't know how to fix this, but I do know neither of us is happy with the current state of our relationship. Because if we were? Josh would have taken

me to prom instead of getting high and fucking his new *friend*.

And I wouldn't have let Memphis kiss me that day at the creek.

"All the more reason we should take a break."

A pang of anguish hits me square in the chest. It's so hard telling the person who's been the biggest part of your life for years—the person you've *loved* since you were thirteen—that you need space so you can figure out if he's still your soul mate.

But something has to give because we can't keep going on like we have been.

"We've been together for so long." Tears threaten to spill over as I continue, but I stand my ground. "And even though we love each other, we want different things. I think we need to take some time apart to figure out what those things are. Maybe there's something better for us out there, and we're not finding it because we're in each other's way."

Outrage crosses his features, and he grips my arm so hard I flinch. "There's *nothing* better than you, Skylar."

I want to believe he truly feels that way, but his actions prove otherwise.

"Then why did you cheat?"

Cupping my face, he brings our foreheads together. "I didn't, baby. I swear."

Once again, he looks me right in the eyes.

And *lies*.

Disgusted, I remove his hands and walk toward the door.

"You're making a mistake," he calls out.

"No, *you* are." Gripping the knob, I glance over my shoulder. "You may think that not owning up to what you did is saving us, but it's not."

It's destroying us.

Chapter 32

MEMPHIS



“I give you a lot of credit, man,” the guy injecting ink into my skin says. “Not only did you sit through three of these babies today, you barely moved.”

That’s because I don’t want him to fuck my shit up.

I’ve been wanting these tattoos for over five years now. I actually had an appointment scheduled for my eighteenth birthday, but Archie and Valerie begged me to wait until I graduated high school.

Which I did...this morning.

They were hoping the extra time would deter me altogether, but the opposite happened.

Instead of getting two. I ended up with three. *For now.*

“A lot of clients tap out when it comes to rib cage tats,” Todd continues.

So I’ve heard. Truth be told, I expected it to hurt a lot more.

Then again, blocking out pain is my strong suit.

“Son of a bitch!” Josh screams from the chair across the room. “I need a break.”

While it’s taken me a little over seven hours to get three tattoos, it’s taken

Josh over seven to get one. On account of him spending more time out of the chair than in it.

His tattoo artist and mine exchange an annoyed glance. “You’re almost done, tough guy. Think you can power through for another minute so I can put the finishing touches on it?”

There’s a long sigh. “I guess.”

Truth be told, I’m surprised he’s handling it so well, given his aversion to blood, cuts, and scars.

“You’re all done,” the guy tells him.

“Sweet.”

A moment later, I hear footsteps approach. “What do you think?”

I think he’ll have to wait. I’ve lied still in this damn chair for what feels like a goddamn eternity, but I’m on the home stretch.

Taking mercy on me, Todd says, “We’ll be finished in another five.” His lips twitch. “Trust me, man. You’re gonna want to see that shit.”

Approximately five minutes later, I’m staring at the large *welcome mat* on Josh’s groin.

While I think it’s funny in a—*I can’t believe this dumbass has a welcome mat tattooed above his dick*—kind of way, something tells me Skylar won’t find it nearly as comical.

For the past week and a half, she’s been forcing me to listen to a nonstop litany of all-men-suck songs while eating cobbler and fried chicken on the floor of my bedroom.

The food, I don’t mind, but if I have to hear “Before he Cheats” by Carrie Underwood one more fucking time, I’m going to take a *Louisville Slugger* to both my ears.

And Josh’s nuts since he’s the cause of all these woman-scorned meltdowns I’ve had to endure.

“What?” he says, admiring his new tattoo. “It’s polite *and* classy.”

I simply shake my head. The fucker is helpless. “Good luck getting her back now.”

Although the odds of that happening are growing slimmer and slimmer. I didn’t think Sky would last more than twenty-four hours without caving, but—breakup breakdowns aside—the girl is a lot stronger than I gave her credit for.

Josh, on the other hand, unravels at the mere mention of her.

“I don’t get it.” Sulking, he leans against the wall. “How the hell could she cheat on *me*?” Anger shades his features and he slaps his chest. “Everyone in town knows she’s mine and it’s hands-off without my say-so. What sheisty motherfucker had the balls to go behind my back and kiss my girl?”

I glance down at the lyrics from my favorite Jimi Hendrix song inked on my rib cage.

Lyrics about kissing the sky.

Skylar didn’t tell him for a reason, though, so I’m not about to blow our cover.

“Best believe I’ll handle him once I find out,” Josh prattles on. “The asshole better get his affairs in order because he’s a dead man.”

It takes a staggering amount of willpower not to laugh. *I’d like to see him try.*

He opens his mouth to say something else, but my tattoo artist gives me the rundown on aftercare.

After tipping him generously for taking up his entire afternoon and most of his evening, we head out of the shop.

“It’s such bullshit,” Josh says as we get into my truck.

I pull out a cigarette and light it. “What is?”

He looks at me like I sprouted another head. “Skylar kissing another guy.”

“I think you should be focusing on what *you* did wrong.”

Feigning innocence, he brings a joint to his lips. “Like what?”

I peel out of the parking lot. “Gee, I don’t know. How about sticking your dick in another chick?”

“Damn it, Memph. I didn’t fuck her.”

Leveling him with a look, I take a long drag of my cigarette. “Don’t bullshit a bullshitter, motherfucker.”

“Holly came on to me,” he utters a moment later. “What was I supposed to do?”

Easy. “Keep your *welcome mat* in your pants.”

“It was a mistake,” he exclaims. “And it only happened one time.”

I don’t believe that for a second. However, I have no way of verifying it since I only caught him in the act once, so I ask him a follow-up question. One I already know the answer to.

“Did you tell her that?”

According to Sky, he flat out denied it multiple times.

But even though she could have told Josh it was me who outed him...she didn’t.

She said it was because we were friends, and she didn’t want to put me in a bad position since I’m his brother.

I didn’t know what the fuck to say to that, but I knew what it meant.

I can trust her.

Josh shakes his head emphatically. “Hell no. I ain’t stupid.”

No, he’s not.

Losing a girl like Skylar confirms he’s a few levels *below* stupid.

She told me she would have been willing to work it out if he was honest, so I’m genuinely curious how he thinks continuously lying to her is the best course of action here.

“Why would coming clean make you stupid?”

He takes a long pull off his joint. “Because when we do get back together, she won’t trust me. She’ll be all—*let me see your phone*. And—*where are you going?* For the rest of my life.”

I’m about to tip him off about not using his birth date as a passcode—given that’s how she was able to go through *mine*—but fuck him.

“I love the girl, Memphis, but no way in hell am I putting up with that bullshit. I just need to let it rock for another week. Then she’ll come to her senses, stop acting crazy, and apologize for not trusting me.”

For fuck’s sake. His brand of logic makes it clear that the only *crazy* person in their relationship is him.

Chuckling my cigarette out the window, I make a sharp left onto our block. “She *shouldn’t* trust you, shithead. You cheated on her.”

“She cheated on me, too.” He folds his arms across his chest. “Stop acting like she’s innocent in all this.”

She may not be innocent, but at least she’s not manipulating him because she doesn’t want to deal with the consequences of her actions.

I pull up the driveway. “In that case, I think Skylar’s right. You guys should take a break. You do your thing and let her do hers.”

“Yeah, for now.” He opens the door and hops out. “But mark my words, she’ll come crawling back. Because in the end, she’ll always choose me.”

Not this time.

Chapter 33

MEMPHIS



I put my tools away in the storage closet and head into the kitchen. “Bathroom faucet is fixed. You almost ready to go?”

Skylar doesn’t look up from her phone. “In a minute. I’m still prepping stuff for the week.”

I take in the plethora of vegetables scattered across the marble island.

“It might go faster if you put your phone down.”

A tiny wrinkle forms between her eyebrows. “Can’t. I’m not finished getting intel. The only things I know so far is that she’s a year older than us, and she goes to the community college a few towns over.” Immersed, she slides her finger across the screen. “Well, that and she has a younger brother named Billy. He’s five and the cutest little thing with these adorable chubby cheeks.”

I’m beginning to wonder if I zoned out at some point because I don’t follow.

“Who the hell are you talking about?”

She gives me a look like I haven’t been paying attention. “Holly.”

Ah.

Although I'm not sure how she found out all this shit about her. As far as I know, Skylar and Josh haven't talked much aside from the occasional "How are you?" text from Josh.

And by occasional? I mean every fucking day.

Evidently, he doesn't understand the meaning of *break*.

Neither does Skylar because here she is...fixating on Holly.

"How do you know all this?"

She places her phone down. "I looked for Big Joe and Big Moe on social media. I had a feeling they'd tag her in a post, and I was right."

I try to tamp down my annoyance, but it bleeds out anyway. "Why are you playing detective?"

The last thing she should be doing is gathering *intel* on the chick Josh cheated on her with. What the fuck is the point?

Glancing down, she picks at the frayed ends of her tiny denim shorts. "Holly's taller, thinner, and has way bigger boobs." Her shoulders lift in a shrug. "I guess I couldn't help wondering what else she has that I don't."

And there it is.

"Ridiculous."

She blinks. "What is?"

"You. You told Josh you wanted a break, and here you are two weeks later, still *obsessing* over him."

She glares at me. "Not him. Her."

I laugh, but there's no humor. "Same shit."

Picking up the knife, she begins chopping carrots...with so much aggression, orange bits go flying.

"When do you leave for Berkeley?"

Reaching over, I pluck one of the survivors off the cutting board and pop it

into my mouth. “Hoping to get rid of me?”

“No.” Her chopping eases to something a little less hostile. “Just wondering.”

It’s only the beginning of June, but August will be here before I know it.

“Third week of August.”

A tiny sliver of a smile peeks out. “So, you’re gonna be around this summer?”

“Yeah.” I lean in. “Why?”

We haven’t hooked up since prom two weeks ago, and it’s probably in our best interests that it doesn’t happen again.

Not only have we settled into this strange *friendship*, but she’s going through a breakup and I’m...leaving.

However, those reasons don’t erase the undeniable attraction between us.

And to think that I once overheard her telling Josh that I wasn’t her type and she thought I was a freak.

A freak who makes her blush apparently.

Our eyes lock and she visibly swallows. “Just wondering.”

“You’ve been doing that a lot lately.”

“What?”

Slanting my head, I inch a little closer. “Wondering about me.”

Her breath hitches and her gaze drops to my mouth.

I could give her what I know she wants and kiss her, but I won’t.

Her stalking Holly on social media proves she’s still not over Josh and she won’t be for a while.

I refuse to be her second choice.

Reaching over, I pluck another carrot off the board. “Come on. It’s getting late.”

Disappointment flickers in her eyes briefly. “Right.” She diverts her

attention to the window above the kitchen sink. “Actually, maybe we should hang out for a bit. It’s raining cats and dogs out there.”

“Welcome to Tennessee, sweetheart. It rains here all the time.”

Swiping her phone off the island, she holds it up. “There are flood warnings.”

No surprise. When it rains this much, the rivers and creeks in town tend to overflow into the streets.

I’m not worried, though. I bought a pickup truck for a reason.

“It’s not a big deal. Just a little rain.”

Her chin lifts in defiance. “I really think we should stay.”

Christ. Usually, I find her stubborn streak adorable, but not right now.

Right now, I want to get home, take a hot shower, and pass the fuck out.

“I have a truck. We’ll be fine.”



Annoyance flares in my gut as I stare at the orange sign with the words: *Road Closed*.

In my peripheral, I see Skylar’s lips quirk. “How are you gonna get through this, *Mr. I Have a Truck We’ll Be Fine?*”

I grit my teeth. “I would have if they didn’t close the damn road.”

Turning around, I head in the direction of Mrs. Landrum’s house. “If you weren’t so busy playing detective, we could have been home by now.”

Her face scrunches as I veer down the street. “Unless you’re a psychic with a fantastic crystal ball, you have no way of knowing that.” Those hazel eyes

sharpen. “But since we’re placing blame, if *you* had bothered to listen to me, we wouldn’t be driving back to Mrs. Landrum’s right now...since we’d already be there.”

I hate when she’s right.

Grinding my molars, I make a right at the stop sign. “Quit being a brat.”

Outrage illuminates her pretty face. “I think what you really meant to say was—I’m sorry, Sky. I never should have doubted you, and should we ever find ourselves in a similar situation, I’ll be sure to take your advice because you’re an intelligent, competent, and remarkable young woman.” Steepling her fingers in her lap, she squares her shoulders, composing herself. “It’s okay, Memphis. We all make mistakes. I forgive you.”

A laugh flies out of me. “Christ. You’re something else, you know that?”

She clears her throat. “Let’s try this again, shall we? Repeat after me. I, Memphis Payne.”

I shouldn’t humor her, but I’ve got nothing better to do. “I, Memphis Payne.”

“Offer my sincerest apologies to Miss Skylar Amethyst Meadows for being a misogynistic—”

I stop her right there. “One—I’m not a misogynist. And two—your middle name is *Amethyst*?”

How the hell did I miss that? All this time, I just assumed she didn’t have one.

Her palm finds her chest, and this time, she’s the one who’s laughing... with scorn. “Are you really making fun of my middle name, *Chiron*?”

“Who said I was making fun of you?”

I have to hand it to her, though, she’s got my number.

She levels me with a look. “Memphis.”

“Yes, purple flower child?”

“You’re such an asshole,” she exclaims, but there’s a hint of a grin emerging.

“Whatever you say, *Amethyst*.”

She pokes my shoulder. “Stop making fun of me.”

How could I *not*? For fuck’s sake, her name is Skylar Amethyst Meadows. Between that and the fortune-teller bullshit, there’s no way Sky’s mother wasn’t a tree-hugging hippie.

“Relax. I love your name. It’s really...” I try to keep a straight face but fail. Getting under her skin is not only easy but highly fucking amusing. “Far out and groovy, man.”

She pokes me again. Harder this time. “Shut up, *Chiron*—oh, shit.”

Oh shit is right.

Mrs. Landrum’s block is now closed off, too.

I pin Skylar with a warning glare. “Not a fucking word.”

The *intelligent, competent, and remarkable* young woman wisely clamps her mouth shut.

Turning the truck around for a second time, I head down a less submerged street.

Provided I don’t encounter any more road closures, I know a place we can chill until they open up again.

“Where are we going?” Skylar questions as I turn down another side street.

Thankfully the road leading to the large and very steep hill isn’t shut down yet. “Hold on tight.”

Wide eyed, Skylar shakes her head. “Memphis, no. It’s too wet.”

Dragging my tongue along my bottom lip, I wink. “That’s what she said.”

Skylar rolls her eyes. “I’m being serious.”

“We’ll be fine.”

No way in hell would I risk doing this with her in the car if there was even

a small chance she'd end up hurt.

I hold her gaze for a split second. "Trust me."

Then I step on the gas, gathering enough momentum.

To Skylar's credit, she doesn't freak out as I maneuver the truck up the hill. It starts to slip, but I ease off the throttle and a moment later, we're sailing over the top.

"Told you we'd be fine."

I continue down the dark, winding road, passing a long row of trees.

A few sharp turns later, I steer into a deserted field and cut the engine.

Skylar peers out the passenger window. "What is this place?"

"It's rumored to be an old sanatorium for the criminally insane. Well, before they demolished the building."

"Really?"

"Yeah." I can't resist teasing her again. "Scared?"

"Nah. I like strange and creepy things." She looks me up and down, giving me a thorough once-over that goes straight to my dick. "Clearly."

Touché.

She fixes her gaze out the windshield. "Have you been here before?"

I don't want to lie to her, but I'd like to preserve my tires. "Maybe."

"What kind of answer is *maybe*?"

Here goes nothing.

"I come here when I need to be discreet."

I see the exact moment it hits her because her features twist with outrage. "You took me to a place where you fucked her?"

Since she values honesty so much. "It wouldn't be the first time."

"What are yo—" A small gasp leaves her. "You motherfucker. The creek?" She gives my shoulder a shove. "That's where we had our first kiss."

She says it like *I'm* the guy she's been in a relationship with since she was

thirteen.

But I'm not.

I'm the guy who had to watch her choose him.

"I lied in bed for years listening to you and Josh hook up. You have no room to talk."

That shuts her up.

For about twenty whole seconds.

"Well, it looks like we're gonna be here for a while."

Placing the giant bag she dubs a purse into her lap, she riffles through enough water bottles and snacks to feed a small village.

"What?" she says when she notices my expression.

"Nothing." I glance at my watch. "I'm just wondering when the ark's supposed to show up."

Another eye roll. "It's good to be prepared. Trust me, you'll thank me later."

I grab a pack of cigarettes out of my center console. "Don't hold your breath."

Her stare turns scrutinizing. "Care to make a bet on that?"

Needless to say, she's piqued my curiosity. "I'm listening."

"If you use or consume anything in my purse, then you have to do whatever I want without protest tonight. And if you don't...same goes for me."

Seems easy enough. "Deal." I make an exaggerated show of stretching. "Fuck knows I could use a massage."

