

A romantic couple is featured in a close embrace. The woman, with long, wavy brown hair and red lipstick, is looking off to the side with a soft expression. The man, with short dark hair, is leaning in to kiss her on the cheek. He is wearing a white shirt and a dark jacket. The background is dark, making the couple stand out.

I'LL SHOW THEM  
NO MERCY.

# WICKED

FALLEN ROYALS BOOK THREE

# PROMISES

S. MASSERY

# WICKED PROMISES

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FALLEN ROYALS, #3

S. MASSERY

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

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*To You.*  
*Yes, you. The one reading this.*  
*Thank you.*

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

WARNING: this book has dubious consent and situations. Our anti-hero behaves questionably at times. Pretty much all the time, if we're being completely honest. He's no white knight, and he's definitely not the good guy.

If that sort of thing bothers you, I'd suggest passing on this story. If I've intrigued you... carry on.

Wicked Promises is the final book of a trilogy and **not** a standalone.

Fallen Royals Series:

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Don't forget to sign up for S. Massery's [newsletter](#) for news about future releases.

## **BLURB**

I made a promise to Caleb, and I intended to keep it.  
I just didn't anticipate the aftermath.

One betrayal.  
One lie.  
One devastating cover-up.

It's all out in the open now, and this time, I'm not running away.  
The secrets I hold are enough to destroy us.

The truth is supposed to set us free—but we aren't destined for freedom.

## UNKNOWN

I WISH I could say this was only ever about you, Margo. But it wasn't.

There were so many other moving pieces. You, Caleb, your families. I sometimes want to laugh at the complexity of the situation I found myself in. How could I have known the hornet's nest I was walking into? The *agony* you brought on Caleb's family?

The luck of the draw.

A single spark of *luck* put us together.

You and me, for all eternity.

We're bound together. And now that I have you...

Pain is inevitable.

And so is your downfall.

## MARGO

SOMETHING COOL TOUCHES MY CHEEK.

I pull away, and my entire body bursts into flames.

*Pain*, not flames.

My face is hot.

“Come on, Margo, I know you’re back.”

Back? Back where?

“Wake up, Margo.”

Am I sleeping?

I can’t open my eyes. I can’t move. It’s just pain everywhere, little rockets sizzling under my skin and across my brain. The headache is extreme.

Where am I?

Another cool thing on my cheek.

“Jesus, did you try to kill her?” A new voice. Lighter.

Someone I know? Their name is on the tip of my tongue.

“I couldn’t really control it once I hit them,” the first one says.

“She’s bleeding.” A sigh. Someone moves my head. A groan fills the air.

My heartbeat echoes in my ears, drowning out the voice for a moment.

“...hospital. You don’t have a choice.”

*Maybe I’m dead.*

“Up you go, Margo.”

I’m lifted, swung into arms. My head falls back.

My eyes open in slits. It’s blinding.

Old slatted wood. Sunlight peeking through. Cold air. A high ceiling, rafters with cobwebs and hay.

*I can't be dead.*

"You aren't dead. You're not going to die. That's not the plan."

Someone has a plan? I used to be a planner. I thought I knew what was going to happen to me. I thought I could control it. And then...

"Don't fucking talk to her."

"I'm sorry," the first voice says. "God, I'm sorry."

Something covers my nose and mouth. A cloth. The fabric is soft, but my body bucks against it. My lungs burn. I wrap my hand around the person's wrist and hold on for dear life.

But wait. *I think...*

I can't breathe. I need to breathe.

I snap my eyes fully open, locking them onto the face of the person carrying me.

It's too late to do anything else. I gasp, inhale the chemicals.

Hands reach up out of the darkness, dragging me back down.

I go. Anywhere is better than here.

## CALEB

A BALLED-UP SOCK hits me in the face.

I jerk and glare at Eli. “What was that for?”

“You were zoning out,” he says.

One thing we can’t get away with in the Black household is laundry duty. Everything else is taken care of except this one task. It’s soothing, the warm fabric sliding through my hands. But it also invoked memories.

Packing clothes. Being shipped off to Uncle’s house.

Mom leaving.

Eli and I stand on opposite sides of the dining table with our own piles of clean clothes. The faster we fold, the sooner we’ll be done. That’s what I keep telling myself, anyway.

“Just think how prepared you’ll be for when you live on your own,” Eli’s mom often told us. “We’re getting you ready for adulthood.”

But I can’t concentrate, because Margo is with her dad. She’ll find out the real truth. The ugliness we’ve been hiding.

Her dad killed mine. Snuffed his life out—

“*Dude.*”

I grimace.

The doorbell rings just as my phone goes off. I glance at Eli. It’s a blocked number.

He waves me off, unaware of the sudden spike in my blood pressure, and heads to the door.

I’m being ridiculous. A blocked number isn’t Unknown, Margo’s harasser. *Stalker*. No, it’s probably a telemarketer or a scam.

“What?” I bark into the phone.

“Hello, Caleb,” a robotic voice says. It sounds like an automated voice reading a line of text. “I’ve greatly anticipated speaking with you.”

I stare at the floor and don’t answer. They want to hear my voice? No way.

“They’re going to ask you about Margo.”

“What?”

The line fills with breathing. It doesn’t make sense in contrast to the automated tone. “When they ask, just remember: anything you say will be held against you.”

“What happened to Margo?” My heart beats faster. Worry takes over.

“Don’t worry, Caleb. You got your wish.”

I fight back the growl. “What the fuck did I wish for?”

*Pause.* “For the foster parents to be... Removed from the situation.”

Mrs. Black walks into the kitchen. “Caleb, hang up the phone.”

Happily. I hit the *end* button and toss my phone onto my folded clothes.

*Game face.*

“The police are here,” she says to me in a low voice. “They wanted to talk to you... Who was on the phone? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I shake off the bad feeling. “No one important.”

She shrugs. “Come along, then. I’ve called Josh.”

Mr. Black is a defense lawyer. If she’s called him...

“Am I in trouble?”

Worry flits across her face, but it’s gone before I can latch on to it. “Have you done something we need to worry about? I can insist we wait—”

“I haven’t done anything.”

She nods, smoothing out my shirt. She’s been more my parent than my family ever was. Taking a deep breath, she turns and leads me into the living room.

“Caleb, this is Detective Masters.” She gestures for us to sit. “Since Caleb is still a minor...”

“Of course.” The detective is an older guy. Bald. He seems like he could eat nails for breakfast. “Caleb, I just have a few questions for you, if you don’t mind.”

I lift one shoulder

“Have you been home all day?”

My eyebrow jumps. It isn’t every day the police come asking for an alibi.

“Yep, Eli and I have been doing laundry and playing games.”

He clears his throat, glancing at a little notepad in his palm. “And when’s the last time you saw Margo Wolfe?”

My stomach twists. “Did something happen to her?”

He waits.

“I saw her this morning. She went home, and I stayed here.”

“And as far as you know, what were her plans today?”

I glance at Mrs. Black. “She had plans to see her father.”

“Her father, who happened to be in jail on murder charges—”

“He pled out to voluntary manslaughter, Detective,” Mrs. Black says in a low voice. “And this line of questioning seems rather extreme. Are you insinuating something happened to Margo?”

Detective Masters leans back, his eyebrow twitching.

*Smug asshole.*

“I’m not insinuating anything, Norah. Margo is missing.”

I bolt to my feet. “Missing?”

“Her foster father was found at the scene of a car accident. She was not in or around the vehicle.” He stands as well. “From the condition of the car, she was badly hurt when they pulled her out of the wreck.”

“And you’re here?” I snap. “Questioning me when you should be—I don’t know, out there searching for—”

“Caleb,” Mrs. Black says, putting her hand on my arm.

I jerk away from her.

“No. No, this is bullshit. You say she’s missing, but what you really mean is someone took her.” I narrow my eyes at the detective. “Get the fuck out of here.”

“Has anyone been paying too much attention to Margo?” the detective asks. “Besides you. Her foster mother was unable to confirm anything, but I suspect Margo would’ve been more open to talking with friends.”

Fucking Unknown.

I’m no closer to figuring out who they are, but I’d bet I can find her faster than the Rose Hill Police Department.

Who knows how much manpower they have on a foster kid who’s been in the system forever? Who was once marked as a runaway? The detective is looking down his nose at her, even though he saw where the Jenkinses live. What kind of company Margo keeps.

He needs to leave.



“I don’t think so,” I say. “Nothing jumps out.”

He pauses, then nods. “All right. We’ll be in touch. Stay in town, hear me?”

I lift my chin.

Eli’s mom shows him to the door, and I beeline for my room. I shove my shoes on, lacing them tightly, and grab my jacket.

Eli intercepts me at the top of the stairs.

“Dude.”

“Get out of my way,” I snarl.

“He’s still *out* there, you jackass,” Eli says. “What do you think, he’s just going to tell you Margo’s missing and then drive away?”

I should’ve assumed he was eavesdropping.

“I know—” I grimace. “I don’t *know* who has her. But I kind of know.”

He rears back. “What?”

“It’s complicated.” Panic grips my throat. I tug at my hair. “Listen, we don’t have time for this. I lost her once. I will *not* let someone else take her from me.”

Eli stares at me for a moment, then he grins. “I’m in.”

I blink. “Huh?”

“I’m *in*. And don’t worry about the detective—just meet me around the block in five.” He shoots me a look, snatching my keys out of my hand and tossing them over my shoulder. “You’re not even supposed to be driving, anyway.”

He spins around, leaving me standing there.

With Eli... a little bit of hope comes back. We can find Margo.

I’m not ten years old, pushed along by my family’s current. I can make my own choices. And I will bring her home.

## Past

Margo. Margo. Where did she go?

Mom grabbed me, and my eyes flew open. I knew it was her before I was even aware, because she always smelled like roses and baby powder.

“Caleb,” she said. “Wake up.”

I was already staring at her. Her order came a few seconds too late.

I didn’t bother pointing it out to her. She moved away, to the foot of my bed. Her glare cut through my misery. Through *me*.

“Why did they take her away?”

“Her father—” Mom pressed her lips together. “After what *that man* did to our family, you still want to see her?”

I sat up. “She didn’t do anything.”

Mom laughed. I flinched at the sudden loudness of it in my room. It was dark, practically the middle of the night. No moonlight came in through my windows. There wasn’t even a breeze to cool my skin.

I was hot. Burning impossibly bright.

“She didn’t *do* anything?” Mom parroted. She turned on my overhead light.

Again, I was the only one who flinched. She was being mean. Grief made people do crazy things. And by grief I mean...

“Do you even care that your father is dead?”

Long live the king.

I’d been repeating that since the day he died. Why? Because he was still here, haunting the house. Lurking. His memory was pungent enough to suffocate a bear, and Mom just wouldn’t let it go.

I wanted Margo. Plain and simple.

Mom huffed at my silence. “Get up.”

I glanced at the clock on my nightstand. “It’s two in the morning.”

“Get *up* Caleb Asher, or so help me—”

“Okay, okay.” I threw back the blankets and stood, keeping my attention half on her while I found my jeans and a clean shirt.

“Pack a bag.”

“What?”

“Pack a bag, Caleb,” she snapped. “Why do I have to ask you to do something twice?” To herself, she added, “He’ll learn.”

I shuddered but did as she'd asked. I threw clothes in a backpack. She disappeared, then returned with my toothbrush and a few other toiletries. She steered me down the stairs. Her grip was forceful.

Her bag was packed, too. A suitcase sat by the door.

"Where are we going?"

She gave me a brittle smile. "Away from this house."

I cast a look around. "For how long?"

She shook her head. "Forever, as far as I'm concerned. The will reading is tomorrow, and I doubt your father left the house to me. Everything was locked up tightly in a trust." She laughed. "How ironic."

We stepped outside. It was just as hot and still out here as it was in my bedroom. The night wasn't silent—not like the house. Quiet, yes, but there was life out here.

*Not like in there.*

"I don't understand," I told her, climbing into the car. At ten—almost eleven—I was just a hair shy of sitting in the front seat. Not that I minded in this particular instance. I took as much distance as I could get away with.

She tucked both our bags in the trunk, then slid into the driver's seat. "You don't understand what?"

*How is Margo going to find me if I leave?*

"You're going to stay with family," she said in an even tone.

I leaned forward against my seatbelt. "What about you?"

She met my eyes in the rearview mirror. "There are some things I need to take care of, Caleb. Finding someone to get the blood out of the carpet, for one. The sooner we can sell that godforsaken house, the better off we'll be."

White-hot fear flashed through me.

"No!" I yelled. "We can't go!"

She ignored me.

"Mom! You can't just—we need to stay! Margo—"

"Do *not* speak her name," Mom hissed. She slammed on the brakes, jerking the car to the side of the road. She twisted around, pinching my chin. Her long nails dug into my skin. "She's dead to us."

"Just like Dad?" I managed.

Mom stared at me for a moment. "Didn't you ever love him? Do you not get it? *He isn't coming back.* This isn't a dream you can wake up from, Caleb. Things won't go back to how they were. And I sure as hell will *not* trap myself in Rose Hill while the rest of the world keeps turning."

I did love him, but he screamed. Threw things. Instilled terror into us.  
*Us.* Like Margo was sitting beside me.

I understood what Mom was saying. In Rose Hill, only bad things happened. She wanted a new chance at life.

But I didn't. I wanted things back to normal.

I rubbed the bracelet on my wrist absently. I should've removed it and thrown it away, but the hate Mom kept insisting on wasn't there. It wasn't Margo's fault. It was her dad's fault.

"Silly boy," Mom said. "You think she didn't have a hand in this?"

Had I spoken out loud?

She exhaled, disgust crawling across her features.

"You'll learn. You can't trust a Wolfe."

**MARGO**

SOME PEOPLE COME BACK from unconsciousness slowly, one sense at a time.  
Hearing, smell, taste. Drifting out of a slumber-like state peacefully.

Not me.

I rush into awareness like I'm bursting from underwater, gasping for air.

And the next thing to hit me?

*Memories.*

They burn through my mind, one after another, a flipbook of information.

It hurts. I cry out as I relive it.

Someone grabs my arm, threading their fingers through mine. They squeeze my hand, but I'm inconsolable. The truth is blinding, but I finally have answers.

*I remember.*

**CALEB**

I CURL my fingers into the black hat on my lap. It's hard not to critique Eli's driving, because we've been going in circles for hours. Literally and figuratively.

Eli pried the entire story out of me, piece by piece. At some points, I let information go willingly. But others... He slowed the truck, and out my secrets came.

They float between us, suffocating me.

"So your folks hate Margo because of something her dad did."

"Basically."

"And your mom just... left."

I sigh. "She went upstate. To some sort of... I don't know. She called it a grieving retreat, but I'm pretty sure it was a resort."

"Oh, Lydia." Eli scowls. "And meanwhile, you were being used as a punching bag for your uncle."

"He's a twisted fucker," I mutter.

"Karma will get him." He's confident in that assessment, but he's wrong. Rich men don't often bow to fate. They're the exception to the rule.

My phone beeps.

**Matt:** *Got it. Call me.*

I flash the screen at Eli and dial Matt's number.

Without saying hello, he says, "I found her location. Or, last known location. There's no way to know if she's still there, since her phone is off,

but—”

“An address,” I snap.

“Easy, man, I was getting to that. You know the old bunkers on Columbus?”

Eli scoffs. “Who would take her there?”

Matt pauses. “I didn’t know you had company.”

“It’s Eli. Just get on with it.” I rub at my face. I feel as helpless as ten-year-old Caleb, letting someone else find Margo.

“I think she’s there. It makes sense when I analyze the data, you know? Her last cell ping was actually pretty close to that—which doesn’t make sense—but then her phone went off. And it’s the only remote place in the area. *Plus*, I hacked into a satellite, and it’s showing that there’s a car parked outside one of the barns.” He clears his throat. “So, yeah. I’d start there.”

“Fuck,” Eli says after I hang up. “What if we actually find her?”

“What?”

“The detective seems to think you’re involved, so...”

I lurch. “Oh my god, I didn’t even think to ask about her foster dad. She’s going to kill me.”

The truck speeds up, flying out of Rose Hill and toward a sort of no-man’s-land between there and Stone Ridge. Rumor has it this area is haunted, but every story is different. Some say the owner of the bunkers went crazy and locked people in, convinced it was the end of the world. Others are convinced we had a cult on our hands, and it was mass suicide.

Eli turns onto a gravel road. The bunkers are in the distance, the roof of a storage barn just visible over the hill. It’s swampy, dark muddy water on either side of the road. Feeble stalks poke out, waving in the wind.

He stops the truck just shy of the top of the hill. “What if they’re there?”

I laugh. “You’re asking me this now?”

“I mean, they could be armed.”

“That’s not stopping me.”

He sighs. “Fine. Don’t say I didn’t warn you...”

We crest the hill.

Nothing.

A barn and a low concrete building, and a whole lot of *nada*. Matt said there would be a car here, but this place looks abandoned.

“Fuck!” I yell.

“Chill out.” Eli pulls his truck around and puts it in park. “She could still

be in there.”

I shove all my emotions down. I can’t afford to be hopeful or nervous or... terrified. We’re going to be smart about this. Logic over emotions. I want to burst into the buildings, scream her name, get her *back*. But that might get all of us killed.

