



**TWISTED.
HEATHENS**

J ROSE

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For Kristen,

*My one and only twisted heathen.
This one is for you, wife.*

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TRIGGER WARNING

Twisted Heathens is a #whychoose, reverse harem romance, so the main character will have multiple love interests that she will not have to choose between.

This book is very dark and contains scenes that may be triggering for some readers. This includes self-harm, suicide, drug use, mental health themes including psychosis, graphic violence, child abuse, and sexual assault.

There is also explicit language throughout and sexual scenes involving blood play, breath play, dubious consent, mutual self-harming and light BDSM.

If you are easily offended or triggered by any of this content, please do not read this book. This is dark romance, and therefore not for the faint of heart. Additionally, this book is written for entertainment and is not intended to accurately represent the treatment of mental health issues.

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*'Monsters are real. Ghosts are real too.
They live inside us and sometimes, they win'*

Stephen King, The Shining

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PREFACE

*He comes to me in my dreams, a thunderous cloud of sin. Faceless, nameless,
so elusive I forget his presence when I wake. I become child-like, a tightly
curled ball cowering from the monsters in my mind.*

*But there's no running. I cannot escape the demons woven into the fabric of
my soul. I cannot excavate them with bloodied fingers, digging deeper and
deeper through flesh and bone.*

I'll tear myself apart at the seams to be rid of you.

I'll shred myself down to the very last atom, a handful of stardust and ash.

When my penance is paid, I will rebuild.

Inch by inch.

Breath by breath.

Lie by lie.

I shall be reborn.

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PROLOGUE

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BROOKLYN

Had Enough by Mouth Culture

“BROOKLYN? I’ve been calling you for ten minutes,” Nurse Jackie shouts.

I roll onto my side, frowning at the drooling guy stretched out on the sofa across from me. Fucking newbie, he just swallowed the pills and passed out. What a damn waste.

“And I’ve been ignoring you for ten minutes,” I drone.

She stops at the end of the sofa and glares down at me, patience utterly spent. “You can’t continue to treat this place like a bloody joke, Brooklyn. Get up, now.”

“Why should I?”

“The doctor is expecting you.”

I flip onto my back and glare at her. “It’s not my therapy day.”

Nurse Jackie crosses her arms, peering down her nose at me. “Do I look like I care, missy? Don’t give me that, get your butt up or it’s another weekend in solitary.”

Terror runs down my spine. I drag myself up and follow her, fearing the consequences. I can’t go back there after last time. Death is fucking preferable. She guides me to the nearby shrink’s office and lets me in, where I take my usual seat.

The office chair spins to reveal Doctor Zimmerman, finishing up his telephone call. “Yes, I understand. Thank you, Augustus. I’ll be in touch.”

The phone is returned to its cradle and Zimmerman stares down his nose at me, sliding those ugly spectacles down to give me his full, unwavering attention. Man, I want to crush those glasses under my boot.

His lips move, but nothing comes out. Ringing fills my ears as I stare at the wall behind him; thick, treacle-like shadows dripping down and pooling on the ground. They whisper at me, my hands trembling in my lap.

Fucking Zimmerman, he's a son of a bitch.

Take the paperweight and smash his head in.

“Brooklyn? Are you even listening to me?”

My eyes snap up and the shadows are suddenly gone, leaving nothing but clean, bright white wall behind.

“Brooklyn! I’ve given you time to think. I need your answer.”

I glance away and focus my gaze out of the barred window. My eyes track the path of the falling raindrops. When was the last time I felt rain on my face? Or wind in my hair? I lick my lips. Breathe. Blink. Fidget. Anything not to reply to this asshole.

“Your attitude isn’t necessary. We’re on the same side here.”

The need to laugh bubbles up inside of me. Smirking, I turn my attention to my hands. Nails bloody and chewed down, knuckles bruised and scarred. The obvious tremble that comes with my heavy dose of medication.

“You aren’t leaving the room until we discuss this offer. Take your time.”

So be it. I can sit here all goddamn day in silence.

Zimmerman sighs, gently placing the pen down and lacing his fingers together. He refuses to look away from me or take no for an answer. Why can’t he just give up on me already? I’m a lost cause. I want to scream in his face, tell him to stop trying to fix me.

“You are going to rot in here for the rest of your life if you don’t accept the board of directors’ offer. I cannot stress enough how precious this chance is. Don’t waste it,” he implores.

Chewing my ragged nails, I savour the bite of pain and coppery tang of blood. “Why shouldn’t I waste it?”

Zimmerman shakes his head, clearly exasperated. “Because you have potential. Don’t allow the past to control your future.”

“I don’t have a future. That’s what the court said when they sent me to you,” I point out.

“That was nearly ten months ago. We aren’t progressing here, you need to be in a different environment. This place isn’t right for you. That’s why

you need to seriously consider what we discussed yesterday.”

I scoff, an amused smile tugging at my lips. “I’m with the rest of the crazies, aren’t I? Exactly where I belong.”

“No. The people here will never leave, many won’t even get better. With the right treatment and management, you can still have a life. You’re only twenty-one.”

I finally meet his eyes. Brows furrowed, the wrinkles around his face are even more pronounced than usual. He’s tired. Weary. Fed up with our pointless therapy sessions.

“And what of my sentence?”

“If you complete three years at Blackwood and prove that you’re rehabilitated enough to pose no threat, then you’ll be free to go,” Zimmerman explains. “The order has already been signed off by the authorities. Do you understand the opportunity you’ve been given?”

Opportunity. I don’t deserve it. I don’t deserve anything, not even to live. If I take the transfer, I’ll finally be free from the weight of nurses watching me. It won’t be hard to find some rope, I know how to tie a noose. Or I’ll stash my pills, and without them checking under my tongue each day, it won’t take long to build up enough to overdose.

With a tempting plan forming, I attempt my best obedient voice, wiping away any trace of bitterness. He can’t know what I’m planning, not if I am going to succeed.

“What will I study there?” I ask, feigning interest.

That’s it, keep smiling. Nod your head.

Play the good girl and then you can die.

“Anything you want. Blackwood is the first of its kind, real cutting-edge experimental treatment blended with education. The recovery rate is phenomenal. You can live there comfortably, learn whatever takes your fancy. Build a life for yourself. Doesn’t that sound good?”

“Well, I would like to feel normal again,” I offer innocently.

Did I say that right? Convincing enough? I don’t know how to cooperate, I’ve never done it before. If he was a half decent doctor, he’d know that I’m lying anyway. I’ve never known normality. Not for a second. Why would I want it now?

“Exactly. I’m so pleased that you are interested. I really believe that you can thrive there.”

Zimmerman slides the clipboard over, uncapping his pen for me to take.

Glancing over the paperwork, I take in the ornate crest in the upper-right corner. The words ‘*Ex Malo Bonum*’ are woven through the image in curling script.

“Just there,” he directs, pointing to the dotted line waiting for my signature.

I hover the pen over, considering. If I sign this, I’ll be transferred next week. That’s seven more days in this hellhole. Then, freedom. An image pops up in my brain, a memory that haunts my every moment. Blood spewing from his mouth as I slashed his throat, the knife I stabbed at his insistent fingers to release their crushing grip. My movements panicked, with pained sobs echoing around me, closing the walls in with the weight of my crimes.

Who knew that death was so loud and messy?

Finishing writing my name, I triumphantly place the pen down. My fate is signed away to this mysterious place, for now. The facilities and programs hold no appeal to me, I stuff the brochures in my pocket without looking. I don’t intend to stick around for long. I’ll end my pathetic existence the first chance I get.

“I’m proud that you’ve taken this step. You have a bright future ahead.” Zimmerman beams. “This is the start of a whole new journey for you.”

ONE

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BROOKLYN

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PHOBIA BY NOTHING BUT THIEVES

“LET’S get this show on the road, it’s a long drive to Wales.”

I tune out the guards’ voices, mindless chatter quickly replaced by the sputtering of the van’s engine. This piece of shit has been on its last legs since the day I arrived. Budget constraints prevent them from replacing it, I suppose. The government always has money for bombs and wars, but never for the places that actually need it.

As we pull away, I glance back through the rear window. Clearview Psychiatric Unit grows smaller in the distance, eventually disappearing into thick, London smog. I breathe a sigh of relief. Never thought I’d see the back of that place. Only way to leave is in a body bag, which despite my best efforts, never happened. After ten months of failure, it seems like the board has finally given up.

Now, I’m Blackwood’s problem.

Resting my head against the cool glass, I curl up into a more comfortable position. Bloody Nylah was screaming all night. When the nurses finally dragged her away, a round of applause sounded in the unit. She loves to make a scene, especially when they threaten the feeding tube. The rest of us just want to fucking sleep. Can’t say that I’ll miss her annoying, skinny ass.

I wonder what it’ll be like in this place. Zimmerman made it sound swanky, all privately funded and shit. This institute is the shining jewel of the psychiatric community. The words *revolutionary* and *progressive* have been tossed in my face all week. Why do I care what these people think they’re doing? It’s still a prison cell, no matter how it’s dressed up.

Not that it makes a difference. If they hadn’t arrested me in November, I would’ve succeeded in killing myself then. That was the next stage of my

plan. The only reason I'm still alive is those damn nosy nurses in Clearview that insisted on strict supervision after the last incident.

My fingers automatically crawl up my sleeve. The scar is thick and gnarly beneath my touch, stretching right down my forearm. I stroke the skin, breathing in the reassurance.

No one can stop me this time.

I refuse to live for a second longer than I'm made to.

The hours pass painfully slow as we drive through the countryside. I completely zone out for the most of it. That happens a lot. It's hard to stay focused when you're drugged up to your tits on more medication than I can even keep track of. Much later, doors slam as I force my eyes open, dark shadows filling the back of the van. I can hear the two guards snickering as they stretch their bodies.

"Let's drop this bitch off and hit the pub for a quick one, aye?"

"I could use a drink for the drive back. This place gives me the creeps anyway, all those dead eyes watching you. Reminds me of a graveyard, not a fucking hospital."

"Don't shit your pants, mate. The crazy bastards are locked up here for a reason."

Paul, aka Dickhead One, opens the side door and jerks his head, beckoning me out. Once I'm standing, he flaunts a pair of familiar handcuffs.

"Really?" I huff.

"Shut up, Brooke. You know the policy."

"You weren't too bothered by policy when my lips were wrapped around your cock last week. And don't fucking call me Brooke. How many times?"

He snaps the cuffs on unnecessarily tight, eyes narrowed angrily. "You keep your pretty little mouth shut about that or I'll have to tell on you. Popping pills is a disciplinary, maybe it'll even increase your sentence."

"You're the one that gave them to me, wanker," I spit back.

I'm roughly dragged along through the car park, with Dickhead Two bringing up the rear. Both seem desperate to get rid of me, the sooner the better. I've always had a way of pissing off the guards, none of them ever appreciated my smart mouth. Like I care what they think anyway.

"Don't forget my bag!" I bellow.

"I've got it, stupid bitch. Man, I hope I never see you again."

"Trust me, the feeling is mutual, you ugly old bastard."

Any further argument quickly dries up as we exit the car park, heading up

a cobbled street engulfed in thick mist. The temperature's dropped significantly between here and London, heavy storm clouds hanging low in the sky.

"Fucking Welsh gits. Man, I hate the countryside," Paul complains.

I roll my eyes. "Drop me off and you can fuck off back then."

He shoves me, fingers digging into my wrists as they escort me through the grounds. We reach a huge set of menacing wrought iron gates, hiding a gothic monstrosity that lies ahead. Paul shifts on his feet impatiently, punching the intercom button for attention.

"Clearview transfer here for drop-off."

There's a buzz in response, followed by a heavy clank as the gates swing open.

"Jesus," I whisper under my breath.

"Welcome to paradise, sweetheart," he goads.

Blackwood Institute is an imposing sight. It's somewhere between a lavish cathedral and an ancient university; with spiralling towers, vibrant stained glass, and polished black stone. Willow trees dot the landscape, leaves swaying in the wind. The quickly descending mist adds to the spookiness, obscuring much of the scenery.

An uncomfortable sensation creeps down my spine, setting me on edge immediately. There's something about this place, an inexplicable feeling that sets off mental alarm bells. I glance around for the source of my unease, but come up empty. Maybe I'm just losing it. I am hardly a poster girl for sanity.

After winding up the pathway, we pass beneath a grand archway. The familiar ornate crest is displayed at the apex, proudly announcing the institute and its date of establishment. Just in case you didn't know that unstable delinquents lie ahead.

There are two grey-faced guards in booths either side, guarding the main entrance. As we step up, I notice the vast selection of CCTV cameras, placed at all angles. Dead black eyes blink as our presence is recorded. A short exchange of information later, we're scanned with wand detectors and finally permitted inside. They don't even spare me a cursory glance while checking that I'm carrying no weapons and scanning my luggage, apparently a little too used to seeing arrivals late at night in handcuffs.

What the hell is this place?

The approaching building casts light across the manicured lawns. Passes checked, we're guided to a warm reception area. The ceiling stretches

upwards endlessly, with glimmering chandeliers adding to the luxury. I lose count of the paintings dotted around, along with stupid sculptures and other artefacts. Everything screams wealth and antiquity.

Is this a university, a prison or a fucking museum?

Paul smashes on the desk bell, sneering as he glances around the room. “It’s like a five-star hotel in here. Hardly fit for a criminal like yourself, Brooke.”

“Don’t worry. If you weren’t dropping me off, your shit poor ass would never see a place like this. Enjoy it while you can,” I quip back.

Sparing a quick look around, Paul tugs on the cuffs to bring me closer. When a hand cups my ass and squeezes, I fight the urge to shiver. He doesn’t deserve the satisfaction.

“No need to be rude. We might not see each other again, which is a shame. Even though you’re a drugged-up skank”—his lips brush my ear, breath wet and sticky—“you’ve still got a tight little pussy going for you.”

Hands clap together, startling him. I manage to pull my gaze from the ground, my cheeks flaming from the public humiliation.

“Is there a problem here, gentlemen?”

The receptionist looks between us, hazel eyes questioning. My gaze travels over his neatly styled blonde hair, crisp shirt with matching blue tie, and stylish black glasses.

“Nope. Just dropping off this troublemaker for you,” Paul replies smugly.

“I’m sure you can do that without touching her, hmm?”

Muttering under his breath, Paul takes a step back and reluctantly unlocks the painful cuffs. I rub my wrists, tilting my chin up in defiance.

“Bye then, don’t let the door hit your ass on the way out.” I smile.

A chuckle is smothered from behind the desk, but I don’t tear my eyes away. Not yet. Paul needs to remember me like this. Head held high, not trampled down by his need to break me. Nobody gets away with that anymore.

“See you in hell, sweetheart,” he spits, quickly signing the transfer papers and striding back out into the night without a second glance. Good fucking riddance.

“Well, that was unpleasant to say the least.” The receptionist laughs.

My attention turns back to him, standing there with a darn cute smile on his face. He’s cute in a boy-next-door kind of way. A little geeky for my tastes, but there’s something attractive about someone defending you, even

when you don't need the help. It'll take a lot more than that to get a matching smile out of me though. I don't do *friendly* very well.

"He's like that," I offer with a shrug.

"Sure. Guards tend to have a superiority complex, it comes with the authority." He chuckles, adjusting his glasses absently. "Anyway, you got a name?"

Staring wordlessly, it takes me a minute to realise what he's asking. *Oh, right.* Receptionist. Stop checking out how tight his shirt is. "It's Brooklyn West. Transferring from Clearview," I mutter.

He raises a pale blonde eyebrow, fingers flying across the keyboard. "Huh, not many people come from there. How'd you swing that?"

"Is it any of your business?"

"I guess not," he concedes. "Hang on, I need to get the deputy warden to come check you over. He's been expecting you. I'll be right back."

He disappears into the back office, leaving me to look around. I spot several guards standing in each corner. Their beady eyes are fixed on me, hands resting on discreetly placed batons. It's unnerving but frankly, I wouldn't expect anything less from a place like this. We're just criminals to them. A faceless horde to boss around.

The receptionist shortly returns with an older man in tow. He's dressed in an ugly tweed suit, greying hair slicked back and a portly belly hanging over his belt. I spy his ID and note the name 'Mike Tramwell' written next to a very unflattering picture.

"Brooklyn?" he asks tonelessly.

"In the flesh."

"You're late. We were expecting you this afternoon."

"Don't look at me, I just go when I'm told." I shrug as he frowns at me. "Those goons from Clearview were the ones in charge of my transfer."

"Those damn hospitals have no respect for timing," Mike grumbles, shuffling through papers and sliding me a stack. "Sign and let's get this over with. I'm late for dinner. The rest of the formalities will have to wait for tomorrow when the shrinks are back in."

I snort, flipping through the forms and signing without bothering to read them. I don't give a damn about his dinner, nor do I care what I'm signing. I have no intention of sticking around for long, it hardly matters. At least my lateness has saved me from facing anyone else tonight. Me and doctors don't exactly get on, especially not when I'm tired and running low on fucks to

give.

Mike files away the signed forms before clicking his fingers at one of the guards, beckoning for him to join us. “Check her over, and be quick about it.”

“Seriously? I just came from a place like this. You really think I have anything on me?” I groan, taking a step back. If they touch me, there’ll be hell to pay.

“Standard procedure. We gonna have a problem?”

One of the guards snatches my bag, swiftly unzipping it and depositing the contents on the reception desk. I watch with gritted teeth as he rifles through my meagre possessions, regardless of any semblance of privacy that I have left. The other marches towards me, preparing to do a pat down.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” I warn.

My resistance proves futile as I’m shoved onto the desk, my face pressed against the wood. It’s humiliating, the hands patting me down and searching my pockets, all while the cute receptionist watches in distaste.

“Shoes off,” the guard grunts.

“Piss off,” I reply shortly.

After a short tussle that has my cheeks burning, he tosses my battered Chucks back at me and declares that I’m all clear. I curse under my breath while lacing them, and a hand appears to help me up. Those hazel eyes stare down at me, waiting expectantly for me to accept the offer of help.

“I’m Kade. Welcome to Blackwood.”

Some fucking welcome that was.

I ignore the pair of them while repacking my bag, glaring at the confiscated toiletries dumped in a trash can. The remaining items are simply left on the side for me to sort. My fingers graze the stitching at the bottom, hiding the stuff that I actually care about. Thankfully, they didn’t notice anything off.

“She’s in Oakridge dorms, here’s the temporary pass until she gets her ID.” Mike slides a key card over to Kade. “Can you sort the rest of the arrangements in the morning? That’s the important stuff over with.”

“I’ll take her up now before I clock off. It’s too late for a tour, but I’ll do it with the other stuff tomorrow during my free period,” Kade replies.

Mike disappears into the office, leaving us alone with the guards still watching me closely. I shuffle my feet, waiting for Kade to gather some booklets and his jacket. He meets me on the other side of the desk. “Ready? Let’s go.”

Anxious sweat coats my palms as we head towards the exit, my head beginning to buzz with the rising panic of the unknown. It took me so long to adjust to life at Clearview, now I'm stuck in the vicious cycle of doing it all over again. I cannot wait to be free of it all, no longer beholden to the laws and control of others.

Kade leads the way, leaving me to trail behind. "You're over in Oakridge. Same as me."

I shove my fear aside and focus on him, eyes locked on his tall, lithe body and trim waistline. They certainly don't look like that where I've just come from, that's for sure. He's in good shape. That stupid shirt and tie are definitely hiding a firm chest.

Then I catch onto his words. "Wait, same as you?"

"You thought I worked here, didn't you?"

Well, fuck me sideways. Preppy's a patient? Or more accurately, a prisoner. This place looks impressive but there's enough CCTV cameras dotted around to tell me otherwise. We're being watched closely with every step we take.

"Don't worry, most people do. I just volunteer a few hours in the office each week. Keeps me busy and in the good books with management. It's fun to help out."

"Sure," I reply sarcastically. *Fun? Really?*

What kind of secure unit lets their detainees work for them? I'm given no further explanation as he scans his ID at the door, guiding me out into the dark night. I automatically tighten my jacket against the chill. I think it's Autumn, but who can tell? Time loses all meaning when you're separated from reality.

"What date is it?"

Kade gives me an odd look. "Uh, September 23rd."

Fuck. Where did all that time go? Nearly a year of my life, vanished into thin air. It's like I stopped living overnight and became a ghost to the world. The anniversary is close, a mere two months away. I can't live to see that day. No matter what it takes, I've got to be dead before November.

"It'll be easier to see in the daylight, but this is the quad. It's the centre of the institute, everything else surrounds this," Kade continues.

Gesturing around at the expanse of grass and perfect gardens, it's peppered with picnic tables and old-school street lamps that cast an orange glow. More cobbled pathways snake outwards, leading to further dated

buildings in the distance. It feels like we've stepped back in time a few hundred years, I almost expect a horse and carriage to appear at any moment.

"What about the rest of it?" I ask.

"I'll show you around first thing in the morning. You must be tired."

I nod, biting my lip. Why am I interested in seeing it anyway? Nothing could possibly keep me here for a second longer. It doesn't matter how nice this place appears to be.

Kade clears his throat. "So, what brings you to Blackwood?"

We walk down the central path, heading towards a glowing building in the distance. Towers twist around the roof, with arched windows and more accentuated brick. The gothic noire theme seems to be a permanent feature around here.

"Brooklyn?" he presses.

I didn't answer for a reason, smartass.

With another sigh, he continues regardless. "Well, hopefully you'll like it here. The teaching is decent and there's plenty to do. Your three years will fly by, I'm sure."

Does this guy ever stop fucking talking? I couldn't care less about the teaching. I certainly won't make it three years. His honey-smooth voice is managing to grate on me. I'm conditioned to silence now, rather than casual conversation.

"I've been here eighteen months. It's not bad really."

"Look," I interrupt, "as much as I appreciate the thought, can we not talk? Clearview sucked, and this place will too. Your guards have already humiliated me enough for one night. There's nothing else to say, so just show me to my room and fuck off, yeah?"

Hold it in.

You can lose it in private. Keep breathing.

"Sure," he mutters as we climb the steps to the dorms.

Upon entering the building, we're blasted with warmth. Polished chequered floors, rich panelled walls and more ugly paintings surround me. Admittedly, it's rather nice. Kind of like a stately home or something. A far cry from the white walls and linoleum floors of my last prison. *I mean hospital.*

Kade pauses to inspect the paperwork. "Looks like you're on the fourth floor."

"Key card?" I stick out my palm.

Hazel eyes resembling pools of molten caramel flecked with green stare back at me. Eventually, Kade surrenders the key card and a collection of information booklets. “You need a photo taken for your ID.”

“Tomorrow, right? I’ll be there.”

My skin is tight and prickly, a sure warning sign that I need to be alone. I’ve had more interaction today than in ten months at Clearview. My brain can’t deal with it all. The need to hide increases, my fingers spasming.

“You don’t have any questions? Nothing?”

“Nope. Night, Kade.”

Turning my back in dismissal, I grab my single bag and hightail it up the nearby stairs, taking them two at a time. *Faster, move it.* Don’t let him see you crumble. That’s private, nobody is allowed to see your vulnerability. Weakness equals exploitation in places like this.

By the time I round the corner, Kade’s annoyed face disappears. Relief loosens my chest, breathing coming a little easier. I continue to sprint upwards, shuffling through the paperwork as I go. Room 20. Single occupancy, thank fuck. Having a roommate will only complicate matters if I’m going to succeed in my plans.

I’m panting by the time I reach my door, glancing down the corridor lit by traditional sconces on dark brocade wallpaper. Somewhere in the distance, angry rap music blares. There’s shouting coming from behind one of the doors, followed by a heavy bang.

“Get the fuck out, now!”

A deep voice roars as a half-naked blonde is shoved out, the door quickly slamming shut in her face. “You’re a sick bastard, Hudson!” she screeches, kicking the wood in frustration.

I fumble with the key card, trying to unlock the door. It takes too long and I can feel her eyes on me as she turns, gathering the clothes tossed at her feet. Glancing up is a mistake, the scowl thrown my way burns like acid.

“The fuck you looking at? Freak.”

Normally I’d stay and piss her off for some entertainment, but the shake in my hands is worsening. I’m running out of time.

Click. Finally getting the door open, I slip inside without another word. My forehead falls to the wood, eyes sliding shut. Heartbeat hammering in my ears, I allow the sob to finally tear free from my mouth.

Red flashes behind my lids, pools of blood quickly gathering as the image forms. No matter how hard I shake my head, I can’t get rid of it — the

nightmare that follows me around. I see the lampshade broken and upended on the floor. A smashed beer bottle in shards around us. Cool steel clenched in my hand as I slip and slide through rivulets of blood.

The shadows wrapped around me that day, steeling my spine and adding fuel to my rage. They whispered their deadly commands. *Killing is easy, Brooklyn. You've just got to have the guts.*

I open my bag, slumping against the door without even bothering to turn the light on. Moonlight illuminates enough of the room for me to see what I'm doing. My finger glides along the stitching until I find my secret stash, fingering the edge of a hidden blade.

Sucking off Paul had its perks, a girl has got to do what's necessary to survive. He was good for some things at least. The pills he snuck in and this precious contraband were worth the degradation. That's what I tell myself anyway.

Shucking my jacket and rolling the sleeve of my jumper, I stroke the pale skin of my arm. Pearlescent scars meeting my fingertips, the bumpy ridges immortalising my sins. It's all about punishment. Nobody should get away with what I did.

Razor meets flesh, hot pain granting me instant satisfaction. I press down hard and bite my lip, savouring the resultant burn. Wetness spreads, running down to my elbow. I sneak a peek, the sight of dark trails making my heart thump harder as my mouth waters.

So fucking beautiful.

Three jagged cuts and I'm done. Only three. Control is necessary; if you do too many, the thrill is lessened. Pleasure comes with precision, not desperation.

I wasn't always this way. Most blame others for their demons. We're all victims one way or another, right? But not me. There's no one else to blame. I got this way all on my own.

I'm the fucking monster in this story.

TWO

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KADE

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JAWS BY SLEEP TOKEN

I STAND FROZEN, watching her dash up the stairs. My mouth slackens with shock and outrage. I should be used to the rudeness in this place, manners and mental health really don't mix. It serves me right for being Mr Nice Guy. Not everyone wants to be helped.

Shaking my head, I make my own way up to the fourth floor. Chest burning with every step, the indignation makes my jaw clench. She's a nobody. Just another lost cause for this hellhole to claim.

I've made it halfway through the program, only another eighteen months to go. I can't wait to get out of here and never look back. Unlocking the door, I'm immediately greeted by my hollering roommate playing Xbox like a hooligan. I stroll in, setting my coat and keys down before frowning at him.

"Dude, it's been seven hours. You're still playing that stupid game?"

Phoenix jerks his chin, refusing to tear his eyes from the screen. "It's Sunday. Get off my back, Kade."

"Exactly. You've got a paper due tomorrow, right?" I sigh.

He shrugs nonchalantly, gesturing towards the other bed.

"Got it covered."

I glance at my own bed. Eli is tucked away in the corner, oversized hoodie covering his wild brown curls and blocking out the world. I can see his hand working overtime from here, smashing out the essay, without stopping for air. The guy's like a machine when it comes to academia. There's an incredible mind buried in there somewhere.

"Eli can't do all your homework for you, jackass," I berate.

"Why not? He likes doing it."

"Is that why you swapped to history? Just because he was doing it too?"

A confident smirk crosses Phoenix's face. "You bet. My grades have never been higher."

Gotcha. He's only four years younger than me, but he behaves more than a twelve-year old than a grown man of nineteen. I slump onto my bed with a defeated sigh. Eli immediately shifts, pale hand reaching out to stroke my hair. It's his way of welcoming me home without saying a word, and I savour the contact with my eyes shut. For better or for worse, these two are my family. Our bonds run deeper than blood ever could.

"You're particularly grumpy today, what's got you all in a twist?" Phoenix asks.

The girl flickers through my mind again. *Brooklyn.* Long legs, pin straight blonde hair and wide, dead eyes. What is it about her that sets me on edge so badly? I normally don't give a shit about anyone beyond the guys.

"We got a new arrival. She gave quite the impression."

The sound of gunfire and racing engines halts as Phoenix abruptly pauses the game. "A girl? She hot?"

"I guess. From some place called Clearview."

The hand tangled in my hair suddenly freezes. I meet Eli's widened eyes. Crap, that's where I've heard that name before. Naturally I checked these guys' files when we became friends. I'm a control freak sometimes. Well, all of the time.

"Sorry man," I mutter.

He simply shakes his head, hand retreating and returning to the essay as he burrows deeper into the hoodie to escape. I put my foot right in it there like a complete moron.

Phoenix smirks. "You don't normally notice things like that."

"Like what?"

"Whether a girl is hot or not."

Rolling my eyes, I loosen my tie and pop a few shirt buttons. "Shut up, Nix. It's just an observation."

"Sounds like you observed her very... *enthusiastically.*"

After removing my dress shoe, I launch it across the room. The resultant yelp of pain makes me smile. "She's nothing. Let's talk about something else, yeah?"

Phoenix grumbles in agreement, tossing the shoe aside and rubbing his head. I slide my phone from my pocket, checking to see if Hudson has returned my calls yet. Of course not.

“You seen Hud today?”

“Last I saw him, he was off to screw Britt again.”

What the hell is he playing at? Just the idea of that bitch touching me is revolting. There isn't a guy in Blackwood that she hasn't tried it on with at least once.

“Fine. I'm going to take a shower,” I state.

“Don't take too long. We're playing football with Rio in half an hour.”

“Do we have to? He's a dick.”

“Agreed, but I owe him for those beers and cigarettes. We've got to play.”

Heading to the shared bathroom, I slam the door. I can't stand Rio and his idiotic entourage. All those jocks drive me insane. Like it's somehow a requirement to be an air-headed asshole. Doesn't take much to be a decent human being these days.

Ditching my glasses and clothing, I step into the shower, turning the heat up to max. Tension thrums beneath my skin. Brooklyn's snark is what put me in this foul mood. No one talks to me like that around here, most view me as untouchable. I'm the only one that is allowed to work in the office. The position grants me a level of respect and immunity.

The way she breezed straight past that, fuck if it didn't turn me on a little. I've got to get a grip. No attachments, no distractions. That was the deal. I'm here for one reason and one reason only. Nothing is allowed to distract me from that.

Her empty, lifeless eyes enter my mind again. The look of ashamed anger on her face as that creep had his hands all over her. Her sharp tongue hitting right back, despite the tell-tale tremble in her body. Goddammit, that was a pretty sight to behold.

My hand wraps around my hard cock. I don't get schoolyard crushes like some lovesick teenager. Yet all I want is to bang on her door until she answers, take her in my arms, and steal away the look of despair that is so clearly cemented in her eyes.

Resting my other hand against the wall, I work my shaft almost angrily, frustrated by my own irrational desire. I imagine the baggy sweater falling from her body, creamy white skin revealed. Kissing my way up her stomach, chest, neck. Lips meeting, she's gasping into my mouth as I touch her where she wants it. Not where that guy forced himself. It's not long before I'm groaning out my release.

She's just the newbie. That's all this is. I'll soon forget about her, she'll melt into the background like the rest of the screw-ups in this place. Insignificant and unimportant. Nobody holds my attention for long, not around here.

Eighteen more months. Damn, it can't go quick enough.

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THREE

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BROOKLYN

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I WANT OUT BY LOWBORN

SUNLIGHT BATHES ME IN WARMTH. Streaks of orange, pink and red paint the sky, the darkness of night abating. I let my gritty eyes sink shut, savouring the feeling. It's been way too long since I've watched a sunrise that wasn't behind metal bars.

My mum used to drag me out of bed to do it with her when I was a kid. No matter the weather, come rain or shine. She insisted we watch, and it became a daily ritual for most of my childhood. Right up until they left my life for good in a cloud of ash.

Come on, Brooke.

Put yourself in the way of beauty.

Another yawn rips free from my mouth. I'm exhausted. By the time I'd swept my hand over every inch of the tiny room assigned to me, it was past midnight. But you always have to check, I learnt that quickly in Clearview. When they put me in solitary for the first time, I discovered a stash of pills in a cracked brick. Based on the coma-like state they left me in after I overdosed, it was someone's meds they fake-swallowed and saved for a rainy day.

No such gifts were left for me here.

I'll have to do it myself.

Nearby footsteps break my precious solitude and I look around, my eyes landing on an early morning jogger. Seems I'm not the only one who can't sleep.

He's gangly, all long limbs and skinny skater-boy vibes. Even from here, I can see the dense curls sticking out of his baseball cap. My attention focuses on the hard muscles of his calves. He's shredded in a way that suggests this is

a regular exercise routine.

He doesn't notice my presence and just keeps on running. I'm really not up for conversation. I was awake all night, tossing and turning as the walls laughed at me. Just the thought of my upcoming morning tour leaves my mouth dry. That preppy geek, Kade, is supposed to be taking me.

I don't need a tour.

Once I see the shrink, I can get the ball rolling.

It won't take long to build up a nice little cocktail of drugs. Enough to stop my heart and choke me to death. Not a pretty way to go, but beggars can't be choosers. The level of privacy I have in this place is incredible. They make you shit with the door open in Clearview, so this is a fucking dream to me. Doc was right, what an opportunity. One that I fully intend to embrace.

I take off through the quad, intending to avoid the crowds. I'll just be fresh meat for them to pick apart and bully. I still remember my first day in Clearview. The guards marched me into the rec room and sat me amongst the other lifers. They were exchanging diagnoses like it was a fucking slumber party, all competing with one another. *Fuck that.*

I'm floored when the entrance door refuses to open. Not even a bit. Cursing, I kick the stupid thing as it still doesn't budge, slamming my body into it and relishing the resultant pain. I don't have a fucking ID yet. Kade let me in last night.

There's a high-pitched beep and it swings open, causing me to stumble. My back hits something hard, but it's too warm and nice smelling to be a wall. I turn my head and meet the bright green eyes of the jogger. He's staring at me blankly, looking almost shocked. His hands grip my arms to prevent me from falling.

"Uh, thanks," I stammer.

He continues to look straight at me, those emerald orbs piercing with intelligence. Not a word passes his lips as he studies me before eventually releasing his iron-grip. I watch as he disappears inside the building, leaving me staring at his back like an idiot.

Clearly, it's not just me that dislikes small talk, but with a tight ass like that, he doesn't really need to say a word.

Back in my room, I prepare for the day. It's not that bad here. With a surprisingly comfortable bed, white sheets and fluffy pillows, it's better than the lumpy cot I had previously. The room features grey walls and a built-in mahogany desk, along with matching curtains hiding a heavily barred

window. Not too shabby. I guess the private sponsors for this experimental program pay well.

Heaving my bag up, everything is a mess inside after the search last night. My belongings are meagre. Four t-shirts. Two sweaters. Two pairs of jeans. One journal. Some old photographs. My dirty Chucks and a pair of ancient Doc Martens. Beneath the stitching, tucked into a secret pocket, there's a half-empty carton of cigarettes, lighter and two more razor blades.

I don't own much. By the time the cops caught up to me, the contents of this bag were my entire life. I'm lucky that I've managed to hold onto it. Especially the creased, dog-eared polaroids. I intended to throw myself in front of the train while holding them but was arrested instead.

Choosing my favourite acid wash jeans and worn *Nirvana* shirt, I dress in silence. My mind ticks away anxiously, even as I lace my neon pink Doc Martens. I wonder what will happen to the bag when I'm gone. Will they throw it? My shit is worthless. I should get rid of the journal myself. Someone will only enjoy reading it and feigning insight into why I did it. Fuck that. This is my moment to own. Dying on my terms, in my way, when I choose to.

Not like he did. You took that from him, a voice whispers from across the room. My head snaps up as I search around, finding nobody there. Not even a shadow taunting me. Someone knocks on my door, bringing me back to reality as I force air back into my constricted lungs.

"Brooklyn? You in?"

Sliding my best blank expression into place, I grab my pack of cigarettes and leather jacket before opening the door.

"Good morning," Kade greets.

He's dressed to the nines again. This time in a pale blue shirt with a navy tie. With his black-rimmed glasses and slick blonde hair, he's probably the fantasy of many women around here.

"Uh huh," I mutter.

Not going to fool me with that megawatt smile, pretty boy.

"Good sleep?" he enquires, leading the way downstairs.

"Sure."

We head outside and I keep my hair loose around my face, shielding me from unwanted attention. If anyone tries to befriend me, I'll just punch them in the face. That should ward off any further attempts at interaction.

"Let's get the rest of the boring stuff sorted and then I'll show you

around, yeah?” Kade offers.

“Whatever. You’re the boss.”

I can feel him looking, but I don’t react. He’ll learn soon enough.

The quad’s a little busier, a few patients milling about. By the time we get back to the main building, at least three people have greeted Kade. Seems like Mr Popular over here has a lot of friends. Definitely need to get rid of him.

Kade logs into the computer in the reception, leaving me to linger awkwardly. He just walks in like he owns the place, doesn’t even bat an eye. *Who the hell is this guy?* He doesn’t act like a patient whatsoever. Not that I’m interested.

“Right, there’s a bunch of other forms you need to fill out and return. Sorry, I’m sure you know how complicated all this transfer stuff is.” Kade attempts to roll his eyes, but I refuse to laugh. He stares at me for a long second before looking away.

“It looks like you’re booked in with Doctor Ashley at three for your psych eval and orientation,” he states, gathering the necessary paperwork. “Give it all to her, she can return it to the office. Now it’s just your ID picture and we’re good to go. Did you get a chance to read everything last night to submit your choices?”

“My... choices?”

Kade pins me with an exasperated look.

“The subjects you want to study? In the booklets I gave you?”

Oh, the ones I discarded without a second glance.

“Not so much, no.”

“Well, what do you enjoy?”

I stare at him unblinking. “What do I enjoy?”

The frown I receive does nothing to improve my mood. Fists clenching, I glance away. Study the wall for a second, then my shoes. *Enjoy? Focus? Studying?* It’s like he’s speaking a whole different language. All I can do is stare blankly.

“Come on, there must be something. What did you do in school?”

Drank too much and fucked the hot teaching assistant for a gram of weed. I press my lips together, holding back the truth. That’s a little too embarrassing to share out loud.

“Brooklyn?”

His voice sounds far away as I begin to spiral, panic taking hold. I don’t

know. There's no answer, I don't fucking enjoy anything. Haven't for a long time. When was the last time I did something for fun? Not since the sickness inside of me took root, and ruined my entire life.

"N-Nothing. I did nothing."

"Why won't you tell me?"

Breathing in sharply, I slam my hands on the welcome desk. A pencil pot goes flying, crashing to the floor as Kade flinches back, eyes wide with surprise.

"Are you fucking deaf? I don't enjoy anything," I yell at him. "I don't want to study anything. And I don't want to be here, or talk to you. Capiche, asshole?"

We glare at each other, neither willing to back down. I briefly consider reaching over to grab his tie and strangle him with it, the temptation is so strong it makes my fingers twitch.

"I'll just sign you up for a taster," Kade concludes.

Oh, fuck me gently. Give me strength.

"What?" I frown at him.

"You'll do a bunch of different stuff for a couple of days, get a feel of things."

My teeth snap together. Breaking his perfectly straight nose isn't the best idea, no matter how tempting the thought is. I can almost hear the bone cracking beneath my fist.

"Fine. Taster it is."

More keyboard tapping and paperwork later, I'm given a schedule that begins tomorrow and lasts two days. The variety of subjects makes me cringe. This is going to be torture. Hell if they think I'm doing sports.

"Right, picture time."

Kade disappears out back, returning a minute later with a digital camera. I stand straight and manage a tiny, forced smile. The act physically pains me. He raises the camera, ready to snap but hesitates.

"Hang on..."

Before I can move or smack his hand away, Kade comes close and tucks stray hair behind my ear. Fingers brush my cheek, forcing my heart to stutter. Those perceptive eyes watch me and he looks like he wants to say more, but then retreats.

"Perfect."

The lens snaps, a few shots are taken and his back turns. I don't let out

my held breath until he's back in the office. Did I just imagine that? When Kade reappears, I force myself to act unaffected.

“Should be ready in a few hours. You'll be able to access buildings and register your attendance then,” he explains. “It's for the cafeteria as well. All included, three meals a day and snacks. Unless you're one of the anorexics, they have a separate dining area and stuff.”

“Yeah, I'm not.”

“Good to know. Let's go, I haven't got all day.”

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FOUR

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ELI

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SAIL BY AWOLNATION

“FUCKING HOT HEAD nearly broke my ankle! What happened to playing for fun and blowing off steam? Honestly,” Phoenix drones on, stabbing his eggs. I tune out most of it. Just lift one shoulder and drop it in a half assed shrug.

“I guess you’re right. No point dwelling on it,” he adds.

Gesturing to his half-full plate, I bob my head.

“Chill, Eli. I’ll eat up. I hate Monday morning classes. It’s too early.”

I hate every second of the day, week and month. But you don’t see me bitching about it. You don’t see me speaking at all. Not when my brain is full of flavours and confusion. Just functioning is hard enough.

My tongue was stolen a long time ago. Words only pass my lips once in a blue moon. I’m too busy dealing with the constant sensory overload. Speaking only worsens my Synaesthesia. Every word and emotion brings new flavours or scents, it’s just too much.

“Hey, Earth to Eli. You’re gonna want to see this.”

He’s nodding at something behind me. Tilting my head, my eyes track across the room. Scanning familiar numb faces, some more alive than others. We’re a cacophony of failures here, in varying degrees. Some are worse than others, but we’re all fucking broken. Society’s rejects stuck in a broken system all in the name of experimentation.

Kade parts the crowd as he strides in. More heads turn when they realise he isn’t alone. Everything stops as I clap eyes on the familiar face following him, one that took me by complete surprise after my jog this morning.

Stomping in her bright pink boots, hands scrunched into balls; her temper clearly hasn’t changed. Even from here I can see her angled jaw is clenched,

perfect pixie face marred by a fierce grimace. Her rage tastes like burned toast. Acrid and bitter on my palate.

“Do you reckon that’s her?”

I nod in response.

Brooklyn. Her name is scored into my memory. I’ve already met the ghost that’s riled Kade up so badly, before I came to Blackwood. I never expected to see her again. She looks even worse than before. Bones protruding, pale skin and that damned blank face, like she doesn’t know how to smile.

“She’s hot, but needs fattening up a little. Poor girl looks half dead.”

The glare I throw at Phoenix comes easily. His big mouth will get him into serious trouble one day. I feel like I’m chewing ashes, the emotion welling up. Breathing deep, I clear my mind and wash the flavour away. It’s not real.

“Dude, they’re coming this way,” Phoenix whispers.

My heart pounds. I may already know Brooklyn, but we’ve never been formally introduced. I always preferred to watch from afar, unable to ever speak to her. What if she remembers me? What if she realises who I am?

“Morning gents,” Kade greets.

He places his breakfast down on my left, leaving the seat opposite vacant. Fucking hell. Why did he do that? Burned waffles. Roaring fire. Cigarette ash. *Calm down and get a grip, Eli.* It’s not bloody real.

“Take a seat, we don’t bite,” Phoenix invites.

I can feel Brooklyn hesitating, lingering just behind me. There’s an audible sigh that makes me want to chuckle. I feel like that as well. She eventually shuffles past, plonking an apple and bottle of water down. The first thing I recognise is the frayed band shirt, it’s the same one she wore in Clearview.

“Guys, this is Brooklyn. She’s new here.”

Phoenix immediately shifts closer. “I’m Phoenix.”

He sticks his hand out expectantly. I almost choke on my mouthful when she eyes him distrustfully, refusing to shake. “Hi,” she deadpans.

He quickly recovers, hand retreating and sweeping through his midnight blue hair. Smooth talker here isn’t used to being dismissed. Our eyes connect and he glares, making my lips twitch into a tiny smile. Serves him right.

Ah, that’s better. Candyfloss and full fat coke. Amusement is a good taste.

“Brooklyn is doing a two-day taster from tomorrow, maybe you can both show her to history in the morning?” Kade suggests.

He’s frustrated, I can see it easily. That tastes like spoiled, sour milk. Negativity in others is never pleasant, hence my avoidance of pretty much everyone but the guys. Talking is completely off the table, even with those I trust.

“It’ll be nice to have some company other than this chatterbox,” Phoenix says.

I flip him off automatically, gaining Brooklyn’s attention. Her gaze burns, eviscerating me until I’m looking up, making rare eye contact. Pale grey puddles stare back, framed by long lashes. Her nose is small and pert, lips chapped and red from excessive chewing. She recognises me from this morning, when I nearly fell over with shock from realising it was her.

“This is Eli, he doesn’t talk much,” Kade explains.

I hate being noticed and judged, hate being *seen*. Invisibility is my friend and protector. Her mind must be working overtime, wondering why I don’t introduce myself. Flipping up my hood, I burrow into the protective bubble of my hoodie. Drop her eyes. Tuck my chin downwards. Anything to escape.

“Nice to meet you,” she murmurs, so low I almost miss it.

Brooklyn sees me, more than I’m comfortable with. She sees me far too easily. Far too deeply. Panic floods my mind, sharp and sour. Like tart grapefruit, so strong it’s almost painful.

“So, what are you planning to major in?” Phoenix interjects.

“She doesn’t know...yet,” Kade adds.

“She can answer for herself, thank you very much.”

Her voice is gravelly and low, not like the overbearing whine of other girls. It’s music to my ears. I hate the screechers. They overwhelm me the most. Hudson often attracts such female interest and it drives me mad. So many emotions on display to fuck my head with.

Kade clears his throat. “Be my guest.”

“I’m not sure yet. That’s all,” she mutters.

“Well, there’s plenty of space on the history course,” Phoenix rambles, desperately needing to fill silence. “It’s boring as fuck and the reading is long, but there’s worse things to be doing. Or... Maths? Science?”

“No maths,” Brooklyn snaps.

“Science?”

“Nope.”

“Err, English?”

No immediate response. He’s got her attention now.

“It’s a popular choice,” Kade adds.

Leave her alone already. I can practically feel her nervous energy from here. It’s thick, like that awful cough syrup you were given as a kid. Other people’s anxiety is a real issue for me. I’ve got enough of my own to manage.

“I don’t know. How many times do I have to say it? Just back off.”

Her voice is high and defensive, and it pushes me over the edge. I lower my head to the table, fighting back the rush of sensations. She’s a ball of anger and hatred, it’s making me sick to my stomach. Too many feelings, too many tastes. All I want is to be left alone. I can’t deal with this.

Kade gently rubs my back, offering comfort. He’s the only one that helps calm me. Cool and composed, like a soothing balm on burned skin. My favourite kind of person. The other two are more difficult to be around, especially when Phoenix has a manic episode. Brooklyn’s an unstable element in this recipe for disaster. It’s unhinging me already.

“It’s okay, bud. We’ll drop it now. Just breathe,” Kade encourages.

“Is he okay?” Brooklyn asks.

“It’s kind of hard to explain. Eli?”

I bob my head, issuing my consent. Once she knows, it’ll be easier. She’ll run in fear and that’ll be it. I can slink back into the background where I belong, and quietly watch her just like before. She’ll never even know.

“Eli has a rare condition. It’s called Lexical-Gustatory Synaesthesia,” Kade begins. “Essentially, it means that he can... taste emotions. Particularly strong ones. They create sensations in him that he can’t control. It’s overwhelming and frightening. We try not to disagree or argue around him for this reason.”

Cue the disgust and judgement.

“I see.”

Something touches my hood, then my hand. It’s her fingers, brushing tentatively. I raise my head, daring to sneak a glance. She isn’t frowning or laughing, there’s no cruel taunt or joke. This is something else. Cool and refreshing, like a glass of iced water on a hot day.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

She’s apologising? Is that... a smile?

“Having a quirky brain isn’t always a bad thing, Eli.”

With that she looks away, picking up her apple to bite into. The others are

staring too, shocked by her reaction. No one treats me like that outside of the group. I'm a freak to them all, the butt of many jokes. But she's just rolling with it regardless.

Licking my lips, I force the exotic taste of surprise from my mouth. Preparing. Gathering strength. Mustering courage. *Come on, Eli. Fucking get it out already, the girl's waiting.* But no words come, just like usual. They're lodged in my throat, refusing to surface as fear wraps around my vocal chords. Instead I manage a tiny smile, hoping to convey my gratitude.

On her lips, she wears a matching smile that takes my breath away. She's beautiful when she's like that. Goddammit, I need to see that smile again. It tastes fucking good. Rare happiness. Like freshly cut grass or a recent rainfall.

We lapse into silence. Just the crunching of her eating the apple, and the other two having some kind of wordless conversation with glances and looks.

A heckling voice interrupts. "Yo, Nix. You really sucked last night, man."

Phoenix pouts. "Fuck off, Rio. You play dirty, it's not fair."

The overbearing dickhead and his trio of assholes circle the table. I look away, they're far too boisterous for me to deal with. Rio runs shit around here among the patients, so he's often trying to screw with me. I can see Brooklyn watching, and I tense knowing that she can see through me even better now. It's uncomfortable as hell.

"Who's this? Been a while since we've had some new pussy in this place," Rio jeers, scooting up close to her.

My blood boils just seeing her shiver, the awful taste of smoke back in my mouth as I swallow ashes. *Leave her alone, asshole.* If only I could scream it in his face or actually do something. Instead I'm sitting here like a scared kid, unable to mount any defence on her behalf.

"Hey there, hotness. Name's Rio. Room 37, if you're interested."

"I'm not."

Her voice lashes like a bolt of lightning. Unwavering with fury, she's got strength beneath that weak, trembling exterior. I like that.

"No need to be so rude, I'm just being friendly," Rio sneers. "You'll learn that I'm kind of a big deal around here, so better cut it out with the attitude. Besides, you look out of place with these misfits. Especially this one."

He jerks a finger in my direction. I'd love to cut it off and shove it down his throat until he chokes.

“Come join us at our table and we’ll show you a good time, yeah?”

“Nope,” Brooklyn replies.

“Excuse me?”

Rio is a prick, but he’s not someone to be messed with. Places like this run on respect and favours, the code of fellow imprisoned patients. Phoenix and Hudson have proven that with many black eyes in the past. But Brooklyn doesn’t care, turning that cold expression on him.

“I said no, fuckface. Now get lost before I become less friendly.”

Rio’s laugh is amused, like he’s enjoying the fight. I get the appeal, she’s a ballbuster and nobody really stands up to him anymore. He’s scared everyone into submission.

“I said come and sit with us. What part of that don’t you understand?”

When his fingers tighten on her chin, I see red. Before I can launch myself and punch his goddamn lights out, Brooklyn takes matters into her own hands. There’s an echoing crack, the blur of her fist sailing through the air. She’s got a mean right hook. Rather embarrassingly, it’s a huge turn on. The way she’s leaning over Rio, dominating the space and humiliating him in front of the whole canteen.

“Learn how to take no for an answer, you piece of shit,” Brooklyn spits at him. “Now get out of here before I embarrass you further, God knows your reputation can’t take another hit like that.”

Rio manages to stand, hand clasped over his bleeding face. “You’re a fucking psychopath!” he accuses. “What the hell? Dumb bitch.”

Brooklyn grins and it’s nothing like the shy smile I received. This one is dark and threatening, her eyes pinched and pupils darkened. Someone else entirely stands before us now, a side of her I’ve never seen.

“You bet. Don’t forget it. Annoy me again, and I’ll break your fucking leg.”

Rio and his back-up scramble before the guards catch wind of what happened and punish us all. The whole cafeteria is staring, but she doesn’t cower or back down. This girl is something else. A brutal alter-ego beneath the vulnerable surface. I’m beyond intrigued and hard just watching her.

“The hell are you all looking at?” Brooklyn bellows.

Gazes are averted and she keeps her head high until conversation resumes. I shift uncomfortably, my dick aching from its denim prison. The fire in her eyes and steel in her spine is incredible.

“Fuck, I think you might be my new favourite,” Phoenix gasps.

She laughs, returning to her half-eaten apple like nothing happened.
We're in for trouble with this one.

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FIVE

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BROOKLYN

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I FALL APART BY POST MALONE

“ALONG THE HALL, second door on the left.”

I nod my thanks to the receptionist, heading in the direction she’s pointing while mentally preparing for the torture ahead. I hate shrinks. Pretentious, overbearing assholes. Never met one who didn’t act like a pompous twat. Using their certificates and awards to tell you that you’re mentally fucked. Thanks, like I didn’t already know that. How kind of you to highlight my failures.

I reach the door at the end of the thickly carpeted hallway, name tagged with ‘Doctor Mariam Ashley, PhD’. *Remember, play along. You know the lines.*

Yes Doctor, I want to improve.

No, I don’t want to die.

Yes, I’m taking my medication.

Weight loss? Just my metabolism.

I’m committed to my recovery, you know.

A voice calls for me to enter and I slip inside. It’s a spacious room, all tall bookshelves and soft lighting. There’s the standard couch, with two armchairs and a coffee table. Tissues front and centre, of course. I don’t need to look at the wall to confirm the rows of framed qualifications and degrees.

It’s the blink of a camera in the corner that surprises me. I keep seeing them everywhere, discreetly tucked away but watching nonetheless. Dozens in every room, even more than the few they had in Clearview.

“Ah, you must be Brooklyn. Please take a seat.”

Doctor Ashley stands, circling the desk to join me. She has lightly greying hair and wears a practical suit with bright red glasses. I’d say she’s

middle aged but ageing gracefully. There's no criticising the bright smile spread across her face, even if she looks mildly unhinged. No one is that happy. It's unrealistic.

Answer her. Make it sound genuine. "Hi. Yeah, that's me."

I take one of the armchairs, bypassing the couch. Too fucking stereotypical for me. She takes the other, folding her legs gracefully while flourishing a pen and notepad.

"Right then. It's a pleasure to meet you, please call me Mariam. We like to keep things nice and relaxed here. I want you to feel comfortable with me."

I stare. *Relaxed? Comfortable?*

It's different from the sedatives and padded rooms of the last ten months. That scares me. I like to know the status quo and this place is defying all expectations so far. Experimental doesn't begin to cover it. I'm yet to decide if it's a good thing, different isn't always better.

"I've been informed by Doctor Zimmerman about your history and treatment. I agree this place could be beneficial for you. As much respect as I have for his tenure, some find themselves lost in the system at Clearview. They never step outside ever again. It's a tragedy, truly."

"Maybe there's a reason for that," I mutter.

"And what's that?"

She sits back, eyeing me expectantly. *Here we go.*

"I'm hardly innocent."

"And you think that you deserve to be punished?"

I dig my nails into my palms. "Don't you?"

Sighing, Mariam removes her glasses. "Brooklyn, you were in the depths of a psychotic episode when you committed your crime. Schizophrenia is a debilitating illness when not managed properly. Your sentence was passed with the insanity plea in mind. You have a sickness, my dear."

Insanity. I hate that word. Implying that I was ever sane to begin with.

"Why am I here then? Why am I not locked up?" I ask defiantly. "Dangerously unhinged and vicious, that's what the judge called me. You know that, right? I'm sure it's in my fucking file."

"Yes, it is. And the answer is simple. We are the best equipped to deal with a young adult such as yourself that has found their life turned upside down by mental illness. The ethos of our experimental programme centres on rehabilitation, not punishment. This isn't a prison, it's a treatment facility. You are a patient here, not a prisoner."

“I can leave?” *And go jump off a bridge*, something whispers mentally.

“No. You’ve been transferred here, not admitted on a voluntary basis as some are,” she answers firmly. “You are still sectioned by law until you are stable and recovered. Finish the program, then you can transition back into the community. Where you will still be supervised, I might add.”

Great. Sounds like prison to me.

“Look, I’m going to level with you,” Mariam begins.

I shrug, inviting her to continue. *Fucking enlighten me.*

“You’re a tough nut to crack, am I right?”

I open my mouth, before clicking it shut.

“Your history is complex and extensive,” she continues. “This isn’t going to be an easy process. Clearview didn’t work, so we’re the other option. I have faith in the unique system we’ve built here. Education, therapy and rehabilitation in equal measure. You cannot achieve recovery without all three to help you along the way. Frankly, if this place can’t stabilise you then nowhere can. You understand?”

Wow, so comforting. I’m screwed.

“What are you suggesting?” I grit out.

This obedience thing is killing me.

“One-to-one therapy with me twice a week. We also run a group session that I’d like you to attend. I want to change your medication too, there’s some avenues for managing your condition that haven’t yet been explored. We’ll up the dosage and add in some new experimental drugs. See if that gets things moving along.”

This must be what winning feels like. More drugs? Yes, Doctor. More fucking ammo for me to use. What a goddamn victory. I gloss right over the other shit, it doesn’t matter much to me anyway. I’ve got what I wanted.

“That sounds good. I really want to get better.”

Fuck, I’m good. I almost believe myself.

“Another thing, I want you to work on embracing the system here,” Mariam instructs. “We run a tight ship with a rigid schedule, but sometimes that’s the best thing for you.”

I smile innocently. “What do you want me to do?”

“Pick a major, throw yourself into routine. Maybe even make a few friends. It’ll be good for you to experience some normality and discipline.” She fiddles with her bright glasses, offering me a smile. “That’s what we have set out to achieve here, Brooklyn. No more hospital life for you. Think

of it as a fresh start for you to move on from the past.”

I have to remind my heart this isn't for real. The initial blossoms of hope are pointless. Quickly crushed. I can never have a normal life, no matter how confident she is otherwise. That's not how things work. The world doesn't just forgive and forget. I deserve my punishment. I deserve to die alone.

“Sounds like a plan,” I concede.

Mariam writes aggressively for a few seconds, nodding to herself. “Fabulous. I'll get all the relevant information to you. I'm looking forward to seeing you for our individual session. Now, there was one other thing...”

She returns to the desk and begins digging through stacks of paper. My fingers drum on my crossed leg, impatience returning. Just give me the prescription and let me go already, I want to yell. Her whole enthusiastic routine is tiresome.

“Ah, here. Doctor Zimmerman sent these for you. There seems to be a whole bunch of letters here, backdated by several months. He apparently took the executive decision not to share them with you while your recovery was so fragile.”

Who would write to me? What kind of fascist bastard keeps personal correspondence from a patient? The questions mount as my emotions spiral out of control. I'm shaking with anger, barely keeping it in as my hands clench into fists.

“Why?” I manage to say.

Mariam shakes her head, clearly annoyed. “Like I said, we're not Clearview. I do things differently around here. You should be in control of your own communication, regardless of your mental state. I'm sorry.”

Handing me the bundle, she offers me a conciliatory smile. I don't return it. The letters are heavy in my hand, the burden instantly weighing me down. I have no one, literally no one. Where did all these unanswered letters come from?

“I'll let you go early so you can dive right in. Someone's probably waiting impatiently for your reply.” She sounds so enthusiastic, it's infuriating. “Family, perhaps? You should let them know how you're getting on.”

“Uh huh. Maybe.”

Don't fucking have any, but I'll say anything to get out of here. Once I've handed over the scrawled paperwork, I'm finally free. Meds are served after dinner apparently, so the rest of the afternoon is mine.

I finger the worn envelopes, eyes flicking over the scrawled writing. Pulling the first letter free from the bundle, I flip it, searching for a return address. The back of the envelope features more rushed penmanship, naming the sender.

Allison Brunel.

Cold washes over me, flooding every inch of my body as uncontrollable trembling begins. No. No. Not happening. There's got to be dozens of letters here. Are they all from her? Fuck me. I can't do this.

You did this. Now you will pay the price.

I never knew a voice could hold that much venom until the day she said that. Shaking my head, I try to push the sickening memory away. The accusations fuelled by grief that were tossed at me, cruel insults and vicious words that I carry with me every damn day. It's too raw, too real. All I feel is guilt.

My fingers twitch with the need to cut. Release. I've got to get it out, this is the only way I know how. Fuck the therapy. Doesn't do shit anyway. Only one thing helps. I don't deserve any better. Only pain.

Tucking the dreaded package into my pocket, I take off down the corridor. Counting each step in my head, breathing in time to the rhythm. Meds tonight. That's three doses. New prescription tomorrow. That's another four. Within a week, that should be enough. No mistakes this time. No second chances or redoes. No waking up in a hospital bed.

I've got to fucking die.

SIX

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PHOENIX

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KISS BY LIL PEEP

I RAM my cock deep into his throat, eyes rolling back with pleasure. Tyler always takes it deep. Almost makes his unbearable personality worth it. Almost. Grasping his hair, I thrust faster. Harder. Rougher. Pouring all my frustration and arousal into the movements. He continues without complaint. Not even a bat of the eye.

That's the thing about fucking guys.

It's so much simpler. Less hassle.

There's one girl that has caught my attention. One particular beauty with enough sass and ferocity to intrigue even me. Being bisexual isn't always linear. It's not equal. I just go where the wind takes me and don't pay much attention. But lately? Nothing's gotten me even remotely hard. Screwing Tyler is just a means to an end, releasing my manic energy before it destroys me.