She snorts. "Good luck with that because I won't be giving you one."

The girl underestimates my stubborn streak.

And my ability to get what I want at all costs.

Without warning, I snatch her purse.

And dump the contents all over the floorboard of my truck.

“What the hell?” she shrieks.

Shooting her an arrogant smile, I grab a water bottle, crack it open, and take a lengthy sip.

Triumph flashes in her eyes. “Damn, Payne. I knew you’d cave eventually, but I expected you to hold out for longer than five seconds.”

“That wasn’t me caving,” I inform her. “That was me *winning*.”

“How so?”

“You specifically said I couldn’t use or consume anything in your purse.” Giving her a shit-eating grin, I gesture to my water bottle. “This wasn’t.”

“Only because you dumped everything out of it, asshole.” Nostrils flaring, she tosses the snacks back into her tote. “That’s cheating.”

“Nah. That’s called a loophole.” I seize a package of gummy bears from the floor. “Thanks, by the way. These are my favorite.”

Skylar’s so furious she’s turning red. “Yeah, I know. Which is why I knew you’d cave sooner or later, you con artist.”

Her indignation is adorable.

“Loophole detector,” I correct. “But don’t worry, I no longer want a massage.”

“Good, because I won’t be giving you one.” She makes a face like she smells something rotten. “I don’t reward swindlers.”

I shove a handful of gummies into my mouth. “Rules are rules, Sky. Don’t write checks your body can’t cash.”

It’s only when her eyes go big that I realize my choice of words.

“Believe me. My body won’t be *cashing* anything for you.”

I crook a finger, summoning her closer.

Once she leans in, I incline my head until my mouth touches the shell of her ear. “Remember what happened the last time I called your bluff?”

Watching her come—for *me*—is something I'll never forget.

Her voice is hoarse and breathy when she speaks. "What do you want?"

Just one thing.

But I don't want to have to win a bet to get it.

"I'm not sure yet." I pull back. "But I'll let you know when I figure it out."

We fall silent for a few moments...until Skylar can't take it anymore.

"Well, I handled the refreshments. What's the entertainment?"

I flick up a brow. "What kind of entertainment are you looking for?"

I was going for sarcastic, but it comes out like an innuendo.

Because even though us hooking up isn't a good idea given the circumstances, my dick doesn't give a shit.

"That depends." She looks out the windshield again. "It looks like the rain has let up. How long do you think the roads will be closed?"

"Hard to tell. Could be a few hours...or all night."

A little wrinkle forms between her brows. "In that case, we better get comfortable. Do you have a blanket?"

"Yeah. In the back of the truck."

Quicker than I can blink, she opens the door and hops out.

Like a moth to a fucking flame, I follow suit.

By the time I reach her, she already has the flatbed cover halfway off.

"It's not raining anymore," she says before I take over.

"I appreciate the weather report, Captain Obvious."

Pinning me with a look of disdain, she proceeds to spread out the blankets, creating a makeshift bed. "I also have a tampon in my purse if you need it."

A laugh bubbles out of her when I raise my middle finger.

Making herself comfortable, she places the one and only pillow I have under her head and smiles...like a kid at Disneyland.

"What are you doing?"

“Taking advantage of the view.”

I’m not sure what kind of *view* she’s referring to, given the only thing surrounding us is grass. “Of the field?”

“The sky.” She pats the spot next to her. “Join me.”

Seeing as I’ve been humoring her all night, why stop now?

Sidling up beside her, I stare up...at nothing.

“It’s still cloudy.”

“Thanks for the weather report, *Captain Obvious*,” she taunts with an impish crinkle of her nose.

I start to laugh, but her expression turns serious. “It won’t be cloudy forever, Memphis. Eventually we’ll see the stars.”

Christ. We couldn’t be more different.

Even after all she’s been through, Sky’s an eternal optimist, always wanting to believe the best in everyone and hopeful for a positive outcome.

Meanwhile, if someone offers to let me skip ahead of them in line, I can’t help but wonder what the catch is.

But not this girl.

Despite having every reason to never trust anyone again, she somehow still does.

She’s quirky but not in an obnoxious way like most.

Her quirks are nearly imperceptible until you get to know her.

Then you find out she calls shoes *feet prisoners* and cries for bees that sting her...

Because her big heart bleeds for others, even if they aren’t worthy of her empathy.

She’s vulnerable but far from weak.

The girl has survived things that would break even the strongest of people.

She’s feisty but sensitive.

She's candid. *Real*...but safeguards her demons.

I'm not scared of anything in this world.

But Skylar Amethyst Meadows fucking terrifies me.

Yet, as cautious as I am about her, I'm just as equally drawn to her.

I can't help but stare at her, taking in every feature on her face. The first time I saw her in that window, I remember thinking she was perfect.

As if God specifically chose to make her his most flawless canvas.

That still hasn't changed.

Only now I know it's not just her outer appearance because who this girl is on the inside is every bit as beautiful.

Typically I prefer silence, but while ours is always comfortable, tonight it's problematic.

It gives me a glimpse of how it could be between us if things were different.

If she was mine.

My sigh is expansive, designed to make her believe that us lying here looking up at the stars we can't see is boring me.

“What are we supposed to do while we wait for the arrival of this *entertainment?*”

She shoots me a wry smile. “We could play a game.”

Chapter 34

SKYLAR



Memphis eyes me warily. “What kind of game?”

Good Lord. You’d think I just suggested we do the cinnamon challenge or eat Tide pods.

“Truth or dare.”

That brooding demeanor of his doesn’t ease up one bit. “Are we twelve?”

Ha. Given he’s such a people person and all, I’m willing to bet he’s never even played before.

“Don’t knock something you’ve never tried.” I bat my eyelashes. “Who knows, you might like it.”

He affixes his gaze on the night sky. “Doubtful.”

For the love of all that is holy. What the hell is his problem?

Memphis being grumpy isn’t exactly foreign, but tonight he’s even crankier than usual. Which is saying something.

“It’s truth or dare, not Russian roulette.” I poke him in the ribs. “Stop being such a killjoy and play the game.”

He opens his mouth to protest again, but I pull out the big guns and give him some puppy eyes.

He snorts. "That won't work on me."

Challenge accepted.

I escalate my puppy eyes and pout my lips dramatically for good measure.

Mr. That Won't Work On Me folds like a cheap lawn chair.

"Fine. We'll play your stupid game. But only because you're a pain in the ass and it's less of a nuisance to concede than have you make faces at me all night."

Whatever you say, grumpster.

I'll get to the bottom of his foul mood one way or another.

"Great. I'll go first. Truth or dare?"

"Dare."

Shocker. The enigmatic recluse doesn't want to answer any personal questions.

However, all is not lost. I'm going to take this opportunity to make him pay the piper for cheating on our little bet.

"I dare you to give me a foot massage for ten whole glorious minutes."

Those sharp features twist. "Fuck off."

I'm trying not to take offense, but he's acting like I have hobbit feet.

"You have to." I sit up and wiggle my toes, emphasizing my sparkly purple polish. "Besides, I have very cute feet." I peer down at him. "And really, Memphis. It's the least you can do after all the damage you've inflicted on my poor little tootsies."

A vein in his neck flexes. "I haven't done shit to your *poor little tootsies*. It's not my fault you stepped on a nail and got stung by a bee."

That's just semantics. "All of which happened in *your* presence. Fortunately, I'm giving you a chance to make amends."

"Christ." He looks like he's trying his hardest not to laugh. "You sound fucking insane. You know that, right?"

I bring my pointer finger and thumb close together. “Little bit.”

I’m about to resort to puppy faces again when a resigned noise leaves him and he sits up. “Take off your feet prisoners.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice. I quickly undo the ankle straps on my sandals and place them in his waiting lap. “Look who’s getting a massage now.”

“Keep talking shit and it won’t be you. Start the timer.”

Picking up my phone, I do what he says. Only I add an extra minute for my pain and suffering.

I nearly moan when he starts massaging, his strong, adept hands kneading my arch before moving upward. “Yup, right there. The meats.”

“What the hell are *the meats*?”

“You know...” I gesture to the padded area he’s currently rubbing. “The meaty part.”

He stares at me like I’m certifiable. “It’s called *ball*, Sky. As in the *ball* of your foot.”

Leave it to Memphis to know all the technical terms.

“There’s already another part of the male anatomy called *balls*.”

And if he doesn’t get back to work, I may just kick him in his.

“You still have seven minutes left. Chop—” A blissful noise leaves me when he squeezes, applying the perfect amount of pressure. “God, that feels so good. Are you sure you don’t have a secret foot fetish? You’re amazing at this.”

He circles the scar on the bottom of my foot with the pad of his thumb, triggering goose bumps. “I think *you’re* the one with the foot fetish.”

Whatever retort I was conjuring up falls by the wayside when he presses on my arch, working out a knot I wasn’t even aware of.

Closing my eyes, I let my head fall back. “Holy hell, your hands...”

I stop talking as visions of those hands touching *other* parts of my body impale me.

“What about them?” he questions, running one of them up my calf.

I want to feel them on every inch of my skin.

I can't tell him that, though, because us hooking up again *can't* happen.

Josh and I have only been broken up for two weeks and I'm still working through that.

Jumping from one relationship straight into another isn't a good idea. Not that Memphis and I could ever actually date.

Even if this break with Josh turns out to be permanent, they're still brothers. *Family.*

Nothing will ever change that, and God knows I'd never want to cause a rift between them. I know how close they are and how important they are to one another.

Besides, he's leaving soon anyway.

As he should.

A bittersweet feeling fills my chest.

Memphis Payne is destined for greatness.

Staying in this small town with two streetlights and one gas station in the middle of nowhere will only hold him back.

A girl like me will only hold him back.

“They're...” I clear my throat. “Adequate.” Remembering we're supposed to be playing a game, I add, “It's your turn, by the way.”

He switches to my other foot. “Truth or dare?”

I have nothing to hide from him.

“Truth.”

He surveys me long and hard before speaking. “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

That's...a loaded question.

Given my aunt is so sick, there's no way I'm going to college in the fall. Not that I even bothered applying to any since I have no idea what I'd major in.

"I mean, I know what my strengths are and what I love doing," I start as I think this through. "I have a knack for taking care of people and figuring out solutions to their problems." Just not my own. "I'm fairly good at seeing an issue or debate from all angles. I'm also detail oriented and organized." I pin him with a look. "And let's not forget my stellar detective skills." I fiddle with some loose frays at the end of my shorts. "I just don't know how those things would translate into a career. So, to answer your question...I have no idea."

Whereas most kids my age are heading off to college to pursue their aspirations, I'm a bit lost at this stage of my life.

A deep frown mars his face. It's obvious my answer didn't strike a chord with him.

Then again, I'm not surprised. Memphis knows exactly what he's doing with his life, and I have no doubt that his list of goals is miles long and he'll accomplish every single one of them.

It's not that I don't have ambition myself, I just don't have anything to direct it toward like he does.

I haven't found my calling yet.

The thing that makes me think *that's* what I should be doing with my life and causes everything to click into place.

I'm hoping with enough time I'll figure it out, though.

"Sorry to disappoint. Not all of us have it figured out like you do."

I'm being defensive because even though it shouldn't matter, I crave his approval.

Probably because I think the world of him.

Memphis appears lost in deep thought. “I’m not disappointed. I’m...” His voice trails off.

“You’re what?”

His eyes fill with something I can’t quite decipher. “Don’t get stuck here, Sky.”

My lungs restrict. It’s like he just ripped a scab off a wound that hasn’t even materialized yet.

Deep down, I know that’s my destiny.

And the worst part about it is, one day, when I’m forty, I’m going to wake up and hate myself for it.

Not wanting to let on that he hit a nerve, I change the subject. “Truth or dare?”

“Truth,” he replies, shocking the hell out of me.

I have a feeling I won’t be getting many of those out of him tonight, so I better use it wisely.

Memphis Payne has always been an enigma.

A mystery I’m dying to solve.

A puzzle I desperately want to put together.

A code I’m determined to crack.

He’s without a doubt the most interesting—an unfathomable—person I’ve ever met or will meet.

“Why do you hide behind a mask?”

And just like that, he retreats. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

That’s a heaping load of bullshit.

“Yes, you do.” Before he can claim I’m wrong again, I utter, “You always try your hardest to blend in.” Even though he *always* sticks out. “You do what everyone tells you to. You never cause any problems or make waves.

You don't allow yourself to get too worked up, and God knows you never let anyone see you sweat. You also don't show emotions...unless it's anger. *Why?*"

A beeping sound pierces my ears.

He pushes my feet off his lap. "Time's up."

"That right there," I snap as I shut off the alarm. "*That's* the mask. The one that keeps everything surface level and everyone at bay...just the way you like it."

My chest coils when he turns his back to me. Physically shutting me out now.

I shouldn't take it personally since he does it to everyone, but I don't want him to do it with me.

I want more.

Sometimes I can't help but think he does, too.

"You know why I fell in love with Josh?"

I watch the muscles under his black T-shirt tense as I continue.

"We share the same demons, but the only reason I know that is because he wasn't afraid to be vulnerable with me. He knows that no matter what happens between us, I'll always be his safe place to land."

"Why the fuck are you telling me this shit?" he grinds out, his voice low and hostile.

I give him the truth. "Because there are times I get this feeling that you want something from me." *Something his brother has.* "But there's only one way to get it."

I can't do surface level with him.

Carving a place inside the innermost layers of my heart requires being willing to sit in the dark and dive into the deep end.

But while Memphis isn't scared of the dark, he doesn't know how to

swim.

He won't even try.

And I can't risk being with someone who'd let me drown.

Because for all of Josh's faults, that's one thing he'd never do.

"I was scared when the nail went through my foot—not only because it hurt—but I was all alone with a boy I didn't know. However, you told me I could trust you...so I did." I swallow the lump forming in my throat. "But it was a one-sided exchange, Memphis. And I spent the next five years wishing things were different because we could have—"

"I'm good at figuring out what people want from me and giving it to them."

His statement equally confuses and surprises me.

"That's..."

"Sociopathic?" He turns to face me. "You wouldn't be the first person to think that."

I was going to say *unexpected*, but I'm far more interested in where he's going with this.

"What do you mean?"

"According to my former social worker, I have problems processing and expressing emotions." Dark brows furrow. "It's why I love music so much... it conveys everything I'm not able to."

That actually makes a lot of sense. However, I can't help but wonder why it's so hard for him.

What shaped him to be the person he is.

"Did someone hurt you?"

Is he one of us? Because it would explain so much about his behavior. And our connection.

He squeezes the back of his neck. "No one abused me."

“Then—”

“Because I *can't* fucking feel emotions.” His voice drops to a coarse rasp. “I don't like to.”

I'm about to point out that being unable to and not liking to are very different things, but he continues.

“A couple weeks after I was put into the system, I overheard the first social worker I had talking on the phone, discussing my case with someone. She insisted I had antisocial personality disorder given my upbringing, my unwillingness to talk, my issues processing emotions and connecting with others, my lack of empathy, and my lack of remorse for it. I had no idea what it meant, but her next words knocked the wind out of me.”

I sit up straight. “What did she say?”

His chest rises on a deep inhale. “That I'd never get placed into a home, let alone adopted, because no one wanted to deal with a psychopath.” Pain flickers in his orbs. “I didn't want to be placed in the box marked *bad kids* and stuck in a group home forever, so I had no choice but to wear the *mask*, as you call it.” His Adam's apple bobs. “I couldn't change my background and I had no desire to open up, but I knew there were other things I could do. Things that wouldn't label me a problem child. So, that's what I did. I still kept to myself for the most part, but I communicated with adults when necessary. I didn't complain about doing chores. I never mouthed off or caused fights. I just...”

“Gave people what they wanted,” I whisper. “So you could survive.”

I understand that more than he'll ever know.

It's what I did with Shane.

“Yeah. Pretty much.”

A knot of sadness forms in my chest. “I hope that social worker is out of a job.”

Not only was that cruel of her to say, but Memphis couldn't be further from a psychopath.

While not overflowing with empathy, he definitely has some. And he cares about others. Josh, Archie, Valerie...me. There's no way Memphis fakes that.

Not to mention, he's one of the least selfish people I know.

But most importantly? He has the ability to connect with someone.

Right now is proof of that.

Reaching over, I squeeze his hand. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I ended up getting a new one shortly after that and she was better."

Still doesn't mean those callous words didn't impact him.

"You're not a psychopath, Memphis." Guilt stabs behind my breastbone. He heard me call him a freak.

It was a shitty thing for me to say, but after hearing this, I realize just how much it must have hurt him.

"You're not a freak, either." My heart pounds harder the longer I stare at him. "I only said that because I didn't want Josh to know."

Those dark eyes are penetrating. "Know what?"

Here goes nothing.

"That I do have a type." I need to find air, but it's impossible. "Because the only person who could ever be a threat to him...to us...is you."

Memphis's gaze drops to my lips, lingering. "Truth or dare?"