What are the chances her kidnappers left her alone?

I find the folded knife he keeps in his glove box and flip it open. “You check the bunker. I’ll take the barn.”

We hop out and split up. The barn is old. It creaks and rattles in the wind. There’s a chain on the sliding doors, so I circle around. If someone got her in here...

I discover a door in the back. The knob is locked, but that’s easier to deal with than a chained sliding door. I take a step back and kick.

It flies open, banging against the wall.

This door leads into what appears to be an old office. There’s a desk in the corner, heavily tilting to one side. Thick dust covers everything. I creep through the door, into the main part of the barn. My eyes go to the hay stacked along one wall. The debris on the dirt floor.

And then...

“Margo!” I yell, sprinting for her.

She’s on the ground. On her side.

Her hair covers her face, and her hands are bound in front of her with duct tape. Her ankles are bound, too.

I fall to my knees in front of her, slowly pushing the hair from her face. Her eyes are closed. There’s a gash on her head, the blood sticky. It must’ve ran for some time, because it’s everywhere. All down her face, neck, soaked up in her shirt.

No jacket.

No shoes.

“Margo,” I whisper, rolling her onto her back.

She groans.

My heart jumps. *She’s alive*. That’s all the confirmation I need.

I pick her up, making sure her head is cradled on my chest, and head for the door. I’m a mix of emotions: *furious* at Unknown, if they were behind her abduction or simply taking credit for it. And so damn happy that I found Margo. In one piece.

I almost crash into Eli in the doorway.



“I got nothing—holy shit, you found her.” Eli stares at her. “What happened?”

I grunt. If I think about her injuries—I’m sure there are more than just the gash on her head—I’ll see red. So instead, I focus on the truck.

“Let’s hope it was just the car accident and not... something else.”

Eli hauls open the back door for me. I climb in without releasing her, holding her close.

“Turn up the heat,” I order. “She’s freezing.”

He complies, and then we’re on our way. He meets my gaze in the mirror. “Hospital, I’m assuming?”

“No shit.”

I spend the drive stroking Margo’s hair, willing her to wake up. Her face is peaceful—minus the blood—and she could pass for sleeping. Except her skin is chilled. Some asshole abducted her and left her in a breezy barn without a jacket or her shoes.

I’m going to kill them.

“You don’t think your family was behind this, do you?”

I tug at the tape on Margo’s wrists. “We’ve been operating under the assumption that Unknown is our age.”

He grunts. “Does she have her phone on her?”

I shift her, feeling her pockets. “Nope.”

“How’s she doing?”

“It’d be great if you could drive faster.”

Eli’s already driving like a maniac, but at this point, I wish we had my speedy little car instead of his massive truck. I’m not a doctor, but Margo being unconscious isn’t a good sign.

It’s a really fucking bad one.

“We’re here, we’re here,” he calls, bumping down the drive toward the emergency room.

As soon as the truck stops moving, I fling the door open and jump out, keeping Margo tight against my chest so she doesn’t bounce.

He follows me inside.

*I should’ve taken the tape off her arms and legs.*

A nurse rushes toward me. “What happened?”

“I—she was abducted. I found her.”

Chaos. She instructs me to set her on a gurney, and a doctor leans over her. They shuffle me backward, but the doctor’s gaze stays on me.

“This is the missing girl?” he asks.

I nod woodenly. “She was in a car accident.”

“Sit down, son,” the doctor orders. “We’ll take good care of her.”

The original nurse leads me to a chair in the waiting room. “Is that your truck?”

“No, mine,” Eli says. “I’ll go... move it...”

“It’s in the way of the ambulance bay,” she explains. “There’s a parking —”

“I know.”

He leaves, and I’m reminded that he was just doing this not too long ago. Different state, different circumstances... same fucked-up feeling going into a hospital gives you.

He’s not going to be back for a while.

I hunch lower and eye the people going in and out of the ER. Margo’s behind a locked door. Just when I had her in my arms again...

Eli’s dad bursts into the waiting room, gaze swinging around before he finds me. He’s usually a composed man, but right now...

Ah.

Detective Masters is right behind him.

“His goal is to make a scene,” Mr. Black says. “He can’t do anything. He has no evidence.”

I stand. “What’s going on?”

Mr. Black stops in front of me. “He wants to bring you down to the station for questioning. He thinks you—it doesn’t matter. It’s best if we go. He’s threatening to get an arrest warrant if you don’t go amicably—bunch of bullshit, if you ask me, but it’s harder to scrub that from your record. I’ll follow you there.”

“Mr. Asher,” Detective Masters calls. He’s got a gleam in his eye like he’s about to enjoy this next part.

I wish I knew what I did in our ten-minute interview to make such an impression.

“You’re going to come down to the station with me. We need to have a little *chat*.”

I stiffen. They’re going to take me away from the hospital. And what will be the first thing Margo sees? Someone who doesn’t give a fuck about her? Her social worker, or worse, the detective himself.

“I can’t right now,” I tell them. “Margo will wake up soon.”

“Now, Caleb, I doubt Margo would want to hear that you refused to help on her case.” He smirks. “Just imagine how hurt she might be by that information.”

“Come on, son,” Mr. Black whispers.

I stare at him for a moment, then turn back to the detective. “Fine.”

He guides me by the arm out of the hospital.

Lenora almost runs head-first into us at the sliding doors. “Caleb! Detective Masters!” Her attention bounces back and forth. “What on earth are you doing?”

“Just have a few questions for Mr. Asher, here,” the detective says.

I would very much like to punch him in the face.

Break his nose, maybe.

“But—”

“We’ve got to get going.” He sounds apologetic. “I’ll be in touch once Margo is awake.”

She nods, scanning my face, then steps to the side.

He hauls me outside, and his grip gets firmer. “Like that little show, did you, boy? You have a grim look on your pretty face. Heh. Not used to getting caught, more like.”

I say nothing.

He puts me in the back of his car, his hand heavy on the back of my head.

He hasn’t arrested me, but it sure feels like he’s about to cart me off and lock me away. My mind jumps ahead to the implications, and what my uncle would do when he finds out, then circles back to Margo.

Ah, well. This wouldn’t be the first thing the Asher family has covered up.

## MARGO

I WAKE up much the same as I did last time: violently.

My body jackknifes, pain crashing through me. It goes straight to my head, and so do my hands.

Someone rushes in. “Margo, Margo, calm down. You’re in the hospital.”

Stars burst behind my eyelids, but I recognize Lenora’s voice. She eases me back, muttering about the lights. A second later, everything in my peripherals goes dim. I lower my fingers away from my eyes and blink.

It still hurts, but not nearly as bad.

Lenora hovers at the side of the bed, her arms crossed over her chest. “I was so worried. I’m not allowed to tell you—”

A nurse comes in, followed quickly by a doctor. The doctor introduced himself, but I can’t focus on his words. I’m too busy eyeing the expression on my foster mother’s face... and trying to decipher it.

“You have a concussion,” the doctor says. I missed his name. “Expect headaches, maybe memory fragments.” He clears his throat. “There’s a detective outside who wants to speak with you.”

I widen my eyes. “Wait. You’re not going to tell me how I got here?”

He takes a step closer, sliding his hand into mine and squeezing. “Try to remember. Close your eyes.”

A nurse says, “You shouldn’t—”

“Leave us for a moment,” the doctor orders.

He notices I’m ignoring his directions and staring at Lenora. Her gaze has been on the floor, but now it flips up and crashes into mine.

“Can you give us a moment, Mrs. Jenkins?”

She flinches. “Yes, yes. But the detective can’t come in until her case worker gets here. She’s a minor.”

She leaves, and it’s almost like she was never here to begin with.

“Just us now,” he says. “So I want you to take a deep breath and think of the last thing you remember. Don’t say it out loud. Liz was right, I shouldn’t be helping.”

I grip his hand tighter. “What if I don’t want to remember?”

“We all grapple with ugly things. It’s how we respond that’s our true defining moment.”

Slowly, I close my eyes.

Last thing I remember...

Dad.

He said he was arrested for killing Caleb’s dad. Took a plea deal... but he said he was innocent. There’s truth buried in there. I was desperate to find it.

*You still are.*

Outside, into Robert’s waiting arms.

It was snowing.

His car. Driving, talking, and then—

I flinch, squeezing the doctor’s hand. “Car accident,” I whisper, blinking. “But... why does that warrant a detective?”

“Keep going,” he urges.

“First—is Robert okay?”

He doesn’t hesitate to say, “He’s in the Intensive Care Unit. His lung collapsed. Few broken ribs. It was touch and go for a while, but he’ll probably be moved to a regular room tomorrow morning.”

I bite my lip. The metallic taste of blood blooms across my tongue.

“Keep going,” the doctor urges. “Don’t focus on that.”

I shut my eyes and relive the car being hit. Going into a ditch and flipping over. Robert’s arm banded across my chest, trying to keep me safe.

And when the dust settled...

Someone pulled me out. Away. But instead of helping me, they were taking me away.

They knocked me out, and when I woke up...

I was in a barn. It was drafty, ice-cold. Two people argued. My head hurt spectacularly. My whole body did. And then...

*Shit.*

I sit up straighter. “Where’s Caleb?”

A man walks into the room as I'm asking, and he raises an eyebrow. "He really fooled you, huh?"

I flinch.

The doctor stands, shaking his head. "Really, Masters? You're supposed to wait for Angela—"

"I'm here," she says, slipping in behind the detective. "Traffic. I was across town. Margo, how are you feeling?"

"I'm alive, so..."

"Detective Masters wants to chat with you about what happened," she explains. "I'm here to be your advocate."

I nod, and the doctor leaves. I'm sad to see him go—even if I didn't catch his name, he was nice. The detective takes his place at the side of my bed. He drags a chair over and makes himself comfortable, adjusting for a moment.

He has dark eyes and a smooth head. His leather jacket doesn't scream *detective*, but it definitely fits his personality. There's a badge at his hip and a holstered gun on the other side of his body.

"As Angela so kindly explained, I'm Detective Jim Masters. I'm just going to ask you some questions about yesterday."

I shoot up. "*Yesterday*? It's been—"

"About twenty-seven hours since the accident," he says. "Your abductor brought you in around five o'clock yesterday evening. You were unconscious."

I frown. "Why would they do that?"

He leans forward. "They? Did you see anything that could help me?"

I shudder. I'd forgotten that part.

He held the cloth over my face.

I tried to resist it, I really did. But then, I made the mistake of opening my eyes.

I take a deep breath and meet the detective's gaze.

It's time to name my kidnapper.

"It was Matt Bonner."

## Past

The room was cold. The surface of the table in front of me was sticky. Spilled milk, maybe, or coffee that hadn't been wiped away.

I avoided putting my arms on the table, keeping them crossed over my chest instead. The entire house smelled like spoiled food. Like death.

"Some lady is here for you." The foster mom sweeps into the kitchen like she was the queen of the castle, and she didn't notice it was rotting. "Not sure why anyone would want to visit with you. Did you even brush your hair this morning?"

I was fourteen, not four, but I didn't bother pointing that out. I left my cereal—*maybe that was the spoiled smell*—untouched and went to the front door.

I yanked it open, more shocked than not to see my mom standing on the porch.

Houses like this always had porches. Big wraparound ones that made everyone else in the neighborhood jealous, but it was the inside that was bleak. Pretty outside, sick inside.

She fidgeted. There were spots on her neck, bruises. A scrape across her cheek.

I always took inventory when she showed up.

She hated me, but she checked up on me.

*It was our little secret.*

Her attention went from my face to the thrift store clothes, then down to my boots. They were falling apart. The laces broke the other day, and I had to duct tape them back together so I could keep wearing them.

Boots were more practical in everyday life than soft-topped sneakers. You could run in boots. Kick shit in them. Stomp on your enemies in them.

I cleared my throat.

Her gaze snapped up. "I heard you moved. How..."

"Shithole house," I said, moving past her. Down the stairs, all the way to the sidewalk. It wasn't often I got to take a deep breath of clean air. "The foster mom's a bitch. Her husband is even worse."

He leered.

They had sex in the middle of the night, the box spring squealing. She never made a noise, but he did. Grunts that filled our ears. The smallest girl

would climb into bed with me, burying her head in my chest under the covers.

At my age, I knew about sex—but I didn't want to think about it. And I definitely didn't want to hear it almost every night.

Mom followed. "Karma's a bitch, too."

I snorted. "Gee, thanks."

"They giving you an allowance?"

Part of me still wanted to be loved by my mother, and I would do anything to get her to stay. If I gave her money—like I had in the past—she would come back.

It wasn't guesswork.

She would run out of money again, and then she'd show up wherever I was. Even if it was only for a few minutes.

But right now, I had nothing.

"Can you tell me about your adventures?" I stall. "Where you've been, or..."

"I've been dealing with a loss," she told me. She kept tapping her finger against her arm. Crossed and uncrossed them. Shifted her weight. "And coping the only way I know how."

I sighed. "What is it now?"

I knew it was drugs. Angela and Lydia had both told me, around the same time, that my mother was giving up her parental rights. She'd been checked into a rehabilitation center only a few months after Dad was locked up.

I blamed him for her addiction.

As much as I hated him, I couldn't give her the same level of loathing. *It wasn't her fault.*

I wondered who she lost. Dad, maybe?

"You could go see Dad," I said. "If you're feeling like he's gone."

She scowled. "No."

It'd been four years. Maybe she saw him and didn't want to tell me. She tended to be petty like that. She blamed me. Everything was my fault.

Sometimes I wondered how we got here.

"Margo, I need to go," she said. "You were right. I've been traveling a lot. I've been working in the city. But I was late because my car broke down, and they fired me..."

"What are you hooked on?" I repeated.

She turned away from me. I hated the sharp angles of her body. She used



to be soft—someone worth hugging. Now, her bones threatened to slice through her skin every time she moved. There were marks not only on her neck and face, but tract marks in the crook of her elbow. I saw it even when she tried to hide it.

It was August.

It was hot.

No one wore long-sleeve t-shirts in August. Only a drug addict.

“If you can’t help me, I’ll leave.” She took three quick steps back, her shoes scraping on the concrete.

“I don’t have anything,” I whispered.

Our little secret was about to end. If I couldn’t make her stay... she wouldn’t come back.

Mom shifted again, pulling at the hem of her shirt. She was backing away, shaking her head. Strands of dark hair slid from the clip on top of her head, getting caught in the wind.

“Take care of yourself,” I told her.

I stayed rooted to the spot until she was gone. Down the street, around the corner.

I glanced back at the house. It was shuttered, dark. Now that I knew what the inside was like, I could spot the flaws on the exterior. Cracked foundation and a crumbling roof. Ivy burrowed in the stucco walls, gripping like its life depends on it.

*Me too, ivy.*

They wouldn’t notice if I went for a walk.

All my belongings were on my back, anyway.

Mom didn’t want me. The foster system certainly didn’t want me.

Maybe I’d just keep walking until I found someone who did.

## Present

The detective is skeptical.

Angela is clueless.

And my head freaking *kills*.

At my request, they turned off most of the lights. A single bulb glows behind my head. It illuminates their faces and hides mine—not that I mind that. The detective is staring at me in a way that tells me he thinks I’m lying. Ignoring that, I clutch a cup of water in both hands and tell them all about Matt Bonner.

Lion’s Head boy. Caleb’s secret friend and public enemy. Nice—or so I thought.

“A friend of Caleb’s?” He latches on to that.

I shrug. “I don’t know much about it. He’s come over and said hi at football games.”

“You’re speaking about Bonner.”

“Yes.” I glance at Angela. “I have to use the restroom.”

She straightens. “Let me grab a nurse.”

Detective Masters and I are suddenly alone.

I shift in the bed. “You said my abductor brought me in, but you were surprised when I said it was Matt.”

He scoffs. “Come on, Margo. I know Caleb had something to do with it.”

“Caleb found me?”

Masters watches me. “He orchestrated the whole thing. He has motive and the arrogance to pull it off. You said you heard another voice. Was it Caleb?”

“No.” No, no, no.

*No matter what dark hole you go down, I will find you and bring you back.* Isn’t that what he promised me?

He kept that promise.

And now I’m going to keep mine.

“It wasn’t him, Detective. I know him. I know his *voice*.”

He opens his mouth but closes it again.

A second later, a nurse comes in behind Angela. She flips the blankets back, shooting the man a quick look before I swing my legs over.

She helps me stand. “Slowly now.”

I'm as wobbly as a newborn deer. The room slants and spins. We pause, allowing me to close my eyes for a moment.

"Head injuries do nasty things to our balance," the nurse murmurs in my ear.

I heave a sigh. I really do need to pee—but I could also use a moment alone. Thankfully, the nurse agrees to my request for privacy. She tells me to ring the bell when I'm done and closes the door.

I hover by it for a moment, listening as hard as I can.

It's quiet, and then, "He really carried her in here?" That from Angela.

My heart picks up speed.

"Her arms and legs were still duct taped. He really didn't think it through." The detective is disgusted. A personal vendetta against the Asher family?

*Maybe.*

My attention goes to my wrists. They're red and angry. I touch one, surprised at the sticky residue still on my skin.