I've been all worked up since she drew blood yesterday, owning Rio's ass without stopping for a breath. Months of boredom ended in that moment. All I wanted to do was lean in and lick the blood from her bruised knuckles. Then fuck her so hard she wouldn't be able to walk straight for a week.

Groaning, I dump my load in Tyler's throat. He slows, obediently swallowing. Dammit, just imagine Brooklyn on her knees down there. Pert lips wrapped around my shaft, my hand fisted in her long hair. I'd love to tie her up. Make her submit to me, knowing the fierce woman that lies beneath the surface. That'll make it even sweeter.

"Nix?"

Tyler's staring up at me expectantly, but all I feel is revulsion. Why am I such an asshole? Using people isn't cool. I know that, yet I can't seem to help

myself.

“Yeah, thanks.”

I zip my ripped black jeans, turning my back to him.

“That’s it?”

“What else do you want from me?”

Tyler grabs my shoulders and shouts in my face. “I want you to fucking care. To act like you actually give a shit about me for once.”

Not likely. Feelings aren’t really my jam.

“It’s not going to happen. You know we’re not about that,” I reply emotionlessly. “We agreed on no strings attached.”

Tears fill his eyes. Jeez, great. Another meltdown.

“You’re a bastard, you know that?”

I shrug, smirking. “Yep, I’m aware.”

“Goddamn junkie, that’s what you are. A screwed up, unstable addict. I’m just another fix to you, right? You can’t get any precious drugs to kill yourself with so you fuck with people instead.”

Tyler turns to leave, angrily wiping the moisture from his red face. I can’t find it in myself to care. Not really. I’m aware of how shitty that is. But truthfully, he means nothing to me. This is all superficial. Yep, I’m a fucking junkie. He got that right.

Addicted to ruining others for my own amusement.

“I’m done, Nix. You’ve pushed me for the last time.”

I gesture to the door. “Fine, fuck off then. Don’t come back.”

His jaw drops, hands balled into fists. “How can you treat me like this?”

Do I really have to humiliate him further? I clasp his face, tilting it up to assert my dominance. The sight of fear and shame swirling in his eyes makes me smile. That’s right, I hope it fucking hurts. This is the real me. Beneath the smiles and banter, there’s something a hell of a lot darker. I’m good at playing the joker and cracking wise. But in private? Not so much.

“Listen up, Tyler. You’re nothing more than a piece of ass to me. You got that? As of right now, you have outlived your purpose. I’m bored. So, when I tell you to leave,” I bite his bottom lip hard enough to draw blood, “I fucking mean it.”

Licking my lips for good measure, I shove him away. There’s no hesitation this time. He’s out the door without another word. I’m not ashamed to admit that his heartbreak thrills me. Tyler’s a good screw, but fucking him over is even better.

Slumping on the bed, I dislodge the loose chunk of plaster and grab one of my stashed meds, swallowing it dry. I can feel the hysteria bubbling up in my mind and I'm in no mood to stay up for three days until it burns out. My last episode ended badly for everyone.

I scroll aimlessly on my phone to distract myself. Shit, I'd love Brooklyn's number. She's stuck in my head like nothing else. I wonder what she's doing right now.

Kade stormed off when she skipped dinner. That guy's got a serious saviour complex. Always worried about others, even when they don't give two shits about him. That's why he stopped caring, focusing solely on our little screwed-up family. We look after our own. This Brooklyn chick? She'd steamroll him in a second if she knew how possessive he is.

Groaning, I toss the phone aside. I picture her splayed out on my bed, legs spread wide and secured to the frame with one of Kade's ties. I'd eat her cunt while she screams and spank her until she bleeds.

The door slams open, bouncing off the wall with a resounding *crack*. "No answer. The hell is she playing at?" Kade exclaims as he storms in.

I watch as he rips the loosened tie off, tossing it in anger at the wall. My mouth goes dry as I consider the item, forcing my filthy fantasy aside. My eyes track down over Kade's body. Yeah, we're best friends and roommates. Doesn't mean I can't appreciate him. Especially when he's all riled up and aggressive.

"Chill out, man. Why do you even care? She's been here for two fucking days," I point out.

"Because!"

Raising an eyebrow, I let my cocky smile piss him off further. "Care to finish that sentence?"

"Because it's my job," Kade groans.

"Yeah, right. Whatever you say."

"Fuck off, Nix. Where's Tyler anyway?"

"He's gone. I got bored of the constant whining."

Kade nods thoughtfully, running a hand through his slick blonde locks. "In that case, come help me find Hudson? He's avoiding me again."

"Jesus. What is it with you and finding people today?"

I'm rewarded with an annoyed glare as Kade runs out of patience. He's always running around after Hudson for one reason or another, when they aren't arguing or trying to kill each other. It's a love-hate relationship at best,

but that doesn't stop Kade from caring.

"You know what he gets like. He seemed to be doing better for a while, but the last few weeks have been tough. We're losing him again," Kade explains.

"I don't know... he doesn't exactly like you spying on him."

Cursing under his breath, he turns to leave. "Again, it's my job."

"Doesn't have to be!" I call after him.

The resounding slam of the door answers me. That's the thing about Kade, he's relentlessly stubborn. When he becomes invested in someone, it's damn near impossible to sway him. That's what happened with me, then Eli. We were both brought into the family through his need to control and protect.

Hudson is a whole other story altogether.

Back on my phone, I tap Brooklyn's name into Facebook on a whim. Got to do something to satisfy the fantasist inside of me. I'm disappointed when it yields no results, so I try Instagram, followed by every other social media platform possible as my curiosity mounts.

There's nothing.

Not a single profile or photo. She's a fucking ghost. It's almost like she's been wiped from every inch of the internet. No way she's gone her whole life without making any accounts. Someone has systematically deleted everything.

Growing frustrated, I turn to Google.

This time, I'm not disappointed. A whole slew of news stories appear, headlines viciously blazoned for the world to see. I scroll through, a heavy weight growing in my gut with every word. Something's telling me to look away, but morbid curiosity beats my conscience. No one here is fucking innocent, you don't end up in a place like this without some kind of damage. But this girl?

She's earned her place alright.

Goddammit, I should be running in the opposite direction. My record here is damn near spotless, I've worked my ass off to get clean and avoid further rehab. The guys supported me through it all when I arrived. Sure, I fuck like a degenerate and disregard any sign of commitment or emotional attachment. But it's better than heroin, right?

This girl is Grade A fucked. No two ways about it. We should all be steering clear for our own protection. But hell, I like a challenge.

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SEVEN

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BROOKLYN

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GASOLINE BY HALSEY

FIRST DAY OF CLASSES, and I'm over it already. It feels like I'm starting school all over again, back when I was fostered and had to attend in borrowed uniform. The memory of those days is fucking toxic and I push it aside. I'm twenty-one years old, for fuck's sake. I've done my time in education. Yet here I am, searching for a t-shirt that isn't worn and threadbare, worrying over the rips in my jeans that I hope others will mistake for a fashion choice rather than the sad truth.

You know what? Screw them.

My blonde hair lies tangled and limp, ashen strands spilling down my back. I didn't bother to wash it after my early morning run, not like I've got anyone to impress around here. Half-assed messy bun it is.

I ran the perimeter of the institute as the sun rose this morning. Figured it's time I have an emergency escape plan in case everything goes to hell. The looming stone walls and security cameras were an intimidating sight. The spacious grounds trick you into thinking this is freedom, but there are still precautions in the background. Nothing about this place is normal.

Security is posted at every entrance and exit, all buildings are only accessible by ID, and there's a stupidly complicated procedure for booking visitation or leave. Not like I'll be doing that any time soon. It's clever, how they give you just enough independence to create a sense of normality, but it's all an illusion. We aren't free at all. Someone's always watching.

That's probably a good thing. Monsters like me are not fit for society.

"Brooklyn, time to wake up!"

A round of enthusiastic knocking makes me jump. I swing the door open, prepared to punch whoever it is, disturbing my peace. I'm startled by the

blue-haired ball of energy waiting. Phoenix looks far too happy for this early in the goddamn morning. Eli stands behind, cocooned in another dark hoodie that hides his face.

“Mornin’ hotness. You ready?”

Phoenix breezes straight past me, inviting himself into my room without a care in the world. I’m left gaping as he begins to poke around in my wardrobe, seemingly at home. Eli moves next, giving me a tentative nod in greeting.

No words of course, just his signature silence and penetrating gaze. Those luminous green eyes meet mine and the tiny smile on his face almost weakens my annoyance. Godfuckingdammit, he’s cute. In a misunderstood emo sort of way that makes my thighs clench.

“You need to go shopping,” Phoenix exclaims.

I gape at him as he dangles a faded bra, grinning broadly. *Motherfucker*. I snatch the offending item away, glowering at his antics. The bastard is laughing at me and enjoying my embarrassment far too much.

“There’s nothing wrong with my clothes,” I argue.

“Sure, you’d look better without them anyway.”

Pausing, I eye him incredulously. “Does that usually work on girls?”

“Every damn time.”

Clearly, he’s never met a girl like me.

“As tempting as your pathetic flirting is, mind telling me what the hell you’re doing in my room at eight o’clock?” I challenge.

His resultant grin is satisfied. The asshole clearly enjoys getting under my skin. “Almighty Kade has given us custody of you for the day. It’s your taster.”

I glower at him. “I don’t need babysitting.”

“Doesn’t look like you get a choice. What Kade wants, he usually gets. So, looks like you’re stuck with us today. Don’t worry, we’ll be gentle with you.” He proceeds to wink and give me a dirty grin. “For now, at least.”

You want to play, joker? I can give as good as I get. Might as well have some fun while I’m still fucking here. I saunter over, adding some sway into my hips as I invade his space. His eyes widen when I brush my fingers down his muscled arm and peek through my lashes.

I brush my lips against his ear. “What makes you think that I like it gentle, hmm?” Before he can respond, I bite down on his velvet lobe, making sure it hurts him. The groan from his parted lips sends tingles straight down

my spine.

“Damn, Brooklyn. Where’ve you been all this time?” he murmurs.

With a quick lick, I meet his eyes and offer a dark look of my own. “You still want to play with me, Nix? You might get hurt.”

“You’re goddamn right I do, sweetness.”

He tries to grab my hand but I dance back, putting distance between us again. Grabbing my sweater, cigarettes, and ID, I stride from the room with my head held high. Sometimes being alive is fun. Only occasionally, I can’t be making a habit of this playfulness.

The door clicks shut behind them, both guys hot on my heels. By the time we get outside, I’m sandwiched between them. Phoenix is sticking a little too close for my liking, with silent Eli trailing at a more reasonable distance.

Pulling a cigarette from my pack, I light up and breathe in deep. I can’t see any security nearby, so I savour each drag. Only a few left now, I need to investigate who is in charge of contraband here. There’s always someone, a resident pimp to supply us delinquents with the necessary substances.

Eli’s eyes fix on the glowing stub of my cigarette. The hunger is plain to see in his transfixed gaze. I shock myself by offering it to him. He looks equally uncertain, finally taking it with a grateful nod.

Phoenix spends the walk across the quad talking incessantly, skipping from one topic to another at random, borderline frenzied. By the time we reach the building, I’m close to backing out and spending the day alone. A headache is already threatening.

“Maybe you should take a leaf out of Eli’s book. It’s too fucking early to be this chatty,” I complain, causing him to rumble with laughter.

“No way. You’d miss my sparkling conversation.”

I stifle my own chuckle. “Not likely.”

After scanning our IDs, we head down more thickly carpeted corridors lined with fine landscape paintings. I’d love to meet whoever designed this place and call them a stuck-up dickhead to their face. That’d be a fun time.

We reach a busy classroom, with students taking their seats. I immediately freeze in place, venomous panic rushing in. There’s so many of them. *What if someone recognises me?* I imagine them whispering already, their hateful stares on me, heavy with disgust.

Maybe they’ll take pictures and sell them to the press, or they’ll campaign to get me kicked out, send me back to the Clearview hellhole. Worse still, I could get locked up in prison this time where my criminal ass really belongs.

A growing black presence billows in the corner of the room, conjured by my panic. My spiralling paranoia steals any remaining courage as I slowly back away, watching the shadows grow. It won't be long before the voices begin to speak. My hallucinations are always the same.

"Brooklyn? You good?"

Phoenix stands in front of me. His fingers slide under my chin and raise my lowered head. He blocks out the nightmare behind him and I stare, desperately hoping that he does something. Anything. He nods and mutters to Eli, who heads in to save our desks.

Grabbing my hand, our fingers link together. "Come with me."

Rather than flinching away from the contact, I allow him to drag me into a nearby empty classroom. There's not a single shadow in sight as we sneak inside. Phoenix flicks the lights on and shuts the door, turning to me.

"What's up?"

Wringing my hands together, I look away. This is so embarrassing. The voice of irrationality is too goddamn loud. That's the thing about delusions, they're so fucking believable that discerning reality from fiction is impossible.

"It's just... there's a lot of them."

"What, students?"

I hum a response, gnawing on my abused lip.

"Well, I think you'll find that in every class, to be fair."

I roll my eyes. "Thanks. That's really helpful."

Arms crossed and biceps bulging, Phoenix pins me with a serious look. "They are patients, just like me and you. You don't need to be scared of them."

Scared of them? Is he for real?

"I'm not scared of them," I whisper.

His brows furrow. "You're not?"

Shaking my head, I swallow the truth. He can never know what I did, or the demons that I carry with me to this day. It's a secret that I'll take to my unhallowed grave.

"Then what is it?"

Keep it in. Keep it in. Fucking keep it in.

Phoenix comes close, hand stroking along my jaw. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying hard not to enjoy his touch. This was not part of the plan. No attachments or distractions from my goal, that's the deal. What the hell am I

doing here with him?

“Tell me,” he demands softly.

“No.”

Phoenix’s breath tickles my face, far too close for comfort yet I can’t pull away. “You will tell me, Brooklyn,” he orders.

“No.”

My eyes remain closed, so when his lips brush against mine for a tantalising second, it’s a complete shock. Featherlight and coaxing, the kiss lingers for a moment before he pulls away. It leaves me trembling and urgently wanting more.

“Changed your mind yet?”

I shake my head, managing to peek up at him. There’s frustration marked across his features, but he tries a reassuring smile, playing the good guy.

“You can trust me.”

“Not with this,” I reply.

But there’s something else he might be useful for.

Latching on to the distraction, I push him against the wall, trapping him with my body. This is insane, neither of us really knows the other. But I don’t give a damn. I’m on a one-way trip to the afterlife. This is just some in-flight entertainment.

“Hang on,” Phoenix begins to protest.

Silencing him with my lips, my arms wrap around his neck. My body is flush against his and within seconds he reciprocates, kissing me with urgency. His hands land on my hips, squeezing so tight I wince involuntarily. More. I need more. The thoughts are still too loud.

Reaching down his chiselled body, I find the hardness straining against his tight jeans. Someone’s pleased to see me. I’d forgotten the thrill of fooling around with another person. Phoenix moans against my mouth, teeth biting down on my chewed lip, breaking skin as blood flows between our clasped lips.

I’m so fucking turned on, everything else pales into insignificance. The tight grip of hysteria silently releases its hold and slinks back. His tongue flicks across the seam of my mouth, and I relent instantly. The kiss deepens, cool metal of a piercing sweeping through my mouth. Fuck, that feels incredible.

It’d feel even better elsewhere.

There’s a bang from outside, followed by high-pitched laughter and

shouting. The moment is shattered as reality sneaks back in. We're complete strangers in a classroom, going at it like horny high schoolers. *What is wrong with me?* Phoenix gradually pulls away, offering me a smirk. Dickhead.

"I've wanted to do that since you clocked Rio in the canteen yesterday."

Almost like he can't resist, he leans in and sucks on my bottom lip, where blood still trickles freely. Stealing it for himself, his eyes are hooded with unashamed desire. His finger swipes at the corner of my mouth to remove any evidence.

"Don't think that I won't be back to finish the job another time," he breathes.

The grin that pulls at my lips is unfamiliar. What is this feeling? Satisfaction? Relief? My body feels light, like those blissful seconds after slicing my skin and watching the crimson river flow. It's euphoric, like a fucking drug, and I'm already longing for another dose.

"Will you come to class now?" Phoenix asks.

The immediate refusal halts on my tongue. I no longer want to run, there's no desire to hide back in my room and play with my blades until I can think clearly again. Something else has taken place here. An exchange of mutual darkness.

A different answer slips out instead.

"Yeah, I will. Lead the way."

EIGHT

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HUDSON

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SEROTONIN BY CALL ME KARIZMA

I SHOVE a gangly kid out of the way. “Move.”

Fucking hell. This place is packed. I told Kade that I wasn't in the mood, but the persistent bastard refused to leave my room until I promised to come down for dinner. Literally stood there and stared at me, demanding my attendance like some kind of patrol guard.

Four-eyed fucker. He'll give up one day.

Until then, he's a pain in the ass.

I grab some of the crappy looking food and a soda. May as well fuel up while I'm here. The gym is calling me. Need to beat the shit out of something, but apparently violence isn't a healthy coping mechanism. Thanks Mariam, fucking thanks.

They wonder why people ridicule those who do therapy. It's hardly surprising, the entire thing is a joke. The biggest waste of three hours a week. Time that could be spent pounding a boxing bag or some sweet pussy. I wonder if Britt is still mad at me. I could use a round or two.

“Hudson!”

Kade is waving me over, looking more relieved than I'm comfortable with. How does he keep that act up twenty-four seven? It's exhausting just watching him. Mr Perfect with the shirt and manners, swanning around and cosying up to management. Doesn't anyone else see through it? All the fake bullshit? It makes me sick.

“Yeah, I'm here,” I mutter, avoiding his hopeful eyes.

He settles down, clearly trying to contain himself. Let's face it, I know that I'm awful to him. It's more than he deserves, but he isn't obligated to stick around. Not anymore. I take no responsibility for hurting his stupid little

feelings until he finally leaves.

“Thanks for coming,” he offers.

I inwardly recoil. More emotional manipulation, making me feel like the worst person in the world. Which obviously, I am. Why else would I be trapped in this shithole for another eighteen months?

“Maybe you’ll get off my goddamn back already.”

“I’m just looking out for you, Hud.”

Not fucking likely.

“How many times have they called this week?” I demand.

He immediately glances away. “They care about you. We all do.”

“Is that so?”

“Come on, lay off. You know we do,” Kade snaps.

I’m tempted to smash my fist in his face. Beyond tempted. But any more strikes on my record, and the warden threatened to send me to the hole. Even I have enough sense to avoid that. My head’s fucked enough. I’ve seen the kids that come out of the basement level, shaking like a fucking leaf and muttering shit that doesn’t make sense. They aren’t the same people that went in.

“If that were true, I wouldn’t be here. It’s as simple as that,” I argue.

Kade drops his fork with a clatter, slumping back in the seat. “Seriously? We still going with the excuses?”

“It’s not an excuse.”

Hazel eyes burn across my skin, loaded with contempt. The hope is utterly extinguished from him by my words. I prefer it when he hates me. It’s easier this way, rather than him constantly trying to save me. I’m on a path to self-destruction and I fucking love it. Beyond redemption, baby. To hell with them all.

“Well, you should know that a lawyer is coming to see you next week. You won’t leave here until you start making progress,” he adds.

“Not necessary. Cancel it.”

Kade rubs his face, breathing deeply. “You’re impossible.”

I finish my drink, crunching the can in one hand without even blinking. “You are the one being stubborn as shit, big brother. As usual.”

This clean shirt bastard is my fucking brother. Who’d have thought it? We’re as different as night and day. Yet here we are. Stuck together, for better or worse.

He doesn’t answer. There’s an awkward silence, filled with all the words

we can't say. If I were a good person, I would fill it with promises and heartfelt platitudes. Thanking him for putting up with me all these years, or promising to clean my act up so we can both go home. But that's never going to happen and the sooner he realises that, the better. For all of us.

"I'm trying to protect you," Kade says evenly.

I can tell by the way his lips are pressed together that he wants to say more. Hell, he probably wants to hit me too. Scream in my face. Punish me for abandoning our family and ruining the perfect life I'd been given.

I've got to make him let go. To stop caring about me, the waste of space that I am. He's stuck here, chasing after me and trying to clear up messes that don't belong to him. He's the success story. The good kid that grew into a great man.

Hurting him is the only way to set him free.

"It's not your job to protect me. It never was," I state coldly, watching him flinch. "We're not family. We're not brothers. We're not even friends. Get that into your head, before it's too late."

He stares at me with wide eyes and I fight the urge to rub my chest. Just saying it hurts, that's the worst part. I'm not that kind of person. Yeah, I'm an asshole. But Kade and his family are the best thing that ever happened to me.

"I was...once."

Kade's voice is a harsh whisper, choked with emotion. I stand abruptly, tossing the crushed can down and storming away. I can't look back at him, can't see the broken look on his face. A look that I put there. It'll finish me off.

Just walk away. It's safer.

I'm out the door and nearly running when two familiar faces slow my steps. Fucking hell, there's no escaping it tonight. These guys are everywhere, showing up to pile on some more guilt for my shitty behaviour of late. Goddammit.

"Hud! Hold up!" Phoenix hollers.

He's entering the building with Eli in tow, both of them seemingly surprised to see me. I run a hand through my hair, scrambling for an excuse to avoid them. I feel like shit, they're my friends but I just can't do it tonight. Not after that conversation.

"Hey," I answer.

"Where are you off to? We've got someone for you to meet."

"Not tonight. I'm... I've got work to do."

Phoenix frowns, and even Eli looks suspicious. They know me too well sometimes. “You sure? Trust me, you don’t want to miss this. She’s a breath of fresh air.”

I begin to inch away. “Nope, I’m good. Catch up later.”

Phoenix shrugs, turning his back. Eli smiles weakly and follows suit. My excuses are transparent but they’re good enough not to press further. Unlike Kade, who can’t take no for an answer.

I jog away, my mind set on one destination. Out into the drizzling rain, through the dark night and into another building. She’s got a project due, so the art room is a good place to start. I’m right of course, but as soon as I stride into the room, her face hardens.

“Seriously Hudson, fuck off. Not today.”

“Come on, Britt. I’m sorry for being a douchebag,” I lie easily.

“Are you?” she challenges, slamming the paintbrush down.

I know just what to say, it’s like a routine by this point. We fuck, fight, argue, then fuck some more. Truthfully, I hate it. Britt’s using me as much as I’m using her. There’s nothing deep about it, but when she tries to demand more from me, we run into difficulties. Last time, I literally threw her out. I couldn’t stand the sight of her for a second longer than necessary.

“I am, baby. Forgive me?” I squeeze the words out. *Liar*.

Abandoning my morals once more in pursuit of a temporary fix. I don’t suppose I deserve anything better than this. Not after the things I’ve said and done. This misery is all I’m allowed, nothing more.

Britt hops up onto the workbench, quickly spreading her legs. I launch across the room without hesitating. Positioning myself between her legs, I shove the stupid flowery dress up to her waist, yanking the thong down her thin legs. I should be worried about hurting her one day, anorexics have brittle bones. But again, it’s not my problem. I don’t care if I break her. Might actually be fun.

“Oh, by the way...” she starts.

I free my rock-hard dick. “Do you have to talk right now?”

“Calm down, no need to be an ass. I was going to tell you about the new girl.”

Wrapping my hand around her throat, I squeeze hard enough to shut her up. “I don’t give a fuck about the new girl. Got that?”

Britt manages a nod and I release my grip, grabbing her hips instead. Before anymore pointless conversation can resume, I slam into her, relishing

the yelp that escapes her mouth. Britt acts all innocent, but she's fucking soaked and loves it. Hard and rough, more of a punishment than anything romantic. She thrives on it, just like me. Just like us all.

"Oh Hudson," she moans.

I tune her out, disconnecting completely with each brutal thrust. Pumping in and out without a care; this is a particularly sick form of self-torture. Fucking a girl that I literally despise, rather than giving myself the chance of something more.

Mariam would have a field day if she heard about this shit. She's probably watching right now. It's not like there aren't cameras everywhere, I have no idea how we get away with half the shit that goes on in here.

I grunt through my climax, uncaring about whether Britt's satisfied or not. Distantly, I wonder what it would be like to feel loved. To share something with someone special. I had that once, a lifetime ago. Brief and fleeting, a whirlwind love affair that ended as explosively as it began. It's always the same with me, I ruin any good that comes into my life.

I may not deserve it, but I'd do anything to feel that again.

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NINE

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BROOKLYN

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LET ME BE SAD BY I PREVAIL

I OFFER Phoenix and Eli a half-hearted wave from the entrance, watching as they walk to their class seemingly with reluctance. They can't trail after me all the time. I'm a big girl and more than capable of handling this.

It's Thursday and the second day of this pointless taster. The morning's class is entry level science. Pretty basic stuff by the sounds of things, but my tasters have all been generic. Any specialism chosen will grant me access to more interesting classes apparently.

I say this like I give a shit.

Straightening my back, I follow the flow of traffic to the classroom. There's work benches and stools scattered around. Hesitating, I glance around for a suitable seat. Everyone seems to have places already. Coming here was truly a mistake, I've never felt so on edge.

The memory of Phoenix's teeth breaking skin sizzles through my mind. Damn, that was one hot mistake. I have to stifle the tingling that threatens when I think about that encounter. What the hell is getting into me? He's just another asshole looking for a quick fix. I shouldn't lower myself to his level. No matter how alive it makes me feel.

There's an empty seat in the back corner, right next to a girl laying with her head on the table. The headphones on her head seal the deal, hopefully I can go a couple of hours without having to dodge conversing or small talk. It's a minefield of social niceties that I have no patience for.

Plonking myself down, I do a quick survey of the room. There are a few familiar faces who I've seen about, mostly in the cafeteria or quad. A couple from my dorms too. From what I've gathered, there's two housing blocks in this place. Oakridge and Pinehill. Each with fifty patients, all enrolled in this

so-called experimental treatment.

It's a huge operation, nothing like the close-knit ward of ten, that I came from where everyone knew your name and diagnosis. I hated that. People sticking their noses in my business, wanting to share and talk like some kind of group therapy shit. Luckily most of them were terrified of me when they figured out my identity.

"Hey there."

It's the girl, headphones now hanging around her neck.

"Hi."

"You're new?"

"Yeah, I arrived two days ago."

Her eyes appraise me openly. I take a moment to give her a once-over, noting her dyed red hair, painted black lips, and shining nose ring. The scruffy Nickelback t-shirt earns her my approval almost instantly. She's got good taste.

"You sure you want to sit here?" she asks.

"Pretty sure. Why not?"

Her eyebrows lift as she shrugs, giving me a crooked smile. "People tend to avoid me. I stress them out."

"Why is that?" I ask casually.

"You really want to know?"

I nod in agreement. Not much scares me off.

"Well, for starters, I get here an hour early every day to move all the desks to sit at a perfect ninety-degree angle. All the stools have to be turned four times before anyone can sit on them. Unless you want to get hit by a car tomorrow. And if I don't lock and unlock the windows precisely seven times, my brother will get sick and die. And that's just for this class. So, don't worry, I won't be offended if you move."

Fidgeting nervously, she picks at the scabbed skin around her fingernails while waiting for my response. I stare back at her for a wordless second, until an easy smile finds its way to my lips. Fuck, I'm going soft.

"What's your name?"

"It's Teegan. You?"

"Brooklyn. And I'm good sitting here, thanks."

She matches my smile enthusiastically, a blush creeping up her neck. Attention turns to the teacher as he calls the class to order, launching into a lecture that has my eyes drooping. His voice literally drills into my head.

Probably doesn't help that I had another night of tossing in sweaty sheets to a chorus of hissing voices before jogging without eating first.

I'm slowly fading with each passing day.

What would happen if I just stopped? Didn't eat, sleep or drink. Would I just slip away piece by piece? Or go insane from hunger, my mind giving in just before my body does? Maybe I'd fall back into the grip of psychosis. That thought leaves a sour taste in my mouth as I swallow hard. I'd fling myself off a roof before going through that again.

"Hey, why's the TA staring at you?"

I quickly look up, following Teegan's line of sight. Sure enough, a pair of hazel eyes stare back at me. Perfectly contrasting with his crisp white shirt, sans tie today. Kade looks rough, unlike his usual perfect self. His sandy blonde hair is tousled rather than neatly combed, buttons undone and sleeves rolled up to reveal muscular forearms.

"He's the assistant?" I whisper back.

"Yeah, he actually goes here too. But he helps out in the lower level classes and with the office stuff. It's weird."

How convenient. What's with all the leeway Kade's been given? He's treated more like a guest than a patient. It doesn't make sense. This is supposed to be a maximum-security treatment program. Not some free-for-all hippy-haven where we all sing hakuna fucking matata.

"Any idea what he's in for?" I ask.

"Nope. His brother's a right loose cannon though."

Brother? He kept that quiet, the other two as well. What are the odds of two brothers ending up here? Not fucking likely, unless being a head case runs in the family, in which case, ditto.

What exactly are you playing at, Kade?

The class passes in a blur, with Teegan leaning over to copy my answers and beguiling me with more of her compulsions. When she walked the perimeter of the room three times before handing our sheets in, no one even batted an eye. She soon laughed it off and by lunchtime, I'm feeling rather protective of her. All the cruel nicknames tossed around seem to upset me more than her.

She's conditioned to the bullying, whereas I'm contemplating kicking all these motherfuckers' asses to teach them a lesson. This is hardly the right place to judge others. I mean come on, none of us are functioning adults, or else we wouldn't be here. This place is a cesspit of failure and dysfunction.

“Brooklyn, can we talk?”

Kade trails over as we pack up, which mostly consists of me standing awkwardly, eyes on Teegan’s smart backpack and stationery supplies. The embarrassment is a familiar feeling, I spent most of my years in education being jealous of others, with their shiny new phones and hole-free clothing.

I fold my arms as we face off. “About what?”

“Just to catch up. It’s been a couple of days.”

His eyes are wide, almost pleading.

“I’m busy, Kade.”

“Please, it’ll only take a second.”

Sighing, I give Teegan a nod of reassurance. She’s antsy, shifting about while trying not to eye Kade too obviously. We say an awkward goodbye and eventually she shuffles off, touching each seat in turn as she passes. The classroom slowly empties until it’s just us.

“What’s this about?” I sigh.

“I just wanted to make sure that you are settling in okay.”

He seems genuine, but I can’t help but doubt his intentions anyway. Trust doesn’t exactly come easily to me. Especially not when it involves the opposite sex. Never trust a guy, especially the sweet ones. They’ll burn you just as good as the others.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Chosen a focus yet?”

I shrug, dodging the question. “Not quite.”

Kade seems to ponder this, running a hand through his messy hair.

“Are you okay?” I blurt. *Where the hell did that come from?*

“Me? Oh, sure. I’m good,” he mutters, the response pretty lack-lustre. “Just some stuff going on. You know how it is.”

“Sure, whatever.” *Why am I even standing here?*

Kade clears his throat. “Nix said that you enjoyed history?”

He’s fishing, scrambling to change conversation. I don’t suppose I should reveal that I only enjoyed it because I’d been fooling around with his best friend beforehand, without whom I would have fallen into a complete breakdown.

“It was okay. I don’t mind it.”

He nods absently, studying his watch. “Well, you’ll need to make a decision by tomorrow. Just let me know, I can take care of the paperwork for you.”

“Uh, okay. Thanks.”

His fingers tap the desk for a moment, eyes flicking over me. I swallow, standing my ground. There’s this feeling between us, like I should be saying more. What does he want from me? Does he just trail around after all the strays in this place?

“Right, I’ll be going then. See you.”

Kade turns to leave, his shoulders slumped. I feel guilty, but this is for his own good. The more people I interact with, the more they will be affected by my death. I don’t want to be remembered. Written off, my files shredded; that’s the aim. People always harp on about not being another statistic but I can’t wait until my life is reduced to nothing more than a number. Then I’ll be free.

“Unless you want to get lunch together?”

Kade hangs in the doorway, peering at me through those sexy specs. There’s a charming smile on his face. Why can’t he be a shitty person? It would make this so much easier. Doesn’t help that I’m attracted to him either. I’m not blind.

“I don’t know...” I say uncertainly.

“Come on, it’s only half an hour. You look like you could use some company.”

Right on cue, my stomach decides to growl. Fucking traitor. I know he hears it, the quirked eyebrow and knowing grin leaves me with no choice but to accept his offer.

“Fine. But if you pester me about choosing a subject anymore, you’ll be eating alone. Deal?” I demand.

Kade nods. “Deal.”

TEN

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ELI

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FOLLOW YOU BY BRING ME THE HORIZON

STEALING PHOENIX'S HEADPHONES, I slip them in and bring my hood back up. He's got shit taste in music, so I search for some *Bring Me The Horizon* that I know he downloaded just for me and immerse myself in the heavy beat. Music is good. It drowns out the rest of my senses. The louder and angrier, the better. Nothing else gets through when my brain is occupied with sound.

I'm huddled in the corner of the football pitch, watching Phoenix and Kade kick a ball about listlessly. They both seem distracted, occupied by their own thoughts. I don't play, preferring to bury my nose in a book. Running is my thing, but alone. Not with company. It's my time to experience the world peacefully while everyone else sleeps. No voices or flavours to overwhelm me at the break of dawn.

There's movement on the neighbouring pitch. The mandatory gym session is in full swing, despite the freezing weather. Most of them are hopping about for warmth, huddled together and moaning. I scan through the bodies, searching for the familiar glossy blonde hair. She's supposed to be in this class.

My rising heart rate slows when I finally locate Brooklyn standing near the back, entirely alone. She doesn't even seem to care. Arms folded and hip popped to the side, she looks beyond bored. Dammit, how does she do it? Most newbies would be crying or sulking, being singled out that way. She's stood there like she owns the whole damn world.

What a sight that is.

I refocus on my essay, trying to keep my eyes from straying. Having her so close is a distraction. Already I've become unhealthily attached, my mind

latching on to her commanding presence. No one's ever looked at me the way she did in that lunchroom. With such fucking purity and respect, rather than treating me like some kind of lab experiment gone wrong. Realistically, there's a reason why I'm becoming obsessed.

I've been through this before. In the hellhole that is Clearview, watching Brooklyn became my obsession. I was fascinated by her. The day she arrived, kicking and screaming, years of boredom ended. She was a spark of interest in the dull landscape of my life. I never said a single word to her face, just studied her from afar. If she ever realises, she'll think I'm some kind of sick stalker.

The ball rolls up next to me, disturbing the stack of papers and sending sheets flying. Phoenix gives me a devious grin. *Asshole*. It's his homework I'm doing here, he's a lazy son of a bitch who loves to exploit my soft spot for him.

Tossing the ball back, I sneak another glance to the side. While the other girls begin to head in, Brooklyn's being yelled at for standing and refusing to participate. Coach is a stickler for getting students involved. But she's taking none of it, giving one of her classic shrugs.

"Eli! You coming in?"

I yank the headphones out, offering a nod to the guys.

"Reckon you can hijack movie night? Get something decent on?"

Phoenix is cajoling Kade, who looks suitably unimpressed by the suggestion. "Nix, I can't just do that. You want to get me fired?"

"Come on, man. It's a fucking movie, hardly the peak of criminality."

He won't get anywhere. Kade is a straight flyer through and through, he lives by the book and never bends the rules. It's one of the things I admire most about him. There isn't a bad bone in his body. He really doesn't belong here.

The rest of us sold our souls to the devil long ago.

Joining the others, I watch as Brooklyn is assigned to collect all the balls. She's muttering to herself, probably cursing with that potty mouth of hers. It's fucking hot if you ask me, I'd love to make her cuss and scream myself.

The group of girls still hold their balls, and I recognise Britt among them. Hudson's slimy fuck buddy, she's the ringleader of a clan of anorexics, all competing against one another in some sick competition to die first. It makes my skin crawl.

"What's taking you so long? Hurry up, I'm freezing my bollocks off."

Phoenix pulls me into a side-hug. “Did you get my homework done? Crawley will kill me if it’s late again. I’ll make it well worth your time, don’t worry.”

I’m not paying attention to his flirting, too focused on the unfolding situation. Brooklyn’s trying to collect the balls and being heckled by the pack of hyenas. It’s a scene I’ve watched countless times, they always find a target to focus their hatred on. Usually the newbie and especially if she’s thin. Girls can be so goddamn cruel, particularly in this place.

I almost shout out loud when the first fist sails her way, the need to warn her bubbling up inside of me. It connects with her jaw and sends her reeling back in shock.

“Seriously, what’s up with you?” Phoenix demands.

I point frantically. Rather than run or cower, Brooklyn is flying straight back at the other girls. She takes two down with brutal blows, the high-pitched screams reaching us even from afar.

“We’ve got to stop this!” Kade shouts, taking off.

Phoenix remains still, his arm tight around my waist. He’s watching just like me, with a kind of morbid fascination for this brilliantly violent girl, giving as good as she gets. I know he’s a sick fuck like me, he’s probably hard just at the sight of her bloody nose and scraped knuckles. We think in similar depraved ways.

“Damn, she knows how to put up a fight,” he mutters.

Britt’s standing back, letting her lackeys scratch and claw, but they are no match for Brooklyn. She rolls with the punches, taking the punishment while dishing out her own. By the time Kade reaches Coach Matthews and breaks it up, I’m having to adjust my own jeans, which feels a little snug. Phoenix offers me a sultry grin, reaching out to run his thumb over my bottom lip. I resist the urge to stick my tongue out and lick it.

“Don’t know about you, but I wouldn’t mind spending some quality time with our cute newbie. With or without your company, although I’d prefer with. It worked for us before.” He winks.

I feel my cheeks flush. It certainly did work. Pretty fucking well.

We join Kade, the three of us watching as the coach plants herself between the brawling group, separating a roughed-up girl and Brooklyn. She’s visibly seething, blood leaking down her face and chin, one eye already swollen.

Who jumps on someone over a handful of balls? Nearly 5-1, outnumbering them? *Welcome to the madhouse.*

“Are you okay? What the hell happened?” Kade demands.

Waving him off, Brooklyn wipes her face on her sleeve, successfully smearing more blood around. “Yeah, fine. Just broke some cunt’s nose, so that’s my day made.”

A round of inappropriate high-fives from Phoenix later, we’re fleeing the pitch and heading back across the quad, making a beeline for home. In my periphery, I can see Kade trying to offer her an arm and being swiftly shoved away with a grunted *‘fuck right off’* from Brooklyn.

We get into the dorms without further incident and follow Brooklyn up to the fourth floor, taking a right rather than heading to our own rooms. She’s fumbling with her key card and muttering before she realises that we’re all still here.

“Um, what are you guys doing?”

“Making sure you’re okay,” Kade replies.

“You might need some help cleaning up,” Phoenix adds suggestively.

Her eyes meet mine and I shrug. She puts her hands on her hips, looking fierce as fuck with her eyebrows pinched in a frown, bloody trails running down her furious face. “You’re not coming in.”

“We are,” Kade deadpans.

“You’re not.”

“Brooklyn—”

“Not a fucking chance!”

Her and Kade stare off, but they’re both equally stubborn so to simplify matters I quickly swipe the key card and open the door, tossing it back over my shoulder for her to catch.

“Bunch of persistent assholes,” she hisses.

Once inside, I’m astounded by the sheer emptiness of her room. There’s nothing personal. Not a scrap. No photos or clutter, nor any cushions, blankets or fairy lights like the other girls have. There’s a single black bag sticking out slightly from under the bed. A quick peek in the wardrobe reveals even less clothing than I own.

Phoenix casts me a loaded look before sprawling out on the bed, kicking his feet up like he owns the place. He studies the room closely, cataloguing the sheer lack of personality.

“Make yourself at home, why don’t you.”

Brooklyn glares, paying no attention to Kade who is making his own assessments, also taking a subtle glance in the wardrobe.

“Will do, sweetness,” Phoenix chirps back.

Kade passes me and takes a seat at the desk, eyes assessing with his professional mask firmly in place. I can see how uncomfortable Brooklyn is, glancing around anxiously as we invade her privacy.

With a final exasperated eye roll, she disappears into the bathroom to clean up. As soon as the door clicks shut, Phoenix sits upright, his playfulness long forgotten. It’s weird to see him looking so serious and concerned.

“The fuck is going on? Didn’t you sort her arrival?” he bellows.

“Of course! She snatched the damn key card and let herself in,” Kade answers gruffly. “I didn’t know she’s been living like this or that she didn’t have anything.”

“What happened to, ‘it’s my job’, huh? This is bullshit and you know it.”

“She’s a grown adult, I’m hardly responsible for looking after her!”

“You work for Blackwood. Don’t give me that shit,” Phoenix seethes.

“I volunteer! And it’s not like I haven’t got enough to worry about with you three!” Kade growls, clearly infuriated.

Their argument escalates and I turn away, unwilling to get between them. Raised voices immediately trigger my senses to work overtime, so I’ve got to escape. I creep over to the bathroom door, peering in through the gap to check on Brooklyn.

The sight of her standing over the sink, hands clenched on the ceramic as she silently sobs shatters whatever pathetic pieces are left of my heart. Thick tears trail down her cheeks and she angrily scrubs them away, silently cursing herself for being stupid.

What is she doing to me?

How do I make it stop?

Feelings are toxic to me. Numbness is my preferred state of being. But in the handful of days since she breezed in without any fucks to give, I’ve been more over-sensitised than ever. She’s broken in a way that is plain as day to me, calling out to my own greedy demons. I’ve always loved breaking things and she’s teetering on the edge. I want nothing more than to shove her off the precipice and follow her all the way down.

Gently easing the door open, I slip inside the cramped room. She startles, flinching back and scrubbing at the pink tears streaming down her face. “Eli, what the—”

Social skills aren’t exactly my forte. I’m fucking mute, I struggle with

this kind of shit. But I'm just going with what feels right. My palm connects with her cheek, thumb tracing the line of her jaw. I brush her rapidly swelling eye, bruising around the socket. *Fuck*, I love the way her skin tarnishes. Blossoming in shades of black and purple. I'd love to mark her myself.

I gravitate down to her split lip as she visibly winces in pain, reluctant to display weakness but unable to hold it in. I can't help myself, I press the bloody cut and make her flinch some more. There's something fascinating about her pain, I desperately want to hurt her. But something stops me. No, I can't be that person with her. It's not normal.

Instead, I stuff the twisted desires down and resolve to fix something for once. Her eyes meet mine, grey storm clouds punctuated by the lightest streaks of blue, barely noticeable unless up close. My hand rests on her skin and she's unconsciously leaning in, relishing my touch without even realising it. I grab a hand towel and silently offer to help.

"Okay," she relents.

Sinking to rest on the toilet lid, she looks at me expectantly. What am I getting myself into here? I'm no saint. Just seeing her covered in fresh blood has my heart hammering against the ribcage and my cock twitching. She looks like a beautiful fucking disaster, one that I can't wait to see unfold.

Soaking the towel, I sink to my knees and begin to clean her face. Broad strokes that wipe the dark splatters away, revealing creamy white skin beneath. Working in loaded silence, the intensity has my hand shaking. She refuses to look away and it's killing me.

Is this what it feels like to be seen? Most of the time, I feel like I'm already dead. No one sees me, even the guys fall into the habit of ignoring me. I don't blame them, it's easily done. I'm just there, plodding along in the background. Alone.

I finish up, turning my back. A hand catches my wrist, demanding attention.

"Eli..."

There's no way to describe the taste of this emotion.

I've never experienced it before.

"If you want to talk to me, you can. Just so you know."

Brooklyn releases her hold. Immediately, I miss the pressure of her fingers wrapped around my wrist. I want nothing more than to shove her against the wall and make her feel what I do. To pull her hair and bruise her skin, drag her down into the depths of hell with me, no matter how much it'll

kill her inside. Life fucking hurts, and I want her to experience it with me.
For the first time, I don't want to be alone. Not one bit.

With a perfunctory nod, I walk away.

Bad Elijah. You've got the devil in you.

She's already damaged. I'd ruin her.

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I'M NOT WELL BY BLACK FOXXES

“SO, you want to tell me what happened yesterday?”

Mariam pins me with an authoritative look. Her pen taps against the notepad as the seconds crawl by, forcing me to respond and break the silence.

“Nope. Not really,” I mutter.

With a sigh, she scribbles something down. What the hell is so noteworthy about that? I want to grab the paper and make her fucking choke on it. See how she likes it. Maybe she'd scream and beg for mercy, finally knowing what it feels like to have someone control you.

“Brooklyn. If someone is bothering you, I need to know.”

“I said I'm fine,” I state.

I'm no snitch. Besides, I'm the one who broke bones. Precisely two. Those girls' noses shattered with blood-tinged satisfaction. Stupid assholes. They should have heeded my warning before coming at me. I don't want any trouble, that's exactly what I said. But anything for some drama, right? That's what girls do.

“Violence is never the answer. It doesn't solve anything.”

Jesus, she's on her high horse today, and I have little patience for it. I want to scream, *read my file, bitch!* Violence is my middle name.

“I can't make you tell me. But know that I'm here if you wish to discuss it.”

I don't answer, just keep staring out of the window at the late afternoon sun. The day passed in a blur without any classes, mostly spent hiding under my duvet and pretending I didn't exist. No one came to bother me, I needed to be alone.

“Did you submit your choices? I notice your taster has officially ended.”

She's literally the female version of Kade. He probably wouldn't appreciate that comparison, no matter how hilariously accurate it is.

"Not yet," I reply.

There are eight pills in my stockpile now. It's a good start, but still not enough. How much more of this can I take? Each second spent breathing, thinking, feeling... it's agony. Even speaking takes effort. My lips are numb and my brain is detached. More and more, I'm hearing whispers that I can't run from. Stockpiling meds is starting to get to my sanity.

"Clock's ticking, Brooklyn. You need to choose something."

Death. I choose fucking death. And if she bangs on for a second longer, I'll bring her along with me. I glance up at the blinking CCTV camera. Are they watching right now? Whoever *they* are. I've yet to find a single room without any cameras, spare the bedrooms. There must be thousands of hours of surveillance. What happens to it all?

If I were to kill her, they'd take one look at the video and throw me in a maximum-security prison. Technically speaking, it's where I should have ended up anyway. If the prosecutors are to be believed. My state-designated defence lawyer argued otherwise, given the circumstances around my... *crime*. Throw the word insanity in there and everything changes.

"What about a double major? Gives you some more flexibility."

It must be tiring to constantly try and fail to instil positivity in us lot.

"English and History," I blurt, latching onto my first thought.

Those were the two least objectionable classes out of the two days of boredom. And at least one of them features some entertainment. I recall the way Eli's eyes tracked over me, green darkening with desire as he pressed on my wound, fascinated by my visible pain. Fuck, I relished that sting. Even when it didn't come from my own hand.

Mariam claps enthusiastically. "Excellent! Good choices."

I nod, trying to play along even when every fibre in my body is screaming otherwise. Eight pills. By this time next week, I'll have a stash big enough to send me into cardiac arrest. Just a little bit longer, I need to remain focused. These guys and their tempting sins, it's fun while it lasts but nothing can sway me from my goal. Nobody is worth sticking around and enduring this sickness for.

Remember what happened to the last person you fell in love with.

You're poison, Brooklyn. Deadly.

Abruptly standing, I almost knock the coffee table over in the process.

Anxiety grips me as I grasp at my chest, fighting to breathe. The voice whispers through the room, sounding far too real.

“What did you just say to me?” I yell.

Mariam flinches back, mouth open in shock.

“Just... well done for choosing. Are you quite alright?”

Swivelling my head, my eyes scour the room. Nothing. There’s nobody. Just us two. “Sorry. My bad.” I sink back down into my seat, deflating quickly.

The voice... it was so real. Not just an inner chatter, but actually audible. And my biggest mistake? Fucking reacting. Now she’s looking at me with bemusement, like I’m a ticking time bomb about to explode and decimate us all.

“Are you hearing voices, Brooklyn?”

I swallow hard. “Not since before Clearview. I just misheard you.”

What a stupid mistake. Never react, that’s the trick. Stuff it all down. Have I just screwed everything up? What if she doesn’t let me out or puts me in solitary? Fuck, I need to fix this. I scramble to make up some convincing bullshit.

“I’m excited to start learning. I really want to turn my life around,” I exclaim, putting on my best voice and forcing the bright smile onto my face. My nails cut into my palms.

“Well, that’s good.” She’s still eyeing me cautiously.

“So... I have reading I should be getting on with,” I prompt.

“Of course. I won’t keep you any longer.”

I bolt for the door. Nothing will remedy this, I just need to escape before I get myself in any more shit. It’s not surprising really, I’ve had all the other symptoms of abusing my medication; the sickness, cold sweats, insomnia. The voices were bound to come back too once I stopped taking it.

Just breathe. Only one more week. It’ll all be over soon.

I manage to get outside before I double over, grasping at any available air. That was close. Too close. Got to keep going. Maintain the image. I’m so near being able to get what I want, I can’t afford to lose this opportunity.

What people don’t tell you is that you can’t show any weakness to shrinks. They’ll jump on any excuse in these places. Before you know it, you’re restrained and sedated while they wheel you down the corridor to solitary confinement. Loneliness is a foreign concept until you’ve experienced that intimidating slice of hell.

A quick jog across the empty quad and I'm back at Oakridge, sprinting for the safety of my room. Hands shaking uncontrollably, I manage to get the door unlocked and slip inside before I slump against the wood.

"Uh, hey."

I nearly jump out of my skin, expecting some harrowing hallucination to be waiting for me. Looking up with fear, I'm shocked to find Kade sat in my desk chair, that bright smile plastered firmly in place.

"Jesus fuck, what are you doing here?" I shout.

He simply shrugs. "Waiting for you."

"In my room? How did you even get in?"

He flourishes the spare key card. "Perks of the job."

Seriously? This guy has an answer for everything. I shrug off my leather jacket, slinging it onto the bed. It's only then that I notice the bags waiting on the mattress. Two of them, rammed full of stuff. What the hell is this?

"Care to explain?" I demand.

Kade clears his throat, a guilty look crossing his face. "Don't get upset, but we couldn't help but notice your lack of belongings. We sorted some stuff to give you. It isn't much, but it'll make us feel better."

I stare. Gape. Try and wrap my head around what he's saying.

"How... uh, what?" I stutter.

"Just some essentials. Nothing special, don't worry." He chuckles nervously, hand rubbing the back of his neck. "Look, Brooklyn. We just want to help you out, okay? Nothing shady, I promise."

This is unbelievable. Do they pity me? Oh God, they came in here yesterday and saw the truth. How pitiful and empty my life truly is, utterly devoid of any meaning. They probably sat and laughed about me afterwards, trading jokes and insults.

Is this a trick?

Some kind of sick game?

Does he expect me to fall to my knees and blow him, just like Paul?

"Don't freak out." Kade stands, hands raised in surrender as he inches closer. I immediately pace backwards, putting distance between us while my thoughts spiral.

"Why are you doing this?"

"We're just trying to help, that's all," he tries to placate.

That can't be true. Nobody ever does anything out of the goodness of their hearts. Not in this world and especially not somewhere like this.

Everything comes with a price, invisible strings attached that come back and bite you in the ass later on. He's trying to manipulate me into owing him a favour.

"Please leave," I order.

"What? Brooklyn, please. We're just looking out for you."

"I said go! And take your shit with you! Leave me alone. All of you."

I point towards the door, my hand waving in the air. Every inch of my body feels hot, radiating indignation and fury. All sense has left my mind. Kade stares at me for a long moment, before nodding with resignation and gathering his coat.

"Keep pushing people away and you'll end up alone. You'd do well to realise that."

"Spare me the fucking lecture, Kade. I never asked for this." I scoff.

He pauses in the doorway, casting a sad look back at me. "Neither did I."

Then he's gone. Slamming the door shut on his way out, clearly angry with me but unable to say another word without losing his temper. I'm left surrounded by their bagged gifts, feeling like the worst person in the entire world.

TWELVE

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KADE

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DADDY BY BADFLOWER

I STORM out into the quad, freeze, and turn back. Heading inside once more, before I freeze again and turn back around. Once, twice, three times. I repeat the nonsense while fisting my hair, struggling to contain my emotions.

“Fuck!” I shout. I’m so goddamn frustrated.

She’s infuriating. Her rejection stings just as badly as before. Why do I even care? I get myself into these messes. Always trying to save people’s asses when they don’t need or want it. She does though, that’s the most infuriating thing. God, she needs it. That girl is crying out to be helped and ever the bleeding heart, I can’t help but listen.

One of these days, I’m going to be fucked over for the last time.

But not today.

Finally making my mind up, I race back up the stairs for the final time and stomp all the way to the fourth floor, my jaw set and blood rushing in my ears. She doesn’t get to push me away, I’m already dealing with Hudson’s need to self-destruct. I can’t take any others right now. I may not know a thing about her, but I’ve seen enough to know that she’s worth saving. Beneath the ice cold exterior and sharp tongue, there’s more.

I hammer on the door, too blinded by anger to let myself in. She doesn’t answer and soon I’m smashing my fist against it even harder. Anger isn’t usually my first response, but it’s been a long week and this is the final straw.

“Jesus, will you keep it down?”

I glance to the side, following the familiar voice. Hudson’s door swings open as he yells, stumbling out with his hair ruffled and inked chest bare. When he realises it’s me in the corridor, he suddenly looks a lot more awake, scrubbing at his eyes in confusion.

“Kade? The hell are you doing?”

“None of your business,” I reply.

I can't deal with that asshole right now as well. We still haven't spoken since the exchange two days ago, and I have no desire to start a conversation with the dick until he bucks up and gets his head out of his ass for once.

“Seriously, what are you playing at?”

“Go back to your room, little brother. This doesn't concern you,” I answer.

He's grumbling and cursing when another voice chimes in, this one female.

“Hud, baby. Come back to bed. Leave him to it.”

I see Britt emerge in my periphery, peeking out with a bedsheet wrapped around her stick-thin, naked body. When she sees the door I'm waiting by, a hateful look carves her features.

“Not that fucking whore. She broke Maya's nose, you know that, right?”

“That's hilarious,” Hudson splutters, earning himself a punch in the shoulder.

“It's not! She's a psycho bitch. You best walk away, Kade.”

I ignore them both, continuing to knock with persistence. Eventually, they slip back into the room, thankfully leaving me alone. You know what? They deserve each other. Britt is an ugly personality wrapped in a brittle shell. I hope she breaks Hud's heart and leaves him. That'll teach him. Or, it would. If he had a heart to break.

I come to my senses enough to let myself in, preparing to lecture the hell out of Brooklyn until she bucks up and accepts my help. Instead, I'm left standing awkwardly, unsure of what I've walked into.

The setting sun blazes through the room, highlighting the picture of despair cowering in the corner. She's in a tight ball, knees to her chest, hands clamped over her ears. I can see her shoulders shaking from here, bobbing up and down with heaving sobs. Definitely not what I was expecting.

I creep over, unsure of how to approach this situation but knowing that I have to do something. Walking away isn't in the realms of possibility. Sinking down to her level, I reach out and brush the top of her head. Her hair is like satin beneath my touch and she stirs, peeking out through the pale curtains covering her face.

“I told you to go,” Brooklyn croaks.

“You know I can't do that.”

Cupping her pixie face, my thumbs brush over her reddened cheeks to wipe the tears away. Her hands slowly begin to slacken, releasing the death-grip she has on her head.

“I’m sorry for knocking so loud.”

Shaking her head, her eyes drop. “It wasn’t you.”

I slide a digit under her chin, tilting her face back up to look at me.

“Then what is it?” I ask.

Her lips press together and she shakes her head, refusing to answer. She’s keeping it in, using all her strength to prevent the words from leaking out. “Why are you doing this to me?” she eventually whispers.

“Because helping people is what I do, love.”

She pries my hands away, gently pushing me back. Rejecting me again, ever the stubborn bitch.

“No. Not me. I don’t want to be helped.”

“Why not?” I hiss at her.

“Nope.” She presses herself further into the corner.

My patience snaps and I hold her still, forcing her to listen to me. “Please let me in. Look at Eli, he was a mess when he got here six months ago. And Phoenix? First time I met him, he threw up on my shoes. Coming down from a weeklong bender and quivering like a leaf. You don’t need to be ashamed.”

A bitter laugh escapes her lips. “Don’t I? You don’t know me.”

“You’re right, I don’t. But I want to. If you’d just let me.”

I shuffle back and keep my distance, allowing her the space she clearly wants. I know the drill, it’s like approaching a wild animal at first. You’ve got to ease in. Get them used to your presence. Hell, it took Eli a month before he allowed me this close. Poor guy was so traumatised he barely moved, let alone spoke. To this day, I’ve never heard his voice.

“I’ll hurt you,” Brooklyn whimpers.

“You won’t,” I assure her.

“It’s what I do.”

Ever so carefully, I stretch out a hand. Palm up in offering, careful to leave distance between us. I’m giving her the option to take it, rather than forcing it upon her. “Come on, Brooke. Trust me. Just for a moment.”

She daggers me with those steely eyes. Gunmetal grey and full of bleak defeat. “And if I say no?” she mutters.

“Then I’ll leave.”

The suspense threatens to cripple my confidence, but she blindly reaches

out and grabs my hand. I tighten my grip, clinging to her now she's on board. Refusing to let go for fear she'll run away from me.

We end up on the bed, bags tossed aside without another word. Her body instinctively curls up, arms tucked close to her chest. I toss any reservations aside and stretch out opposite, our heads mere inches apart, making sure my legs don't touch hers. I don't want to scare her off now we've gotten this far.

"Why are you here?" she asks.

My instinct is to lie, whether deliberately or by omission. That would be infinitely easier and less complicated for both of us. But the whole point of this isn't to do that. There's only a handful of people in this godforsaken place that know of my true purpose here.

"My brother," I reveal.

"Hudson?" she guesses.

"You know him?"

"No, just heard his name around."

She's frowning to herself, like the name brings back bad memories or something, but quickly clears the expression away. "He's here?"

I breathe a sigh. "Yeah, he's here. It's complicated, but when he was arrested and charged, I was desperate to protect him. Having that power stripped away was tough. I was a student at the time, studying for my master's degree in mathematics."

"What happened?"

"To cut a long story short, I made a deal with our parents. They're very active in local government and were able to cut a deal with the authorities in exchange for some fairly substantial donations to Blackwood's program. I was given a free ride to this place, able to continue my studies online and also keep an eye on Hudson. Try and help him get better."

Her eyes are wide. "You did that for him? Seriously?"

I look away, feeling a hot blush rising from my shirt collar. "Yeah, he'd do it for me. It's not so bad, I help out with the admin and a couple classes, as you know. It's worth it to be there for him, even when he treats me like shit."

"That's why you're given free reign," she hums, finally catching on.

"Pretty much. But that stays between us, okay?"

Brooklyn nods her agreement, easing my nerves somewhat. "So, you're... uh, normal?"

"Well, I don't really care for that word, but sure. I'm here voluntarily."

She stares at me like I'm a puzzle she just can't fathom, eyes searching

with calculation that makes me nervous. “You don’t take meds? Or go to therapy?”

“Ah, not so much. I actually help out in the pharmacy a bit too, it’s good experience.”

Her eyes seem to light up momentarily, like she’s clocking something. I wait for her response but none comes, she’s deep in thought about something.

“What about you?” I ask gently.

“Me? Haven’t you read my file?”

Fuck, she’s got me down alright. “Ah, no. I actually haven’t.”

“But you could have?”

I nod. No point in lying about it. I did with the others, but something about her has led me to hold back so far. Some faint hope that maybe she’d tell me herself, given time.

“I... I did something,” she utters. “Something unforgivable.” An involuntary shudder seems to pass over her. “Please don’t make me say it.”

Taking a chance, I move to hold her hand. “You don’t have to.”

Our fingers automatically twine together, in a way that feels almost natural.

“I’m not like you, Kade. You’re a good person. I’m not.”

I shake my head resolutely. “I refuse to believe that. Look at the way you handled Eli on your first day. And standing up to Rio like that? It was a sight for sore eyes. He’s been pushing everyone around for far too long and getting away with it.”

“Those things don’t redeem me of my sins.”

That’s far more than I can argue against. This is clearly ingrained into her, a belief as corrosive as it is false. She’s internalised it so hard, I have no chance of digging the festering hatred out of her. Not like that’s going to stop me from trying.

“Nobody is all good, Brooke. We’re all somewhere on the spectrum of morality, dabbling in shades of grey. There’s no such thing as good and bad. Not really,” I explain.

Brooklyn listens intently, eyes flicking over my face. Then she shifts her body closer, gradually closing the gap between us. I dare not move, not now that I’ve gotten so far. Her knees brush mine and I can just feel her breath on my skin. “Tell me then.”

“Tell you what?” I reply.

“The worst thing you’ve ever done. I want to know.” Her fingers squeeze

mine. “Promise I can keep a secret. I’ll take it to my grave.”

It comes to me easily. Too easily. My most awful source of shame. She must see it on my face, a dark smile pulling at her full lips almost with excitement. I want to tell her, on a primal level. She’s calling out to something inside, a layer of my personality that I’ve buried as deep as possible, hoping never to awaken it again. How did she find it within me?