My stomach somersaults. *I'm playing with fire.*

But the spark between us—the heat that engulfs me whenever we're alone—is too potent to ignore.

"Dare."

My breath stills when he inches closer.

“I dare you to let me kiss you.” His lips trail along the shell of my ear, and his voice drops to a seductive rasp. “*Wherever* I want.”

Tiny tingles travel between my thighs. “Okay.”

He cups my cheek, and my eyes flutter closed, eagerly awaiting.

However, a second before our lips touch, he breathes, “*Whenever* I want.”

I barely have time to process what he’s saying before he’s gone.

Memphis definitely has a kink, all right. *Torturing me.*

I want to wipe the cocky grin off his gorgeous face when he lies back down, tucking his arms behind his head. “Your turn.”

He may not be a psychopath, but one thing’s certain. “You’re such an asshole.”

Pouting, I curl up beside him. “Truth or dare?”

The muscles in his throat work. “Truth.”

The fact he’s giving me another one is unexpected. However, I’m grateful he’s permitting me these glimpses behind the mask.

“What does your dream life look like?”

As much as I want to know about his past, knowing how he envisions his future is just as imperative to understanding who he is.

It represents his wants, needs, and values.

What’s most important to him.

A groove in his forehead appears as he stares up at the stars that have emerged.

And then his expression fills with an emotion I’ve never seen from him before.

Happiness.

I know whatever he’s about to divulge is significant.

“Making a living doing what I love.” His mouth curves into an incandescent smile that grips my heart. “A nice house, wife, five kids—”

“Five?” I interject.

That’s almost half a basketball team.

That smile deepens, lighting up his entire face. “At *least*.” Dark brows knitting, his demeanor turns serious. “Family has always been something I’ve wanted, so having kids is important to me.”

I can tell. He gets that same glimmer in his eye whenever he talks about music.

For the second time tonight, he’s managed to shock me.

“I wasn’t expecting that.”

“I know it’s weird since I’m still young, but you asked what my dream life was...and that’s the truth.” He scans every inch of my face, studying me intently. “What about you?”

“I can’t have kids,” I blurt before I can stop myself.

An uneasy weight abrades my chest...like I’ve been thrown overboard with a hundred-pound brick tied to my ankle. “I had an infection when I was younger, but it went untreated for too long and caused some damage.”

I didn’t even know I was infertile until two years ago when I made an appointment with a local gynecologist for birth control.

I’ll never forget the moment he declared I didn’t need it because there was a greater chance of *him* conceiving a baby than me.

Then he quickly rattled off something about having scarring on my fallopian tubes.

The worst he’d ever seen.

I wasn’t sure how to feel. I was only sixteen and even though I was there to prevent having a baby, it didn’t mean that I *never* wanted kids.

Although I wasn’t positive that I did want them, either.

In the end it didn’t matter. The choice was taken from me.

It was yet another thing Shane stole.

Josh was happy about the news, though. He's vehement about not having children.

Too much responsibility.

Too afraid of screwing them up because of his demons.

Despite knowing that, I was still upset when I told him. *Feeling inadequate and ashamed.*

However, he pulled me into his arms and said the fact I couldn't have any was further proof that we were soul mates.

I was just happy I didn't disappoint him.

We live in a small Southern town. Having babies is not only expected around these parts but encouraged.

"Sky?"

Memphis's voice rips me from my thoughts. I meet his stare and the sadness—*disappointment*—in his expression hits me square in the gut.

"I'm sorry."

While I appreciate his sympathy, I don't want this to turn into a pity party.

There's no use crying about something that isn't meant to be.

I'm honestly over it anyway.

"It is what it is." Clearing my throat, I switch gears. "You asked me a question out of turn, though. Which means I get to hit you with a double whammy now."

It's clear he doesn't like this one bit. "What kind of double whammy?"

"You don't get to choose whether your next one is truth or dare. I do."

"Let me guess," he drawls. "You're choosing truth."

Heck yeah, I am. "Duh."

A disgruntled sound leaves him. "Go ahead."

I thought uncovering his secrets would diminish the air of mystery surrounding him and lessen my attraction.

However, the more I discover about Memphis, the more fascinating he becomes.

The deeper I want to dive.

“Tell me what happened with your mom and how you ended up in foster care.”

Instantly, he slams on the brakes. “I already told you. She was an addict. The end.”

The warning in his tone is unmistakable. *Back the fuck off.*

But I can't.

Tonight he's exposing parts of himself I've never seen, and I have no idea when—or if—it will ever happen again.

But even more than that, I want him to know he can confide in me.

That regardless of what may or may not happen between us, I'll always be here for him.

“You know the worst thing I've ever been through, Memphis.”

I'm not trying to make him feel bad or manipulate him. I just want him to realize that no matter what he tells me, I won't run away and hide.

I won't let him drown.

He just needs to be willing to dive into the deep end with me.

A muscle in his jaw bunches and if looks could kill...I'd be in a coffin already.

“Please.”

You can trust me.

I don't know what he sees in my expression, but whatever it is has him conceding.

“Remember how I told you I'm good at figuring out what people want and giving it to them?”

I'm too afraid to speak and ruin this, so I just nod.

“Well, there’s a reason for that.” There’s a distinctive lilt in his deep voice. *Pain*. “I knew from an early age that she didn’t want me around.”

His forehead creases and he stares down at the blanket. “So...that’s what I did. I didn’t bother her. Didn’t ask for anything.” Those broad shoulders drop with what seems like the weight of the world. “I disappeared...just like she wanted me to.”

Oh god. My heart. It’s coming apart at the seams and splintering right down the middle for him.

No wonder he’s so withdrawn and prefers isolation. *It’s all he knows*.

I force myself to speak through the lump of emotion welling in my throat. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be.” He releases a ragged breath. “She wanted drugs more than she wanted a son. Fucking ironic, given drugs are the reason I’m here.”

“What do you mean?”

“She used to have men—some drug dealers, some not—come to the apartment a lot. I made myself scarce, but there were times it was so loud I heard them over the music I was listening to. After they left, she’d be different...*high*.” He snorts with disgust. “There were even a few times she fucked our piece-of-shit landlord so he wouldn’t evict us.”

I’m speechless as I take all this in.

“Needless to say, getting knocked up wasn’t part of the plan. I used to wonder why she didn’t give me away, but I figured it out once I got a little older.”

When I give him a questioning look, he says, “She’d use me to get those assholes to give her extra cash. *Come on, baby. I’m a single mom. Or—can you give me another twenty, sexy? I really need it for my kid. Funny, huh?* She had no problem remembering I fucking existed when it suited her.”

He spits the last sentence out like it’s rancid and I can’t blame him.

Like Memphis, I have no idea who my father is, but unlike him, at least I know my mom wanted me. It just sucks that she was around for such a short time, and the only two memories I have of her are quick flashes that seem to fade more and more with time.

The first one is me rubbing her back when she was throwing up because she was sick from chemo.

And the other...is right before she died.

When she made me promise her I'd be a good girl for my aunt.

And Shane.

"That's..." My stomach churns. "Awful."

He averts his gaze. "I could have had it a lot worse."

I suppose that's one way of looking at it. Although it sounds like it was pretty bad already.

But since he's choosing to look on the bright side of all this, Memphis might still be able to repair his relationship with her. She sounds terrible, but maybe she's clean now and regrets everything.

I mean, how could she not? Her son is amazing. She's seriously missing out.

"Has she ever contacted you?"

A bitter noise leaves him. "Hard to contact people from the grave."

The hope in my chest deflates. "Oh."

I probably should have presumed that was the case given he talks about her in the past tense. Although I figured that might be due to him being in foster care.

"Did you end up in the system before or after she passed?"

He shrugs. "Don't remember."

That doesn't make sense. If he has memories of her fucking drug dealers and landlords, then surely he should have some kind of inkling about how he

ended up in foster care.

Then again, I've already learned my lesson about assuming anything when it comes to Memphis.

"How old were you when she died?"

He keeps his expression aloof and his tone indifferent, but I don't miss the way his right hand clenches. "Don't remember."

There's no way he wouldn't know *that*. "Memphis."

I'd rather him say he doesn't want to tell me than lie straight to my face.

"Please don't lie—"

"I'm not," he grinds out. "Not exactly. I don't..." There's a hint of vulnerability seeping out, but then just as quickly, it's gone. "There are some parts I don't remember."

I draw a deep breath as understanding dawns.

Most of the time, I don't remember Shane's abuse because as soon as I realized I could detach myself during...that's what I did.

It's what makes my flashbacks so excruciating.

I don't want to remember the trauma and I prefer to block out any thoughts of Shane altogether, but I don't always get that choice.

And the worst part about it is, there's no warning. No rhyme or reason.

One moment I'll be fine. For days, weeks, sometimes even months at a time...and then out of nowhere.

I have no control. *Just like when he was touching me.*

"I get it," I whisper. "There are some things I don't remember, either." I wring my hands, hoping he doesn't hate me for prying. "Can you share what you do?"

His head snaps up like a predatory animal about to strike.

"Only if you want to," I quickly add. "If not, I understand."

Anguish shades his features and I realize I'm pushing him too hard, too

fast. What he's shared with me tonight is far more than I ever expected. "I'm sor—"

"It was my seventh birthday." He squeezes his eyes shut. "I'd been watching kids—kids my age—get on the school bus from our living room window for months. I wanted to join them...but I couldn't."

His nostrils flare. "It was public school, for fuck's sake, so it's not like she had to pay for it. All she had to do was bring me up there and talk to someone about enrolling me, but things—*drugs*—kept getting in the way." He shrugs helplessly. "I finally had enough. Enough of her never choosing me. Enough of making myself disappear so she'd be happy. Enough of her not giving a shit when I'd do just about anything for her. I ended up snapping one day."

Nerves bunch in my stomach. "Snapping how?"

"I told her I'd run away and tell the police she was a bad mom. That I hated her." A deep frown mars his face. "I didn't mean it. I just wanted to scare her, but it didn't work."

The lump in my throat tightens and I silently implore him to keep going.

"Instead, she pointed to the front door, screamed she didn't want me...and told me to get out and never come back."

Anger wars with the sorrow burning in my chest. "Did you leave?"

He shakes his head. "No. I went into my room—a closet with a few blankets on the ground—and cried like a little bitch for hours."

His pain is so tangible my vision blurs. "Memphis."

"By the time I came out, it was nighttime."

The color drains from his face, and his body goes rigid. When he speaks, his voice is devoid of emotion. *Like he's on autopilot.*

"I found her on the kitchen floor with a needle near her arm. I called out, 'Mom' a few times, but she kept staring at the ceiling...not even blinking. I shook her...and she felt cold and stiff. The last thing I remember is squeezing

her hand and telling her I was sorry.”

Both his vacant expression and what he’s sharing rip me to shreds.

“According to my social worker, the landlord walked in and found me four days later...still clutching her hand. He thought we were both dead when he called the police, but then he saw me blink. Evidently, I didn’t talk for an entire week after. When I finally did, it was because I heard music playing and asked someone to turn the volume up.” A small smile touches his lips. “Come as You Are” by Nirvana.”

A mass of emotions collide within my chest—sorrow, heartache, despair. The tears I was trying to hold back spill over.

My heart is no longer splintering. It’s breaking into a thousand pieces.

And each one of those broken pieces allows me to see the real him.

The little boy who was made to feel unwanted and unloved.

“Everyone thinks it’s about heroin,” he continues, and it takes me a second to realize he’s still talking about the song. “But Cobain said it was about what people were supposed to act like.”

The need to hold him—to comfort him—is so strong my body trembles with it.

“He used a Strat and a Mustang to record the entire album. But he usually played the Jaguar whenever he performed the song live—”

I throw my arms around him.

A small tremor vibrates his frame. “I shouldn’t have said those things to her.”

He told me he wasn’t abused earlier, but he was wrong.

I grab his face, forcing him to look at me. “You were a little boy being neglected by the person you needed most. You had every right to be upset and angry with her.” My heart folds in on itself. “It wasn’t your fault, Memphis. The path she was going down...it was bound to happen sooner or

later.”

I shouldn't speak ill of the dead, especially when I didn't know her when she was living, but it's hard to muster up any sympathy for her.

Not when I'm witnessing the tragedy she caused.

“She might still be here if it wasn't for me.”

The walls of my chest compress. As if what that woman put Memphis through wasn't enough, he's riddled with guilt over her death.

I contemplate my next words carefully, debating whether or not I should say them.

In the end, I decide not to—because while pointing out that she didn't miraculously decide to grow a conscience after his outburst might ease his guilt—it will undoubtedly make him feel even more unwanted.

I can't stand the thought of Memphis blaming himself for something that isn't his fault, though.

Then again, maybe in a sick, twisted way, convincing himself that she intentionally overdosed means she did care about him...and believing that is better than the alternative.

Brows pulling together, he sweeps the pad of his thumb along my wet cheek. “Why are you crying?”

Taking his free hand, I place it on my chest...right over the organ hammering out a painful rhythm for him. “Because you broke my heart.”

Then crawled over the shattered pieces...and invaded all my layers.

Carving himself a permanent place inside.

Next to someone else.

“I'm thankful she gave birth to you, but she didn't deserve you. And I know it's hard for you to believe, but it wasn't your fault—”

“Truth or dare?”

The abrupt request throws me. “Huh?”

“Truth or dare?” he repeats, his tone urgent.

My breath catches when his fingers caress my jaw.

We’ve been walking on a tightrope, but we’re losing our balance.

And now we only have two choices.

Keep trying to fight the gravitational pull between us...

Or fall.

“Dare.”

The second his lips are on mine, I plummet.

His tongue prods the seam of my lips, coaxing me to open up. When I do, the kiss goes from urgent to reckless.

In the blink of an eye, I’m lying on my back and he’s on top of me, our tongues mingling as we both fight for air.

“Fuck.” Without warning, he pries his mouth away. The sight of those beautiful lips swollen from my kisses sends a fresh wave of desire through me. “That doesn’t count.”

“What do you mean?”

“Me kissing you wherever and whenever I want. That one didn’t count. Neither does this.”

A slow tingle courses through me when his lips find mine again.

“Why not?”

Thrusting his fingers through my hair, he nibbles my bottom lip. “You’re breaking the rules.”

For someone who didn’t want to even play the game, he’s sure being a stickler.

“Fine. Truth or dare?”

His lips bend. “Dare.”

Oh, this bastard.

I’m about to *dare* him to shut up and kiss me again when another thought

occurs to me.

Memphis and Josh got tattoos right after graduation. Something I only know thanks to Josh posting the absurd—and quite frankly, *insolent*—welcome mat he now has above his dick on Instagram.

However, when I asked Memphis to show me his, he outright refused without any explanation. So far, I've only been able to see what appears to be the top of a guitar on his upper back and a quick peek of what looks like music notes on his bicep.

I don't understand why he's being so secretive, but I intend to find out.

"Take off your shirt." Heat blazes in his eyes...until my next words. "And show me your tattoos."

"You're a pain in the ass," he grumbles as he rolls off me.

Turning, so his back is facing me, he pulls it over his head in one fluid motion.

My eyes zero in on the guitar etched in bold black ink. I sit up, wanting a closer look. It starts between his shoulder blades and continues down his back. Although intricate and detailed, it's not flashy. Then again, *flashy* isn't Memphis's style.

This suits him perfectly. Eye-catching without being gaudy.

I follow the lines with the tip of my finger. It's an exact replica of the one he has, minus one element. "Your guitar is purple."

"Color fades faster," he informs me gruffly. "It's more high maintenance."

That makes sense. High maintenance isn't his style either.

I walk my fingers up his broad back and across his shoulders, stopping when I reach the row of music notes on his right bicep. Just like the guitar, they're also in black ink. It's a simple design but in a refined way rather than boring.

"What song is it?" I ask, even though I have a feeling I already know.

My prediction is confirmed when he replies, “Come as You Are.”

Without warning, he reaches for his shirt. “Show’s over.”

I’m about to protest when I catch another flash of ink in my peripheral.
“Not so fast. What’s that?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t insult my intelligence. Or my eyesight.”

A resigned sigh passes his lips. And then he turns and throws his T-shirt at me.

My mouth goes dry as I take in his lean stomach and the sharp V that disappears beneath his jeans.

Good God in heaven, I want to lick it.

Focus, Skylar.

Remembering I’m supposed to be checking out his tattoo and not his body, I shift my attention to the ink in question.

Air gets trapped in my lungs as I peer down at the lyric from Purple Haze scrawled in elegant black cursive on the left side of his rib cage.

The one about kissing the sky.

I can’t help but touch it. “That’s my song.”

Amusement lights his face. “It’s *Hendrix’s* song.”

My heart beats like a drum as I trace it with my finger. “Out of all the lines you could have gone with...you chose the one with my name.”

My name...that’s etched in vibrant purple. A sharp contrast to all the black.

“There are only twelve verses,” he points out.

“It’s my name.”

“It’s my *favorite song.*”

I pin him with a defiant glare. “I’m your favorite person.”

A smirk pulls at the corner of his mouth. “That so?”

“Tell me I’m not.”