After Matt wouldn't stop apologizing, I don't remember much. Any of it, really. I don't know what he knocked me out with, but it was like only a sliver of me was still with it. But the parts I need to remember slip away like sand.

Why they decided not to bring me to a hospital—since clearly Caleb found me, and he probably didn't run into them.

Which means Matt is still on the loose.

I shiver. My fingers are still on my opposite wrist, scratching at the sticky residue.

"You okay?" the nurse calls through the door. Her voice is jarringly loud.

I step away from the door and reply, "Yep, almost done."

The detective and Angela haven't said anything else—probably because the nurse is hovering outside the bathroom door. I scrub my hands until my skin is pink.

I cast one look at myself in the mirror, afraid of what I'm going to find.

There's a wound on my head that's been bandaged—and presumably stitched underneath. Various scrapes across my face. There's a bruise on my temple, coming down onto my cheek, and the skin around my eyes is puffy. If I had more time, I'd do a more thorough examination. But in this moment, I can barely stomach to see my bare legs and socked feet. If my ankles are in the same shape as my wrists, I don't want to see.

I breathe. My ribs don't hurt as much as they did when Ian kicked me, but there's still a deep ache.

*Enough stalling.* I open the door and smile at the nurse. She doesn't have to help much on the way back, and soon enough, I'm tucked back into bed, hooked back up to monitors and the IV.

The detective drags the chair back to my bedside. Angela is once again leaning on the wall.

"Can you walk us through the day? Everything you remember."

"I got home—"

"Who dropped you off?"

"Caleb."

"So he knew where you were going?"

I narrow my eyes. "Objection—leading the witness."

He jerks, then laughs.

"*Caleb* dropped me off, then left. Robert and I went to the prison soon after that. I visited with my dad for the first time in..." I shrug. Not relevant. "I left, got in the car with Robert, and we were hit."

I try not to think about the crunch of metal. The car flipping. Or the way he hung upside down. He's in the ICU while I'm being interrogated.

And what about Caleb? Did they arrest him?

Is he sitting in a jail cell?

"We were off the road. I had hit my head, so everything is kind of blurry..."

"Just do the best you can," Masters says.

"Someone helped me out of the car."

"Did they unbuckle you?"

I frown. "No... I think I did that. I was right-side-up, about to check on Robert, when..."

I was dragged over glass.

"They kept apologizing. Saying it was going to be okay." My fingernails are on my wrist again, scratching. "I believed them up until they put something over my face. It hurt to breathe."

"They took blood," Angela tells me. "The hospital is running a full lab to figure out what happened."

I slowly nod. "I woke up once, when I heard the voices talking. Matt... he wanted to take me to the hospital. Someone else didn't."

Detective Masters leans forward. "I need specifics here, Margo. Tell me

about that other voice.”

“They...” Searing pain flashes through my head. I cover my face with my hands and groan.

My heart monitor shrieks.

A nurse rushes in, followed by the doctor who helped me.

“Out,” he orders the detective. He puts the bed back flat, his hand on my shoulder. “Margo, it’s okay.” He guides my hand away, showing me a clear mask. “Oxygen. Okay?”

He lowers it over my nose and mouth.

*I’m so sorry—*

It’s too similar to what just happened to me. My head is searing. A ringing noise fills my ears. It takes a second to realize I’m the one screaming, pushing at the mask.

A sob breaks through me like a crashing wave.

Is it too much to ask for a little peace?

“I’m giving you something to help you sleep,” the doctor says.

Ice rushes into my vein through the IV. It spreads, rushing through my body, weighing it down.

Panic still crushes my chest, though. Just because I’m about to be dragged under, doesn’t mean all my fear goes away. No, it’s being pulled down with me... right into my own personal nightmare.

*My memories.*

**CALEB**

MR. BLACK MEETS me outside the county jail, and I can't say I've ever felt like more of a miscreant. I'm just glad it isn't my uncle waiting for me.

After our 'interview', the detective said he had enough cause to hold me without pressing charges. So there I sat, while Margo was in the hospital without me.

"I found her," I say once we're in the car. "And they just—"

"He already suspected you. When you showed up with her at the hospital, her arms still fucking bound..."

Eli's dad isn't a swearer. He drinks expensive whiskey when the occasion calls for it—after a big day at work, maybe—but otherwise, he doesn't like alcohol. For years, I've been trying to find his vice. Smoking, gambling, women.

There had to be something.

Instead, I found a good man. He went to church with his wife on Sundays and tried not to disappear into his office on the weekends. He was present. At the games, cheering us on. When we were younger, he'd pick us up from school and we'd grab ice cream.

Eli's family was more like mine for a long time.

He hands me my phone. "Your uncle called."

I grimace. "I was hoping to avoid telling him I'm out."

"Did two nights in jail make you delusional?"

"Maybe." I fiddle with it. "How is she?"

It's been just under seventy-two hours. Almost three days exactly since I saw her. And every moment of it has been hell.

“She told the detective it wasn’t you.”

I didn’t expect anything different. It *wasn’t* me.

“Is she still in the hospital?”

His grip flexes on the steering wheel. “I think they were discharging her this morning.”

“Now?”

“She could be home already.”

I scroll through the missed calls and texts. Falling off the radar doesn’t go unnoticed in Rose Hill. But I’m only scanning for one name in particular.

**Riley:** *It’s Margo. I’m home.*

An invitation if I’ve ever heard one.

“Robert is still in the hospital,” Eli’s dad offers unexpectedly. “They moved him out of ICU, but I hear Lenora is trying to be in two places at once.”

I glance over at him. “Margo shouldn’t be alone. Not with a kidnapper on the loose.”

*And Unknown still harassing us.*

They knew I was going to get arrested. Knew I’d find the barn... but how?

He nods. “I figured you would say that. I checked with her case worker and made some calls. Riley and her mother are going to stay with Margo while Lenora stays at the hospital.”

*Not good enough*, I almost say.

I swallow. “Is the detective going to come after me again?”

“Apparently...” He shakes his head. “I shouldn’t even be telling you this. Margo told the detective she saw who took her.”

Something funny happens in my body. Every muscle gets tight. Alarmed. A lump forms in my throat, and it’s hard to breathe.

“Even more reason to stay with her,” I manage. “Who—”

“They were being tight-lipped about it. *And*,” he glances pointedly at me, “the charges were dropped, but Detective Masters is still considering you a person of interest.”

Mr. Black is a badass defense lawyer. He has sway in the prosecutor’s office and all over the county. Hell, half of New York City knows of Josh Black. I don’t think the district attorney has ever had a worse record in court

against one lawyer.

And right now, I'm grateful for it.

I barely slept while in holding. They kept me separated, but it was county jail. All sorts of crazies were brought in. Mr. Black said my uncle called—well, he called the jail, too. Reamed me out and said I was an embarrassment on the family name.

I know it isn't the charge that rankles—it's that I got charged at all.

He thinks I did it, but he's disappointed I got caught.

I don't respond to Margo, or my uncle, or any of the other messages. I need to see her with my own eyes.

"I should've taken off the duct tape." I don't realize I've said it out loud until Mr. Black has slowed the car and twisted toward me.

"Caleb." His voice is stern. "You cannot say things like that, especially around the detective. You understand?"

"I found her on the floor." I meet his gaze. "She was unconscious. I was more worried about getting her to the hospital."

"All they'll see is someone who wanted to keep her in check. Under their thumb."

I bristle. "That's not it."

"I *know* that's not it. I know you. But that's what they'll say, and that argument is what they'll build a case on, if Detective Masters decides to charge you."

"She said it wasn't me."

Eli's dad tsks. "She was drugged. She could've been confused."

"I *found* her!"

"How? How did you know exactly where to go? Why didn't you call the police?"

"Fuck!" I'm tempted to jump out of the car.

"Son, I'm just trying to get you to see how the prosecutor would—"

"Yeah, I get it. Can we just..." I wave toward the road. We're close to Margo's house. I take a minute to be thankful that I didn't even have to ask.

He steps on the gas, silent for a moment. Then he says, "I suppose it's a good thing we're going to see her now. Saves you a midnight trip."

Ah, shit. "You know?"

"Just because you *think* you're quiet doesn't mean I don't know everything that happens in that house." He smiles, acting okay with it. Yeah, right. It's just because I'm me. If it was Eli sneaking out... I see how he gets



along with criminals. Gets on their side, earning trust.

“Your *runs* don’t usually end with you coming home in a reasonable time. And sometimes they involve your car.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, that may be true.”

We pull into Margo’s driveway, and he stops me from getting out with a hand on my shoulder.

“Seriously. We had the sex talk when you were fourteen. I don’t need to tell you to be safe, right? You’re smart enough to already—”

“Yeah, we’re good.”

He drops his hand, and I get out. Lenora’s car is in the driveway. Robert’s is probably at the junk yard... or in police custody. I didn’t see it, but I have enough mental imagery to last a lifetime.

Margo’s case worker arrives as we head up the walkway. Eli’s dad stops to talk to her, and I go to the door.

Lenora yanks it open before I have a chance to knock. “Caleb.”

She’s decidedly unfriendly.

I narrow my eyes. “Mrs. Jenkins.”

“Angela told me...” Her attention slides past me, to where Angela and Mr. Black are conversing on the sidewalk. “The charges were dropped?”

“I didn’t do it.” I stare at her, willing her eyes to come back to me. “I would never.”

She scoffs. “You seem to be the cause of a lot of heartache.”

“I can’t really do much about that unless you let me in to fix it,” I say quietly.

She only steps aside once Mr. Black and Angela are behind me.

The living room is empty. I glance into the kitchen, find that empty, and head up the stairs. My imagination runs wild. I walk down the hall to her room, and it stretches out in front of me.

Her door is cracked open, and it doesn’t make a noise when I nudge it open farther.

She’s... *cleaning*.

Shoving papers into drawers, straightening her books. Her small trashcan is in her hand, and she periodically shoves random things—a bauble, a paper, something that appears to be a seasonal decoration—into it. Her sheets are off the mattress, balled up in the center of the room. Comforter thrown on the floor. All her clothes are stacked in a pile on top of her nightstand.

Maybe cleaning was the wrong word. She’s doing more harm than good.

And she's sniffing.

The whole room feels different. Like I left her one way, and now I'm coming back to someone new.

"Margo."

She drops the trash and spins toward me.

Ah, my heart gives a nasty thump.

Her face is bruised. A few butterfly bandages are taped over stitches across her forehead—that gash was the source of a lot of blood. She probably has more injuries, but those are the only visible ones.

That, and the expression on her face.

I step toward her, and she steps back.

That's not how this normally goes.

"You don't think I had anything to do with this, did you?"

Her eyes widen, then skip to the window. I can't help but notice it's locked. A message if I ever saw one. I want to howl. Instead, I keep approaching. Her back bumps against the bookshelf—the very same one I found the spying figure on—and she freezes.

I relish the heat of her body, but I don't touch her. I stop just a hair's breadth away and meet her dark eyes. There are hours unaccounted for after the accident, and I would kill to give them back to her.

I force myself not to trace her jaw. To inhale the scent of her shampoo—because even that is off, tainted by the antiseptic smell of the hospital.

She's breathing heavy, like me being in her room has stolen her oxygen.

*This isn't you*, I almost say. This girl is scared—but she doesn't need to be scared of *me*.

"Are you angry?" she blurts out.

Am I angry? "Furious."

Now, I do give in to temptation. I drag my finger across her lip. It's split, a little swollen, but she doesn't move when I press on her lower lip, parting her pretty mouth.

Her tongue darts out, touching my thumb, and I grin. I'm getting harder by the second, but I think Margo knows what she does to me.

I lean down.

"I thought you might be happy to see me," I whisper.

She shakes her head. "Caleb..."

"Matt told me where to find you. He's a computer whiz—I know, he doesn't seem like it—but he..."

Her whole face has drained of blood. I've never seen her so pale.

"Matt Bonner told you where to find me?"

I squint at her. "Yeah. He's actually been helping me try to figure out who was behind the mermaid..."

She grabs my hands. "Caleb, stop." She takes a deep breath, like she's afraid to say this out loud. "Matt was the one who took me."

My stomach bottoms out.

"What?" I misheard her.

She's trembling, a leaf in the wind, and the way she's looking at me makes me think... I'm the storm.

"Someone was with him. Someone he knew, but I can't—"

"And you think it was me." That stings.

"No, Caleb, I don't." Sadness.

*Why is she sad?*

"My memories came back."

Oh fuck.

**MARGO**

## Past

CALEB and I were playing hide and seek, which required me to be extra quiet. I tiptoed through the house, planning on balling up under the sink in the kitchen. It would take him *forever* to find me, and I'd be victorious.

We weren't supposed to be here, though. Lydia—*Mrs. Asher*—had taken us to the park, but she dropped us off about an hour ago and told us to play in Caleb's room until she got back. There were only so many things we could do in his room, and he was sick of me touching his Legos. The puzzles were built. I wasn't allowed to play video games, so that was out.

We were used to being let loose, and eventually, Caleb caved.

He still liked to listen to his mom, especially since we could hear his dad walking around downstairs. His dad got home shortly after us.

My dad was working. Mom was out.

Caleb and I had experienced an odd thrill of imminent capture when his dad got home. His dad wouldn't just yell at us—he'd probably scream his voice hoarse at Caleb's mom, too. But hide and seek was an excellent game. It was meant for devious kids like us.

And yeah, it may have been my idea.

There was an odd thumping noise coming from the kitchen.

Lowering myself down into a crouch, I kept close to the wall.

Upstairs, Caleb was probably counting as quietly as possible. I counted in my head, keeping track of my time. That's how you were supposed to do it when being stealthy.

"Fuck, Amber," a voice growled.

My whole body got icy.

I stopped just before the doorway and poked my head into the kitchen.

My mother... her bare legs were wrapped around Caleb's dad's hips. She sat on the counter—the same one she cooked on—like she was in pain. Her mouth was open. Eyes closed.

His hand was tangled in her hair, keeping her head back.

I knew about sex. We'd learned about it in health class.

But I didn't think it would be like *this*. Caleb's dad was still wearing his pants, and all I saw was his back. But the words coming out of his mouth were vicious.

Mom was cheating on Dad.

I knew what that was, too. We had learned about it from Amelie, whose dad had a shiny new girlfriend who sometimes picked Amelie up from school. She said her dad liked to say the girlfriend was the newer model—whatever that meant.

But after the initial shock of it passed, horror sunk in.

Dad would... Dad would be heartbroken.

A hand wrapped around my mouth, dragging me backward. I kicked, then realized it was Caleb. He pushed me into the pantry, closing the door behind him.

“What are you doing?” I needed to scrub my eyes out with soap.

“You can’t tell,” Caleb said.

I blinked. It wasn’t what I expected.

“Please, Margo, you can’t tell them.” He was desperate. Reeked of it. He came at me and grabbed my wrists. His thumb caressed my bracelet. “That won’t be us. Okay? But it’s them, and doing whatever you’re about to do will just make everything worse.”

“Caleb, Mom is cheating on my dad—” I took a step back, shaking him loose. “You knew?”

Slowly, he nodded.

“Cheating is wrong,” I said. Decisive.

Dad always talked about morals. Morality. It was such a hard thing to wrap my brain around, but he made it easy. Right and wrong. Stick up for the truth.

This... this was a lie. Plain and simple.

I shoved past Caleb and into the hall, where Mom was standing. Her hands were on her hair, pulling it up, but they slowly dropped when she saw me.

I swallowed.

Her pants were still unbuttoned.

“Margo!”

I turned and fled. Up the stairs, down the hall to Caleb’s room. Caleb chased after me, and once we were inside he slammed the door, flipping the lock.

The doorknob rattled, then Mom pounded on the door. “Margo Wolfe, open up right now.”

Caleb stared at me. “You’re not going to tell, right?”

The door flew open. Caleb’s dad straightened, triumphant, but my mom

shoved past him.

She grabbed my shoulders, shaking me slightly. “You don’t know what you saw, Margo. It was nothing.”

Her voice was angrier than I’d ever heard it.

I shook my head. “But, Mom—”

“No buts. Please, Margo.” She dipped her head toward me. “If he found out, it would ruin everything. And nothing even happened. It just looked bad.”

It looked like sex, but who was I to know?

Her fingers dug into my shoulders. Caleb’s dad stared at me. Caleb was breathing heavily behind me, the entire room waiting on my answer.

“I won’t tell,” I promised.

*I promised.*

## Present

“All of your memories?” Caleb asks.

I shift. “I remember catching them. Running to your room. We were playing hide and seek.”

It hurts to see him, because all I want to do is throw myself into his arms. He found me. Took me to the hospital. Detective Masters *arrested* him. But it wasn’t Caleb. I know that deep in my bones.

And yet...

“Your mom said it was nothing,” he says.

“She was trying to minimize it. I know that now. And you—” I break off. What did he say the first time we went into his house?

*One day I’m going to fuck you on this counter.* And then he did.

He did, and he didn’t have any regrets, even knowing—

“I never claimed to be the nice guy.” He comes closer and reaches for me. “If you’re remembering that day in the kitchen...”

“I hate you for that.” The image is burned behind my eyelids—my mom and his dad. “For putting me in that position.”