“It was seven years ago. Right before my sixteenth birthday,” I croak.

The words burst free, refusing to be contained any longer. As I speak, her leg hooks over mine, tangling together to trap me in place. Her warmth pushes me to the edge, more shameful secrets escaping my lips.

“There was this girl, Amy Bond. Only a few months older than me. We were just kids, fooling around on our lunch breaks. Stealing kisses behind buildings and exchanging endless text messages. Within weeks, we were both besotted with each other.”

She’s hanging onto my every word, her attention almost too intense to handle. Like she’s greedily eating up my secrets, sneaking them away for her own use. This has stayed secret for so long, but she’s pulling the sordid shadows free. I’m powerless to stop.

“She got sick. Throwing up in school.” I gulp hard, forcing moisture into my suddenly dry mouth. “I was terrified and when the test came back positive, confirming that she was pregnant, it was like the world was ending. Looking back, I was so shallow. So stupid. It didn’t matter, the world wasn’t ending. But my parents demand perfection from me, they always have. I knew that if they found out... that would be it for me. For my future.”

“What did you do?”

I pause, Amy’s face filling my vision. Sweet rosy cheeks and brown curls, a wide smile that charmed anyone and everyone. Top of her class, she was a wizard on the violin. Her talent unrivalled. Even at sixteen, her bright future was secured.

“I threatened her, said that no music school would ever take a teen mom with a screaming baby on to their program. Her folks were just like mine, obsessed with image and reputation. I broke her down, scared her into thinking there was no other option but to get rid of it. She just cried, begging for my help, telling me that we could make it... be a family. I said no. Never going to happen.”

My eyes close briefly. The grief is overwhelming, even now. It’s like I’m talking about a stranger, when realistically, the bastard in this story is me. My

arrogant younger self. Like Brooklyn said, *unforgivable*. We've both earned that word apparently.

"Where's Amy now?"

I prepare myself to admit the truth out loud for the first time. "She's dead. Has been for the last seven years. Never even made it to music school."

And it's my fault.

"How did she die, Kade?" Her voice is soft and mesmerising, coaxing me on. She's stealing my sins and swallowing them whole, greedy for more to hang on to.

"Complications from a back-street abortion. Dead within days of that damn test."

There's a loaded pause, both of us immersed in each other's gaze. The pain in my chest reaches its peak and ebbs away, along with the words that have just been vocalised. I can't take them back now, it's out there and beyond my control.

"I never stepped forward and claimed the child," I continue. "Everyone heard what happened and judged her, tossing about vicious rumours. Our fling was always a secret, we were both terrified of our families finding out. To this day... they still don't know it was me that knocked her up."

I'm ready for her to pull away or toss me out of her room in utter disgust. She's within her right after hearing that story. I'd be repulsed too, hell, I am every day when I look in the mirror and remember the past.

"You see, I guess I really do deserve to be here," I finish.

"No, you don't. Not one bit. You were an asshole, but who isn't?"

I can't help the broken laugh that comes out. "I was a fucking coward."

Brooklyn's lips turn upwards into a tiny smile, making my heart squeeze painfully. "We're all cowards, Kade," she whispers. "Running scared from our pasts, avoiding the inevitable. It always finds its way back to us in the end."

Her head drops to the pillow, eyes sinking shut. She snuggles closer, almost like she's comforted by the skeletons in my closet that I've just revealed. When I was playing the good guy, she stubbornly pushed me away. But now I've owned my mistakes and shared my darkness with her? She's cuddling up like a goddamn puppy, bathing in the grief.

This girl isn't right. Not one bit.

I couldn't save Amy. I'll spend the rest of my life making up for that, saving all the other hopeless victims in her place. No matter how much it kills

me inside every day. Hudson. Phoenix. Eli. And now? Brooklyn, too.
We're family.
No one goes down on my watch.

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THIRTEEN

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BROOKLYN

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TEARS DON'T FALL BY BULLET FOR MY VALENTINE

I'VE SURVIVED my first week at Blackwood.

Adjusting to classes was fine, the two boys kept me company and helped with the towering workload. I have no intention of tackling the stacks of books on my desk for English, not like I'm going to be here to sit the exams. Group therapy was thankfully cancelled, so at least I don't have to endure that horror show yet.

I pace the room, evening light stretching through the small space. Kade's coming to get me for dinner soon, so I'm just killing time. The bags still sit under the desk where I threw them after he left. How I managed to fall asleep in front of him, I'll never know. Sleeping is hard enough on my own, let alone in the presence of another. I'm starting to think that I judged him too quickly.

With a defeated sigh, I empty the bags onto the bed. Did I even say thank you before I threw the gifts back in his face? I'm an asshole. No surprises there.

They've given me an assortment of bits, none of it new. Of course not, how would they even get out to go shopping? This stuff clearly belongs to them and they've given it... to me?

The band t-shirts are definitely Eli's. He's the smallest, and I don't see any of the others sporting *Iron Maiden* merchandise. My fingers run over the soft hoodie buried underneath, it's a lighter shade of grey than his usual one. My heart somersaults, feeling the ramifications of this gesture. I raise it to my nose and take a sniff, relishing the familiar citrusy scent that I've come to associate with him.

Goddammit. When did I start caring so much?

Phoenix's offerings consist of a cute beanie hat and an indigo blue blanket for the bed. I spread it out immediately, smiling at the cosy set up. There's also a couple of beers which makes me laugh. Where did he even get these? I can't even begin to imagine. I'm grateful though, I haven't had a drink in far too long.

Lastly, Kade. Some fresh toiletries to replace my confiscated ones, along with a basic backpack filled with stationary and new notebooks. I pause over them, that damned feeling in my chest ballooning. Jeez, what are these guys doing to me? They're creeping in no matter how hard I try to block the feelings out. Nobody's ever done this for me before. Not since my parents died and left me alone in the world.

My eyes flick over to the bedside table. The polaroids are buried in the drawer, hidden from sight. The temptation to look returns. My fingers near the handle but I hold back, fearing the consequences. Last time I looked at their faces, I ended up needing three stitches.

In that case, maybe I should look. Stop fucking around with counting pills and do things the old-fashioned way. But I know better than anyone that you have to do it properly to succeed. It's easy to pass out and only do half a job. Then I'll never get another chance.

Stick to the plan. Only a few more days until we're ready to go.

I change into one of the new t-shirts, this one with *Red Hot Chili Peppers* scrawled across the front. Allowing myself a small smile, I slip on my pink Docs and grab my leather jacket, adding Phoenix's beanie on a whim.

I prefer to skip dinner usually, my stomach is too unsettled to deal with food. Turns out going cold turkey on meds ain't fun. But Kade has apparently taken it upon himself to fix that, hence I'm being escorted to the cafeteria tonight.

Heading downstairs, I check for guards before lighting up a cigarette on the front lawn, leaning against some stupid decorative statue. Curious looks are tossed my way as patients pass on their way out, but I ignore them all and keep smoking. *Motherfuckers*. Seems my run-in during gym class has earned me a reputation already.

"Hey Brooklyn!"

Phoenix jogs over, signature megawatt smile in place. He comes way too close and plucks the cigarette from between my fingers, backtracking as he takes a drag. "You're actually joining us for once, what a treat. Nice hat by the way." He laughs.

“Don’t get used to it. And thanks, some weirdo gave it to me.”

“Huh, he clearly has good taste.”

He gives me a flirty wink as the others join us. Eli shuffles up to my side, giving me a nod. His eyes trail over the shirt peeking out from beneath my jacket and he manages a smile that makes my toes curl.

Christ, I’m playing with fire here.

“You morons coming?” Kade calls.

My jaw nearly drops when I take in his casual outfit. The usual shirt and slacks nowhere to be found, replaced by grey sweatpants and a tight black shirt that reveals more toned lines of muscle than my brain can handle. Holy smokes.

I’m literally screwed.

Phoenix links his arm through mine and drags me along, joining the hordes of people heading across the quad. I can feel Kade’s eyes on me but I don’t react, deliberately keeping my distance. Things are still odd between us after the other night. He’s more overbearing than ever, constantly studying me.

All I can think about is him laying across the bed from me, thick lashes framing hazel eyes. The feel of his leg on mine, face close enough to hear his breath as he confesses to his sins. I can’t move past that night. It’s done something to me. *Don’t get invested*, I remind myself. I can’t afford to care about these guys.

Once in the cafeteria, we join the queue and load up our trays. I select a small salad that doesn’t look too intimidating for my stomach and Phoenix steals my plate, muttering as he dumps a giant serving of lasagna on it as well.

“Fucking eat it,” he orders, all humour and jokes aside as he pushes me to the dinner lady. I kind of like this bossy version of him, all growly and harsh.

We crowd around the usual table, conversation flowing easily. There’s something comforting about it, the ease with which they’ve inserted me into the group. No matter how badly I’ve behaved or my shitty attitude.

“Heads up, Kade. Hudson and Britt just walked in.”

Phoenix’s low whisper elicits a groan from his friend. “That’s just great.”

“Hey, at least they’ve got clothes on this time.”

“Makes a change,” Kade grumbles.

I keep my head down, pushing the food around my plate. Fucking Hudson. That name is cursed, I swear. I’m not particularly looking forward to

meeting someone who will only remind me of the past. Even if he's a decent person, which from what I've heard he isn't, I won't be able to get past that damn name.

“Kade! Didn't I say to cancel that fucking appointment?”

He's close, marching up to the table with furious steps. That voice sends shivers right down my spine, earth-shatteringly familiar in its gruffness. My blood chills as my stomach drops to the floor. Oh, fuck me gently. It can't be. The universe doesn't hate me that much, surely?

With every ounce of willpower possible, I look up, taking in the man skidding to a halt beside his brother. Dark jeans ripped and t-shirt skin-tight, revealing chiselled abs that I know all too well. I trailed my tongue over them many times, tasting the salty tang of his sweat after we fucked like rabbits in the dark. He's filled out, grown into his looks since the last time we spoke. Five whole years ago.

It still hurts like it was yesterday.

All noise falls away. The can in Hudson's hand falls to the ground, his face slackening with absolute shock. His crystal-clear blue eyes go so wide, it's almost comical. The new eyebrow piercing disappears into his shock of dark hair. Locks I used to tangle my fingers in. Plump lips that used to worship me in the dead of night, when they weren't whispering lies and manipulations to control me further. His corrupted soul took everything from me.

This can't be happening.

Ever so gently, I set my fork down. A strange sense of calm is quickly descending. I've waited for this day, dreamt about it night after night while nursing my shattered heart. Plotting my revenge if I ever saw his face again. I stuffed the feelings so goddamn deep, they sank into the pits of my heart and poisoned everything around them. The memories haunted me for years to come, in every guy that followed him. He ruined them all for me.

“W-wha... Brooke?”

The table descends into heavy silence, all eyes on me. Kade's glancing between the two of us with concern, Phoenix is poised to move closer. Even Eli is paying attention, his hood back and headphones out. They're watching the car crash unfold in slow motion, unable to stop the disaster barreling straight ahead.

“Hello Hudson.”

My voice doesn't sound like my own. It's dark, angry, accusatory. Of

course, he's here. It's where monsters belong, I shouldn't be surprised. He'll fit right in with the other treacherous bastards that frequent these halls.

He continues to stare, hands quickly clenching into tight fists. "You're here."

"I'd think that was fucking obvious," I lash back.

He swallows hard. "How? Why?"

I slowly rise to my feet. Sliding my dinner knife up my sleeve, I maintain eye contact, never once allowing him a glimpse of the chaos beneath my steely exterior. I'm cold as ice and razor sharp, ready to give him a taste of his own medicine.

"Not sure it's any of your business why I'm here."

"This is... Jesus. I can't believe it's you," Hudson splutters.

"Bet you never planned to see me again."

Jaw clenching angrily, Hudson finally breaks and looks away. He casts his brother a look, silently asking for assistance. Seems like cowardice runs in the fucking family.

"I never stopped hoping for that, I tried to find you," he murmurs.

"Spare me the lies, Hud. And frankly, I'm glad you didn't find me."

A twisted memory comes back to me, filling my vision and solidifying my rage. My body is straddling his, wrapping the belt around my arm as he fills the syringe. He watches hungrily as I shoot up, quickly relaxing and slumping onto the thin mattress. Warmth and adrenaline surging with the substance in my veins.

Fucking and getting high. That's all he was ever good for and inevitably, that's what set us on course for a cataclysmic ending.

"Brooklyn?"

Kade stands, looking so confused, so lost. I almost pity him. He really has no idea about the kind of monster he's related to.

"I didn't realise that your brother was *this guy*."

"How exactly do you two know each other?" Phoenix interjects.

A resentful laugh bubbles up. "You want to tell them or should I?"

Hudson's mouth clicks open and shuts several times. He's pale, too pale. Looking sick to his stomach, and I fucking love it. I want to pound on his body until his bones break and his skin cracks. Leaving nothing but a bloodied, crippled bag of dead organs behind.

Even then I won't forgive him.

"I... ah. Well..."

He's tumbling over his words like a scared child. Looking brokenly at me, the devastation on his face so visceral, it makes my mouth water with need. That's exactly how I want him to look. Like that and worse. Much worse.

Ensuring the knife is securely hidden, I leave the table and get up in his face, leaving scant inches between us. Close enough to bathe in his heady, masculine scent. So achingly familiar, I want to peel my skin off just to get it away from me.

"Say it, Hud. Fucking say it."

He shakes his head and attempts to grab my hand, failing utterly as I swing it out of reach. Silently pleading with me, he's begging me to relent. Let him off the hook. Whatever. No way in hell is that going to happen. Not after what he did to me back then.

"Brooke, blackbird. I'm so sor—"

Before he can finish, I strike him firmly across the face.

"How dare you! I'm not your fucking blackbird. Not anymore."

I follow the blow with another, over and over until he falls to the ground. Scooting away from my savage attack, trying to hold me back without physically hurting me. As if it will make any difference. The damage he inflicted long ago can't be undone now. I almost want him to hurt me physically, to validate the wounds he created that can never be seen by anyone but me.

"Brooklyn! Stop!"

"Someone grab her!"

"Quick, security is coming!"

All I see is red. Not reality, not the blossoming friendships around me or the care I've been shown. Just the pure, unadulterated need to hurt this bastard. To make him feel even a smidgen of what I went through. I may not deserve to live, but neither does he.

Make him pay. Make him hurt.

Cut him, the devil in my mind orders.

The knife slips down into my hand and I go to town. Putting all my strength into the movements, hoping to cause maximum damage. My body is weak compared to him, but I still draw blood from each stab that I manage. It blooms through the thin material of his shirt like a watercolour painting.

Fucking beautiful. That's how it goddamn feels.

Hands grab my body, hauling me up and away from Hudson. Kade steps

between us, ever the peacekeeper. Fuck that. I'll hurt him to get to his brother if I have to. Phoenix holds me to his body with arms like steel bands, telling me to calm down. It's futile. Fury thrums through me, stronger than any drug ever injected. Fiery rage that seals my determination.

I slam my head back, hearing him cry out in pain. Slipping his hold, I fling myself at Kade. Snarling and swearing like a rabid animal. This is what it feels like to lose control. So damn satisfying.

In the end, it's the guards that break us up. Like invisible sentries appearing out of thin air, reminding us all this isn't the real world. You don't just get away with stuff and simply walk away to lick your wounds. They're always watching, poised to intervene if necessary.

I'm sandwiched between the burly men, one yanking my arms back and crunching my fingers together until I release the weapon. Hot tears pour freely as my face is smashed onto the floor. *Ah, this is familiar.* Just like good old days. The Clearview special, restrain and punish.

"Say goodbye, you psycho. They'll never let you out after this."

The officer is shouting, threatening me. I don't care. Not one bit. In the seconds before I'm dragged away, I see Kade kneeling on the ground by his brother. Phoenix and Eli stand frozen, both watching me helplessly.

Then there's Hudson. His hand pressed to his abdomen, he doesn't even look phased by the bleeding injuries I inflicted. His attention is focused on me as I'm taken away, expression caught somewhere between disbelief and pity.

I hate them. I hate them all.

I hope my death *kills* them.

FOURTEEN

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HUDSON

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LET YOU GO BY MACHINE GUN KELLY

I SCRUNCH the paper up in my hand, tossing it across the desk to join the others. Six attempts and I still can't write a damn word. Kade watches silently from his seat opposite, glancing back down at his laptop screen.

Taking a fresh piece, my pen is poised. Right. Consumer marketing. I know this, come on. It's fucking easy. Pressing the nib down, I quickly lose focus and scribble angrily. So hard it tears a massive hole in the middle, ink spilling everywhere.

In my head, those storm cloud eyes are peering up at me. Pupils blown wide and dilated. Lips wrapped around my dick, taking it so fucking deep I can hardly contain myself for a second longer. She always knew exactly how I liked it and never disappointed.

My dirty little blackbird.

Another image comes. Her hands secured to the bed frame with my belt, body open and exposed. Perfect tits calling out to me as I tear my eyes away, focusing on the leg propped up on my shoulder, my fingers searching for a vein to tap. Her squirming and writhing, begging for me to taste her sweet pussy as the drugs work their magic.

"Hudson?"

Kade's hand lands on my arm. I open my eyes, the memories melting away. He's looking at me, stuck in an eternal state of anxiety at the moment.

She's been gone for a whole week.

People that go down into the basement, locked in solitary until they're stable enough to return... they come back different. More broken than how they went in. The four walls closing in, time melting into insignificance; it's a recipe for insanity. I'm under no illusions, I've been there before. Two days

was enough to scare me straight, relatively speaking.

“When are you going to talk to me?” Kade sighs.

Shaking my head, I gather the papers and walk to the bin to shove them in with all my frustration. For good measure, I kick it too. “I’m not. Ever.”

He shrugs. “I’ll only ask her about your history when she returns.”

If she ever does.

“Don’t you dare. Leave her out of it, Kade.”

“How? Brooklyn’s the reason you’re in this state. She tried to fucking stab you! That’s a big deal. What happened between you two? What did she do?”

“Nothing. It’s not what she did, you idiot.”

It’s what I did. The unthinkable.

Kade slams his laptop shut, leaning back in the chair. His arms are crossed as he evaluates me. “Was this before or after you came to us?”

“Before.”

“In foster care?”

The memories bombard me. St Anne’s, the Catholic orphanage where I first met my blackbird. Tucked away in a remote countryside town, far from the luxury of upper-class London suburbia where I eventually ended up. Kade’s family adopted me when I was sixteen and I left the misery of being in care behind. *I left her behind.* Alone and utterly destroyed by everything I’d done. My blackbird was broken.

“Yeah, I knew her then.”

That’s all I can say. The rest is too awful.

“What happened?”

I slam my palm down on the desk. “Do you ever stop?”

“I’m just trying to help you, Hud. You need to talk about it.”

“No, I don’t. Because nothing is ever going to fix what I did.”

Kade thankfully shuts up. I’ve dealt with him following me around like a fucking patrol officer all week, it’s just too much. I get it. He wants to help, but it’s entirely unwelcome. He should be in the warden’s office, convincing her to release Brooklyn before it’s too late.

I don’t blame her for what happened, I deserve it. But the way she came for me... she’s not the timid, innocent girl I once knew. This isn’t where they send angels. We’re all fucking devils here.

“You need to stay away when she gets back.” Kade points a finger at me, deadly serious and his voice hard as nails. “I mean it.”

“I can’t,” I mutter.

“You will. She doesn’t need you and clearly doesn’t like you.”

The worst part is, I don’t even care. Now I’ve seen her, laid my eyes on her translucent skin, that billowing hair lighter than fresh snow, I’m enthralled all over again. Just like before, I fell hard and fucking fast without coming up for air. I’ll only hurt her by sticking around. So why can’t I let go?

The door to the library opens and I glance up, eyes searching for her. Disappointment fills me as Phoenix and Eli appear instead. Fuck’s sake, she’s not coming. Even if they let her out, I’m the last person she’ll want to see. She will have to face me soon enough. If she needs to scream and beat on me again, so be it. I’ll take it. Whatever brings her back to me.

“Anything?” Kade asks.

Phoenix shakes his head. “Nope. No sign of her.”

All eyes are on me, with matching expressions of anger. Hands clenched, I turn my attention back to the textbook. Reading the words without taking them in, my brain caught in a state of complete numbness. This is all my fault.

Phoenix glares. “What do we do now?”

“No one will talk to me about her. I’ve been shut out,” Kade states.

“You’ve got to know something!”

“I’m just as frustrated as the rest of you. There’s nothing we can do.”

Shoulders slumping in defeat, Phoenix curses colourfully. “I hate this.”

“Why the fuck do you guys even care?” I hiss at them.

Matching glowers are tossed my way, indicating that was entirely the wrong thing to say. Even my so-called friends hate me right now. It’s not a great feeling, but I’m used to being the bad guy around here.

“While you’ve been busy screwing Britt and being the world’s shittiest friend, we’ve been getting to know Brooklyn, helping her settle in. So, lose the entitlement and wake up, Hud. You’re not the only one who’s pissed,” Kade rants.

I almost want to pat him on the back for finally saying it how it is for once.

“We care as much as you do, if not more,” Phoenix chimes in.

Even Eli nods, chewing on his lip anxiously. He’s not looking great, more washed out and jittery than usual as he glances around. They care, all three of them. It’s blindingly obvious and I can’t help the jealousy that brings.

“Fine, then help me fix this,” I plea.

“How?”

“I don’t know. Between the four of us, we’ve got to think of something.”

There’s a chime and Kade punches buttons on his phone, quickly silencing it. He needs to be more careful, we’re allowed phones but internet access is strictly monitored, along with calls.

“It’s your appointment this afternoon with the lawyer.”

He shoots me a loaded look. Just as I’m about to berate him for the millionth time, an idea hits me. Management will never listen to us, a group of fucking delinquents with records that shame most prisoners. Even Kade, he clearly has less sway around here than previously believed.

“That’s it,” I exclaim.

Kade is the first to catch on of course. “Dammit. You’re right!”

“Someone catch me up?” Phoenix whines.

“The lawyer. He’s here to provide an update on my case, but we’ll just use him to free Brooklyn instead. Say that they’re holding her without cause or whatever. He’ll know exactly what to do, the punishment will never stick.”

The words tumble free, my relief growing. This could work. If we leave her, they’ll let her rot. Regardless of the toll solitary will inevitably take. I can’t just sit here while they slowly break her down, day by day.

Kade strides away. “I’ll make the call.”

“Then what?”

“Huh?” I turn to Phoenix.

“She hates your fucking guts, Hud. You’ve got to sort it.”

I look away, feeling the hot, clinging embrace of shame. What’s my plan here? Beg on my knees for forgiveness? I don’t think I’ve ever apologised for a thing in my whole damn life. That’s what drove her away in the first place, the inability to own my shit.

“I’ll figure it out,” I mutter.

“Promise?”

“Jesus, man. I promise, okay?”

Phoenix nods, clearly still unhappy but conceding for the time being. I don’t bother looking at Eli, the deathly silent statue in the corner. I’m sure he’s thinking the exact same thing, judging me with those eyes that see far too much.

How do you rectify the worst thing you’ve ever done in your life?

“You’ve got to tell us what happened between you two,” Phoenix states, sitting back in his chair like he’s a damn interrogator or some shit, rather than

my friend.

“Haven’t we been over this, shithead? Not happening.”

“We have a right to know.”

I abruptly push my chair back, gathering my stuff as he watches me closely. Rage slips beneath my skin and burns hot, scalding every nerve ending until I can’t contain it anymore. The chair shatters as I smash it against the wall, my roar of frustration startling nearby patients.

Phoenix jumps in shock. “Jesus, Hud. Chill the fuck out before security comes over! You need to cool it.”

Standing amongst the splintered wood, my chest heaves and cheeks burn. Even smashing the chair didn’t release the heavy weight in my mind, the choking guilt. If only I could go back, punch my younger self in the face and tell him to do the right thing, no matter the consequences.

Instead, I ruined us both.

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FIFTEEN

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BROOKLYN

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MONSTER (UNDER MY BED) BY CALL ME KARIZMA

VIC GRUNTS, *body flush against mine, hips glued together. Thrusting into me with tender strokes, moaning and kissing my neck. I feel sick to my stomach but can't pull away, he doesn't need to know what goes through my head when we make love.*

It'll break his heart.

"You're so fucking tight. God, I love you. I love you so much."

"I love you too," I grind out. The words killing me slowly, piece by piece.

It's not his fault. Vic... he's troubled. Kind and sweet when he wants to be, but scarily quick to anger. Hateful of the distance growing between us. When we fight over the drink and drugs, he comes to me to apologise first. Sweeping up broken glass or fixing shattered picture frames.

But he's always the first to start swinging too. Neither one of us is good for the other. The ghosts and shadows in my head, they're ripping us both apart.

Vic rolls off me, breathing heavy as cold air hits my skin. The relief is acute, quickly followed by shame. This should be giving me pleasure, making me feel loved and wanted. Not repelled, holding in my disgust as I fake the noises and an eventual orgasm.

"Did you try the dress on that I bought you?"

"Uh, it's not really me."

"Put the damn dress on. It's my sister's wedding, for fuck's sake," he hisses.

Dressed up like a prized puppy. Fuck that. But if I refuse, I'm the bad guy.

"I... can't wear it, Vic."

He turns his eyes on me, wide and upset. The emotion quickly fading into anger that is never far beneath the surface. He's always mad at me for one thing or another. "Why not? Did you do it again?"

Shaking my head, I'm ignored as he pins me down with his substantial weight and yanks my sleeves up. He gasps and swears at the mess he finds, making me cringe back into the pillows to escape his inevitable wrath.

"Brooke! The hell are you doing to yourself? Fucking freak."

His fingers bite into my skin, aggravating the throbbing cuts like he wants to punish me. I try to pull my arm away but his grip tightens. He's furious and the disappointment stings. Bile gathers in my throat, I want to run and hide. These aren't his to look at, it's private. Personal.

"You promised."

"Screw promises, it's stupid," I mutter shamefully.

"How can we be together if all you do is lie? Does it mean nothing to you, the shit that spews from your mouth? You're fucking breaking my heart here, Brooke."

No. It doesn't matter to me. I'm not even sure he has a heart to break, just a twisted, gaping hole where it should be. We're both assholes but I'll lie, cheat and manipulate without blinking an eye. That's the truth of it. This good girl persona that he's constructed for me, it's not real. He's deluding himself and punishing me for failing to meet that standard.

"Leave me alone." I shrug him off, trying to escape.

"You don't get to do that, Brooke!"

He drags me back, refusing to let go. I struggle and fight, but it's no use. He's stronger than me, bigger than me. Determined to save me, or the version of me he believes exists.

What if I told him where I was last night?

What if he knew that less than twelve hours ago, I was fucking another man? Bent over a table in the closed diner, my uniform hitched up around my waist, taking it rough and hard from the chef in exchange for a baggie of coke. Didn't even use a condom, that's how little I care about myself.

Anything just to feel something.

No matter how much it destroys my soul.

The urge to throw the ugly truth in his face is overwhelming. But deep down, I'm fucking selfish. I don't want to be alone. Secretly, no matter how toxic this thing is between us, I want to be the person he thinks I am. She's better than me, tenfold. No matter how long I stay in this hazardous waste...

the chances of me ever becoming her?

Zero. Nil. I'm too far gone.

I shove him hard, breaking the hold. My head buzzing and ears ringing with panic. Screaming voices grow louder with every second, fuelled by my anger and always ready to taunt me some more. The accompanying shadows grow until they are chasing me from the bedroom, but I can't escape the dark suggestions that follow.

Kill him. Break his neck.

Slit his throat. Push him down the stairs.

I don't listen. I never listen. I've heard voices and seen the shadows for years, long predating my shitty relationship with Vic. I grew up with invisible friends that no one could see, until the friends became shadows that haunted my every waking moment.

The constant failure to live up to Vic's impossible expectations?

They don't like that. They want us to act, to punish him right back for idolising me. When really I'm just a worthless bitch, coasting through life from one disaster to the next. It's his fault, making me feel bad for being my true, broken self.

Kill him. Kill him. Kill him.

Kill him. Kill him. Kill him.

I storm out of the room, locking myself in the bathroom. Searching frantically for the spare razor, I smash it on the sink to release the tantalising blades. Vic throws them out, I buy more. It's a never-ending battle of wills. Even when I promise to get better, and we share a brief glimpse of a normal, happy relationship... it's all hot air. Fake words and easy lies to appease his own demons. Nothing can stop me.

Kill him. Kill him. Kill him.

Kill him. Kill him. Kill him.

"NO," I scream in response.

The shadows melt down the walls, bubbling and spitting with rage. They creep closer by the second, whispering their poisonous commands to me. No matter how loud I shout, they refuse to leave. Refuse to stop talking to me. Sometimes I talk back just to appease them.

I can't kill him, please don't make me. I can't do it.

I slice and slash, fucking devastated by the ceaseless anger. The pain that isn't even Vic's fault, I've carried the scars inside for years before we met in a backstreet nightclub. Cutting myself viciously until the voices fade once

more, I slump on the floor. Suddenly tired and drained of all hope. This is my routine. It always works.

But my biggest fear?

That one day, it won't be enough. Even this won't stop me.

And the shadows will win.



THERE'S a metallic bang as the guard slides the food tray in, rousing me from the nightmare of the past and hurtling me straight into the nightmare of the present. He slams the hatch shut again without uttering a word. Speaking isn't allowed. Even if I had something to say, my body won't cooperate. Nothing escapes my lips right now. They're just numb, slippery with drool. Every inch of my body is empty. Immobile.

How long have I been here? A week? Month? Year?

Does it even matter?

I once spent a weekend in the hole, back in Clearview. That was torture enough, and it felt shorter than this. But who knows? Time isn't real anyway, not anymore. Life ceased to exist for me a long time ago, when this sickness took root, invading my brain and corrupting my soul. It's all been illusionary since, dragging on without meaning.

Sleep returns, black smog descending and enveloping me. The food turns cold, the sunlight fades. Stripling across the room through the high barred window, peeking out from the basement level of the institute. I can't escape through it.

Don't you think I've tried that?

Another day begins. Another tray of food. More sunlight, more rain, more numbness. Then another. Tray after tray. Day after day.

I lay there, fading and withering. Tormented by ghosts and memories in my head. Voices and whispers of a time long past, yet still irrevocably tied to my present. Truly, I envy people that can simply move on. Like it's so fucking easy to do. Everyone should hurt as much as me. Everyone should suffer like I do. That's all I can think. It's bitter and pointless, like an angry child. But inside, deep down, I'm still that angry child.

The days blur into one another. When my endless solitude is finally disturbed, I'm not even sure what's real and what's not anymore. The drugs

have been forced in through an IV, eroding all of the precious, painstakingly constructed boundaries in my mind. Unhinging and destabilising until I swear the padded room is watching me, laughing and sneering. They're meant to have the opposite effect, right? Fucking psychiatrists. It's all bullshit.

"Brooklyn? Can you hear me?"

I'm rolled over, the sheets pulled back as cold air hits my skin. Beady eyes peer down at me, beneath white hair and wire-rimmed glasses. His skin is creased like old parchment and scented with expensive cologne.

"Time to get up now," he croons. "You're free to leave."

A guard is brought in to lift my flaccid body, forcing me onto legs that refuse to hold my weight. I'm removed from the cell, out into a bleak corridor. Shadowy and never ending, with more cells and barred doors stretching onwards into the distance. I think I hear voices as we pass, but the whispers from behind the doors are indecipherable.

My mind is groggy, unstable and short-circuiting. I can't process anything or even begin to question what's happening around me, the sinister darkness in this place. The scenery just melts away into the background as we walk past.

"It's taken some time, but we're now happy for you to leave and rejoin the main population. The new drugs have you looking much more stable, hmmm?"

He's talking on and on, this odd-looking man. Signing release papers as he walks, tucking the fancy fountain pen back into his white coat once finished. The words float inside my head, all meaning lost in translation. One thing screams at me through the heavy fog.

This is not what better feels like.

What have they done to me?

Entering a nearby office, I'm deposited into an armchair. My head is propped up so I can see the doctor taking a seat at his desk, humming under his breath. He's short and round, clearly well into his sixties. The striped bowtie and braces beneath his coat make him look like a fucking cartoon character. If I could feel my face, I'd laugh.

"Hmm, let's see. Well, well. Interesting stuff."

Continuing to mutter and ruminate, he hobbles over to a nearby mini-fridge and ducks inside. Rifling through the tiny labelled bottles of countless drug cocktails like he's the fucking bartender and I'm a helpless punter. When he sidles up to my chair with a hypodermic needle, I try to move and

fail. Nothing responds to me, not even my toes. All I can do is sit helplessly frozen as he finds a suitable vein and plunges it in.

“Very good. This should liven you up, dear. Such a good girl.”

He retakes his seat and studies me intently, a loud grandfather clock ticking away in the corner. Gradually, feeling begins to return. My fingers spasm painfully, pins and needles spread. First paralysing cold infects my cells, then burning heat. Looking down at my bare feet, ever so slowly, I manage to wiggle my toes.

Within half an hour, I can sit somewhat upright and form words. I wipe drool from my mouth and lick my lips, tongue heavy and foreign in my sore mouth. Whatever he’s given me, it seems to have kickstarted my body. Was it adrenaline? Some experimental drug? I’ve lost count of the shit they’ve pumped into me. This isn’t right. It isn’t normal.

“H-how long?” I manage to say.

“Two weeks. Your lawyer has been giving us some trouble, missy.”

“My l-lawyer?”

Don’t fucking have one.

None of this makes sense. I just want to go back to sleep.

“Yes, lawyer. Frightfully rude gentleman from the city, they love to swan in here making demands. But we insisted on getting you into a healthy state before even considering a return to the general population. This is a mental health institution, after all. Treatment is our first priority, along with customer satisfaction.”

His smile is wide, almost savage, and it makes me uncomfortable. I need to argue back, to point out that drugging me to death isn’t treatment. It’s fucking sedation and abusing their power. Nothing about this is healthy. Not a damn thing.

“I w-want to go home.”

The plea slips out unbidden. My voice is cracked and reveals more emotion than I want anyone to see. I hate the vulnerability, but I’m in no place to play games right now. Then it hits me, straight in the motherfucking heart.

I don’t have a home.

The man smiles, nodding with what should be kindness, but looks more like fascination. It makes my skin crawl, the restrained curiosity so clear in his gaze. Like I’m just another social experiment ready to sacrifice for the cause.

“You’re clear to return back upstairs.” He beams at me proudly. “I’ll be taking over your treatment from now on. You’ll return to me once a week for your shot and therapy, not Mariam. She isn’t equipped to deal with your... *specific challenges*. I have more suitable experience.”

“Experience?” I stutter.

“Yes. We have lots to work on together. Exciting plans.”

Ice travels through my veins and I want to cry. Scream, refuse and flee from sight. Everything inside of me is saying this guy is bad news. But there’s no proof, no tangible evidence to suggest this isn’t another one of my delusions. I try to wrack my brains, but the two weeks are all a blur. A twisted, amorphous cloud in my psyche.

Just get back to the room.

Get away from this man, this floor. All of it.

He calls for the guard to return, giving him instructions to get me home safe. I can walk better now, but everything shakes and burns. Every muscle, unused to sudden movement after so long spent in a barred cot.

As we leave, I look back at the twisted little man for a final time, my heart hammering in my chest. I can’t hold the final question back.

“Who are you?”

He tips his head towards me, plastering a charming smile in place that would win over any jury. “Professor Lazlo, my dear. Pleasure to meet you properly. I look forward to our appointment next Monday morning. Do rest up, we have plenty to crack on with. Plenty.”

SIXTEEN

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PHOENIX

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CATHEDRALS BY ANIMAL FLAG

I KICK the ball to Hudson a little harder than necessary. It goes sailing past him and out of the pitch, causing a round of complaints. He flips me off and chases after it, giving me a burst of satisfaction. *Good.* Just the sight of his face right now is too much to handle.

I'm not a particularly violent person. Words are better weapons than anything else. You can cut someone far deeper with the truth than any blade. But what he's done? I'm pissed off. Hell, I'm fucking furious. Everything was going fine until he showed up and it all went to shit.

Two weeks.

Brooklyn's been gone for two damn weeks. No matter what legal precedence is thrown at this place, she's under the custody of the shrinks. Her life has been signed away to them. There's not much else to be done, the attack on Hudson sealed her fate. With enough witnesses to verify what happened, even the fancy fucking lawyer from London couldn't get her out of solitary.

I'm going crazy. This girl, she's under my skin. I don't know how or why, but knowing she's in that basement, all alone.... it's doing things to me. Causing feelings that I didn't even think I was capable of.

Me and Eli tried to break in the other night. We nearly got tossed in there ourselves. Luckily I'm squeaky clean and he's too fucking crazy to survive the hole, so we only got a warning. Regardless, if she isn't back by the end of the weekend, we're going back down there. Consequences be damned to hell. I'd happily kiss my spotless record goodbye for the chance to see her again.

"If you're going to be a dick, we may as well stop," Hudson yells.

Well, that's pretty much guaranteed.

I march over, hating how angry I feel right now. This isn't me. I don't *feel* shit like this. He seems to think I'm coming to talk, but as soon as I'm close enough, I smash my fist into his stomach. Doubling over, he grunts in pain. I can see the appeal of violence now.

"Think I've earned the right to be a dick. Fuck you, buddy," I shout back.

Turning my back is a mistake. Next thing I know, my legs are swept out from underneath me, my head connecting with the hard ground. Hudson looms over me, his face twisted in a mask of rage.

"Screw you, Nix. You think I don't feel the same way?"

"Yeah, well, I don't see you doing shit about it!"

Hudson grabs me by the scruff of my shirt, his face close enough for spit to hit my cheek. "You have no fucking idea. None at all," he mutters darkly. "Don't talk about shit you don't understand, or we're going to have a problem."

"Guys, come on. Let's not do this again." Kade sighs.

"Piss off," we both reply at the same time.

A few punches and insults later, we're walking away and dusting ourselves off. No point dragging it out, we both just needed a release. Kade prefers to suffer in silence, pointlessly scrolling the internet for legal arguments and loopholes. Waste of time if you ask me.

Eli's another breed altogether. For an unsociable guy, he's breaking records at the moment. Completely retreated into himself, his nose always buried in a book. Yet he never seems to finish it. In fact, I think he's been reading the same page for a while now.

"Let's just go back to the room," I say, dusting myself off. "We got some more beers off Rio."

"You really need to stop bargaining with him," Kade chastises.

"I'll pay him back, don't worry. He knows I'm good for it."

"I could use a drink," Hudson chimes in moodily.

We trail back to Oakridge in uncomfortable silence, the mood sombre. Things between us have never been so tense. The repercussions of Brooklyn's attack on Hudson has been hard on all of us, but no one knows how to fix this mess. Not while we're wrapped in fear of what's happening to the little firecracker that barrelled into our lives.

I'm aware that I've become too attached, too quickly. Doesn't change a damn thing though. Every night, those stormy eyes invade my dreams. Her lips on mine, body fitting against mine fucking perfectly, sweet cunt wrapped

tight around my dick. Best kiss of my life. You bet that when she's out, nothing's going to stop me from doing that again and more. Anything to bring some life to her, that reluctant smile devastating my heart with a mere look.

"Hudson! Baby!"

Britt's shrill voice rings out across the quad. She's spotted our group, chasing after us. *Stupid bitch*. Flinging herself at Hudson, he's forced to peel her off and take a big step back. His facial expression says it all.

"Where have you been? I've been looking everywhere. I miss you."

She's whining again and Eli swiftly departs, literally striding away without a second glance. I know he can't stand her voice, but now me and Kade are stuck. We shift awkwardly as she gapes at Eli's retreating back, turning to meet Hudson's obvious rejection. It's actually pretty entertaining, watching her get crushed into a million pathetic pieces.

Just me? Oh well.

Hudson runs a hand through his hair, lips pursed unhappily. "I thought I told you to leave me alone, Britt. We're done, for good. It's over."

"Baby, what are you talking about? Quit messing around already." Her voice becomes gradually more hysterical as she latches onto his arm. "Don't do this, Hud. You need me."

"Listen to me, we're through. That's it. No more," Hudson barks.

Fat tears begin to roll down her cheeks, sparkling satisfyingly as her heartbreak takes root. It's fucking hilarious if you ask me.

"Don't say that. Please," she whimpers.

Hudson grits his teeth, forcing some patience. "That's the truth."

Bursting into loud, echoing sobs, Britt hangs off his body. Clawing at his shirt like some kind of deranged kitten while mewling her pathetic begging. Fucking hell, I should've run while I had the chance. She barely weighs a thing with her protruding bones and stick thin legs, so Hudson swiftly places her back on the ground.

"Leave me alone. Move on," he orders.

Her pain swiftly descends into anger, face scrunching up and hands balling into tight fists. The slap comes as quickly as expected, leaving a big red handprint on his cheek.

"Fuck you, Hudson Knight. You're a bastard," she spits harshly.

Hudson simply shrugs without showing any emotion. Without even looking her in the eye, like she's nothing more than shit on the bottom of his

shoe. It's excruciating to watch but morbidly fascinating.

Some more shouting and cursing later, Britt storms off in a cloud of rage, leaving Hudson to rub his sore cheek. He glares after her with exasperation. "Man, she's hard work."

"We've been telling you that for months," Kade points out.

"Whatever, it's done now."

"Another victim," I reply. He looks like he wants to kill me.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I scoff bitterly. "You know exactly what it means."

"I'm sorry, how many guys did you fuck last week?" Hudson hits back.

We argue all the way home, trading insults. In many ways, Hudson and I are far too alike. I lack his anger, but we both have a tendency to leave a trail of broken hearts behind us, fucking and chucking like there's no tomorrow. It's easier that way, commitment is too risky. Getting attached never leads to anything good around here.

We reach the fourth floor and I'm in the lead, giving me a clear view down the corridor. My eyes are the first to fall on her. I have to blink to reassure myself that she's real, I'm so shocked and relieved. The guard gives her an aggressive shove and storms away without looking back. She slumps against the door, her knees giving way.

"Holy shit," I breathe.

Taking off before the others can respond, I'm at her door in a flash, anticipation quickening my steps. It feels like forever has passed. Just seeing her feels like a dream after the nights spent imaging that platinum hair wrapped around my fingertips.

"Brooklyn," I holler.

Her head doesn't even raise as I pause, suddenly unsure.

"Brooke?"

She rests against the door, desperately failing to get inside. Her hand is shaking so violently, she can't scan the key card.

"I can't do it," Brooklyn whimpers.

That hushed voice lethally stabs my heart. Leaning in, I tuck her hair aside and take a good look at the face hidden beneath. If she looked like a ghost before, she's nothing more than a corpse now. Deathly pale and drawn, eyes swollen from crying. I can see the blue of her veins beneath her skin as she blinks hard, seeming to process exactly who I am.

"Hey, firecracker. It's me. Nix," I coax softly.

Tilting her head up, Brooklyn's eyes finally meet mine. Faded and washed out, the pupils are blown impossibly wide. I can practically see the drugs swimming in her system. My thumb brushes over her sore bottom lip, so fucking gentle I surprise even myself.

"It's good to see your face," I whisper.

My words break the spell and she removes my fingers from her face, expression hardening. The vulnerability is stuffed down deep, stubborn rage taking its place instead.

"Leave me alone," she grunts.

"What? No."

"All of you... just leave me alone."

We stare off as the other two finally catch up. Kade immediately comes to my side, slipping seamlessly into protector mode as he assesses and evaluates. He looks about as happy as I feel at the mess they've made of our girl. She can barely stand up, let alone open her door.

Hudson hangs way back, suddenly quiet now she's here. I can practically taste the tension that explodes between them, but he's seemingly doing the right thing for once in his life by keeping his mouth shut.

"Brooklyn! We've been so worried," Kade rushes out.

I can see his hands clenching, itching to reach out and touch her. I know that feeling all too well. Her head ducks down, ignoring our presence as she continues scrabbling with the door, hands still trembling violently.

Kade exchanges a look with me. "What's going on?"

I shrug, lost for words. All that stress, two weeks of sleepless nights and guilt... and she doesn't even want to see us. What happened down there? She's changed. None of the spirit and fire is there, just this defeated shell trying to push us away.

"I don't want to see you guys," Brooklyn mutters.

"Give me the key card," I demand, trying to snag it from her trembling fingers. "Give it to me now!"

She tries to fight me off. "No! Fuck off, Nix."

"Give me the goddamn card, Brooke. This is ridiculous."

Stubborn as hell, she denies me again. Kade and I are suddenly shoved aside, Hudson's patience expiring. He swiftly plucks the card from Brooklyn's grasp and unlocks the door, tucking it into his back pocket. Before she can finish getting the insult out, he scoops her small body up, crushing her to his chest.

“Put me down! Damn asshole,” she yells.

“Shut up and do as you are fucking told,” he bites back.

Storming into the room, we follow hot on his heels. Kade seems slightly aghast at the rough handling as he slams the door shut. Hudson deposits Brooklyn on the bed, where she lands with a gasp. She continues to struggle against him as he tightly tucks her in.

“What part of don’t ever touch me again do you not understand?”

Hudson shakes his head, clearly exasperated. “I never agreed to that bullshit and you know it. Stop acting like a child.”

“You’re right, I shouldn’t be surprised,” Brooklyn says, voice dripping with acid. “Consent never meant much to you anyway.”

Hudson flinches, deliberately avoiding looking at us. I can almost see the shame crawling over his face as he looks away from us all, hiding from judgement. The hell is she talking about? What exactly did he do?

“Touch me again and next time, I’ll aim for your heart,” she promises darkly. “Final fucking warning, Hud.”

“Give it a rest. Hate me tomorrow, just let us check you’re okay.”

“Please,” Kade adds emphatically.

Considering for a long, hate-filled second, Brooklyn eventually nods and sinks back into the pillows. “I’m fine. Just tired, okay?”

“No, not okay. We haven’t seen you for two whole weeks. Going to need more than that,” I grit out. The need to shake her increases, to make her understand what’s happening here. We can’t just be pushed away like this.

“Just drop it.” She’s looking at me now, begging with her eyes.

Nobody gets what they want with me. I take pleasure in rejection. But immediately, I want to relent just to make her happy. She looks like shit, but it’s what lies beneath the surface that concerns me, something we’ll have to carefully draw out of her.

“Maybe we should just let her rest,” I concede.

“No way,” Hudson retorts.

She shoots him a glower that silences any further comments, her cold stare making even me shiver. “You are the last person I want here. Learn when you’re not wanted.”

“I’m not walking away,” Hudson insists.

Brooklyn glares at him. “Didn’t stop you before.”

“I never meant to hurt you, blackbird.”

Fat tears run down her face as she seems to grow even angrier. “You

didn't, huh?" She shakes her head in disbelief, managing to sit up. "I don't want your excuses or apologies, Hud. I never did."

"I don't, fuck... I can't..." Hudson stumbles.

Jabbing a finger at her chest, Brooklyn's voice drips with contempt as she cuts him off. "You did this to me. You are the reason I'm here, why I'm screwed beyond repair. Nothing, *absolutely fucking nothing*, will ever fix that. Walk away and never return."

She lays back down, dismissing us all. Hudson stares for a split second before turning and storming away, kicking the desk chair so hard on his way out, a dramatic crack splits the back. He storms out the door, leaving us both gaping and completely flummoxed.

"You both too. I mean it, fuck off already," Brooklyn shouts.

I glance at Kade who gestures towards the exit, apparently willing to give in. I'm tempted to stay and argue some more, but frankly, she's in no fit state. There's only so much I can do for someone so unwilling.

"You sure?" Kade asks gently.

Her hard, clipped response follows. "Are you still fucking here?"

His shoulders slump in defeat as he walks away. I make sure the covers are pulled up tight to Brooklyn's chin and gently brush her tangled hair. I'm aching to do more, regardless of her feelings.

"You know where we are if you need us," I offer.

"I won't. Just leave and don't fucking come back, alright?"

We reluctantly do as we're told, and it takes every ounce of respect for her privacy that I have. Whatever shadowy treatment they conduct in that basement, it's crippled her for good.

SEVENTEEN

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BROOKLYN

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TWISTED BY MISSIO

FORCING my numb legs to move, I take the stairs two at a time. It's painful but I push myself regardless, warming my body up in preparation for a gruelling run. Anything to get the static out of my mind that refuses to lift, no matter how loud I scream into my pillow at night.

Nothing's been the same since I returned two days ago.

Admittedly, I haven't really left my room in that time. Only to visit the nurse's station for meds, or else they threatened to take me straight back to solitary. Lazlo has me on a strict new regime. I now get a shot every week, along with my daily pills like before. There's no cheating. It's injected straight in and rather than trusting me, I'm now watched like a fucking prisoner as I swallow each day. Mouth inspected after too, ensuring there's no trickery and I'm actually swallowing them.

What a fucking joke.

As a result, all the plans I've laid are tattered and destroyed. I've been here a whole month yet somehow, I'm still at goddamn square one.

I can't recall a single thing that happened in that basement. It's all just a big, ugly blur in my mind. Punctuated by the awful memories of a time that I really don't want to remember. The solitude brought all my demons back up to the surface, and now they refuse to be suppressed again.

Did they ever really leave me?

I'm expected back in class today. Considering how far behind I am at this point, it barely seems worth it. I was supposed to be dead by now. If I hadn't attacked Hudson, I'd be free. Finally, after all this time I was so close to getting what I want. I don't know who I'm angrier with; myself or him.

I take off into the early morning mist. Readjusting to taking meds again

along with the trauma of solitary has wrecked me, physically and emotionally. How I'll get through classes, I have no idea. I need a new plan to get the hell out, November is fast approaching.

During my time in the hole, an official 'search' took place of all the residential blocks. There's a contraband issue here, everyone knows it. They tore apart the rooms in a bid to hunt down the culprits. I quickly found that not only did they find and confiscate my stash of pills but my blades as well, along with anything else that was deemed risky.

Looping around the perimeter twice, counting the guards and cameras as I go, I'm still not ready to head back. What used to work for me is no longer helpful, I can't seem to relieve this suffocating darkness in my mind. Opting for a different route, I head behind the slightly smaller Pinehill dorms and cut through the rear gardens.

Pristine greenery gradually melts away the further I run, growing unkempt and forgotten. Towering birch trees soon envelope me into the thick underbrush. When I come to a towering security fence that marks the edge of the property, I scale the perimeter in frustration, ready to admit defeat. I don't expect to find a tiny, passable hole hidden in the corner.

Squeezing myself through the barbed wire, I hold my breath and make it to the other side, breaking into a sprint just in case anyone is watching. The further I run, the more removed I feel. Like I've entered into a different world, far from the nightmares of Blackwood. Out here in the unknown, I can almost forget the trap I'm stuck in. The harrowing reality that I actually have to *live*.

I've got four weeks to make it out.

Four weeks before the anniversary.

I jog into a clearing, finding a graveyard tucked into the Welsh wilderness. Black wrought iron gates encircle the space, filled with crumbling gravestones and statues. There's a mausoleum at the back, imposing in all its gothic beauty. Willow trees sway in the light breeze, and golden leaves coat the pathway leading inside.

I trail my fingers over the faded names, overcome with pointless spite and jealousy. Why are they dead and not me? Why can't I be buried in this ground, cold and empty? It's only fair that we get to choose if we live or not. If someone wants to die, that's their decision. Not everyone wants to be saved.

Sinking to the frosty ground, I rest against one of the stones, savouring

the peace and quiet that sinks beneath my skin. Except it isn't silent. Somewhere, there's a noise. It's tinny, almost like a muffled speaker. I peer around and my eyes land on a crouched form by the mausoleum doors, dressed in a familiar black hoodie and distressed jeans.

Eli's headphones blare heavy rock music as he rustles in his backpack. His curly brown hair is messy and escaping from the scruffy cap he wears. Pulling a tobacco tin out and searching inside, I'm unable to look away as he locates a small, razor sharp penknife. He takes the time to methodically clean and disinfect it, with a kind of ritualistic attention to detail. Then he's slowly rolling up his sleeve, face pinched in concentration as he studies his arm.

I can't tear my eyes away.

My mouth waters as he presses the blade to his skin and draws it along, eliciting an immediate release. His shoulders slump and his face relaxes as the blood flows. Watching with fascination, he moves an inch down and repeats the process. It's like I'm watching an artist, the blade his paintbrush and arm the canvas. Painting a beautiful, bloody scene of morbid proportions.

I'm so enraptured by the sight that my grip on the stone slips, causing a chunk to crash to the ground. His head shoots up and our eyes immediately connect. Fear and panic quickly melt into something else that I can't describe. He's looking straight at me, lips quirked in a secret smile. Like I'm some kind of voyeur to his most intimate moment, and he's getting off on the thrill of having an audience.

Screw it. He's clearly happy to see me.

I join him on the moss-covered steps. Neither of us speak, there's no awkward reunion or insistent questioning like with the others. Both of our attention is focused on the knife clutched tightly in his hand. Blood streams from his wrist to his elbow in crimson rivulets. My fingers ache with the need to snatch it away.

But not to stop him.

Fuck no, I want it for myself.

I want to feel something, to elicit that sweet, euphoric release for just a second. Like a recovering alcoholic, I'm staring at him with raw need. Eyeing the prize and determining how to get some of it for my own pleasure. As sick as it is, I'm not interested in stopping him from hurting himself. I understand the need to gamble with that delicate line, somewhere between life and death. Too deep, and that's it. Not deep enough and you're left wanting more.

It's a vicious, addictive cycle, and I fucking love it.

Shining emerald orbs stare at me curiously as I run my finger over his palm, daring to move higher. Circling his wrist and the blue veins there, I follow the trail up to his weeping lacerations. Spreading the trickles of blood beneath my skin, creating a trail of crimson brushstrokes. Now we're both artists, imprisoned by this sick fascination together.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, trying to pull away.

His hand stops me, holding me in place as he shakes his head. That dark smile is lopsided and knowing. Fuck, he wants this as much as I do. How twisted is that? But it doesn't matter. It doesn't stop me. This feeling between us, these tendrils of darkness and pure fucking sickness drawing us closer, it's irrevocable. Uncontrollable. Nothing exists outside of this moment.

Eli offers the knife to me. My heart pounds faster than ever. I can't rip my gaze away from the glinting steel as he cleans and disinfects it. Before I know it, my fingers wrap around the handle. My hand is still shaking and pathetic, but he doesn't judge. Not my Eli.

Rolling the sleeve of my sweater up, countless silvery scars and gnarled lumps of skin are revealed. His gaze burns like fire and I actually enjoy it. Filled with this odd sense of pride, I want him to see my artwork. To appreciate it for himself, one cutter to another. It's like a rite of passage, this intimate sharing of our battle scars, inflicted by the ultimate enemy; ourselves.

Everything about this is wrong.

Unhealthy. Toxic. Messed up.

But at the same time, *oh so right*.

The serrated edge meets my sensitive flesh. A sigh escapes my lips at the familiar feeling, seconds before taking that tempting step. Then I'm moving the knife, trying to draw blood, but my trembling hand is preventing me from getting a good grip to press deep enough. I huff, cursing the fucking medication I'm dosed to high heaven on. A few more failed attempts and the frustrated tears are threatening to fall.

"Fucking hand," I growl.

Eli swallows hard, biting his lower lip. He gently eases the knife from my spasming hand. Giving me a long, hard look, he silently asks the question I know he can't say out loud. *My consent*. This complicated, broken man wants to help me in the only way he knows how.

I'm nodding without thinking, trusting him intuitively with every fibre of my being. He lifts his eyebrows, seeking confirmation and rather than

answer, I seal my lips on his. Just a whispered moment of affection, giving him a glimpse beneath the surface at the damaged girl tucked away behind layers of sarcasm and anger, who wants him to cut her when *she can't fucking do it herself*.

“Please,” I whimper. “Make it better, Eli. Please.”

As he draws it across my wrist, I wonder if he feels it. This unexplainable bond between us, like kindred souls reunited at last. We're two lone wolves circling one another, both intrigued and a little afraid. I wonder what that feeling tastes like to him.

My eyes sink shut as the release comes, hot and sharp with the bite of pain. I can't hold back the moan of satisfaction as he repeats this action four times. Methodically, precisely. Taking his time and care.

Once he's done, another sensation takes over. *Holy fuck*. It's his tongue, gliding across the skin of my wrist as he kisses his handiwork. He laps at the blood, fingers digging painfully into my arm. Send me to hell, I don't care. I'm fucking wetter than I've ever been. My thighs clench with the flood of pure arousal.

“Eli,” I whisper like a prayer.

Burying my fingers in his unruly chocolate curls, I yank hard until his bloodied lips are there for me to claim. Teeth clash with the violence of our kiss, he's just as enthralled as I am. Grasping my face, exploring every inch of my mouth with his coppery tongue and marking his territory.

Desire burns through me as I scramble onto Eli's lap, wrapping my legs around his trim waist. Drawing our bodies together, I need to feel him everywhere. Now I've had a taste I can't get enough, I'm plummeting fast and he's there to catch me.

Our hips grind together as his hand slips beneath my sweater, gliding over my stomach and ribs. His fingers undoubtedly feel the ridges and raised skin there too. He makes short work of getting inside my bra, teasing my stiff nipples. I rub myself against him even harder, the press of his rock-hard cock driving me wild.

“More,” I gasp.

Eli looks at me, eyes sparkling with mischief as he bites his lip. It's the most alive I've seen him, the most alert. He's always hiding from the world, zoned out for his own self-preservation. But right now, Eli's here with me.

Swiftly undoing his jeans, I reach for the hard length trapped inside. It's ready for me, hot and pulsing. Eli yanks my shirt up and I shift so he can

remove my joggers, soaked panties too. Then his fingers are gliding over my skin, circling my thighs until he slips inside my dripping folds. Teasing the bundle of nerves there, I shudder a breath. He casts me another cheeky smile before he plunges inside with two digits, spreading me wide.

“Fuck yes,” I moan.

Eli pauses, calculating for a devilish second before retreating and rubbing his fingers into my bleeding arm, sizzling pain biting into my skin. With the gathered blood, he returns to my pussy and slips them back inside, hot blood moistening my folds as I scream out.

So fucking wrong, yet so right at the same time.

He quickens the pace, fucking me roughly with his fingers and I begin to work his velvet shaft. I can hear his rasping breath, enjoying the pleasure I know I’m giving him. As the feeling builds and I’m wound tighter, I realise this is what I like, after years of suffering through shitty hook-ups.

Depraved.

Bloody.

Twisted.

But ultimately, fucking *incredible*.

Eli’s lips work across my jawline, all the way down the slope of my neck, sucking and bruising along the way. I love it. He’s owning me and I cannot get enough. Lowering onto his lap fully, I spread my legs. Straddling him perfectly as his tip presses against my red stained cunt.

Eli hesitates, his hand wrapping around my neck to gain my attention. Squeezing my throat until I’m gasping for air, the question in his eyes is clear. Even after all of this, he still wants my consent. That’s a real fucking gentleman. The same gentleman that just sliced my skin and *liked it*.

“Please,” I beg sheepishly.

He wastes no time, slamming his cock home deep enough for me to cry out. I’m so full, every nerve ending on fire as his forehead meets mine. When I find my balance and begin to move, the euphoria only increases. I ride him hard, arms wrapped around his neck for support. He’s still gripping my throat, squeezing tight enough to excite me further as breathing becomes even more difficult.

I’m chasing the high, insatiable and desperate for more of this feeling. Our bodies smash together as we both moan and gasp. Once I’ve screamed out my first release, Eli moves, assuming dominance and removing me from his lap. I’m lowered onto the cold ground of the mausoleum steps. Hands grip

my thighs as he hangs over me, tousled hair slipping over his face and disturbing my view. I swipe it away.

The way he looks at me? It's fucking addictive.

Like I'm the very oxygen he breathes.

Slipping back inside, Eli buries his face in my neck as I writhe and cry out. He fucks me hard and fast like his life depends on it. The open air only makes it hotter, kissing my bare skin. There's something forbidden about screwing among the dead buried in this graveyard. Blood leaking from both of our arms, evidencing our shared fascination for the art of self-destruction.

Twin flames destined for oblivion.

We both climax shortly after. Eli's hair tickles my cheek as he catches his breath, eventually looking up at me with those damned knowing eyes. It's like he can hear my very thoughts, despite the silence between us.

"Eli," I begin.

A loud voice interrupts, our heads snapping up. I grab my clothes and Eli does the same, scrambling to cover himself as the voice nears. Grabbing his hand, we jump down the steps and sneak around the side of the mausoleum just in time. A pair of sour-faced guards burst into the graveyard and search around urgently, reporting back into their radios.

"Nothing here. You sure she went this way?"

The radio crackles. "Yes, lieutenant. Use your eyes."

"It's empty. Check your damn computer again."

There's a crackling through the speaker, some kind of scuffle before a new voice chimes in. "This is Augustus. Bring the asset back in range or pack your bags."