He goes quiet and I go back to tracing my name. “I think you might be mine.”

The damage—all the *ugliness* inside me—vanishes whenever we’re together...and in its place is something different.

Something beautiful. *Pure.*

Even when we’re arguing or he’s relentlessly teasing me, there’s still nowhere else I’d rather be than with him.

It scares the shit out of me.

“Has he seen this?”

“He was there when I got it.”

“Did he say anything about it?”

Did he suspect something?

Those eyes laser into mine. “No.”

Then again, why would he? It’s just a song.

Because that’s all I can ever be to him. *A secret.*

Shadows pass over his sharp features, and I feel his skin contract under my touch. “You have two seconds to decide, Sky.”

“Decide what?”

Expression darkening, he leans in. “Whether you want to keep talking about him all night.” His hand wraps around the back of my neck. “Or let me do this.”

The second his mouth is on mine, I ignite, snaking my arms around him and meeting the fervent slides of his tongue with eager ones of my own.

His fingers bite into my hip and I dig my nails into his scalp, both of us seeking more.

Securing an arm around my waist, he reclines until I’m lying on top of him.

White-hot arousal punches through me, and I rub myself against the prominent erection forming inside his jeans.

“Fuck.”

A breathless noise leaves me as he grabs my hips and rolls us over, pinning me underneath him.

A low, growly sound rumbles in his chest and he grinds against me. It’s a good thing we’re lying down because my brain scrambles and my belly clenches with need.

“I’m cashing in on that dare now.”

His voice is a husky rasp that lands straight between my thighs.

I run my hands up and down his bare back, loving the way his muscles contract under my touch. “Where else do you want to kiss me?”

His lips graze my ear and what he says next has my entire body breaking out in shivers. “Everywhere.”

My eyes flutter closed as he kisses down my jaw.

But then he’s pulling away. “Sky?”

The serious note in his tone has me on high alert. “What’s wrong?”

Dark eyes hold mine. His expression is so earnest it grips my heart. “I need you to know that if you ever tell me to stop, I will.”

I freeze, processing his words.

No one’s ever said that to me before.

Every guy who’s touched me has treated my body like it was something to use.

As though it were theirs to take whatever they wanted from it.

I draw in a tattered breath.

Memphis didn’t have to say it. I’ve known I was safe with him ever since he took that nail out of my foot.

But the fact he did means more than he’ll ever know.

“I’ll never tell you to stop.”

I don’t think there will ever come a time when I won’t want his hands and lips all over me.

“Good. Because I’m going to make you come for me again.” Sharp teeth graze the column of my throat. “Only this time, I *will* be touching you.”

My nipples turn to glass when one of his hands slips under my shirt, moving the fabric up my torso.

It’s a struggle to catch my breath as he grips the sides of my waist, his thumbs grazing the skin directly under my bra.

I melt, arching into him as those calloused fingers brand me.

“Your clothes are in my way.” His head moves south, settling between my breasts. His breath comes out in hot pants against the thin material of my top. “I need them gone.”

Oh god.

My heart thrums in my ears as I lift my arms and he slips it over my head.

Nerves bunch in my belly when he reaches for my bra next. I quickly divert his attention by popping open the button of my denim cutoffs.

It works like a charm because Memphis takes over, lowering the zipper and shoving them down my hips.

I’m having serious regrets regarding my choice of undergarments. A pair of white cotton bikini underwear and an equally plain white cotton bra.

A bra he’s eyeing with interest again.

However, the moment he cups one of my breasts...I cringe.

“Too rough?”

I shake my head. “No.”

Sadly, it feels really good.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

Everything.

He raises an eyebrow in question. “Sky.”

“You don’t have to...you know.” I gesture to my chest. “It’s cool.”

Josh hates my breasts just as much as I do.

I used to beg him to give them some attention, but I learned my lesson because it meant enduring even more of his *jokes*.

Like referring to them as cute little *mosquito bites*.

Calling me his beautiful *surfboard*.

Telling me I should invest in *Band-Aids* instead of bras.

And my personal favorite—pointing out that I look like a boy whenever I’m lying down.

God knows I despise my flat chest, and I’d give just about anything to snap my fingers and grow some tits. However, knowing the guy you love is turned off by certain parts of your body is a hard pill to swallow.

And while I’m very aware that Memphis isn’t Josh...he’s still a guy.

A guy who seems to dig what he sees so far. I don’t want to ruin it.

But it seems I already have because he’s looking at me like I’ve sprouted another head. “No. I don’t know. What the fuck are you talking about?”

He’s making this so much harder than it has to be. I gave him a get-out-of-jail-free card. He needs to stop asking questions and take the damn thing.

“Trust me, you don’t want to see them.”

His stare turns molten. “Trust me, I *do*.”

“No, you—”

In one fell swoop, he yanks down the cups of my bra, exposing me.

My cheeks heat with embarrassment and I’m about to push him away, but then he closes his mouth over my nipple.

The desperate, needy sound that flies out of me is humiliating.

A husky grunt fills the air, and he flicks it with the tip of his tongue. “I had

a feeling you'd like that."

Memphis increases his suction, taking long pulls that drive me out of my mind. I damn near whimper when he palms my other breast with his free hand.

"Take it off." Grunting, he licks a hot circle around my puckered nipple. "Now."

Reaching behind me, I unhook my bra, a move that pushes my boobs into his face.

His growl sends a rush of heat through me. I squirm and whimper when he moves to my other nipple, lavishing it with the same attention.

"I love your tits." He releases me with an audible pop. "I want to come all over them."

Visions of him doing that send tiny tingles everywhere.

I'm about to tell him he can...but he moves lower.

Bracing his forearms on either side of me, his lips travel down my ribs, giving every square inch of skin he encounters open-mouthed kisses that turn me into liquid.

"Christ." I squirm when he drags his teeth across my lower stomach. "I can smell how much you want me."

Oh. My. God.

I want to crawl under the blankets and hide, but then he trails his tongue along the waistband of my panties and rasps, "I can't wait to taste it."

He's going to kill me tonight. I'm sure of it.

I cry out when he buries his face between my legs, pressing his nose against the damp crotch of my panties and inhaling deeply.

Hooking his fingers into the sides, he begins removing them.

Panic crawls up my chest. Soon there will be no barrier between us.

He'll see all of me.

I wish I was one of those confident girls who didn't have any insecurities, but I'm not.

While being viewed as *good-looking* by most of society can make things easier...it doesn't matter when you feel ugly inside.

And whenever you look in the mirror, all you see are your flaws staring back at you.

Including some I wasn't even aware of until they were pointed out to me.

Like the part of my body Memphis is currently uncovering.

I thought I was normal down there, but Josh once made a passing comment about me being dark pink as opposed to a pretty light pink like the girls in porn. I've never been able to get it out of my head since.

Nerves coil in my belly as Memphis tugs my panties down my legs.

Will he be let down? Dissatisfied? *Grossed out*?

Hunger etches his features as he zeroes in on my pussy. "Jesus. Look at you." Those dark eyes rake up and down my naked body. "Fucking perfect."

"Believe me, I have *lots* of flaws."

So. Many. Flaws.

He's just being nice because he's about to get some.

Emotions slash his face. Lust, need...and resolve. "Whatever you think are flaws...aren't." He holds my stare. "Not to me."

Both his words—and the way he's looking at me...like I'm the most immaculate thing ever created—have my chest expanding and my defenses crumbling.

He trails a finger down my wet slit. "Open for me."

Tiny quivers dance in my stomach as I spread my legs.

"Wider," he rasps. "Show me everything."

Hot prickles race over my skin as I do what he says, bringing my legs up and hooking my arms under my knees. *Fully exposing myself.*

His voice is a gravelly rumble. “Good girl.”

Normally those two words trigger a volatile reaction, but it has the opposite effect on me right now.

His praise lights me up, filling me with assurance and confidence.

Shooting me a predatory look, his lips skim the inside of my thigh. “I’m gonna make you come so fucking hard.”

That’s the only warning I get before his mouth is on me.

I twist and writhe, my brain scrambling as he sucks my lips like a glutton, teasing me.

Greedy sounds tear out of him as he draws me into his mouth, each wet pull ending with a taunting flick to my clit.

I bask in the sensations, my back bowing as he eats me.

This isn’t what I’m used to. The first couple of times Josh went down on me, it felt nice, but over the years it changed.

Now when he does it, it’s because I’m dry and he wants to make it feel good for *himself*.

However, the only selfish thing about Memphis’s technique is the way he keeps bringing me to the edge...only to stop right before I fall.

Fingers digging into my thighs, he tugs my clit into his hot mouth.

Moaning, I press down on his head, keeping him there.

“Fuck yeah.” He suckles my lips again. The feeling and the crude noises make me throb. “Keep making those sounds for me.”

When I do, his tongue delves deeper, devouring me. I sway into the movement, desperate because I’m *right there*. “I need—”

A garbled noise leaves me when he adds a finger into the mix, pumping in tandem with the rigorous flicks of his tongue against my clit.

I buck my hips. It’s too much. *It’s not enough.*

I’m so close. So damn close. “Memphis.”

He adds another finger, slowly dragging them out before pushing back in.

“Oh god.” Waves of pleasure rack my body. “I’m gonna—”

I hiss—half in frustration, half in need—when he shifts gears, kissing me the same way he kisses my mouth. *Soft and dirty.*

I whimper as he begins building me up again. Every time he does, it feels even better—more intense—and I get a little more frantic.

Panting, I fist the blankets. “I’m so close.”

“I know you are.” A smug smirk plays at the corners of his glistening mouth and he gives me a lazy lick. “Eyes on me.”

Wet sounds fill the space between us as he finds a rhythm that makes my head spin. “Memphis.” I gasp as I watch his talented tongue work over my flesh. It’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever witnessed. “Oh god. *Please.*”

I’ll spontaneously combust if he doesn’t let me come this time.

A carnal glint enters his eyes and he sucks my swollen clit in earnest, curling those fingers inside me.

I grind against his jaw as the knot of pleasure he’s created coils tighter and tighter.

It feels so fucking good. *Too good.*

Loud, unintelligible noises pass my lips and my thighs tremble.

Something’s different. It’s more concentrated...more intense. His fingers—his tongue—are hitting spots that turn me inside out.

A sharp cry cuts the air. God, I’m so *loud*. But I have no control over it.

I’m shamelessly humping his face, imploring the knot to unravel...only the knot becomes a bomb.

And then it explodes, hurtling me into an orgasm so powerful I don’t have time to warn Memphis that something bad is about to happen.

Intense white-hot pleasure immerses me...followed by shame when I feel the large puddle beneath me.

There's no way Memphis didn't notice me gushing like Niagara fucking Falls, given his gorgeous face was parked between my thighs.

I. Want. To. Die.

Mortified, I bury my face in my hands. "I am so sorry."

That's never happened before. *Ever.*

Hell, I wasn't aware *that* was something I was capable of.

Fuck my life. There's no way I'll ever be able to look him in the eyes again.

"Sorry for what?" comes his gruff voice. "That was hot as fuck."

He must be high.

Too bad I'm not. "What was hot about me turning your face into my fire hydrant?"

A choked laugh escapes him, but it's cut off by a loud crack of thunder...

And then the skies open up and it begins downpouring.

"Awesome," I mutter as we haul ass and scramble into the back seat of his truck. "Even the universe is taunting me."

When I look over, I see Memphis biting his knuckle, shaking with laughter.

I want to disappear under the blanket I threw into the front, but it's soaking wet.

Due to the rain. *And me.*

Screw this. I'll take my chances out in the wilderness.

I go to open the door, but there's a sharp tug on my arm. "Where are you going?"

"Outside. This way, I don't have to hear you laugh your ass off about something that makes me want to run away and join the circus."

Although I highly doubt they're looking for someone with my particular *talent.*

"That's not why I'm laughing." His expression evens out. "*You're* why I'm

laughing.”

He’s unbelievable. “Wow. Way to rub it in.”

His lips twitch. “You’re cute when you’re freaking out.” Cupping my cheek, he looks at me. “Don’t be embarrassed. It was sexy as hell.”

Heat flashes in his eyes and his gaze drifts lower.

I’m suddenly aware that I’m naked.

And wet.

And cold.

Leaning in, he gently brushes his lips over mine. I taste myself on him, which somehow makes it even more intimate.

“Now I can cross ‘making a chick squirt’ off my bucket list.”

“Asshole,” I utter through chattering teeth.

“Shit. You’re freezing.” Curling his hands around my waist, he pulls me toward him. “Come here.”

Straddling his lap, I nuzzle his bare chest, which is surprisingly warm.

“Want me to put the heat on?”

“No.” Then I won’t have a reason to snuggle. “I’m okay.”

Goose bumps break out when he runs his fingers up and down the length of my back.

I burrow my face into his neck, breathing him in. “I’ve never done that before.”

It’s probably a good thing because I have no doubt that Josh would either make me feel self-conscious about it...or want to show my new *party trick* off to his friends.

Memphis falls silent. I’d give just about anything to know what he’s thinking about right now.

“Penny for your thoughts?”

Nothing.

I'm about to repeat the question when he murmurs, "Berkeley."

My mind fills with visions of him meeting friends, attending parties... hanging out with girls.

Falling in love.

There's a sharp pang in my chest because while I want him to experience all the best things life has to offer...part of me wishes I'd met him first.

"I'm jealous of the girl who's going to steal your heart."

Steal him from me.

His entire body tenses. "Says the girl whose heart is already taken."

Josh doesn't have all of it, though.

Not anymore.

"Tell me something I'll never forget."

Something I can keep with me when it's over.

Rough hands slide up my bare back and he rests his forehead against mine.

"You were right."

"About?"

"My tattoo." The tips of his fingers skim the curve of my shoulder. "It's your song...your name."

I knew it.

Closing my eyes, I press my lips to his as another crack of thunder booms outside.

Memphis's heart speeds up.

"Scared?" I tease.

His hand slides to the nape of my neck. "Fucking terrified."

And then his mouth is on mine, deliberate and demanding.

I match the sizzling strokes of his tongue with intense ones of my own. Head hazy with want, I grind against the large bulge forming in his jeans until we're both breathless.

“We have to stop,” he says, despite that big hand cupping my breast.

“Why?”

His tongue flicks the inside of my mouth. “Because you’re naked, wet, and making me so fucking hard.”

Yes, I am. Holy shit. I’m surprised his zipper hasn’t snapped in half.

“Sounds like three great reasons for us *not* to stop.”

Biting my bottom lip, he makes a noise like he’s in pain. “I never have sex without a condom.”

“Okay—”

“I don’t have any.”

“Oh.” I pull back. “How come?”

Isn’t it kind of a requirement for teenage guys to keep one in their wallets at all times?

He blows out a sharp breath. “I wasn’t...I haven’t...”

His voice trails off, but he doesn’t have to say it.

Memphis isn’t like most guys. He doesn’t just stick his dick in any girl.

Sex is a big deal to him.

“No, yeah.” My movements come to a halt. “I get it.”

Doesn’t mean I can’t return the favor and please him.

Reaching between us, I toy with the button on his jeans.

He places his hand on top of mine. “What are you doing?”

Getting off his lap, I shift so I’m sitting next to him. “You made me come before, now it’s my turn.” Afraid I might be jumping the gun, I hesitate. “If you want.”

His lids lower, his hot gaze fixated on my mouth now. “I want.”

Dark eyes look on with keen interest as I undo his button and tug down the zipper. The cords in his throat tighten when I slip my hand inside, making contact with firm satin skin.

A mixture of nerves and excitement jolts through me.

Damn. *Am I tall enough to ride this ride?*

I haven't even seen him yet, but dear God, he's...massive.

My fingers don't even touch when I wrap my hand around him.

"Who knew you were hiding the eighth wonder in your pants this whole time."

Smirking, he raises his hips and I pull down his jeans with my free hand.

"More like the twelfth."

I'm about to ask what he means, but it becomes very apparent as I take him—*it*—in.

Goodness. This thing should come with its own area code.

Gawking, I stare at the ginormous twitching entity in my hand.

Long, girthy, veiny, intimidating...and *beautiful*.

I can't help but compare it to the other ones I've seen.

Josh is fairly average, as are the rest.

The exception being Doug, who's so small I didn't feel anything but bad, and one guy named Isaac, who was so big I pretended not to notice for Josh's sake.

But even Isaac was smaller than Memphis.

The air around us grows humid as I stroke him from root to tip.

Deep-throating is out of the question with this big boy, but I'll do what I can.

Lowering my head, I suck him down as hard and fast as I possibly can, choking myself.

"Jesus Christ," Memphis grunts, stopping me. "Slow the fuck down."

I thought squirting was the peak of my mountain of humiliation tonight, but clearly, I was wrong.

"I'm sorry. I thought..."

It's what guys liked.

Or at least, it's what the only guy I've ever done it to does.

Because even though Josh has no problem watching me screw a guy of his choosing for his amusement, he has certain rules.

I'm not allowed to give them head.

And they're not allowed to get me off.

Blow jobs are strictly reserved for him...as are my orgasms.