“Literally,” he adds, smirking. “But, Margo, there are dark memories all over that house. How are we ever going to move on if we don’t erase them?”

I push at his chest.

I’ve been so *stupid*. I thought the truth was going to release me. But it turns out, it’s just another shackle.

He tugs on my wrists. I fall into him, unable to stop myself.

“You forget, love. I wasn’t the one to block away my memories. I’ve been living with the truth for years.”

He’s totally right. I had forgotten—both that he knew and that he refused to tell me. How foolish. My emotions are on a pendulum swing.

His eyes see too much. I slip away from him and go to the window. My room is a wreck—the first thing I did when I got home was yank it apart, and now I feel like I’m bleeding from every seam.

“Matt?” he asks.

I jerk. “He kept apologizing. I finally opened my eyes when he picked me up—it sounded like he wanted to take me to the hospital.”

“He didn’t.”

He exhales noisily behind me. My bed creaks as Caleb sits. “He didn’t



take you to the hospital. I found—”

I don’t hear him get up, but suddenly he’s behind me. His hand lands on mine, stopping my fingers. I had been scratching at my wrist again.

His lips press into the top of my head. Two points of contact.

“You’re going to haunt my memories.”

I close my eyes. He’s haunting mine, too.

“And I’m sorry, but I need you to touch me.”

I turn slowly. Touch him?

I don’t deserve that.

“It feels like you’re not really here,” he whispers. “I’m going to wake up in bed and you’ll still be missing.”

My chest aches.

I raise my hand. One touch won’t kill us.

“Caleb!” someone calls from downstairs.

I’m about to drop my hand when Caleb snags it, holding it to his cheek. We both exhale.

“Margo? Come down, please.”

I tilt my head. “Angela is here?”

“Is that your case worker?” Caleb lifts an eyebrow, then nods. “She got here when I did. Eli’s dad drove us.”

“That explains the many cars in the driveway, I guess.” I pull away and grab a sweatshirt, carefully zipping it up and heading downstairs.

Before we left the hospital, I got to see Robert. He was intubated and sedated in ICU, and I couldn’t get close, but seeing him through a window was enough. He was in good hands.

Me, on the other hand? Lenora kept worrying the entire way back. She asked me how I was feeling, if I needed anything special at the house, what happened.

*What happened, Margo? Who took you?*

I already told the detective, and I didn’t have the energy to go through it again. I could sleep for a week.

Three days in the hospital. The detective visited me twice, asking much the same questions. But apparently, they can’t just take witness testimony as fact. There has to be *evidence*. And so far... nothing.

Plus, Matt Bonner has an alibi.

I didn’t tell Caleb that—mainly because the detective is eager for me to admit it was actually Caleb who took me. It’s odd that the detective has such

disdain for him... and such bias.

But who am I to know?

Lenora, Angela, and Eli's dad—who I've managed to only meet once—sit at the kitchen table when Caleb and I come down.

Angela stands, coming over to me. She puts her finger under my chin, lifting my head and inspecting the bandage. "How do you feel?"

"Like..." I shrug. "I don't know. Fine."

"Let's sit," she suggests.

I wonder if this is the part where they tell me the accident was too much—that I can't stay. I'll get a few minutes to pack my bag. At least Caleb will be here to say goodbye.

"Originally, Riley and her mom were going to stay here," Lenora says. Her eyes are puffy from crying. She stretches her arm across the table, taking my hand. "But... they're not approved by the county for any sort of fostering. Including respite."

Respite—temporary housing. A foster's nightmare. It's a house you don't know, with rules you're unaware, or unfamiliar with, and strangers trying to boss you around.

Angela takes over. "So that wasn't a possibility, unfortunately. However, the Blacks have actually been approved to take in fosters."

My gaze shoots over to Eli's dad.

"You can stay with us," he says. "Until Robert is out of the hospital. And that leaves Lenora free to stay at the hospital with him."

Lenora squeezes my hand. "Does that make me a bad mother? Wanting to stay with him?"

Ignoring her responsibilities to stay by his side? Admirable—but maybe, yes, it does shine a certain light on her choices.

I stay silent.

"Is that allowed?" Caleb asks. "The detective—"

"That's why we wanted to sit down and discuss it," Angela says. "Yes, you're a person of interest in the case, but everyone here believes that you didn't have a hand in it."

My eyes fill with tears. "Lenora? You believe me?"

She hadn't... "If you say he didn't do it, then yes. I believe you."

Caleb scoffs.

Josh rises. "Gather some things, Margo, if you would."

Whirlwind. Like so many other things in my life, this is happening almost

too fast to comprehend.

Accident. Kidnapped. Hospital. Home. And now—Caleb's home.

I shove clothes into a bag. I don't know how long I'll be, so I take only a few items. My school uniform. Toiletries from the bathroom.

Caleb is in my room when I return, sitting on my bed again.

"Matt fucking Bonner," he repeats. "That's the part that doesn't make sense. He was helping me find you. He's my friend."

I lift my shoulder. "I don't know."

My gaze clashes with his, and he exhales. "You're crying."

I swipe at my cheeks. They're wet. "I don't know why I'm crying."

And yet, it keeps building. The sadness.

"Mom told me not to tell." I stare down at my boots. "I promised."

"I know."

"I have a history of not keeping my promises, Caleb. How can you believe anything that comes out of my mouth?"

He may be a liar, but so am I.

I was the original.

"I know you," he says. "Okay? I know *you*. And some promises you won't break." He reaches out and snags my wrist, pulling me closer. Between his legs.

"Why can't we go back to normal?" I ask.

He laughs. His thumb brushes my cheek. "Normal? What's that?"

I giggle—and then abruptly stop. I *laughed*. Robert is in the hospital and I laughed. And—

"Stop."

His gaze is dark. I could run from it, but what's the use? He'd just find me again.

I back away from him and grab my bag. It's an improvement from the garbage bags I've had to use in the past. This one is thicker canvas. It won't break on me.

*An omen if I've ever heard one.*

And then... I leave him there. Sitting in my room, staring at me like I'm still his salvation.

I'm not. I'm so not.

I'm *dirty*. Just as dark as him now. Maybe worse. Because I remember the start of my awful betrayal, and I know the memories that will come next: I'll tell someone.

I'll betray my mother.

It's in my blood. It's in my history. So what if I do that to Caleb? What if the next time the detective asks, I lie and say he did take me?

Would I do that to him?

I don't know myself anymore. I don't know anything.

**CALEB**

I WATCH her when she thinks I'm not.

Or maybe she feels my gaze and is an expert in ignoring me. Fuck if I know.

We loaded up into the car and drove in silence. I sprawled across the backseat, my eyes on the back of her neck, and turn over all the revelations.

One: she knows what she witnessed.

Mother insisted Margo made it up, but I figured it was a little too far-fetched for a ten-year-old to create. So I held on to the belief that Margo saw Dad fucking her mom, and let my own mother live in the fantasy world she created.

Without that truth—that Dad *had* cheated—her whole world stayed intact.

Two: Matt Bonner kidnapped her.

It doesn't make sense. He didn't even know her until the first football game I took Margo to, and by that point, Margo had already been receiving texts for a while.

I long to reach forward and touch her, to move the hair off her neck and kiss down her shoulder. To chase away the shadows in her eyes.

Margo Wolfe has her own demons now.

I know all about them.

We get back, and I take the bag out of the trunk. She follows Eli's dad slowly, like the house is going to suddenly realize she's intruding and catapult her out. We go up the stairs, down the hall. The room on the end, across from the bathroom, is all hers.

Mrs. Black is a good decorator. Normally the room is a bit cold and formal—more like an adult’s guest room than anything else—but in the short time she had, she’s transformed it.

There’s a fuzzy, hot-pink pillow in the center of the bed. The comforter and throw pillows, which used to be all white, have been replaced with a floral print. Muted colors, but color nonetheless.

A desk in the corner has a vase of flowers.

The curtains are thrown open wide, letting in a stream of light.

I put the bag down on the desk chair.

“Make yourself comfortable,” Mr. Black says. “I have to go make a few phone calls. Norah is picking up some groceries, but she should be home soon.”

I eye him. There’s no way he *didn’t* see this coming.

He leaves, and then it’s just us.

My phone has been steadily blowing up in the last hour, but I’ve ignored it. Now, I pull it out and scroll through the messages. Half of them are from Riley.

“Do you have your phone?” I ask.

Margo lies on the bed, her dark hair fanning across the pink pillow. “They took it, I think. Or I lost it in the accident.”

I frown. “You haven’t been able to contact... anyone you wanted?”

She shrugs. “Riley came by the hospital, but she wasn’t allowed to stay. They were going to come over. I assume Lenora took care of that.

I hand her my phone.

While half are from Riley, the other half are random people from school asking if Margo is okay. My lacrosse team, some of the nicer cheerleaders...

“I notice Amelie and Savannah don’t give a shit,” she mumbles.

She types out a text, then sets the phone down. “Matt had an alibi.”

I squint. “What?”

“What if I’m misremembering everything? Like my brain just put in a person who didn’t really make sense—”

“You don’t trust yourself?”

“How could I?” She stares up at the ceiling. “I forgot that my own mother cheated on Dad with yours.”

“It was traumatic,” I say. “For us, yes, but... I wasn’t allowed to forget.”

She sits up. Her head tilts. “What do you mean?”

I could give her this. A little bit of my side.

“After Dad died, Mom couldn’t stand to be in the house. She was self-destructing.”

“Not as bad as mine,” she whispers.

I crack a smile. “No, Mother didn’t turn to drugs. But she did think she couldn’t parent me anymore, so she carted me off to my aunt and uncle’s house.”

Margo freezes. “No.”

“Uncle David is Dad’s brother. He was... not happy. And all I wanted was to get you back.” I sit beside her. “He was the one who did his best to turn me against you. And I hate to say that he was successful, but he was. It was easy to blame you for everything that happened.”

She bites her lip.

Everything is so fucking fragile right now.

“I’ll let you sleep,” I eventually say. I don’t know how to talk to her. What to do to make it better.

I’ll figure it out, though.

She lets me go. I half expect her to call me back, but she doesn’t.

And all of a sudden, energy burns through me. It twitches my limbs. Fuck Matt and his alibi, and whoever else was with him. I bang on Eli’s door, shoving it open without waiting for an answer.

He’s at his desk, chewing on the end of a pen.

“Homework?” I ask.

“Yeah. How’s Margo?”

“I don’t know. I need to get out of here.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, I could use some exercise.”

We both change into running gear and meet at the front door.

“A mile?” he suggests.

I roll my eyes. “Five.”

“You’re trying to kill me right out of the gate, huh?”

“First one back gets—”

Eli takes off before I finish. A laugh bursts out of me. This is what I need—to come home exhausted, to pretend Margo isn’t upstairs. She’s safe here, but she’s not safe with me.

I need to remember that.

I chase after Eli.

**UNKNOWN**

YOU DON'T SEE ME.

None of you SEE me.

Caleb carries your bag into the house. You're like a little bird, fluttering your wings against the cage. Still trapped, even if you don't know it.

From one prison to another.

From one master to another.

They're going to clip your wings, Margo. They'll keep you locked away forever.

Except you think your cage is a house, and your keeper is your lover.

Foolish. Foolish to believe in love when it's nothing more than noise, thunder rumbling over our heads.

And luck is just a flash of lightning, brief and bright.

I only need one strike.





## MARGO

SILENCE SETTLES OVER THE HOUSE. I try my best to fall asleep, but the pain medication is wearing off. Angela had given me a prescription bottle before I left, and Lenora had kissed my cheek.

Tears prick my eyes.

Most of all, I want... Robert.

He would know what to say to make me feel better. He's good with words. He's good at seeing me. Hell, his entire life is communicating with teenagers. It's no surprise he took to parenting.

Norah, Eli's mom, knocks on the open door.

"Hey, sweetie," she says. "How are you feeling?"

The tears spill down my face.

She comes over and sits on the bed, pulling me into a hug. I wait a beat—maybe this is just an automatic reaction and she'll realize who I am—but her arms stay wrapped around me. Her palms press into my back, gentle but sure.

I latch on to her, unable to control the sob working its way up my chest.

"Let it out," she says.

Crying is exhausting.

"I-is Robert going to be okay?" I sniffle, leaning away to wipe my face.

"I hope so."

"The detective doesn't believe me. T-that Matt took me a-and Caleb didn't."

She rubs my shoulder. "Detective Masters went to school with Caleb's dad. There's some bad blood there."

My head throbs. "Did he know my parents?"

She shifts. "We all did."

"What?"

"Josh, Ben, and Keith were friends in high school. Josh and Ben played football together, and Keith..."

*My dad.*

It's surreal to hear his name on her lips, after so many years of nothing.

"He was the smart one of the group." She smiles.

"You knew my mom, too?"

Her smile fades fast. "I didn't meet her until after college. Your parents came back to Rose Hill engaged, and your dad disowned."

I squint at her. "Disowned?"

She nods. "You have a grandmother out there. At least, the last I knew... She had a home in England, so she may have relocated. Or passed away... I wish I could tell you for certain."

"That's..." *The first I'm hearing of this.* I have a grandmother. "I always figured they died. Dad never mentioned having anyone, and neither did Mom."

It's the reason I went into the foster system. The state couldn't find anyone who would take me. No relatives they could contact. The last name *Wolfe* was a dead end.

"Dad never said anything about knowing the Ashers, either," I mumble. "I thought we moved into their guest house because Mom got a job."

Norah clucks her tongue. "No, I remember Keith calling up Josh and asking for help. They were struggling for a while, and then Amberly got pregnant with you..."

"I never knew."

"Amberly wanted to make a name for herself. She was working like a crazy person—harder than I'd ever seen Josh work, and he worked eighty-hour weeks—and it all came crashing down on her..."

I flinch. Just what I want to hear: that *I* was the source of my mother's misery. The anger that made her boil over.

"She loved you," Norah adds.

"Didn't Eli and Caleb not meet until after..."

She heaves a sigh. "Josh and Ben had a falling out when you all were young—in diapers. For the sake of our family, we cut ties and moved away. After Keith was arrested, he reached out to Josh. Said he felt caught in the middle of everything, that he was sorry."

“So why did Dad get a public defender instead?”

“It would’ve been a conflict of interest.” She shakes her head. “Sometimes I wish Josh did defend Keith. But knowing...”

I flinch. “He didn’t do it.”

“I’m sorry, honey.”

This time, I remain silent. I shouldn’t expect to convince her of his innocence—I barely believe it myself. It’s more of a point of hope. If he didn’t do it, then he’s not the bad guy I thought.

And if he didn’t do it... who did?

Slowly, I pick myself up and go to my bag. “I think I just need to shower and...” I motion to my body. I showered at the hospital, but it was quick. I didn’t get to scrub my hair because of the stitches.

School is out of the question. As is going home. The least I can do is try to feel clean.

Norah stands. “Yes, of course. There are towels and soap in your bathroom, and I’ll... leave you to it.”

The door clicks shut behind her, and silence once again descends. For the first time since Caleb walked out, I wish he had stayed. But the need to ask that of him was overshadowed by guilt.

I cross into the bathroom and strip off my shirt. The stitches will come out in a few days, but already the swelling is better. My face is almost normal, except for a few scrapes from breaking glass and the gash.

Robert did his best to protect me. I close my eyes and see the accident in slow motion. The vehicle Matt was driving coming at us, hitting our car just in front of where I sat. The way his arm banded across my chest as we careened into a ditch. We were weightless for a moment, and then it all came smashing down.

Glass.

Metal.

Blood.

My torso is speckled with bruises, and one nasty one that stretches diagonally across my chest—the seatbelt’s grip.

It’s the backs of my legs that are the most cut up, thanks to Matt dragging me across the glass-ridden asphalt.

I shower, scrubbing my scalp and doing my best to avoid the stitches.

I find the scar on the back of my head, and I hesitate. I remember the stitches I had to get for it, but I don’t quite remember how it happened.

Falling backward, my head hitting the edge of... *something*.

A hand held mine in the hospital. The doctor cut away my hair and put stitches in. Or maybe it was staples?

With sudden clarity, I realize I lied to Caleb. I don't have all my memories back. I don't know how I got the scar or how I told Dad about Mom's affair.

I don't know how she reacted.

How the blood got on my door.

Dad has a story to tell. I thought that when I was there. Maybe he can jog my memory...

I rinse and dry as fast as I can, avoiding the rest of my bumps and bruises. After I pull on the loosest-fitting outfit I brought, I go up to the third floor, where Eli's dad's home office is.

He's at his desk, staring down at a file.

I knock on the door, and his head jerks up. His gaze goes through me for a second, then he frowns. "Margo. You look a little pale."

I shrug. Complaining never got me anywhere. And besides, Norah's story has me hungry for more.

"Do you need to sit?"

I sink into the chair across from his desk. We sit in silence for a moment, and I try to think of the best way to word my question.

"I, um..." *Yeah, this is going well.*

Josh glances up, then slowly closes the file. "Why do I think you came in here for a purpose?"

"You're defending Caleb, right? In case Detective Masters tries to arrest him again."

"I am. I doubt Masters will do anything without solid evidence and a warrant."

I chew on my lower lip for a minute. "But he arrested..."