The two guards quickly resume searching, ducking behind gravestones and checking in the trees. Eli clings to my hand as one of them comes dangerously close, heavy black boots stomping up the steps to the mausoleum. There's a loud groan as he works the door open, yanking the ancient stone away to peek in. We take that opportunity to flee around the back and sprint all the way back to the fence.

Eli doesn't release my hand until we're back in Oakridge.

Sweaty, bloodied, and satisfied.

EIGHTEEN

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KADE

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HURRICANE BY HALSEY

CLOCKED in for my usual Monday shift, I'm tapping away on my laptop with anticipation. I check to make sure the warden's in her office before I pull up Brooklyn's records. Moral considerations aside, I could easily lose my privileges for this. But I need to know what happened in that basement. Brooklyn's become a ghost, nobody has seen her all weekend and I'm losing my mind.

I checked out Phoenix and Eli after our very first interactions, knowing I had to do something to help them. Not everyone that comes here is a criminal, nor are they all court sanctioned. Some are just plain crazy and of particular interest to the shrinks.

Technically, Nix was threatened with jail time for dealing drugs if he didn't attend here and clean up his act. The bipolar diagnosis spared him that unpleasantness, along with the fact that he was an unstable mess at the time of his arrest.

Eli's the most innocent out of us all. It's not what he did, but what others did to him that led him to Blackwood, after years of bouncing between different facilities, the most recent of which was Clearview.

"Kade? You got that list for the Christmas market trip?"

Mike comes to a halt at my desk, leaning on his elbow. The deputy warden is a bit overbearing, but he's decent enough. A damn sight more approachable than the warden herself, Elizabeth White. She oversees business and spends most of her time in board meetings, but she is the real authority around here. The shrinks are just her lapdogs.

"Sure, I'll get it for you now. The one in early December?"

"Yep. We need to start making arrangements. Liz is on my case again

about rewarding those with good behaviour.” He rolls his eyes dramatically. “You coming? I put your name down, could use the help.”

Shrugging, I bring up the lengthy file and glance over the details. It’s a small list, very few have spotless records and no disciplinaries. Phoenix’s name is on there, much to my relief.

“Why not. My exams should all be done by then anyway,” I decide.

Mike beams at me. “Gets you out of this place at least.”

I sneak a glance out of the corner of my eye as Mike fiddles with his phone. His head is partially turned, so I have a chance to glance over the other names listed. It’s an alright group, no one too difficult or dangerous. Naturally Hudson and Eli are nowhere to be seen.

“You get the names from the shrinks?” I ask casually.

“Yeah, we had to get security clearance. Liz approved them already, barely looked at it,” he complains with a frown. “Damn woman is more interested in her emails than actually doing something meaningful around here.”

I hum a response, pretending that I’m getting ready to print. A tempting thought forms in my mind when I hear that it’s already gone through the warden. Heart hammering, I type another name at the bottom, changing the automatic status from red to green to indicate that she’s low risk.

What could possibly go wrong?

Brooklyn will be with us both, away from the suffocating surveillance at Blackwood. I’m fucking ecstatic just thinking about it, hungry for any opportunity to get her alone. Even if she won’t talk to us right now, we’re not all like Hudson. I have to earn a second chance from her.

“Here you go.” I give him a professional smile.

“Thanks, Kade. You’re a good lad.”

Mike collects the paperwork and wanders off back to his office, leaving me to return to my sleuthing. It was easy enough to get into Brooklyn’s records, perks of the job and all. Not being a genuine patient has its benefits, even if I did sign away my freedom for the privilege. Nobody can understand why I volunteer to help out, but there’s a reason for it.

I like to know what I’m getting myself into.

Control is power in this world.

Brooklyn’s record photo is a scary sight. Limp, unwashed hair and hollow cheeks frame her dead eyes. Even worse than when she came back from solitary. It’s backdated by ten months, from her first admission to Clearview.

I scroll down, trying to glean as much information as possible while stifling my guilt for invading her privacy.

BROOKLYN WEST, 20, Female.

Presented in an acute phase of psychosis — schizophrenia and personality disorder. Assessment needed immediately, case assigned to R Zimmerman for triage.

I READ ON FURTHER, curiosity burning as I scan through the brief notes from the psychiatric team that assessed her before she even got to Clearview.

UPON ARREST at St Pancras Train station, the patient was detained by police after a 48-hour chase. She has been put in custody to await psych evaluation. Presents with delusional thoughts, visual and auditory hallucinations, violent tendencies and an unstable personality.

See attached incident report for more details.

THE CURSOR HOVERS over the attached file, but as I click, a box appears to request a security code. Looks like it's locked for confidentiality and only the warden can give permission to access. I quickly close the screen and take an unsteady breath, glancing at her door. This is why I should mind my own damn business.

Using my computer skills, I quickly erase my presence from the system and catch all the hidden records. This isn't my first rodeo, and whatever is in that file, it's nothing good. While I scramble to cover my tracks, the words blaze in my mind.

What exactly did she do?

Despite that, the chances of it affecting this odd possessiveness I feel about her is low. I can't explain it, the way I get attached to people. Like my heart claims them long before my brain has a chance to catch up. No matter who they are or what they've done, once I'm invested, there's no turning

back.

A sharp bang on the desk bell has me jumping in my seat, heart in my mouth. I glance up to find Hudson grinning in amusement. “Hey bro. Got some post for me?”

“Was that really necessary?” I demand.

“Yep, it was. Fucking scaredy cat. What’ve you got to hide?”

I shrug, relieved that I’ve already cleared my laptop. Reaching in my satchel tucked beneath the desk, I pull the expensive cream envelope out and slide it over.

“I was going to bring it to you after work.”

“Don’t bother,” Hudson mutters.

I watch him rip into the letter, eyes scanning over my mother’s elegant writing. She uses personalised stationery emblazoned with all her credentials, much to Hudson’s embarrassment. Our parents are rather image obsessed, but fuck if they don’t love him like he’s their own. No matter how insistent he is on pushing us all away.

“Any good?” I ask hopefully.

“Same shit. Misses me, wants to visit.”

I force myself to keep a reasonable tone, biting back my frustration. “She’s been asking for the last eighteen months. You could give the poor woman a break, Hud. One visit won’t kill you. She’s earned that at least.”

He growls, balling up the letter and tossing it towards the bin, landing a perfect shot. “I told her to forget about me. If I let her see me now, she’ll never let me go.”

I gape at him in disbelief, astounded by the sheer lack of human emotion. “She’s your mother, for Christ’s sake.”

“No. She’s yours,” Hudson argues, expression turning bleak. “I’m just the trash that got brought in and put her to shame.”

His hands ball into fists as he stares at me, completely clueless to the trail of broken bodies he leaves in his wake. She couldn’t care less what he did, she still loves him. Like any good parent would. He’s just too blinded by the past to see that, trapped in his own head.

“She isn’t ashamed of you. Not one bit,” I bite out. “She cares, something you should learn to accept. Keep going and one day, nobody will anymore.”

Before I know it, Hudson’s grabbed hold of my shirt and hauls me up. His face is right in front of mine, furious eyes front and centre.

“I didn’t ask for you to follow me here, brother,” he hisses at me. “Nor do

I want it. I did the crime, now I'm doing the time. Don't talk to me about acceptance when you're here, wasting your goddamn life away when you could be out there actually living. It's enough that I've ruined my life, you've got to add yours to my conscience, too?"

I give Hudson a hard shove, causing him to stumble back and release me. I refuse to give him the satisfaction of intimidating me. "I'm only trying to help you. There's no ulterior motive. You know what my first thought was when I heard what you did?"

Hudson looks away, jaw clenched as he shrugs.

"I didn't worry about the other guy. I worried about you. What this meant for your life, your future. And more importantly? What the hell I was going to do without my little brother. Someone that came into my life when I was already an adult, but still managed to become family." I take a deep breath, trying to manage my temper. "You'd do well to think about that when you're going around beating on people, or fucking and boozing yourself into oblivion. There are people that care about you, even if you don't."

He reluctantly listens as I rant, beyond done with his bullshit. When I'm finished, he simply turns on his heel and stalks away. As if I don't even exist and my words mean nothing. I gave up the best years of my life to be here. To support him and ensure that he isn't alone in this world. And what do I get for my loyalty?

Nothing. Fucking nothing.

Glancing back down at my screen, I bring up the ID photo that I took for Brooklyn. She actually smiled as I tucked the hair behind her ear, if only for a brief second. Her wide eyes flickered with something other than pain before shutting down again, but I saw it. Something's there, buried beneath the surface. I'll find it again, no matter what it takes.

Hudson doesn't want my help? *Fine.*

Let's see how he likes it when I steal his girl.

Then he'll know how it feels to be disregarded.

NINETEEN

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BROOKLYN

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HIGHER BY SLEEP TOKEN

THURSDAY MORNING, I walk into the classroom and avoid dozens of eyes that immediately lock onto me. For the last few days, everyone's been all up in my business. As I've gradually returned to class, it seems I'm now somewhat of a celebrity.

Everyone looks at me with equal parts fear and fascination. I barely survived my first day of English class, sat alone at the back as others whispered and gossiped around me. Yesterday, I stomped around in a cloud of rage, refusing to speak to anyone to avoid exploding spectacularly. Even the guys seem determined to get in my head.

They'll give up eventually and leave me alone. I can't afford distractions, not now that Lazlo has me on tight lockdown. Getting the hell out of here before next month is all I can think about. I've listed all the potential methods in my journal, ink stained pages filled with hatred and regret.

My options are limited at best. When I ran back to the fence to investigate further, hoping that would provide some opportunity, I found it had been repaired and electrified. Nobody's getting out for a stroll now.

Entering the packed classroom, I walk past tables filled with interested onlookers. "Crazy bitch," someone coughs, sparing no thought for subtlety.

I have to stifle the urge to smile. *You got that right.* If anyone deserves to be stabbed with a blunt dinner knife, it's Hudson. My only regret is that I didn't have anything sharper on hand.

I pass the assholes with my head held high. Phoenix and Eli are sitting in our usual place waiting for me. I can't tear my eyes away from Eli's messy ringlets and blushing cheeks as he avoids looking at me. Does the memory of fucking me keep him awake at night as well? The way he looked at me as the

knife dragged across my skin was pure fucking magic.

Schooling my blank expression back into place, I take my seat at the end of the table, ignoring Phoenix's gaze as I slide in next to him. "Hi guys."

Phoenix does a dramatic double take. "Well, look who decided to join us."

I can feel his attention acutely as I slip the gifted beanie off my head, revealing my still slightly damp hair. There's a smile tugging at his lips and it's driving me insane.

"You're looking better," he compliments, shamelessly checking me out. "Finally decided to walk among us living folks again?"

"Whatever."

This winds him up further, just like I intended. "When are you going to actually talk to us? Come on, Brooke. It's been days, I'm so over this stupid silent treatment thing you've got going on. Whatever happened between you and Hud, it's got nothing to do with me."

I can't help but melt a little at the sight of his bottom lip jutting out for dramatic effect. Damn, I'd like to bite that lip.

"Look, I couldn't care less. He's your friend and that's enough reason for me to stay away," I explain simply. "As soon as I can request a seat change, I'm getting the hell away from all of you. I don't need any more hassle in my life than I already have."

I relish the flash of pain in his eyes. It feels good to be in control here. No matter what happens, I'm the one calling the shots.

"You're being a stubborn bitch," Phoenix whines.

"Get over it and leave me alone."

We lapse into silence as the history teacher walks in, immediately clapping his hands for everyone's attention. Crawley is tall, spindly and beyond creepy, but he's decent enough. After two weeks' absence, I'm on his shit list. As the others get on with their assignments, he dumps a shed load of work on my desk, demanding that I catch up before the midterms next week. Next fucking week. I don't bother trying to argue back, just nod and glare daggers at his back as he turns to leave.

"Need a hand?" Phoenix offers.

I'm shaking my head before he even finishes. "Nope, I'm good."

With a frustrated growl, his hand swipes through his spiky blue hair. "You know what? Screw you. Do what you fucking want, it's your choice."

"Damn right, it is."

Phoenix's glare burns into the side of my head, but I don't bother to look as he lashes out. "Keep this up and you'll end up alone for the next three years. That's all I'm saying."

"What makes you think that bothers me?" I reply.

"You really are a piece of work, aren't you?" He leans closer, deliberately trying to make me uncomfortable. "No wonder you have no fucking friends. Born alone, die alone, right? Good luck with that, crazy bitch."

He seems to think that I have a heart to hurt.

He's in for a fucking surprise.

I lick my lips and produce an amused smile. "I'd rather be alone than friends with the likes of you lot. Do you have any clue who Hudson really is? What he's done? Check yourself before coming at me, dickhead. The grass ain't always greener."

"Hudson is a good guy... most of the time," Phoenix defends.

I laugh and snatch up some papers, giving my hands a task rather than punching his pretty fucking face until he bleeds. "Right. And you accuse me of being full of bullshit."

Apparently this hits a little too close to home, as he turns his head and dismisses me, sticking headphones in. I grind my teeth, mentally chanting to myself that I'll be gone soon, no matter what it takes. I've got to get away from these guys and their petty little feelings. The sight of Hudson at my door reminded me of the price you pay for letting people get close.

No one's allowed inside my dead heart. I won't survive it.

They won't survive it.

I get through the rest of class by ignoring everyone, doodling little nooses on the corners of my textbook. The list of materials I should be reading to catch up is lengthy, but I toss it in my bag without a second look. I don't give a damn about this class, the exam or the assholes in charge of this circus. They can kiss my ass before I write a fucking essay.

"What are you..." Phoenix trails off, eyes on my book.

I quickly flip the pages and block the doodles from sight. He's really pushing his luck. Just as I'm about to get my shit and storm out, a loud alarm begins to ring. It screams through the air and everyone starts moving, grabbing their bags.

Phoenix curses and begins jamming loose sheets of paper away, but my attention is focused on Eli. He's hunched over, forehead pressed to the desk and hands clamped over his ears. I can see his body shaking from here,

beneath the thick hoodie he wears like usual.

“Come on, it’s a fire drill,” Phoenix orders.

I ignore him completely, briefly debating with myself before walking to Eli’s side. *I can help him out without caring, right?* Running my hand down his spine, he stiffens instantly, face peeking to the side. Terror dances in his eyes as he stares, silently begging for help. Just like I did in that graveyard, where he obliged without question.

I offer him a tentative hand. “Let’s get you out of here.”

Eli pauses for a moment, utterly detached and controlled by his fear. I don’t look away, waiting for him to gather some semblance of strength. When his fingers link with mine, I offer him a small smile.

"Trust me," I say simply.

I wait an eternity for his eventual nod.

Together we head out of the classroom and down the polished staircase, taking the steps two at a time. Out here, the alarm rings even louder, and Eli clutches my hand painfully tight. When the first hint of smoke whispers through the air, we move faster, practically running to escape. The air’s getting thick, the acrid scent of burning growing stronger.

“Just a drill, huh?” I hiss at Phoenix..

“How was I supposed to know that it’s real?”

Suddenly, Eli’s hand is ripped from mine and I stumble, crashing into Phoenix’s back. He steadies me before I topple down the stairs and we both turn back. Eli’s crouched down, head lowered and hidden from sight, arms wrapped around his body as the trembling intensifies.

“Oh man...” Phoenix sighs.

“What is it?”

“He doesn’t do fire. Fuck, okay.”

Lowering to his level, Phoenix slides a finger under Eli’s chin, tilting his head just enough so that their eyes can meet. Their lips are inches apart, faces intimately close. “I’ve got you, E. I’m not leaving you,” he promises.

Eli stares without breathing, the ingrained mistrust clear.

“You’re not alone, buddy,” Phoenix adds. “Come on.”

I stand transfixed, watching the exchange with bated breath. My eyes are beginning to water from the smoke, getting stronger and more noxious by the second. Eli watches Phoenix with empty eyes, lips pressed together as he battles his demons. It’s almost like he doesn’t believe a word his friend is saying. Even though we’d never leave him, no person would when there’s a

fire raging nearby.

Phoenix repeats the same assurances, a little more forcefully. He's practically chanting it, begging Eli to trust him. It's heartbreaking to watch, the terror that's holding Eli hostage. Like he's trapped in his own mind and can't move a muscle, let alone speak.

An idea suddenly comes to me and I ease down next to Phoenix, moving him out of the way. Eli can't listen when he's under the influence of his anxiety, that motherfucker doesn't listen to rhyme or reason. I've got to break through, and I know just how he likes to do that.

"Eli? It's Brooke. We need to move, work with me here," I coax.

Snaking my fingers up the sleeve of his hoodie, I hold his eyes as I search for the ridges that I know I'll find. Four horizontal cuts, right where I watched him slice himself open a few days ago. They're still raw and barely healed, so it's easy enough to dig my nails in to rip the fresh scabs away. I scratch at his cuts until I can feel the blood flowing once more, warm on my fingertips. His eyes widen at the pain, teeth surrendering his abused lip.

That's it. Come back to me, little Eli.

I know just what you need.

A few seconds pass as he slowly comes crashing back down to earth, latching on to the comfort of pain just like I knew he would. We're the same fucking person. When he gives a slight jerk of his head, I step back and allow Phoenix to haul him up, resuming our descent towards the smoke-filled foyer.

I can't help but stare at my red stained fingertips as I follow the guys, fascinated by the sight of Eli's blood on my skin. Now we're even, both claimed in crimson by the other.

We make it to the entrance of the humanities building, where students are pouring out the doors to escape the thick, oppressive air. I cover my mouth with my sleeve before the coughing fit can take over, ducking low and following the crowd. The smoke pours from one of the classrooms, and I can just make out the glowing flames as they attack rows of textbooks and papers. Eli and Phoenix are lost in the crowd as my feet freeze, rooted to the spot by the glorious sight of deadly fire.

My mind is quickly consumed by an evil, penetrating voice.

Walk in. Give it all up and offer yourself to the flames.

This is your best chance. Do it. Give up.

It would be so easy. I'm standing in the middle of chaos, there's no guards or teachers to stop me. Cameras obscured by smoke and a glimpse of

freedom right there for the taking. I place one foot in front of another.

Each step takes me dangerously close to the blazing heat that I feel against my face. My hands curl into fists, nails biting deep into my palms. The voice intensifies, drowning out all other noise. I can practically taste it on my tongue, the sliver of hope in the form of inevitable death.

No more breathing.

No more suffering.

No more living.

For the first time since that fateful night nearly a year ago, when I completed my spiralling descent into hell, I could be free again.

Just as I'm about to reach out and grasp the door handle, arms wrap around my waist. Big scarred hands hold me tight as I'm dragged backwards, further and further away from my salvation. I scream bloody murder, pleading for my captor to release me, but it's no use.

I know those hands.

I remember the fights that scarred those knuckles.

“What the hell are you doing? The room's on fucking fire.”

Hudson's words send me falling back down the rabbit hole, into the sordid past. Memories of him ripping the duvet off me and snatching the pills from my hands, yelling and screaming vicious words. Or him bursting into the bathroom at school, careless of the other girls that squealed at his entrance. He nearly smashed down the stall door just to get to me, snatching the scissors away from my bleeding wrist.

“Let me go!” I scream.

Always touching me when he isn't wanted. Sticking his arrogant nose into my business, like he has any right to involve himself after what he did five years ago.

“It's a fire! You dumb bitch. We're leaving.”

Hudson drags me all the way outside. We stumble into the fresh midday air and collapse on the ground in a fit of coughing. Other patients huddle all around, gasping for air. Hudson releases me and I immediately move away like he burned me, not the fire. I'm shaking like a leaf, adrenaline and anger compounded into a toxic chemical in my blood.

“How dare you touch me,” I yell accusingly.

Those bright blue eyes stare back at me with the same barely restrained rage that poisoned our every moment together. “You were seconds away from walking into that fucking classroom, don't bother denying it. You

always were unhinged. I just saved your damn life.”

“What makes you think that I want to be saved?!”

He just looks at me like I’m mad, full of judgement and something resembling pity. Hatred sits heavily in my gut as I stand and slap him firmly across the face for a second time.

“If you don’t leave me alone, I’ll report you and have you thrown into solitary,” I threaten. “How would you like that? I can assure you, it ain’t fun down there.”

Hudson rubs his cheek, frowning in confusion. “You’re kidding me, right? Are you that stubborn? Give it up, blackbird. I’m done fighting you.”

“I’m not stupid, you brain dead dickwipe. Just pissed off, and you seem to have forgotten why we’re no longer together.” I glare daggers down at him, wishing I had a knife to slip into his gut again. “You can’t just come strolling in after all these years and start acting like you give a shit. Not happening. It’s too fucking late for that.”

I turn my back before he can answer, pushing past gasping patients and guards shouting their instructions. Phoenix tries to grab me as I pass him, but I quickly storm off, unable to bear any of them for a second longer. I feel Hudson’s eyes on me all the way across the quad.

Of course, he doesn’t have the guts to follow me though. If only he cared this much before, we wouldn’t be in this position.

TWENTY

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PHOENIX

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TOXIC LOVERS BY MASS OF MAN & MASETTI

I WRAP the duct tape tight around Scott's wrists, leaving him no room to wiggle as I attach them to my bed frame. Giving my handiwork a tug to check, he doesn't budge. He's firmly restrained and unable to move an inch without my permission.

Staring down at his light brown eyes, his lashes frame innocence and anticipation. Scott's far too meek and breakable to handle this, but I don't care. I'm not one for exercising my conscience often.

"N-Nix? It's a bit tight," Scott whines, biting his bottom lip.

I stare blankly at him. "Do I look like I care?"

Bet Brooklyn wouldn't complain if she were the one tied to my bed. Hell, I'd bet my life that she'd love it. But the narrow-minded, stubborn bitch herself is still avoiding us, and I'm fucking done with being ignored.

Scott sighs, batting those thick lashes at me. "I came to have some fun, but you're being a dick. Lighten up, will you?"

Pulling my hand back, I slap him firmly across the face. I relish the tears that spring in his eyes and the glorious red mark that appears. Don't feel sorry for him, his cock is harder than steel right now. I can see it bulging against his sweatpants.

"Shut the hell up, man. You came because you're bored. We're under curfew because of the fire, so behave or I won't lay a fucking finger on you or your cock tonight. Got that?"

He nods obediently. The little freak loves being roughed up, and I'm more than happy to do all the punishing. I hurt him because he reacts, and it's oh-so sweet. Least I can get that out of someone, even if it isn't the person I truly want.

“Don’t say another word,” I warn.

Scott just keeps smiling and nods, drawing in a sharp breath. I pull my dick free and palm it in my hand, watching his eyes travel down. He licks his lips as I rub myself, enjoying the feel of his eyes on my skin, but he’s powerless to move. I’ve got him all trussed up with nowhere to go. That’s the good thing about a metal bed.

“Please, Nix... Please...”

“What did I say? Keep your goddamn mouth shut.”

To further illustrate my point, I silence him by shoving my dick deep into his throat. He gags and moans, teardrops leaking down his face as I choke him with my hard cock. I can tell that despite my roughness, he’s actually enjoying it. That’s the sick truth.

People love to cry victim and play the innocent card. When really, we’re all equally fucked up in our own way. Only difference is, some wear it on their sleeves, while others live a lie. Denying themselves the pleasure of taking exactly what they want, when they want it.

As my dick hits the back of his throat, I moan at the shockwaves of pleasure. Even if this feels wrong, like I’m betraying my own feelings somehow by screwing him.

“Fuck yeah...” I mumble.

Scott means nothing to me, just like the rest of them don’t. He’s a means to an end. I’ll take whatever I can get to escape this world. It used to be drugs, but in my sobriety, I have to rely on sex instead.

Dammit, some nights... I’d kill for a hit.

Just one more time.

Loosening his restraints enough to roughly flip him over, I run my finger over the ring of muscle ready and waiting for me. All the while, those damned grey eyes are stuck in my head. She won’t leave me alone.

Am I sick for wanting to march over to her room and throw the past right in her pretty face? Spank her until she bleeds and tell her she’s a filthy fucking sinner? That would get a reaction. I just want her to acknowledge my existence. I’m desperate for a fix and nothing else cuts it. She’s lured me in with her sad smiles and blood thirst, before pushing me away like nothing happened in that classroom on her first day.

I discard people when I’m done with them, not the other way around.

Scott grunts as I roughly fuck him from behind, my nails dragging down his back and leaving angry red marks. I have to shut my eyes to block him

out, pretending instead that it's Brooklyn writhing beneath me, moaning and sweating as I give her something that she won't be able to ignore. That's enough to finish me off and I spill my load.

Shoving Scott aside when I'm done, I leave him gasping for breath and straining against the tape. Grabbing the scissors from my desk, I swiftly cut through the restraints, freeing his exhausted body. Avoiding his searching eyes of course, because I don't do feelings. It's nothing personal.

"Want me to come back tomorrow?" he asks hopefully.

I collapse into my desk chair and grab a beer from the stash hidden in the fake bottom, without bothering to offer him one. "Nope. One time's enough, I'll find someone else for then."

He swallows hard and stands, pulling his sweats up as he readies to escape. "Fine then. You know where to find me if you change your mind."

With a final lingering look, he's gone. Slipping back into the darkened corridor, running fast to avoid being caught by the patrols. I don't bother to turn or say another word, my thoughts consumed by another. I feel guilty, which only infuriates me off further. Why should I be sorry? It's her goddamn fault. I haven't done anything wrong but I'm still getting the silent treatment. We've all been lumped into the naughty corner together.

I need answers.

Quickly showering before I redress, I feel trapped in my own skin. Even the quickie with Scott hasn't calmed me. If anything, I feel more rattled than before. I slip out into the corridor, waiting for the patrolling guard to turn his back and march back in the other direction.

We're on lockdown for the night but this doesn't stop me; I can easily blend into the shadows and move without seeing. Becoming one with the darkness that eagerly welcomes me home.

I glance at Brooklyn's room as I pass, the light spilling out from beneath the door. The temptation to walk in reaches fever pitch but I refrain, forcing myself to go to Hudson's door instead. The guys are inside, playing cards and watching football on his big TV. Having rich adoptive parents pays, I guess. It's twice the size of mine.

"Hey," I greet.

Their heads turn as I snag a bag of chips from his desk, plonking myself down on the bed next to Eli. Kade and Hudson resume their game of poker, and Eli shuffles to make space for me on the mattress. His head is back in another book, even quieter than usual after the morning's drama.

“Thought you had company?” Kade asks.

“Got bored. Thought I’d come and annoy you lot instead.”

Hudson throws down his cards, grinning smugly at his brother. “Royal flush, motherfucker. You lose. Again.”

Kade frowns. “You’re a cheat.”

“Nope, just better than you. You’re overthinking it, that’s the problem,” Hudson snickers. “Aren’t you mathematicians supposed to be clever and shit?”

“Don’t start with me again. I’m not in the mood.”

“Not my fault you’re a sore fucking loser.”

Kade gets up with an angry huff and heads over to the packed shelf next to the bed, shuffling a couple textbooks out of the way and grabbing one of the cans of soda hidden behind. We had to restock after the big sweep the other night. Every now and then, the authorities get uptight and try to exert their power over us. Like we’re not all adept at hiding stuff by now. You learn quick living in this place.

Hudson shuffles the cards again. “You want in?”

I consider him for a moment. “What’s the stakes?”

“Well, Kade’s doing my essays for a week. What you got to offer?”

I shrug. “I know what I want, but you ain’t gonna like it.”

“Try me,” he counters.

“I want to know what happened between you and Brooklyn.”

Hudson chews his lip for a moment, eyes focused on the cards in his hands. I can tell that I’ve hit a sore spot, but I don’t care. I need to know what happened, it’s been driving me crazy for weeks and I can’t wait a second longer.

“Nope. Not my story to tell,” he answers eventually.

“Mate, it kinda is. You’re the one she attacked.”

“If she knew that I’d told you, we’d never see her again.”

I let out a laugh. “We don’t see her anyway, thanks to you.”

“Seriously Nix, don’t push it. Choose something else.”

With a sigh, I accept my stack of cards. “Fine, start.”

Hudson offers Kade a hand, but he refuses. It’s just the two of us facing off, and I’m determined to walk away with at least some idea of what we’re dealing with.

“I want to know why you call her blackbird,” I state.

He looks surprised, but that quickly turns to exasperation. “Bloody hell.

You won't drop this, will you?"

"Nope. Time to fess up."

I can tell the others are interested too, their heads perking up as we begin to play. Even Eli, peering over his book when he thinks nobody is watching. I've got a pretty decent hand and despite Hudson's confidence, his face reveals too much. He always runs hot, full of emotion and anger. Where I'm cool and unfeeling, he's all fire and brimstone. I can use that against him.

"Fine. But if I win, you have to convince Brooklyn to talk to me. In private."

I snort at his demand. "You really think she'll go for that?"

"I didn't say to tell her the truth. Get her there by any means necessary."

Looks like Hudson is ready to play dirty. I don't have any qualms with that. We play in complete silence, both spurred on by the prospect of our respective prizes. When I eventually win, he tosses the cards down with a disappointed sigh.

"You lose," I boast smugly.

"Yeah, whatever. We got anything to drink?"

Kade jimmies the loose floorboard up and hands a beer over, slotting the wood back into place over our secret stash. "We need to pay our tab off with Rio before he breaks this door down and kills us all. You know what he's like about late payment."

Taking a long draw, Hudson nods. "I'll handle it tomorrow."

We all settle in and he rolls the drinks in his hands, picking his words carefully. "You guys know that Kade's folks adopted me five years ago, when I was sixteen. What you may not know is that before then, I lived in foster care. Bounced from place to place over the years, I entered the system at twelve. I eventually ended up at a place called St Anne's, a Catholic-run abusive hell hole. Nothing about that place was holy."

He drains his beer in a few desperate gulps.

"I was only there for a few months before I was adopted. That was lucky compared to others that were just swallowed by the system and forgotten. We all went to the same school a few miles away. First day, the jocks got hold of me and I ended up in the nurse's office with a black eye."

Hudson laughs, like the memory is funny somehow.

"I wasn't the only one in there. She was sprawled out across the chairs, tissues stuffed up her bloody nose and sporting a big fat lip. When I sat down with the ice pack, she looked me in the eye and said *I hope the other guy*

looks worse than you.”

Kade snorts, shaking his head with amusement. I spare a glance at Eli, furtive eyes hiding behind pages as he hangs onto every spoken word. We're all in far too deep with this girl for our own good.

Hudson crosses his arms, tensing up at the memories. “I'd seen her around back at the home, but we never spoke before then. After that I didn't let her out of my sight. We were inseparable. Brooklyn was just so damn tenacious. Fragile, innocent... but fucking fiery when she needed to be. If she ever saw a kid getting bullied or one of the foster carers beating someone, she was the first person to throw herself into the fray. Even if it got her in trouble. Hell, she got off on the thrill of it.”

Hudson's voice dries up and he avoids all our eyes. “Truth is, I... admired her. Everything about her. I'd sneak into her room at night whenever I heard her crying out, and crawl into the tiny bunk bed just to hold her close. Man, she was so tempting and fucking beautiful.” He smiles to himself at the memory. “She'd just spread her legs for me and it was like nothing else mattered beyond the two of us. I couldn't get enough. But even then, she was haunted. The others said that she was one of St Anne's original kids, having been there since she was ten years old. Nobody knew why, she refused to talk about it.”

I drum my fingers on my leg, growing more aggravated by the second. Why does her shitty childhood bother me so much? Or is it the idea of Hudson taking advantage of a damaged girl that was so clearly desperate for love? It sets my teeth on edge. I try to shove the feelings aside, but Brooklyn's grumpy face refuses to leave my mind.

“What about the nickname?” I prod.

Hudson runs a frustrated hand through his hair. “I came home from school one day and found Mrs Dane, the head carer, beating the shit out of her. She was curled up on the kitchen floor, bloody and bruised. I later found out they'd caught her stealing food and sneaking off with it. When I asked her about it that night, she made me swear that I could keep a secret. The answer was in the drawer by her bed. Inside, I found a tiny, injured blackbird. Tucked away in a matchbox that she stole from Mr Dane, eating crumbs that she stole and got beaten to pay for.”

If possible, the room grows even quieter. Eli abandons his book entirely and gives Hudson his full attention, while Kade nervously plays with his shirt sleeves. I have a feeling that something awful is coming, because I know

Hudson too fucking well. The person he's describing isn't the real him.

Shuddering a breath, he picks the stack of cards back up to give his hands something to do. "Its wings were broken and she used matchsticks to try and fix it. I told her that she was wasting her time, that it was just a stupid bird... but she didn't listen. She refused to give up on the little creature. This girl had become my entire reason for existing in a matter of months, and she was ignoring me just to watch this fucking bird. It became an obsession, she was clinging to this thing like it was the centre of her whole damn universe, the only source of hope she had. All her attention was stolen by it. I was so fucking angry."

"What did you do?" Kade whispers.

"What do you think I did? I took that matchbox and killed the thing that took her from me. Told her that hope was a pointless emotion as I snapped its neck right in front of her and tossed the carcass aside." He snorts bitterly, the real Hudson emerging. "She was my fucking girl and no one was allowed to steal her from me. Not even a stupid bird. After that... I called her blackbird every day. Just to remind her of who exactly she belonged to and that nothing else was allowed to matter to her. Only me."

We all stare at him speechlessly. The other two look equally as horrified, so I'm guessing we're all on the same page now. I'm a depraved fucker, no two ways about it. But that was a whole new level entirely. What can you possibly say to something like that?

Kade nails it as always. "Well, she certainly earned the right to stab you."

TWENTY-ONE

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BROOKLYN

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EVERYBODY GETS HIGH BY MISSIO

“COMPLETELY RANDOM, right? I couldn’t believe it when he asked me, although I’ve definitely messed it up already. One look and I ran in the other direction. I mean, it’s just a date. Not a big deal. But in this place?” Teegan chatters away.

I’m rolling the pen in my hands, pretending to listen while lost in my own head.

“Movie night as well! Loads of people will be there, practically the entire block. Does he really expect it to be romantic? I can’t even sit in a seat without a panic attack. There is no organisational system in that room, no matter how early you arrive. It’s all beanbags and shit. I don’t know, maybe I should cancel. Hey, are you listening to me?”

A sharp elbow in the ribs rouses me.

“Sorry, rough night. I’m listening, I promise.”

She looks unconvinced. “What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing. Just didn’t sleep well. The whole fire and lockdown thing were a bit much. Did you hear all that screaming last night too?” I ask.

Or was it just in my head?

Teegan huffs, straightening her notebook so it sits at a perfect right angle to the library desk. “Tell me about it, we heard it even from the first floor. Apparently they figured out who set the fire and dragged them to solitary, hence the screaming and dramatics. I heard it was Owen, the pyromaniac from the top floor. He’s been caught playing with matches and burning people before, it’s his thing.” She shrugs casually.

I shudder, fighting through the wave of sickness. The mere mention of solitary has sweat breaking out on my palms, so much that I can’t even begin

to unpack the new information about a crazed pyromaniac attacking people. Just another day in paradise, right?

“How’s that even possible?”

Teegan chuckles. “Don’t ask me. People find a way to do shit, especially in this place. Take someone’s freedom away and they just find new ways to do what they want. Each more creative than the last.”

She pauses, frowning to herself. “I remember when I first arrived, little over six months ago. There was this girl, Tiffany. Proper crackpot, she’d taken so much acid over the years her mouth was like a gaping hole. No fuckin’ teeth. Anyway, she went cold turkey like the rest of the addicts do when they come in through those doors. Turns out reality was a little much for her, they found her dead by the end of the month.”

“How’d she do it?” I ask casually.

Not like I’m looking for ideas or anything.

“Died in the gymnasium pool. Got hold of some crank everyone reckons, you can get most things here if you know the right people and have good enough payment. Tiffany went for a swim and drowned her stoned ass.”

Teegan takes a slurp from her water bottle, as if we aren’t discussing the brutal death of a fellow inmate. Sorry, *patient*. Everyone’s so desensitised here, no longer shocked by the stark reality of life and death. That’s what this sickness does to you. Gets in your head, makes that line seem so small, you’re no longer afraid to cross it.

Catcalls and heckling break our conversation as we both seem to snap out of it. The noise is coming from the far end of the room, where Rio and his buddies are waving for my attention, grinding against the air in a pathetic demonstration that I suppose they think is appealing. Do girls seriously find that attractive?

“Ignore them, the stupid twats won’t pass the midterms anyway. Not like I’m going to do much better though. I’m so screwed,” Teegan mutters.

She begins to anxiously scratch her hands, where I can see the skin is already mottled with burst blood vessels. Nervousness practically leaks from her, and to my own surprise, I want to hug her. She marched to my door earlier and dragged me over here to study, refusing to take no for an answer. Beneath the worry and fear is a little ball of sass.

“You’ll do fine,” I offer.

“Yeah right. Ever since I transferred to business, I’ve been completely lost. The professors just fly through the content like it’s easy, while I’m sitting

there trying to count how many roof tiles there are just to keep calm. I miss science.”

“So, transfer back. What’s stopping you?” I point out.

“My parents. They’re the ones that paid for me to be here. They pressured me into doing business and I felt like I couldn’t refuse. Money and all that... it comes with strings, you know? Obligations and shit. So yeah, I’m stuck.”

I look at Teegan for a moment, taking in the glossy dyed red hair and various facial piercings. She’s probably the mellowest, most friendly goth I’ve ever met. A complete softie at heart, beneath the anxious candy coating. I want to throw her parents’ money back in their faces on her behalf. No one should live for someone else.

“If you want to do science then fucking do it. Screw your parents and their money. What kind of cruel assholes send you to a place like this anyway?”

“It was here or the psychiatric unit back in Birmingham. Apparently you’re not considered stable if you break into your neighbour’s house to rearrange their furniture at 3am.”

I choke on a mouthful of water, lowering my bottle as she stares at me, fighting back a smile. “Woah, hold up. You broke into their house?”

“Um, kinda. I couldn’t sleep after glancing inside at the summer barbecue the week before. If I didn’t straighten things out, I think I would have imploded from anxiety. Crazy, right? You can say so, I know I am.”

Making sure she meets my eyes, I answer steadily, “Nope. Not one bit. Just a little quirky is all. Don’t worry, all the best people are. Being normal is overrated, Tee.”

She beams at me, a genuine smile that has me grinning back. Dammit, this girl is burrowing further beneath my defences with each passing second. When did I start giving a shit all of a sudden? I knew when I saw her getting bullied by the other girls while having a panic attack that she was worth defending.

“Anyway, the exams. You haven’t been given a free pass?” she guesses, swiftly changing the subject as we both look away, unused to the feeling of friendship.

“Nope. Not that it matters,” I answer without thinking.

“Why are you so relaxed? They are right around the corner.”

I scramble for an excuse, cursing my stupidity. Can’t exactly say that I plan to fucking kill myself by any means possible, and some pointless exams

mean nothing to me.

“I’ve been catching up, so it’s chill,” I lie easily.

“Well, you’ve got brains. You’ll ace it. But me? Nah, I’m nothing but air up here.” She gestures to her head, rolling her eyes. “I’ve got about as much hope as fuckface over there with his idiotic mates.”

We both turn to look at Rio, telling dirty jokes as loud as possible while his friends laugh and jeer. My stomach turns just listening to the way he talks about his hook-ups, with zero fucking respect or sensitivity. A purebred, entitled asshole if I ever did see one.

“I don’t get it. How is he so popular?”

Teegan shuffles closer so that she can whisper without being overheard, eyes darting about furtively. “You know I said about Tiffany getting gear in here? Well, if you want contraband, he’s your guy. Anything you want. He runs shit around here.”

I’m suddenly all ears. “How does he get it past security?”

She wrinkles her nose in distaste, as if just talking about Rio and his illegal endeavours offends her. “Beats me. One thing I do know? Money talks. I heard on the down low his parents are investors, filthy rich. They own stately homes and titles or some shit. Clearly, they don’t give a toss about what their delinquent son does with his nest egg, long as he keeps it quiet and doesn’t fuck with their reputation.”

I nod absently, filing the information away. Bingo, I’ve got my source. Looks like I’ll have to put my morals aside and approach the jackass. It’s fucking degrading, but I’m desperate. It’s not like I’ll be around much longer to regret it.

“So, movie night. What do you think? Should I go with Todd?”

“Yeah, why not. He seems cute. Go for it.” I wink at her.

“Oh boy. You’re right, I’m going to do it. What’s the worst that could happen? Who in the block are you going with? The emo guy?”

“Like I said, that was a one-time thing,” I defend quickly.

There’s more wolf whistling directed my way, gaining the attention of the rest of the library. Lifeless eyes fall on us and I glare at them, hoping to scare them off. Whispers and gossip circulate, much to my annoyance. I’ll break their damn legs if I have to.

“Just ignore them. They’ll get bored eventually,” Teegan mutters.

A long and torturous study session later, we’re packing up for the day. I’ve got a free period this afternoon, seeing as my new therapist works a

different schedule to Mariam. Fine by me, I'm in no rush to see that lunatic Lazlo again. The mere thought is almost too much for me to handle and I have to take a deep, calming breath.

You're running out of time.

The anniversary is coming, better die before it gets here.

I conceal the shake in my hands by fiddling with my zip, attempting to remove the invasive voice from my thoughts. Like I've got a mental clock ticking down every second, the pressure increasing with each passing moment.

Teegan packs up her stuff, turning it over in her hands four times before neatly slotting it into her backpack. I linger behind, moving deliberately slow as my eyes stray to Rio.

"I'll see you tomorrow then for the movie. I got to run," she says.

"Maybe. I'll see, not sure if it's really my thing. But have fun with Todd."

She blushes beet red. "It's not like that, honestly."

"Sure, whatever. Have fun, don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Teegan grabs her backpack and walks off, turning to laugh at my words. "That doesn't exactly leave much, Brooke!"

I look away as she leaves, feeling this weird warmth in my chest again. It's been a long time since I've had anything even remotely resembling friendship in my life. Part of me finds that terrifying, the idea of having someone close enough to care.

When I die... she'll only suffer.

And make no mistake, I will die. Living is fucking overrated.

Slinging my bag over my shoulder, I survey the room and slowly head over to the far corner, making sure to meet Rio's eyes. I jerk my head towards the towering bookshelves that create a great hiding place. He casts a quick look around before following me.

"Well, ain't you a sight for sore eyes." He smirks.

"Cut it out. I want to make a deal, not listen to your pathetic flirting."

"No beating around the bush, I see. You know most girls in this place would kill for a look in with me, right?" He flexes his biceps as he speaks, and I almost gag.

Rio's a slimy fucking creep. I would rather break his nose than bargain with him. But this is the price you pay for shit in this world. Clearview taught me real quick that if you're willing to pay, then anything is possible.

"Most girls are fucking stupid," I mutter. "Look, I hear you're the

resident hook-up around here. I've got a list. What's it gonna cost me?"

I pull the scrunched-up note from my pocket and subtly slip it into his hand, glancing around to ensure we're still hidden from sight. Rio shakes his head, enjoying this way too much as he takes a quick read and whistles under his breath.

"Damn, you have high expectations. Want me to bring you a fucking unicorn too?"

I take a step closer into his personal space, maintaining eye contact. The trick is to own it, to show them you're serious and not to be messed with.

"I'm willing to pay a high price for those things. Don't fuck around, I'm not some dewy-eyed bitch asking for nail polish. Fix me up and I'll make it worth your time. Or should I take my business elsewhere?" I pout exaggeratedly. "Thought you were the boss in this place."

That makes him smile, my words hitting their target. Rio inches even closer, his strong aftershave making my chest burn. I stand stock still, forcing my breath to even out as he grabs a strand of my hair, twirling it around his finger.

"I hear you. But I don't simply take empty promises, Brooklyn."

"What do you take?" I force my clenched hands to release.

With a slight grin, he replies smugly. "Proof of payment. Now."

Goddamn arrogant bastard. I have to force the descending red haze back and remind myself that I want the stuff on that list. Desperately. It's nothing I haven't done before, I let men fuck me over the bar at work without even getting their names, just to feel something for one damn second. If I do this, I'll be ready and equipped to check out for good.

"And you'll follow through? You got the means to fulfil my order?" I clarify, nodding towards the paper now tucked into his jeans pocket. I'm not fucking stupid.

"I'm a man of my word, believe it or not. I can fix you up fine."

He's deadly serious, all signs of humour aside. Gone is the laddish jock that prances around like he owns the place, replaced by a slick businessman capitalising on a gap in the market. It's pretty scary, but every prison needs a supplier. Contraband is hot shit when you have little to lose and much to gain from disregarding the rules.

Casting another suspicious look around, I make sure the coast is clear. Rio's goons are guarding the perimeter, keeping check of the few students still in the library. Like they are his fucking bodyguards or something. How

didn't I see it before? The power dynamic beneath all the bravado? It's plain as day that he runs the shop around here.

"Haven't got all day, Brooklyn," he goads.

Here goes nothing. Falling to my knees, I undo his belt and lick my lips. I can see his rock-hard shaft straining against his boxers, and I'm just wrapping my lips around his head when a scuffle breaks out. Swearing and bickering has me freezing, dick in hand. We both turn to look as a towering shadow rounds the corner, black hair framing an apocalyptically angry face.

"The fuck, man? Get out of here," Rio barks.

Bad move. Hudson's furious eyes take in my position, from my knees resting on the floor to my hands in a very suspicious place, mouth scant inches away from Rio's erection. There's no mistaking this scene, he should know well enough what I'm up to. I spent plenty of time on my knees before him once. Publicly and privately.

With a smug smile, I lean in and press a gentle kiss to Rio's cock. Taunting Hud with my eyes as he watches, his Adam's apple works overtime and his face turns purple with rage. *Doesn't feel so good, does it, motherfucker?* He watched before, in a situation not so different. Only then he got something out of it, the selfish son of a bitch.

This is just me taking back control. One blowjob at a time.

"Something the matter, Hudson?" I ask innocently.

He doesn't say a word. There's no need. I see the attack coming from a mile off as his fist sails towards Rio's face, sending him flying back into a desk. Without stopping for a breath, Hudson advances and delivers brutal blow after blow.

Bones crack and blood sprays as the pair beat each other, and all I can hear is grunting and the sound of fists meeting flesh. It takes all three of Rio's guys to pull them apart, both sporting injuries and future black eyes.

"You're fucking unhinged!" Rio yells.

Hudson laughs shortly, spitting blood on the ground and wiping his split lip. "Your point, asshole? Stay the hell away from her. You hear me? Or I'll fucking kill you next time. That's a promise."

Those crystal-clear blue eyes turn to me, tinged with anger and disappointment. How dare he judge me? When he tries to grab my arm, I dodge out of the way, storming off. He soon catches up and yanks my arm, slamming the exit door open.

"Get off me, you son of a bitch!"

Hudson's fingers tighten on my arm as he drags me along, hard enough that I know I'll have a bruise tomorrow. "Zip it, Brooke. Swear to God, one more word and there'll be hell to pay."

Sparing one last glance over my shoulder as we leave, I catch the look that Rio sends me as his boys run to get security. Fucking tattletale, like he's the innocent one.

But the look he sends me is downright cold, vastly different after Hudson's little performance. He pulls my note from his pocket as I watch, ripping it to pieces. Slowly, deliberately, with the threat abundantly clear.

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TWENTY-TWO

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HUDSON

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FUCKING WHORE.

Filthy fucking bitch.

I'm losing my shit right now and spiralling fast, but hell if I care. That shitshow merited violence, regardless of the consequences. I'd do it all over again, no matter what they do to me. Rio will rat to his bankrolled, corrupted guards just to spite me. Screw him.

The hell happened to my blackbird? This isn't the girl I remember from St Anne's. If I didn't recognise her, I'd say she's an entirely different person. Where's the innocent orphan that wore pink pyjamas and fell asleep while clutching old photos of her parents? Or the girl that crept into my room at night with stolen bandages to clean up after the older kids beat the shit out of me?

My precious girl wouldn't be on her knees, mouth wrapped around another man's cock, trading favours like a desperate slut. Who am I kidding, I know what happened to her. It's my goddamn fault. *I fucking ruined her.*

Shoving Brooklyn out the door, I watch as she trips and stumbles. Good, serves her right. What would've happened if I didn't walk in at that exact second? Would she have let him fuck her against the wall? I feel physically sick just thinking about it. I roughly pull her back onto her feet and she struggles against my grip, tossing every insult under the sun in my face.

"Shut the fuck up," I growl, fisting her hair as she yelps.

I hope it hurts. She deserves it. I ought to bend her over my knee for that shit show back there. She won't be able to sit down for a week by the time I'm done.

"Let me go or I'll fucking report you," she shouts.

Ignoring her threats, I keep walking back across the quad towards home. Refusing to release her, no matter how hard she fights me. I've had enough of watching her flounce around, acting like she doesn't even know me. I'll break her all over again if I have to, one stupid bird at a time. Whatever it takes to bring her back to me.

"What was he getting for you? Booze? Cigarettes?"

"None of your damn business."

I grind to a halt, slamming her body into a nearby wall. It's not gentle and she cries out in shock as I pin her against the hard brick, invading her space until we're nose to nose.

"Talk to me like that again and you'll regret it. I asked you a question."

She breathes rapidly, eyes wide but unafraid. "And I said fuck off."

Her defiance is new to me, but fuck if I don't find it hot. The naive schoolgirl I once knew doesn't exist anymore. My blackbird grew a spine.

"I said, *what was he getting for you?*" I roughly grab her chin, forcing her head up. "You will answer me, Brooklyn. I want to know what was so important that his cock was in your mouth instead of mine."

She stares up at me, eyes burning. "Get your hands off me."

After checking that we're alone, I let out a frustrated growl and yank her arms above her head, pinning them there so she can't move or struggle. "Want me to let go, huh? That's what you want?"

Leaning in, I steal her frantic breaths and inhale her scent. Bathing in her pure fucking existence, painfully familiar and reminiscent of home. She isn't allowed to breathe if it's not for me.

"Let go," she repeats.

"So you can run back to that asshole and beg on your knees?" I taunt.

"If that's what I want, then you're the last person to complain," Brooklyn hits back angrily. "You have a shitty memory, Hud. All that time we spent together... who exactly taught me to beg on my fucking knees, huh?"

She moves so fast, I can't dodge the headbutt that comes my way. Connecting with my nose which bursts instantly, blood streaming down into my mouth. She watches, waiting for my reaction. For a flinch or a cry, desperate to see my pain.

I don't give her the fucking satisfaction.

I just lick my lips and maintain eye contact, letting her see the chaotic tangle of emotions beneath the surface. There's nothing left to hide from her. She's seen the absolute worst in me and hates my guts for it. Can't get any

worse than that.

“I’m not letting you go until you talk to me,” I state plainly. “You took one look at me the other week and came at me with a knife. I’m not blaming you, I earned that. But it took two of us to ruin our relationship, blackbird. Own your shit already.”

She thrashes in my arms, trying to break free as her eyes sparkle with tears. “Own my shit? You’re kidding, right? You should be in fucking prison for what you let them do to me. I was sixteen years old! Goddamn you. *Godfuckingdamn you.*”

Her words sting like acid as the buried memories roll through my mind. Brooklyn trussed up and restrained while I snorted coke off her bare breasts. Her knees knocking together as we shot up together for the first time, before I fucked her good and rough from behind. Pulling on her pearly white braids hard enough to rip hair free. Just the way she liked it, more punishment than pleasure. Treading that fine while we both clung to a single moment where living wasn’t a burden.

“Hate me all you want. But you can’t ignore me forever.”

She bares her teeth. “You walked away, not me.”

“I didn’t fucking walk away. I was adopted.”

“So what, a shitty half assed apology and you’re off the hook? You really thought that was enough? Five years you’ve been gone! Five fucking years and you want to argue that you’re the victim here,” she screams at me. “You left me alone in that hell and went swanning off into the sunset with your perfect new family. Do you have any idea of the damage you left behind?”

The anger sneaks back in like a silent assassin, my ever-present companion. I can’t keep a cool head any longer for this conversation. She needs to be taught a fucking lesson and reminded of who exactly owns her ass. I wrap a hand around her delicate throat and brush the pulse point there, finding her unsteady heartbeat. Just as her lips part on a sharp intake of breath, I squeeze hard, easily crushing her windpipe.

“I left when the girl I loved became a stranger,” I whisper harshly. “You were like a ghost. Staying wasn’t an option after what happened. So yes, I fucking ran. Blame me all you want. But you’re the one that cut me off when you turned your damn back on me and said that you didn’t love me anymore. I died that day, right there and then. It felt like this.”

With all my strength, I choke her, relishing her teary eyes and seizing chest. Desperately trying to suck in a breath that’s being stolen away. I could

kill her with my bare hands without batting an eye. I release my grip just enough to let her gasp before tightening again, stealing back the privilege of breathing as she fails to fight me off.

“Does it hurt, baby? Your chest burning? Eyesight swimming? Good. I want you to fucking hurt, you little whore,” I lash out. “When you turned your back on me and walked away like nothing between us ever mattered, I felt like you’d taken a knife to my goddamn stomach and gutted me.”

I force a hand up Brooklyn’s shirt as I speak, even though she flinches away from my touch. Finding them through nothing but memory, I stroke the soft scars that litter her hips, showing her just how well I know her dark secrets.

“You cut me deeper than you ever cut yourself, Brooke. That’s why I never looked back. You took my heart and ground it into pathetic little pieces. Happy now?”

When I let go of her throat this time, she violently coughs and splutters. The tears stream freely down her cheeks as she sucks in deep, rattling breaths.

“Am I happy now? I fucking hate you,” she sobs. “I’m glad you left, because the only thing you were ever good for was ruining my damn life. From the day you walked into that nurse’s office, I was doomed. Walk away, Hudson. That’s all you’re good at. Leave me alone.”

I stumble as she breaks my hold. Rubbing her rapidly bruising throat, while those bright eyes tear through my skin and penetrate my dead fucking soul. Call me sick, but I can’t help smiling. Her yelling and hatred show that she still cares. Somewhere, deep down, there’s still feelings. I can work with that.

“The hell are you grinning about, fucking psycho?”

I shrug nonchalantly. “It takes one to know one, B. You want to tell me what you’re doing at Blackwood? Or you gonna run off again like a scared little kid?”

“Shut your mouth. What I’m doing here is none of your business. You lost that privilege a very long time ago and based on what I’ve heard from your *brother*, you continue to disappoint. This place is where you belong, asshole.”

My heartbeat roars in my ears as she speaks, her ruined voice not a single octave above a whisper. But it’s as if she’s shouting into my head, sneering at me and throwing Kade in my face like it’s common knowledge that we’re

brothers. The fucking cheek of this bitch. I know that I'm a damn disappointment, I don't need reminding of that fact.

"You always were fucked in the head. If I belong here, then so do you."

I watch as her face falls. *Not nice having the past thrown in your face, is it?* Just as she's about to hit back, our stand-off is interrupted and the door we fled through bangs open. Two guards emerge, searching around until they spot us. I recognise them instantly as Rio's men, who are slipped a tidy salary to make his life a fucking luxury here. The bastard himself points in our direction, a smug grin on his face.

Brooklyn readies to flee. "I'm not going back to the hole."

"No reason we should both end up there. I got this, you go."

I jerk my head towards the dorms in the distance, indicating for her to run. She just stares at me in complete confusion, like I didn't just offer to save her damn hide.

"You'd do that? Why?"

"I'm the one that hit him." I shrug. "Don't get all fucking soft on me, I just don't want to see you go down into that basement again and never come out. Run back and don't stop until you find Kade, he's in his room. He'll stop them from dragging you off again."

"But—"

"No buts. Do as you're told for once in your life."

I give her a push to get her moving, fighting to keep my voice firm. There's no doubt that I'll be dragged down to solitary after that fiasco in the library, especially if he's tattled on me already. They all know I'm a hothead, any excuse to toss me back in a cell.

"This doesn't make us even. Not by a long shot," Brooklyn says.

"Yeah, didn't expect it to. You're a stubborn bitch, you know that?"

"Damn straight. Learned from the best," she snarks.

Casting her a look, I focus on her soft pink lips that are curled in a slight smile. Fuck, I'd give anything to kiss her one more time. Even if she did punch me after, it'd be worth it. Deciding to take a risk, I ignore the incoming trouble and yank her body to mine, hand gripping her jaw tight. She freezes in my arms, body rigid but unable to move away. Like there's a magnetic force drawing us together, stronger than either of us can resist.

"For old time's sake," I mutter, pressing my lips to hers.

She's pissed still, but unable to object as her lips part. Like they're trained to react to me after the thousands of times we've done exactly this. Her

tongue darts out to tangle with mine, the taste of tobacco on her breath driving me wild. I kiss her with every ounce of regret that lingers between us. Trying to communicate the apology that feels hollow when said aloud. Her teeth clash with mine and she gives as good as she gets, sending a message of hatred right back.

“Screw you, Hudson. You can’t just kiss me like nothing’s changed,” she murmurs against my lips. “This changes nothing. I still fucking hate you.”

“And I still want to spank your ass for the shit you pulled back there. You best fucking hide when I get out, because I’m coming for you. This time, you ain’t running away again. I’m done chasing you,” I state, ensuring that she hears every last word.

Brooklyn just stares, but I swear I see her mouth twitch.

Much too soon the hired guards catch up and drag me away. They snatch at thin air as Brooklyn runs full speed without looking back. *Good girl.* They’re less interested in her and wrestle with me instead, leading me away to the doom that I know awaits.

It’s a small price to pay to taste my broken blackbird. And just like when we were kids, I’m fucking addicted all over again. All it took was one hit of her toxic poison to enthrall me. One tiny taste and I’m on my knees just where she left me, broken and begging for another chance.

But this time, I won’t be walking away. She’s been mine since the day I laid eyes on her and when I get back, I’m gonna make sure she fucking knows it.

TWENTY-THREE

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BROOKLYN

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HEROIN BY BADFLOWER

LAYING ON MY BACK, I'm sprawled across the bed and staring up at the blank ceiling. Light from the rapidly fading sunset paints the concrete, but I don't turn to watch. Despite my mother's words nudging me at the back of my mind. If she wasn't dead and gone, she could watch the fucking sunset herself. I wouldn't have to watch it for her, enacting the ritual like some kind of twisted dedication to her memory.

Everyone dies eventually. One disappointment after another.

I roll onto my stomach and wrap Phoenix's blanket tighter around my body, half-heartedly picking up my copy of *The Handmaid's Tale*. I'm supposed to be revising, but I only picked it up to tear pages out and see if I could cut myself with the edges. Didn't fucking work, of course. But the words caught my eye and I fell into a deep rabbit hole.

My fingers trace over the sentence that I circled so heavily, my pen tore through the page. *It's those other escapes, the ones you can open in yourself, given a cutting edge.*

What I wouldn't give to cut my way out of this life. To tear a hole big enough to squeeze through and disappear from reality. That's the thing about dying. Those who battle hardest against it, they're afraid of what they'll leave behind. But when you have nothing, nobody to grieve you or notice the chasm you leave behind in the world, there's nothing terrifying about death. In the end, it's more appealing than living.

I hear Phoenix's loud voice before the knock on my door comes.

"Brooklyn! You in?" he hollers.

Sighing, I open the door. "Yeah?"

Phoenix and Eli wait on the other side, both dressed in their weekend

casuals. My mouth goes dry at the acid wash sweatpants and tight graphic shirt Phoenix wears, showcasing refined muscles and broad shoulders. His blue hair is starting to fade, but still garish under the bright lights of the corridor. Meanwhile Eli's just as delicious in his tight ripped jeans and hoodie, the word *Metallica* emblazoned across the front. His chocolate curls are bouncy and freshly washed, sticking out from beneath the dark beanie he wears.

Fuck me, it should be illegal to look this good.

"We're here to bust you out," Phoenix declares proudly.

I stare, refusing them entry. "Bust me out?"

"It's Saturday, weekly movie night in the block. C'mon, you can't just sit in here alone. Besides, I bribed Kade to get something decent on. We normally get lumped with some vanilla PG shit, but I bargained for something better." He quirks an eyebrow at me, leaning against the doorframe to close the distance between us. "You know you want to."

Still I don't budge, folding my arms and offering him a mean smile. "And what makes you think I actually want to go with the likes of you two?"

Phoenix dramatically lays a hand over his heart, letting out a sigh. "You wound me! Put it this way, come downstairs and we'll make it worth your while. We can be very gentlemanly when the mood strikes, firecracker." He winks at me, the sexual tension electric.

I bite my lip, heat rushing through my body.

Eli just stares, those green eyes layered with even darker intentions. He doesn't have to say a damn word for me to feel the lightning between us, my hands itching to reach out and touch his body again. But with Phoenix in the mix too? These two will be the death of me. *How convenient.*

"Fine. I'm bored anyway." I sigh dramatically. "But I expect to be thoroughly entertained."

We head downstairs as a trio, with Phoenix keeping close by my side. His hand rests on my lower back and I don't bother to move it. I made my feelings clear, so if he wants to play a dangerous game, that's on him. I can't be blamed for whatever comes next.

"Kade joining us?"