Despite how few and far between they are.

"I'm not *him*."

The acrimony in Memphis's voice cracks like a whip.

"I know you're not."

The closer we get, the more I realize that they couldn't be more different from one another.

Wanting to salvage this and make it good for him, I sink to my knees. "Tell me what you like."

His hand frames my cheek. "Trust me, I'll let you know." He drags his thumb along my bottom lip. "Start slow."

He must sense how nervous I am about these uncharted waters because he takes charge, guiding me.

Gripping the base of his cock, his dark gaze snaps to mine. "You want a taste?"

His dirty words and the heat coming off him have my breath hitching.

I nod, parting my lips.

"Kiss it," he orders.

A wave of need washes over me as I press a soft kiss to the shiny, wide head.

"More," he rasps, his deep voice wrapping around me like a live wire. "Kiss it the way I kissed your pretty little pussy earlier."

Heaven help me because he's turning *me* on.

I've never been opposed to giving oral because I like pleasing my partner, but Josh always makes me feel degraded and debased.

Memphis doesn't, though.

He's leading, but in a way that makes me feel like I'm an active participant...not just here to service him.

Opening my mouth, I lap at the milky drop forming on the tip.

Making a hum of approval, he gives himself a languid stroke. "Good girl."

I nearly purr. I am such a sucker for his praise.

He pushes his entire crown inside my mouth. "Kiss it again. Give me more of that tongue."

Exploring, I circle it with my tongue before teasing the tiny slit.

A small groan leaves him, and I repeat the movement.

"That's it." The muscles in his throat work on a swallow. "Want more of me?"

My answer is a soft suck that has him throbbing against the roof of my mouth.

He threads his fingers through my hair with his free hand. "Open wider."

When I do, he slowly feeds me his cock, stretching my lips.

His jaw clenches as he goes deeper, so deep he hits the back of my throat and I gag.

"Fuck."

With a grunt, he pulls all the way out, causing a string of saliva to appear between us.

"Do you have any idea how sexy you look right now?" He thrusts inside my mouth again. I revel in the way his body coils. The way his beautiful dick pulsates on my tongue. "*Christ*. I want to fuck your perfect face."

I want that, too. Because the sight of Memphis coming unhinged is hotter

than the Sahara.

I hold his stare.

Do it, I silently urge.

A feral sound leaves him, and he winds my hair around his fist.

That's the only warning I get before he slams his free hand against the window and pumps his hips, thrusting in and out of my mouth wildly.

I relax my throat as he picks up his pace. "You like the taste of my cock?"

Oh, Jesus. Memphis is the opposite of reserved in bed and I can't get enough of it.

This uninhibited side of him brings out things in me.

Saliva drips down my chin and tears leak out of my eyes as I nod.

His chest rises on a ragged inhale. "Show me how much."

Rising up on my knees, I suck him as deep as I can, relishing every inch.

I've never wanted anyone as much as I want him.

I suck harder and faster. He groans, letting me know how much he enjoys it.

"Fucking hell." He juts his hips. "You're gonna make me come."

God, how I want to.

Moaning around him, I increase my speed.

"Sky...*fuck.*"

His muscles strain and I know he's close.

Swallowing isn't something I like to do—much to Josh's dissatisfaction—but I have the urge to right now.

I don't get the chance to though, because Memphis pulls out of my mouth.

One hand squeezes my breast while his other works frantically over his length, causing those irresistible tendons and veins to flex.

"I want to see your pretty tits dripping with my cum."

I arch my back, lifting them higher, my head and heart brimming with

exhilaration.

Pleasure washes over his face and a strangled sound leaves him as milky liquid splashes my chest.

Hot shivers run through me when he reaches over, smearing his cum with two of his fingers.

“Look at me.”

When I do, he pushes them inside my mouth. I eagerly suck them clean, tasting him.

A lewd grin curves his mouth. “My dirty girl.”

His dirty girl.

As if he can’t help himself, he hauls me onto his lap and kisses me.

“You’re perfect, Sky,” he rasps, his eyes roaming over every inch of my face. “So fucking perfect.”

I’m not, but whenever he looks at me...

I feel like I just might be.

Arms tightening around my frame, he shifts until we’re lying down in the back seat.

I press my cheek to his chest, listening to the sound of rain batter his truck.

I can’t help but smile when I notice his handprint on the foggy window.

Tonight was not only unexpected, it’s the best night I’ve ever had.

I never knew it could be like this. *Fun. Sexy. Enjoyable.*

“It’s different with you.” I trace the tattoo on his ribs. “I’m different with you.”

Lighter. Uninhibited. *Happy.*

He draws little patterns on the small of my back with his fingers. “I know.”

I wonder if *this* is how it’s supposed to be.

If one day—far into the future—we can be together. After the dust has settled and Josh has met someone else.

The thought sends a pang through my chest.

Picturing Josh with anyone but me is still too raw.

Then again...that didn't stop him.

Perhaps that's where it all went wrong. Agreeing to let him experiment and live out all his fantasies...without taking my own needs into account.

We share the same demons, but that doesn't mean we want the same things.

He wants parties and orgies and debauchery.

I want affection and connection and *monogamy*.

A love so deep it swallows me whole and never lets me go.

A love so pure it can never be tainted by another.

A love so strong it can withstand any catastrophe life throws at it.

"Can I ask you something?"

"You didn't say truth or dare first, but I'll let it slide." My expression must convey how serious this is because the amusement bleeds out of his. "What's up?"

"Could you ever share the person you love?"

He goes rigid. "Why are you asking me that?"

Emotion fills my voice. "Because I need to know if there's something wrong with me. If I'm controlling, inconsiderate, and selfish."

I once read an article that said it wasn't natural for human beings to be monogamous. That culture and social constructs essentially forced us into believing it's how we should be.

That it's the reason there are so many divorces and why so many married people are unhappy.

Maybe what I'm seeking is too much to demand from another and it isn't fair.

Maybe what I want doesn't exist.

I don't know what to make of his expression. "For wanting to be shared?"

"For *not* wanting to be shared...or wanting to share the person I love."

A deafening silence envelops us as he contemplates this.

After what feels like an eternity, he speaks.

"I think love is different for everyone, as are standards. For some, sharing is what feels right." His brows pull together. "But the love I need is permanent. *Exclusive.*" His gaze locks with mine, penetrating me down to the bone. "I can't share, Sky."

I can't either.

Breathing him in, I go back to tracing the tattoo on his ribs.

Perhaps the fortune-teller was right...

But I got it wrong.

Chapter 35

SKYLAR



I squint up at the bright sun, basking in the early summer warmth. “I want to live someplace where the weather is like this all the time.”

We’re currently sitting on the edge of Mrs. Landrum’s in-ground pool, dipping our feet in the water.

Memphis doesn’t seem to be enjoying it all that much, though, because he keeps staring at his phone and frowning.

Our truck hookup was a week ago, and since then, things have been... surprisingly not awkward.

In fact, it’s been pretty awesome.

I’ve been sneaking into his bedroom nearly every night and we’ve been making out every spare chance we get. The only reason we haven’t had a repeat *truck performance* yet is because Mother Nature decided to be a cockblocker.

Fortunately, she’s taken a hike.

I catch myself smiling as I think back to two mornings ago when my hand wandered inside his boxers, and he finished on my tits again.

However, my smile fades when I catch *him* glancing at his cell for the hundredth time in five minutes. “Do you have a hot date? Why do you keep checking your phone?”

It comes out way more irritable—*jealous*—than I intended, but I can't help it.

Even though I have no right to demand any kind of commitment from Memphis, given we can't be together—for *numerous* reasons—the thought of him being with another girl makes me want to go on a tire-slashing spree again.

Scowling, he rolls his shoulders back. “No reason.”

His response does little to take the edge off. “Yes, reason.”

If he's talking to another girl, I'd rather he just be honest and tell me.

However, the next words out of his mouth leave me more stunned than heartbroken.

“A couple of weeks ago, this guy came into Guitar Galaxy. He was in a bind and needed a specific guitar. Turns out he's the manager of The Resistance.”

The band sounds vaguely familiar. I gesture for him to keep going.

“Long story short, he left, and I started jamming. Only...the guy didn't leave like I thought. He asked me to play a few more songs, so I did. He seemed impressed.”

Of course, he was impressed. Memphis is *phenomenal*.

“Anyway, he mentioned something about a guy named Vic and asked for my number. Told me I'd hear back in a couple of weeks. It wasn't until after he was gone that I realized the Vic guy he was talking about was none other than *Vic Doherty*.”

“Who's that?”

Memphis's eyes widen with disbelief. “He's the executive and owner of Phantom Rock Records...the biggest label in rock music. The guy's a fucking legend.”

Holy shit. Safe to say I get it now.

“Wow...that’s amazing.”

“Yeah.” That scowl is back. “Chandler still hasn’t called, though. I had a feeling he wasn’t going to, but...”

“But what?” I press when his voice trails off.

Trepidation flickers across his face. “It scares me how much I want it.” His shoulders slump with defeat. “I don’t think it’s in the cards for me.”

He’s wrong. *So fucking wrong.*

Carefully, I straddle his lap and grab his face, forcing him to look at me.

“I don’t know much about music.” My heart beats so hard it feels like it’s going to burst right out of my chest. “All I know is that whenever you play... no one else in the world exists.” I lean my forehead against his. “And that tells me that you, Memphis Payne, are destined for greatness.”

His talent is irrefutable—and while there are plenty of unknown gifted artists walking the earth—there’s no way a gift like *his* will go undiscovered.

Because Memphis isn’t just gifted...he’s incomparable.

Which is why he has no reason to be scared. *He’s got this.*

Piercing dark eyes sear me. “That might be the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

My breath hitches when he inclines his head, his delectable mouth a mere centimeter from mine.

“I meant every word.”

I close my eyes as he gently grazes my top lip with his bottom one.

And then I’m falling...

Into the fucking pool.

Shock, followed by irritation, surges through me as I come up to the surface, sputtering up water.

“You jerk.” I swim over to where he’s still sitting...with a shit-eating grin

marring his face. “*That’s* what I get for being nice?”

His gaze drops to my thin white T-shirt that’s now see-through, thanks to him. “Sorry, were you saying something?”

That does it.

Swimming to the other side of the deep end, I brace the ledge for support and kick my legs, splashing the crap out of him.

I’m so focused on settling the score I don’t realize my opponent is closing in until a pair of strong arms wrap around me.

His voice is a gravelly rasp in my ear. “Brat.”

Turning, I lock my legs around his waist. My stomach dips because a wet Memphis fills my mind with all kinds of dirty thoughts. “Asshole.”

The barest hint of a smile twists his lips, and he slides two fingers under my chin, tilting my face up. “Have any plans tomorrow night?”

I start to answer, but my phone rings.

Josh’s ringtone is like nails on a chalkboard.

He’s been *checking in* nonstop lately.

It’s a little ironic. He barely called the first week we were broken up and the disconnect between us hurt so much I cried myself to sleep while willing my phone to ring...just to know he still cared.

Now three weeks later, all he does is call...and I wish he’d stop because even though it still hurts, I’ve been...preoccupied.

Happy.

A pang of guilt hits me square in the chest. He’s going through a lot right now. Archie and Valerie—rightly so—are on his case about his constant partying.

The other night they laid down the law and gave him two choices. Quit drinking and doing drugs and hold down a full-time job by the end of summer...or go to rehab.

If he doesn't, they're prepared to kick him out.

As much as I'd love to take Josh's side on this, they aren't being unreasonable.

They're scared. *So am I.*

Because the road he's going down isn't good.

But I believe in him. I know he can turn this all around.

Making a mental note to call him later, I focus my attention back on Memphis.

"Nope. No plans." I bite my lip coyly. "I mean, there is this guy I'm kind of interested in and I was hoping we'd hang out." I shrug. "But I guess you'll do."

There's a trace of amusement in his expression. "*Kind of* interested in?"

"Ye—"

I squeal when he picks me up and tosses me into the water.

I shove him after I come up for air. "You're such a bully."

"A bully is someone who wants to hurt you." His arms find my waist, tugging me closer. "I'm just trying to ask the brat who's *kind of* interested in me out on a date."

My jaw nearly hits the bottom of the pool. "Oh." My heart rate kicks into high gear. "Um...that's...I mean, I *want* to."

It's a small town, though. People talk. A lot.

One of Josh's dumb friends might spot us and snitch.

I can't take that chance.

Not when I don't even know what this thing is between us.

Not when he's leaving.

Memphis doesn't look the least bit worried. Quite the opposite. He seems determined. Like he's already made a decision and nothing and no one is going to stand in his way.

Including his own brother.

“I’ll pick you up at seven tomorrow night.”

I should turn him down because this is a terrible idea.

Is it, though?

I’m not looking to hurt Josh—I love him—but he’s no longer the only one occupying the organ in my chest.

Oh god.

This path is reckless.

My feelings for him are dangerous.

The choice I’m making is heartless.

But I want it. *Want him.*

I try to hide my smile, but I can’t. “What exactly does this date of ours entail?”

Cupping my cheek, he leans in. “It’s a surpri—”

“If you two are done frolicking around down there, I could use some lunch and my lawn could use some mowing,” Mrs. Landrum hollers from the balcony of her bedroom.

I back up, putting some distance between us. “Be right there.”

I’m fairly certain she knows about Memphis and me, and she’s firmly team *suiter number two*...especially after finding out that Josh stood me up for prom.

She said if he ever came within twenty feet of her home, she’d have him stuffed like one of her animals.

However, her *support* doesn’t mean it’s okay for me to kiss my coworker on the job. I take my employment seriously and I’m extremely grateful for all she does.

I quickly swim over to the pool steps, but right before I climb out, there’s a sharp tug on my arm.

“What are you doing?” I question as Memphis curls a hand around my hip.

“I’m not done frolicking.”

Before I can protest, his lips are on mine...

And once again, I’m falling.

Chapter 36

MEMPHIS



Ed dangles a greasy fast-food bag in front of my face. My boss's go-to *bribe* before asking me for something.

"I need a favor."

And there it is.

Already knowing what it is, I shake my head. "I can't stay late. I have plans."

I'm taking Sky out on a date and nothing short of a hundred-kilometer comet hitting the earth is going to stop me.

Although that would be cynical as fuck, considering I'm taking her to the new planetarium that opened up a few towns over.

Given her fascination with the universe—and stars in particular—I think she'll enjoy it.

But on the off chance she doesn't, I picked up a peach cobbler before work.

Ed's eyebrows shoot up to the ceiling. "Really?"

I snatch the fast-food bag. "Yes, really."

I can't fault the man for being surprised, though. Usually, my *plans* consist of work or music.

Curious, he rubs his chin. "Is it a music thing or..." He trails off, waiting

for me to fill in the blank.

I take out the burger and unwrap it. “Not a music thing.”

He smiles to himself. “About damn time. Who’s the lucky girl?”

I chew slowly, debating my next words. While Ed can’t stand Josh, I have no doubt he’ll hit me with some unsolicited advice about stealing my brother’s girl.

Fuck knows I’ve had enough of that shit, thanks to Archie.

Ever since prom, he’s been cautioning me that pursuing this thing with Skylar is going to blow up in my face...for two reasons.

One—it will destroy my relationship with Josh.

And two—I’m going to end up getting burned.

Not because he thinks Skylar’s a terrible person—he adores her—but because her ties with Josh are too strong.

While I appreciate his concern, he’s wrong.

Josh and Skylar do have a bond, but the one we have is stronger. *Deeper.*

Because she was always meant to be *mine*.

And while I know Josh will be upset once he finds out about us, he’ll eventually get over it.

He had his chance, but he fucked up and lost her.

I’ll never make that mistake.

It’s his turn to stand on the sidelines now.

Ed motions with his hand, indicating he’s waiting for a response.

“She’s—”

The sound of my phone ringing cuts me off.

I grind my molars when I see Josh’s name on the screen.

Speak of the devil.

“I’m at work. What’s up?”

Judging by the boisterous sounds I hear in the background, he’s up to his

usual shit.

Swear the fucker is determined to learn his lesson the hard way.

But if he doesn't clean up his act soon, he's going to find himself homeless by the end of summer.

He doesn't waste any time cutting to the chase. "I need a favor."

Seems to be the recurring theme of the night.

"If it involves giving you a ride somewhere, you're out of luck."

"No. I need you to tell Archie and Valerie that I'm fixing the clogged toilet at Mrs. Landrum's."

My grip on the phone tightens. "Are you?"

Why the fuck would Sky call Josh for help? She's better off fixing anything *without* his assistance.

"Hell no." He blows out a breath and I take one. "Skylar's still on her 'we need a break' bullshit." The noise in the background fades. I'm guessing he either walked outside or went into another room. "I thought she'd be over it by now, but it turns out losing her is easier than getting her back. Last night she mentioned something about wanting us to always be *friends*. Can you believe that shit? She knows she's my endgame."

You're not hers, though.

While hearing all this makes me happy, I can't revel in it fully because I know how much it sucks to be him right now.