"They're allowed some leeway, unfortunately. He held him for the seventy-two hours that he was allowed, then I'm sure it was his superiors that made Masters release Caleb." He grimaces. "I've heard things about Masters. Once he gets his teeth into something, it's hard for him to let go."

"I told him Caleb was innocent."

He sighs. "You did. Doesn't mean the truth can't be twisted."

"Like... my dad's trial?"

Any warmth in his gaze falls away. "What makes you say that?"

I shift on the seat. He's put me on trial without even blinking.

"What can we do about Matt?" Switching subjects is my finest moment. "Someone's covering for him. Maybe if we could find out who—"

"Margo, stop." Josh rubs at his eyes. The cold expression vanished as soon as I dropped the subject of my father. "I know this is hard. Someone took you, your memory might be jumbled. You were drugged—"

I tilt my head. "What?"

*Drugged.*

"The toxicology report came back. Angela told us," he said. "She got the results back before they discharged you."

I swallow that information. It makes sense that they wouldn't let me leave without knowing what was in my blood. Still. I lean back and cross my arms over my chest. "What was I drugged with?"

"Margo..."

I'm beginning to think everyone in this damn town is keeping things from me.

"I deserve to know, Mr. Black," I say. "It's my body. Honestly, the doctors should've told me."

He nods. "We'll find out, okay?"

We sit and stare at each other for a moment.

I hate that I have so many questions—what my dad's relationship was like with the Blacks, what the hell Matt is up to, my stolen hours. And even further back: *what can't I remember?*

"Margo."

I start.

He looks pointedly at my hands. "You're bleeding."

I release my wrist, where a thin line oozes blood. The rest of my wrist is covered in scratch marks. "Oh, um, I'm going to go put a... Band-Aid on it."

He says nothing, and I rush away. Instead of going to the safety of my temporary room, I go to the basement. Caleb's space.

He's not here—he took off running with Eli, but that was an hour ago—and the room is cold without him. I rinse off my wrist, determined to stop touching it.

The feeling of duct tape being wrapped around them comes back full force.

*I thought I was knocked out.*

It hits me hard enough to put me off balance. I grab the counter, staring at

my reflection.

I should've kept Caleb's phone when he offered it, seconds before he left. Part of me thought I'd be happy with the freedom, but it just serves to isolate me.

A hysterical giggle creeps up my throat. Didn't I think that was *exactly* what Caleb wanted to do to me before? Isolate me. Single me out.

Turns out, all he had to do was mastermind a car accident, a kidnapping, and steal my phone. Oh, and put my foster father in the hospital.

Caleb could very well be the bad guy in my situation, pulling the strings. It's what he's wanted from day one: to break me. Destroy me.

*He's still playing the game.*

"He's not your knight in shining armor," I tell myself.

He's the villain. I've known this from the beginning. And villains...

They'll do anything to win.





## CALEB

ELI AND I RUN, and I try not to think about where our feet are leading us. My body is spiked with heat and nervous energy, like I got a shot of adrenaline just by leaving the house. Our five-mile run has more than doubled, but we seemed to agree without words that something bigger than just a run needed to happen.

We go to Theo's house first. It's in a gated community on the edge of Rose Hill, and it takes us a half hour just to get there.

We're dripping sweat, but exhaustion is a long way off.

Theo opens the door and scowls. "Do I need to hose you two off?"

Eli slaps his back and slips past him. "Mmm, an ice-cold shower would feel good right about now."

"I could smell you idiots from the kitchen," Theo's brother calls, passing us for the stairs. "For the love of God, haven't you heard of deodorant?"

"This musk is what draws the ladies," Eli says. "Not that you'd know anything about that..."

Theo snickers. "Not that *you'd* know anything about that, either." He crosses to the window. "You know you had a shadow?"

I frown. "The detective?"

He shrugs, turning away from the glass. "Dark sedan, so yeah, probably. Why exactly did you march into the hospital with Margo instead of calling an ambulance?"

"It was faster."

"Yeah, but it also made you seem guilty."

I grit my teeth. "You would've done something different?"

“You bet—”

“Okay, okay.” Eli gets between us, glaring at him, then me. “Let’s go easy. And get Liam here.”

Theo shakes his head. “For what, exactly?”

“Matt apparently has an alibi,” I tell him. “Even though Margo told the detective—”

“You touch Matt and you’ll get arrested for assault quicker than you can say ‘don’t drop the soap,’” Theo says.

“Which is why we’re here, establishing an alibi of our own...”

Eli meets my gaze and grins. “Right. So Liam comes here, we all have a grand old time, and then Caleb and I will steal Will’s car and find Matt.” His grin turns positively gleeful. “And we’ll get to the bottom of his *alibi*.”

I knew Eli would get it. He has Riley—although that’s just temporary. Even if he refuses to acknowledge it.

But for now, he has her, and he understands.

“Will isn’t going to let you steal his car,” Theo grumbles.

We follow him up to his room.

He throws a towel at Eli, then one at me. “And please, for the sake of my nose, rinse off.”

Eli chuckles, disappearing into the bathroom.

I cross my arms. “We have to ditch the detective.”

“I know.” He whips out his phone and shoots off a text. It vibrates a second later. “Liam is on his way.”

“His car got fixed?”

He shrugs. “I guess.”

The bathroom door swings open, and Eli walks out, a towel around his waist. “You gonna let us borrow clothes or...?”

Theo groans. “I better get this shit back.”

Armed with a clean shirt and jeans—we’re lucky we’re all around the same build, although his pants will be long on me—I lock myself in the bathroom.

I should be home with Margo, but instead...

I shower quickly, suds sliding down my body. Once I’m passably clean, I dry off and pull on the clothes. I have to roll the bottom of the pants, shaking my head slightly. This is ridiculous. We should’ve driven here.

Eli and Theo are down in the front living room, playing cards.

“I swear I can feel the detective’s eyeballs like laser beams.” Eli glances

up when I walk in. “He’s still out there.”

“Great. So we just act normal until Liam gets here—”

The doorbell rings, cutting off my words.

Theo’s eyebrows jump.

Liam has never, in his life, rang a doorbell. Which leaves one person.

Theo hops up, shaking his head, and I take his seat. We’re just going to have to act normal—like we weren’t planning on hunting Matt down like a fucking dog.

He returns with Detective Masters close behind him.

“Ah, Mr. Asher,” Masters says. “I thought you might be here.”

I clench my jaw instead of backtalking.

“Theo, did I hear—” Theo’s mother stops short. “Mr. Masters.”

“Detective,” he grits out.

She’s a formidable woman. After all, she raised Will *and* Theo. She works normal hours, is home at a normal time... but she’s a psychologist. I’m sure she deals with crazy shit Monday through Friday, nine to five.

She crosses her arms over her chest, gaze sweeping across the room. She barely hesitates on me, then is back to the detective. He seems to have shrunk in her presence.

“You’re aware that Caleb has an attorney, Jim, but on top of that—he’s a minor.”

I glance at Theo, but he just shrugs.

Everyone knows everyone in Rose Hill. For a community so close to a huge city, people sure do take pride in getting up in their neighbor’s shit.

So it’s not *surprising*, really, that Beth Alistair has heard of Detective Masters. But it is rather jarring to find they seem... familiar.

She raises her hand when Masters starts to speak. “Honestly, I don’t really want to hear it. Please leave.”

He winces.

“Like you had no idea this was my house,” she adds. “If you’d like to speak with Caleb, you can arrange to do so through his lawyer.”

Detective Masters takes a step forward, but Beth just lifts her chin.

“What happened to you, Elizabeth?” he asks her. “Defending criminals?”

Her eyes narrow. “The only one exhibiting *criminal* behavior here is you. Get out.”

I’ve never felt like cheering so much in my life.

The detective looks at me as if to say, *We’re not done*. He spins on his

heel and shows himself out, the door slamming behind him. The four of us stand in silence as his car turns over, the engine roaring to life. His headlights flash through the window, then swing away from us. We watch him get to the end of the road and turn toward the main gate.

“You do not let that man into our home,” she tells Theo. “Understand?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Theo answers.

His tone isn’t sassy. Beth Alistair demands respect. Commands a room, even though she’s barely five-four and slight.

“It’s late,” she says to me. “Let me drive you home.”

“Mom—”

She silences Theo with a wave. “No. Caleb, stay home until things have settled down.”

A warning to avoid her son?

I spare a fleeting thought for what Emery-Rose will do. What Coach will do. The Asher name is powerful, but there’s only so far they can go.

*I’m innocent.* First time I’ve ever said those words—but no doubt the last.

“Let him stay,” Theo mutters. “Liam is on his way over. We’re just going to play cards, and then I’ll take them home.”

“Please, Mrs. Alistair?” Eli gives her his best smile.

She sighs. “Fine, but I want this house empty except for my family by nine thirty.”

Needless to say, this is why we don’t hang out at Theo’s often.

Eli grabs us drinks, and Liam arrives just as we’re sitting down.

He frowns at me. “You look like hell.”

“He’s a convict now.” Eli cracks his knuckles. “He already had a rugged style, but now...”

I roll my eyes.

Liam throws his keys on the side table and falls onto the chair next to mine. “So, what’s the plan? I’m ready to beat—”

“Me at poker?” Eli raises his eyebrows. “Like hell.”

Liam catches on fast. Maybe he does know Theo’s house better than anyone, because he glances around like the walls have ears.

“Careful,” Theo jabs. “Liam likes to count cards.”

“Gotta be good at something in life,” Liam answers. He shuffles the deck, then deals our hands. “Besides, how else am I going to afford college?”

Eli snorts. “You plan to, what, go to Atlantic City and gamble your way into a college tuition?”

“As I just stated: how else am I going to fucking pay for it?” He glares at Eli. “I’m not going to be left behind while you assholes run off—”

“What about the whole football thing?” I cut in.

Although, I know his answer before his face even changes it.

“You and I both know that ship sailed,” he says. “Scouts came, but no one reached out. I’ve got a semester left to prove my lacrosse skills, but I’ve still got to get into the schools.”

He grimaces at the cards in his hand.

“So, yeah. Grades will get me into a good school, and poker will pay for it.”

Eli and I exchange a glance.

“Okay,” Eli says. “But you know—”

Liam jerks. “I don’t really want to talk about this anymore.”

“I was trying to convince Margo to apply,” I say, sliding the cards toward me.

He dealt me a pair of queens.

“She pushed back, huh?” Theo chuckles.

“She doesn’t think she’s going to college,” I mutter.

Liam snorts. “See? She gets it.”

“What are we betting with?” Eli waves the bag of chips he had brought in with the drinks. “These?”

Liam is too busy watching me to answer. “You can’t pressure her into it.”

“Like hell I can’t.” I fold my arms over my chest.

She’s going, whether she thinks she can do it or not. She’s smart. She has A’s and B’s in all of her classes, and college admissions teams love the harsh upbringing schtick.

And yet...

“I turn eighteen in April. I get my trust fund, and then...”

“Then what? You’ll finance Margo’s college experience?” Liam snorts. “I wish I had that kind of benefactor.”

I narrow my eyes. “It’s not a bad idea.”

“Just making sure she owes you, right, Caleb?” Liam throws down his cards and stands.

“Where are you going?” Theo calls.

“To get something stronger than soda.” He disappears down the hall.

Eli exhales. “You know how to ruin a mood.”

“Me?” I retort. “You were nitpicking his way of making money—”

“It’s illegal,” Eli snaps. “A concept you don’t really seem to take into consideration.”

“I haven’t broken any laws,” I correct. “Just because—”

“You were fucking *talking* to the dickbag who took Margo!” Eli yells.

I rear back, shocked. He doesn’t get riled up about much, but this has his panties in a twist. The way he’s staring at me...

“If you wanna take a fucking swing at me, do it,” I say in a low voice.

He shakes his head. “Why are you here? Go home. Be with Margo.” Quietly, he adds, “Imagine what she went through? Her foster dad is in the hospital and her boyfriend is here, hanging out with his friends—”

“We weren’t supposed to be *hanging out*,” I grit out.

“No, you just want to beat someone bloody.” Liam reenters the room. “Shocker.”

I jump to my feet. “Matt took her, and no one is doing anything!”

“That detective is breathing down your neck, and you think it’s a good idea to go pay Bonner a visit,” Liam goads. “So smart. Good thing your pockets are deep—oh wait, they aren’t quite yet... do you think you’re going to make it to eighteen at this rate?”

I stay silent. I ball my hands into fists.

The anger I had directed at Matt is slowly changing course.

“No,” he continues. “You’ll be locked up before Christmas. Wonder which one of us will take care of Margo while—”

I lunge at him, barely getting my hand on his shirt before Theo blocks me.

“You don’t touch her!” I yell, still trying to get to him.

Theo shoves me back, one hand extended toward Liam. “As much as I love a brawl, I can’t let you destroy the living room.”

Liam huffs. “We were just getting to the good part. Watch Caleb throw his life away.”

“Why? By taking action? It’s how things get *done* around here.”

I stop. I can’t believe those words just came out of my mouth.

Eli’s expression turns uneasy. “I think it’s time to go home.”

Liam coughs. “Yeah. Take my car.”

He tosses Eli his keys, but I’m still stuck in place.

“Old shitter better not break down on us,” Eli grumbles.

*Taking action is how things get done around here.*

Eli jostles me. “Snap out of it, dude. Let’s go.”

My body is ancient as I nod. My limbs are rusted. My heart is beating out of sync.

I don't remember saying goodbye to Theo and Liam—not that they'd want to hear it, anyway. We're in the car, halfway down the road, before I realize it.

"I'm not going to ask if you're okay, because you're clearly not." Eli glances over at me. "But if you want to talk about it..."

"Uncle used to say that." My voice is hoarse. "He was all about... taking action."

"He's one sick motherfucker, that's for sure."

Eli knows the reason I went to live with his family in the first place. I don't think I ever had to spell it out to him—his parents took care of that—but the scars... There's no hiding those.

Hell, the entire lacrosse team has seen them, but no one has ever said anything.

I tip my head back and close my eyes. *I'm going home to Margo*, I remind myself. That should be enough. Revenge, taking action—those are words my uncle put into my head. Drilled into me.

*Beat into me.*





**CALEB**

## Past

MOM WAS GONE. She didn't say where she was going before she left. One minute she was there, kissing the top of my head, and the next...

It had been two days. Two days of moping, staring out the window, and avoiding my uncle's gaze.

"You look like your father," he said to me now, filling the doorway. "I'm sure that's why she hasn't come back."

I flinched.

He liked it when I reacted to his words. He came out with these awful thoughts. He spoke them into existence and then watched the damage they inflicted.

"Ben and I looked alike, too." He came closer and sat down in the chair to my right. "Lydia... she's a troubled girl."

"Mom?" I asked. "Troubled?"

"Always up to her ears in mischief." He grimaced. "It was what attracted Ben to her in the first place. Like a moth to a flame..."

"Mom was the flame?"

"Indeed," Uncle said. "Still is."

I didn't know what to make of that.

"Caleb, sit before me." A demand, not a request.

My feet moved on their own, carrying me to the space in front of him.

Uncle did look like Dad. He had the same mean glint in his eyes, too. But that meanness only came out in Dad after a few drinks. It was ever-present on Uncle's face. He was like a supermodel in the magazines Margo used to flip through. Beautiful and ice-cold.

There was no chair in front of him, but I already knew what he meant. We'd done this a few times—*lessons*, he called them.

I sank to my knees, keeping my eyes on Uncle's shoes. They were polished.

"Tell me again how it happened," Uncle said.

"We were playing hide and seek." I glanced up. "And Margo was hiding. She saw..."

"Your father fucking her mom."

I blinked. Mom hadn't let me swear. Practically vibrated with anger when *hell* slipped out my mouth. But that was then. Now, she wasn't here.

“She saw Dad...”

“Say it,” he prodded. “It’s just a word, Caleb. It’s what they were doing.”  
I couldn’t. Mom would be angry.

He exhaled.

The next thing I knew, I was flat on my back. He knelt beside me, his hand wrapped around my throat. The pressure was just enough that I could barely suck in air.

“Continue,” he said.

“She came up to... tell me.” It wasn’t quite right, but the details were blending together. Did she come up to tell me or did she come to hide? “Her mom came in, yelled at her. Begged her not to tell.”

Uncle David leaned down. “But she did tell, didn’t she? And then her father took matters into his own hands.”

I shuddered.

“She should’ve listened to you, Caleb. If she had, your father would still be alive. Your family would still be together.”

He squeezed harder, until white spots exploded across my vision.

“Say it,” he repeated.

I knew better than to grab at his hands, but the urge was still there. The last time I did that, he backhanded me.

The easiest way to get out of this was to give him what he wanted.

“It’s Margo’s fault,” I whispered. “She ruined everything.”

He released me and sat back, smiling. He was a bit maniacal, wild hair and a crazy grin. “That’s it. One day, we’ll demand justice. Action is the only way things get done around here. Trust me, son. It’ll make you feel better.”

I swallowed. I didn’t believe him, but I would do anything to keep him calm.

“Yes, Uncle.”

## Present

What if everything I believed was... *twisted*?

"Dude."

I open my eyes. We're home.

"You fall asleep?" Eli shakes his head. "You still have that concussion."