"Nope. He got leave for the day to see his folks. Some family birthday shit," Phoenix replies with a shrug. "Being Blackwood's bitch has its perks, I guess. You don't see the rest of us making it home for birthdays."

"Bitter much?" I laugh. But deep down, guilt settles in my gut. Is Hudson

missing seeing his family because of me? *No, don't fucking go there.* He chose to start that fight.

Phoenix clears his throat, apparently uncomfortable with my question. "Haven't got any folks to miss, so no, not bitter. But my sister turns fourteen in a few weeks and I won't be there." He adds under his breath, "My record is fucking spotless too."

"You have a sister?"

"Yeah. My nan raised us both when Mum ran off with her latest exploit. Ain't seen that bitch in nearly eight years. Charlie doesn't even remember her."

"That sucks. Good riddance to shitty parents," I comment.

He immediately chuckles. "Agreed."

We head down through the foyer and past the guard station, deliberately avoiding the meatheads sitting inside, studying everyone that passes. I don't have anything else constructive to offer Phoenix. Shit happens and parents only disappoint. Us kids are just left to pick up the pieces.

We reach the movie room, where a bustle of patients slowly file in. Joining the back of the queue, we filter through into a large, relatively modern space. This end of the block seems to be an extension to the rest of the ancient institute. Big, comfy couches and bean bags are strewn about in the low-lit room, with blankets and cushions thrown in. A projector hangs from the ceiling, beaming directly onto the black wall at the front.

I take in the impressive arrangement. "This is fancy."

"None of that public hospital shit here. We're in the big leagues, baby."

Phoenix grabs my hand and directs me towards the back, passing Teegan who gives me a wink from her spot next to her date. Eli trails close behind and we take the uppermost corner, where two beanbags sit unoccupied. Everyone seems to be spreading out automatically into what must be their usual places.

"Gotta bribe us to behave somehow, right? It's all an act," Phoenix informs me. "You only get compliance if you keep the masses happy with treats. Don't be fooled by it."

He takes one of the beanbags and sprawls out, offering me a hand. His fingers curl inwards to beckon me closer. "Don't be shy. I don't bite." He bares his teeth in a way that has my thighs clenching together. "Not much, anyway. Come play with us."

I end up sandwiched between the pair of them, my ass occupying both

bags simultaneously. Phoenix slings his arm around my shoulders straight away as I shiver. Why's he making it so damned hard to stay uninvolved?

"You okay?" I whisper to Eli, noting the tense muscle twitching in his neck.

His eyes slide over to me, followed by a tiny nod of his head. I want to ask more, but a smartly dressed, middle-aged woman strolls in, flanked by two guards that look deadly serious, hands resting on batons strapped to their belts.

Phoenix's lips touch my ear. "That's the warden, Miss Elizabeth White. You don't see her around much, even though she's in charge. Just gets others to do her dirty work."

Miss White looks like a fucking sadist in her neatly pressed pant suit, with hair scraped back in a severe bun that highlights her cruel face. She strides to the front of the room, arms folded and heeled foot tapping impatiently.

"Attention Oakridge residents. This is just a reminder that only orderly conduct is permitted in this room. Don't try any funny business. After the events of this week, my patience is wearing thin. Any illicit activities will be swiftly punished, no more verbal warnings. Am I making myself clear?" she barks.

I swear her eyes stray to us, clocking our position at the back of the room. Eli tenses beside me, his leg jiggling to expel nervous energy. I lay a hand on his denim-clad thigh, silently urging him to take a breath.

"Taggert and Jackson will be staying behind to keep an eye on things," Miss White adds, gesturing to the two unfriendly guards. "Abuse this privilege and it will be taken away. Enjoy the film."

She turns on her heel and stalks away, the two guards shutting the door behind her. They station themselves there with a perfect view of the room, studying us intently in what is clearly a shitty intimidation tactic.

Phoenix curses. "They'll be watching us in the bathroom soon too."

I stifle the urge to laugh in his pretty face. "You're all too fucking spoiled around here; back where I came from, a bathroom door was a rare commodity."

I swear I see the ghost of a smile on Eli's lips, like he knows exactly what I'm talking about, but my attention is stolen by Phoenix's breath against my skin. "Well, we're not all a hardened badass like you. Excuse me for wanting some privacy when I shit."

“Charming. Thanks for that image.”

“You started it.”

We continue to bicker playfully as the credits roll, some stupid sci-fi movie coming onto the screen. Everyone seems pretty happy about it as they settle in, but I shoot Phoenix an incredulous look. “Thought you got something decent on?”

“Hey, it’s usually kids shit. This is the best I could do.”

We lapse into silence as the movie plays, and all I can feel is the suffocating warmth of their bodies around me. My hand still rests on Eli’s leg and at some point he adds his, drawing lazy circles on my skin. Phoenix isn’t much better, snuggling his body close to mine until we’re practically spooning. His muscular legs fit perfectly around mine, and something suspiciously firm is nudging my lower back.

“Problem?” Phoenix asks.

His hand brushes my hip as he continues to toy with me. I exact my revenge by wiggling my ass, his erection grinding into me as I hear him gasp.

“Nope, just getting comfortable. Thanks for asking.” I beam.

“Quit moving then. You’re killing me.”

I’m killing him? I feel like I may actually melt into a puddle at any moment. It’s been far too long since my steamy kiss with Phoenix or the graveyard tryst with the silent man on my left. I’m not ashamed to admit that I want them both, who fucking cares? Life is short and I intend to make it even shorter. May as well enjoy it while I can.

By halfway through the movie, I’m ready to combust. The guards have long since gotten comfortable and are both focused entirely on the screen now. Being at the back gives us the perfect privacy, and Phoenix takes the opportunity to snake a hand up my sweater, his fingertips gliding across my ribs. He rubs a thumb over my nipple, which is hard as a pebble even through the thin material of my bra.

“Not ignoring me now, are you?” he says softly, teeth nibbling on my earlobe. “You’ve been a complete bitch this week, firecracker. Think that deserves a punishment, don’t you?”

His tongue is hot on my neck, tracing down until it reaches my clavicle.

“I don’t ignore you anyway,” I moan.

“Give it up already. You’ve treated us like we have the fucking plague ever since Hudson came into the picture. But that’s fine, I guess we just need to show you what you’re missing. Ain’t that right, Eli?”

Another mouth secures itself to my throat, peppering kisses around the back of my ear. Eli shoots me a look as I gasp, eyes twinkling with mischief while he sucks on the sensitive skin there. He barely has to do a thing and my cunt is soaked, begging to be filled by him again.

“I have done no such thing,” I defend. “You’re being a pussy.”

Phoenix pulls the cup of my bra aside, fingers painfully twisting my nipple. “Don’t fucking lie. You’re punishing us all for his mistakes. I don’t take shit like that lightly, baby. You best remember who was there for you on your first day.”

Like marines executing a coordinated manoeuvre, they both attack my body. I writhe between them, Eli tugging on my hair and battling with my jeans as Phoenix lavishes my breasts with his signature blend of borderline painful pleasure. A hand clamps down over my mouth, swiftly silencing me.

“Not a fucking word. Be a good girl and we’ll let you come, hmm?”

My pussy clenches tight, screaming out for relief. I groan under my breath, stifling the response that wants to escape. Phoenix laughs and bites my earlobe. “That’s it, quiet now.”

Eli finally wiggles his way into my panties, and his fingers brush right over my clit. Slow, gentle, driving me wild with need. He’s toying with me and I will combust if he doesn’t do something soon.

“Show our girl why we’re worth it,” Phoenix orders.

Eli slips two digits inside my slit without warning, the sneaky bastard. He invades my body while I bite down hard on my lip. Fucking me with his hand, he watches me closely for the torture he’s inflicting on my nerves. Phoenix decides to punish me further and captures me in a searing kiss, tongue sweeping through my mouth.

“You taste so damn sweet,” he mumbles.

That fucking piercing is deliciously cold and oh-so satisfying. I can hardly breathe between his expert lips and Eli driving me over the edge. Tension builds in my core and I raise my hips, seeking more friction. Anything to relieve the ache building inside of me.

“Enough, Eli,” Phoenix barks.

Then the hand is gone. Leaving me just on the cusp of an orgasm, cruelly preventing the final plunge into oblivion. I whimper against Phoenix’s mouth while he chuckles like a fucking deviant.

“Doesn’t feel good to be left hanging, does it?” he taunts.

Sucking on my bottom lip hard enough to hurt, he bites down with his

teeth and soothes the sting with his tongue. Moving down my jaw and neck, he bites me repeatedly.

“Finish what you fucking started here,” I hiss at him.

I can see the enjoyment on his face. He’s loving torturing me.

“Why should we? You’re the one that’s been a complete bitch to us. I thought you liked pain, huh?” Phoenix’s fingers slide up my sleeve, digging into my freshly cleaned wounds. “Nice to know you hurt yourself as much as others.”

“Screw you, that’s none of your business,” I groan.

Phoenix bites my throat, right above my skipping pulse. I swear I die on the spot, his nails digging into my arm, searing pain throbbing through me as he adds his teeth on top.

“Am I not allowed to hurt you? Or is it just Hudson who has that honour?”

“Do what you fucking want,” I grunt. “Just don’t bring him into it.”

Phoenix snickers, pulling back to stare into my eyes. “That asshole doesn’t speak for the group. If you want this, you’re going to put your drama with him aside. Quit ghosting us and I’ll hurt you, firecracker. I’ll fuck you up as much as you want.”

The two devils share a loaded look as I prepare to relent, because let’s face it, I’m fucking gone for. I was kidding myself if I thought I could keep my distance.

“Fine,” I growl.

Eli grabs my chin with his free hand, refusing to let me look away. Those green eyes speak a thousand words as he kisses me just as hard, ringlets tickling my face. His hand resumes driving me crazy and just when I think it can’t get any better, Phoenix shifts behind me. He tugs my jeans down lower, making sure I’m hidden by their bodies around me.

“Do you like that, firecracker? Eli fingering you like the dirty slut you are?”

“Yes.” I shudder, lifting my hips higher.

“We’re gonna do things to you that will push your boundaries. Don’t expect sweet and sappy, because that ain’t what we’re about. You still want it?” he murmurs.

I nod tightly, watching Phoenix’s pleased smirk. Like he planned this all along, and I’ve just fallen into his nefarious trap. He brings his fingers to my mouth, slipping them between my lips.

“Let’s start here then. Suck,” he demands.

I open my mouth without protesting, taking his slim digits in and moistening them with my tongue. After a few seconds, he pulls them free and lowers his hand into my jeans, finding the ultra-sensitive nerve endings of my asshole. My entire body tenses in preparation.

“Say please,” Phoenix commands, circling the tight ring of muscle.

I swallow a scream as Eli adds another finger, stretching my pussy even wider while Phoenix continues to mercilessly toy with me. Another climax spirals inside of me, ready to climb higher as they play me like an instrument, perfectly synchronised.

“Please...” I moan, unable to resist.

He pushes the tip of his finger in. “Please what?”

I want to yell and tell him to go to hell, but every ounce of self-control has left the building. I want them both to fuck me, right here, right now. Regardless of the room full of people. I’d bend over and take it from behind without question if they wanted to.

Phoenix grabs my hair, roughly yanking to turn my head to him. My eyes water at the roughness and a smug smile dances across his lips. “I asked, *please what?* Answer the fucking question or Eli will leave you hanging again.”

The fingers working my pussy pause right as he says that, and another whimper of pain threatens to escape. “Please fuck me,” I mutter instead, blushing hard.

Goddammit, the son of a bitch is grinning at me.

“Not yet,” Phoenix replies shortly. “But soon, Brooklyn. I can’t wait to have you screaming my name while we both fuck you into oblivion. Is that what you want? We’ll push every boundary you have and more. Final warning.”

He bites my lip again, drawing blood and licking it clean off.

“Yes,” I answer obediently.

“Now you’re behaving,” he praises. “Give me that attitude again and I’ll spank your ass raw.”

Phoenix nods to Eli and my voice is stolen by the finger breaching my ass, gradually easing in as Eli picks up the pace again. With them both inside of me now, I think I’m going to shatter into a million pieces. I feel so full, I can’t help but wonder what will happen when they both fuck me at the same time. Because that sure as hell is definitely happening.

“This is mine, you hear me?” Phoenix states, roughly fingering my ass. “A night with us two and you won’t walk straight for a fucking week. I can’t wait to bruise your perfect skin.”

Eli’s mouth trails down my sweater until his lips latch onto an exposed nipple. Hell, just the image of being trapped between them has me swallowing a cry, my release taking over. I bury my face in Eli’s hair, breathing in his mouth-watering scent and stifling the noise so nobody hears us.

When I manage to lift my head, I’m fucking wet again at the sight that waits for me. *Goddamn sadistic bastards.*

Phoenix and Eli kiss passionately, mouths latched onto one another like hungry animals. I’m entranced by the sight, aftershocks from my orgasm still making my legs shake. Phoenix fists a handful of Eli’s curls as his tongue dances across his lips. He yanks hard, exposing Eli’s throat into which he sinks his teeth like a damn predator. Eli rubs the solid lump in his jeans, breaths coming out as pained shudders.

When they part, both stare down at me with hooded eyes.

“Damn,” I comment breathlessly.

Eli’s chest vibrates with a laugh that doesn’t make it out for anyone else I hear. The son of a bitch looks mighty pleased with himself and slowly raises his fingers to his mouth, ensuring that we’re both watching. He takes his time sucking every last drop of moisture from them.

“Our girl taste good?” Phoenix asks.

They share a silent conversation in typical fashion, communicating without a single word being spoken. I glance around, the loud movie concealing our filthy conversation. No one saw a thing, entranced by the screen. Even the guards are none the wiser, fixated on the movie like the negligent twats they are.

Crossing my arms, I feign annoyance. “You two done already?”

Trapped between both of them, it’s impossible to remain mad for long. Already I’m wet and shivering, my body burning for more. And when Phoenix winks at me, I’m like putty in his fucking hands.

“Nope, we’re just getting started, baby.”

TWENTY-FOUR

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KADE

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HOLY NIGHT BY LANDON TEWERS

CROUCHED behind my dad's vintage Porsche 911, I'm well hidden from sight as I spark up a cigarette. Taking a long drag, I blow the smoke out and my body begins to relax. It burns my lungs but I don't care, I need the relief right now. I'm not much of a smoker, but when you're surrounded by stuck up assholes commenting on shit that's none of their business, it's needed. Why the hell did I think coming home was a good idea?

"Kade! You out here?"

My head falls between my legs as I sigh, hoping that she'll give up. There's no such luck as Cece peers around the car, eyes landing on me. She scoffs and sits down by my side, her hand held out to demand a drag on my cigarette.

"Come on, give it up. You know Mum and Dad don't let me."

"Fine," I grumble, passing it off to my baby sister.

Where Hudson is adopted, Cece is my sister by blood. She's the only one out of all of them that I can stand to be around. Down to earth and level-headed in a way our parents really aren't.

"Was it what Uncle Terrence said?" she guesses.

I manage a nod.

"Fuck him. He has no right to say shit about Hudson or his life choices. What happened to blood is thicker than water, huh? Stupid old bastard."

I snatch the cigarette back, giving her a shrug. "He'll just wheel out the tolerance card when it suits him. We all know what he really thinks of Hudson. Doesn't give him the right to talk smack about him in front of the entire family though."

"True, but least he isn't trying to act like he actually cares."

I guess that would be worse, at least we can rely on him to be a cunt. We sit in silence until the smoke is done, staring out across the foggy grounds surrounding our family mansion. Seven acres of grass, trees and horses line the estate, with a giant circular driveway to fit Dad's extensive car collection. The house itself is a million-pound monstrosity, full of antique crap that Mum proudly collects and displays, as if to suggest that her days as a housewife actually amount to anything.

I hate it here.

I hate everything about this life, and the expectations that come with it. I'm aware how much of a privileged shit that makes me sound. But the truth is, I'd rather be fucking poor and in control of my own destiny than in this prison of superficiality. Controlled by other people's plans and ideals, trying to defend my rejected adoptive brother to relatives whose kids attended Oxbridge and boast several doctorates.

"How's boarding school?" I sling an arm around my sister.

"Crap as usual, I hate it there so much. Can't wait to graduate, but now Mum won't let me apply to art school. Apparently that's what, and I quote, *'bums and lowlifes do to pay for their skank addiction and shitty apartments.'* No joke, those were her exact words. Can you believe this shit?"

"Yeah," I answer drily.

Our parents care more about propriety than anything else. Why do you think they paid a fortune to hush up Hudson's arrest and pack him off to a place like Blackwood? Just so the embarrassment would fly undetected under the radar. To this day, our extended family think I'm studying abroad to explain my constant absence.

"How is he?" Cece asks.

She anxiously picks at her pale pink dress. I can't tell her the truth. That he's a fucking wreck barely scraping by, making zero progress and on track to be refused release. He's got a record longer than my arm and more incident reports than most prisoners. Right now, he's spending the rest of his weekend rotting in a cell for getting into a fight. The damn idiot.

"Good. You know Hudson, he's never far away from trouble."

"But you're looking after him, right? Like you said you would?"

I clear my throat, forcing a smile onto my face. "Of course. I promised, didn't I? I'll bring him home, Cece. We're halfway done."

"I can't wait until you're both back. These stupid family dinners aren't the same without you guys." She sniffles.

I give her a squeeze, trying to convey the comfort that I can't manage to vocalise. So many empty promises, they threaten to drown me at every turn. Will I ever come back here, to the life I so desperately want to escape? Even if I do, will Hudson be with me?

"Miss you too, kid. We'll be back before you know it," I lie.

"I'm not a fucking kid anymore, Kade. Haven't been for a while."

I ruffle her hair, even as she curses under her breath. "You'll always be a kid to me," I reply with a smile.

Someone shouts our names from far off. We share a grim look before rising and walking back to the house. Mum stands in the door with her hands on her hips, looking suitably unimpressed. I get a whack around the head with a dish towel for my absence.

"What are you two doing out here? It's your father's birthday, least you can do is join in. And is that smoke I smell? Bloody kids... if I find out—"

"Mum," I interrupt, "we were just catching up, okay? Calm down."

"Well, get back in there and spend some time with your cousins. I'll be serving dessert soon anyway." She gestures for Cece to go, but lays a hand on my arm to stop me before I can escape too. "Not you. We need to have a chat."

Great. The universal words of guaranteed doom.

"Sure. Lead the way." I sigh.

She guides me through the grand reception area, past rows of priceless artwork and delicate china vases. Raucous laughter and the clinking of glasses rings out from the formal dining area as we pass, but she keeps silent until we reach my father's office. I sink into one of the armchairs and prepare for what I'm sure is bad news.

"How's Blackwood? Keeping up with your studies okay?"

Avoiding her eyes, I search for some enthusiasm. "Yeah, I guess. It's not exactly paradise but we make do. You know how Hudson can be."

Her fingers dance across her throat as she sighs in relief. "Good, good."

"Mum?"

"Yes dear?" she says absently.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

With a trembling hand, she wipes at her teary eyes. "I'm sorry to do this on your weekend at home, but I couldn't tell you over the phone." She takes a shaky breath. "It's about Hudson, there's been a new motion filed against him. They are pushing for a court case in the new year to get a conviction this

time.”

A heavy weight settles in the pit of my stomach and I swallow hard. “For... conviction? I thought he was off the hook? It was self-defence, you know that. The judge agreed to three years at Blackwood and he walks free. That’s the deal we made.”

Mum shakes her head, fingers worrying the hem of her dress. “That was the initial ruling, to avoid him spending the next year rotting in a jail cell while he awaited trial. But now a witness has come forward with new evidence against him. They can’t justify not proceeding with a prison sentence anymore. Things are a little complex, it’s hard to explain. But don’t worry, we have a plan...”

She rambles on, throwing out names of fancy law firms and extravagant sums of money, but all I can hear is my heartbeat rushing in my ears. It’s like the ground has collapsed beneath me and I’m tumbling in a free fall. Eighteen months of my life, all sacrificed in the name of getting Hudson back on his feet and *bringing him home*.

Was it all for fucking nothing?

I can’t lose him. Not like this.

“Who’s the witness?” I interrupt her stream of words.

“Look, Kade. I don’t think—”

“Tell me who it is!”

“I didn’t mean to upset you...”

I grab her hand, squeezing it tight as tears fill my own eyes. We’re both verging on a breakdown, faced with the prospect of Hudson’s permanent removal from our lives. Say what you will about my shallow parents, but you can’t fault their love for my adoptive brother. Mum loves the bones of that asshole and has done for the last five years since he joined our family. Even when he broke her heart.

“Please. Who is it? I won’t tell him,” I reason.

She nods decisively. “Give me one.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, boy. I’m your mother, for Christ’s sake. I cleaned your bedroom as a teenager enough times to know what you were up to in there. Now give me a damn cigarette before I lose my mind.”

I reluctantly hand the pack over and light one for her. She leans back, breathing in a lungful and seeming to relax slightly. “Your father would kill me if he saw this.”

I shrug, watching her carefully. "I won't tell if you won't."

We sit in silence for a moment as she enjoys her cigarette. Meanwhile I'm losing my mind, desperately trying to understand what could possibly be gained from sending Hudson down for a crime that wasn't his fault. The judge agreed that Blackwood was the best solution. Hudson wasn't in his right mind, he still isn't. He doesn't need punishment, he needs help.

Who could have possibly come forward after all this time?

"I need to know," I say, breaking Mum's little spell.

Her momentary relief soon fades as her face falls. "There was one person missing from the police interviews, Kade. One person that didn't talk and fill in the gaps."

"I don't understand... I thought there weren't any witnesses? Hudson was the only one there."

"That's... not exactly true." Mum hesitates, cheeks colouring with embarrassment. "We went with that story to make things better for Hudson. The lawyers figured the whole thing, made it sound like our only option if we wanted to avoid life imprisonment. Who can prosecute when there's no one to testify as to what happened but a dead corpse?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose, battling with my temper. "So someone was there that night? Someone saw what Hudson did... to him?"

"That's why Hudson got off lightly." Mum nods in confirmation. "His voice was the only one that was heard. She just acted like the whole thing was a bad dream, and we used that to our advantage. Pretended like she wasn't even there that night. The woman was drugged to high heaven, it didn't take much convincing. But now... his account is being challenged."

The penny drops and I want to be sick. It's an ugly realisation as I cast my mind back, recalling the weeks of anxiety as they analysed crime scene data, taking accounts from Hudson, us, his friends and fellow college students. Piecing together the mind of a man broken by childhood circumstances, enough that he felt the need to sneak off from his ideal life with us back to a crackpot mother that abandoned him for drugs instead.

He wanted to save her, but he destroyed his life instead.

"It's his mother, Stephanie," I say distastefully.

Mum nods.

Stephanie was there that night. All this time, I've been fed a big fat lie. That Hudson snuck home and she was gone, leaving her abuser behind who didn't take too kindly to Hudson's return. It was self-defence, or so I thought.

That was the story I was fed. Or more accurately... *the lie*.

“She saw the whole thing, Kade. Just refused to acknowledge it until now.”

The image of Hudson’s drug-addled mother swims in my mind. I’d only ever seen pictures, the little snippets that I could glean from my traumatised brother who refused to acknowledge the childhood abuse that warped his mind.

“And now?” I press, knowing the worst is yet to come.

“Stephanie wants to testify. Against her own son. She’s threatening to bring the entire thing down on us. What really happened that night... she’s going to expose it all. ”

All I can do is stare into Mum’s pain filled eyes, the weight of responsibility on my shoulders slowly crushing me to the ground. All this time, I was fighting to protect Hudson from himself. I couldn’t see that the real threat was just waiting in the wings, embroiled in lies and ready to strike at the opportune moment.

Hudson killed for her, a truly pathetic excuse for a parent.

And now she’s going to bury him for it.

TWENTY-FIVE

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BROOKLYN

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DARK SIGNS BY SLEEP TOKEN

I STAND in the long queue outside the nurse's station, waiting to pick up my morning meds. All around me, zombie patients sway and stumble, lining up for their next dose of sedatives to get them through the day. I'm just as bad, my hands shaking and body sweaty.

"Elijah Woods!" the nurse calls from her hatch.

I look up, finding Eli in the crowd. He skulks forwards and accepts the little paper cup of pills, swiftly knocking them back before sticking his tongue out for inspection.

"Clear. Move along."

Eli tosses the cup away as he leaves, heading straight for the cafeteria. I watch every step he takes, leg muscles pronounced through his tight jeans, well-honed from running. The guys flash through my mind again, playing my body like a fine-tuned instrument as I was sandwiched between them at the weekend.

"Brooklyn West!"

Forcibly dragging myself out of the daydream, I retrieve my meds from the grey-faced matron and swallow the numerous pills. Choking them down without gagging is near impossible, but I've had a lot of practice over time.

"Tongue," she demands, eyebrow raised in challenge.

Opening my mouth and sticking my tongue out as requested, I'm soon dismissed with a curt nod. "Good. You're expected in Professor Lazlo's office at ten o'clock for your shot. Next!"

My stomach drops as dread fills me. Shuffling away from the line, I fight to keep my breathing steady. Every inch of my body quakes involuntarily, despite my best efforts. *Why am I so afraid of him?*

Voices blur around me as I stand stock still, lost in my head. I tell myself that it's just the others talking, but fear creeps down my spine nonetheless. No matter how many pills I swallow, the shadows and voices won't leave me alone. They refuse to return to that little box in my mind and sneak back in when I least expect it.

A hand latches around my wrist and Rio sneers at me. I step backwards, attempting to put distance between us that he swiftly ignores. "Your boyfriend put on quite the show the other day. I do hope he's enjoying his stay in the hole. Send him my regards, won't you?"

"Screw you," I mutter, fighting to escape his restraint.

"Not quite. He interrupted, remember? So rude and inconsiderate. Anyway, I don't deliver without full payment, Brooklyn. You owe me, we had a deal."

"I don't owe you shit. You tore up the list days ago. We're through."

His hand only seems to tighten at my words, nails digging deep into my flesh. "Nope. We're not through until I say so. Didn't I tell you how things work around here? I don't tolerate disrespect. Pay up or there'll be trouble."

"Pay for what exactly? You're a fucking lunatic. I don't see what I asked for."

I shove Rio's shoulder as he stumbles back, eyes hardening. "You need to learn your goddamn place already. Nobody fucking breathes in this place without my permission. You hear me, bitch? Piss me off and you won't live to see your precious Hudson again."

He glances around, giving a subtle nod to the nearby guard. I barely catch the knowing look shared between them before he shoves me against the wall, something cold and hard pressing into my ribcage. The slice of pain tells me exactly what it is.

"Like it?" Rio jeers, drawing the shank across my skin.

"Cute. Never took you for a prison thug," I hiss under my breath. "Just how many guards have you paid off with daddy's credit card? Or do you just blow them in the store cupboard?"

I feel the blood spilling beneath my t-shirt as he leans dangerously close. "Your smart mouth ain't doing you any favours. Here's the deal. I've got some blow for you, but my price has just gone up. Call it interest for messing me around. Take it or leave it."

I'm so tempted to tell him to stick it up his ass, but my desperation is stronger and soon dissolves any sense of self-worth I have left. "I'll take it."

What about the rest?”

Please, I want to beg. I need that fucking stuff to escape in time.

“This is it for now. Make it worth my time and I’ll think about the rest.”

The blade disappears and the cocky asshole dances backwards like he owns the place, utterly unconcerned. No one says a damn word about the altercation. His buddy on duty is literally looking in the other direction, completely oblivious to what transpired.

“Meet me on the roof tonight at eight. Don’t be late.”

“The roof?” I repeat in confusion.

Rio winks, giving me a flash of the steel slipping into his pocket. I simply nod my agreement and turn away, swallowing the lump in my throat. I can’t face the guys for breakfast now. Not after agreeing to that. Instead I sneak outside, finding a bench to fall onto as my trembling hands reach into my coat pocket, quickly realising that I have no smokes left to occupy myself with.

I want to scream.

Pull my hair, slice my wrists and fucking shatter into a million pieces. Have you ever felt like a stranger in your own life? People talk to you, call your name ... but none of it feels real. Like you’re just trapped behind glass watching your life simply pass by, one disaster at a time.

I sit there in the freezing autumn air until the bell rings and patients flood out from their first classes, indicating that it’s nearly ten. Hell awaits for me. I manage to dodge through the crowds to make it back inside, and check in at the desk that marks the entrance to the treatment wing.

“Brooklyn, here for Lazlo,” I mutter, flashing my ID badge.

Bundled past the therapy rooms, I pass Mariam’s door with a wistful sigh. Never thought I’d miss that overenthusiastic bitch, but here we are. The silent guard guides me through several locked doors, until we reach the wide staircase leading down. In my drug-addled state last time, I didn’t notice the sign.

Level Two - Therapy rooms 20-35

Level One - Solitary confinement

Basement - Z Wing

Down the stairs to level one, I’m escorted past endless doors, a familiar sight from my last trip to the hole. Muffled crying and voices fill the air, whispered ghosts telling tales of insanity behind locked doors. I struggle to repress the shiver wracking my body. We pass an open door leading into one

of the solitary rooms, and I sneak a glance that has my blood freezing in my veins.

A pair of shrinks wrapped in their pristine white coats battle with a male patient, one securing him in restraints, the other brandishing a deadly looking needle. I hastily look away as they successfully get the screaming man sedated. The sight brings up far too many bad memories, both past and present.

Hurrying the rest of the way down the endless corridor, we descend into the basement and through a final layer of security into the Z Wing. Lazlo's office awaits at the very end. He promptly opens his door on the first knock, as if waiting for me to arrive.

"Good morning, Brooklyn. Come in, quickly now. Lots to be getting on with."

I sit in the chair facing him, my arms wrapped around my jittery body. Lazlo takes a seat and studies me for a moment, setting my teeth on edge. When he goes to the mini fridge and retrieves the shot, I have to swallow the protests bubbling in my throat.

"Here we go, another dose. How are you adjusting?"

Let's see. I can't fucking sleep. My mind feels alien. My skin itches and I feel like a stranger in my own body. The trembles kill me and delusions plague every waking moment. Voices taunt me, shadows chase me, and I'm losing my fucking mind—day by day.

I offer a simple nod. "Fine."

"Good. No more voices?"

Shaking my head mutely, I turn and study his shelves. Anything to avoid that penetrative stare that threatens to uncover my darkest secrets. Can't give him any more ammo to use against me. I'll be tossed into a padded cell for the rest of my miserable existence.

"Well then, that's good news." Lazlo beams. "Now, just a little prick. It'll be over before you know it." He slips the needle into my neck and I flinch.

"What's this?" He runs a finger over my tender forehead, where I know there's a dark bruise forming. "Been banging your head against the wall, have we? Tut tut."

"No," I struggle out, swallowing hard.

Fucking idiot, Brooke. Too obvious.

"I've worked in psychiatry for forty years, Brooklyn. I know a self-harmer when I see one. Were you lying about the voices? Or is it the

intrusive thoughts this time?”

I pick at my jeans, still avoiding his gaze.

Fuck him. Fuck this room. Fuck Blackwood.

Lazlo chortles under his breath. “Okay, we can discuss this later. We hardly know each other, after all. Now that I’m your therapist, I need to familiarise myself with your case. We will be spending a lot of time together over the next three years.”

He peers at me again, almost like he’s expecting something. I remain silent, unprepared for his next words. “Tell me about Victor.”

“Hell no,” I blurt automatically.

“Excuse me?”

I finally meet his widened eyes. “I said no.”

Placing my file down, Lazlo sighs and folds his ugly spectacles. I can feel the lecture coming from a mile off as he plasters that therapist shit talking smile on his face, ready to spew some patronising bullshit.

“Look, Brooklyn. We both know why you’re here. I’ve read your notes from Clearview and the various assessments conducted there. I am familiar with the details of your case. Schizophrenia is a weighty label in itself, let alone any others. Your destructive personality is something we can work on together.”

I stand abruptly. “Can I leave?”

“No. Sit down.”

Ignoring him completely, I begin to pace the small office. Wringing my hands as he watches intently, taking subtle notes that he thinks I can’t see. I don’t give a fuck if I look crazy, my spiralling thoughts take over everything and I need to *move*.

“Tell me what you are feeling right now,” Lazlo suggests.

“Get out of my head.”

“It’s my job to be in your head,” he replies curtly. “Come on, what’s the worst that could happen?”

He could lock me up for the rest of my life, preventing me from ending my pathetic existence. He’ll force me to live beyond the looming anniversary and my mind simply won’t cope. It’ll implode. The memories will be too much to handle and I’m fucking terrified of what my mind does when it’s had enough.

“I’m... pissed off,” I admit reluctantly.

Lazlo crosses his legs, getting comfortable. “Why is that?”

“I don’t like being analysed.”

“Are you afraid of what I might find?”

Fucking smug wanker. Of course I’m afraid of that.

“No,” I lie easily, but it doesn’t quite ring true.

Lazlo taps his pen, eyes calculating. “It is our natural instinct to protect what we are ashamed of. But in this space, we are nothing more than therapist and patient. You need not be embarrassed of what afflicts you.”

I throw my arms up in annoyance. “I’m not fucking embarrassed!”

“Then tell me what’s got you strung so tight right now.”

I give up and sink to the floor, crossing my legs. Refusing to return to the stupid seat where he can study me like a damn specimen. “The labels,” I mutter.

Understanding dawns as he clicks his pen, scribbling something else down. I resist the urge to march over there and snatch the notebook away, or shove it so far up his ass he’ll spit paper.

“Schizophrenia?”

A thick lump forms in my throat, impossible to swallow. Ancient memories tickle my mind that I don’t have the strength to keep at bay in the face of his scrutiny. A time long past, when the family sickness first reared its ugly head.

The car veers off to the side as my parents scream at each other, Mum battling an invisible enemy that none of us can see. She talks to it all the time. We sail straight into a tree, twisted metal and smoke filling the space. Airbags burn my skin and sizzling flames drown out Dad’s dying cries. Broken ribs cut off all air as I battle against the seatbelt. Blood slick beneath my fingers, my own and theirs mingling.

“Brooklyn? You with me?” Lazlo prompts.

I clear my throat, vision filled with smoke. “Yeah.”

Blinking rapidly, I try to force the images away. Reality and imagination blur as their cries still echo through my mind, mingling with the ever-present shadows that always appear to torture me further.

Lazlo gives me a moment, watching my expression closely before continuing, “I want to talk a little about your diagnoses. You’ve been aware of these issues for some time, I believe.” He searches his papers again. “I can see that you had several psych evaluations growing up, and a stint in an inpatient unit then too.”

When the stupid foster carer stumbled in and cut me down from the

noose. Interfering bitch.

“When did the voices start?” he asks conversationally, as if he isn’t prying into the deepest pit of my mind and shining a light where it really isn’t wanted.

“On and off for several years. Worse as I got older,” I reply, hoping to appease him and prevent further questioning. I deliberately don’t mention the shadows. Voices are crazy enough without adding horrifying hallucinations into the melting pot of madness.

“And the drugs. This made your affliction worse, I presume?”

I shoot him a frustrated glare. “Don’t bring the drugs into it.”

Lazlo disregards my words, lacing his hands together. “Drug use and psychosis is well documented. Narcotics are proven to increase paranoia, hallucinations, erratic emotions. In fact, I participated in a study which...”

“No,” I interject firmly. “Don’t blame the drugs. We both know where it came from.”

“Your illness?” he clarifies, quickly catching on. “I see. Well, there is a genetic component to Schizophrenia, a familial pattern that is also well established. Although myriad factors also impact...”

I suddenly stand, my body coiled tight with tension. “I’m done.”

“We still have an hour, Brooklyn.”

“Just, please. Not now,” I beg, revealingly honest for once.

Lazlo looks me over, sighing in frustration. He slides some printouts from my file and hands them to me. “As you’re still adjusting to life in general population, I will make an exception today. But only this once. Don’t get used to it.”

I take the sheets blindly and prepare to flee.

“Read them, Brooklyn!” Lazlo shouts after me. “Do your homework before you return. If you don’t put the effort into therapy, we won’t get anywhere together!”

I ignore him completely and stride out, passing the startled guard waiting outside. He checks with the disgruntled doctor and I practically run from the building. Every step mirrors the heavy beat of my heart.

I know exactly where my fucking demons came from.

My blood is cursed.

As I emerge into the foyer and dash for the exit, my escort finally lets me go. Breaking out into the fresh air, I stumble and end up falling to my knees. The hard gravel rips my jeans and slices my leg, hot pain bursting from the

scratch, but I don't react. Just sucking in air takes all of my attention, a full breakdown threatening to take over.

"Brooklyn?"

A warm hand lands on my shoulder, brushing my long hair aside. I note his familiar scent, fresh mint and coffee meeting my nose. Kade crouches down, peering at me with warm eyes behind his thick rimmed glasses. "Hey there, love. What's up?"

I push his hand away, fighting to compose myself. "What do you want?"

"Woah, easy. Just making sure you're okay."

My head falls as I shove my emotions down, picturing the little box in my mind that all my monsters and demons barely fit into. It's bursting at the seams and one day, it'll erupt spectacularly. I offer Kade a weak smile that doesn't feel particularly genuine.

"Sorry. Bad timing."

"Clearly. You alright? Need a hand up?"

He helps me to my feet, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. For a brief, glorious second, I relax into him. Burying into the warmth and comfort that his body offers without judgement, even if I've spent weeks running from exactly that.

"Want to talk?" he murmurs.

I can feel his nose buried in my hair.

"Nope."

Pulling back, Kade stares down at me. In typical protective fashion, he's silently searching for my secrets. But for once, he doesn't pry or push me any further. Just forces a smile and takes a step back, giving me some much-needed space.

"Okay. I'll leave you be. You know where I am."

Just as I turn to race away, he calls my name again. "I almost forgot, I got you something. Don't tell the guys, I didn't bring souvenirs from home for everyone."

After a quick glance about, he subtly presses a brand new pack of cigarettes into my hand. "Come find me later if you want some company. No pressure."

And with that, Kade strides away. Leaving me taken aback, the bitter clutch of despair around my heart loosening. Something else takes its place.

Warm, unfamiliar, fuzzy.

Something akin to gratitude.

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TWENTY-SIX

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ELI

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BEAUTIFUL WAY BY YOU ME AT SIX

STANDING in the shade of an oak tree, I let the raindrops lash my face. Ice cold, burning my skin as the wind howls. The cigarette between my fingers fizzles out but I don't care, tossing it aside. For once, there's a single taste in my mind. Untainted by the usual chaos.

Rain tastes like regret.

Bitter, acrid, sharp.

Like battery acid or the smoke from a raging house fire.

"I'm fucking cold. Coming in?" Phoenix asks.

He only waits for a second when I fail to respond. Taking my silence as agreement like usual, rather than actually communicating with me. It isn't his fault. I'd give up trying to talk to me too.

He tosses his cigarette aside and jogs away, leaving me and the rain to continue our unspoken conversation. After another futile language therapy session, I'm coiled tighter than a spring and ready to explode. It always brings up far too many memories that I fight every damn day to suppress.

Rio and his goons sprint past, sparing me from their cruel taunts for once as they fight to escape the rain. I must look insane, drenched to the skin and staring up into the fathomless clouds. Like the opinions of those inferiors matter to me anyway.

I don't need them to understand.

No one ever will.

Much later, I trail inside, calmed by the ferocious storm that has me shivering. Violent thunder and lightning rattle the picture frames as I skulk up the stairs, intent on a hot shower with my penknife. A quick glance at the clock tells me it's gone half eight.

“Hey Eli! You coming for a round of poker?”

Kade and Phoenix walk down the stairs to meet me halfway, both dressed casually in their sweats. I shake my head automatically, itching to escape and sort myself out.

“Sure, man? We’ll be in the rec room if you change your mind,” Kade offers.

Leaving them to their game, I take the stairs two at a time. When I reach the fourth level, something catches my eye and halts my hurried steps. Brooklyn’s descending from upstairs to her floor, face crumpled and cheeks tear streaked. Who the hell just upset her? I’ll kill them myself.

She freezes, eyes shifty and filled with guilt. “Eli?”

I don’t move. Seeing her so broken is almost too much for me to handle after an endlessly shitty day. I let her come to me, chin tucked down and shaking hands wrapped around her midsection. “What are you doing here?”

I dart my eyes up, indicating the above floor where my room is.

“Oh. Well, I’ll see you later.”

She tries to pass, but I suddenly brace my hand on the bannister. As I block the way past, she visibly swallows, gaze on her feet. “Eli... please. I need to be alone right now.”

Brooklyn’s soaked through, just like me. Was she up on the roof in the middle of a storm? How did she even get through security? The only person I’ve ever seen sneak up there is Rio and his thugs.

Risking a tentative step towards her, I let my fingers trail over the dripping sleeves of my hoodie that she still wears. I haven’t seen her take it off yet.

“Please go,” she whimpers.

I’m drawn in further, her sad expression calling out to me on a fundamental level. When I cup her cheek and run my thumb over her lip, graduating up to the bruise across her forehead, a hissed breath escapes her mouth.

My broken girl. We’re more alike than she’ll ever know. If only she remembered me, and if only I’d had the courage to approach her in Clearview.

Tangling our fingers together, I decide to take action. I can’t stand the gaping hole in my chest that being in her presence creates. I need to touch her. Taste her. Be seen by her, *heard* by her in any way possible.

“Eli, don’t.”

I ignore her and run my fingers through her wet hair, droplets of water clinging to her dark lashes and trailing over her skin. It's like there's an invisible thread between us, tugging on my heart and silencing the demons in my mind. All I can taste is my own desire. Thick, heady, overwhelmingly concentrated.

I tug her along, straight to her door. She reluctantly surrenders her key card and soon we're toppling inside. That's where my patience fails. I shove her against the wall, my knee spreading her legs as my mouth attacks hers. She doesn't kiss me back at first.

"Eli, no. I can't. You don't know—"

I interrupt and tangle my tongue with hers, claiming her mouth, swallowing her excuses. I can feel the clash of her teeth meeting mine. Fingers bury in my soaked hair as I grind my body against her, struggling to hold a growl in.

Then she's shoving me away, sending me stumbling into the desk. Those dark eyes ablaze with indignation and something else. Unintelligible. All-consuming. Bleak. It's regret—the rain has whispered to us both tonight.

"Why do you all insist on caring about me?" she snarls, barely above a whisper. "Can't you see that I'm worthless? I'm a fucking failure and a waste of air."

I try to advance, but she raises her hand in warning.

"No. I said no."

The words are clawing at my throat, so damn close but stuck behind that invisible barrier. Brooklyn shakes her head and disappears into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her, leaving me standing there in the dark room. Anger fills the silence and matches the brewing storm in my mind.

The shower clicks on. I shouldn't go in there, her refusal was clear. The front door is right there. A better man would walk through it and never return, just like she wants. But fuck that, I never claimed to be a good person.

I slip into the steam-filled room against my better judgement. She stands under the spray, hands braced against the wall as sobs wrack her body. I stand there staring, enraptured by her pain. She turns and stares, somehow unsurprised that I followed her.

"Fuck off, Eli," she croaks.

I shake my head.

"Leave me alone! I don't want you here."

I shake my head again.

“Why won’t you talk to me? Just say it! Say that you’re disgusted by me.” Brooklyn sucks in a pained breath, her rage rapidly spiralling. “Say that you hate me. Don’t just stand there looking all pitying and shit.”

I take a tentative step closer. Softly sliding the door open and stepping into the warm spray, fully clothed. Her back hits the wall as I crowd the small space, her bare breasts brushing against my soaked t-shirt.

“You don’t fucking give up, do you?”

This time, I answer with a kiss. Brushing my lips against hers so gently, like one wrong move and she’ll break. I want her to break. Fall apart in my arms. Cling to me like a lifeboat. Nobody has ever needed me. What would it be like to be wanted?

She grabs a handful of my hair, her lips firm against mine. Our tongues tangle as my hands roam her body, gliding across scarred skin to cup her butt. She’s kissing me like I’m the air she breathes and I’ve never felt so fucking alive.

“Off,” she orders.

All signs of resistance are gone as she tugs my shirt. I freeze, my body flush with ice-cold dread. I can’t let her see what’s hidden beneath. She can never know how damaged I really am. Backing away, I try to escape the shower as she pursues me, no longer running or afraid.

I’m the prey, and she’s here to devour me whole.

“I said *off*.”

My hand scrabbles with the handle, desperate to escape.

“I thought you wanted this?”

We’ve fucked, but she’s never seen me. Not fully. There’s no turning back from that. All I can do is stare into her hooded eyes, hoping she can sense the fear in me.

Brooklyn’s bruised forehead meets mine. Nose to nose, inhaling each other in a moment that feels infinite. “You don’t need to be afraid, Eli. Not from me. Please, trust me.”

Her hands grasp the hem of my shirt, dragging it up inch by inch. I’m on the precipice and about to plummet to my demise as she strips me off. Her gaze eats up my twisted flesh, more scar tissue than actual skin. I don’t need to look. I know it snakes all around my torso, across my shoulders and dips into the waistband of my jeans.

Understanding flickers across her face. “Fire?” she murmurs.

I swallow. Try to breathe. Lick my lips. Nod my head.

You're a sinner, Elijah.

This is what sinners deserve. Fire cleanses everything.

The smoke in my nose is too real, infecting my senses and blocking out reality. It isn't until she unbuckles my jeans and frees my dick that I come back slightly. Brooklyn spares me a knowing glance as she falls to her knees in the shower, mouth secured to my hard length. Bobbing, sucking, licking; she invades my mind with sensations that refuse to be ignored.

The fire in my mind rescinds as I latch onto the feel of her mouth around me. Hitting the back of her throat, I brace my arms against the wall. My breath hisses from between my teeth and when I'm on the verge of coming down her throat, I yank her up. Back against the wall and legs wrapped around my waist, she's breathing hard as my fingers tug on her clit. She's so fucking wet.

"Eli..." she cries when I thrust inside in one slick move.

Our hips slam together as I fuck her against the wall, her tight pussy driving me wild. Nails bite into my back as she kisses me again; roughly, savagely. Tongue invading my mouth while I pummel her cunt into oblivion.

When she breaks away for air, I suck on her hard nipples. My teeth pull at her buds before I bite and suck her tits hard enough to leave a purple pattern, moving gradually up her neck. I want to see my bruises all over her fucking body. I want to hurt her and see her pain, own her in the most twisted way possible.

Movements growing more frenzied, we both chase that elusive high. Groaning and clinging to one another as the pressure builds, Brooklyn falls apart first, screaming my name. Her pussy clenches around me, and I'm spilling into her seconds later.

We breathe heavily in silence, water cascading around us. Washing quickly, I exit first and dry off, before handing her the towel. Then I realise that my clothes are fucking drenched in a puddle on the floor.

Brooklyn wraps herself up and grabs my hand. "Stay?"

With her lip caught between her teeth, she looks impossibly young. Platinum hair wet and scraggly, eyes lined with circles and holding more grief than anyone should. I follow her into the bedroom, like a dying man chasing a mirage. She climbs into bed completely naked, silently beckoning me to join.

"I'm not, ah..." She gulps, running a hand over her face. "Not very good at this, the-sticking-around-after thing. But with you..." Her eyes flick back

up to mine apprehensively. “I want to be.”

My feet carry me forwards, into the bed until our bodies are entwined, skin damp and breath mingling. My fingers bury in her wet blonde strands as her hand runs over my lower stomach, teasing the sensitive patches of burned scar tissue there.

I’ve never let anyone do that before.

Not even Phoenix.

“I wish you could talk to me,” she blurts.

The sound of crashing thunder fills the room as light flashes behind the drawn curtains. Brooklyn clings to me harder, leg hanging over mine, arms wrapped around my bare chest. I don’t know where I end and she begins.

Brooklyn sighs. “Tell me something. Please.”

Fucking Christ, I want to. More than ever before in my life, I wish I could say something. *Anything*. But I can’t get a fucking word out, not even when her lips graze my jaw.

“You really can’t, can you? Not a word?”

My head hits the pillows in aggravation. Brooklyn stares for a second longer before disentangling herself from me, leaving the bed to rustle in her coat pocket. She comes back with a pack of cigarettes, popping the window open through the safety bars as she lights up.

Stupid fucking words. I don’t need them. Not with her.

She wants to know about my pain? I’ll fucking hurt her myself, spill her blood and claim her heathen soul. Then she’ll understand. Roughly grabbing her arm, I pull her back towards the bed before flipping her onto her back.

“What are you up to?” she breathes.

I’ll tell you something, babygirl.

If that’s what you want.

Her legs slide open on instinct and I settle between them, staring down at her. Cold air floods the room as the rainstorm rages. I kiss my way down her soft thighs, tongue flicking across her clit as her back arches.

“Fuck... Eli. Don’t stop.”

Tasting her sweet little pussy, I slide a finger in and rub her clit with my thumb. She’s already soaked again, legs quivering at my mere touch. Once she’s mewling and ready to burst, my mouth leaves her cunt and I raise my head, slowly licking my lips.

This girl. We’re cut from the same fucking cloth.

I leave her shivering, searching for something to use. My eyes land on her

Chucks, and I quickly steal the laces while she watches me intently. Back in bed, I spread Brooklyn wide and grab her wrists, looping the laces around and tying her hands together tight.

No escaping now. Running away isn't allowed.

I snatch the still-lit cigarette from between her fingers and shift into position, my cock nudging her drenched folds. She groans while I tease her opening, and I take the opportunity to lower the cigarette to her forearm.

"Oh fuck..." she hisses as I burn her without mercy. "Goddammit. Don't you dare fucking stop."

I slip fully inside, filling her tight pussy up while I burn her again. This time for longer, leaving beautiful red welts behind on her creamy skin. Her walls clench around my dick as she moans, biting her damn lip again in a way that drives me crazy.

"P-please... Eli. More," she begs.

Her legs wrap around my waist to pull me closer, my strokes deepening. Perfect tits bounce as I tug her wrists high, exposing more vulnerable skin for me to scar. I burn her a third time, enthralled by the bloody wounds that mark my path across her skin. She hisses in pain and moves her hips, stealing more twisted pleasure from me.

I drop the cigarette into the beaker of water by her bed after a few more goes. Hurting her has only wound me up more. I want to do it again. I want to cut her. Make her bleed. Make her cry.

We're both completely fucked up, that's how I know she'd take it.

Brooklyn grabs my hair with her restrained hands, manoeuvring my body until she's on top, straddling my cock like the fucking queen she is. I grab her hips as she begins to move, riding me hard and pulling my curls tight enough to sting.

"You drive me insane," she groans.

We fuck frantically in the dark, surrounded by the patter of heavy rain and the odd flash of lightning. Just as I'm ready to spill my load a second time, I grab her by the throat. I own her right now. Her breath, her mind, her pussy. It's all mine. My fucking property.

Mine to destroy as I please.

Pulling her face close as my grip tightens, her eyes grow wide. I squeeze, my thumb teasing her pulse point while she struggles for breath. The seconds crawl by as she slams her body down onto mine.

I don't let her breathe again until everything shatters into spectacular

pieces. She slumps on top of me, sucking in deep lungfuls, our sweat mingling. Warmth seeps across my crotch as she eventually climbs off.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got an implant. We’re good.”

I hate the rapidly forming distance between us. I want to invade Brooklyn’s every cell and possess her, until her whole world revolves around me alone. Thoughts of restraining her fully and playing with my knife tickle my mind, or fucking her senseless in a blood-slick mess while she screams my name. It makes my dick twitch already in excitement.

“Still got nothing to say to me?” Brooklyn smirks.

Pulling her back to me, I wrap my arms around her sticky body. I can hear her roaring heartbeat as she burrows into my side, fitting perfectly against my body like we were made for each other.

“Maybe we don’t need to talk,” she adds, leg rubbing mine. “That was good enough for me.” Settling into a comfortable position, she lets out a satisfied sigh.

I don’t intend to stay.

Nights are the worst, when the dreams of being beaten with a Bible and fire consuming my body sneak in. That’s when I can’t keep quiet any longer, the screams break free whether I like it or not. But as Brooklyn’s breathing evens out and her soft hairs tickle my chest, my eyes grow heavy. For the first time since I got my scars, I’m not afraid of someone seeing them.

TWENTY-SEVEN

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BROOKLYN

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BLASPHEMY BY BRING ME THE HORIZON

I STARE at the selection of dreary breakfast foods. Fruit, cereal and toast. None of which look remotely appealing. Even the coffee is fucking decaf. Like caffeine is going to make us any crazier. A plate of eggs drops onto my tray, startling me.

“Stare all you want, it ain’t gonna get any better,” Phoenix smarts.

He adds some more food to my plate and grabs my hand, hauling me onwards. I let him pull me along, with no energy to protest. The first couple of days after my shot are the worst, I feel so fucking numb that even his aggressive need to feed me doesn’t matter.

Scanning both our IDs to log the meal, he steers me through the cafeteria and I savour the warm hand wrapped around my bicep. We take our seats at the usual table, deserted apart from Kade, who sits with his nose in a scarily thick textbook.

Phoenix shuffles close to me on the bench, pressing his lips to my ear. “Nice hickey you’ve got there, firecracker. Any more beneath that cute sweater of yours?”

I flush with embarrassment. “Is it any of your business?”

“It could be,” he murmurs, his gaze full of heat. “Think I’ve earned myself some time alone with you, don’t ya think?”

Snorting, I push the food around my plate. “Since when?”

Phoenix leans back, rolling his eyes. “That’s how you want to play, huh?” His hand lands on my leg beneath the table, giving it a tight squeeze. “I know what you were up to last night with Eli. Must say that I’m a little disappointed at my lack of invite. Come find me tonight.”

“Is that an order or an invitation?” I hum.

The hand skates higher, brushing between my thighs. “An order.”

Kade drops his textbook with a curse, mopping up the spilled juice spreading across the table. He quickly realises that we’ve joined him and blushes. “You been here long?”

Phoenix leans back, putting space between us again. “Nope, brainiac. What’s so interesting in that book of yours?”

Kade shrugs, tossing the textbook aside. “Got a final tomorrow that I’m cramming for, that’s all.” His eyes flicker to me, that warm smile making me tingle inside. “How are you, Brooklyn?”

“Good. Same old. Good luck with your exam,” I reply.

“Thanks. Can’t wait until it’s over so I can relax again. Are you guys coming to the party this weekend? I’ve been planning it for months.”

My eyebrow lifts. “A... party? Here?”

Kade shrugs, pausing to tuck his book away in his bag. “Halloween. It’s this Saturday, and when I say party, I mean crazy asylum edition. Not exactly a wild rave, but it’s the closest thing we get to fun around here.”

I shudder at his mention of Halloween. Another reminder that the clock is ticking down, impending doom growing closer with each day. Rio fucked me over with the order, I can’t do anything with a single bag of blow. No blades, no pills. I’m getting desperate now.

Phoenix chuckles around a mouthful of toast, breaking my morbid thoughts. “Yeah, last year was zombie themed. Everyone fit in perfectly in this place.” He gestures at the patients around us, and the varying degrees of alertness. “Especially the nutters.”

“Hey,” I interject with a frown, “You calling me a nutter?”

“Obviously. You’re the queen of nutters, girl. Own it.”

He waggles his eyebrows at me, face lit with humour. I deliver a kick under the table that has him choking on a mouthful of breakfast. Kade laughs into his mug while I grin smugly, completely surprising myself. My swinging emotions give me whiplash sometimes.

“Anyone seen Eli?” Kade asks once he’s composed himself.

“He went back to his room to change,” I blurt, before realising just what I’d said. All eyes firmly on me, I struggle to reign in my embarrassment. “I... think. Saw him going that way.”

“Is that so?” Phoenix scoffs.

I shoot him a glare. “I don’t know. Ask him yourself.”

His eyes trail back down to my bruised neck, lip curling up at the corner.

“Oh, don’t worry, I intend to.”

We lapse into silence while eating until another tray hits the table. Whispers around us put me on high alert as I look up, heart leaping into my mouth. Hudson lowers himself onto the bench, giving his brother a small nod of greeting.

Then his oceanic eyes are on me.

“Shit man, you’re back!” Phoenix exclaims.

They exchange fist bumps as I stare into Hudson’s weary eyes, the blue colour faded beneath the weight of exhaustion. His eyebrow piercing is crooked and thick black hair impossibly messy, sticking up in all angles. I’ve never seen him so unkempt before.

I struggle to swallow my immediate anger. “Hi.”

Taking a half-hearted bite of an apple, he nods. “Hey.”

Kade’s eyes bounce between us as he watches the awkward encounter, before clearing his throat expectantly. “It’s good to have you back, bro.”

Hudson doesn’t respond, just munches lifelessly on his apple. He’s washed out, drained and extremely pale. Just like I was after a trip to the hole. There’s something about that place that just drains the fucking life out of you. Nothing worse than being trapped with your own mind.

Kade forces a smile. “So, Halloween. We’re all in?”

I toss my napkin down, giving him an unenthusiastic shrug. “I guess, although I can’t exactly get a costume together in this place.”

“We’ll sort it,” Kade answers swiftly, holding a hand up when I begin to protest. “Seriously, don’t worry. I’ve got you covered, love.”

That warm feeling in my chest returns, and I mentally berate myself for enjoying the thrill. *He’s got me covered*. Why does that feel so damn good? How do I turn this feeling off?

Phoenix and Kade chatter as I stare moodily at my plate, entirely uncomfortable with the dark presence at our table. Hudson’s gaze sears across my skin like Eli with his cigarette, but I continue to chew my lip and avoid his eyes. He went to the hole because of me. *Willingly*. Where does that leave us?

I can’t forgive him.

I’ll take my resentment to the grave.

Wrapped up in my thoughts, I don’t hear the footsteps running up behind me until it’s too late. Scolding hot liquid hits the back of my neck first, burning and running down my back. There’s no suppressing the cry of shock

and pain that slips out, and I trip over in my reaction, landing flat on my ass.

A smirking, gaunt face grins down at me. “Oh gosh, I’m so sorry. Slipped on my shoelace,” Britt exclaims, hands flapping about dramatically as the room falls silent.

All three guys curse and jump into action while Britt stares down at me triumphantly, empty plastic cup in hand and piping hot tea scolding my skin. The cafeteria’s guards appear in an instant, swiftly yanking Britt far away from me.

“I’m sorry, it was an accident, I swear!”

They shove her against the wall, tightly restraining her arms. Phoenix sinks to his knees by my side as Britt makes exaggerated crying sounds, acting all fucking innocent but it’s so obviously fake.

“It was an accident, I swear,” she protests. “These floors can get so slippery! I would never hurt my friend here on purpose.” Her bottom lip juts out and she bats her lashes.

Phoenix mutters a scathing insult and wraps an arm around my shoulders, gently lifting me up. His hand tracks over my soaked shirt and I hiss, angrily shoving him away. “I’m fine, leave it.”

“She fucking attacked you, that is not fine.” He turns to the two exasperated guards. “We all saw it, that was deliberate!”

“No! Me and Brooklyn are great friends. It was just a little accident,” Britt defends.

Her eyes turn to the deliberately silent asshole across the table, watching the incident with a blank expression. “Hudson, tell them! Back me up!”

He just stares at her blankly. “Why?”

Britt gapes at him, furious eyes filling with tears. “What do you mean why? Because it’s me!” Her voice turns shrill. “I just slipped, okay? Accidents happen all the time!”

I know the minute she flashes me a deadly look of hatred, just how false that sentiment is. I don’t give a fuck what’s going on between her and Hudson, it ain’t got shit to do with me.

Rising to my feet and pushing Phoenix’s hands away, I face the bemused guards. “It’s fine, it was an accident.” I shoot Britt a cold smile. “No problem, *friend*. I’m all good.”

“What? Brooklyn, you can’t be serious,” Phoenix splutters.

I take my seat again, utterly calm as the guards release Britt, moaning about incident reports and reluctantly backing off. As soon as their backs are

turned, I spin in my seat and face her. “You practice that wail all night? Because your acting is shit.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” Britt replies sweetly.

Just as she turns to waltz away, my hand darts out and snatches her wrist. I glance at the retreating backs of the guards before roughly yanking her closer, getting up close and personal to ensure she hears my every word.

“I don’t know what your game is, but try that again and I’ll make you regret the day your skinny ass landed in this hellhole. Got that, whore? Or should I demonstrate?”

Her lips part as she frowns at me, eyes lifting to look at Hudson again. “Stop slutting around with my boyfriend and you’ll never have to look at me again,” she sneers at me. “If anyone’s a whore here... *honey*, it’s you.”

My fingers tighten around her wrist and I dig my ragged nails in, making her flinch. Satisfying droplets of blood begin to well up. “That’s what this is about? You are so far off the mark, you stupid cunt.” I jerk my head at Hudson, who’s watching the exchange with a frown. “He’s all fucking yours. Word of advice though?”

I turn and meet his eyes, ensuring he hears my next words. “Keep your damn eyes open, because he’ll stab you in the back the first chance he gets.” I offer Britt a fake smile, loving the uncertain look on her face. “He’ll break your fucking heart without batting an eye. Good luck.”