"That's...damn."

It's all I can manage without showing my cards.

"I know. This whole 'we want different things' garbage she's been spouting is a load of horseshit. I'm not sure what the fuck has gotten into her, but..."

"But what?" I press when he goes quiet.

"Do you think she's seeing that asshole she cheated on me with?"

As a matter of fact, she is. *Tonight.*

I don't want to get into this with him right now, though, so I dodge it. "I have to get back to work."

"Got it. Thanks for covering for me."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "I'm not lying for you, Josh."

I'll just lie to you.

"Come on. You're my brother."

I know.

My guilty conscience works in his favor. "Fine. But only if they specifically ask me where you are."

"Thanks. I owe you one."

I owe him something, too. *The truth.*

I can feel Ed eyeing me as I disconnect the call. "Oh, hell, Memphis."

"What?"

"You look guiltier than a sinner at church." He sighs. "You're messing around with your brother's girl, ain't you?"

I'm not sure how he knows, but then I remember that Skylar came into the store this week, so I could give her a driving lesson after work.

Turns out her propensity for slashing tires should be the least of anyone's concerns when it comes to vehicles. The girl can't drive for shit.

"She's not his." I grit out.

"Does he know that?"

I fall silent, which makes him scoff, "That's what I thought."

"I'm gonna tell him soon."

I just want to talk to Sky about it beforehand because the fallout will impact her, too.

But not tonight. Tonight is *ours*.

"I hope so." Making a tsking sound, he heads for the back room. "Even a

dog knows the difference between being stumbled over and kicked.”

He’s right.

I fucking hate it.

I’m walking over to the wall of guitars when my phone rings again.

Despite not recognizing the number, I answer it.

“Hello.”

“Sorry it took me so long to call you,” a voice I vaguely remember says.

“We’ve been trying to figure out what to do with someone of your caliber.”

Chandler.

However, I’m too focused on something else he said. “We?”

He makes an irritated noise. “I assumed you were smart enough to figure out that I work for Vic Doherty.”

“I am. I mean, I know.”

Christ. I’m so anxious I’m tripping over my words like a goddamn idiot.

“Gold star for you then. Anyway, Vic is very interested, so much so he changed some things in his schedule. We’ll be in Nashville early next week. I’ll text you the address of where we’re staying.”

I almost drop the phone. “Okay, yeah. I’ll be there.”

“Good. Bring that brother of yours if you want.”

With that, he hangs up.

Holy fucking shit.

“You okay?”

My head is spinning so much I didn’t even realize Ed had come back out.

“Yeah. I’m good. Great, actually.”

This is the best night of my fucking life.

Ed’s understandably confused, but as much as I want to bring him up to speed, there’s someone else I need to tell first.

The girl who believes in me.

I start typing out a text, but she beats me to it.

Sky: I can't see you tonight.

Chapter 37

SKYLAR



I wince as the crackling, gurgling sound pierces my ears again.

It seems to be growing louder every hour.

The first time I heard it was early this morning and I ran into my aunt's room to check on her. Despite appearing comfortable, it still freaked me out.

So much so I called the hospice nurse and begged her to come here.

According to her, this is completely normal, but it sure doesn't seem *normal*.

"Is she in any pain?"

The nurse gives me a sad smile. "No, honey. She's okay."

But how does she know for sure? I mean, yes, she's a nurse and has far more medical knowledge than I do, but what if she's wrong?

What if my poor aunt is suffocating and we're just standing here *watching* it happen instead of helping?

"What do I do?"

I'm not an idiot. I know my aunt is on hospice—which essentially means comfort care only—but there has to be something I can do to slow this down.

The doctor said she still had another month or two left.

I thought we had more time.

Not that our time together has been jam-packed with fun. She's been

sleeping a lot lately and eating less and less.

Withering away a little more each day.

Fuck cancer.

My aunt is only thirty-eight. She should be contemplating upgrading her skincare regimen versus getting Botox, complaining about the men on dating apps, and giving me advice about fuckboys.

Not dying.

The nurse places her hand on my shoulder. “Some people use these final moments to get some closure. This is a chance to say whatever it is you need to say and tell your aunt anything you think she may need to hear.”

With those parting words, she slips out of the room.

I fight the urge to call her back in.

There’s so much I want to say to this woman.

But I can’t.

Because telling her that even though I love her, I also *resent* her for the things she let him do to me while she’s knocking on death’s door is heartless.

Drawing in a slow breath, I reach for her hand.

No one deserves to die alone.

“It’s okay, Aunt Cheryl.” Tears prickle the back of my throat. “Go be with my mom.”

She squeezes my hand, letting me know she can hear me. I repeat the words, hoping they’ll comfort her.

However, she squeezes my hand harder, visibly restless now.

That’s when I realize my aunt doesn’t need me to tell her it’s okay to perish.

She needs something else.

Something I’m not sure I feel.

Digging deep within myself, I muster every bit of compassion I possess so I can give her the peace she's seeking.

"I forgive you."



She died approximately three minutes after I said the words.

After that, things happened in slow motion. The nurse came in, checked her vital signs, and told me what I already knew before making some phone calls.

And now the coroner is wheeling her sheet-clad body out on a gurney.

The nurse asked if there was anyone she could call on my behalf, but I told her no.

There's no one now. *Just me.*

A fact that becomes even more prominent after I close the front door and a somber silence surrounds me like a dense fog.

I walk around, taking in the familiar surroundings.

The weight in my chest becomes heavier with every step.

This place is full of bad memories.

Heartbreaking thoughts of a shattered little girl.

Evil deeds.

And demons that will forever haunt her.

If I close my eyes, I can still hear my screams, feel my pain, and taste my tears.

I can't help but wonder what I would be like if Shane didn't touch me that

day.

If he didn't break me in the most awful way.

But it's like looking into shards of a cracked mirror.

No matter how hard I try, I can't envision that perfect version of myself.

The ugly is too opaque. The damage too severe. The scars too deep.

A cold sweat dots my forehead.

Everyone is dead...but I'm going to live with this for the rest of my life.

There will never be peace for me.

Just pieces of me.

I clutch my chest, trying to draw air into my lungs, but it's impossible.

I. Can't. Breathe.

Because he's here.

He's always here.

I take my phone out of my pocket so I can call Josh. Even though things are strained between us, he's the one person who truly understands what I'm going through.

The person I need right now.

I'm shaking so much the phone slips out of my grip.

I drop to my knees and grab it.

Please pick up.

My heart falls to the floor when it rings four times and goes to voice mail.

Curling up into a ball on the living room carpet, I leave him a message. "I need you."

He killed my monster.

A wave of nausea barrels into me.

But even from the grave, he still haunts me.

I smell him.

I feel him.

I see his face.

“Leave me alone!”

But my outburst only makes it worse. He’s coming closer...twisting the knob of my bedroom door.

“Please stop. *Please.*”

He doesn’t, though. *He never does.*

His claws dig deeper, carving me open. Taking more of me.

Memphis.

He always leaves the ladder out in case I need it.

Need him.

My heart races as I peel myself off the floor. And then I’m running...out of this house and to my home.

Memphis might not understand like Josh does, but for reasons I can’t explain, he’s my safe haven.

My monster can’t hurt me when I’m in his arms.

But Shane is faster than I am, and he’s no longer closing in.

He’s on top of me. *Inside me.*

Bile surges up my esophagus and I climb the ladder as fast as I can, almost slipping as I near the top.

I crawl through the window at the same time Memphis enters his bedroom.

Expression inscrutable, he places his keys on the dresser. “Hey—”

“I can’t get him off me.”

He’s making my insides ugly.

I dig my nails into my flesh, desperate to get him off my skin, but strong arms close around me, shoving Shane back into the shadows.

I breathe in Irish Spring soap and oranges.

“Hold me tighter.”

I need more. More of him. More of *this*.

Memphis compresses me against his chest, and I angle my head until my ear is resting over his heart.

It isn't an ordinary *thump thump thump* rhythm. It's a soothing melody that hums and whooshes between beats.

My very own lullaby.

"I love the soft swishy sound your heart makes."

He snorts. "That's probably my murmur."

"What?"

This is the first time I'm hearing about *that*.

"Not a big deal. I've had it since I was born. According to the doctors, it's harmless."

"Are you sure?"

It sounds kind of scary.

"Positive. It's only noticeable when my heart beats too fast."

Oh.

Concern shades his sharp features and he cups my cheek. "Enough about me. How are you?"

"Better."

I cringe, recalling the vague text I sent him earlier. I should have gone into more detail, but the nurse had made a comment about it being a good idea for me to contact a close friend for support because it was happening soon, and my brain went on the fritz.

Memphis called me shortly after I sent the text canceling our plans, but I was too overwhelmed to pick up. I ended up ghosting my *closest friend* without any explanation.

Feeling like a fool, I avert my gaze. "My aunt died. It's why I couldn't go on our date. I'm so sorry."

The pad of his thumb skims my cheekbone. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

“I blew you off.”

“Your aunt died.”

I know. I was there when she took her last rattling breath.

My heart twinges as the memory comes rushing back. “I told her I forgave her for...you know.”

A groove in his forehead appears. “Do you?”

Without warning, Shane slinks out of the shadows...taunting me.

“Um...I...”

I can't breathe.

“It's okay if you don—”

The sound of Josh's ringtone makes me jump.

Mind whirling and panic mounting, I back away.

Josh.

My gaze bounces between my phone and Memphis, who's watching me intently.

Josh calls again, undoubtedly worried.

I stare at the screen illuminating his name.

I could answer it.

I could let him hold me and console me. Make it better temporarily.

I could choose him.

Josh knows my demons—my trauma—in ways no one else ever will.

But what if there's more to me?

What if underneath all my damage is a girl who isn't destroyed?

A strong girl who isn't ugly and broken.

The girl I could have been if Shane didn't violate me.

The perfect girl Memphis sees whenever he looks at me.

What if I'm both?

Fragile and strong.

Flawed and perfect.

Damaged and restored.

What if I didn't run from my demons this time?

Pressing the ignore button, I drop my phone. It lands on the floor with a loud thud.

Memphis raises a brow. "What—"

Surging forward, I crash my mouth against his.

The first sweep of his tongue is a strike on the wall of the prison Shane's trapped me in all these years.

The second is a perforation, sending a wave of heat through me with so much force it takes the strength from my knees.

Fisting the collar of his shirt, I walk us backward until we're tumbling onto his bed.

Shane creeps closer, but I focus on the weight of Memphis's body and the feeling of his mouth claiming mine.

I part my thighs and fasten my legs around him, craving friction.

Craving more.

Propping himself up on his forearms, he stares down at me, those dark, expressive eyes darting over every inch of my face.

I hold his gaze, imploring him to understand what I can't explain.

What I need.

I raise my hips, grinding against the bulge thickening in his jeans.

I don't want to be a victim.

Apprehension steals over his features, his hesitation palpable.

Shame snakes through me and I close my eyes, feeling vulnerable.
Desolate.

Once again, Shane wins.

Just like he always does.

Without warning, Memphis's mouth collides with mine again. The organ in my chest takes off in a gallop as he alternates between soft kisses and sensual lashes of his tongue.

I work his shirt over his head, needing skin on skin contact.

Calloused hands slide up my torso, slowly inching my tank top up, but despite his stilted breath and rock-hard erection...that's as far as he goes.

I arch, silently begging him to strip me. However, understanding dawns when I look at him.

This isn't about what he wants...this is about what I want.

My fingers find the hem of my tank and I wrench it off. My purple bralette soon follows.

Taking his hand, I place it on my breast. "Touch me."

Heat sparks between my thighs when he squeezes, drawing one of my nipples into his eager mouth.

I attempt to wiggle out of my sweatpants, but my current position makes it difficult.

A squeak of surprise leaves me when he rolls us over, so I'm on top. I quickly shed the rest of my clothing before straddling him.

"Christ." Pure hunger etches his face as he takes in my naked body, running his rough hands down the sides of my stomach before settling on the curve of my hips. "You're fucking perfect."

His words are like a balm for my pain.

Memphis still doesn't see that broken girl, despite cracking myself open and exposing all my ugly.

I yank on the belt loop of his jeans. "I want these off."

The corner of his mouth tugs up in a smug grin as he situates his head on

the pillow. "I'm not stopping you."

My blood quickens as I undo the button and zipper before pulling down his jeans and boxers.

His cock springs out, slapping against his stomach. Long. Thick. *Irresistible.*

I trace the vein spanning the underside, loving the way it pulsates under my touch. Feeling bold, I lower my head, dragging the flat of my tongue along it.

A low grunt leaves him and his hands clench like it's taking every ounce of willpower not to place them on the back of my head and shove himself inside my mouth.

His nostrils flare when I repeat the movement, causing a few drops of milky liquid to pool above his navel.

Dark brows draw together and his mouth parts on a groan when I lap it up, tasting him.

"Sky."

I love the way he says my name...like I'm *his* sky.

His everything.

I place my hand between my legs. I'm so wet, so...

Panic claws at my throat. I'm no longer in Memphis's bedroom. I'm on the couch in the living room, terrified because Shane's hand is under the blanket...doing things he shouldn't.

Things I don't like.

Memphis's voice snaps me back. "Hey."

Shaking the revolting memory from my head, I straddle his upper thighs. "I'm okay."

I'm not. But I so badly want to be.

He palms my cheek. His touch is featherlight. Tender.

Like I'm fragile.

"We should stop."

"No."

Stopping means I'm what Shane made me.

It means there's no strong girl buried underneath all this destruction.

It means I'm a casualty.

Leaning down, I grab his jaw. "Kiss me."

A slow tremble works through me when he captures my mouth. His lips are tender. Soothing. *Gentle.*

But I don't want safe right now.

I want the deep end. The darkness.

I want to spit in my demon's face and prove I'm not broken.

On a mission, I sink my teeth into his lower lip, commanding more.

His kiss grows firmer and his tongue slides along the seam of my lips, demanding entry. The moment I open, I feel the band of his self-control weaken. On a groan, one hand cups my nape and the other grabs my hip, holding me steady as he fucks my mouth.

I whimper, my senses going haywire as I meet the ravenous strikes of his tongue with avid ones of my own.

God, I can't get enough of him. I love the taste of him. The smell of him. The way he kisses me. Touches me.

I wonder how he'd fuck me.

A pinch to my sensitive nipple makes me hiss, and I rub myself against his thigh. White-hot arousal spears me, and I repeat the movement, again and again, inching up a little more each time.

He exhales into my mouth when I graze his weighty balls, unabashedly humping him.

It's like a switch has been flipped inside me. I'm so turned on I could

scream. “I need to come.”

Raw lust slashes his face and the hand on my hip tightens, steering me until my pussy is lined up with the underside of his cock. “Go ahead.” Rough hands grab my ass, guiding me up and down the length of his shaft. “Use my dick to get yourself off.”

My stomach clenches as I work myself into a frenzy, throbbing with each slick slide.

Oh god.

Every ridge and vein seems like it was made for my pleasure.

If just part of him feels this good, how would *all* of him feel?

The thought has me breaking out in shivers.

“Christ,” he rasps as I slither along his thick length. “Your pretty pussy is drenching my cock.”

Good Lord. *That mouth.*

Heat flares in his eyes and he wraps a hand around his base, dragging his wide head between my lips. “Rub it against your clit.”

I curl my fingers around him, taking over.

“That’s it,” he grits out as I circle the sensitive bud. “Feels good, huh?”

“So good.”

But it’s not just the sensations driving me crazy. It’s the visual of his glistening plump head massaging my swollen clit. It’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen in my life.

Scratch that.

Memphis’s parted mouth, lowered lids, and hungry expression are the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.

Moaning, I go faster. I’m so slippery—so *close*—I can’t take it.

“Fuck. I feel you pulsing.” His fingers dig into my ass. “You’re almost there.”

The knot of arousal coils, growing tighter and tighter.

But it's not enough.

“I want you inside me when I come.”

We both go still, tension around us mounting as my words permeate the air between us.

Those penetrating eyes lock on me as he sits up, snaking an arm around my lower back.

His mouth ghosts mine, his smoky rasp sending little vibrations throughout me when he speaks. “Put my cock inside you.”

Goose bumps erupt along my skin. My insides burn with the urge to feel every inch of him.

The pad of his finger massages my clit—winding me up all over again—as I position myself over his cock. I whimper against his lips as I slowly take him in, my walls stretching around the invasion.

I've had sex tons of times...yet somehow, this feels like the very first time.

His finger moves faster and I take him deeper. Tiny waves of pleasure build and build.

It's too much. Too good. *Too right.*

“Oh my god.”

I pant against his lips, shattering around him at the same time he fills me completely. “Memphis.”

A gruff noise rumbles in his throat, and I clench and squeeze, wrapping my arms around his neck as my orgasm pummels me.

He licks into my mouth, his broad chest lifting and falling in harsh breaths as if he's the one who just came.

Mind hazy, I sag against him. “I'm...that...you...”

I don't know how to describe what I'm feeling right now. I just know that

I've never felt it before.