I touch the back of my head. The wound my uncle gave me is all but closed. "I'm fine."

He grunts. "You're in denial, is what I think."

I don't bother with a response. He gets out, and I follow him up into the house. Mr. Black comes down the stairs as we're kicking off our shoes.

"Margo is a curious girl," he tells me.

"She talked to you?"

He watches me with eagle eyes. "Wanted to know what there was to be done about Matt Bonner."

I grimace.

Eli nudges me, then blurts out, "The detective followed us to Theo's house."

His dad straightens. "Did you talk to him?"

"Theo's mom told him to kick rocks," Eli says. "He's kind of creepy."

Mr. Black just shakes his head. "I'll look into it. See if we can file a harassment complaint. In the meantime, it's late. Get some rest, boys. Caleb, you have to go back to school tomorrow."

I raise my eyebrows. "They're letting me back?"

Given the detective's interest in me and everything happening with Margo's family, I figured...

"Yes. I talked to the school, and since no formal charges were brought against you, they can't expel you. Understand?" The expression he levels me with says I can't make any more mistakes.

I nod. "Yes, sir."

He exhales. "Goodnight, then."

He and Eli head up the stairs, but I hesitate. I should go see Margo, make sure she's okay. And yet...

Guilt overrides my decision. I can't see her, knowing I failed. I failed her in so many ways, I can't even count them.

I shove the emotion down and clear my throat. I'll see her tomorrow

before school—or after, if she’s still sleeping.

I get to the basement and stop. My bathroom light is on, throwing a warm, dim light across my room. I scan it, uneasy.

This wouldn’t be the first time my uncle ambushed me.

Instead, my gaze lands on my bed. My unmade... lumpy bed.

A knot forms in my chest. She was waiting for me in my bed while I was being an idiot.

I go closer, until her hair fanned across my pillow becomes clearer. She faces me, but her lips are slightly parted. Eyes closed. She’s beautiful and innocent in sleep, with no walls between us.

Well, none of *her* walls.

I sit on the edge of the bed and brush her hair off her face. She shifts, and I about die when her tongue pokes out, sweeping over her lower lip.

“You’re back,” she murmurs.

“You’re in my bed,” I answer. My chest tightens.

She sighs, reaching out blindly for me.

I catch her hand and kiss her knuckles.

Her eyes open, meeting mine. “I don’t know if you’re the best or the worst thing to happen to me.”

I suppress a frown. Where is this coming from?

“Definitely the worst,” I say.

She watches me for a moment with those huge dark eyes. “You’ve been avoiding me.”

I could deny it, but I don’t want to lie to her. So I keep my mouth shut.

All the excuses come to the tip of my tongue.

She was kidnapped because of me.

She’s been hurt, over and over, because of me.

And the worst part is, I haven’t been able to prevent any of it.

Ian, our parents, her abduction.

“Stop thinking,” she orders, pushing herself upright. “Caleb. I’m right here. I’m *okay*.”

“But you...”

She touches my face.

“I couldn’t save you,” I mutter, and a piece of weight lifts off my chest. *See where honesty gets you?* “God, I didn’t even know you had been taken —”

She pulls me toward her, her hands gentle on the back of my neck. I go

with the pressure until our lips are inches apart.

And then I stop.

“Margo—”

She kisses me.

It shocks me, in a way. She’s not usually the pursuer in our fucked-up relationship. I’ve hunted her down, bullied her, broke her. But in the end, she turned out stronger than I could’ve imagined.

Her lips move against my frozen ones. It isn’t until her teeth tug on my lower lip that my body thaws.

I slide my hands up her sides, over her shoulder blades and into her hair. She gives me the control, letting me tilt her head back, my tongue slip into her mouth. Her tongue slides along mine, forcing me out. She explores my mouth.

She tastes sweet.

I lay her down gently, cupping the back of her head even after it rests on the pillow. My body follows, hovering just over her.

We’re a mess, her and I.

Her leg hooks over my hip, drawing me closer.

I groan into her mouth, shifting so she can feel *exactly* what she does to me.

She tears her mouth away from mine, panting. “Caleb.”

I move to her neck, licking and kissing a spot just below her ear that drives her crazy. She wriggles beneath me, her head lolling to the side to give me better access. Her hands go to the button of my pants, shoving them down.

She gets my boxers off next.

I bite her neck, and her whole body lurches. I grin.

“Caleb, I need to feel you,” she whispers.

I roll my hips, the head of my cock brushing her panties. It just makes me harder, because she’s soaked.

Her fingers find my erection, and she moves her panties to the side.

I thrust into her, and we both let out a low groan.

Being inside her without a condom is dangerous. This is one time I can’t lose my mind. And I really want to just not fucking think for a little while.

She leans to the side, toward my nightstand. The mind reader.

“As good as this feels, I don’t want to be a teen mom,” she says.

I snort. “Ditto.”

She finds a condom, and I pull out of her, rolling it on. I tear her panties off, while my mind is at least a fraction clearer.

“If this hurts your head, tell me,” I warn her.

“You have a head wound, too,” she says. “So, ditto back.”

I chuckle. “It won’t.”

I’ve had a constant, minor headache for the last week. And this? Worth it.

I grab her thighs, hauling her to me, and line myself up. My heart is beating out of my chest. In the dim light, she appears ethereal. Dark hair, dark eyes, pale skin. So much pale skin.

I slide her shirt up to her chin. No bra.

Her breasts are perfect, and her nipples harden. I pinch one between my thumb and index finger at the same time that I push into her.

She groans, her back arching off the bed. Her pussy clenches around me.

I almost explode right then and there.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” I growl. I pull back and slam into her, and she rises to meet me.

I set a fast pace, ignoring the demons that’ve been crowding my head for as long as I can remember. She’s beautiful splayed out beneath me, taking my length and begging for more.

“Touch yourself,” I say. My hand is still on her breast, and I tweak her nipple when she blinks up at me.

Slowly, her hand slides down her body. Her finger pauses on her clit, and she shudders, then rubs in small circles. Her eyes roll back.

I roll my hips, hitting a new spot inside her. Her ass bounces on my thighs from the force of my thrusts, but her finger doesn’t stop moving.

Her orgasm claws out of her.

I lean down and cover her lips with mine, swallowing her loud moan. She rakes her nails down my back.

I pound into her, hissing out a breath as I come. I still inside her and breathe sharply through my nose.

Our lips are still fused together.

She doesn’t let me get away. If anything, we’ve broken through a barrier and she wants me *closer*. Her legs and arms wrap around me, and she tucks her head into my neck.

“You’re not the worst thing to happen to me,” she says.

Her breath hits my skin and gives me goosebumps. “Far from it.”

I slide out of her and roll us onto our sides. She watches me deal with the

condom, then I pull her close again. There's a lump in my throat, and my head is pounding.

Concussion be damned.

"Caleb..."

I hadn't realized my eyes closed. I meet her gaze, but my attention strays to her stitches. "How do you feel?"

She sucks her lower lip between her teeth and contemplates my question.

"Lost," she says.

"Then I'll find you," I tell her.

"Why did everyone hate me? Shouldn't they have been mad at the people actually having an affair?"

"Apparently, everyone knew except your dad." It's time for a bit more truth around here.

She flinches. "What?"

"I don't know how, but Uncle David wasn't surprised. And at the funeral..." I grimace. "Mom didn't cry. I think it was the betrayal..."

"Her husband was cheating on her," Margo says. "So she was mad at his betrayal."

I lift one shoulder. "I was ten. I don't know."

She huffs, then flops onto her back. "Dad said he didn't do it."

"You can't be serious." The words are out of my mouth too fast. I should've held them back. But old, deep rage reignites in my chest. "He murdered my dad in cold blood. Of course he's going to lie to you and say he didn't."

"I shouldn't have said anything," she murmurs. She sits up and scoots to the end of the bed—choosing to go around me than climb over me to get up.

I watch her pick up her underwear, straighten her shirt, and yank on leggings draped over my couch.

"You're leaving?"

"Going back to my room," she says stiffly. "In case the Blacks check on me."

"I—"

I almost just apologized. And for what? Not believing the words of a murderer? Not gonna happen.

She spares a glance back at me, then lets out a long breath. "I know."

I narrow my eyes. "You know what?"

"That your dad's death still hurts. That you blame the entire Wolfe family



for it—including me.” Her beautiful lips tip down.

She’s almost entirely in shadow, but I know her eyes are burning into mine.

Maybe she’s right. I do blame all of them.

It’s what my uncle drilled into me from the moment I stepped into his house.

After Margo leaves, slipping up the stairs quieter than a mouse, I touch my own throat. Flat on my back, it’s easy to remember how his hand on me felt. He liked shows of power. Cutting me down, making me feel small.

And what do you know?

I did the same to Margo—just like Uncle taught.

MY PHONE BUZZING jars me awake.

It took me forever to get to sleep, my mind twisting around Uncle’s lessons that I had shoved away, on top of Margo’s confession.

I fumble for the phone and finally find it.

“What?”

“Come outside.” It’s Theo.

I glance at the screen. It’s late—like, two in the morning, the rest of the world is sleeping late—and that piques my interest.

That and the urgency in his voice.

“Be there in a minute.”

“Backyard,” he says, then hangs up.

I wait a beat. I cross to the bathroom, the light still on from Margo, and splash water on my face. Get dressed, grab my shoes. Creep up the stairs, through the kitchen and out the back door, then put my shoes on.

Eli and Liam are waiting for me just beyond the brick patio.

“Took him long enough.” Liam grins. “Guess Theo didn’t spoil the surprise.”

I shake my head. “He didn’t.”

“Right this way.” Liam turns and disappears into the darkness.

I glance at Eli. “A surprise? For me?”

He shrugs. “I dunno.”

We follow Liam up the hill, to the shed at the back of the Blacks’

property. They used to keep a lawn mower in here, but now it just houses a few jet skis. Summer with the Blacks is never a dull moment.

We arrive just as Liam cracks the door, sliding it open wide enough for us to slip inside.

“We’re lucky the snow melted,” Eli whispers before we go in. “Or else my parents would question why we were up here.”

I grunt my agreement and enter ahead of him.

He closes the door behind us, and then the overhead light flickers on.

Theo stands in the center of the room, grinning like a fool.

“Best. Christmas. Present. Ever,” he says. “Just saying.”

I look around. “Yeah?”

“Fuck yeah,” he answers. He steps to the side, revealing...

*Ah, hell.*

Matt is bound by his wrists and ankles, curled into a ball. Duct tape covers his mouth, and he jerks when he sees me.

“Come now, Matty, you didn’t think we *weren’t* bringing you to Caleb?” Liam says, approaching and crouching down. He grabs Matt’s jaw, tilting his head back. “What do you think, Caleb? Free hall pass.”

“How the hell—”

“Matt’s sister sure is a pretty one,” Liam says. He leans in close to Bonner’s face. “Sure would be a shame if something were to happen to her...”

Matt lunges, knocking Liam back with his bound arms.

Theo quickly hauls Matt away, holding him upright, and Liam laughs from the floor.

He climbs to his feet and shakes his head. “See? He knows not to talk.”

Eli shifts. “But don’t kill him. Not sure how I’ll explain that to my parents.”

I take a deep breath. “Remove the duct tape from his mouth.”

Theo rips it off in one smooth motion, and Matt jerks away. Theo gives him a little push into the center of the room.

“Are you going to answer our questions?” I ask.

He glares up at me. “Fuck you.”

I tilt my head. “I thought we were friends.”

“We are—”

“*Were*,” Eli corrects from my left.

Liam stands behind Matt. Theo to my right.

And then there's Matt Bonner, on his knees in the center.

"Who was your alibi, Bonner?" I ask. When he doesn't answer, I crack my knuckles. The demons are coming out to play, and there's no one here to reel them back in.

I think even Margo would be okay with this.

"Why did you take her?"

His gaze would cut through me if he wasn't such a fucking coward.

Sudden clarity hits me. I hate him more than I've hated anyone in my life. Dad, Uncle David, the way I used to feel about Margo... it's all dust compared to the fury welling inside me.

He hurt her.

Took her.

Tied her up and left her to die—

"Just fucking hit me already, Asher," Matt growls. "Because I'm not saying a goddamn thing one way or another."

"We'll see about that," Theo mutters.

"Who owns your loyalty?" I squat in front of him. "Honestly, Bonner. What the hell would make you clam up?"

He shakes his head. "Someone scarier than you lot."

I snap my fist out, connecting with his nose. Pain radiates down my arm. It's a sharp feeling, like squeezing a piece of glass. It wakes me up.

All of my senses come to life, exploding through me.

Blood gushes from his nose, and he brings his hands up to his face.

But he doesn't say anything. Hardly protests.

"Cut him loose," I order.

Liam frowns.

"Cut. Him. *Loose*."

Eli pulls out his knife and cuts through the tape on his ankles, then his wrists. It's painfully similar to how we found Margo.

Matt shakes out his arms and stands quickly, spinning in a circle.

"Eyes on me, Bonner," I growl. "You hit me, you get to walk out of here. Right now."

His eyebrow goes up. "What's the catch?"

"No catch."

Liam steps forward. "What are you—?"

"Hit me, Bonner," I goad. "You took Margo, and I think you did it to get back at me for something. Jealousy?"

“Jealous of you?” He lunges for me, swinging wildly.

I easily dodge it.

He stumbles to a stop and spins around. “Your whole family is fucking crazy.”

I shrug. He’s right, there’s no point denying it. Although, I’m not sure when he would’ve formed that opinion.

He charges again, his fist barely missing my cheek as I twist away. I stick out my foot, and he catches on it, sprawling out.

My blood is pumping. Theo was right—best fucking Christmas present ever. Revenge is a dirty thing, like a stink that you can’t wash off. But this isn’t revenge.

This is justice.

Eli pulls Matt up, slapping his cheek. “You still with us, Bonney?”

He shoves Eli away and spins back toward me. The blood from his nose has stained his front teeth red. I’m itching to hit him again—just like I’m itching for him to hit me.

When he comes back around, I get in two quick punches to his torso, then back away. If I get him flat on his back, I know I won’t be able to stop.

Matt yells. It shatters the night.

Liam grabs him from behind and slaps a hand over his mouth. In his other hand is a knife, and he raises it to Matt’s neck. “What did we say, huh? You want to die tonight?”

Eli shifts.

Yeah, we didn’t sign up for murder.

“You talk or you get a hit in,” I tell Matt in an even voice. “That’s the only way you’re getting out of here on your own two feet.”

Theo grins, making a show of looking Matt up and down.

Matt swallows. “I’m dead if I talk, so... there goes that option.”

Liam releases him, shoving him toward me.

Margo’s face flashes in front of my eyes. What would she think about this? Justice or not, she calms the bloodlust. For sense to trickle in. There’s a bit of hopelessness to this situation. Four boys beating up a fifth. Is that what we’ve reduced ourselves to?

He comes after me, and I stay still long enough for him to get a hit in.

His knuckles glance across my jaw, harder than I would’ve wanted—but definitely not as bad as it could’ve been. My head cranks to the side, and my cheek is torn open by my teeth. The metallic taste of blood fills my mouth.

I spit onto the floor.

Silence.

I stare at Matt. He's watching me like he can't believe he actually hit me—and if I'm going to uphold my promise.

"I will get to the bottom of this," I warn him. I'm sure my teeth are stained red like his, and I make sure he sees it. "And until then? You better stay the fuck away from anyone you care about. We'll be watching."

He slowly raises his arm, wiping the blood from his mouth off on the back of his hand.

Eli steps aside to let him pass, and he follows out to watch Matt go.

"You let him off the hook too easy," Theo says.

"Hitting him felt good, but..." I crack my neck. The adrenaline is leeching out of me, reminding me that it's the middle of the night. "He's smart. He wouldn't have done this on his own—and clearly he wasn't going to spill."

Liam grunts. "Maybe."

I tilt my head back, gaze on the rafters. "And... thank you."

Theo chokes. "Yeah?"

"We didn't learn a fucking thing," Eli says.

I shrug. "We learned Matt's afraid of someone."

"He's a pussy." Theo grabs a flashlight from the floor and clicks off the overhead light. "He plays a tough game, but he's afraid of his shadow."

"A lot of people in his life could be threatened," I say. "And honestly? We're in no position to threaten any of them."

"Just his sister," Liam says. We close up the shed and slowly walk toward the house. "Have you seen her? Instagram model, hot as hell. Lips—"

"All right." Eli shakes his head. "I love you crazy fuckers, but I need sleep. You two staying?"

Liam and Theo trade a look.

"I've got to get home," Theo says. "Ma will flip out if I'm not there when she wakes up."

Liam sighs. "Yeah, I've gotta take Jake to school now that my car is functioning. So..."

"Keys are in my room," Eli says. "Come get them."

Theo doesn't enter the house, just disappears around the corner without a word. I watch Liam and Eli head toward the stairs, and I contemplate an apology. But what for?

I flip my light on in the basement, half expecting Margo to be waiting for me again. But no, she's asleep, safe in her room. Away from my darkness.

She sure does know how to bring out the light in me, but the moment she's gone... she takes the good with her, leaving the broken mess she created.

*No*, that isn't quite right. I need to stop blaming her.

I rinse the blood away.