Then I release her and gather up my tray, ignoring everyone’s stunned silence as I stride away. Kade calls my name but I ignore him, not stopping until the tray is deposited and I’m out of the room. Only then do I dare to breathe again, fists clenched as I fight my rage.

That fucking idiotic bastard.

I march out into the freezing air of the quad, turning and punching the wall with a shout. The skin across my knuckles breaks, throbbing in time to the fresh burns across my back. I latch onto the pain, savouring the release. Public revenge isn’t my style. I’ll let her go running back to that asshole, and when the inevitable heartbreak comes, I’ll dance on her fucking grave. That’s what I call real revenge.

“Brooklyn?”

His broken voice calls out, rooting me to the spot. Indignation floods my body as I spin, facing the man that stole my heart before crushing it to pathetic pieces. Hudson hangs in the doorway, hand shakily running through his unruly hair.

“What?” I bark.

“Britt... she’s just pissed off.”

“Because you won’t fuck her or because you stopped?”

Hudson looks away, letting out an unsteady breath. “Stopped.”

What a truly disgusting mental image that is.

“Tell your little hook-up that she has no need to be jealous and she can keep the tea to herself in future. I have zero fucking interest in you.” I step closer, offering him a derisive sneer. “Frankly, if you died tomorrow I would have a party in celebration.”

Chilly wind whips between us as Hudson looks at me, his expression hardening. “When did you become such a cold-hearted bitch?”

“Why don’t you ask yourself that question?” I laugh, throwing my hands up in exasperation. “I’m sure you’ll find a suitable answer if you cast your mind back. What was it you said to me then?”

Hudson shakes his head, refusing to answer. *Coward.*

I walk right up to him, gently cupping his cheek as he sucks in a startled breath. His eyes close slightly when I tenderly caress the stubble on his face with my thumb, like he’s savouring my touch. With my lips scant inches from his, tricking him into thinking I’m here for a kiss, I fire my parting shot.

“You said to trust you, because you love me and will never hurt me. Look where that got me. Don’t lecture me on being cold hearted, you piece of *utter, utter scum.*”

I swing my leg back and kick Hudson right in the balls, hard enough to elicit an agonised cry. He goes rigid, eyes bugging out before crumpling to his knees. Just for good luck, I punch him in the face too. “That’s for ruining my motherfucking life!”

Just as I draw back, the other two guys round the corner, screeching to a halt when they see our altercation. Hudson slumps onto his side, spitting blood and cupping his undoubtedly sore crown jewels. So goddamn satisfying, I could watch him cower all day long.

“What the fuck?” Kade shouts.

He looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. Phoenix is staring too, although he looks somewhat more understanding. I gesture down at their groaning, pitiful friend.

“Why don’t you ask your brother how he paid off his addiction before you swept him off into the sunset? I assume he hasn’t told you that part.”

Kade remains silent, confirming my suspicions. They don’t have a damn

clue, just like I thought. Hudson will never admit to the truth. He's too fucking ashamed to own his shit.

"I didn't think so," I summarise. "Word of advice? Don't believe a word this lying son of a bitch says. When you've heard the full story, then you can think about judging me."

I shrug, relishing the dawning look of dread on Kade's face as he glances at his groaning brother. "Until then, mind your own goddamn business."

Stalking away with my head held high, I leave Hudson to pick up the pieces. All three watch me go in stunned silence. I have to walk away before I end up killing every last one of them for my own satisfaction.

Prison sentence be fucking damned.

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TWENTY-EIGHT

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BROOKLYN

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HURRICANE BY I PREVAIL

I'M BOUNCING NERVOUSLY on my feet, glancing at the door to the group therapy room for the third time. Still shut. Conversation buzzes all around us, patients standing in huddles and gossiping while they wait. Teegan places a hand on my shoulder to still my movements.

"Hey, chill. Thursday's group is a decent bunch. You don't even have to speak if you don't want to."

"Yeah, right. It was a rather unpleasant experience in Clearview though." Shuddering, I hug my stomach tighter. "Usually ended up getting messy, one way or another. Although the supervisor was one of the good ones."

After getting away with not attending so far due to cancelled sessions and my stint in the hole, the doom that is group therapy has finally arrived. The doors open and the line begins to move, with Teegan squeezing my arm.

"Try not to worry. It's just forty minutes and then you're done for another two weeks. Besides, it's not too taxing. Just your standard shared pain fest and some meditation crap," she explains.

Delightful.

We slip into the large room, heading towards the back where chairs are lined up in a rough circle. I can practically see the tension leaking from Teegan as she chooses a spot, hands gliding over the plastic arms and legs four times before she sits down.

"Here's good," she confirms.

Chatter continues around us as I take in my surroundings, the expensively carpeted floor and wallpaper, chandeliers casting warm light. Some of the group are dressed casually in sweats or pyjamas, while others wear jeans and actual clothing. The one's dressed down seem to be more out of it, eyes

glassy or mouths slack. Then there's the walking skeletons, bones protruding as they eye up other people's weight. When Britt strolls in and shoots me a glare, I fight the urge to get up and leave.

"Ignore her," Teegan whispers. "When her hair falls out and she's got a feeding tube shoved up her nose, she'll be the one on the receiving end of hate for once."

I shake my head, despite the smile twisting my lips. "You're evil."

"Nope. Just realistic. Did I hear that you two had a fight in the cafeteria?"

"Hardly a fight." I shrug, playing it off. "A few days ago, she threw her drink at me out of pointless jealousy. I doubt she'll be doing it again, or I'll break her gangly fucking legs just to make a point."

More people trickle in, gradually filling up the room as Teegan leans closer. "No way! That bitch. Besides, aren't her and Hudson a thing? I thought you're with Eli?"

I shush her before anyone can hear. "No! How many times do I have to tell you, it's nothing serious. She is with Hudson, sort of. But we have... history," I finish lamely.

"Oh man, now this I've got to hear. How come you're pulling all the cute ones?"

I deliberately look at Todd, seated by the door and cleaning his glasses on his loose band tee. "Thought you two were... you know." I waggle my eyebrows at Teegan, who blushes beet red. "Didn't you go to movie night together?"

"Yes," she admits with a nervous chuckle. "But turns out, stealing a quickie when you're more worried about the lack of coordination in his bedroom is near impossible."

"Girl, your brain is exhausting," I joke.

"I know. Hilarious." Todd smiles at her across the room and Teegan quickly looks away, cursing under her breath as her hands shake. "Maybe you've got a point."

The room falls quiet and the door bangs open, a short woman with strawberry pink hair walking in. Her bright shirt and loose linen trousers are instantly recognisable to me, and when she turns, I almost laugh in pleasant surprise. She hasn't changed one bit in the months since I last saw her.

"Morning campers! How're we all doing today?" Sadie chirps, grabbing a chair and sitting down. "Great to see y'all again. Let's get started, shall we?"

As everyone seems to relax, eyes automatically closing and taking deep

breaths, Sadie finally sees me. Her mouth drops open, eyebrows raising in utter shock. I offer her an awkward wave and a smile. *Later*, she mouths, finally giving me a grin.

“Great, let’s begin with our mindfulness exercise.”

A lot of pointless breathing and gratitude shit later, we’re given Post-it notes and kiddie pencils. Sadie makes sure everyone has one before clapping her hands together.

“For the sake of our new members, let’s just do a bit of an intro. My name’s Sadie, I’m a trainee psychologist here at Blackwood. In these group sessions we are working on our coping skills using teamwork and collaboration. Any questions?”

Awkward silence ensues, but nothing fazes Sadie. She’s a perpetual fountain of enthusiasm, always has been. “Good! Perhaps our newcomers would like to introduce themselves.” Her eyes land on me. “Would you like to start?”

I glare daggers at her. She knows how I feel about being put on the spot. Back when she led the group sessions in Clearview, I seem to remember telling her to go to hell when she asked me to recite a poem. No fucking thanks.

“Sure,” I grit out. “I’m Brooklyn, been here five weeks or so.”

“Got an interesting fact for us, Brooklyn?” she presses.

“Yeah, she’s a fucking whore.” Someone coughs.

I immediately meet Britt’s malicious gaze. Sniggers sound throughout the room as all eyes land on me, and I have to physically restrain myself from getting up and smashing that bitch’s head into the wall.

“Sure,” I state acidly. “Despite popular belief, I’m *not* a fucking whore. And anyone that thinks so is welcome to tell me to my face. I’ll make the hole look like a vacation.”

I give her a wan smile and cross my arms, everyone’s attention suddenly ceasing. Sadie coughs to smother her laughter. “Well, thanks for that. Just a gentle reminder, this is a non-violent space. We’re here to heal and grow. Who’s next?”

Heal and grow.

I haven’t missed those words being recited to me.

A couple of girls introduce themselves, Kate and Lana, both newly transferred from juvie prison. They can’t be older than sixteen, but wear their aggression like a coat of armour. Lana, her brown hair cut into a short pixie

cut, spares me a chin jerk of respect. Apparently my threat has earned me some street cred or something.

Sadie thanks the group and leads us through another stupid exercise, as is her style. Once the torture is over, she lets out a relieved sigh. “Isn’t that better?”

Nobody answers. We all seem equally unimpressed.

“Okay, today we are going to be working on *fear*. A powerful emotion, one that can lead us astray in so many ways. What we’re going to do is this. Each person will write on their Post-it what they are afraid of. These all go in a hat”—she raises the beanie clasped between her hands—“and we’ll each go around and pick one. That person must offer some constructive suggestion for tackling that fear.”

After a collective groan from the group, Sadie tuts disapprovingly.

“Come on now, let’s give it a go. And remember, be honest. This is all anonymous, so really challenge yourself. Choose something that is important to your recovery.”

We’re given five minutes, of which I spend at least four and a half staring at my pencil. Not a single part of me wants to do this bullshit. Teegan seems stuck too, the paper crumpled between her clenched hands. Without having to say a word, I get the issue.

We’re all ruled by fear. The dark, amorphous cloud that touches every life one way or another. Narrowing it down to any single thing is an insurmountable task.

“Thirty seconds,” Sadie calls.

Lie. Make something up. Leave it blank. The choices run through my head, but in the last five seconds I take a leap of faith. Scribbling hard enough to break through the paper, I angrily toss my answer into the hat.

“Okay then! Let’s see what we’ve got.” Sadie takes the hat and gives it a stir, before walking around the circle and handing each person a piece of paper.

“Leon, why don’t you start us off.”

The blonde-haired, blue-eyed jock gives her a charming smile. He’s one of Rio’s goons and turns my stomach with just a look. “Sure, Sadie. I’m afraid that if I don’t get laid pretty fucking soon, my dick’s gonna fall off. You want to help me out?”

Raucous laughter erupts as Sadie gives him a scowl. Even I’m struggling to hold the giggles in. “Firstly, remember the group rules or you’ll be put in

front of the warden for a little chat. Secondly, you should be reading what's on the paper, not what you wrote."

"Sorry Ma'am, my bad." He shrugs, fighting a grin.

"Okay, let's move swiftly on. Teegan?"

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, Teegan unfolds her bit of paper and clears her throat. "Um, this person is afraid of failure."

"Good. Now what would you suggest to that person to help them with their fear?"

Teegan sits impossibly still, riddled with anxiety as the entire class looks at her. "Ah, I guess I'd say that as long as you keep trying, it doesn't matter if you fail. The effort is what counts."

Sadie beams at her. "Very nice, I think that is good advice. We're all afraid of getting things wrong, of letting people down. But as Teegan suggests, sometimes that is inevitable." Her eyes stray to mine momentarily. "Sometimes it's the showing up and getting your hands dirty that counts."

Subtlety was never really her strong suit.

A few more take their turns, fears ranging from the profound, to more sleazy jokes from the clearly sexually frustrated assholes in the group. When Lana picks up her note and reads it, she pauses for a moment, silently pondering before clearing her throat.

"This person said... I'm afraid of becoming the monster the world thinks I am."

A hush takes over the room as I school my expression, ensuring nothing slips out. Tension sits heavily in the air and Sadie casts a glance around, forcing an encouraging smile.

"We're all here for a reason, folks. Some more serious than others, but we share a common goal. We *all* want to do better than we've done before. To amount to more than what our mistakes make us. Lana, what would you like to say to that person?"

Lana gives a slow, cold smile while crossing her legs. "I'd say that when some cunt came at me in prison, I shanked her so fucking hard she's shitting in a bag now. So fuck everyone's opinions, nothin' wrong with a little blood and that ain't what makes you a monster."

Raising an eyebrow, she shoots me a wink. "It's all subjective."

I can't help but return her dark smile from across the room, while others whisper to each other and giggle. Sadie's mouth hangs open and she struggles to find an adequate response, speechless for the first time I've ever seen.

“Well, ah. Thanks for that, Lana...”

“No problem,” she replies casually.

The other’s answers pale in comparison after that. I mostly tune out, happy to daydream rather than play Sadie’s stupid little game. When the session’s up, I make my excuses to Teegan and hang back as the room empties. Sadie shoves her stuff away and immediately comes to me, wrapping me in a tight hug.

“Dammit Brooke, it’s good to see your face.”

“You too. Never thought I’d have to suffer through more of your *Hakuna Matata* therapy shit, but here we are.” I shrug, noting the strangely nervous look on her face.

“I transferred from Manchester to here shortly after leaving Clearview,” she explains, keeping her voice light. I have this instinctive feeling that she’s lying. “What are you doing here? Were you transferred?”

“Zimmerman gave up on me.” I pick the loose threads on my jeans. “He sent me here for the three year program.”

“They gonna let you out when you finish?”

I have zero intentions of finishing this pointless shit.

“Apparently, although it depends on my behaviour and stuff. Don’t know how they intend to cure the crazy in my damn head.”

Sadie lays her hand on top of mine, giving it a squeeze. “You may not see it now, but last time I saw you, there was drool coming out your mouth and you couldn’t string together a sentence because they had you so drugged up.”

I roll my eyes. “Thanks for reminding me.”

“My point is, recovery is possible. Look at yourself and how far you’ve come. I’m so proud of you.”

My gut twists in anger, no matter how irrational. Rule number one, never tell a crazy person they look better. We don’t want to hear that shit. Nine times out of ten, you’ll push them to self-destruct even more just to prove you wrong. Trust me.

Swiftly changing the topic, Sadie grows serious once more, casting an anxious glance around the deserted room. I swear she checks the CCTV cameras, confusing me further. “Brooklyn, just promise me one thing.”

I nod slowly. “What is it?”

“Just be careful. Blackwood has a good reputation, but that doesn’t mean bad things don’t happen here. Watch your back, okay?”

Fear slithers down my spine at her ominous words. She looks at me

imploringly, all signs of her usual optimism brushed aside. “What do you mean?” I ask with a frown. “What’s wrong with Blackwood?”

Sadie jumps to her feet, plastering her usual bright smile back into place. “I’ve got another group to facilitate, must go. If you need anything, you know where to find me.” She holds my gaze for a moment, an unspoken message in her eyes. “*Anything* at all.”

I force a smile when all I want is to scream in her face, demand to know what the hell she’s on about. But it’s clear she doesn’t intend to elaborate on her vague words, rushing to escape our conversation.

“It’s good to see you,” I force out. “See you around.”

Just as I open the door to leave, Sadie calls after me. “Brooke! You aren’t a monster. No matter what the world thinks or the newspapers print. You’re a good kid that just made some bad choices. Remember that.”

She returns to quickly packing her stuff away, glancing at me one last time. My heart seizes, all my suspicions melting away at her words. More than anything, I regret writing my biggest fear down. Now it’s out there and I can’t take it back. Truth is, it doesn’t matter what everyone else thinks.

I already hate myself enough for what I did.

TWENTY-NINE

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HUDSON

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IF YOU WANT LOVE BY NF

SLAMMING MY DOOR SHUT, I toss the handfuls of papers onto the bed. Fisting my hair, I fight the urge to scream aloud. Piping hot rage fills my every thought. Blinding, blurring, leaving no space for rationality or calm.

My fist meets the plaster wall, skin splitting and blood smearing across the paint. I yell my frustration and keep punching, regardless of the pain in my busted knuckles. Mariam says I have to work through my anger if I'm going to have any chance of leaving this place.

You know what? Screw Mariam. I'm never escaping this godforsaken cage because it's where I fucking belong.

Brooklyn hasn't spoken to me all week after our bust up on Monday. She passes me in corridors like I don't even exist, like that kiss outside of the library never fucking happened. I know she felt it, the instant electricity behind us. That spark paved our way for ruin five years ago, and we were always destined to burn together.

Meanwhile, our group is splintering apart. We sit in silence at meal time, the air thick with resentment. I get it, the guys blame me for screwing things up. That empty chair at the table is painfully obvious. Kade silently plots while Phoenix acts like a complete bellend. Don't even get me started on Eli, he's worse than ever and hellbent on destruction.

I can't believe I didn't see it sooner.

We're all caught in her orbit. Every damn one of us.

I slump on the floor, my back against the bloodied wall. My head falls to my hands as I fight the overwhelming need to smash Brooklyn's door down and sort this toxic mess once and for all. Break her, scream at her, tell her I can't stop fucking thinking about her. Anything to fix this toxic mess. I can't

remain trapped in limbo, caught between loving and hating that bitch.

The knock at my door comes before it swings open, Kade striding in. He takes one look at me on the floor and frowns, freezing on the spot. “Hud? What’s going on?”

I shake my head and flee to the bathroom, unable to express the intensity of my anger. Kade refuses to look away while I rinse my hands under the tap, red swirls trailing down the drain along with chunks of broken plaster.

“Nothing. I’m good,” I grit out.

He hesitates, seeming to choose his words carefully. “Thought you were working through this stuff, not giving in to it. What’s gotten into you recently? Don’t you want to go home?”

I wrap the towel around my sore hand, sparing him a withering glance. “Who are you, my fucking therapist?” Brushing past him, I take a seat on the bed. “Just mind your own business. It’s got nothing to do with you.”

Kade heaves a frustrated sigh. “It has everything to do with me.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. *Seriously? This again?*

“When will you learn to fuck off when you’re not wanted? You think I wanted you to give up university to follow me here? Or that I wanted anyone to lie—” I pause, teetering on the edge of revealing too much.

Kade takes three long strides and sinks to his knees in front of me, his hand landing on my leg. “I know, brother. I know.”

My eyes slide up to meet his. Wide and certain, without a single crack of doubt. “You... know?” I repeat slowly.

My heartbeat pounds in my ears as he nods. The entire fucking world ends with that admission. It has never mattered what everyone else thinks of my crimes, a half-baked lie that we spun with cash and influence to conceal what really happened that night. All I’ve ever cared about is one thing. *Kade*.

He’s my better half, everything I should be and more.

“You don’t know,” I mutter, as if trying to convince myself.

“Mum told me everything. The whole ugly fucking truth.” He grinds his teeth, struggling to remain calm and level-headed. “You should have told me. I deserved to know.”

My gaze instantly drops to the floor, cheeks burning and heart thumping erratically. I can still see the blood that poured from his battered body. Streaked up the walls, pooling across the kitchen tiles, peppered with fragments of skull.

“Tell you what? That what happened wasn’t self-defence?” I hiss.

Kade gulps. Shudders. Silently fights his own conscience. “Yes.”

The air feels impossibly thick as we watch one another, awful reality crushing us both. “I didn’t want you to know,” I manage to say.

“Why? I don’t get it, Hud. None of it.”

“Because I didn’t want you to think bad of me! That’s why!”

I stride over to the barred window, staring out at the dark night. We used to spend every Friday night like this together, before Blackwood. Before I became this person. Clubbing or drinking, sometimes taking a train into the city centre to find some cute girls to chat up.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I mutter regretfully. “You’re wasting your life in this place. They’re never going to let me out, in three years or thirty. Not after what I did.”

I glance back at Kade, noting the look of absolute devastation across his face. He chews his lip, carefully choosing his next words. “Hud... there’s something you need to know.”

I wait for him to finish, knowing that whatever is coming, it must be bad. Enough to affect the unshakeable Kade. Enough to drive him to my room when he can barely stand to be around me as I slowly ruin my life even further.

“Just tell me,” I command. “Tell me and go.”

Kade joins me by the window, hands clenched in balls. He can’t even look at me, resolutely staring ahead. “Mum says that there’s been a development in the case.”

“Right... And?”

“Fuck, Hud,” he curses, anxiously loosening his shirt collar. “Your ma, she’s come forward and wants to testify against you.”

My stomach bottoms out. Ice floods my body and sickness muddles my mind. I can hear Kade saying my name, feel his hand on my shoulder, but it doesn’t resonate. Nothing about this feels real, like I’m imprisoned in a twisted nightmare designed to fuck me up.

“She wants... to testify. Against me,” I state emotionlessly.

“Yeah. You realise what this means, right?”

Stumbling to the bed, I sit down and put my head in my hands. “Of course, I fucking do. She’s going to expose the lie. Your parents will be implicated. We’re all going to jail.”

I recite the prospects tonelessly, too overwhelmed to fully comprehend the almighty shit storm heading our way. Kade joins me on the bed, equally

tense.

“*Your* parents too. They made this mess to protect you, dammit. Now they will go down with you.” He gulps loudly. “We need a plan. There’s got to be a way out of this.”

“It’s perjury, Kade. We all lied.”

I smash my clenched hand against my forehead, willing the truth to go away. How could I have been so stupid to go along with this? Fucking hell, I deserve that prison sentence. I can’t let them go down for my mistakes too.

“How do we protect them?” I ask through gritted teeth. “I’ll march up to the judge and confess if I have to. They can do whatever the fuck they like to me. I can’t let—” My voice chokes up as I swallow hard. “I can’t let this happen. Your family saved my life.”

Of all the responses, Kade laughs.

“The hell are you laughing at?”

“Nothing.” He chuckles weakly. “It’s just... I think that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

I shoot him an incredulous look. “You kidding, right? That’s what you’re thinking right now?”

Sobering, Kade stands and looks down at me. “We’re a family, whether you like it or not. And we will fix this *as a family*. Nobody is going to prison. You are coming home. I made promises and I intend to keep them.”

“What exactly is your plan then?” I call after him.

“We’re figuring it out,” he answers evasively. “Mum is coming in a couple of weeks to see us both. She’s requested visitation. Hopefully we’ll have an update then.”

“Sit tight? That’s your plan?” I gape at him.

“Yes. In the meantime, keep your mouth shut. The lawyers are tying the investigation up in red tape as we speak to delay things. Sit tight and don’t lose your shit, brother. We fixed this mess once...” He looks me right in the eye. “We’ll fix it again.”

I stare at the door long after it closes behind him. My eyes unseeing, vision tainted by the memory of blood. It happened in a split second, a decision that changed everything for me. I drove down to see my mother in a daze, intending to finally confront her about the years of abuse that led me into the foster system.

Hudson, what are you doing here?

You can’t be here. Please go. If Ron sees you...

I should've listened to Ma. In fact, I should've never gone back to that hellhole, filled with pointless ideas about closure and finally healing from the past. I had it all laid out for me. This perfect life that Kade's folks provided. College. Friends. Good grades. A future. And I tossed it all away just to go back for that crackpot whore.

There's only one person that can possibly understand. My feet move automatically as I flee the room and march across the corridor. Fist banging on Brooklyn's door, my chest seizes and sweat coats my forehead. Everything is spinning and falling apart at the seams. She's the only person that has ever come close to understanding me.

No answer.

I rattle the handle but it's locked. Darkness closes over my vision as I lean my forehead on the wood. This can't be happening. Kade and his family can't go down for my mistakes and stupidity. This is all my fucking fault.

"Hudson?"

I look up, desperately hoping it's my girl there. Disappointment coats my tongue as Britt stares at me, eyebrows furrowed. "You okay? What's wrong?"

I lose all sense of right and wrong. Marching over to her and grabbing her face, my lips are straight on hers. I don't want to kiss Britt. I fucking hate her guts. But if I concentrate hard enough, I can pretend that she's my blackbird. That her dry hair is long and luscious. That her thin body is soft against mine and lined with every scar that I've memorised.

"I knew you'd come to your senses," she pants.

"Shut the fuck up," I growl.

When she speaks, I remember who she really is.

Dragging her to my room, I shove Britt up against the door and grab her body, craving the release I know screwing her until she screams will bring. Just as she mewls and begins to get my door open, there's a gasp nearby. A noise that's a razor-sharp dagger to my heart.

Brooklyn stands by her door, eyes trained on both of us with horror. Her face splinters with pain that she swiftly wipes away as soon as I look up. My hands fall away from Britt's body, like I've been shocked with electricity.

"Brooke, wait!" I shout frantically.

She turns and flees into her room. I run to follow her and smash straight into the door as the lock turns. Kicking it and yelling for her to come back out does nothing. She's gone, leaving me locked in the corridor with nothing but

my regret and self-loathing.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Britt hisses.

She marches up to me and slaps me hard enough to sting. “What does she have that I don’t? You can’t keep using me, I will not be disrespected for a second longer!”

“Go then,” I reply cruelly. “Get the fuck out of my face and don’t come back.”

Eyes filled with tears, Britt sniffs and nods solemnly. “Fine, I will. That’s it, we’re done. Don’t you ever come back to me when you need someone to pick up the pieces.”

Britt runs away sobbing, leaving me alone and surrounded by nothing but the remains of my petty selfishness. All I do is hurt people, I’m no good for anything else. Brooklyn always managed to see the good in me, even when I broke her in the worst possible way.

Now there’s nothing good left to see.

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WHATEVER LETS YOU COPE BY BLACK FOXXES

TEEGAN HANDS me the black eyeliner, chewing on her lip as she inspects me. “Try this. You’ll look even hotter.”

“I’m not trying to look ‘hot’ when I don’t even want to go to this stupid party.” I roll the pen between my fingers, glowering at her. “Why can’t I just stay behind?”

“Because you’ve moped around all week long and I’m sick of watching it. Where’s the badass that socked Rio on her first day or broke those girls’ noses?” She raises a pierced eyebrow at me. “The only way to teach those idiots is to go to the party, looking drop dead gorgeous, might I add, and hook up with someone even hotter than them.”

I flop back on her bed, crumpling the stupid Halloween costume beneath me. “First off, I’m not moping. Second, I don’t give a fuck what they think and never have.”

Teegan snorts. “Yeah right. You’re so full of shit.”

With a frustrated growl, I stand and snatch up the bloodied nurse’s outfit. “Fine! I’ll go to the idiotic Halloween party with you if it’ll shut you up.”

I turn away from her smug, victorious face and go to the bathroom, slamming the door behind me. This is the problem with having friends. They don’t know when to butt the hell out and leave you alone. I don’t want to fucking celebrate Halloween, because that means it’s two weeks until the anniversary emotionally assaults me. Two weeks to get my ass out of here, with zero leads and limited opportunities to do just that.

I’m screwed. Trapped and powerless.

Maybe I’ll go to the party and get absolutely fucked up to forget, if I’m lucky my body will simply give in to my broken mind’s demands. I unwrap

the tacky costume and shake it out, staring down at the short, skin-tight dress.

The fact that Kade probably picked this out makes my palms sticky.

Despite me ignoring them all, he still left it outside of my door last night. All week I've been set on avoiding the shitty party and the confusing men that will undoubtedly be attending it. Just seeing Hudson with that slut wrapped around him has me in a tailspin.

"Do I seriously have to wear this?" I yell through the door.

"Yes! Stop fucking whining and get dressed already."

Cursing under my breath, I strip off my jeans and t-shirt. My body is pale and slim in the mirror, my eyes instantly landing on the almost healed slashes on my right arm, peppered with angry cigarette burns. I haven't seen Eli since the night of the storm, he's retreated into himself and disappeared off the face of the earth recently.

I can't keep doing this. Letting them close enough to hurt me. *If I never met them, would I be dead by now?*

"Hurry up before I come in there and dress you myself!" Teegan bellows.

One look at the cheap, plastic white tights and I toss them aside. The dress isn't much better as I pull it up my bare legs, fastening the poppers and scowling at my reflection. I look like a slutty nurse that would certainly get fired for this get-up. My boobs barely fit inside and way too much cleavage spills out. My long legs are also entirely on show.

Teegan's eyes light up when I step out to show her.

"Holy fucking damn. Kade chose that strategically, right?"

"I cannot wear this in public," I grit out.

"Dude. You've got to, besides it's only Oakridge attending. Pinehill is celebrating tomorrow. Too many people to manage all at once." She frowns, eyes on my legs. "Although you should probably avoid the warden, one look at you and she'll give you a disciplinary."

Handing me the eyeliner along with a tube of contraband red lipstick, she shoves me back in the bathroom. "Sort your face out and let's split. I told Todd we'd meet him outside at seven o'clock."

"Who are you to lecture me about guys when you've got that poor fucker right in the friend zone?" I ask snarkily.

She slams the door in my face.

"You get over your relationship drama and I'll get over mine!"

"Not a relationship," I mutter.

Brushing through my pearly hair and adding some winged eyeliner, I

consider the lipstick. I'm going to be attracting all the wrong kinds of attention like this. With a grin, I swipe it across my lips, a devious plan forming. After tonight, maybe those guys will finally take the hint and leave me alone to my plans. Even Eli. I'm done hurting and being vulnerable.

Time to finish what I started.

As Teegan grabs our coats and key cards, I prise the lid from the toilet and reach into the tank, searching for the waterproof bag I stashed inside. This is the only way I'm getting through the night. Running it under the tap, I tip a line of snowy powder onto the edge of the sink and squeeze my eyes shut, snorting it up.

One whole line, then another just for luck. Bitterness hits the back of my throat as I flinch back, rubbing my nostrils. I can't feel it yet, but this shit will be worth the price I paid. I don't want to feel a single fucking thing tonight.

The door handle rattles and Teegan stick her head in, eyes wide when she sees me wiping the excess away and stashing the bag in my bra.

"Jesus, what are you doing?"

"None of your damn business. Let's go."

I brush past her and grab my leather jacket from her hands, slipping my bright pink Docs on. We head down the stairs in silence. It's freezing outside, jogging through the drizzly rain to reach the cafeteria. Sure enough, Todd stands at the entrance waiting.

"Hey, Teegan! It's so good to..." His eyes land on me and his jaw drops. "Oh, um. Hi Brooklyn." He offers a limp wave.

Choosing to ignore him, I light up a cigarette and bounce on my toes, shivering in the cold. Thankfully, there's no guards around to catch me smoking. Teegan stands awkwardly between us and I give her a subtle nudge.

"Doesn't she look hot?" I waggle my brows at Todd.

"Y-yeah, of course. Tee, you look... really, um, cute."

Fuck's sake. They're both as bad at this as each other. With the blood rushing through my head and the coke dissolving my manners, I grab Tee's face and press my lips to hers. Kissing her good and proper before I pull away, turning to Todd who watches the exchange excitedly. Men are so easy to manipulate. I grab his hand and place it in Teegan's.

"Have fun, kids."

Strutting inside, I chance a look back and find them making out against the wall, hands all over each other like horny teenagers. That shit works every time.

The corridors seem to bend and move as I march towards the cafeteria, stumbling straight into the wall at one point. An over friendly arm snakes around my waist as I right myself, looking up into an unpleasant set of eyes.

“Hey good lookin’, miss me?” Rio sneers.

“Like hell I did,” I slur.

“Fuck me, you’re high as a kite. How is it? Good shit, right?”

Grabbing a hold of his bicep, I offer him a grin. “Almost worth the price.”

He laughs and links his arm with mine, guiding me down the hall. We pass several guards that stare at me suspiciously, but Rio gives them a subtle nod, holding me close. No one says a damn word and they just let us go on our merry way.

“Babe, I’ve got plenty more where that came from.”

Rio’s lips brush my neck and I shudder, suddenly cold despite the narcotic fire burning beneath my skin. Gently disentangling our arms, I meet his eyes with certainty.

“You know what I want. Shame you tore up the list.”

He swears, hand reaching out to grab my wrist. “I’m all ears. Tell me.”

My breasts brushing against his chest, I smirk as his eyes widen in surprise. My lips ghost along his jaw before I reach his ear to whisper. “I want your key to the roof.”

Rio laughs under his breath. “You never cease to entertain. That’s gonna cost you a damn sight more than a blowjob, sugar. Are you fucking insane?”

I tilt my chin up in defiance. “I want that key.”

“What for? I ain’t taking blame when you throw your pretty little ass off that roof.”

“You’ve got enough strings to pull to conceal your involvement. Unless you’re objecting for some other reason?” I raise my eyebrows in challenge without denying the insinuation. Like he’s gonna stop me from doing it anyway, the asshole doesn’t care.

Rio looks into my eyes for a long pause before shaking his head in disbelief. “Bloody hell, you really are crazy. I’m outta here.” He turns and strides away, muttering to himself about lunatics wasting his time.

Fucking coward.

I’ll get that damn key, and it’ll be the last thing I do.

Walking on wobbly legs, I enter the hot cafeteria and toss aside my jacket. The lights are down low and coloured strobes are dappled across the linoleum from the DJ set up in the corner. There are several tables full of

food, paper bowls overflowing with approved snacks dolled up to look interesting. Despite the mass of people dancing and enjoying themselves, there's still that undercurrent of reality.

The drinks are all non-alcoholic.

Guards line the perimeter in their dozens.

Cameras capture everything.

Drugged up patients stare and drool.

I skip past a pumpkin carving station, equipped with kiddie plastic tools and fake candles. The party is busy, more popular than I thought it would be. Various costumes ranging from vampires to zombies are showcased, although most look homemade and pretty shit if I'm honest.

I snag a lemonade from the stand and smile cheekily at the guard who frowns at me. He's one of Rio's men, I recognise him from the library incident.

"Ain't you cold, girl? Seen more clothes on a stripper." He leers at me, checking me out a little too obviously to be appropriate. "Anything I can help you with?"

"Nope," I deadpan, giving him a wink as I pass.

Joining the dance floor, I wiggle between various bodies and join in, swaying my hips like no one is watching. For a brief second, this almost feels like real life. Out in a club, dancing the night away just like everyone else my age.

My back connects with a firm chest and I peer over my shoulder to find tousled blue hair, warm eyes and a painted skeleton staring back at me.

"Fancy seeing you here," Phoenix taunts.

He wears all black and a t-shirt printed with white bones. When his arm wraps around my waist, he pulls me close to his body, the other hand landing firmly on my hip.

"The hell are you wearing, firecracker?"

"An outfit. Ask Kade." I smirk.

Hand skating down, his fingers stroke the skin of my inner thigh, brushing dangerously close to my throbbing pussy. I grind my ass against him shamelessly, enjoying the feel of his lips at my ear. I hear Phoenix gasp, breath hot on my cheek as his dick grows hard.

"What's gotten into you?"

I tug my dress up a little higher, glancing around to ensure no one is watching. All my inhibitions have vanished under the influence. All I can

think about is him bending me over and fucking me right here, right now in the ass. Regardless of those watching.

“Nothing. Just having some fun. Got a problem with that?”

“Hell no,” he answers quickly.

Concealed from sight by the packed bodies on the dance floor, Phoenix’s hand meets my wet pussy, tracing the damp cotton of my panties. His teeth nibble my earlobe as I moan, shifting my ass against his crotch even harder.

“Jeez, have you been body snatched or something?”

I spin to face him, finally meeting his eyes through my thick lashes. He studies me, lips parted. He’s seconds away from kissing me when the penny finally drops. His expression hardens in an instant, all playfulness dissipating.

“Christ... are you fucking high?” he hisses.

Running my hand over his hard pecs, I roll my eyes rather than replying. The urge to laugh hysterically bubbles up and I can’t help but giggle, only infuriating him further.

“I knew it. Your eyes look like flying saucers. Dammit, Brooke!”

Hand latching around my wrist, he forcibly drags me through the packed bodies, no matter how loudly I protest. I’m still laughing, hilarious tears fighting to break free.

“Niiiiix, don’t be a bore. Let’s dance and then fuck, hmm?” I coax. Yanking my hand free and planting my feet, he’s almost yanked off balance. “You know you want to.”

His hand tightens on my chin, jerking my head up. “You’re a fucking mess. I don’t do drugs anymore, you should damn well know that. Come on, let’s get you some water.”

I’m guided over to the back corner where the kitchens are open. Kade’s dressed as the grim reaper and talking to some staff members, soaking up the appreciation for his party planning. As soon as we approach, his white painted face drops and Phoenix jerks his head towards the kitchen.

“Ah, excuse me. Just need to check on dessert,” Kade lies easily.

He jogs over to us and grabs my other arm, effortlessly smiling to direct any suspicion away. Between the two of them, I’m muscled through the doorway and straight out back.

Eli’s head shoots up from where his nose is buried in a book. He looks fucking rough, even in my blurry vision. Far gaunter and paler compared to the last time I saw him, like Caspar the ghost minus any costume.

“What on earth is going on?” Kade demands.

Phoenix deposits me in a peeling armchair, letting out a huff. “What’s going on is Brooklyn is fucking stoned. I had to get her out of there. Look at the state of her!”

“Not stoned,” I correct, raising my brow at him. “I don’t do weed.”

Eli stares at me wordlessly, quickly tossing his book aside. His dark eyes scan my face and he frowns, as if trying to bury beneath the surface. Meanwhile Kade yanks at his hair in exasperation, unable to even look at me, and Phoenix curses colourfully.

“Why are you all being such grumpy assholes? Isn’t this a party?” I pout.

Wobbling to my feet, I tug my skimpy dress back down to cover my bare thighs. Kade finally looks at me, eyes bouncing over my bare skin with a visible gulp.

“Thanks for the dress.” I invade his space, giving him a wonky smile.

His hands run over my shoulders and down my mottled arms. I don’t miss the way he catalogues the devastation across my skin, both new and old. His eyes flick over my shoulder to where Eli sits before he turns that stern expression back on me.

“What have you taken?”

“None of your business,” I hit back.

“I’m being serious, Brooklyn. You can’t just do what you want around here.”

“Says who? Nobody gives a damn either way.”

Kade pushes me into a chair. “Says me, alright?”

I shove his attentive hands away. “News flash. I can do whatever the fuck I like, when I like, and there’s nothing you guys can do about it.” I flick my eyes over Phoenix and Eli, including them in the sentiment. “Stop trying to pull me into your fucked-up little family dynamic here. I’m done.”

I stagger to my feet and head for the door, breezing straight past Phoenix’s grabbing hands. My good mood has evaporated as I start to come down from the high, needing another hit to perk me up again. Too many feelings threaten to take over and I need to purge them. Just as I near my escape, Kade’s voice freezes me on the spot.

“What exactly did my brother do to screw you up so badly?”

How fucking dare he.

My heartbeat roars in my ears. Heat flushes my tingling skin and the amusement drains from my body like blood down a plughole. Digging my nails into my palms, I spin to face Kade. *Fuck Hudson.* I’m done keeping his

filthy secret.

“Did you ever wonder how he paid off his drug debts before coming to you?”

The resultant silence is thick with confusion.

“I didn’t think so.” I scoff, turning to Phoenix. “You were a dealer, right? Okay, so tell me what happens when someone doesn’t pay up. Enlighten us.”

He keeps quiet.

I laugh again. “Don’t be shy now. What happens?”

It feels like forever before he finally answers. “You threaten them,” Phoenix mutters, rubbing the back of his neck in shame.

“Precisely. And if that doesn’t work?”

He tries to move towards me, but I lift a shaking hand to halt his steps. “Answer the goddamn question.” I face him, refusing to back down. “Tell Kade exactly what his brother did to me. Why I’m like this. Why I’m stuck *here*, forced to justify my fucking high to you lowlifes.”

“Brooklyn, please. We just want to help,” Kade pleads.

Ignoring his wide eyes, I shake my head in distaste. They still don’t get it.

“I don’t want your help. I don’t want anyone’s help!”

Eli shoots to his feet, almost as unsteady as me, his face troubled and steps hurried. We’re both breaking apart at the seams but that doesn’t mean I want his help. I backtrack further, unwilling to let him even remotely close to me.

“Will someone answer my question?” I shout. “Or are you all too scared to face the truth?”

“You pay with whatever you have,” Phoenix admits.

Bingo. You pay with whatever the fuck you can offer, regardless of the consequences. All four of us face off, locked in a deadly battle of wills while the DJ’s music pulses through the room. No one will meet my eyes. The truth weighs thick and suffocating between us, the notable absence of the man in question only making it worse.

“You wanted the truth. There you have it,” I sneer at Kade. “You want to know why I’m so screwed up? The answer is simple. Your brother paid his debts with the only thing he had.”

I turn to Phoenix, hating the pity on his face. “Me. He paid with me.”

“Brooke...” Kade begins before trailing off in horror.

He looks at me with unimaginable pain in his eyes. Wiping the stray tears away, I’m sure my eyes reflect the same emotion. Even five years down the

line, the wound is festering and deep, forever raw from the lack of resolution with the man that ruined me.

“The fucking blackbird is not the only thing he killed,” I spit, my emotions spiralling out of control. “That’s your truth.”

Marching out while searching for the baggie in my bra, I’m determined to eliminate the agony ripping both my mind and body apart. The twisted feelings of hatred and anger that have somehow escaped their prison to torment me further.

Nobody follows me.

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GUEST ROOM BY ECHOS

NUMB. Sweet, meaningless, irrefutable numbness.

All the anger, indignation, gut punching rage... it's gone.

Finishing my second line and wiping my nose, I clamber to my feet. The toilet lid is dusty and spotted with white flecks, but I don't bother to clean up after myself. Snorting cocaine in the bathroom on my knees is a new low, but luckily, I don't care anymore.

"Leave me alone!"

A door slams, followed by muffled crying and the sound of a lock sliding across the neighbouring stall. I brush myself off and sneak out to splash my face. Eyeliner streaming down my cheeks and red lipstick smeared, I look like a deranged clown. I stare into my own eyes, watching my drugged-up smile fade.

I am my own destroyer.

Every single solitary moment of my life, I've been fucked over, abandoned, forgotten and used. By everyone and everything. And somehow, it all comes back to me. There's no one else to blame but myself. I'm a failure, a goddamn failure.

"I hate you," I shout at myself, a deep frown marring my brows. The pressure in my chest still doesn't relent so I shout even louder. "I fucking hate you!"

My fist sails into the glass and it cracks right down the middle, my blood smearing beautifully. With all the coke swimming in my veins, I don't feel the pain from my busted hand. Crimson rivulets spill down my skin and I stare, enraptured by the sight.

I deserve this. People like me shouldn't live. I'm a waste of air and if I

died right now, I'd be doing the world a favour. No one would even notice.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Britt emerges from the stall, trailing mascara and pink cheeks staining her face. She looks from the smashed mirror to me in disbelief, unwilling to move even a step closer, like she's physically afraid of me. "Seriously, Brooklyn? Hello?" She waves a hand in the air as if to attract my attention.

"I...I—" I stumble, blinking rapidly.

What am I doing? Why am I here? Nothing makes sense anymore. Shadows creep into the edges of my vision and begin to mutter, tipping reality on its head. All I can feel is my heartbeat threatening to break my ribcage open.

"You look fucking insane right now." Britt slowly crosses the bathroom, hopping onto the counter next to me. "But who am I to judge, right?"

"Right," I croak, splashing my face a second time.

I try to force the crescendo of voices from my mind, to seem somewhat in control as Britt watches me with critical eyes that see far too much. She clicks her tongue, a knowing smile blossoming as I contemplate breaking her jaw.

"Where'd you get it?"

"Why should I tell you?" I counter.

She hops down from the counter and gets in my face, lips pressed tightly together. "Don't be a dick. Just tell me. You got more?" Her eyes trail down over my skimpy outfit. "Although I can't imagine where you'd be storing it in this slutty get up."

The insult snaps my remaining self-control and I shove her back, watching in delight as she stumbles and falls on her ass. Something that looks a lot like fear flashes through her eyes as I prowl closer, looming over her, my fists clenched tight.

"Who exactly are you calling a whore? Tell me, *Britt*," I spit her name hatefully. "How many times did you spread your little legs for Hudson, hmm? Bet you took every scrap of attention he threw at you, like the desperate whore you are."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

I shoot her a grin. "How does it feel now he's gone?"

"Fuck off! If it wasn't for you, he would still be with me."

I bat my lashes innocently just to screw with her further. "Nothing to do with me, sweetheart. Guess he just got bored of breaking you over and over

again. It loses its thrill after a while. Trust me,” I meet her eyes without shame, “I know.”

I turn to leave but her choked, furious voice stops me dead.

“You know what? You and Hudson deserve each other. You’re both screwed up, selfish, unlovable psychopaths.” Her voice drops low as she glares daggers at me. “I hope you kill each other or better yet, hurry up and fucking kill yourself. God knows you won’t be missed.”

She looks away to face herself in the mirror, and my stomach bottoms out when I see the reflection looking back at me in the cracked glass. He’s standing next to her, soaked in blood. Clothes torn and saturated, body slashed beyond recognition. Looking so real, I’m convinced if I reach out, I’ll be able to touch his broken form.

Victor.

I’m terrified that he’ll escape the glass and kill me himself. Watching the slow smile spread across his blue lips, I break into a run, desperately fleeing the bathroom and the demons inside. The party still rages in the cafeteria, I can hear the pumpkin competition being called over the microphone.

But I can’t go back in or face the men that see the good in me that I can’t. They are safer far, far away from me. With my body trembling from the hit rushing through my system, I run back down the deserted corridor.

Britt’s words echo on a loop and all I can think about is opening a vein wide enough to end this shit for good. I can practically see the puddle of blood in my mind’s eye, forming a dark halo of death around my still corpse.

A voice whispers through my mind. *Hurry up and fucking kill yourself.* Even as I shake my head, it refuses to be silent. *You know you want to.*

“Brooklyn!” Tegan calls as I pass, without even sparing a glance. Her and Todd watch me go with concern, repeatedly shouting my name while I grapple with reality.

I don’t stop running until I’m back in the dorms. Taking the stairs two at a time, I trip and stumble multiple times, burning my hands against the rough carpet. I don’t stop until I finally reach my floor, skidding to a halt.

There’s a shadow slumped against the mahogany, black hair wild and untamed, head hanging low between his legs. My feet backtrack as his head raises, brilliant blue eyes latching onto me. They dissolve everything around me until nothing remains but the distance between us.

“Blackbird,” Hudson whispers.

I should run. Turn around and flee. Hide. Shout. Anything to escape the

devil at my door. But my feet move of their own accord, guiding me forwards with the magnetic pull of Hudson's defeated eyes. I stop in front of him, lip curled in derision.

"Get out of my way," I mutter, but it sounds weak, fucking feeble.

He clambers to his feet, jaw set and expression hard. Sorrow melts into something darker, more primal. "The guys sent me to look for you. I've been waiting."

Hudson looms at my back, the stench of alcohol coming off him in waves.

"You're drunk, Hud. Go home," I state, as if I'm any better.

"I'm drunk, you're high. What better time to have this conversation?"

And with that, he bends and picks me up. A shocked scream escapes my lips as he lifts me in one smooth move, tossing me over his shoulder.

"Put me down! Put me down this instance!"

"Shut the fuck up before you wake everyone," Hudson growls, spanking my ass as he stalks to his room. He kicks the door open and marches in, the distinct noise of the lock clicking before I'm roughly tossed onto his bed.

"I'm done running circles around you." He discards his phone and key card, turning that unfathomable expression on me. "You continue to forget the lesson I taught you when we were kids."

Standing at the end of his bed, eyes prowling my splayed out, vulnerable body, he offers me a bleak smile. "You're fucking mine, blackbird. *You've always been fucking mine.*"

"You're mistaken." I shake my head, desperately scrabbling backwards to escape him. "I was never yours to begin with. You stole everything from me. My sanity, sobriety, education. Everything." Reaching out to grab the nearby lampshade, I toss it straight at him as hard as possible. "Fucking everything!"

The light narrowly misses and smashes against the wall behind Hudson. He doesn't even flinch at the pointed shards cascading down. He just huffs and pulls the duvet, dragging me closer while I battle to escape.

"You're a monster," I shout, hands clutching the mattress.

His hands grab my ankles and pull, until I'm hopelessly caught beneath him at the end of the bed. He traps my body between his legs and latches onto my wrists, pinning them above my head. Simmering blue eyes burn a path straight down to my damned soul.

"You think I don't know that?" Hudson hisses at me. "Every single day for the last five years, I've had to live with the knowledge of what they did to

you.” His Adam’s apple bobs, betraying his emotions. “Of what I *let them* do to you.”

His hand releases me to cup my cheek, black hair falling across his eyes. Rather than tenderly brushing it aside like the old me would have, I take the opportunity and swing my fist, punching him in the face. “Fuck you!”

Hudson stumbles back, wiping his split lip. My chest seizes as he glares at me, patience crumbling. “Why do you continue to fight me?”

When he tries to come close again, I kick my leg out so it connects with his jaw. He reels back and I leap up to advance, pushing him into the bookshelf. It groans and wobbles precariously for a second before toppling over. Books, pictures and debris fly everywhere, showering down and bruising us both.

“Because you took away my ability to fight, goddamn you!” I yell back.

We continue to fight and both end up on the floor, gasping for breath, surrounded by destruction. Before I can launch another assault, Hudson scrambles across the floor and pounces on me. As his heavy weight presses into me, I writhe and scream.

“Come back to me,” he demands.

The minute his lips land on mine, something inside of me gives. It snaps and fucking dissolves as my lips part, automatically reacting to the familiar mouth against mine. His kiss is desperate, unapologetic. For a second I allow myself to feel something, and then it all comes crashing back in. Every reason why this is a terrible idea that will only hurt both of us. As I come to my senses, I bite down on his lip until he yelps and releases me.

“You fucking bit me.” Hudson frowns.

“You fucking kissed me,” I counter furiously.

Then his lips are devouring mine again, smearing the blood between us as copper dances across my tongue. He grasps the cheap poppers of my costume and rips them open in one swift move. My bra soon disappears too, exposing my bare breasts. Hudson groans, his mouth blazing down my neck and along my collar bone, skating ever closer to my hard nipples.

“Don’t you dare,” I protest as he takes a bud in his mouth, teeth teasing the soft skin. My breath catches as my hips buck, unable to suppress the reaction. “Stop. Please stop.”

“No,” Hudson answers simply, kissing his way down my flat belly.

Undoing the remaining poppers, he exposes my cotton-covered pussy, his eyes closing briefly. Like he’s memorising this moment, unable to believe

that it's actually real. With one hand pinning my arm, he tugs the material lower, fingers brushing against my throbbing clit.

"I said stop..." I plead uselessly.

Hudson's lips brush my cunt, tongue slipping between my folds as hot pleasure zips straight up my spine. He fucks me with his mouth, licking and sucking as I fight for every breath, protests lodged in my throat. When his teeth pull at my sensitive nub, I scream against the back of my hand.

"Stop?" he asks innocently, devilish eyes meeting mine.

"Yes," I squeeze out, but I'm unsure if I'm arguing or agreeing.

Ignoring me, his eyes stray to my discarded dress and land on the baggie that I had tucked away inside. "What's this?" he utters, studying the remaining powder.

I attempt to snatch it away. "That doesn't belong to you!"

The look Hudson shoots me would scare even a grown man. "Thought I interrupted that little session you had going on in the library. How'd you pay for it, Brooke?"

I try to escape, but he sits on my legs and traps me once more. Dangling the bag in front of me like it's the fucking murder weapon and I'm on trial.

"I said, how did you pay for it?" His fingers trail down and meet my dripping folds, toying with my slit. "With your tight little pussy, or that sweet mouth of yours? Fucking whore."

"None of your goddamn business," I answer.

The anger on his face is so familiar, I feel like I've fallen back in time. With a livid shake of his head, he shoves his fingers inside and stretches me wide. I gasp, reacting to his expert stroking. His other hand carefully tips a line of coke on my stomach, trailing down to meet my belly button.

"You're acting like a slut," he comments cruelly.

My fingers fist in his unruly hair and he devours the line, nose teasing my hot skin, moaning in pleasure as the drugs hit.

"Learned from the best, you arrogant asshole."

Wide eyes filled with hatred scan my face. "You do remember."

I gape at him as he kisses over my scarred hips, lips meeting my wet heat again. I'm shocked as he proceeds to dump the remaining coke straight onto my clit, smirking to himself.

"Yet you seem to have forgotten who fucking owns your ass though."

My back arches, body alight with stimulation from the drugs mingling with my juices. I yank his hair hard and he snorts the powder straight from

my pussy, licking away the rest with that perfect tongue. Desire twists in my core, traitorous fucking desire that he doesn't deserve.

"Just like the good old days, huh, blackbird?"

"I hate you," I moan, knees trembling as the pleasure builds.

The sound of his belt has my half-lidded eyes flinging open, gaze landing on his straining boxers. Hudson grabs his t-shirt and yanks it over his head, exposing deliciously chiselled muscles and endless inches of black ink across his skin. The tattoos are new, but I don't have time to study them as he prepares to tie me up.

"You're not allowed to finish yet. Not until you answer my question."

My foot connects with his bare chest and I kick him away, snatching my dress up. "I don't want anything from you. Not anymore."

Just as I get to my feet, readying to escape, a hand tangles in my long hair. With zero apologies, Hudson yanks me back, tearing my hair just like he used to, the scheming bastard.

"Tough shit. You don't get to walk away." Hudson pulls at my scalp again and tears burn my eyes, his hand tightening around my throat. "I will not lose you again."

"You... walked... away," I choke out.

Walking me backwards until my legs hit the bed, we sink into the mattress. His hard cock rocks against me through his boxers, brushing against my soaked slit. Hudson takes the opportunity to slip the belt around my wrists and quickly secure it to his bed frame, far too smoothly to be the first time he's done that.

"Perfect. You always looked best when at my mercy."

I yank on the leather strap, trying to slip my wrists free but it's no use. He's got me utterly trapped. When his head presses against my inner thigh, my hips buck involuntarily to seek out more friction. No matter how loud my head is telling me to scream, my body is betraying me.

"You left me no choice but to walk away," he murmurs, mouth gliding over my torso until he's stationed above me, in a position of complete control. Hudson's hand grabs my throat again, squeezing impossibly tight and only offering me slivers of air.

"You're fucking mine," he states possessively.

"You don't own me. You never did."

"That's a damn lie and you know it. Let me remind you."

His cock strokes my folds without entering, teasing the slick opening and

driving me insane. Hand tightening further, my lungs burn with the lack of oxygen and I writhe beneath him, still fighting desperately to escape. Anything to end the sick, familiar torture.

“Something to say, Brooke?”

Hudson’s teeth graze my ear, the burst of pain lancing through me as he bites down. Heat pools in my core, despite my inner protests and raging anger. When he releases my throat just enough for me to respond, I desperately suck in precious air.

“Only... cowards... run,” I stutter.

Hudson pulls back to look at me and I headbutt him so hard, my teeth knock together. Finally, my hands work free from the belt and I shove his muscled body off me, relishing his yelp of pain. I flee the bed, intending to take the coward’s way out and run myself.

“You’re fucking unhinged,” I snap.

Giving Hudson a final glance, the sight of him sends my plan up in smoke. Slumped against the pillows, wearing the most guilty, ashamed look, Hudson simply nods and rubs his sore head.

“I was a coward. For what it’s worth”—his eyes sink shut in frustration—“I never should have left. No matter how hard you pushed me away. Walking away was the biggest mistake of my life.”

Those oceanic orbs flash open, piercing my skull with the intensity of his gaze. He looks so broken, utterly devastated.

“Blackbird... *I’m sorry.*”

The drug haze dissipates as we study each other like foreign specimens, caught in a bubble of malicious, festering regret. So much mutual suffering and hatred pulsating between us, but there’s a thread of something else. I can’t quite name it. Not fucking forgiveness, I’m not that stupid. But something else.

“You’re sorry?”

Hudson gulps. Nods. Silently begs me with his eyes. He’s a fucking monster... just like me. I can’t resist his darkness.

Within seconds, the roles are reversed and I’m climbing on top of him, straddling his generously inked body with confidence. He grunts in shock but offers no complaint as I land my lips on his, driven by wordless need. Pure, frantic need to simply be *owned* by someone again, that empty void in my chest demanding relief.

“I don’t fucking forgive you,” I snarl, lining his dick up with my

entrance.

“Wouldn’t expect you to.”

Hudson’s eyes roll back as I sink down on him. He fills my pussy so deep, I have to bite my lip to hold the groan in. I start to move, riding him at a fast pace that has me ready to fall apart within minutes. Nothing gentle or tender about it. His hands are tight on my hips, guiding our momentum.

We’re like two broken shards of glass, smashed and scattered beyond repair. As the pieces mingle together, you can’t tell which bit came from where. It doesn’t even matter anymore. You just have a worthless mess, but it’s still irreplaceable.

Hudson is too broken for anyone else. I am too broken for anyone else. I fucking hate him, but there’s a hellish part of my brain that is still addicted. We need each other, there’s no denying that ugly truth.

“Come for me baby,” he orders.

My release crests, flushing my body with heat and sensation. Hudson takes the brief reprieve to gain the upper hand, flipping me over and pressing my face into the pillow. He yanks my ass high and plunges his cock back in. I hiss, relishing the sting of his palm cracking across my butt cheek.

“That’s it, take your punishment like the filthy bitch you are,” he goads. “Next time you decide to go off the handle and get jacked up, I expect to be invited along for the ride.”

Hudson fucks me rough and hard from behind, nails digging painfully into my back. A long, slender finger reaches around and trails teasingly over my clit, moistening it before he finds my asshole. The digit slips inside and I scream into the pillow, relishing the intrusion.

Hudson spans me another time, jolting the finger buried deep in my ass. “You always liked it dirty. Your pussy is mine, no matter what you say. Don’t fucking forget that fact ever again or there will be hell to pay.”

His speed increases, movements growing wild as heat twists inside of me like a freight train, barreling straight for destruction. When his hand returns to my throat, he cuts off my cries. It’s all too much and I soon fall apart, overstimulated while Hudson steals the orgasm from me.

“Say my fucking name,” he commands. “Say it.”

“Hudson,” I moan, unable to stop myself.

He gruffly bellows and hot release spreads through me not long after. We collapse at the same time, sweaty bodies slumping and legs entangling. I gasp for breath, lacking the energy to push him away. Hudson tucks hair behind

my ear and traces my chapped lips, far too gentle for my sanity to take.

“Stop fucking looking at me like that,” I whisper.

He brushes his lips across mine ever so softly. “I can’t.”

When I try to move and dislodge his body, he lets out a huff, pressing me back into the sheets. “Don’t go. Please blackbird, don’t leave me.”

Featherlight fingers brush down my arm, teasing the solid ridges and scars. He circles the blindingly obvious cigarette burns for a moment, pausing to take them in, before his fingers intertwine with mine. Despite everything, I don’t have the strength to pull away.

“I have to.” I sigh, sounding reluctant in a way that is completely alien.

Hudson grabs the duvet and yanks it up, covering our bare, tangled bodies. His heavily inked arms wrap around and pull me close, until my cheek rests against his firm chest.

“For once... just forget. For one night, stay with me,” he murmurs.

There’s nothing left inside of me to fight. Millions of reasons why I should leave, but not a single one matters. The feel of his skin and the achingly familiar scent erodes my control, until I’m slinging my leg over his and curling up close.

“One night. That’s all you’re getting,” I grumble.

“I’ll take it.”

THIRTY-TWO

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KADE

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THE KILL BY THIRTY SECONDS TO MARS

I TAP my foot impatiently as Phoenix grabs his jacket, attempting to smooth his electric blue hair in the mirror. Eli stands next to me, equally unimpressed but maintaining his constant silence.

“Dude, come on. We’re going to miss breakfast otherwise.”

“Coming, fuck’s sake. I’m tired,” he grumbles. “It’s Sunday, no one should be awake this damn early.”

“You were the one that offered to stay and help clear up after the party last night,” I point out.

He slings on a faded denim jacket. “Didn’t think it through.”

We pile out into the corridor, all rubbing our eyes and yawning. I doubt anyone slept well after the altercation with Brooklyn, after which she disappeared. Traipsing down to Hudson’s door, I bang on the wood.

“Hud, get your ass out of bed. We got to talk.”

There’s no answer. I know he’s awake, I can hear the tell-tale scuffling and rustle of clothes from inside the room. He needs to be involved in this conversation so I knock again, readying to let myself in when he finally flings the door open.

“What?” he grunts, pulling his sweats up with one hand.

Phoenix slumps tiredly against the door frame. “Food. Dictator Kade here is dragging us down for a *family meeting*.” He shoots me an exasperated, worn out glare.

“We need to talk about Brooklyn,” I state simply.

Hudson runs a hand through his wild bed head, eyes lowering shiftily. He steps further into the corridor and tugs the door shut behind him, dropping his voice. “Look, now is not a good time, and frankly there’s nothing to talk

about. She's a big girl."

"Did you find her last night? Talk some sense into her?"

Phoenix snorts. "Yeah right. She won't listen to anyone, least of all him."

The sound of someone throwing up and a toilet flushing echoes from inside his room, all of our eyes widening. Phoenix smirks, far too amused.