His features pull tight with restraint, and he threads his fingers through my hair, forcing me to look at him. "Take what you need, Sky."

My heart kicks up as I drink in the sharp lines of his face. The savage look in his eyes. *His pained expression.*

Like not moving while being inside me is physically killing him, but he's trying his hardest to give me the one thing he always has.

Control.

But that isn't what I want.

What I want is to see him crack and fall apart with me.

My lips find the shell of his ear. "I need you to fuck me and make me yours."

His hands latch on to my ass, and I feel his pulse speed up. Sheer greed illuminates his face and whatever willpower he was holding on to vanishes...

And then he's pulling out of me.

Instantly my heart drops, my body betrayed by the loss.

"What—"

In a flash, I'm on my back and his face is moving between my legs. The look in his eye is downright menacing, like a predator ensnaring its prey.

"You're already mine." He runs his knuckles down the length of my slit. "You and this tight little pussy that just made a mess all over my cock."

Damn him. That filthy mouth of his is going to be the death of me. I'm sure of it.

Especially when he drags his talented tongue between my lips.

Tiny cries escape me as he swirls my hole before plunging inside.

"You're *killing* me."

A low laugh leaves him like he's perfectly aware and is enjoying every second of it. *Asshole.*

One of his hands skates up my torso and he twists my nipple.

I nearly purr. It's like he's memorized every single one of my hot spots.

He draws a lazy circle around my clit, driving me out of my mind.

Growing frustrated, I buck my hips against his face. "Fuck me," I gasp when he slips his thumb inside, taunting. *Bastard*. "Now."

"How bad do you want it?" comes his husky voice.

I dig my nails into his scalp. "So bad."

"Yeah, you do. You're fucking soaked." He peppers kisses along my slit as he pushes his thumb in and out, causing wet sounds to fill the room. "You gonna squirt all over my cock like a good girl?"

My cheeks flame and my chest heaves. "I'll do anything you want."

I mean it. He could ask me to maim the next person who pisses him off, and at the very least, I'd consider it.

Because no one makes me feel like he does.

It's addicting.

"That's what I like to hear."

Planting one last kiss on my pussy, he crawls up my body, bracing his arms on either side of me. "Take a deep breath."

I'm about to ask why, but then he thrusts. *Hard*.

Oh, fuck.

I gasp, my mouth falling open in shock. Taking him inch by inch was difficult enough but taking his giant dick all at once is a whole other animal.

He's a whole other animal.

One I'm not sure I can tame.

One I'm not sure I want to.

Rising up on his knees, he takes hold of my hips. I tremble as he pulls back before ramming into me.

He repeats the movement again and again. The force of each one pushes

me up the mattress. The hands on my hips constrict so much I know I'll have marks.

But I want them.

I want every part of him.

My legs begin shaking. "Memphis."

I'm reaching for him, desperately seeking something I can't explain.

I just know I need it more than I've ever needed anything.

"I got you."

Those dark eyes hold me captive as he settles on top of me. There's so much longing lingering in his stare it steals my breath.

His movements become slower. *Deeper.*

The energy between us shifts, turning into something tangible.

Something real.

He sucks the column of my throat as he eases in and out of me, the tempo building an addicting momentum that has my toes curling.

Lifting my hips, I meet his deep thrusts. I don't know the first thing about playing an instrument, but I feel like I'm learning.

Every movement strengthens the cadence of the sequence he's conducting. And every time he sinks inside me, it's propelling us toward a crescendo.

All I can do is follow his lead. His melody.

Get lost in him.

My hands slide down his back, settling on his muscular ass that's flexing with every thrust.

"Memphis."

Each drive breaks me open a little more. *Embeds him in my marrow.*

Calloused fingertips trail down the side of my face and he seizes my lips, kissing me with the kind of passion I've never felt or experienced before.

It's like he's starving and overflowing at the same time.

Awareness spears me.

I wanted to break down his walls...and I did.

This is Memphis. Unguarded and vulnerable.

Falling into the deep end with me.

I trace the stubble on his jaw. He's so heartbreakingly beautiful it gives me butterflies. "You're perfect."

Placing my hand over his frantic heart, I kiss him until we're both breathless and shaking.

Groaning, he buries his face in the crook of my neck, drawing me into his lungs.

He's inside me, but it's more than sex.

It's...different.

It's everything I've ever wanted.

Memphis Payne doesn't fuck...he worships.

Interlacing our fingers, he brings them above my head while his other delves between us, tending to my clit.

I whimper with every deep stroke as he brings me closer to the edge.

I open my mouth to beg him not to stop but end up moaning. *Loudly.*

Whoever's downstairs definitely heard us.

We should stop before someone catches on to what we're doing, but he takes me faster. Moving with powerful, meticulous strokes.

I bite my lip, but it's not enough to silence me. Whimpering, I drag my nails down his shoulder, clawing at his skin.

"Fuck."

He pinches my clit and his next thrust is my undoing.

I come in a giant gush, my guttural moans filling the room as I soak his sheets.

Tears well in my eyes as the aftershocks fade.

Visibly alarmed, Memphis stills. “You okay?”

Way better than okay.

Sex has always been something that I either hated—or, at best—tolerated. Despite Josh encouraging me to own my sexuality, it was impossible.

Because while I love pleasing my partner, I didn’t enjoy the act itself.

But Memphis showed me all the good parts.

Which proves that even though I’m damaged...I’m not broken.

At least, not beyond repair.

He really is Chiron.

This isn’t the right time to get into all that, though, so instead, I hold him close and whisper, “Thank you.”

And then I kiss him, moving my tongue in time with his thrusts.

His ragged breathing turns to low groans as he drives in and out of me.

“Sky.”

Those sharp features strain with pleasure and he shudders, coming with a hoarse curse.

Heavy exhales fan my breasts as I run my fingers through his damp hair.

I’m his sky, but he’s *my* earth...keeping me grounded when my demons take hold of me.

He pulls me into his arms a few moments later. Amusement crosses his face when I curl up against his chest and wedge my legs between both of his.

“It’s rude to make a girl sleep in the wet spot.”

A vulgar smirk bends his mouth. “Then you’re screwed because I plan on making you come again before the night is over.”

Speaking of coming. I press my thighs together. I’m sore and sticky.

Memphis told me he never has sex without condoms...but he just did...with me.

Even though it was a heat-of-the-moment thing, it’s something we should

discuss.

“We didn’t use a condom.”

His expression goes slack. “I know.”

“Don’t worry,” I quickly assure him. “I’ve only had unprotected sex with Josh, and I got tested shortly after I found out he cheated, and I’m fine. I also can’t get pregnant, so that’s not an issue.”

The flicker of disappointment I catch in his eyes cuts me to the bone. “Right.”

“We can use them next time.” An uninvited swell of anxiety plucks at my belly. “Provided there is a next time, that is.”

Ugh. Why am I babbling like a moron?

No guy likes postcoital conversation. Especially one that veers dangerously close to the “What are we?” talk.

That flicker of disappointment turns to full-blown annoyance.

Good job, Skylar. Way to ruin it.

“Do you want there to be a next time?”

Well then. I guess we’re going there after all.

Biting back a smile, I nod. “Yeah.”

More than anything.

“Then do us both a favor and stop fucking talking.”

Instantly my smile falls. *Wow.*

“Look, if you don’t want me—”

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

Is he serious right now? “You don’t have to be such an asshole. I’d just like to know if this is a one-time thing or...more.”

His glare is glacial. “What do you think?”

I think he needs to stop being a dick and tell me.

“I don’t know,” I exclaim. “You’re not exactly the easiest person to get a

read on.”

“That may be true for everyone else.” He holds my gaze. “But *you* know me, Sky.”

The fervent way my pulse pounds and the intuitive feeling in my gut backs that up.

So does what we just did.

There’s passion between us. Connection. *Intimacy*.

“You’re right.” Smiling coyly, I wrap my limbs around him. “You totally want me, Memphis Payne.”

I expect him to laugh and make a joke, but the next words out of his mouth slay me. “You have no fucking idea how much.”

My chest expands to the point of pain. *I want him, too.*

I just don’t know how we can be together when he’s going away to college and I’m...

Letting him steal pieces of my heart that belong to someone else.

“You scare me.”

His chest rises on a deep inhale. “Why?”

Because everything inside me is screaming that he’s going to tear my world apart and I’ll never be the same.

Evading the question, I glance around his bedroom. My stare snags on the purple guitar propped up against the wall. Aside from the color and size, it looks pretty similar to Josh’s bass.

“What’s the difference between the guitar and bass?”

Rough fingertips trail down my spine. “Well, for starters, the bass is easier to learn...which is why it’s usually the first choice for beginners.”

A shiver breaks free when he walks his fingers across my hip bone. “Then there are the strings. The bass has four while the guitar has six.”

No wonder Memphis is so...*dexterous*.

His mouth coasts along the shell of my ear. “But the most distinct difference is the purpose. The bass is the steady beat that backs up the song. It helps provide a foundation, it’s fun to play, and it’s the life of the party... but it’s also stagnant...because it can’t function on its own.” His hand slides up my torso. “It’s an important instrument, but not vital like the guitar.”

My breath hitches when his palm glides over my ribs and past the curve of my breast before coming to a stop on the organ threatening to beat out of my chest. “The guitar is where the heart of the song lies. Where all the passion is.”

Safe to say I understand now.

Shifting, I trace the tattoo on his rib cage. “I wish we had gone on our date.”

“We might still be able to.” He glances at the watch on his wrist and frowns. “Scratch that. It closes in ten minutes.”

“What closes?”

There’s a teasing glint in his eye. “I told you, it’s a surprise.”

I can’t help but smile. “Does that mean you’re still going to take me?”

He opens his mouth to speak, but the sound of my phone vibrating against the floor catches my attention.

It’s probably Josh wondering if I’m okay. It’s not exactly *ideal* for me to talk to him right now, but the least I can do is text back and let him know I’m fine.

I lift a finger. “Hold that thought.” Leaning over, I root around for my phone. “I called Josh during my meltdown and left him a panicked message, so I’m—”

“You called him?” Memphis grits out.

I don’t know why he sounds so surprised. Or irritated.

Josh and I have been broken up for three weeks, but he’s been my best

friend—my *everything*—since I was thirteen.

My feelings for Memphis don't negate the fact that I'll always care about Josh.

Plus, he understands my trauma in ways Memphis can't.

My fingers make contact with my phone, and I snatch it off the floor. “Well, yeah, but I was freaking out—”

“And you called him *first*.”

There's a dark edge to his voice.

Oh, boy.

“I know this situation is...complicated. But you're acting a little...”

My voice trails off and I shake my head. I don't want to fight with him but expecting me not to talk to Josh anymore is absurd. It would be like me expecting him not to talk to Josh anymore.

“Acting a little *what?*” he presses as I click on my unread text.

Josh: Hara-kiri.

Instantly, my insides lurch and my heart stops.

Back when we were thirteen, we made a promise that if the pain ever became too overwhelming and we couldn't take it anymore...we'd let the other know we ended the battle by leaving a note with our secret code word on it.

Hara-kiri.

Bolting out of the bed, I make a mad dash for my clothes, throwing them on as quickly as I can.

“What the fuck, Sky?”

The ripping sensation in my chest intensifies and I clutch my stomach, swallowing bile.

He can't leave me.

“I was being a dick,” Memphis says. “I'm just...this thing—”

I run down the stairs on wobbly legs, making a beeline for his bedroom.

“Josh!”

Please don't be dead.

Panic wraps around my throat when I open the door.

Blood.

So much blood.

Pooling on the floor...

Oozing out of his wrist.

“Help!” I scream, my vocal cords scraping against my throat.

Whipping my tank top off, I drop down beside him and wrap it around his wrist, squeezing as tightly as I can.

His eyes are closed, but he still feels warm. Although his breathing is shallow and his skin is turning pale.

“Josh, baby. I need you to hold on. *Please.*”

Something sharp digs into my knee. Nausea barrels through me when I glance down and realize I'm kneeling on the razor blade he must have used.

“This is your fault.”

His voice is a faint whisper, but the impact hits me like a nuclear bomb.

“Wha—”

I'm shoved out of the way.

“Call 9-1-1,” Valerie yells, taking over.

“I need an ambulance at 846 Clemon Street right away,” a deep voice grinds out. “My brother...he...just send a fucking ambulance. *Now.*”

Memphis.

I turn my head to look at him, but blue eyes full of agony sear into me, causing the room to tilt.

I clutch my chest as the realization—the unmistakable look of betrayal—grips me by the throat.

He knows.

“Here,” Memphis says, shoving something soft into my hands. *His shirt.*

“Put this on.”

I can't.

Can't move.

Can't breathe.

Can't function.

Josh's words keep replaying in my head, each one causing another stab wound to my soul until I'm bleeding out...just like he is.

This is my fault.

Chapter 38

SKYLAR



According to the doctor, Josh missed his arteries and—apart from the ten stitches his wound required and his blood alcohol level when they admitted him—he’s doing okay physically.

Valerie said they should be finished with the psych eval soon and depending on what the outcome of that is, he’ll either be discharged...or transferred to a mental institution.

I asked if I could see him, but Valerie told me he didn’t want to talk to me.

I’m pretty sure both she and Archie have figured out what transpired between us.

I’m grateful neither of them is treating me like the traitorous piece of shit I feel like.

As if sensing my thoughts, Memphis’s stare locks with mine from across the waiting room.

I quickly avert my gaze, focusing on the clock nailed to the wall. It’s a little after two in the morning. We’ve been here nearly four hours already.

In my peripheral, I see Memphis stand.

Nerves bunch in my stomach when he walks over. His peeved expression makes it clear he’s had enough of me ignoring him.

I spring out of my chair.

I can't do this with him right now. Not while Josh is strapped to a hospital bed.

Because of us.

Because the two people he loves most betrayed him.

A soft touch to my elbow has the tiny hairs on my arms lifting.

"Don't—"

"I went to the vending machine and got us some snacks," Archie exclaims as he makes his way over to us.

I divert my attention to him, welcoming the interference. "Thanks, but I'm not hungry."

My stomach feels like it's full of rocks.

I gesture to the glass doors near the exit sign. "I'm gonna get some fresh air."

"No problem, darling. I'll keep your seat warm. I make no promises about these potato chips, though."

I'd give him a smile, but I don't think I'll ever be able to smile again.

I start to walk away, but Memphis's fingers wrap around my wrist. "Sky."

I yank my arm away. "Not right now."

Not until I know Josh will be okay.

"Give the girl some space, Memphis," Archie says, his tone soft and his disposition uncharacteristically solemn.

Memphis looks like he's about to lose his shit when Valerie approaches. "They're still waiting on another psychiatrist so they can finish the evaluation, but as of now, it looks like they'll be discharging him in a few hours."

"Is he okay?"

"He seems to be doing better." She gives me a small smile that doesn't

quite reach her eyes. “And he’s asking to see you. Come on, I’ll take you to his room.”

Memphis reaches for me again, but Archie places an arm around his shoulders, steering him away. “Take a walk with me to the vending machine. I’ll get you some gummy bears.”

“I’m not fucking five,” Memphis snaps as I follow Valerie out of the waiting room.

Nerves jumble in my stomach as she leads me down one hallway and then another.

All I wanted to do was see him and make sure he was okay, but now? It feels like I’m walking the plank...about to plummet into a turbulent ocean.

We come to a stop in front of a private room in the emergency department. Probably a perk of Valerie being a longtime employee here.

She turns to me. “I’m gonna go back out to the waiting room and talk to Archie.”

I nod, quelling the urge to beg her to stay.

I have no idea what’s awaiting me on the other side of the door. I just know it won’t be good.

“Thank you.”

However, I make no move to go inside.

My feet are stuck. *Nailed down.*

A frown mars her face. “I know you feel bad, honey, but—”

“What happened was my fault.”

There’s no getting around that.

She sighs. “You know, there’s a wise saying that’s always stuck with me.”

“What?”

She gives my hand a soft squeeze. “Don’t set yourself on fire to keep someone else warm.”

With that, she wanders down the hallway.

I didn't set myself on fire.

Memphis did.

And then that fire spread...and almost became a fatality.

Now it's time for me to face the consequences.

Pushing my shoulders back, I inhale a few deep breaths and open the sliding door.

My heart clenches when I pull back the curtain. Seeing Josh lying on the bed, looking so miserable—so dejected—makes me physically ill.

We stare at one another for several long beats...and then my gaze drops to the white bandage wrapped around his wrist.

I swallow against the boulder of guilt forming in my throat. "How are you?"

"Alive." Those blue orbs narrow, pain giving way to anger. "Bet you wish I wasn't though."

How in the world could he say such a thing? "That's not true."

"You sure?" he snarls. "Then you wouldn't have to keep fucking him behind my back."

His words are a punch to the gut.

"How..." A jittery breath leaves me. "How did you find out?"

"Seriously?" He scoffs. "You were so loud the entire neighborhood heard you being a lying, cheating whore."

Wincing, I rear back. I know he's upset and lashing out, but that was a low blow.