I was willing to break Margo so our pieces would fit, but Matt took that away from me. She's more damaged than I am now. Fragile. One wrong move and she'll shatter, and it wasn't *my* decision. Hers, neither.

No matter.

I'll throw myself against the truth until I'm dust. And then nothing will separate us.



## MARGO

I'M NOT sure what wakes me up. One minute I'm out, dreaming of my father, and the next, my eyes are open in the dark and my heart is racing.

I blink and try to regain control of my emotions. Fear is the predominant one. It surges through me, slippery and toxic. I sit up slowly, practicing my deep breathing.

A trick the doctor taught me before I left.

Panic follows close behind the fear, and I reach blindly for my phone before I realize I don't have it anymore. I squint around the dark room, but nothing seems out of place.

My attention goes to the window. The nights have been getting colder, but tonight was unseasonably warm. The window is cracked, letting in a strong breeze.

And beyond the window, a light bouncing across the lawn.

I climb out of bed and press my nose to the glass. It's hard to make out, but it looks like one person rushing away from the storage shed. The light moves erratically, then they disappear around the side of the house.

I throw a glance over my shoulder, checking my door. It's shut. It doesn't have a lock on it, but Eli's parents are sleeping right down the hall. No one would come in here to attack me with them so close... right?

Voices seep in through the window, and I hunch down. It's ridiculous, the idea that whoever is out there might see into my dark room.

Four bodies moving through the darkness. One flashlight illuminating their feet.

Caleb.



Liam.

Eli.

Theo.

"I've got to get home," one of them says.

Theo, I would guess, judging from his tone. I can barely hear him, and the wind only picks up some of their words.

I hold my breath.

*What were they doing?*

"Keys are up in my room," Eli says.

I saw Liam's car in the driveway on my mad dash out of Caleb's room earlier, so that's who he must be talking to.

A minute later, their footsteps creak on the stairs.

I press my ear to the door, waiting for the sound of keys.

"Later, man," Eli says in a low voice.

His door closes, and I yank mine open.

I catch Liam just as he's passing. He freezes, spinning toward me.

"Fuck, Margo, you startled me."

I raise my eyebrows. "What were you doing?"

"Trying to get to the truth," he answers.

I roll my eyes. It's such a cop-out answer.

"You're safe here," he says. "No one knows you're here. Right? Just Riley and us."

I squint at him. He's completely in shadow, it's impossible to see his expression. And I can't dissect his tone, either. Is he worried? Angry? My disappearance probably put Caleb through hell.

"Lenora and my social worker, too," I murmur.

"Matt was the one who took you," Liam says. "You believe it, and Caleb believes you, we believe Caleb. You see how long a train this is."

I shrug. "I know I saw him. Do you think I'm lying?"

"No."

We're silent for a moment.

"What were you doing in that shed?"

"You don't want to know."

Maybe that's true. Caleb would do anything to protect me...

"Take this," Liam says. He extends something toward me.

The second I grasp it, he pushes me back into my room and closes the door behind him.

I suck in a sharp breath and stumble away.

All he does is flick my light on.

“Look at it,” he says, lifting his chin toward my hand.

It’s... a folded knife.

When I glance back up, he’s right in front of me. His hand covers mine, showing me how to flip it open with one hand.

“It’s a pocketknife,” he says. “Usually for work, but... handy for self-defense if you need something small and light.”

I shake my head. “A knife? What do you want me to do, stab someone with it?”

He grins. “If you have to. But most women prefer slicing.”

My eyes are the size of dinner plates, I’m sure.

“I know how it feels to be helpless,” he says. “All too often, some asshole thinks I’m one of the rich ones. But I’m usually walking home because my car broke down and my parents work late. Defending myself became a priority.”

“You got mugged?”

“A few times.” He shrugs. “Anyway. Someone comes at you from the front?” He steps in front of me, jostling me back.

This is so not what I expected... a middle-of-the-night self-defense lesson.

“Fight back, Margo,” he says. He taps vulnerable spots on his body. “When in doubt, go for the eyes.”

I rear back. “Stab them in the eyes? Are you insane?”

“Knife or thumbs.” He winks. “Arteries. The inside of the elbow or thigh, the neck. Soft points like just under the chin or the eyes... And if someone grabs you from behind, slash the fuck out of their arms. Scratch them. Don’t hold back.”

“I have just been in a car accident.”

He steps back, his face softening for a moment. “I know.”

“My head—”

“I know.”

“Was it Matt?” I ask, blinking back tears. “Did you bring Matt here for Caleb?”

“You know as well as I do that you don’t want to know.”

I straighten. How dare he tell me what I do and don’t want to know.

And you know what? I’m kind of sick of *everyone* dictating—and

limiting—the information I get told.

“You should leave.” It’s either that or swear at him, and that wouldn’t be very nice after the lesson he just gave me.

He nods.

I try to give him back the knife, but he raises his hands in surrender.

“It’s yours, Wolfe. Keep it and do great things.” He goes to leave, turning off the light before opening my door. “Great and terrible things.”

I’m immobile in the center of my room long after he goes, contemplating his words. Tomorrow is a big day. I’m meeting with Angela, who is going to take me to see Robert. And I have my first appointment with the new therapist. After that, someone will bring me homework, and I’ll attempt to concentrate without getting a headache.

I should go to bed, but I can’t tear my eyes off the door.

My fingers move along the handle of the knife. I get used to the feel of it in my palm and try to imagine a world in which I’m not defenseless. Not meek or cowardly.

I take a deep breath and finally jolt myself out of a standstill, closing my door.

And then I practice.

Wolves have teeth, and it’s about time I grow into mine.

ANGELA IS PROMPT, and I am exhausted.

She doesn’t say anything at my messy hair or the dark circles under my eyes. I was still awake at seven o’clock this morning when Caleb and Eli left for school. I’d only just drifted off, then Norah knocked on my door telling me she had breakfast ready.

And twenty minutes later, Angela arrived to take me to the hospital.

“He’s been moved out of ICU,” she says. “I talked to Lenora this morning, to make sure you’d be able to see him.”

I watch the houses flash by. The ICU is strict—I learned that the hard way before we left the hospital yesterday.

*Yesterday.*

So much has changed in less than twenty-four hours. I learned that Caleb and his friends interrogated Matt. Although I don’t know if *interrogated* is

the right word. Maybe they just beat the shit out of him and... what, let him run away?

I sigh.

"You okay?" Angela asks.

I shove away thoughts of Caleb and Matt and focus on her. She's the one who had me believing my dad went to jail for drugs, not *manslaughter*.

"I tried to look up Dad's trial coverage," I say, watching her reaction.

"What were you hoping to find?"

"Anything," I answer. "But... apparently he wasn't sentenced for drug possession, or whatever you told me. He wasn't dealing... or even using."

Her lips purse, then smooth out. "I don't remember saying anything about drugs."

"What did he go away for, then?"

"Margo." Her tone is exasperated. She opens and closes her hands on the steering wheel. "You were young. I'm sure you're misremembering something. With your mother's drug addiction, it would've been easy to transpose that onto your father."

She's trying to make me think I'm crazy.

I slowly nod. "You must be right."

We're quiet for a minute, and then she says, "It's sad, really. Your parents... The whole thing is unfortunate."

"Lydia came to see me, didn't she?"

Angela hesitates.

I've taken her by surprise.

"Lydia Asher? Um, yes, I think she did. She was like a second mother to you."

I focus back on the road. We're nearing the hospital.

I wonder what she'd say if I told her I went to see Dad. She'd probably freak out on me and the Jenkinses.

But... she never asked where we were coming from when the accident happened. So maybe she knows the only way we'd be out on that side of town would be if we were visiting the prison.

I shift. My hand feels for the knife in my pocket, and the knot in my chest loosens.

She stops in front of the hospital. "Lenora said she would take you to your therapy appointment, okay? Call me if you need anything."

*Need anything.*

I need answers. The truth.

But I can't really say that, now can I?

I get out and walk toward the entrance, but her voice calls me back.  
"Margo, sorry, I forgot! Here."

She reaches toward the open passenger window, extending a cell phone toward me. "To replace your other one. It was recovered in the car at the scene of the accident, so the insurance covered the new one. Isn't that great?"

I take it, flipping it over. It's an upgraded version of my previous one.

I smile. It'll be nice to be in contact with Riley and Lenora. And Caleb.

She pulls away while I'm still looking down at it.

As long as Unknown hasn't messaged me... But why would they? Their master plan succeeded.

*Or did it?*

Taking a deep breath, I slip it into my jacket pocket, turn on my heel, and go into the hospital. I can deal with that later.

I have the room number on a piece of paper in my pocket. After helpful direction from a nurse, I step into a busy wing. Lenora sees me almost immediately and jogs toward me.

She throws her arms around me, hugging me close.

I breathe in her scent—a mix of lavender shampoo and perfume—and relish the fact that it's become familiar already. It reminds me of safety.

I haven't seen her in only a day, but it feels longer. More than just wanting to settle back into normal... I want to go *home*.

"I'm glad you're here. Did you sleep?" She brushes my hair back, scanning my face. Worry creases her eyebrows, and she briefly touches my forehead, near my stitches.

She's the one who looks like she didn't sleep. Her eyes are puffy, and she wears leggings and a baggy sweater.

"They've been letting me stay in his room on a cot now that he's out of the ICU, but..." She tries to smile, but her chin wobbles.

Impulsively, I hug her again.

Her lips brush the top of my head, and I close my eyes.

"He's going to be okay," she whispers. "You're safe. He's safe."

I blink back tears. "Okay."

"He was asking for you."

I pull back slightly. "He's awake?"

"Yes, they just gave him breakfast. It's the first meal he's had..." She

covers her mouth. "I'm just so thankful you both got through this."

I don't know how to respond to that, so I say, "I'm glad Caleb found me."

Her face falls. "God, Margo, the police took him out of here so forcefully, I didn't know what to think. But you said you saw who it really was?"

"One of his friends from a different school." My stomach turns over. "It wasn't Caleb."

"I believe you." She wraps her arm around my shoulders and leading me down the hall. "And I know the detective was rather critical, but I wouldn't let you stay in the same house as Caleb if I thought he had something to do with it."

I tilt my head. "But... you did point the detective in Caleb's direction while I was gone, didn't you?"

"I gave him the names of everyone you're friends with. I didn't know he was going to single out Caleb. Are you ready to see Robert?"

We stop in front of a door to a private room. She releases me, and I enter on my own, creeping farther in. The busyness of the hall falls away.

He's propped up in bed, a rolling table in front of him with a plate of food on it, and... so much medical equipment surrounds him. Wires disappear under his gown, there's an IV taped to his arm. He has a tube under his nose for oxygen.

How can a person go from strong to so frail in days? His skin is pale. His face is covered in healing cuts and fading bruises, and his right arm is in a cast, slung to his chest.

This is my fault. I put him here.

I can't move.

But I still catch his eye—or maybe it's the *snick* of the door closing.

His whole damn face lights up.

And me? I burst into tears.

"Come here, sweetheart," he says, reaching for me. He pushes the table away.

I'm stuck in guilt, my shoes glued to the floor. How do people overcome anguish?

"Margo." His hand is still stretched toward me.

I finally move, venturing closer. He's pale. They had intubated him for a collapsed lung, sedated him. And now...

"Come here," he repeats. He scoots to the edge of the bed, patting the space next to him.

I wipe at my face, but the tears keep coming. I finally sit next to him. Take his hand.

He lifts my hand and kisses the back of it. "I'm so glad you're okay."

There's a thousand pound weight on my chest. Slowly, I lie next to him. I curl my arm over his chest and lay my head on his shoulder.

He smooths my hair.

Wipes my cheeks.

He brushes my hair back from the cut on my forehead, and I feel his sharp intake of breath.

"That's nice stitching," he says. "Good as new, yeah? Both of us."

"You—" I close my eyes. "No. You're not good as new. You're in a hospital bed. Your arm, your lung—"

"All will heal."

"It's my fault," I whisper. "And I'm sorry. I'm so sorry—"

The guilt overwhelms me, and I choke on a sob. He hugs me closer. I fall apart, but he keeps whispering words I can't make sense of. *It's okay*, and *We're all right*. But those are just things you say to make someone feel better.

I deserve to feel bad about this.

To be shipped off to a different foster home. To never see them again.

It would be a just punishment.

Fair.

So this? This is a goodbye.

This is putting my heart in a blender because I deserve pain over any form of happiness. Caleb knew that, made sure it was drilled into my head. Even my mother knew it—it's why she left instead of choosing to fight for me.

He lets me cry into his chest without complaint. Eventually my tears will run out, but the grief is endless.

I sit up. Lenora comes farther into the room, a box of tissues in her hand. She offers me the box, and I take a few, dabbing at my eyes.

And then I force myself off the bed and go to the window, then suck in a deep breath. The weight is still there, crushing me.

"You should get rid of me," I say to the glass. We're on the fourth floor with a decent view. The hospital is the tallest building around. There's the neighborhood, then a stretch of forest, and there my line of sight ends. "I'm no good. A danger, even."

“Why would you say that?” Lenora asks.

“For the past three months, I’ve been...” I close my eyes. “Harassed? Stalked? I don’t know. By someone I didn’t know. But then on Sunday, they —”

“Margo—”

I spin around. “It’s my fault. They hit our car to get to me. And you were hurt because of me.”

I rub my chest. I can’t breathe again. My heart takes off, galloping out of control.

*My fault*, it chants with every beat.

Lenora guides me into a chair. “I think you’re having a panic attack.”

*My fault. My fault.*

I gasp, but I can’t seem to get any air. Black spots flash in front of my vision.

*—what did you do, Margo?—*

*This wouldn’t be the first time you destroyed a family.*

“Breathe, honey,” Lenora says.

And then Robert is in front of me, his hands on my cheeks.

“With me, now,” he says. “In and out.”

“You shouldn’t be out of bed.” Lenora strokes his hair back. Her other hand is on my shoulder.

I take a moment to appreciate them both.

They’re grounding.

“Margo,” Robert says firmly. “We’re not sending you away. Len said you’re staying with the Blacks until I’m well enough to go home. It should be any day now, right?”

He sucks in a noisy breath, holds it, then blows it out.

I mimic him, and cool, sweet air rushes back into my lungs. We keep going until my heart has slowed. My hands shake, but I mask it by smoothing out my pants.

“We’re not giving you up,” he repeats. He uses the arm of the chair to lift himself off the floor. He makes it almost all the way straight before he doubles over.

“Robert!” Lenora yells, grabbing his arm. “What’s wrong?”

“My chest is on fire.” He coughs into his hand, then grimaces at it. One of the monitors behind his bed starts beeping.

I hadn’t realized he was still connected to them.



A second later, a nurse rushes into the room. “Robert, what are you doing out of bed?”

She guides him back into it, making sure everything is in place. The monitor is still going crazy. He rubs at his chest, shaking his head.

“My chest is on fire,” he gasps.

He coughs again, and blood sprays across his blankets.

The nurse leans over and hits a button while Lenora and I watch in horror. The air drains from the room. His face goes deathly pale, and his eyes roll back a moment before he seems to go unconscious.

Lenora and I are shuffled back against the window as a team pours into the room, surrounding him.

He jerks, and they flatten the bed.

“Someone get them out of here,” one of the doctors calls.

A nurse separates and herds us out, down the hall.

“What’s happening?” Lenora demands.

“Looks like a complication with his chest tube,” she says. “Unfortunately, I don’t have any more information than that.”

She shows us to a waiting room and just... leaves us there.

Lenora’s hands go to her head, pulling at her hair, and she lets out a strangled cry. “Death can’t take you, too,” she whispers.

Oh god.

Why is it only just now occurring to me that her daughter died in a car accident?

I slip my arm through hers, drawing her hands away from her head. Slowly, as if I not to frighten her, I thread my fingers through hers.

She squeezes, turning away from the doorway and toward me.

“He’ll be okay,” she tells me.

It’s a bravado.

He might not be. He might...

I close my eyes and hold on tighter. “I’m so sorry.”

She cups my cheek until I look at her. “It isn’t your fault, Margo. This...” She shrugs. “All we can do is wait.”

Cindy and Jeff, my last foster parents, would’ve urged us to pray about it. They thought God could fix everything He wanted to—and if things had a shitty outcome, well, at least we learned a lesson.

Utter bullshit.

Time moves slowly after that.

I take off my jacket—I had forgotten I was even wearing it—and fold it over the arm of a chair. I sit and contemplate reaching for my phone, but my hands are trembling too badly.

Lenora paces by the door, occasionally peeking into the hallway.

And finally, minutes or hours later, a doctor comes to see us.

“We just finished testing. The surgeon decided to rush him into emergency surgery,” she says. “He has a pulmonary embolism. A blood clot in the lung. This particular kind he has can be quite severe.”

“Was it because he got out of bed?” I ask from the corner of the room, covering my face with my hands. Still, the words slip out before I can stop them.

Lenora shakes her head. “No.”

“The PE could’ve been caused by a number of things. We also discovered that the site of the chest tube had become infected.” The doctor clears her throat. “Was him getting out of bed the cause? Probably not. There’s no way to know for sure, so you shouldn’t think it was because of you.”

I bite my lip. Part of me doesn’t want to accept that dismissal of blame.