"Knew you wouldn't stay away from Britt for long. Looks like we're interrupting Hud's morning delight, boys," he taunts.

I peer suspiciously around the corner, but Hudson blocks my view. I knew telling him about the court case was a mistake, I just didn't think it would send him running back to that toxic bitch. I'm about to lecture him when the door swings open fully. I think all of our jaws drop in unison.

"Oh shit," Brooklyn exclaims.

She's standing there in Hudson's t-shirt and nothing else. I can see the curve of her breasts through the material, hanging low enough to cover her ass while leaving her luscious legs on display. Hudson looks at me, clearly trying to communicate something. The three of us remain silent, utterly bemused by the sight of her, looking significantly worse for wear, inside of Hudson's bedroom.

Eli's the first to react, simply turning and striding away. Not a single word but his steps are heavy with annoyance. Brooklyn watches him go regretfully, the pain shuttering her eyes. I feel Phoenix shift next to me, straightening and folding his strong arms across his chest.

"I see. Well, this is cosy," he comments snidely.

Brooklyn narrows her eyes at him. "Talk some sense into me? That's why you sent him after me? Fucking mature. Didn't we discuss this issue last night?"

I force a controlled smile, attempting to level with her stubborn ass. "We were worried about you, that's all. Will you come to breakfast so we can all talk?"

Laughing under her breath, Brooklyn grabs her belongings and slips straight past all three of us, heading back towards her room. I cast Hudson an unimpressed glare and follow hot on her tail.

"Wait, just hear me out. We only want to help," I call.

"Leave me alone. Like I said, I don't want or need your help."

"But you'll happily fuck our friend?" Phoenix retorts.

She swivels, casting him a furious glower. I'm just about to try and de-escalate the situation when Phoenix grabs her wrist and pulls her close,

fingers tilting her chin up.

“You’re playing a dangerous game here, firecracker. Don’t start something you’re not going to finish. Hudson’s not the only one that’s involved here.”

She smacks his hand away, scoffing incredulously. “Since when is it any of your business who I fuck?” Her lips spread into a slow, twisted smile. “You jealous?”

Phoenix meets her challenge, shrugging nonchalantly. “You asked for it. All bets are off.”

What exactly does that mean? She’s tearing our group apart at the seams and fucking loving every second of it. I’ve got to intervene and stop this before it’s too late and the damage is irreversible. We can’t be undone by a screwed-up chick with zero morals.

Grabbing Phoenix’s arm, I muscle him away. “Leave it. We’re going.”

Brooklyn watches us as we head back down the corridor, leaving a half-naked Hudson to return to his room. Her door slams when we reach the stairs, and I finally release Phoenix.

“What the hell, man?”

“I was doing you a favour.” I shrug.

“Don’t get involved. She’s slept with both Eli and Hudson, and you’re just okay with that? Seriously?” He throws his hands up angrily. “I can’t just ignore my feelings.”

Phoenix storms away, abandoning me and returning to our room. I’m left alone on the stairs, entirely frustrated and unsure of how we even got to this point. We’re fighting like children over a fucking *girl*, some nobody that strolled in here like she owns the place and doesn’t give a shit about hurting us.

I can’t lose them.

None of us will survive this place alone.

Since day one I have been in charge of keeping us together, so that’s what I’m going to damn well do. She’s not the only one that can play dirty. My next moves will make or break us, but I don’t see any other options. Someone’s got to wade in and sort this mess.

I march back down the corridor and storm into her room without even knocking, thankful that she left the door unlocked. Brooklyn’s braced against the wall, head lowered and breathing heavy. Just as she looks up and begins to protest, I grab her by the shoulders and spin her around, pinning her body

against the wall.

“You’ve got me and my best friends in a tailspin,” I growl at her, surprising myself with the aggression in my voice. “My family means everything to me, and I refuse to lose that because of you.”

She squeaks in surprise when I pin her against the concrete.

“It’s all or nothing, love. You don’t get to turn us against each other.”

I can’t hold back, finally doing what I’ve been dreaming about for weeks. Securing my lips to hers, I cup her cheek and pillage her mouth. She tastes so fucking sweet, her soft lips melting against mine just like they belong. I twine my fingers in her tangled hair and lose myself to the kiss, our tongues stroking, breath mingling, bodies grinding against one another.

All my instincts are telling me to keep this car crash of a person as far away from my family as possible. She’s going to be the death of us all, but as I press my painfully hard dick into her body and hear that breathy little moan, I stop caring.

Brooklyn breaks the frenzied kiss first. “Kade, I can’t…”

“Stop screwing with us. You’re playing with fire and I don’t want to see anyone get burned.” Stepping away from her needy, shivering body, I raise an eyebrow. “You’re in or you’re out. It’s that simple. Choose us or walk away and don’t look back.”

“Choose you?” she repeats.

“No, *all of us*. Since the day I welcomed you into this place, I’ve tried to bring you into the fold. You’ve fought me at every turn, fucking with my friends behind my back.”

Her gaze drops in something that looks like shame, but I tilt her head back up. “We aren’t a family by blood, but necessity. You don’t get to pick favourites or turn us against one another. We all care about you.”

“I don’t understand,” she mutters.

“Let me make it real simple for you then. I’m a nice guy, but when someone threatens those I care about, I can be your worst nightmare. Either pull your shit together and join the group, or get the hell away from us all. No more playing childish fucking games.”

It’s the only thing I can think to do. She can’t choose, it will kill us all with jealousy. And anyway, the truth is, *I don’t want her to choose*. We all need her, in different ways. She’s the missing piece of the puzzle.

Brooklyn’s steely grey eyes pierce mine, all the bullshit stripped away, leaving her open and vulnerable. She licks her lips, carefully selecting her

next words. “What if I don’t deserve you guys? What if you’d all be better off without me here?”

“Bullshit,” I call her out. “Every single one of us has issues in some way. Why the hell do you think we’re here?” My knee slides between her legs, spreading them wide. I trail my lips over her soft skin, my heart skittering.

“Phoenix is an addict turned dealer that sold his soul to provide for his family. You haven’t seen him in a manic episode yet, but trust me it ain’t pretty. Then there’s Hudson, the hot-headed asshole that can’t go a single day without beating on someone or fucking to deal with his guilt. Eli’s a silent, tortured soul so traumatised by his past that he can’t look at a match without breaking down and cutting himself. He hasn’t spoken since he was a kid.”

I brush my lips over hers, gentler this time, coaxing her compliance.

“You know how far back my demons reach. I’m a control freak that can’t help but pick up lost causes to try and fix, no matter how pathetic and desperate for love that makes me. So, you see...” I press my forehead to hers, chest tight with emotion. “None of us are perfect, but you don’t have to be to take up space in the world. Besides, none of us are getting out if we don’t have each other’s backs. I’m offering you the chance to *belong*.”

I step back, letting Brooklyn’s body sag against the wall. Her cheeks are wet as she glances up at me, face broken and troubled in a way I can never truly fix. But I’ll damn well try my best, because she’s like me. Frantically treading water in the hope that someone will rock up and pull her out of hell.

I’ll save this stubborn bitch even if it’s the last thing I do. I wait. Watch. Hope and pray. When she raises her chin with determination, hope blossoms in my chest. Brooklyn nods once. It’s tight and forced, but a fucking nod in agreement.

“Get dressed,” I order immediately, without betraying my relief. “Get your ass down to breakfast, then we’re going to the library to study. You’re passing that exam next week. Come on, move it. You’ve got five minutes.”

I leave her room, slamming the door behind me as I make my way to the others, intending to drag their sorry asses downstairs too. I will keep this family together, one way or another. If Brooklyn wants to screw with my guys, then there isn’t going to be any special treatment.

We’re a fucking family, and families *share*.

THIRTY-THREE

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BROOKLYN

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THE HILLS BY THE WEEKND

“TIME’S UP! Papers at the end of your desk.”

I finish scribbling my final words and stack the papers, sliding them over to Phoenix. He grins at me and places them at the edge of our table, where Crawley promptly collects them. Eli’s already long finished, arms crossed as he stares blankly out of the window, clearly lost in thought.

“How’d it go?” Phoenix asks.

“Alright. Kade’s tutoring this past week has helped, I think.”

“I’m sure you nailed it.” He bumps my shoulder with a wink, playfully ruffling my blonde hair. “Come on, let’s get out of here. It’s celebrating time.”

We gather our bags and prepare to go, the two guys sandwiching me between them. Phoenix casually slings his arm around my shoulders and Eli grabs my hand, neither saying a word about casually touching me in public. My cheeks burn hot as we pass several staring patients, and I stuff my embarrassment down.

I have no idea what they’re both playing at, but I’m not going to complain. Ever since Kade apparently had a ‘little chat’ with them last Sunday, after the humiliating incident with Hudson, things have been different.

“Where are we meeting the other two?”

Phoenix and Eli share a look as we head downstairs, inching through the crowd of patients leaving their afternoon classes. “They’ve got a meeting or something, it’s just us for now. Think they’ll join us after.”

I shrug, adjusting the heavy bag on my shoulder. “Sure, whatever. I know how I want to celebrate.” Smiling sweetly at Phoenix, I give him a heated

wink. “You’ve been promising me a go on that game of yours all week. Time to pay up.”

He snorts, clearly expecting me to say something else entirely. “I see. Fine, video games it is. But don’t cry when I beat your ass.”

We head back to the dorms to escape the cold, making a beeline for Phoenix’s and Kade’s shared room. Once inside, I ditch my heavy bag laden with books and flop on the neatly made bed. Kade’s scent immediately invades my nose, peppermint and expensive aftershave clinging to his soft bed sheets.

Phoenix ditches his coat and scuffed Chucks, smiling as his eyes travel over me sprawled out on the bed. “I’ll get the game loaded. Eli, you sort snacks.”

While the two boys prepare for our evening entertainment, I subtly press my nose into the pillow and breathe deeply, my eyes falling shut. Kade’s gruff words come back to me from last week, having plagued me ever since. *I’m offering you a chance to belong.*

This is wrong. I’m pretending like I fit in here, that I accept his offer, when really my desperate need to self-destruct is growing by the day. I should push them all away and break their hearts, at least that would offer them some protection from inevitable pain.

“Yo Brooke, shift your ass and get over here.”

I will walk away, but not yet. Let me pretend just a little longer. Shoving the darkness to the back of my mind, I turn to Phoenix who has set up two bean bags in front of their large screen. He pats the spot next to him and I shake my head to clear the haze, trying not to think too deeply.

Taking my place, he passes me a controller and begins to load the game. I can hear Eli shuffling about in their mini fridge as he returns with snacks, spreading bags of chips and sweets around.

“What are we, twelve years old?” I gesture towards the binge foods.

Eli offers me a shrug while silently nudging me to move closer to Phoenix. He’s been even more isolated than usual for a while now, and I long to ask what’s going on in his messy little head. Unfortunately, it’s a slippery slope and I need to keep my own cards close to my chest.

Soon I’m trapped between them both, my breath hitching as the scheming assholes sandwich me impossibly tight. I’m not sure what the plan is here, but I’m certain there is one.

“Want to make this interesting?” Phoenix smirks.

“What are you thinking?”

“Best of three?”

I shrug, examining the buttons on the sleek controller. “Hardly seems fair, I’ve never played. Plus, you’ll probably cheat.”

He chuckles, his leg brushing against mine teasingly. “Scout’s honour! Promise I won’t cheat. Hell, Eli can even help you. I’m nothing if not a gentleman.”

Yeah, right.

I lose the first game within minutes, my little pixelated head blown to pieces as Phoenix whoops in victory. Eli ignores him completely and tugs my sleeve, spreading his legs wide with a lifted eyebrow. As the next game loads, I hop into his lap and relax against his body.

“Behave,” I admonish, feeling his lips against my ear.

Slim but muscular arms wrap around my torso, and he holds the controller over my own hands. With his help, I beat Phoenix easily at the next round and he’s left pouting, muttering under his breath about cheating.

I grin at him. “It’s best of three. You could still win.”

“Game on.”

Eli’s lips trail down my neck, causing a shiver to run through my body as we prepare for the final game. I shift on his lap, my ass grinding against the rapidly hardening lump in his ripped jeans. When his teeth nip my skin, a sigh escapes my lips, causing Phoenix to shoot us a heated look.

“Stop distracting me,” I complain.

Eli’s spare hand gently brushes over my breasts and I jump a little, promptly dying on the screen. Phoenix cheers and waves the controller over his head. The satisfied smile he shoots me is so fucking smug, I almost want to flake out on our deal just to wind him up.

“Who’s the cheater now?” I jab my finger at Eli behind me, trailing his fingers up and down my arm in a teasing rhythm. “No fair using him. That’s poor sportsmanship.”

“It worked, didn’t it?” Phoenix goads.

Clambering out of Eli’s lap with a huff, I snag a bag of chips and deposit myself back on Kade’s bed. Both guys watch me like hawks, the air suddenly heavy with sexual tension. Despite the stalemate between us all week after my little slip up with Hudson, their intentions are still far from honourable.

“So the question is, what do you want as your prize?”

I pop a chip into my mouth and watch as they silently confer, seemingly

coming to a decision without uttering a single word. My pulse is racing, but I don't let my excitement show. They aren't the only ones that can play games.

"Play truth or dare with us," Phoenix states, relaxing into the bean bag.

I shake my head, crunching through a mouthful of salty goodness. "You really are big kids, aren't you? We're not fucking teenagers at a sleepover."

"Technically, I'm still nineteen, so there's that. You really don't have much of a choice, winners pick." Phoenix eyes me up with a smirk, entirely too pleased with himself.

I flop onto my back, waving my hand for him to start. "Fine. I pick truth."

"Let's start simple. Favourite booze?"

"Tequila."

"Food?"

"Sushi."

Phoenix laughs. "Seriously? That fishy shit?"

"What? It's good. There was a sushi bar across from the diner where I used to work." I shrug, tossing the half empty chip bag aside. "Anyway, that's two. My turn."

He waits as I wrack my brain, curiosity burning. There are too many questions to count, so I settle for the most pressing. "What did Kade say to you last week?"

I almost don't expect him to answer, but Phoenix doesn't disappoint. "That you can sleep with whomever you please and it's none of our business."

"And what did you say?"

Phoenix waggles his finger at me. "Nope, that's your lot."

"Ugh, fine. Eli?" I pause, wondering how exactly to do this. "Dare?"

He nods simply, and I can't help the smile that creeps onto my face. Rolling onto my side and propping my head up, I have the perfect viewpoint to observe them from. "I dare you to kiss Phoenix. No half measures either, I want to be entertained."

Neither of them hesitates, magnetised to the other within seconds. The chemistry between them is electric as Eli grabs a handful of Phoenix's midnight blue hair, yanking his face closer and positioning his body.

"Like this?" Phoenix simpers as Eli's lips tease his jawline, working up to his plump, vulnerable lips. I watch the simple kiss with bated breath, my thighs automatically clenching together. The sight of them touching each other has me so fucking wet.

“Too nice,” I respond drily. “Come on, Eli, I know you give better than that. Kiss him like you fucking mean it and I’ll make sure your efforts aren’t in vain.”

Those brilliant green eyes flick to me, eyebrow raising in challenge. Before I can tease him further, he’s straddling Phoenix and kissing him hard enough to have my pussy quivering. Phoenix holds Eli’s narrow hips and kisses him back, their tongues tangling and hands exploring each other. By the time they break apart, I can’t sit still for a moment longer.

“More to your liking, Ma’am?” Phoenix asks.

They both turn to look at me, gazes loaded with pent-up desire and frustration, I clear my throat and nod once, not trusting myself to speak. They both settle into the bean bag together without separating. My eyes track Phoenix’s hand as it lands on Eli’s thigh, dangerously close to the bulge between his legs.

“Firecracker, truth or dare?”

“Dare.” I smirk.

Phoenix contemplates for a second before wiggling his finger for me to come closer. “Eli’s feeling a bit down, why don’t you come cheer him up?”

I roll my eyes, my heartbeat suddenly picking up. Crawling across the bed to join them on the floor, I consider the bean bag for a moment and deposit myself on top of them both.

“Room for one more?”

“Always.” Phoenix grins.

He disentangles himself from Eli, allowing me to slip in the middle. I stare hungrily at the raven-haired ghost before me, his chest seizing and lips parted. My fingers trail up his leg and undo his jeans, brushing teasingly across the skin of his washboard abs.

“Like this?” I ask innocently.

My hand slips into Eli’s boxers and wraps around the straining dick inside, his hot length pulsing with need. I feel Phoenix move behind me, pushing me onto my knees as he braces my body between them.

“You got it, baby.”

Freeing Eli’s cock, I glance up at him through my lashes for consent just like he did for me. The jerking nod is all I need to wrap my lips around the tip, tongue skating over his velvet skin. I bob my head for a moment, getting acquainted before greedily taking the rest of his length. Fingers dive into my hair and hold me tight as his dick hits the back of my throat.

“Fucking beautiful,” Phoenix groans.

Sucking Eli off, I’m powerless to respond as Phoenix grabs hold of my waistband and slowly works my own jeans down. My ass rises in the air and he shifts behind me, dragging my panties down too. Throbbing need fills my body all at once.

“Keep going, firecracker. You’re not allowed to stop.”

I twist my head and keep working Eli’s cock between my lips, one hand splayed across his lower stomach and the other reaching down to cup his balls. For a second, I swear I hear Eli moan out loud, actual noise escaping his mouth.

Then Phoenix’s mouth is between my legs, tongue spearing my slit. I gasp around Eli, watering eyes squeezing shut. *Fuck, that feels incredible.* His tongue piercing is cold against my sensitive nerves, enhancing every sensation pounding through me. When he kisses around to the back, his tongue tickling the tight muscle there, I swear I see stars.

“Have you ever...?” Phoenix enquires.

I wiggle my ass in response, hoping he can sense my enthusiasm. Phoenix pauses for a moment and delivers a punishing smack to my butt, his thumb pressing against my asshole. I can’t help but groan, gagging for a second on Eli’s generous length as he continues to ride my mouth.

Phoenix wraps his hand around my loose ponytail, wrenching my head back and leaving Eli bereft. He pins me to his body from behind, hands swiftly removing my shirt. I watch the fabric go flying, his fingers cold across my back as my bra disappears next.

“Kiss those perfect tits,” Phoenix orders Eli, his hand still wrenching my hair.

Teeth and tongue meet my breasts, nibbling across the solid peaks. I bite my lip, eyes rolling back in pleasure as Phoenix removes his sweats. His hand lands on my lower back, pushing me back down into the perfect doggy position.

“Eli’s lonely, finish the job,” he orders.

I take the Eli’s cock back into my mouth, blowing with everything I’ve got while Phoenix plays with my clit. The minute his hard rod brushes my inner thighs, my pussy spasms in anticipation, ready to finally have him inside of me. His head teases my opening for a second, excitement building.

“Dammit,” Phoenix groans as he slams home.

If I could scream, I would. I move my body in time to Phoenix’s powerful

thrusts, each one sending shockwaves through my core. Eli tenses beneath me, bucking his hips and teasing his own release. The minute he finishes in my mouth, he collapses and Phoenix pulls out in one punishing move.

“Argh,” I hiss, angered by the sudden withdrawal. “Don’t fucking tease me.”

“Shut the hell up or I’ll gag you.”

Eli quickly assists his friend and wraps a hand around my throat, cutting off my snarky reply. I glare at him, licking my lips as his eyes widen at the insinuation. Then Eli’s kissing me, invading my mouth and rewarding me for my efforts, despite the fact I was swallowing his seed mere seconds ago.

“Dammit, you two,” Phoenix hisses.

His nails dig into my butt cheeks as he shifts again, his cock quickly finding my back entrance. I forget how to breathe for a second, even with Eli still choking me, and internally high-five myself. *This is how I should be spending my last week alive.*

Phoenix rubs my wet folds again, gathering moisture and transferring it to my ass. I hear him lubricating his length before it presses against the tight muscle, gradually entering inch by inch. Eli swallows my screams with his invasive tongue, allowing me a sliver of air.

“You’re fucking ours.”

Phoenix hisses as he pounds into me, his speed picking up. I can feel him spiralling, movements growing wild as he repeats the declaration like a prayer. *“You’re all fucking ours.”*

Eli releases my throat and skates his nails down my arm, fingers pressing against the healing cigarette burns that he inflicted. My climax slams through me with that burst of pain, pushing me straight over the edge and plummeting down. I swear I hear him whisper something, sounding a lot like *ours*.

Phoenix bruises my hips with his grip and soon comes undone, spilling into me with a roar. His body slumps on top of me, and I fall forwards, straight into Eli’s open arms. We all collapse into a tangled, gasping dog pile, barely fitting on one bean bag together.

“Next time, I’m gonna tie you up and we’ll both fuck your sweet little pussy,” Phoenix whispers in my ear, nibbling on the lobe. “How’d you like that? Both of us inside of you?”

If I’m still alive then.

“Sure,” I reply instead. “Although next time I might pick truth, you never know.”

He snorts, managing to get to his feet and offering me a hand. We traipse to the bathroom and rinse off separately, removing all traces of the sordid affair that just occurred. I steal a shirt from Phoenix's wardrobe and slip it over my naked body, foregoing any panties or bra. The bed is calling me, where Eli's already burrowed beneath the covers, arms open and waiting for me.

The three of us cosy up together, stretching the mattress to maximum occupancy. Phoenix flicks a movie on and throws an arm around us both, his fingers teasing Eli's curls. It's seconds before the silent member of our group falls asleep, seemingly succumbing to his exhaustion.

"Phoenix?"

"Yeah, baby?"

I glance down at the peaceful look on Eli's sleeping face, where he usually looks so tortured by the world. "What's going on with him?"

Phoenix gets comfy and draws the blanket tighter over us, his strong legs entangling with mine. "You can't say anything, but I heard his papa is sick. Terminal cancer."

"Shit, that's awful."

Eyebrows raised, Phoenix slowly shakes his head. "No, it's not. Who do you think gave him those burns? The man is a child abuser and religious nutcase. He's dying in prison as we speak, reckon he has days at best."

I softly stroke Eli's shoulder, reassuring myself with the soft rise and fall of his chest. "His father did it?"

"When he was eight. Locked him in the sin closet and set the damn thing on fire. Apparently he thought Eli was possessed by a demon and used to beat him whenever he spoke. Eventually he stopped, and hasn't said a word since."

Bile rises in my throat and my fingers twitch with the need to hit something, I'm so furious. He literally beat the voice out of Eli, it's sick. I'm disgusted, utterly heartbroken on Eli's behalf. He was just a kid and they stole his tongue, before trying to steal the rest of him too.

"He was convicted?"

"Yeah. Child abuse, false imprisonment and attempted murder. Eli survived, obviously. Spent years in and out of hospitals before he was eventually sectioned. Kade says there were at least five attempts on his file, possibly more. He hasn't been free since."

I hug Eli's body even tighter, furious tears filling my eyes. No point even

denying how I feel, just the thought of everything he's been through devastates me. No wonder he doesn't speak or function normally, dependent on self-harm.

He burned me... just like he was burned.

We lapse into silence, the TV playing to itself. I doubt either of us are watching. I'm drowning in guilt because this time next week, I have no intention of being here. One way or another, I'll be leaving these beautifully broken souls behind. That's the deal I made with the devil in my head. A bargain with the darkness that whispers endlessly.

You're not allowed to live. Even if it kills them.

Even if they want to follow you to hell.

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THIRTY-FOUR

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HUDSON

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WAITING GAME BY BANKS

I SCRAPE MY THICK, unruly hair away from my forehead, staring at my tired eyes in the mirror. They are lined with bags and more burdens than I care to admit. My gaze flickers back to the bed, sheets rumped and messy. It looked a hell of a lot better with Brooklyn in it last week.

Goddammit, the way she came apart beneath my touch.

The memory has been seared onto my mind ever since. Every stolen kiss and late-night fuck when we were kids pales in comparison. She acted like she didn't want it, but the minute I touched her dripping pussy, I knew the truth. She's as hung up on the past as I am. Neither of us has moved on in the last five years.

I can't stop thinking about her. Every day she ignores me is fucking torture. I hate her, hate how powerless she makes me feel. Like I'm nothing more than a puppy trailing after her, begging for any crumb of attention. Yet every night since she was in my bed, I jerk off to the memory and imagine ways to lure her back. Excuses to talk to her. Ways to get in her room. Conversation starters and scenarios in which we could actually be good for each other.

Yet every time I come up empty handed.

Attempting to tame my hair, I startle when Kade breezes into the room.

"Hey, you ready to go? It's nearly four."

"Since when don't you knock?" I groan.

"Since you stopped answering when I knocked. Come on, we're going to be late."

I straighten my shirt collar, tugging at the material that threatens to choke me. Kade looks me up and down, giving me a smile. "You look good. Mum

will be pleased.”

“Can’t believe you’re making me do this.”

“She hasn’t seen you in over a year. With the legal shitstorm heading our way, least you can do is act like you care,” he criticises, causing guilt to bloom in my chest.

I follow him out, leaving my phone but grabbing my ID. Not much of a defence I can offer, I’ve behaved like a fucking asshole. To my adoptive mum and many others. We walk over to the reception in tense silence, neither bothering to make small talk.

Once inside, we head through several brightly lit corridors, walls lined with art that probably costs more than my entire tattoo sleeves. Everything’s clean and tidy the closer we get to the visitation area, with even more finery than the other buildings. Like the wealth of this place isn’t clear enough, they’ve got to rub it in just that little bit more.

At another reception surrounded by equal grandeur, we check in and get our IDs scanned, a burly security officer seizing us both up. He frisks us and checks for concealed contraband, anything we could be trying to get out or trade with the visitor.

“Out,” he demands, placing his hand under my chin.

I spit the gum out. “You done? We’ve got somewhere to be.”

Several more seconds of aggressive patting down later, we’re finally permitted to enter the room. It’s kind of like a restaurant, with tables and chairs spread out, refreshments available from the hatch and elevator music playing in the background. The only difference being the barred windows, heavy security presence and multiple cameras dotted about.

“Smile,” Kade orders as we take a seat.

“I’m an adult, I know how to fucking behave.”

“Do you? That’s news to me.”

My leg jiggles under the table, betraying my anxiety while we wait for our visitor to show up. “No need to be a dick. I know you’re just fucking jealous.”

Kade scoffs incredulously. “Of what exactly?”

“I’m the only one that’s had her in my bed.” I smirk at him, “And that’s driving you crazy. Don’t worry bro, I’ll take good care of Brooklyn.”

The laugh he lets out hurts my confidence a little, it’s so full of humour and disbelief. “You really are delusional. You think you’re the only one?” Kade turns in his chair, giving me his full attention. “She agreed to stick

around, that doesn't mean she's all yours. The other two are with her right now doing God knows what."

I swallow the lump in my throat, refusing to entertain the possibilities of what could be happening at this exact moment with my goddamn girl. "So what, we're sharing her now? Like she's some piece of meat to pass between us?"

Kade settles back in his chair, shaking his head. "Look... I don't know. We're looking out for each other, that's it. You know that we all care about her, that's why we've brought her into the fold." He hesitates, fidgeting nervously. "The rest of it is up to her."

"I don't share," I growl automatically. *Hell no.*

"She's sleeping with Eli already, Hud. Probably Phoenix too. You gonna say no if she comes to you?" Kade asks simply. "All I care about is getting everyone out of here alive and starting fresh. Nothing else matters. We stick together."

I hesitate, feeling a brief blossom of hope that's quickly crushed. I don't want to lose the guys, and I can't begin to contemplate losing Brooklyn now that I've found her again. But *sharing* her? How the hell would that even work? It's insane to say the least.

"So you're happy to fuck someone that's also screwing your best friends?" I snort.

"Would you rather lose it all?" Kade snaps. "Open your eyes. Nothing about our lives is normal or reasonable. I'm simply proposing an alternative route forward."

Just as I'm going to hit him with another snide comment, the door buzzes and opens. We both stand and Janet walks in, kitten heels clicking against the floor. She hasn't changed in the past year since I last saw her, crying in the court while I was escorted away in cuffs.

Her perfectly coiffed blonde hair is dabbled with grey, framing kind eyes and perfectly applied makeup. She still wears the silver locket around her neck that Kade bought for her fiftieth, pictures of all three of us enclosed in it.

"Oh Hudson... my boy," she cries out.

I adjust my shirt as Janet approaches, silvery tears already tracking down her cheeks. She rushes at me and pulls me into a fierce hug, her tiny body holding me tight despite the fact that I tower over her by at least a foot.

"Hi Janet," I manage to reply.

“Let me get a look at you,” she gripes, fussing over me. Her hands run over my shoulders and hair, fingers pinching my cheeks. “You look too skinny. Aren’t they feeding you?”

“I’m fine...” I offer, prising her hands away.

“Don’t give me that. I haven’t seen you for over a year, young man!”

I cringe at the anger in her voice, sinking into my seat. She pulls Kade in for a quick hug, not lingering too long as the security will only come and break them up. Once we’re all seated her attention is back on me, studying and analysing just like her son does.

Kade breaks the heavy silence. “How was the drive?”

“Fine. I had to drop your sister back in Warwick, she says hello. Your father is away on business, else he would have come.” Janet offers me a small smile. “He sends his love.”

I nod tightly. Kade’s father is a decent enough man, but not a patch on Janet. She was the one that truly brought me into their family. Putting up with all my shit, paying for tattoos to win me over, basically doing whatever necessary to make me feel welcome.

“Your studies? They’re going well?” she asks me.

“Yeah, it’s fine.” I shrug nonchalantly, trying not to feel her palpable disappointment. What more does she expect? This place isn’t some summer camp. I’m not here by choice.

“How are the other boys? Phoenix and Eli?”

Kade links his hand with hers, casting me an impatient look as I struggle to find any words to offer. “Everyone’s good, Mum. We’re all keeping busy.”

“Good, good. Listen, we don’t have much time.” Her eyes flick to me, full of sadness and regret. “I know your brother has informed you of the... *little problem* we have.”

“Yeah, he told me.” I lower my voice, forcing the words out despite my choking guilt. “I think I should just come clean. Tell them the truth.”

“No!” Janet exclaims, hand flickering to her throat. “You will not put yourself at risk like that. Why do you think we’re in this predicament?” Her eyes dart around, checking no one is listening. “I couldn’t see you go down for something that wasn’t your fault.”

I take her other hand when she offers it, the three of us connected. More tears leak down her aged face as I bite my lip, fighting to keep my own emotions in check. It was my fault, but she still doesn’t see it that way.

“What now?” Kade says gruffly.

“We’re throwing legal challenges left, right and centre, trying to discredit Stephanie. Claim she’s unhinged, doesn’t know what she’s saying.” Janet nods to herself in reassurance. “It buys us some time. For now, keep both of your noses clean and heads down. We’ll sort something.”

Her eyes connect with Kade’s and he nods, but I’m too lost in my mind to question the look shared between them. The mention of Ma’s name has me spiralling into the past, down the black pit of memories that I’ve tried to purge from my soul with little success.

“She isn’t right in the head, Hudson. Accusing her own son... it’s sickening. She won’t get away with this, I will not allow it,” Janet declares, squeezing my hand tight.

“It’s the truth though, isn’t it?” I reply tonelessly. “I did it. I killed—”

“Stop,” she interrupts swiftly. “We’re not going through this again. I refuse to sit here and let you torture yourself.” Her hand releases mine and grabs my chin, forcing my eyes up to meet hers. “You’re my boy, not that witch’s. Keep your head together and I will fix this mess.”

I stare back at her, pain wrapping around my heart. Despite everything, all the shit I’ve put her through... Janet still has my back. I don’t fucking deserve it. All I can think to do is hand myself in, get it over and done with. No one else should suffer for my mistakes.

“I’ll keep my mouth shut,” I agree reluctantly, but quickly shut down her relief. “*For now*. The minute you or anyone else comes under threat, that’s it. I’m telling the truth. I don’t care what they do to me, where they send me.”

I nod to myself decisively.

“I’ll protect my family whatever it takes.”

We all cling to each other for a second, savouring the contact until the timer buzzes. Janet presses a quick kiss to both of our heads, eyes shining with tears as she plasters that strong smile back in place. “I’ll be back with more soon. Kade, look after your brother and keep in touch.”

“Yeah, always. Bye Mum,” he replies.

She turns to me, eyes softening. “You’re a good man, Hudson. Don’t forget that. We all love you so much.”

As she leaves, we both watch in silence, taking a second to gather ourselves. Her words stick in my mind, however distasteful they seem to me. *Good man*. I’m nowhere near the person she thinks I am. Not even on a good day. But I’ll damn well try to be just for the chance of making her proud.

“Come on.” Kade clears his throat. “Let’s find the others.”

He takes charge, checking us out and leading the way as I walk numbly. Each step feels like it's sealing my fate, the agreement to sit tight weighing me down. I should have refused, demanded they both give up on me.

"Stop it," Kade orders.

"Huh?"

"Stop fretting. You know how she gets. No way you were going to win that argument."

I scan my ID and let us into the dorms, holding the door for Kade. "Yeah, I know. Just wish she'd admit defeat once in a while."

"She cares about you." He shrugs, as if the explanation is simple. "We all do, even when you act like an arrogant, self-obsessed prick."

"Probably the nicest thing you've ever said," I laugh darkly, throwing his own words back at him. "Fucking love you too, brother."

We walk back to his room, letting ourselves in. The sound of a movie playing comes from the corner, darkness lit by the TV screen. It takes me a moment to find the shape of sleeping bodies crammed into Phoenix's bed.

"Looks like we missed the fun," Kade comments.

He flicks on a lamp, chasing away the shadows. My eyes land on Brooklyn, snoring lightly and curled around Eli like a spider monkey.

"Nice of you to join us," Phoenix mutters from beneath the covers.

"What did you do to them?" Kade laughs, sitting down on the bed opposite to pull his shoes off. "They're bloody sparked out."

"Nothing, just comfy." He smirks at me.

Kade looks at the two snoring cuddle buddies. "So I see."

Phoenix reaches over, pulling the covers tighter around Brooklyn and gently brushing Eli's hair away from his face. "It's good to see her getting some decent rest."

I linger in the doorway, hands tightening and loosening into fists. Just seeing him touch her has piping hot anger racing through my veins, along with raw possession and the need to pummel his smug face. She's *my* fucking girl. I should be the one looking after her.

"You gonna stand there all night?" Kade asks.

"What exactly do you suggest?" I remark. "You all look pretty fucking cosy to me."

Phoenix rolls his eyes, keeping his voice low so as not to wake them. "Give it up, Hud. You've been a pain in the ass all week. You think she doesn't see it?" He glances at the sleeping beauty inches away. "If you're not

careful, you'll drive her away completely."

Kade nods solemnly, standing to grab his sweats and change. "There's beer hidden in the loose roof tile. Just chill and watch the movie before you have a brain aneurysm."

He disappears inside the bathroom, leaving me to retrieve the goods and settle on the floor, back resting against the bed. I resolutely ignore the clothes strewn over the floor, refusing to contemplate what went on while we were in visitation.

She agreed to stick around, doesn't mean she's yours.

Fuck Kade if that's what he thinks. I know the truth.

I'm close enough to hear my blackbird breathing, and I latch onto the sound just like Mariam taught me, using it to centre myself. Brooklyn's always been my anchor, even in the years since we've been apart. It always came back to her, the memory of her soft skin and sharp eyes. The horrifying night that eventually tore us apart.

Phoenix begins munching on snacks, snuggling up to her and making sure I'm watching. The asshole clearly has a death wish, I'll hospitalise him if he keeps playing up.

"Touch her again and I won't be accountable for what happens," I warn.

"She isn't your fucking property. Besides, she wasn't complaining earlier. You're not the only one that cares about Brooklyn. Time to face the facts," Phoenix replies smugly.

The movie plays and my body begins to relax with the beer, every sip soothing my ceaseless rage. I manage to avoid breaking the blue-haired wanker's legs. Even when he falls asleep and joins the snoring dog pile in the bed. I'm counting that as a win.

She's still fucking mine though.

THIRTY-FIVE

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CRAZY BY LOWBORN

DO you ever stop to think about how the past defines you?

Most people don't. They just shake it off and move on.

I've never been like that. I can remember every event that led me right here. Blow by blow, slowly chipping away at my sanity, gradually adding to the expanding mosaic of my fragile mind. Every memory, twisted secret and filthy sin.

As the clock strikes eight o'clock and the final week of my life begins, I stare up at the ceiling in contemplation. This is it. The end that I've been waiting for all this time. *Why does the thought of dying hurt so bad?*

I dress methodically, movements stiff like a robot. Two outfits lay on my bed. One for each remaining day before it's show time. The final ensemble is my favourite shirt and jeans that I intend to wear tomorrow. I have a plan, Phoenix's belt lies stolen beneath my mattress. That's the back-up option if I can't steal one of Eli's blades. I know exactly where he keeps them.

I should be ashamed, stealing from them to end my own life. It will only twist the knife further when I'm gone, but I've never proclaimed to be a good person. Not once.

I slip my Docs on and manage a smile as I contemplate the bright pink material. Shame they can't come with me. I'll be sure to dispose of all my secrets. Journal, photos and any other personal effects. Can't have the vultures picking at my corpse after.

Leaving the dorms and heading across the quad, I peer about to ensure none of the guys are around. Dinner last night was weird, nobody knew quite what to say after Friday night's antics and me sneaking out long past midnight to hide from them.

Eli is even more broken than I thought. I can't fucking stand the thought that I'll only make that hurt worse, but the pain of living is far heavier. There are no easy choices anymore, just shitty options and a tonne of guilt.

Checking in at reception, I wait to be escorted down to Lazlo's office for my weekly shot. The corridors seem even gloomier today, whispered moans and cries escaping from behind the numerous doors. A dinner lady I recognise from the cafeteria takes the trolley from door to door, accompanied by a guard to unlock the solitary cells and slide a tray in.

My eyes land on a skeletal, ghostly white body strapped to a cot inside. An IV line is attached and feeding the necessary fluids to suspend life. His hair is long and unkempt, like he's been locked away from society for a very long time. Our eyes lock through the door and I quickly look away, suddenly afraid.

That'll be me if I don't get the fuck out of here.

"Brooklyn! Good morning," Lazlo greets once we get to his office, bustling me inside as he checks his watch. "9.50. You're early, I'm impressed. Just can't wait, eh?"

"What are you doing to the people here?" I bark at him.

"In solitary?"

I nod tightly, sitting stiff in my usual chair. Gooseflesh breaks out across my skin as he retrieves the dose from the mini fridge, crystal clear fluid dripping into the syringe. Lazlo eyes it intently, tapping the glass to remove any air bubbles.

"They are here for many reasons, Brooklyn. Poor behaviour, violence, suicide attempts. Just to name a few. You spent two weeks here yourself, or did you forget?"

I shudder, fighting back the dark cloud of dread. "I didn't forget. But it's all... a bit blurred."

Lazlo leans on his desk, legs crossed and smiling wide. I contemplate his thick grey hair and glasses, framing the mind of a man that thinks punishment is acceptable for those mentally unwell. Fucking shrinks, I'll never get over my disdain for them.

"You were acutely unwell. That's why it's blurred," he answers simply.

That's a lie, my mind whispers to me. He's lying out of his ass.

I flinch back into my chair, eyes squeezing shut to push the voice aside. That damned needle is coming for me and I'm irrationally fearful, even more than before. What's changed? I'm not going to be here for next week's shot.

It doesn't matter what he puts in me.

"What medication am I on?"

The needle slips beneath my skin, icy fluid rapidly spreading as Lazlo watches my reaction. "Experimental anti-psychotics, dear. Blackwood is a pioneering institution in the psychiatric community. You are all forwarding the progression of science. Isn't that good?"

Lazlo retakes his seat behind the desk, shuffling back through my heavy file. If only I could get down here and burn it to shreds before I depart. A final farewell to the bastards that have plagued the last twelve months of my life. *And the rest.*

"Last time we were discussing your diagnoses and you mentioned your family. Mind if we discuss that a little further?" He peeks at his notes quickly. "Your mother, specifically."

"I told you there's nothing to discuss," I snap.

"It's important to acknowledge the past. These things don't stay quiet in their tidy little boxes. What have you been carrying around with you, Brooklyn?"

Bereavement.

Drugs.

Assault.

Murder.

"Nothing," I state coldly.

"How old were you when they died? Ten?"

I squeeze my eyes shut, pressing my fingers into my eyelids until I see stars. Anything to avoid the familiar faces that swim to the surface, despite being buried deep and rotten to the core. My original wound, ancient yet still tragically present.

"Your mother was a paranoid schizophrenic," he presses.

"She was sick and loved her imaginary children more than me," I blurt out, hands fisting in Eli's soft hoodie to hide the tremble. "She lost her fucking mind and died, that's it."

"What makes you think that she loved her hallucinations?"

I cross my legs and swallow hard.

"You acknowledge that she was sick," Lazlo points out, tapping his pen.

"But she didn't fight it. She just gave up and was consumed by her insanity. That's what took them from me," I choke up, voice wavering. "She didn't want to live but couldn't leave us behind."

*We're going for a drive, Brooke. You, me and Daddy.
A nice long drive together.*

“Are you ‘fighting it’, Brooklyn? Unlike her?”

Lazlo looks at me, calm as anything, while I feel like a tornado is ripping me apart. What gives this dickhead the right to ask me that? I’ve spent every damn day since that car wreck *fighting it*. Since my mother lost her battle and tried to kill us all, just to appease the monsters in her mind.

“Yes,” I mutter, my cheeks flaming. It’s a fucking lie.

I’m done fighting. Utterly, inarguably done.

“What would happen if you were to just give in?” Lazlo muses, chin resting on folded hands. He cocks his head, beady eyes far too big behind his thick glasses.

“What... What do you mean?” I gulp.

“You tell me. What’s the worst thing that could happen?”

He holds his pen poised, ready for my answer.

“Nothing. I will just... disappear. Like ashes in the wind.”

“Hmm. It’s almost too easy, isn’t it?” Lazlo smiles at me.

Fear washes through me; not irrational, pointless fear, but visceral terror. That feeling when you know that something is wrong, without any evidence or support to explain why. I glance up at the camera blinking away in the corner, capturing our exchange.

“What are you doing?” I ask in a small, timid voice, sounding entirely unlike myself. He’s getting beneath my skin, unhinging me.

“Just exploring your thought processes. Tell me, how would you do it?”

The camera blinks. Lazlo stares. Distant shouts and cries echo through the room. My skin begins to itch and I pull my knees to my chest, seeking the intrinsic comfort as a threatened child would.

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Are you afraid of the way it makes you feel?”

I shake my head rapidly, as if to force him out. “No, I just... No.”

“Don’t you want to see your parents again?”

“No,” I whimper, teeth breaking skin as I gnaw my lip. “I don’t...”

“Don’t what?”

“I don’t want to die!” I scream, feeling my tears spill over. “I’m fucking afraid and I don’t want to die! But I have no choice, I have to do what they tell me to. That was always the plan.”

Lazlo’s fingers drum on the table methodically, entrancing my gaze. His

face looks completely different to me now, gone is the fragile old man, replaced by a wolf in human skin. I blink, trying to disperse the image, shadows creeping up from the corner of the room.

“Who? The voices?” he guesses.

I swallow the bitter lump in my throat. “I... I’m not sure. Why are we talking about this?”

“Because it’s November 13th today.”

The room seems to freeze around me, detaching from reality and existing in an entirely dark world of its own. Lazlo flips through the papers, humming under his breath. When he selects a glossy photograph and slides it across the desk, my world implodes.

Victor’s face stares back at me.

Bright, happy and *alive*.

“Does he look how you remember him?”

“Why are you doing this?” I whimper.

The photo seems to stare at me, those pixelated eyes wide and terrifying. When I manage to look away, someone stands behind Lazlo. Escaped from his mirror and grinning at me, slick blood pooling across the cream carpet. His pearly whites reflect sparkling light, fingers reaching out to point towards me.

You will join me, Brooklyn.

I’ve waited a year and your time is up.

I can’t help it. I scream bloody murder, leaping up and tripping over the coffee table. Splayed across the floor, I scramble on my hands and knees, frantically putting distance between myself and the shadowy ghost my mind has created.

“He’s here for you, Brooklyn.” Lazlo smiles at me encouragingly. “All debts must be paid in the end. Time to face the devil and take your punishment.”

“Please help me,” I beg. “Don’t let him hurt me. P-Please.”

“I can’t help you. People like you cannot be cured.”

The world is closing in around me, the blinking camera seeming to pierce my head along with Lazlo’s intent gaze.

“Run along now. The clock’s ticking,” he adds.

I fight the urge to throw up, confusion and fear reigning supreme inside me. Gathering enough sense to find my feet and flee the room, Vic’s bloodstained footsteps follow me along the way.

I sprint down twisting corridors, passing guards that pretend like I don't exist. I'm just a ghost passing through these sordid halls, hidden from sight and protected by my insanity. Am I alive? Is this even real? Sobs wrack my chest and I fight to remain present, so close to disassociating completely to escape the impending hell.

The gruesome hallucination of my demon follows me all the way back upstairs, until I'm bursting out in the reception area and skidding to a halt. I have to take a moment, a stitch burning my torso and breathing completely impossible. Checking several times to ensure nobody followed me up, I brace my hands on my knees and break down.

There's something wrong with this place.

Sadie was right. *Bad things happen here.*

"Brooklyn? You okay?"

Someone crouches in front of me and I flinch back, fists clenched protectively. Kade backs off, hands raised as if to steady me. His warm hazel eyes almost calm me, but I'm in too deep. Spiralling beyond salvation into whatever cataclysm of death awaits.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"Lazlo," I pant, fighting for every gasp.

"Yes... your session starts in half an hour. You're early actually."

My brain threatens to implode, pain lancing behind my eyes and sweat coating my palms. I feel weak at the knees, ready to collapse, throw up or both. Kade just stares unwittingly, analysing my every move but coming up empty.

"Are you worried about the session? Is that what this is?"

"But I just..." I spin, finding myself on the wrong side of the room, as if I just entered through the door in preparation for my session. "What time is it?"

His eyes widen even further, anxiety seeming to enter his expression. Kade attempts to step closer, forcing me to take a shaky step back. Like he's tracking me down, an injured animal ready to be euthanized.

"It's 9.30, Brooklyn."

He doesn't have a chance to grab me as I run past, each step taking me further and further away from this twisted nightmare. I lose my battle with my stomach and violently throw up once outside, pausing only to wipe my mouth before sprinting back to the dorms. I need to get a locked door between me and the world *right now*, so I can figure out if I'm losing my

fucking mind.

Or if I'm dead already and this is just my punishment in hell.

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THIRTY-SIX

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ELI

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SNUFF BY SLIPKNOT

“THE PRISON WILL TAKE care of the funeral arrangements,” Miss White informs me, barely sparing me a glance. “There isn’t much in the way of an estate, but I assume a solicitor will be in touch given time. Any questions?”

I stare at the carpet, refusing to answer her. For once, there are no words niggling to escape. I have nothing to say, not a single thought or flavour in response to the sudden news. It isn’t long before the cold-hearted bitch dismisses me, ready to get on with more pressing matters than some sick old bastard’s inevitable death.

Leaving the warden’s office as fast as possible, I carefully fold the letter passed along to me, taking time to make sure the edges are straight before slipping it into my pocket. His last words will stay with me forever.

The envelope gets scrunched in my fist, paper on purple flesh, bruises marring my knuckles from punching the wall. Gently, with more self-control than I feel, I take careful steps back to reception. Kade waits for me, studying my face.

“Is it...?” He trails off.

I nod once. It’s over. He’s dead.

I’ve outlived the devil, once again.

“I’m so sorry, Eli. I can’t imagine how you must feel.”

His words sit heavily in my mind, tasting utterly unpleasant and futile. Like washed out dishwater swirling down a plug hole, debris and remains littered in a vortex of waste.

“You’ve got Mariam now, right? Maybe she’ll help?” Kade tries hopefully.

I don’t respond. Not even a look. There’s no way to describe how I feel

about my father's death.

"Look, we're here for you. Okay?"

My hands brace on the desk and I manage to meet his eyes. Kade fucking flinches, as if afraid I'm going to attack him or something. I look away, hot shame flooding every nerve. It isn't his fault, he just picked all the lost causes and has no hope of fixing us.

"Did you see Brooklyn on your way over by any chance? Running?"

Shaking my head, I roll my shoulders until they crack. The mention of Brooklyn doesn't even scratch the surface, I'm too ensconced in my confusing grief to clock his words. Kade just sighs, clicking on his computer as the guard comes to escort me to Mariam.

I don't look at him again.

I can't bear the disappointment and lack of hope I'll find there.

Back in Mariam's office, she begins with some lacklustre condolences, offering me the space to talk about him. I decline, my pursed lips and hard eyes portraying my refusal. Even if I could talk, there's nothing to say. Nothing can make this better.

Mariam continues to talk endlessly without paying any attention to me. The words simply pass over my head as they always do. I've spent months enduring this pointless therapy designed to 'cure' my mutism. *What a joke.* Some people simply aren't curable, that's a fact. We're too fucked to be cured.

"The sky is blue. Yes or no?"

Mariam watches me expectantly, her smile a poor attempt at comfort. The flavour of vile, acidic spoiled milk sits heavy on my tongue, denoting the fear pulling at my skin. It mingles with my volatile emotions. *How dare he fucking die and escape his punishment early.* Meanwhile I'm still trapped, the real prisoner in this screwed up situation.

"Use your cards, Eli. Come on, we can do this."

I reluctantly study the two slips of paper, the words *yes* and *no* printed across in big letters. My entire body judders as the pins and needles spread, anxiety pulsating through every nerve. It takes me nearly a full minute to find the courage to lift the *yes* card.

"Excellent. Well done."

I cringe internally at her pointless reinforcement, the fake enthusiasm only adding to the storm brewing beneath the surface. He used to be enthusiastic too, that pathetic excuse of a parent. Beating on me and starving

me with pleasure, all in the name of purging a devil that didn't exist.

"Next statement... Tomorrow is Tuesday."

I study the wall behind her, watching flames in my mind that don't exist.

"Give it a go. There's a commissary credit up for grabs."

My hand shakes as I nudge the *no* card, forcing myself to appease her. The sooner she gives up, the sooner I can escape. Find a quiet corner to cut myself in, alone this time. I don't want any witnesses to this impending breakdown. Especially not *her*.

"How about telling me yourself? Can you do that?"

Fucking persistent bitch. She still doesn't get it, even after all this time. Mariam thinks I can be treated and I will speak again with enough therapy. She doesn't fucking understand. It's not that I can't speak. I choose not to.

Words only bring punishment. Pain. Fists and blood. Fire and ash. That's what he taught me. Keep quiet or else you'll pay the price. I will hold my tongue for the rest of my life before I subject myself to that particular form of evil again. I have the scars to prove it.

My collar bone clicks as I tilt my head, remembering the break that sealed my lips for good. The baseball bat connecting with my little body as I swallowed the screams, his sermon of pain torturing me endlessly. Any sound would have only resulted in further punishment. I knew that well enough even as a kid.

"Try this one... My name is Elijah. Yes or no?"

I shudder, the name cracking like a whip on my skin. Mariam tries another smile, forever playing the doting mother that I never had. Staring at the thick carpet and resolutely ignoring her, more flavours invade my overwhelmed mind.

Expectation and hope tastes like ripe fruit. Sweet, but underscored with something rotten. Ultimately disappointing when I refuse to give in. I'm trapped in a vicious fucking cycle. The silence breeds my Synaesthesia, senses strung tight from all the words trapped inside. Yet the more overwhelmed my mind becomes, the less I'm able to communicate.

I can't escape the perpetual hell.

Not like he did. He's free now.

"Look, Eli. You know that I want to help you. I'm just struggling to see any route that leads to progress. You won't be allowed back into the community until you show signs of improvement. Don't you want to go home?"

I don't have a home.

Not since it burned to the ground.

“Tell me what you think.” Mariam sighs, trying to find some hope in this situation. “Give me something to work with.”

Feeling increasingly angry, I flip the *no* card at her. She stares, hands laced together and lips pursed. We're both frustrated, drained of patience.

“Well, I've asked a colleague to consult on your case. Perhaps some trauma-based therapy will prove beneficial. It's clear that this isn't working. How does that sound?”

I study the crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Imagine it crashing down and crushing me. The glass slicing my jugular and blood pouring free. Metal puncturing my chest and piercing my heart. Anything to end the season of despair that is my life.

“I'll be in touch with the details. Please think about what I've said. You need to start engaging, or I fear that Blackwood may be deemed inappropriate for you. You'll be sent back to Clearview with no opportunity to leave. This is your last chance.”

Ice wraps around my heart, cold fingers of death and misery. Not that place, I won't survive it again. Especially without her there. My troubled girl with her dark, haunted eyes. I take Mariam's dismissal and flee, eyeing the blinking camera above the door on my way out.

Blackwood, Clearview.

It's all the same thing.

People like me, we're born to die. Failures bred from our very first breath. I would never survive on the outside. I've been in and out of institutions since I got my scars, so much that I've forgotten what it feels like to have free will. To experience normality. To breathe without being watched. To have aspirations, dreams, *hope*.

I begin to head to class, but draw to a halt in the drizzly quad instead. I can't face them. Phoenix, Brooklyn. The people that actually care about me and see beneath the walls I've constructed. The walls *he* forced me to create. I need to expel the dark energy swirling in my chest. I need to be fucking punished because I shouldn't be alive. What kind of cruel joke is it when I'm stuck here and my goddamn abuser is at peace in death?

I see Brooklyn in my mind's eye. Curled up between us, face slack and relaxed. *Trusting*. Letting her impossibly high guard down just long enough for me to sneak in. I'll never be able to tell her how I feel. Not now, not ever.

The others will make her laugh, tell them they love her, poke fun at her grumpy morning face and sassy comebacks.

I'll always be the odd one out. The runt in the pack. The worthless piece of shit that my nutjob father made me. When all is said and done, I'll be the one left behind in this place. Hudson and Kade will go first. Then Phoenix, Brooklyn, and every other fucker that plays their cards right.

I'll be alone. Always alone.

I should have died in that fire.

You were born broken, Elijah.

Shut your unholy mouth or I won't put food in it for another week.

His voice is loud and awful in my ears, along with the crackling of flames. Too far ingrained for me to remove, no matter how hard I try. He's always there. Stumbling through the afternoon rain blindly, my feet guide me to the football pitch.

I'm not thinking straight, my only thought to punish myself just like I've been taught to. He's not here to do it, but I know the drill. Bad Eli deserves to be punished for his sins. The jocks are kicking a ball and messing around on the wet grass just like I knew they would be.

"Get off the pitch, freak!"

"Fuck off before we make you."

"Come to get your ass kicked?"

"Look lads, it's the resident sociopath."

The insults fly, cutting my skin as much as any razor blade. I don't know what I'm doing. Nor do I care. After all these months, I'm buried beneath the mountain of my failure. Letting Brooklyn get close enough to care has only wounded me further. It's a constant reminder of what I lack, a future stolen from me before I even knew what it meant.

My fist connects with a jaw, I don't know whose. The provocation doesn't go unchallenged, just as I planned. The assholes circle, boxing me in. Taking advantage of the CCTV blind spot, the sneers and laughs escalate the adrenaline flooding my body.

Fucking hurt me, I want to scream in their faces.

"You've got a death wish, you psycho!"

I allow myself a sick smile as the many punches land, skin breaking and bones crunching. Pain explodes in all directions and I slump to the ground, gladly taking the beating. I could laugh, it feels so good. Beautiful, bittersweet agony. Blood runs down my throat and I cough, spitting crimson

globules out.

“Come on lads, let’s leave him.”

They start to retreat, but it’s not enough. My mind still buzzes with frenetic, destructive energy. I’ve got to release it, the desperate need is corroding me from the inside out. Hand searching around, my fingers latch on to a rock. I throw it with my remaining strength and watch as it sails into the back of someone’s head.

“Ow! Dammit, this asshole’s tripping. You stupid fuck.”

Surrounded again, I blink through blood as they pull my leg at an odd angle, yanking it just right. Something snaps, bone splintering and sending a wave of nausea through me. But still I don’t make a sound. Even as they break my fucking leg and any remaining air escapes my lungs. He trained me well; quiet is good. Holy. *Pure.*

“Stay down or we’ll break the other one too.”

Forcing my eyes open, I catch sight of Rio standing behind his thugs, watching with amusement. Forever the ringleader, protected by his privilege. He epitomises the evil at Blackwood’s centre.

Taking a final boot to my ribs, I curl inwards like a child, finally sated as the tsunami of pain overwhelms my bloodied body. At last, relief comes. Like a trained lab rat, I’m addicted to the pain. My attackers laugh at me and walk away without a second glance.

I’m ashamed to call you my son, Elijah.

You got the devil inside.

But don’t worry, I’ll get it out.

Let’s call it a baptism of fire, eh kid?

I stare up at the angry sky as my consciousness finally fades, along with the constant whisper of nightmares in my head. No one’s looking for me or even cares. Not really. I’m expendable. I’m fucking thankful because all I want is to lay here, broken and beaten, until my sorry ass is finally permitted to leave this world behind.

Some people leave empty spaces where they used to be. I’m already empty. I don’t exist.

The rain pours, heavy clouds thundering down on my broken body; the falling droplets slowly turning red around me. A halo of death encircles my desecrated remains.

THIRTY-SEVEN

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PHOENIX

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BLOOD SPORT BY SLEEP TOKEN

THE SOUND of buzzing and voices rouses me, uncomfortable pain immediately rising to the surface. I stretch out, limbs stiff from spending the night curled up in the medical wing's shitty waiting area. The others look equally exhausted, Kade resting in an armchair and Hudson's towering frame stretched out across several chairs.

I'm so fucking angry I could kill with my bare hands.

Whoever attacked Eli yesterday... they left him there to die. Alone, beaten within an inch of his life, his fucking leg broken. It wasn't until the afternoon gym class came out that he was discovered. Just thinking about him lying there, completely abandoned by the world, makes me long to strike a match and burn this entire institute to the ground.

I'll find out who did it.

Then I'll fucking kill them for it. *Slowly.*

"Shit..." Kade curses, stretching his arms high. "Anything?"

I shake my head, staring down the corridor where the treatment rooms lie beyond. "Nothing. What's taking so long? Why won't they let us in?"

"Standard procedure," Kade growls, rushing to his feet. "Even though I'm his emergency contact, they still wouldn't let me in yesterday. It's fucking ridiculous."

He swiftly kicks a chair with uncharacteristic anger, the loud bang waking Hudson up.

"You're his emergency contact?" I frown.

Kade collapses back into the armchair and shrugs, staring up at the white ceiling. "He doesn't have anyone else. We're it. I put my name down the day we took him in."

If there's one thing about Kade that I admire most, it's his determination to fix the entire goddamn world. And I tell you what, it's going to be the death of him one day.

"Just calm down, they'll let us in eventually," Hudson states groggily.

Kade glares at him. "Don't tell me to calm down. I'm done being the calm one."

Things are definitely fucked if Hudson is the voice of reason. We each fall silent, sitting in this damned empty hallway that smells of bleach and cleaning products. Kade's head falls in his hands and Hudson slowly wakes up, groaning about his aches and pains.

We refused to leave last night. Nobody wanted to go home without seeing Eli first. We're a family, and we shoulder mutual blame for Eli's relapse. Even if it was bound to happen again sooner or later. He's never far from another implosion, each worse than the last. This time, he could have died.

The thought makes me want to scream.

"Has anyone spoken to Brooklyn?"

Kade and Hudson both shake their heads. Everything happened so fast, we'd completely forgotten the devil walking in scarred skin who has us wrapped around her fucking finger without even realising it.

"She should be here," I mutter.

"It will only upset her. Leave it until we know more."

"She probably already heard. The entire institute likely knows by now."

We lapse into silence, neither one of us speaking again until the entrance door swings open and Doctor Andrew strides in, shaking rain from his umbrella. He takes one look at us, rumpled and grumpy after twelve hours in this godforsaken waiting area, and rolls his eyes.

"You lot still here?"

Kade stands to his feet, brushing down his creased shirt and wild hair. "We told you we're not leaving until we see him."

Doctor Andrew deposits his damp coat and grumbles under his breath, attaching the various medical paraphernalia from his bag. "This isn't a bloody hotel. You shouldn't be here."

"Let us in and then we'll go," I counter.

He turns to me, still glowering, before acknowledging Hudson with a slight nod. Doctor Andrew has patched up Hudson on many an occasion, and this isn't the first night we've spent stubbornly waiting for an update. We all stand as he finally walks over, sighing in frustration.

“One visitor only. You’ve got ten minutes, keep it brief.”

“You’re kidding?” I glance down the pearly white corridor. “We all need to see him.”

“Well, you all just have to wait,” he chastises. “Eli is concussed and we’ve got to take him for more X-rays at eight o’clock for his leg. Take your pick and the rest of you go home.”