Only unlike him, I won't stand here and deny my transgressions.

Before I can stop myself, I blurt, "That's awfully hypocritical, given we broke up because you fucked Holly. Oh, that's right, you don't acknowledge *your* mistakes. Only mine."

Glaring, he sits up in the bed. “Want me to admit I fucked her? Fine. I fucked her. Only unlike you, she didn’t lay there like a dead fish. She fucked me back. Better than you *ever* have.” A sadistic grin spreads across his face. “Happy?”

And just like that, the scab that formed these past three weeks has been ripped off and a mountain of salt has been poured into my wound.

“Good for you. Keep fucking her. Better yet, go fuck *yourself*.”

I spin around to leave because this is getting ugly and that’s not why I came here, but what he says next sends a fresh wave of pain crashing over me.

Pain that I caused.

“I heard your voice mail and dropped everything.”

The bitterness in his voice is gone. In its place is pure agony.

“I called you back, but you didn’t pick up. I knew you needed me though, so I got a ride to your house.” He draws an unsteady breath. “The front door was unlocked, but when I walked inside, you weren’t there. I figured you either went to your treehome or crawled through my bedroom window...but you didn’t. I was getting nervous, so I walked upstairs to ask Memphis if he’d seen you. That’s when...”

“You heard us,” I whisper, turning around.

“I thought I was gonna die.” His eyes turn glassy, and he motions to his wrist. “I wanted to.”

His features twist with anguish. “Holly was just some stupid bitch I fucked when I was high one time. The only reason I didn’t tell you was because I didn’t want you thinking it meant something more when it didn’t. It was a stupid mistake.” A guttural sound leaves him, and he buries his face in his hands. “Out of all the guys you could have cheated on me with...you chose *him*? How could you do that to me? I thought you loved me.”

Another gut-wrenching sound fills the room, and he begins sobbing.

My insides churn and my heart crumbles. Seeing how much I've hurt him is ripping me to shreds.

I used to pride myself on being a good person. One who was sensitive and compassionate. Heck, Josh used to tease me about being an empath.

Turns out I'm just a selfish asshole.

It hurt like hell when I found out Josh cheated, but I didn't know the girl.

My betrayal, however, was so much worse. *The wound so much deeper.*

Because it was his best friend...*his brother.*

My feet move toward him on their own accord. "I'm sorry."

Falling for Memphis wasn't a choice—it was something beyond my control—but I never meant to destroy Josh like this.

As hard as it would have been for us to sit Josh down and tell him there was something brewing between us...we should have. Because finding out the way he did was beyond cruel.

I half expect him to kick me out, but he pulls me closer, wrapping his arms around me.

"I'm sorry," I say again. I don't think I can ever say it enough. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

But I did. *So much so he almost died.*

Constricting his grip, he clutches my T-shirt. *Memphis's T-shirt.* "I love you."

Relief, followed by another swell of guilt, rises within me.

I'm grateful he doesn't hate me, but I know it will take some time for him to forgive me. I'm hoping one day he will, though, and we can be friends because I can't imagine not having him in my life.

Cupping my face in his hands, he brings our foreheads together. "I know we're strong enough to get through this."

An uneasy feeling moves through me, and the boulder of guilt turns to apprehension.

Josh must pick up on this because confusion flashes across his face, followed by disbelief...and then fear. “You still love me, don’t you?”

I do. But it’s different now. Altered.

Obstructed by something.

“Yes, but—”

His mouth slams against mine.

The texture of his lips is familiar. The persistent glide of his tongue habitual. The taste of him...comforting.

But it’s not the same. *I’m not the same.*

My feelings for him are still there...but they’re no longer at the forefront like they once were.

Placing my hand on his chest, I break the kiss. “Loving one another doesn’t change the fact that we want different things—”

“What things do you want? Whatever they are, I’ll give them to you.”

That’s just it. I don’t think he’s capable.

“You can’t.”

He’ll be miserable. And I don’t think you should be forced to change the things that make you happy—the things that make you who you are—for someone else.

His hold on my face constricts. “Tell me.”

“I did,” I whisper, my voice cracking like glass.

I told him every time I shut down during sex.

Every time I mentioned that I wanted it to be just *us*.

Every time I begged him to stop partying so much.

His agitated stare roams over every inch of my face, settling on my eyes.

“It will only be us, okay? No more of that other shit.”

“But that’s what you like. What you want—”

“That’s just me fucking around and having fun. But I’m done with that. You’ll have me all to yourself.” He presses his lips to my forehead. “*You* are all I want, baby. You have to know that.”

I wish he’d said all this three weeks ago.

Then the spark between me and Memphis would have stayed buried—*contained*—instead of becoming an inferno.

“Josh—”

“No.” His face contorts with pain. “You have to give me a chance. You owe me that.” Those ocean eyes become glassy again. “You can’t leave me, Skylar. You *can’t*.”

My heart squeezes and it becomes harder to breathe.

I grew stronger with our time apart...but he grew weaker.

I open my mouth to assure him that I’ll always be here for him, but he takes the opportunity to kiss me again.

“Please don’t give up on me, baby,” he pleads when I turn my head. “*Please.*”

Emotion fills my throat. “I’m not. But—”

“Don’t do this to me,” he grinds out, his tone inimical. “Not after *everything* that I’ve done for you.” Bringing his lips to my ear, he whispers, “I killed your monster.” He smacks his chest. “I’m the one who made sure that bastard never touched you again.”

My insides churn and the ground beneath me tilts so much I sway. Instantly, his hands latch on to my waist, holding me steady, preventing me from collapsing...just like he always has.

He saved me.

“This is the thanks I get?” he continues. “You’re gonna kick me to the curb after tearing my heart out. After betraying me?”

Tears clog my vision, and I shake my head. “No.”

“Then don’t leave me.” He looks so earnest it guts me. “Please, baby.”

Oh god. My mind and heart are being torn in opposite directions.

“I need you.” His voice is shredded, and his expression is utterly hopeless...like he’s got nothing left to hang on to. “You have to give me another chance. If you don’t...”

Anxiety pierces me when his voice trails off.

“If I don’t, *what?*”

Blue orbs lock with mine. “I’ll make sure I finish the job this time around. Because if you walk out that door. If you leave me when I’m sitting here crying—*begging*—you not to give up on me, then the next time you see me, I’ll be in a casket.”

My stomach lurches and my lungs compress so much it burns. It’s not just his chilling words that send me reeling. It’s the sincere look in his eyes.

It’s the way my heart is punching my rib cage. Warning me that I’m going to lose him.

That if I do...

I won’t survive it.

Memphis penetrated my heart like a poisonous arrow. One there’s no antidote for.

But that little boy I met in the woods...

The one I used to wish on stars for.

The one who shares my demons.

The one who killed my monster.

He needs me to save him this time around.

Having no choice, I shove the part of my heart that still belongs to Josh to the forefront.

And push my feelings for Memphis as far down as they’ll go and put a

dead bolt on them.

“I don’t want to lose you.”

He pinches my chin between his fingers. “Then tell me you’re mine. All mine.”

I can feel Memphis banging on the door of my heart, threatening to break it down. “I’m yours.”

Visibly relieved, he frames my face with his hands. “Promise you’ll never hurt me again.”

I swallow, and it feels like glass going down. “I promise.”

He kisses my lips. “Good. Now I want you to go back out there and tell him it’s over. Tell him it was a mistake, and you love *me*.”

I know he’s hurting and wants assurances, but it feels like I’m being sentenced to a fate worse than death.

“Josh—”

“Him or me, Skylar?”

My blood runs cold and my heart beats off rhythm like it knows the choice I’m about to make will permanently alter the melody.

That it’s about to lose something vital.

However, only one of them is strong enough to function without me.

“You.”

Chapter 39

MEMPHIS



“You have to let her go,” Archie says as he presses a button on the vending machine.

She’s already gone.

I knew it the moment I saw her in Josh’s room.

It was like her entire world was crumbling and if he were to die...so would she.

I just didn’t want to admit it.

Didn’t want to believe that I had somehow let the girl I’ve always wanted slip through my fingers.

That I lost her.

Or worse...that I never had her to begin with and I was only deluding myself.

“Mind your business.”

Glowering, he hits the machine holding the candy bar he wants hostage.

“I’m not saying this to hurt you, Memphis. I’m saying this to protect you. Skylar is a good girl with a good heart, but her and Josh...they have a connection that you can’t relate to.” He shakes his head. “They aren’t bad

people, but you're different. You're..."

"I'm what?"

"You need to get away from them—from this situation—before it ends up destroying you." Giving up the plight with the candy bar, he turns and we head back to the waiting room. "Go to Berkeley. Or see how things play out with this Chandler guy if you want. Just promise me you won't stick around waiting for her to choose you...because she won't. That poor girl's past won't let her."

There might be some merit to that, but a small part of me—the part still holding on to what we have—refuses to accept defeat.

This thing between us is stronger than her trauma.

Sky is stronger than her trauma.

"You don't know her like I do."

An expansive sigh leaves him, and he pinches the bridge of his nose. "Son —"

"I'm *not* your son." A flicker of remorse goes through me when hurt fills his expression, but I'm too pissed off to apologize...or stop. "And I don't need or want your advice, so quit fucking giving it."

Aggravated, I storm past him, bypassing the waiting room.

I'm about to head outside because I could use a breather—and a fucking cigarette—but the sound of her voice stops me in my tracks.

"Can we talk?"

Talk.

Relationships aren't my thing, but even I know *talk* is code for *end shit*.

I don't want to turn around.

I don't want her to speak.

I don't want to hear that she loves *him*.

Without a word, I head down a hallway with less traffic.

Skylar keeps her gaze fixed on the floor as she leans against the wall on the opposite side, refusing to look my way as she folds and unfolds her arms. Like she's uneasy.

Like she doesn't want to have this discussion either.

I can't help but study her, wondering where *my* girl went.

The bratty girl who gives me shit and always has a comeback.

The girl who's not afraid to say what's on her mind. No matter how weird, emotional, or hard it might be.

Because this chick standing across from me isn't my girl. She's *his*.

Fidgeting, she swallows nervously. "Hi."

I stay silent, which only makes her that much more uncomfortable.

It's hard not to laugh. Less than six hours ago, I was inside her—giving her parts of myself I wasn't even aware I fucking had—and now we're strangers.

Keeping my expression neutral, I rip off the Band-Aid that she doesn't have the guts to.

"I don't have all night. Spit it out."

Her head snaps up and those hazel eyes find mine. The muscles in my chest draw tight when I catch the pain lingering in them.

"Memphis."

Fuck her. She doesn't get to say my name like that.

Like it's significant.

Like I mean something to her.

Because if I did, she'd be having this conversation with *him* instead of me.

Curling her arms around herself, she stares down at her shoes again. "We almost lost him."

Her guilt is palpable. But as much as it pisses me off, I get it.

However, they were broken up. Skylar wasn't obligated to tell Josh shit.

Same can't be said for me.

Even so, I'm not convinced that taking the moral route would have made things any better.

Josh was never going to let Skylar go without a fight.

Because for all the ways we're different...we're exactly the same when it comes to her.

The only thing I misjudged in this shit show was Sky.

After that night in the field, I was convinced she felt the same way I did, and nothing—not even him—could tear us apart.

Turns out I was wrong. Because here she is.

Saying nothing and everything.

But I don't need to hear it.

I've always been good at figuring out what others want from me.

And what Skylar wants...is Josh.

Anguish spreads over her pretty features. "He needs me." A tear falls down her cheek. "I can't give up on him, Memphis. Not after everything..." She gives her head a shake. "What we did was selfish and wrong."

It was a mistake.

That's what she really means.

Christ. Five minutes ago, I couldn't be in the same room without wanting to touch her.

Now I can't even look at her.

"Will you say something?" she whispers after a few moments pass. "Please."

Choose me.

I want to scream it from the highest rooftop.

Loud enough that she'll hear me.

Loud enough that she can't ignore me.

But it would be a waste of air.

And I have too much goddamn pride to beg her to change her mind...or let her know how much this is killing me.

She takes a step closer. "I'm so sor—"

"Jesus fucking Christ. Get over yourself."

Bitterness swells inside my gut. She doesn't get to stand here and pretend like she gives a shit.

Not when she just took a sledgehammer to the fucked-up thing inside my chest.

"We fucked. It's not like it was some monumental event." I shrug. "Not for me at least."

Her eyes widen with disbelief. "What?"

It's clear I've offended her. *Good.*

But I'm not done yet.

She made her choice, but it doesn't come with a side of friendship. There's no going back to that anymore. The option is off the table.

She wants to end things. *I want to sever them.*

"It didn't mean anything, it was just sex. I tried telling you this before, but you kept avoiding me. I don't do relationships, and your clingy bullshit turns me off." Reaching into my pocket, I pull out my lighter and cigarettes. "It's why you and Josh are perfect for each other. He loves that shit."

Outraged, her mouth drops open, but right when she's about to speak, Valerie approaches.

"Josh is asking for you."

Skylar huffs out a breath. "I'll be there in a minute."

"Not you, honey." Valerie regards me. "He wants to see you."

Fucking hell. Just what I need.

Whatever. The sooner I get this shit over with, the better.

I start to walk off, but the sound of her voice halts me.

“Memphis.”

“What?” I bite out with so much venom Valerie frowns and Sky flinches.

“I...” She’s staring at me like I’m a strange specimen under a microscope.
One she’s never seen before.

One she doesn’t understand.

Mission accomplished.

Now she knows how it feels...because I don’t recognize her either.

We’re better off this way.

She must be thinking the same thing because she shakes her head, dismissing whatever she was going to say. “Never mind.”

“Come on.” Valerie tugs on my arm. “I’ll take you to his room.”

Without a word, I follow her down the hall.

I used to wonder if meeting me first would have changed anything.

If she would have picked me.

Now I know.

At least this time I won’t be forced to see them together because I’ll be leaving.

Until then, I’ll just go back to pretending she doesn’t exist.

Because she isn’t my sky to touch.

She’s his.



I should be feeling guilty. After all, it’s my fault.

I broke the bro code.

However, the only thing I feel is resentment.

Josh eyes me skeptically from his hospital bed, sizing me up. “You’re not gonna say anything?”

There’s nothing to say.

I won’t apologize because doing so means I regret it.

And despite how much it fucking stings...I don’t.

He makes a scoffing sound. “You’re a piece of shit.”

I don’t bother arguing because from where he’s sitting, I’m the bad guy.

I stay silent, allowing him to get a few more shots in...but he doesn’t take advantage of it.

Scowling, he studies his scar.

Not the new one forming underneath the bandage on his wrist.

The old one on his hand.

The same one I have.

On instinct, I inspect mine. It’s faded even more with time. Barely even visible now.

But if you look close enough...it’s still there.

Blood brothers.

“I expect everyone else in my life to hurt me. But not you, Memph.”

A weird sensation invades my chest, and what he does next makes me want to bolt out the door.

He starts crying.

And I don’t mean glassy eyes and a throat clear.

Full-on waterworks.

“How could you betray me, Memph?” A guttural sound leaves him, and he buries his face in his hands. “We’re supposed to be family. *Brothers.*”

Turns out I’m not a sociopath after all.

Because now I feel it.

Guilt. Remorse. Shame. It’s all there.

Not because I fell for Sky. That was out of my control.

But for not being a decent enough man—brother—to let him know I did.

Because I didn't want to think about Josh.

I wanted to pretend that he and Skylar were in two separate worlds and I could have her all to myself.

That because he fucked up and cheated, I was entitled to make her mine.

I wanted to make him the villain because it was easier than admitting that taking what I wanted—what once belonged to *him*—made me one.

I take a step forward. “I'm so—”

“You failed the test, Memph.”

The tiny hairs on the back of my neck rise. “What are you talking about?”

His eyes narrow and a sadistic smile spreads across his face. “Keep your hands off what's mine...or I'll tell everyone that you're a murderer.”

To be continued...

Turn the page for a special treat.

Sneak peek

Hey guys.

Want a sneak peak for The Consequence?

Grab it here: <https://BookHip.com/VSNBFVL>

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About the Author

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Ashley Jade craves tackling different genres and tropes within romance. Her first loves are New Adult Romance and Romantic Suspense, but she also writes everything in between including: contemporary romance, erotica, and dark romance.

Her characters are flawed and complex, and chances are you will hate them before you fall head over heels in love with them.

She's a die-hard lover of oxford commas, em dashes, music, coffee, and anything thought provoking...except for math.

Books make her heart beat faster and writing makes her soul come alive. She's always read books growing up and scribbled stories in her journal, and after having a strange dream one night; she decided to just go for it and publish her first series.

It was the best decision she ever made.

If she's not paying off student loan debt, working, or writing a novel—you can usually find her listening to music, hanging out with her readers online, and pondering the meaning of life.

Check out her social media pages for future novels.

She recently became hip and joined TikTok, so you can find her there, too.

She loves connecting with her readers—they make her world go round.

~Happy Reading~

* * *

Feel free to email her with any questions /
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Blame It on the Shame - Trilogy (Parts 1-3)

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