He points towards the exit and Hudson immediately puts his arm around my shoulders, dropping his voice low. “Come on man, let’s leave Kade to it. We’ll come back later.”

“But I’m his—”

“Emergency contact?” Kade snarks.

Best friend, asshole. I’m his best fucking friend.

“You seriously gonna be like that?” I ask him furiously.

Kade just stares back in response like I’m the one being unreasonable.

“Fine.” I swallow my anger, trying to focus instead on Eli. “Just make sure he’s being looked after.”

Hudson and I begrudgingly leave, heading for the cafeteria. We’re both in a seriously shitty mood. I want to go back there and punch Kade’s fucking lights out for being a smug git, but apparently it’s rude to punch your so-called friends. Who the hell knew?

“Quit grinding your teeth,” Hudson snaps at me.

“Tell your brother to get his head out his ass and I will.”

“Like he’d ever listen to me.”

We grab some food and walk to our usual table, resolutely ignoring the looks cast our way. News of what happened has clearly been circulating and the tension is brewing big time. When one of Rio’s goons smugly asks how Eli is, I have to physically drag Hudson away before he gets us both thrown into solitary.

“They fucking did it,” he protests, struggling as I sit him down.

“I heard,” I grind out, battling my own need for violence. “But be smart about this, we can’t help anyone if we get ourselves locked up. Now isn’t the time or place for this.”

His hands ball into fists beneath the table, barely controlling his rage. We watch the huddled group of assholes whispering and trading jokes, every laugh serving to escalate the thick tension between us. Worst of all, that slimy bastard Rio just stares, ensuring we know *exactly* who orchestrated Eli’s beating.

“I’ll break all of their fucking legs,” Hudson snarls.

“You can’t take them all.”

“Wanna bet? I’ll tear their goddamn heads off one by one for what they’ve done.”

“And land your ass back in solitary?” I point out, biting into an apple.

“Who cares? It’d be worth it for the satisfaction.”

I cast a glance at the looming security at every door. Always watching with their dark, beady eyes. Cataloguing every move and word uttered without alerting anyone.

“One day they’ll stop letting you out of that place,” I mutter.

“They ain’t letting me out of here, period. Get over it.”

We finish up quick and dump our trays, making sure to walk straight past the boasting dickheads with our heads held high. I walk Hudson to class and check my phone, finding nothing from Kade. That wanker better at least update us after the shit he pulled back there.

When I get to the history classroom, I’m too late to slip in unnoticed and glance through the door instead, finding our usual table deserted. No Brooklyn in sight. Anxiety immediately attacks me as I stare at the empty set, my stomach turning. *Where is she?*

I try to remember the last time I saw Brooklyn, realising with horror it was Sunday night in the cafeteria, a whole two days ago. Kade briefly saw her yesterday and mentioned something seeming off, but we were quickly swept up in the drama and everything moved so fast. *Fucking idiots*. In our fear for Eli’s health, we left her all alone. What if she heard and was looking for us?

We’ve screwed up *big time*.

I break into a jog to get back to the dorms. Once inside, I take the stairs two at a time to reach Brooklyn’s door. Rattling the locked handle, I press my ear to the wood, straining to hear but there’s nothing coming from inside. The bad feeling in my gut spirals. It seems completely irrational, but something is wrong. I just know it.

“The hell are you doing?”

I spin, desperate hope blooming but it’s quickly replaced with disappointment at what I find. Britt stands there frowning, hands on her narrow hips like she owns the place. “Looking for your psycho girlfriend?”

“Is it any of your business?” I snap.

“Where’s Hudson?” She tilts her chin up, eyes straying to his nearby

door. “I’ve been waiting for him, we need to talk. It’s important.”

“Leave Hudson alone, he doesn’t want to see you.”

Britt stalks closer, sneering in my face. “What exactly do you see in her? She must have the tightest snatch in England to have all four of you losing your minds.”

My brewing anger flares and I grab her by the throat, shoving her against Brooklyn’s door. Her eyes bug out and I snicker, leaning close enough to see her yellow tinged eyes.

“She ain’t a bag of skin and bones, for starters. I wonder how long it’ll be before your heart just gives up.” I scan over her with disgust, my fingers toying with her brittle hair. “You’re fucking nothing. You got that? *Nothing.*”

Glorious tears brew in her eyes and I lean even closer, my nose brushing against her vulnerable throat. I can almost smell her fear. “Keep starving yourself and you’ll just crumble to ash, where you fucking belong,” I whisper into her ear.

“You weren’t saying that when you fucked me last month,” she spits, yanking her hair out of my clutch. “Thought you boys were all family and shit. Wonder what Hudson will think about you screwing his girl. Or better yet,” a devious grin lights her face as she winks at me, “*your precious Brooklyn.*”

No one threatens my firecracker and gets away with it. Britt tries to escape but I tighten my grip, flexing proudly while she struggles to breathe. I’ve got her completely trapped against the door, unable to run from my menacing smile.

“You dare tell them. I will *ruin* you. Got that?”

“Don’t worry, Nix. Our little secret, right? That’s what you said,” she chokes out.

I dig my nails into her skin, baring my teeth as she flinches. “That’s right, honey. I’m the fucking monster under the bed. Your literal worst nightmare if you start playing games.”

I finally release her, watching as she turns and flees, broken sobs echoing her steps. I can’t believe I was ever stupid enough to sleep with that bitch. Worst mistake of my life, now she’s trying to pull some twisted shit and screw with us? Not gonna happen.

Kade’s not the only one that would do anything for his family.

I consider Brooklyn’s door for a moment, ready to resume knocking when a thought crosses my mind. My feet hurry to the next floor, where I

reach Eli's room and test the handle, finding it unlocked. Just like I thought, they probably searched the place top to bottom after he was hospitalised. Safety and all, can't have a dead kid on their hands.

That would be bad for business, right?

Slipping inside, I find the room pitch black with curtains drawn across the autumnal day. Just as I move to flick the lamp on, a soft whimper freezes me on the spot. Tension radiates down my spine as I flinch at the barely audible noise, laced with so much fucking pain.

"Firecracker?" I whisper into the dark.

It's got to be her. Where else would she go?

Tripping over books and dirty t-shirts, I stumble to the bed. A cowering shadow betrays her presence. She's tucked into the corner, hugging Eli's pillow tight, buried in dark sheets that don't immediately reveal their secrets. Relief floods my body. She's here, she's okay.

"Hey," I say softly.

Her soft cries are the only response.

My relief is short-lived. Heartbeat roaring in my ears as I inch closer, I finally notice the dark stains on the fabric. Icy tendrils invade my body and copper fills my nose. Everything stops. Nothing exists beyond the sheer terror that infects my mind at the sight of Brooklyn.

Blood.

Everywhere.

An impassable crimson ocean separating us.

"Brooke? What...." I trail off, fingers touching wet sheets. "Oh, holy fuck..."

"Go away, Nix," she mumbles drunkenly.

What have you done, baby?

I crawl across the bed, spooning Brooklyn in my arms. Her sticky blonde hair is stained red, splayed out across the pillows. As soon as I touch her she jumps, struggling to break free from my embrace, still trying to run from me. Like I'd ever let her go willingly.

I tighten my arms and hold her to my chest. "Don't move."

"Why are you here?" She grabs a handful of my shirt, weak voice trapped on a sob. "Leave me the fuck alone. All of you. I want to be alone."

"So you can die? Is that what this is? Goddammit," I curse furiously. My fingers slip on blood-slick skin, searching for the source. "What the fuck did you do to yourself?"

I lay her down on the bed, flicking on the bedside lamp. Horrifying destruction is revealed on her skin. My mouth goes dry at the deep, uneven slashes, blade parting flesh without mercy. Too many to count, weeping red from both arms. She can't have cut herself that long ago if she's still conscious, but it's pouring out of her too fast.

So much blood. I'm losing her.

"I made it stop." She snuffles.

I gulp hard. "Made what stop, baby?"

Shrugging my jacket off, I wrap Brooklyn up and lift her into my arms. Panic rules my every thought and all I can think to do is fix her, no matter what it takes. Her head lands on my chest, nose burrowing into my neck as she shudders a pained breath.

"Everything. The world. Voices. Guilt."

"You have nothing to be guilty for!"

Vicious newspaper articles and dark allegations threaten to contradict me, but I forcibly kick the thoughts out of my mind. None of us are bloody innocent here. She may be a monster, but she's *my fucking monster*. I decide whether she's guilty or not.

"You're not allowed to die," I declare, my decision sealed.

I can't take her to the medics. They'll lock her away for good. I've got to fix this myself. Striding from the room and kicking the door open, I glance around to check the coast is clear before tightening the fabric around her body, concealing the almighty mess inside.

"Keep quiet," I say tersely, jogging down the stairs.

Once we're safely back in mine and Kade's room, I take her straight to the bathroom. Brooklyn's legs immediately collapse beneath her and I growl in frustration, depositing her in the tub. She looks even worse underneath the harsh light, skin waxy and smeared with blood. Eyes barely open. Mouth slack. Cheeks stained with tears.

You're not allowed to fucking die on me. Not today.

I turn the tap on, cold water spraying across her fully clothed body. Brooklyn gasps, back arching. "What the... Phoenix?!"

"Wake the hell up. No sleeping," I order firmly, rooting around under the sink for the stashed emergency kit. It's under the false bottom, along with my cigarettes, spare cash and a couple of back-up mobile phones.

The noise that slips past her lips pierces my damn heart. Caught between a cry and a scream, her rage flowing freely. "You should have just left me,"

she yells at me weakly.

“Not happening. You hear me?!”

I lose patience and roughly shake her, hysteria buzzing in my ears. “No one checks out early, do your fucking time and walk away free. Your sins don’t have to define you.”

Brooklyn’s head rolls to the side and her eyes slide shut, causing panic to seize hold of my lungs. I shout her name, but she remains limp and barely responsive. In my desperation, I take the kit and climb in the tub with her.

Both under the icy spray, I prise her eyes open and force her to look at me. “How’d you do it, huh? That room was cleaned out by security.”

Her semi-conscious grin makes my skin crawl. “E-Eli’s good at hiding stuff. I’m good at finding it.”

Trying to be gentle, I take her in my arms and slip my hand around the back of her neck. “Hold your breath, this is gonna hurt.”

One, two... three.

Dumping the bottle of antiseptic on her shredded skin, my teeth clench at her swift and immediate scream. “It’s okay, breathe...” I coax, holding her head to my chest. My own hands are trembling violently as she fists my wet shirt.

The bathwater turns bright red and leaks down the drain, pungent antiseptic scent thick in the air. She goes limp, but I can hear the rattled breaths coming from her chest. She’s still with me. Battling against the clock, I prop her up and grab the suture kit, expertly threading the needle in seconds.

Not my first rodeo.

“Here.” I offer the jacket cuff to her, slipping it in her slack mouth. “Bite down and try to keep quiet. We don’t need company right now.”

It takes me half an hour to get the deepest cuts stitched, cleaned and bandaged. She missed the major arteries but still managed to screw herself up good and proper, enough to threaten her life. She needs blood, but I’m so mad I can barely think straight, keeping myself strictly disciplined to focus on one problem at a time.

Then I’ll punish her for trying to leave me.

“I’d offer you something for the pain, but that’s kinda the point, right?” I bark at her.

“Fuck you. I didn’t ask you to help me.”

I gently extricate her ghostly white body from the tub, ignoring the

bloody mess left behind as I carry her to my bed. Gently setting her down, those wide, unnerving eyes glare up at me. My fingers tighten on her chin and I fight the urge to bend her over my knee right here, right now. Like she fucking deserves, verging on death or not.

“You’re selfish and give no regard for anyone else’s feelings,” I accuse, staring down at her. She collapses against the pillows and eyes the thick bandages encasing her arms.

“Are you real?” Brooklyn asks me.

My stomach bottoms out. “Of course I’m real.”

I cup her cheek so that she can feel me, automatically leaning into my touch. I’m beyond terrified, more than I’ve ever felt in my life as I stare at her numb, confused gaze. What happened to her? First Eli, now my firecracker. The world feels like it’s ending.

“It’s the anniversary,” Brooklyn murmurs.

“Of what, baby?”

She tries to hold it in, but the words tumble free nonetheless, followed by near hysterical tears. “One year ago, I became a monster. I’m not going to drag you all down to hell with me, you deserve better than that. Just let me walk away now and it’ll be simpler for everyone.”

I collapse next to Brooklyn, pulling the sticky, stained shirt over my head because I can’t fucking think straight while covered in her blood. It’s unhinging my damn sanity, reminding me of how close we just came to losing her.

“That’s today? Fuck, baby...”

Brooklyn stares up at the ceiling, muttering a weak yes. I can see her eyelids fluttering, sleep beckoning her under. There’s enough blood in Eli’s room and the bathtub to warrant her unconsciousness. I watch her carefully until she finally gives in, burrowing down despite still being dressed in her soaked, ruined clothes.

This girl will destroy me, and everything I’ve worked for. Already I can feel the impending mania niggling in my head, burning behind my eyes as it battles to the surface. It’s all just too much, I can’t keep doing this. Picking up everyone’s fucking broken pieces over and over. I’ve got enough of my own to contend with.

I strip off Brooklyn’s jeans and t-shirt, being as gentle as possible. She barely stirs, soft beneath my touch as I slip one of my shirts over her head and tuck her in. I recheck the bandages to make sure they are done tight, and

retreat to Kade's bed to study her.

We need blood.

Medication.

Sedatives.

A fucking psychiatrist.

Real medical attention, other than just me. But if I hand her over, that'll be it. They'll most likely send her back to Clearview, with no hope of ever leaving. That or she'll end up in solitary, where nothing good ever happens. There's no right answer here, I'm being forced to choose between losing my firecracker and saving her damn life. When my phone vibrates in my pocket I startle, noting Hudson's name before answering.

"Where the hell are you? I sat alone at lunch like a fucking freak."

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I sigh. "Long story. Come to my room."

There's a long, loaded pause before he replies. "I just need to finish up here. You good for an hour?"

"Just fucking hurry up."

I hang up and continue my silent vigil, hands clenched tight as I wrestle with my emotions. She can't escape her past while it continues to torment her. I'll never be able to fix that, no matter how many times I stitch her up or make her smile. Some scars simply run too deep.

I raid my stash of pills and break two of the capsules open, carefully tipping it into a glass of water. Rousing Brooklyn long enough to get it down her is easy, and the hefty dose soon takes effect. She passes the fuck out. Safe... for now.

I can't lose my firecracker to the demons in her head.

None of us will be able to live with ourselves.

THIRTY-EIGHT

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BROOKLYN - ONE YEAR AGO

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LITTLE MONSTER BY ROYAL BLOOD

“THANKS FOR THE RIDE.”

Grant watches me grab my handbag, hand slipping into his pocket. My mouth waters at the bag of white powder he pulls free and slides over to me. “Least I can do. This should hold you for a while. Hit me up when you want more though.”

I squeeze my legs together, trying not to wince at the burn. Sex with him is never gentle, but at least I get something from it. Even if I have to do it all over again next week in order to get more drugs.

“Sure thing. See you at work tomorrow?”

“Later, B.”

I climb out and watch him go, itching to get inside and tuck into my next dose. Vic’s home from visiting his parents, so I’ll have to be fucking high to deal with his possessive shit all night. My nails dig into my palms as I take the crappy elevator all the way up to our apartment, dread and anxiety spiralling.

Slit his throat and run away, the devil whispers in my head.

“Nope,” I mutter under my breath, digging my keys out. “Not listening.”

They whisper to me non-stop now, the shadows. Forever my dark and sinister companions. Tuning them out becomes harder with every passing day, but the alternative is even more terrifying. I know what happened to my mother when she stopped fighting. It’s not pretty.

Once I get inside, Vic surges to his feet and meets me in the kitchen. His dress shirt is unbuttoned, revealing tanned muscles that hold no appeal for me anymore.

“Where were you?” he demands.

I drop my keys on the counter, shrugging off my leather jacket. Cold air chills my bare legs and crotch beneath my shitty uniform. I couldn't wear those panties home, not after letting Grant fuck me once we closed up the diner.

"Late shift, customers," I lie, shrugging. "Needed the overtime."

"That's fucking bullshit! You're lying to me again."

Vic wrings his hands, face bright with fury. He grabs my arm and shoves me into the wall, ignoring my squeak of shock. "Stop fucking lying through your teeth!"

He shouts and raves, yelling in my face like he thinks I'm listening. He's drastically changed in recent months, growing angry and violent the more I push him away. The truth is no longer a hidden secret between us. Every day I fuck and shoot up, and every day he suffocates me with his demands that I stop slowly killing myself. I'm used to the regular screaming matches now.

All I can do is stare blankly at him when he's like this, because the voices in my head are far louder. Growing stronger with each second, outweighing his pathetic moaning.

Kill him, Brooklyn.

He's worthless. Kill him. You know you want to.

I clutch my head and squeeze my eyes shut, but Vic grabs my wrists and wrenches them away, yelling right in my face. I see red, overwhelmed by the pressure in my mind. My fist connects with his jaw and as he reels back, eyes blown wide with fury.

"Don't touch me," I yell.

"What has gotten into you? I don't even recognise you anymore."

It would be so easy to slip a knife into his gut and feel the hot, satisfying blood pour. So damn easy. I bite my lip, refusing to answer his question. Acid in my throat steals my voice as the shadows creep up the walls, infecting my sight. They twist and weave through the air to reach me, bigger than I've ever seen. Like towering angels of death determined to claim what remains of my black soul.

"No! Stop it! Go away!" I scream, attempting to flee the visions.

"Don't run away from me, Brooklyn!" Vic yells, mistaking my reaction.

He storms after me and grabs me by the hair, slamming my body into the kitchen table. My eyes burn from the pain across my scalp as he tightens his grip on my throat.

"Who is it, hmmm? Who are you screwing?"

His furious eyes sear my skin and dissolve any remaining control. I can't keep this act up any longer, playing at domestic bliss when realistically, everything is twisted and poisonous between us. This isn't living. I give up the pretence, letting my hatred flow.

"Anyone. I'll fuck anyone as long as they aren't you!"

The brief sense of victory is snuffed out by the cruel blow he delivers to my face, stars bursting behind my eyes as blood bursts from my nose.

"I knew it! You're a psycho bitch, you know that? All these months I've watched you drink and drug yourself into oblivion." Vic shakes his head, a despicable sneer twisting his lips. "I should have just let you die. You clearly want to. Go join your trailer trash parents."

"So why don't you let me die then? Walk away," I lash out.

"Because I love you! All I ever wanted was to share my life with you, but it's like the girl I loved has been fucking body-snatched by the devil. She's still in there though, I know it."

"She doesn't fucking exist!" I screech, slapping him hard.

Big mistake. You don't poke the beast and get away with it.

Vic blinks, pitiful mask slipping to reveal the hidden demon inside. A disturbed mind disguised by a pretty face and charming words. I'm not the only one making this relationship toxic. He hits me again, this time smashing my face into the table. I'm bent over and utterly exposed, my naked legs trembling from the sudden wave of fear.

"Don't you love me anymore? You'd rather fuck someone else?"

I scream and fight back uselessly.

"Get the hell off me. I don't love you!"

"Too bad! You don't get to say that." He spreads my legs with his knee, sickness swirling in my gut. I continue to struggle against his weight, attempting to break free but he's so much bigger than me, strengthened by his rage. I'm his prey, trapped and vulnerable.

"Please don't," I beg, giving into my terror.

"All I've ever done is love you," Vic responds in my ear, breath hot and sticky. "This is all your fault, Brooke. You're making me do this."

"It's over! Just stop! Stop it now!"

"No! It's not over. You'll learn your fucking lesson and give me Brooklyn back. Not this screwed up whore that's taken over recently," he demands. "Love me back!"

I can't protest anymore, tears flowing down my cheeks as his jeans rustle,

belt clicking open. Every second feels like its own individual death, repeated on an endless, hellish loop. It's like paralysis has taken over, imprisoning me in this nightmare. I bite my tongue and hold back the sob of pain when he roughly shoves his dick inside me, agony ripping through my insides.

"That's it, remember who loves you," Vic goads, fingers digging into my hips.

Kill him. Kill him. Kill him.

An angry mob of voices fill my head, combining all the different monsters until they blur into a tsunami of murderous rage. I open my teary eyes to watch the shadows leaking down the walls like black tar. Crawling ever closer, promising temptation and sin along the way.

Kill him. Kill him. Kill him.

Vic grunts his release and pushes me aside. I collapse bonelessly on the floor, curling inwards for protection and hugging my knees. Warmth seeps between my legs, blood mixing with his semen. I'm suddenly overcome with memories of the past and the last man that assaulted me, four long years ago. All while the person I loved most in the world watched.

Hudson. My first love.

He wasn't an abuser like Vic. That flawed, blue-eyed fool was trapped against the wall by the drug lord's thug, forced to watch as the tears streamed down his face. What happened broke him as much as it did me. I've never loved anyone since, the hurt ran too deep. Opened a chasm in my chest that paved the way for every moment of agony since. It's all come down to this moment, every sin and secret creating a monster of its own.

Me. I'm the product of evil, and I'm ready to inflict some pain of my own.

Vic goes to the kitchen, grabbing himself a beer. "We're moving. I don't care where, any place. Pack up your shit and hand your notice in. That's a fucking order, Brooklyn."

Kill him. Kill him. Kill him.

"No," I croak, but the word is nothing more than a whisper.

The voices will protect me. They know what's best, I've just got to do as I'm told. Getting my legs beneath me is an impossible task, but I force my broken body to move. Vic spares me a disgusted look and heads to the sofa, putting on football like nothing just happened between us.

Don't let him get away with it.

Punish him. Bathe in his blood.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say, this time a little more forcefully. I reach for the knife block in the kitchen and grab the cleaver. It’s heavy in my hand, but feels terrifyingly good.

“You’re talking nonsense again. Go start packing.”

His eyes are on the TV, completely distracted while he simply orders me around. My entire body trembles and shakes as I walk over, weapon clutched behind my back. Lucifer himself rests on my shoulder and beckons me onwards with his unholy demands.

Go for the neck first.

It’s soft, tender, vulnerable. Then finish the job.

“And shower as well while you’re there, I can’t stand the smell of that diner on you.” Vic snorts, downing the rest of his drink. “Scrub your filthy cunt too, get whatever asshole has been screwing you erased. We’ll never discuss it again.”

I pause directly behind him, close enough to smell the earthy beer. One move and this will all end. *Just do as the voices say*, I remind myself. The rest will take care of itself. My heart is pounding, chest thumping as sweat runs down my face. The seconds crawl by unintelligibly and I raise the blade, a triumphant smile escaping.

That’s it, good girl.

Give him what he deserves for hurting you.

I slash and stab, screaming like an animal. Vic fights back at first, eyes blown wide with delicious fear, but I have the element of surprise. The wickedly sharp blade parts flesh and he slumps to the ground, beer bottle shattering. Blood gurgles from his mouth, spurting and pouring from exposed arteries in his neck. Vic slowly chokes, clutching at the air for help that will never come.

I smile sweetly. “I’m sorry, babe. I do love you really.”

The blade slips into his torso and pierces his organs as I viciously attack, leaving no part untouched. By the time I’m done and my thirst for revenge is sated, his eyes are empty. Nothing but a butchered carcass remains, soaking my cream carpet with a crimson river.

Well done. Didn’t that feel good? The power?

You can hurt whoever you want.

Take their lives and dance in their blood.

You know you want to.

I stroll to the bedroom, smashing endless framed photographs along the

way. Then I stare at my horrifying reflection in the mirror. A new version of myself exists now, someone beyond redemption and irrevocably lost to the world. Shadows wrap around my ankles, voices whispering their applause in my mind. Blood coats my uniform and skin, and I rub circles in the sticky liquid with fascination.

So beautiful. Vic had to die. Just like me. I raise the blade to my arm and hold it in position, ready to rip a hole in my artery.

No, Brooklyn.

You have to run, not die. Sort the body.

There's plenty more people out there who deserve to die. Find them.

Shaking my head, I argue with the voices and defend my case. Death is the only option, I'm too far gone to continue. But ultimately the shadows control me, and I leave bloody footprints all the way back to Vic's cooling corpse. He's too large and heavy for just me to move. I'll have to get creative. Can't disappoint, I've been given a task. It must be completed.

Got to finish the job.

A handsaw ought to do the trick.

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THIRTY-NINE

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HUDSON

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THE JESTER BY BADFLOWER

“YOU’RE GOING to tell me exactly what happened here or I will *slowly* and *painfully* break every single fucking bone in your body,” I utter menacingly.

Phoenix shushes me and drags me to the corner, further away from the fitfully sleeping girl in his bed. “Keep it down, will you? The longer she’s out, the better.”

He runs an anxious hand through his hair, eyes straying back over to her. I follow his gaze, pain blooming in my chest at the devastating sight. She’s tightly wrapped in sheets, moaning in her sleep. Bright white bandages peek out, revealing the extent of our current predicament.

“I crushed a load of Valium into her water. She needed it,” Phoenix informs me.

“You spiked her drink with your medication? Dude, what the fuck?”

He glares at me indignantly. “Would you rather she tries it again? If I hadn’t walked in and stitched her up earlier, she would have died. Bled out and fucking *died*.”

My mouth turns to ash, the bitter taste on my tongue refusing to be swallowed. It feels like a snake has wrapped itself around my insides and is squeezing tight, removing all available air. *Died*. She would have left me again, this time for good. The thought fucking destroys me.

“We can’t turn her in. They’ll throw her in the hole for her own protection.”

“Or ship her back to where she came from,” I say grimly. “If they deem her too unstable for Blackwood’s programme.”

“Goddammit!” Phoenix curses. “What the hell do we do then?”

“We deal with this ourselves! We have no choice!”

“We can’t. She needs medical attention.”

He stares at me, shaking his head like I’m the one that’s unstable. I fight the urge to yell at him some more and watch as he walks to the bed and sits down, hand ghosting over Brooklyn’s exposed shoulder.

“Tell me honestly, right now, how you feel about her.”

“Huh?” I frown at him.

“Just answer the fucking question. All cards on the table.”

I sink to the floor, legs stretched out as I struggle through the mess of thoughts in my mind. There’s too many to count. Love. Hate. Lust. Shame. It all mixes into one giant shitshow that has my head spinning. But one thought burns too bright to ignore.

“I can’t lose her. Not now that I’ve found her again,” I admit. “She’s different now, not the person she was before. But it doesn’t matter, my feelings haven’t changed.”

Phoenix nods solemnly, his serious attitude so unlike him. But when faced with crisis, we all have our redeeming qualities. He’s cleaned Eli up many times in similar circumstances without a single complaint.

“You should know that I’m falling in love with her,” he adds.

I wish I could say that I’m surprised, but I’ve seen the way they look at her. You’d have to be a fool to miss it. The guys are all fucking enraptured, just like me. Inexplicably drawn to the beautiful, chaotic disaster that is Brooklyn West and her crazy goddamn head.

“We all care about her, so we’ve got to find a solution here.” I look back at my girl, comforting myself with the rise and fall of her chest. “I’ll get Kade, he’ll know what to do.”

Phoenix snorts. “Yeah, right. He’s busy fixing the other idiot hellbent on self-destruction.”

“What exactly do you bloody suggest then?”

He continues to stroke Brooklyn’s skin, gnawing his lip. “She’ll be out for a few hours, we need to get everyone together to talk some sense into her.”

“Talk to her? That’s your solution?” I repeat. *Is he for real?*

“We’ve got to convince her to stick around.”

Fighting my initial reaction, I consider his idea for a second, shoving the tendrils of jealousy aside. Will it work? Between us all, maybe we have a slim chance of success. Very fucking slim.

“I’ll find Kade and fill him in,” I concede.

“Good,” Phoenix mumbles, nodding to himself. “We need to pull ourselves together for when she wakes up, it’s now or never. All of us need to be there.”

Huffing a breath, I walk to the bed and stare down at my sleeping blackbird. She clutches at the sheets, tormented even now. Surrounded by us, temporarily safe from her own mind. Fuck, there’s no way this will work. We can’t give her what she needs. How can you convince someone to live when they don’t want to?

“It’ll work,” Phoenix reassures, reading my mind.

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because there’s no other option. It’s this or let her implode. The shrinks aren’t getting a look in here, they’ll bury her so deep she’ll never come out again. We’re her last chance.”

He glances up at me, offering me a bleak smile. “Get it done, Hud. For her.”

“Keep her safe until we get back later? I’ll bring the others. Just... watch over her.” Gulping, I let some of my desperation leak out. “We can’t afford to fuck this up.”

“Yeah, got it,” he mutters.

I press a kiss to Brooklyn’s forehead and leave them behind, forcing myself to focus. I’ll need the exact right words to offer her, to make her see that she has a reason to live. Phoenix is right, it’ll take all of us. And if we fail, I can’t even begin to contemplate the repercussions. Losing my blackbird is unimaginable.

I burst into the reception area after sprinting over, struggling for breath. Kade’s on duty and his head snaps up immediately as I enter. “Hud? What’s wrong?”

I jerk my head towards the back and he has a quick glance around, checking the coast is clear. We slip into the rear office for privacy and I slam the door shut.

“I need to tell you something.”

“Um, okay. Anything wrong?”

“Just... don’t freak. It’s Brooklyn.”

Kade stills, colour draining from his face. “What happened?”

I’m so fucking angry and scared, I can barely see straight. It takes all of my self-control to keep calm and rational, the thought of Brooklyn bleeding alone in Eli’s bed a nightmare playing on repeat in my mind. We don’t have

time to waste right now.

“She tried to kill herself,” I blurt.

Kade’s mouth drops open as he goes white. “What?”

“Phoenix found her bleeding out.” I pause, shoving the chilling image from my imagination. “She’s alive, out of it currently. We need to be there when she wakes up. And she needs medical attention, Phoenix has done what he can.”

Kade fists his hair, panic gripping him. “Are you fucking insane? We should take her to Doctor Andrew right now before she tries it again. Jesus Christ, where is she now?”

I shake my head frantically “No! Don’t you see? They’ll take her away for good this time. If we turn her in, we lose her. Permanently. Don’t be a fool.”

Kade’s face falls and his eyes move without seeing, as if searching for options and coming up blank. “But we can’t just do nothing! Isn’t it better that she’s alive, even if it takes her away from us? She’s a loose cannon and you know it.”

I can’t help myself, I punch the blithering idiot.

“Ow! Dammit Hud, the hell was that for?”

“To knock some sense into your thick skull. She will *rot* if they take her away. You know that Blackwood is the only way out of the system. We’re talking about her life here.”

“And I’m trying to save it,” Kade spits.

Turning my back, I walk away to prevent myself hurting him further.

“What exactly was your idea? Screwing her to make it better?” he adds.

He’s got a fucking death wish.

“Don’t push me right now, I will break your fucking legs. Of course, that’s not what this is about!” I collapse into a desk chair, gathering myself. “I don’t know what else to do.”

Kade kneels in front of me, his expression an open wound of shame. “What is happening to us? First Eli, now Brooklyn.” His eyes fall shut, hard lines carving his forehead. “I’ve failed you all, we’re falling apart at the seams.”

I place my hand on my brother’s shoulder, summoning some reassurance that I really don’t believe myself. “We’ll fix it. That’s what family does, right? You said so yourself.”

He manages a half-hearted smile, sparing me an appraising look.

“Careful, brother. You’re starting to sound a little too optimistic for your own liking.”

“Well, don’t get used to it,” I mumble.

We both stand and clasp hands, nodding in acknowledgement. It’s probably the first time we’ve agreed upon something in the eighteen months we’ve spent here. Brooklyn’s brought us together despite the odds, now we’ve both got to work to save her. Kade holds my hand for a second too long, overcome with the moment of clarity.

“Good to have you on my side,” he offers.

“Don’t get all weepy on me, we’ve got shit to do.”

We leave the back office, heading back to the reception but my attention is drawn by the guard leading someone up the stairs from the basement level. My eyes clap on his proud smirk first as he sees us standing there, watching in dismay.

“Gentlemen,” Rio taunts. “How’s Eli’s leg doing? Bit sore?”

I try to move, determined to pummel him into the ground and release the anger slowly choking me. Kade grabs my arm, muttering under his breath. “Not worth it. I reported him to the warden for the attack. He’ll be punished the correct way.”

Rio struts past us, heading for Miss White’s nearby office. My fingers twitch with the urge to punish him myself, but I focus on the task at hand, Brooklyn front and centre in my mind.

“I hope they bury you in solitary,” Kade snaps.

Before Rio can respond with some inflammatory response, a stern voice barks at us. “What exactly is going on here?”

We all turn to see the warden herself appear from her office, hands on her hips and face unimpressed. “Kade, if you wish to keep your job, I suggest you get back to work. You and your friends are already on *very thin ice*. My patience is limited.”

Her cold eyes stray to me, bitter resentment taking over. “You best pray that Rio here doesn’t wish to press charges against Elijah for starting the fight. This could get very messy.”

“What the fuck?” I gasp. “You can’t be serious. You’re taking his side?”

Kade and I gape incredulously at her words, utter disbelief taking over. This is fucking unbelievable. Rio and his group of untouchable lowlifes literally beat the living shit out of Eli, even broke his fucking leg. Why are they defending this asshole?

“Eli’s the one in hospital, beaten within an inch of his life,” Kade points out acidly.

Rio holds his hands up innocently. “He attacked my friends. It was self-defence.”

“There’s not a single fucking scratch on any of you,” I hiss.

Miss White’s patience expires and she turns to the silent guard. “Please escort Rio inside. I will deal with this and join you momentarily.”

We both fall silent and watch Rio pass, slipping into her office. He shoots me a hateful look before disappearing, promising retribution. My mouth waters at the thought. *Fucking bring it*, I’ll rip the cocky shit apart piece by piece.

“Kade, your privileges here can be removed as quickly as they were given, don’t forget that,” Miss White points out, face pinched with displeasure. “There are protocols for a reason around here. Elijah attacked a fellow patient, therefore he is the one at fault.”

“That’s bullshit!” I interrupt.

She glares at me threateningly. “Silence! Or you’ll spend the rest of the bloody year in solitary. I’ve had it with you, Hudson Knight!”

We both stand still, angry beyond words as the warden gives us meaningful looks, ensuring her authority is clear. “Leave Rio alone and worry about yourselves.”

She turns and marches away, slamming her office door hard enough to rattle priceless artworks up and down the hallway. We stare at each other, completely bemused by her blatant favouritism. What the hell has Rio got on her? Has he paid off everyone in this corrupt institute?

Kade rubs his forehead with a pained frown, clearly unhappy. “Rio will get what he deserves one day. There’s something wrong with this place and I refuse to tolerate it for a second longer. Nothing about Blackwood makes sense, least of all that asshole’s power.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“Right now? Nothing. We need to sort our current mess and keep Eli out of their reach. One problem at a time, Hud. Come on, we need to convince Doctor Andrew to release him and see about stealing some supplies to treat Brooklyn.”

We leave for the medical wing together, both struggling with the injustice. Nothing about this unholy place is right, it never has been. In an enclosed world with its own rules and social norms, of course things will be a

little strange.

But that doesn't explain the growing list of worrying incidents that just don't stack up. I have a feeling that we've only glimpsed the horrors that happen behind closed doors. Even if we save Brooklyn and Eli...

Blackwood Institute will swallow them whole.

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FORTY

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BROOKLYN

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BORN TO DIE BY LANA DEL REY

I LAY STOCK STILL, body numb and tingling. The sound of the shower running fills my ears, providing the only sense of reality in the pitch-black room. My mind is so heavy, an eternal burden that refuses to shift. I shouldn't be awake right now, judging by the metallic taste of chemicals on my tongue.

Phoenix saved me. Stitched me. Drugged me. If it wasn't for him, I would certainly be dead by now. Little did he know, I didn't want to be saved. I'm beyond redemption.

I test my limbs, gradually moving from the stiff position. His little cocktail of drugs kept me out for a while, but after twelve months of incarceration, I've built up a tolerance. He miscalculated. It takes more than a handful of Valium to keep me down these days.

This is my final chance.

No drawn-out goodbyes.

No pain or heartbreak.

I'll just disappear and they can all go back to their lives like I never even existed. From the very first day I set foot inside of Blackwood Institute, I never intended to stay. This was just a brief stopping point, a layaway on my inevitable road to promising oblivion. I allowed the guys to distract me from my true purpose in being here, however briefly.

Fucking foolish. I'll never be like them.

My sins are too great.

I walk barefoot and swaying, the room buzzing all around me in a kaleidoscope of confusion. It takes great effort not to fall over, but I've got just enough sense to keep moving, past the bloody, ruined clothes that Phoenix stripped off on his way to freshen up.

I bided my time.

Calculated my moves.

Waited for his guard to fall.

This is my final move. Check mate. No failures this time. Slitting my wrists is too risky, we've proven the odds are unfavourable. These relentless men will just keep patching me back together with their hopes and desperation. Forever seeing something in me that simply isn't there.

Vic saw it too. In his own twisted, possessive way. He refused to let me die and paid the price for his stupidity. I killed him; intimately, brutally, *happily*. The shadows were my guide and they mark my steps now.

I leave Phoenix and this warped reality behind, softly clicking the door shut. My feet ghost across the thick carpet, bare and bloody. There's one more thing I need, my back-up plan. It'll have to do, I'm out of options. I'll hang myself and choke to death if that's what it takes to escape, no matter how messy it will be.

I get back to my room and lift the loose ceiling tile, hand searching in the cobwebs until it meets paper. The package of accusations and hatred has taunted me for the last two months, ever since Mariam handed it over. I didn't break once in all that time, saving them all for this exact moment.

It's only fair that I read the letters now at the end of this chaotic journey, a fitting memorial for this inevitable day. I've lived a whole year longer than he got to. Time to right that wrong. I stuff the bundle in my leather jacket and slip it on, too out of it to contemplate putting proper clothes or shoes on. My mind is numb and broken beyond repair.

My eyes stray to the phantom girl in the mirror. She looks haunted. Gaunt, tired, and inarguably *done*. The longer I look, I see him staring back at me. The golden boy hiding his evil, who hurt me in the worst possible way and died choking on his own blood. I watch myself smile. It's twisted and sick. Shadows curl around my limbs and begin to whisper, growing stronger.

He deserved it. You do too.

Come on, Brooklyn. Time's up.

Taking one final glance around my room, I swallow the rising emotion that threatens to distract me. It's messy in here, scattered with books and clothes. I note the reminders of the past two months, snippets of normality and belonging that prolonged my inevitable end.

Phoenix's beanie.

Eli's hoodie.

Kade's backpack.

Hudson's shirt.

Life is fucking temporary, fleeting in its brutality. It ends and begins, trapped on an endless loop that most are powerless to escape. I'm just taking off early, unable to stomach any more of this rollercoaster. The guys will soon forget and move on. Whatever feelings that I have for them... it's irrelevant now. I've got to finish the job that I started one year ago, and pay back the outstanding debt on my life. I'll end it and free all four pieces of my heart from this toxic *thing* between us.

There's a knock on my door, before it swings open. I prepare to fight whoever is trying to save me this time. I'll hurt them if I have to. They can't stop me again.

"Hey Brooklyn."

Dread seizes me and I force myself to look, finding Rio in my doorway. He grins at me, eyes slowly travelling over my body, noting the bandages on my arms and skittish look on my face. Smiling slow and sinister, he easily excavates the truth from my soul.

"Still want that key?"

I try to speak, my mouth impossibly dry. Nothing comes out.

"Some people have forgotten their place around here and need to be taught a lesson. We don't tolerate disrespect here at Blackwood. They just need reminding." Rio gestures behind to the corridor, where Kade and Phoenix's room is located. "You want to help me out with this? Free of charge. Call it a parting gift."

I nod, but not a sound passes my lips. Morbid hope balloons in my chest.

"Follow me," he orders.

Leaving my room behind, we climb the stairs together to the top floor, passing several guards along the way that simply nod at Rio, deferring to his authority. Almost like he's the one in charge, not them, which makes zero sense. I wait outside his bedroom door, trembling all over while he gets the key. The sound of a floorboard slotting back into place reverberates through my mind. I'm close, I can almost taste the freedom.

Lazlo's question flashes through my mind.

Don't you want to see your parents again?

There's a strange feeling in my chest, desperately battling to break free.

"Ready?" Rio asks, offering the slim key card to me.

I clutch it tight, managing another nod despite my body trying to defy me.

It feels like I'm being pulled in two directions, ripping my entire psyche apart straight down the middle. I stare at him, wracked with uncertainty and a heavy dose of panic.

"Don't worry about a thing, it's planned out for you," Rio informs me, his words going straight over my head despite the immediate alarm bells. "I'll have a guard testify, say you stole the card from him. Might even rough him up a bit, make it believable. Schizos can be so unstable, you know. I'll take care of everything, Brooklyn."

Why?

Who are you?

Why are you doing this?

Questions rise to the surface like demons refusing to drown and I shove them aside, ignoring the terror of reality. This is my chance and I won't waste it. No matter what pieces on the chess board are carefully manipulating me, a clueless pawn.

We take the steps to the roof with solemn proclamation. Like the grim reaper guiding his victim, Rio hides from sight and gestures to the camera. Counting down the seconds and giving me an encouraging nod as the red light blinks out.

"It's time." Rio gives me a long, hard look, as if savouring his victory. "Got anything you want to say?"

I stare at him, unfathomable pressure threatening to break my mind apart. Confusion and panic rise like an erupting volcano, but it remains locked out by the numb cloud coating everything. I should say something. Anything. Yet I can't think of a single word.

"You played the game well," he offers with a conciliatory smile. "Didn't think you'd last this long."

Game?

Rio laughs, plucking the card from my shaking hands and scanning it to unlock the exterior door. His hand strokes over my tangled hair, lips twisting with satisfied amusement.

"Nothing about this place is real, Brooklyn. Don't you see that yet? It's all just..." He pauses, grinning and searching for the right word. "An illusion."

Freezing cold air rushes through the gap, entangled with voices that beckon me up.

"Off you go. I can't wait to tell the others about this, I'll be given a

fucking promotion. You've proven mighty interesting. I'm glad Augustus decided to bring you into the program."

"Augustus?" I choke out, barely above a whisper.

Something is screaming at me from deep inside, protesting against the slow realisation. This isn't right, his words mean something. I should be fucking running, not taking an offer that is simply too good to be true. But everything is so loud in my mind, too exhausted and defeated to fight back.

"Oh, yes. Shame you'll never meet him," Rio goads.

Say it, Brooklyn. You know the truth. Say it.

"Y-you're not a real patient. Are you?"

Rio strokes my cheek with something akin to pride, happy to boast his true status. "You've been fun, but it's time. Goodbye Brooklyn."

My feet move of their own accord, giving me no choice but to comply. I take the steps up, leaving the devil behind. Voices scream in my mind to keep going, we're so close and nothing stands in our way anymore. Even though on a subconscious level, rationality is itching to escape. *This is too easy.*

Wind whips my hair as I emerge on the roof. The sky is marked in shades of indigo and purple, an angry sunset just disappearing on the horizon. I think of my mother putting herself in the way of beauty. She's here with me now, arms open and ready to welcome me home.

I make it to the edge of the building, my feet nudging brick that melts into thin air. I'm glad it's ending this way. With day fading into night, life morphing into death. Thing is, I've never lived in darkness. The darkness lives in me.

I take the bundle from my pocket and carefully undo the knot, endless letters falling all around me. Allison's penmanship screams at me from the ink-stained pages, the words taking life in my mind as sharp voices whisper her hatred. I open the first letter.

You took my brother from me. I hope you rot in hell, where you belong.

It falls from my hands. The next one is marked a week later.

We had to bury him in pieces, that's how you left him. Unrecognisable.

I scrunch it up and toss it over the edge, watching the paper fall through the air. Marking the path that I shall soon follow. They continue in order; week on week, for nearly ten months. Each spewing hatred that I most definitely deserve. Countless letters telling me to die and remove my evil stain from this earth for good.

I'm more than happy to oblige.

Stepping up onto the edge, my body wobbles in the suddenly thin air. Mere inches to go and I'm free. The final letter is clasped in my hands, bending under the weight of my anticipated grip.

I don't think everyone is evil, some deserve forgiveness. But that's just not you. What you did to my brother... that's not sickness. That's depravity. You're a monster, not a victim.

My eyes slip shut. Breathing halts. The voices quieten. Everything waits for the eventual fall. As I ready to throw myself into the comforting arms of the unknown, faces flick through my mind. Bright hazel eyes and perfect blonde hair. A silent, secretive smile and soft brown curls. Playful blue waves and an optimistic grin. Inky black strands and overwhelming regret.

I teeter on the edge and reply to the images in my head.

Goodbye. I'm sorry.

In the split second before throwing myself from the roof, a blood-curdling scream pierces the air. Followed by shouting. Yelling. My name. Multiple voices. Desperation. My head turns and I see them, this time for real. Running towards me with hands waving frantically.

“Don't come any closer!”

My pursuers freeze, gripped with terror as I dangerously sway on the edge. Bricks crumble and topple off from the roof, barely supporting my weight. Kade steps forward and raises his hands placatingly, his entire body fraught with tension.

“Brooklyn, listen to me carefully—”

“No!” I scream back.

Kade flinches, face collapsing with fear and he searches for help. Phoenix tentatively steps forward next, leaving Hudson behind as he holds a wriggling Rio in a headlock.

“Firecracker... it's me,” Phoenix offers.

He approaches me like a startled animal. There's blood smeared on his face from a recent fight, knuckles cracked and bleeding. I can see that Rio's nose is pouring while Hudson continues to choke him vehemently.

“Don't move. There's nothing left to say,” I say in a robotic voice.

“There's everything left to say. You don't have to do this, please let us help you.”

I shift my right foot. More bricks crumble and my body sways again. “One more step and I go,” I interrupt him. “Stop fighting this. All of you.”

“Blackbird, stop!”

“Brooklyn, don’t!”

“Firecracker, please!”

They all shout and plead as I inch my left foot back, so fucking close to falling. The wind picks up and a squeak escapes my lips as I teeter, struggling to maintain my balance. All three of them shift closer, ignoring my raised hand holding them back.

“No! This is my decision and mine alone!” I cry out, tilting my face up to feel the falling rain. “I must be punished for what I’ve done. I’m sorry, this is the only way.”

Beginning to turn away from them, I face the towering drop. I lift my right foot to fling myself into the air, my heart bruising my ribs as it threatens to break free, but a different voice stops me.

Harsh. Grating. Raw. Disused.

“D-don’t... go.”

I tremble on one foot as the sound of crutches against concrete approaches. Tears stream down my cheeks and freeze in the gradually increasing wind. In that moment, the final scrap of light disappears from the sunset. Ceaseless darkness invades everything.

“S-stay.”

Stuttered. Broken. Pained. Unpractised.

I look over my shoulder through the thick curtain of tears. He stands mere metres away, leg wrapped in a cast and face marked in unnatural shades of colour. Brown curls matted and unwashed. Lips parted on words spoken only to me, breaking years of silence.

Eli drops one of his crutches and raises his hand, fingers outstretched to beckon me closer. I stare into his wide green eyes, full of horrors of both past and present, understanding in a way only kindred spirits can be. My foot lowers of its own accord as we face off in the gathering storm, locked in a battle of wills.

“I can’t... don’t make me,” I manage to reply.

Those perfect lips turn up in a smile just for me. Thick eyelashes frame dazzling emerald eyes, begging me to step down. Eli wiggles his fingers; coaxing, encouraging, imploring me to return to him.

“L-live,” he struggles out. “W-we... live.”

He hops closer to close the distance between us.

“Please stay away.” I sob brokenly. “I don’t... want to live.”

Eli stops mere inches away from me, but he doesn’t move any closer. His

hand hovers in the air, encouraging me to close that final gap. I reach out automatically. I can't help myself, our fingers entwine. His palm is warm and dry. Steady. Reassuring. *Alive*.

“Neither do I.”

His voice is raw, but flows like honey through my veins.

My feet move back from the edge without thinking. Only slightly, but enough for him to see. That devastating gaze burrows beneath my skin and attacks the tendrils of hatred around my heart. I take a shuddering breath. More tears fall. My body shakes. The wind howls. Eli's hand clutches mine painfully tight.

“Live... f-for me. For us.”

His words ghost over my skin, caressing my fractured soul. Invading my mind in a way that no one else ever will. All because Elijah Woods is me. Broken pieces held together by bitter resentment and determination to take up less goddamn space in the world.

There's a sudden, brutal gust of wind just as I resolve to step down. I teeter in the air for a terrifying second before finally losing my balance.

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EPILOGUE

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ELI

The Funeral by Bands of Horses

“IF ANYONE HAS any further information about the tragic events that transpired last night, I urge you to come forward. You won’t be in trouble. We need witnesses to shed some light on what happened. And remember... suicide is never the answer.”

Miss White casts a serious look around the cafeteria, her dominance and authority stifling. There are more guards than you can possibly count in this room, a clear show of force after the chaos of the last twenty-four hours.

Phoenix grips my hand so hard it turns white. I touch his frantically jiggling leg, trying to communicate my silent support. We’ve got to keep it together in front of everyone.

“I understand that you are all shaken by what happened yesterday. A full investigation will take place, I can assure you that we will get to the bottom of this,” she adds meaningfully.

“Fucking lies,” Phoenix hisses under his breath. “All of it.”

His acrid rage dances across my tongue and I swallow, forcing the bitter flavour aside. *Hold it together, just for a few more seconds. Got to keep a brave face, don’t let them see the truth.* This is torturous, sitting here like nothing is wrong, but it’s necessary.

Miss White sighs and shuffles her papers, brows furrowed. “That’s it for now. Classes are cancelled for the rest of the week.”

There's a scraping of chairs as a handful of therapists rise, including Mariam and Sadie. They all watch us carefully, faces schooled into heartfelt sadness. Like any of them actually care.

Miss White clears her throat, forcing a horrid smile that really doesn't suit her. "This institute will mourn the loss of one of its own. Rest assured, if anyone was involved... there will be punishment. You're all dismissed."

The room bursts into a flurry of movement, patients rushing to escape. We allow the crowd to dissipate, then Phoenix hauls me to my feet and offers an arm. I get my crutches into position and resolutely ignore the pain wracking my body.

"You good?" Phoenix asks.

I nod curtly, keeping my expression neutral. We slowly stumble past the warden, who turns away from the conversation she's having to watch us suspiciously. We avoid all eye contact.

"Think they know?" Phoenix whispers once we escape outside.

I shake my head. *Who fucking knows at this point?*

It takes an age for us to get home at my snail's pace, but as we tackle the stairs, I notice the dorms are eerily quiet, with everyone seeming to avoid returning to where last night's tragedy took place. The entire institute is shaken to the very core.

Back at his room, Phoenix roots in his pocket for the key card and scans it shakily, letting us both in. Kade shoots up as soon as we enter.

"How was it? What happened?"

I release Phoenix, letting him collapse and sink to the ground. He immediately buries his face in his hands, taking an uneven breath. "They're scrambling, searching for information."

"But nobody gave any?"

I shake my head and Kade's body visibly sags with relief. He runs a hand through his messy hair, face pale and exhausted. None of us slept a wink last night, too traumatised to sleep. We're running on empty, clutching at straws as we scramble to cover our asses.

"We need to get our stories straight in case they question us," Phoenix mutters. "The warden is ordering a full investigation."

"Way ahead of you. I'll brief everyone later." Kade sighs.

I ignore them both, shrugging off my jacket and rounding the corner to bring Phoenix's bed into view. Two bodies are safely tucked inside where we left them. Hudson is sound asleep on his back, arm tightly wrapped around

Brooklyn's shoulders as she naps on his chest. He hasn't left her side since the roof, possessively clinging to her out of fear.

"They've been out for a while," Kade explains, also contemplating the occupied bed. "Sadie gave her more sedatives when she came to finish the transfusion. We're out of the woods for the time being."

I nod again, eternally grateful that the trainee agreed to help us.

"Good shout involving her, she's on our side here," Kade praises me.

She's the only person here that I even remotely trust. Sadie cared about Brooklyn in Clearview, so I knew we could approach her. Not like the others know that, thankfully she kept her mouth shut about the past. That's my story to tell.

Phoenix pulls himself together and joins me by the bed, wrapping an arm around my waist for comfort. Kade comes next, completing our group, attention firmly on the unconscious girl that narrowly cheated death mere hours ago. Our entire world rests in that bed.

We're her family now. Come hell or high water.

"What next?" Phoenix asks fearfully.

I don't answer, deferring to our leader. He's the one in charge of this car crash, though I expect he's making it up as he goes along. Kade lets out a sigh and meets both of our eyes, wracked with overwhelming uncertainty.

"We figure out how to keep her alive, no matter what it takes."

"What about Blackwood?"

Kade gulps hard, more afraid than I've ever seen him.

"Something's wrong with this place. We need to find out what is really happening, and somehow conceal the fact that it was us who threw Rio off that fucking roof."

THE END
TO BE CONTINUED IN BI # 2

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BONUS SCENE

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ELI

Stop Trying, Be Nothing by Boston Manor

6 Months Earlier

ONE CUT.

Bad Elijah.

Two cuts.

Filthy sinner.

Three cuts.

Devil child.

Swimming in my own slick blood, I breathe a deep sigh of relief. With every drop that flows out of me, I take back control. Piece by piece, I shed the hollow remains of who I was. The broken person that my father made me. An obedient little boy, who always did what he was told.

Pray.

Beg for redemption.

Shut your unholy mouth, boy.

Blessed are the meek.

What little good that did me. He still locked me in the sin closet. He still struck a match and let righteous judgement decide my fate. The bastard walked away with the unshakeable faith that he was doing God's work.

Methodically cleaning my blade and tucking it away, I yank the sleeve of my hoodie down to hide the cuts. The graveyard is silent around me, punctuated by the chirp of insects. Afternoon sunshine beats down on

me. Summer is right around the corner now, the whispers of spring dissipating.

In the past month since I arrived at Blackwood Institute, I have remained a lone wolf. The runt of the fucked-up pack. It's by necessity that I hide from the world. This is safer, simpler. The world fucking scares me.

I breathe in the soft breeze.

Savour the clean air.

Thank the universe for freedom.

Years of incarceration have changed my perspective. If this is as free as I'll ever get, I'm thankful. It's enough for me. My days of straightjackets and padded cells are over.

Leaving the safe haven of the graveyard behind, I head back to the dorms. Patients stare and whisper as I go. I'm the resident freak, even in this place. I defy the usual bounds of insanity to set a whole new crazy-ass standard. Most of the population pretend I don't exist. The ones brave enough to speak to me, I ignore. No matter how persistent they are.

"Eli!"

It's him. His footsteps are full of confidence.

"Wait up, man. How are you?"

Kade, the most determined of them all. He's a collector of lost causes. In my first days, I ran from him. Terrified and unable to make eye contact, let alone anything else. Now, I merely tolerate his presence. He doesn't push or make me uncomfortable, unlike the rest of the human species.

"Hang on, Phoenix is just grabbing his phone."

I fight the urge to facepalm. That bundle of manic energy is a whole other issue entirely. He comes bounding around the corner, a goofy grin on his face.

"Thanks for waiting. Hey Eli."

I can feel him studying me, smirking like usual. He thinks I don't notice the secret looks, his gaze laden with heat. *Fool*. I know what he wants from me, but it's dangerous. Someone will get hurt. I'm too damaged to be loved.

Trailing behind them to the cafeteria, I take my usual seat in the corner. Alone, as always. Just as I'm about to slip my headphones in, three trays hit the table. *Determined motherfuckers*. Kade gives me a reassuring smile while Phoenix just stares, determined to get a reaction. Hudson has also joined us, stewing in silence. He's the brooding asshole of the group.

Sweat coats my palms

Ashes dance across my tongue.

This is panic—sour and awful. All I can taste are their expectations, the inherent judgement that plagues my existence. As I begin to spiral, collapsing inwards for comfort, Phoenix saves me.

“You guys hear about Rio getting caught balls deep in the receptionist?”

Water shoots from Hudson’s nostrils as he chokes, coughing and spluttering. Kade hammers him on the back, fighting a grin. He glances around to make sure no one is listening before answering.

“It’s true. The warden sacked her on the spot and made her cry.”

Pushing his tray away, Hudson’s nose is wrinkled in disgust. “Yeah, I’ve lost my appetite now. Thanks for that mental image. How old is she?”

Kade snorts. “Old enough to be his mother!”

“Hey, beggars can’t be choosers.”

Phoenix shoots me a wink, causing heat to rush to my cheeks. The flirting is truly shameless. I have no idea what his deal is, but clearly gender isn’t a consideration. He drools over women and men alike.

“They’ve asked me to cover some of her shifts in the interim, basic admin stuff,” Kade reveals.

“Does that mean you can get us privileges and shit? Pull some strings?”

Kade glares at Phoenix’s suggestion, clearly incensed.

“No! I’m not doing anything illegal just so you can get out of mandatory gym class. Dream on, fucker.”

They continue to bicker, with Hudson chiming in his requests. Kade denies every single one, determined to keep it by the books. As he descends into an argument with his brother, Phoenix gives me his full attention. His lips are full and inviting, freshly dyed hair begging to be touched. *Damn it, Eli.*

“How long are you going to mope about for?”

I stare, daring to lift my shoulder in a shrug.

“The way I see it, you have a choice. Continue to sit alone, do your own thing, whatever. Or come to my room tonight. I’ve got a girl coming over, she wants to celebrate before getting discharged tomorrow. You game?”

Is he suggesting what I think he is? Sitting frozen, my heart hammers as he reaches out, thumb gliding over my bottom lip. Nobody has ever touched me with anything but hatred and disgust. The simple act has my dick standing to attention. Phoenix’s eyes sparkle with mischief.

“I don’t mind sharing if you don’t, *Elijah*. I like to play rough, but

something tells me you can keep up. I've seen what you do in that graveyard when you think no one is looking. Playing with your blades like the sadistic little fuck you are. I'd be lying if I said it isn't hot."

His voice drops to a low, throaty whisper.

"Watching you cut yourself makes me so fucking hard."

Squeezing my thigh under the table, I'm left gaping as he turns away. Normal conversation resumes, like nothing happened. When it's time to go, something changes. I'm automatically included in the group, despite the fact that not a single word has left my mouth. Kade takes my empty tray and Hudson grabs my backpack, while Phoenix rests a hand on my waist.

"Come on, I've got an essay to write. You're smart, right? Reckon you can give me some pointers?" Phoenix waggles his eyebrows.

Surprisingly, I nod. He grins and drags me out of the cafeteria. Sandwiched between the three guys, I'm protected from the stares and whispers. Nobody dares to utter a single hateful thing to me. I've been claimed, but it feels right. Easier than breathing. For the first time, I feel something other than despair. An unknown, alien emotion that doesn't burn my senses or make me gag with bitter flavours.

Hope. Belonging.

Perhaps even... trust.

Thanks so much for reading! If you loved Twisted Heathens, please consider leaving a review on Amazon and Goodreads. These so important and you'll be making this sleep-deprived author smile.

With love, J Rose x

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PLAYLIST

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Had Enough by Mouth Culture
Phobia by Nothing But Thieves
Jaws by Sleep Token
I Want Out by Lowborn
Sail by AWOLNATION
I Fall Apart by Post Malone
Kiss by Lil Peep
Gasoline by Halsey
Serotonin by Call Me Karizma
Let Me Be Sad by I Prevail
Follow You by Bring Me The Horizon
I'm Not Well by Black Foxxes
Daddy by Badflower
Tears Don't Fall by Bullet For My Valentine
Let You Go by Machine Gun Kelly
Monster (Under My Bed) by Call Me Karizma
Cathedrals by Animal Flag
Twisted by MISSIO
Hurricane by Halsey
Higher by Sleep Token
Toxic Lovers by Mass of Man & Masetti
Everybody Gets High by MISSIO
11 Minutes by YUNGBLUD, Halsey & Travis Barker

Heroin by Badflower
Holy Night by Landon Tewers
Dark Signs by Sleep Token
Beautiful Way by You Me At Six
Blasphemy by Bring Me The Horizon
Hurricane by I Prevail
If You Want by NF
Whatever Lets You Cope by Black Foxxes
Guest Room by Echos
The Kill by Thirty Seconds To Mars
The Hills by The Weeknd
Waiting Game by BANKS
Crazy by LOWBORN
Snuff by Slipknot
Blood Sport by Sleep Token
Little Monster by Royal Blood
The Jester by Badflower
Born To Die by Lana Del Rey
The Funeral by Bands of Horses
Stop Trying, Be Nothing by Boston Manor

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

J Rose is an independent dark romance author from the United Kingdom. She dabbles in both the contemporary and paranormal genres, writing emotionally impactful stories that tackle real world issues. She's an introverted bookworm at heart, with a caffeine addiction, penchant for cursing, and an unhealthy attachment to fictional characters. Feel free to reach out on social media, J Rose loves talking to her readers!

For exclusive insights, updates, and general mayhem, please join J Rose's Readers Group on Facebook.

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Come join the chaos. Stalk J Rose here...



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