I can’t let it go.

“How long is the surgery? Is he... did you catch it in time?” Lenora asks.

“Removing the blood clot is a minimally invasive surgery. The surgeon is going to remove it and also clean out the infection. We’ll update you once we know more, but we caught it. That’s the important part.”

Lenora lets out a long breath at the same time my entire body shudders.

The doctor leaves, and Lenora spins toward me, joy written across her face.

“Hear that? He’s going to be okay.” She falls into the seat next to me. “Thank God.”

“How do you do it?” I ask.

She tilts her head and raises her eyebrow.

“I mean... the emotions. Everything in the past week. How are you still standing?”

She lets out a little laugh. “I’m still standing?”

We’re quiet for a moment.

“No, I’m still... I’m functioning. You’ll be surprised at how much you can endure before you shut down.” She blinks at the ceiling. “But, I can’t tell you how many times I wanted to scream. Every single moment he was in the ICU. Even now.”

I exhale.

“Love can be a beautiful thing,” she tells me in a low voice. “But it can also be a terrible burden.”

My eyes burn. My thoughts jump to Caleb. Of course they do.

“Is it better to be alone?” I ask.

She considers my answer, and in this moment, that’s what I appreciate the most about her. She doesn’t bullshit me—I’m practically an adult. She’s never tried to make me feel younger than I am. Sure, she’s still a parent. But it’s different.

“There are epic love stories that end in tragedy,” she finally says. “And then there are people who just float at the baseline of emotion. No love, no loss. I think it’s better to experience it all. Everything good and bad and terrifyingly ugly in this world. Otherwise, we’ll just walk around numb, and what kind of life is that?”

Love, loss, tragedy.

“And besides, who’s to say every story ends in a ball of flames? Some surpass time.” She wraps her arm around my shoulders.

I surprise myself by leaning into it, resting my head on her shoulder.

“I’m scared.”

“Why do I think you’re not just talking about Robert?” She hums.

“I don’t want to fall in love with Caleb if he’s just going to break my heart,” I whisper. “I don’t want him to... string me along or mess with me.”

She taps my bracelet. “What’s the story with this, if you don’t mind me asking?”

I snort. “When we were nine, I basically talked Caleb into pretend marrying me. It was just braided thread back then, nothing... substantial.” I twist it around my wrist. “I lost it at one of the foster homes, but I think Caleb was the one who stole it back. It was my own fault for not wearing it, but I didn’t want it to break. He gave it back to me at the masquerade ball.”

“Before he told us the lies about our daughter.”

“Yeah.”

“The nine-year-old Margo was ready to commit.” She chuckles. “If only we all had the courage that kids do.”

“Well, that was before I broke his heart, and he broke mine,” I mumble.

She twists toward me. “If you listen to anything I say, I hope it’s this. Hearts heal. Scars fade. Memories of the past... they don’t last very long, either. If you love him, love him with everything you have, and I promise it’ll

be worth it.”

I blink back tears. “Is that how you feel about Robert?”

“Absolutely. We may not seem like it at times, though.” She wipes at her own cheeks. “Time has worn us down. But we put work and love into our relationship every day.”

“It’s funny... I never got to have a conversation about relationships or sex or love.” I roll my eyes. “Mom and Dad had a weird, angry relationship. The Ashers weren’t the best role models, either. And the foster families...” I laugh under my breath. “None of them really had their shit together. Some pretended, of course, but we saw through it.”

“I’m sorry you’ve had to go through that,” she says.

She glances at her watch and jumps. “Oh, dear. You’re going to be late to therapy.”

“You’re going to make me go? Now?” I stand and go to the opposite wall. “I want to stay here.”

She’s quiet. “You’re right. You should be able to stay. But...”

I whirl around.

“You should talk about how you feel to someone objective.”

“Can’t we move it back?” I plead. “At least... later today, tomorrow, something?”

Lenora watches me for a moment, then brushes her bangs out of her eyes. “Let me make a phone call, okay? How about you get us something from the vending machine.”

She hands me a few dollars, shooing me into the hall.

My whole body is numb. I walk down the hall and around the corner to the little alcove of vending machines. I get each of us a coffee and a granola bar, then trudge back.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, like someone is watching me.

I spin around, but the hallway is practically empty. Just a nurse walking away from me, pushing a cart, and another woman in scrubs at the nurses’ station.

I back away from that spot, rounding the corner. I get the same feeling again and turn, coffee sloshing through the little hole in the lid.

“Fuck, ow.” I set down the coffee and shake out my hand, wincing at the red spots that already appear on my skin.

The hallway is empty.

Thoroughly spooked, I grab the cup and rush back to the waiting room.

How was it so busy not too long ago, and deserted now?

Lenora grimaces. “She wasn’t happy about rescheduling until I explained why. Interesting woman.” She takes the coffee and granola bar with a smile. “I think you’ll actually like her. She’s... sassy.”

“A sassy talk therapist,” I repeat. I tear into my bar. “I guess I’ll just have to catch her next week.”

“Angela told me she got you a new phone?”

*Subject change.*

“She gave it to me when she dropped me off. I haven’t looked at it.”

Lenora nods. “Well, maybe you should set it up and see if someone wants to come by. Riley or Caleb...”

“Is that okay?” I ask. “I don’t want to intrude.”

“It isn’t intrusive for you to have someone to support you,” she says quietly. “God knows the whole family was here when Josie—”

I watch her out of the corner of my eye. I don’t want to ask, but at the same time...

“They brought her here?”

“She was cold,” she whispers. “By the time they found her. It was an unusually cold night, so her temperature was too low. I guess you can’t declare someone dead until they’re...”

*Warm and dead.* I’d heard that on a television show or two.

“Yeah,” I mutter, just so she doesn’t have to say it out loud.

How awful? Knowing they were warming up your frozen daughter just down the hall, and she probably is already dead—but who really knew?

“I’m sorry you’ve had to be back here,” I say.

She waves me off. “It was a long time ago. Robert and I were very different people.”

“Funny, I used to say that about Caleb and me.”

“You should call him.” She presses her lips together. “You’ve been staying with his...”

“Friend’s family,” I supply. “Is he technically a foster, too?”

She shrugs. “Benjamin Asher left behind an odd will, I heard once. It was all Rose Hill could talk about. His disgraced wife and scorned brother.”

My eyes go wide. “What?”

“I’m not too sure about the details—Robert and I were still getting our feet wet in town. My first big job was transitioning the Asher firm over to Prinze Industries, but we were still in the city at that point. After a successful

merger, my company paid for our relocation.”

“Oh, wow. So, you knew Caleb’s dad?” *And you never mentioned he was dead?*

“I only met him twice. Once to discuss his future at Prinze Industries, and the second time when he signed the paperwork.” She shakes her head. “That wasn’t long before...”

“But back to the will...”

“Oh, yes. It was all over town—especially my coworkers, honestly, they’re gossiping fools—that Benjamin had left everything to his son.”

“Are you sure?”

She laughs. “Not in the slightest.”

I mull it over. Taking it with a grain of salt, even if Caleb’s dad had left him *most* of what he owned, it was still a sizeable chunk. And it would explain his uncle’s fury. And his mother’s... His mother’s *what*? She’s been missing from the story this entire time.

“I think... I will make that phone call.”

She nods.

I fumble with the phone. My hands are steady now, thanks to the granola bar, and I unlock it with my usual password to find that everything from my previous phone has already been loaded onto this one.

Suspicion gnaws at me, but nothing seems unusual about it.

I dial Riley’s number, not trusting a text message.

“Margo?”

“Yeah, hey.” I clear my throat. “Um, could you come to the hospital? If it’s not too much trouble?”

“I’m at Eli’s. I brought your schoolwork, but he said you were going to therapy. Are you okay?”

I wince at her concern. It’s nice—it’s *normal*—for a friend to worry, but I don’t want to have this conversation over the phone.

“I’ll explain when you get here.”

“Okay,” she says immediately. “I’ll be there in ten.”

I let out a sigh when the phone goes dead.

Lenora has resumed pacing.

“It’s getting dark out,” she comments. “Nice of them to give us a window.”

Winter in New York... The days have been getting shorter. Soon we’re going to be covered in snow *and* darkness.

I shiver. "I'm glad I'm not learning to drive anytime soon."

She squints at me. "Huh?"

"Driving in the snow... doesn't sound like a good time."

"You don't—" She smacks her forehead. "We're idiots!"

"What..."

"Margo, what a complete, total, awful oversight on our part." She winces. "I'm sorry, I should've realized it when your foster sister came by and boasted about her learner's permit."

"It's not a big deal," I mumble. My fingers find their way to my wrist, and I have to stop myself from scratching at the scab. "I just, you know, plan on learning eventually. Or at least taking the test and hope I pass."

She scoffs. "No, absolutely not. As soon as this is all sorted, we'll put you in driver's ed."

My eyebrows go up. "Just like that?"

"I've seen your reckless tendencies. I don't even want to know what that'd be like with you behind the wheel," she says, and it takes me a moment to realize she's teasing.

Lenora.

Teasing.

Who would've thought?

I cough over my laugh. "I wouldn't be *that* bad."

"You sure?"

She giggles, and it breaks the dam. I laugh, too. We both howl with laughter, clutching our stomachs. Tears—happy ones, I think—stream down my face. My abs hurt by the time we finally stop.

"Oh god," I say, the happiness draining away like someone just pulled the plug on it. "We're laughing while—"

"Stop right there," she says, reaching out and taking my hands.

For the first time, probably ever, I hold her hands back.

"We're allowed to laugh. He'd probably be happy we weren't crying without cause."

"But..." *He could still die.* It's late, almost six o'clock. That alone shocks me, since I got here so early in the day.

*Hours or minutes.* Time swung away from me when I wasn't paying attention.

I lost a whole day to this limbo.

I'm still contemplating that when Riley appears, breathless. She looks

between Lenora and me. We must be quite the sight—red-faced and winded ourselves—but she doesn't comment. She beelines for me and squeezes the daylight out of me.

I grasp at her back, letting the rib-crunching hug put me back together.

"I came as soon as I could. Caleb is on his way, too. He wouldn't let me leave without interrogating me. Are you okay?"

"Um..."

"Sorry, stupid question." She releases me, then gives Lenora a hug. "Anything I can do for you? What's going on?"

"Robert had to be rushed into surgery," Lenora says. "We've been waiting..."

Riley nods. "Got it."

I grab her hand. "I don't think Caleb should be here."

She blinks at me. "Um, why?"

"I just..."

Lenora smiles. "You're avoiding him, huh?"

"Looks like I'm getting my dose of therapy in today, anyway," I say under my breath. To my foster mom, I add, "Yes. Unequivocally."

"Because he rescued you from Matt?" Riley asks, scowling. "I mean, what'd he do that was wrong?"

"I've been hurting *everyone*." I shake my head. "He got arrested because of me. Did you miss that part?"

"They just held him," Riley says. "And if you ask me—which I *know* you didn't, but you should because I'm your best friend and I love you—he makes you happier. When you're both not brooding, that is."

Lenora snorts.

"So, I guess you can call him up and tell him not to come..." Riley waves her phone at me.

I sigh. There's no way he'd listen to me.

"Exactly." She's smug.

I'll just have to escape before he gets here.





## CALEB

I CAST one look at Margo's window before we get down the street. She wasn't awake when we were getting ready for school, but I had hoped she would come down...

"Lovesick, dude." Eli laughs. "I've never seen it so bad."

"I'm not..." *Lovesick*. It would explain why my chest doesn't feel quite right. Missing pieces and all that.

"Whatever. Hey, try not to give everyone hell at school."

I set my jaw. "I won't if they don't fucking say anything about Margo."

It's my first day back. From eavesdropping on Eli's parents this morning, I know Margo has a full plate herself: going to see Robert and then therapy. She didn't seem too pleased at the idea of talking to a stranger, and I don't blame her.

"Get through it and then lacrosse practice—"

"Fuck." I groan. "Coach is gonna ream me out for getting arrested."

Eli shrugs. "Probably."

Coach Marzden wins the jackass of the year competition every time. When we were freshmen, we admired the way he commanded a room.

He was a role model for both of us.

However, it appears that even role models have a temper.

"Riley didn't come over," I say. "Last night? Would've thought she'd be like glue on Margo's skin."

He frowns. "She's avoiding the house."

"Why?" That's not like her. Once Eli got her in his clutches, she seemed into it. But maybe something happened.

“This isn’t a fucking psychobabble session,” Eli snaps.

I don’t comment, and we hurry into the school.

“Smells like snow.” I scan the hallway automatically. No one’s this close to the doors, but it’s habit to search for Margo. Even though I know exactly where I left her.

*Or, where she left me.*

“That’ll just make for a more miserable lacrosse practice, if you ask me —”

Coach appears at the top of the hallway, glaring at us and silencing Eli.

“Shit,” he mutters. “I’m out. I’m gonna...” He ducks down a random hallway, leaving me to travel toward Coach on my own.

Anger rolls off Coach in waves. He’s practically vibrating with it.

When I reach him, he turns and walks away. I follow him, staying a few steps behind. He’ll probably start the berating before we reach his office, just so some kids can hear that the great and terrible Caleb Asher has finally fallen.

*Newsflash*, I want to yell at them. It takes a lot more than one stalker to dethrone *me*.

Yet... I’m definitely losing my grip.

“In,” Coach orders, holding the door open.

I sigh, then go to my usual chair in front of his desk.

“Did I fucking say you could sit?”

I sprawl in it, forcing my body to relax. This isn’t like a meeting with my uncle, where it could end with a glass thrown at my head. Coach may threaten and bluster, but he wouldn’t even go so far as to remove me from the team. He just needs to yell.

It gives him some control he craves.

Then again, I like to fuck with control.

So I stay sprawled and watch him out of the corner of my eye. He circles around his desk and drops into his own chair.

“Really made a goddamn mess of everything,” he says. “Arrested. *Arrested*. What am I supposed to do with that? Let a felon stay on the team?”

“I’m sure Mr. Black would be happy to explain the difference between being read my rights and being held as a person of interest,” I say dryly. “Oh, wait, you should know. Didn’t you major in pre-law? Before your life fell to shit.”

He glares at me.

Coach, the original golden boy of Emery-Rose Elite, is as much of a walking disaster as I am. He just hides it better.

“Is that what you think?”

I shrug.

“You’re a fool.” He rubs at his eyes. “Honestly, Caleb. We all make choices. My life didn’t *fall to shit*. It just changed.”

“And you weren’t angry about it?”

He sits back. “I was at the time. Now, not so much.”

He’s a self-proclaimed bachelor with a well-hidden thirteen-year-old daughter.

“What’s your plan, son? You going to put this on your college applications?”

I grit my teeth. “Does it matter? I need to get into any shitty old school. Dad—”

“Dear pops.” Coach laughs. “Yeah, left you a fuckton of money. Buy your way into any old school and tell me how it feels.”

I smile. “I’ll tell you exactly how it feels, Coach. Happily.”

The bell rings, and I stand. I’ll be late to first period if I linger any longer, and I know a certain someone is counting on me to bring her schoolwork back.

“Sit,” Coach growls.

My smile falls away. “Why?”

“Because we have a visitor.” And then... he smiles.

The door opens.

My uncle fills the doorway, looking down his nose at me.

Subsequently, he blocks all the escape routes, too.

He closes the door behind him and takes his sweet time removing his coat, hanging it on the coat tree in the corner. And then he reaches over and shakes Coach’s hand.

He doesn’t so much as glance my way when he sits, slinging one leg over the other.

I have to admire the way he takes over a room. Dad would be proud.

“So, Caleb, I have to hear through *social media* that my nephew was held in a jail cell for two days?” His fingers twitch, like he really wants to hit me.

At least here, he can’t. Coach wouldn’t let him.

I resist the urge to touch the back of my head, which has finally closed up. The bruises have mostly faded, too. Time heals most things, but it hasn’t

healed his sick head.

“You’re keeping me from class for this?” I ask Coach.

“I was the one who requested the meeting,” Uncle says. He adjusts his tie.

Looks like he’s going into the office for once. Crisp white shirt, a navy-blue tie and sports coat. He’s the picture of perfection, and just as deadly.

“Why?” I’m immediately wary of his plan. Because I’m sure there is a plan hidden in there.

“I’ve come to request Coach remove you from the lacrosse team.”

Silence.

My jaw drops open, and Coach... well, to his credit, seems equally flabbergasted.

I snap my mouth closed at the same time that Coach seems to shake off his surprise. He straightens in his seat, eyes narrowing at my uncle.

*Well, this should be interesting.*

“I hate to tell you this, David, but you can’t come in here and demand—”

“Request,” Uncle interrupts. “Very politely. You see, I think lacrosse is a bad influence on Caleb. He’s following in your footsteps, after all.”

“How’s that?” I ask, unable to help myself.

Uncle glances at me. “Falling for a girl, acting ludicrously... it’s only a matter of time before the girl turns up pregnant and ruins everything the Ashers have worked toward.”

“Hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Dad ruined everything *he* worked for when he sold the company. Right? Your name isn’t on the door, even.”

Uncle’s hand twitches. If we were home...

Well, I’ll pay for this later.

*Every action has an equal and opposite reaction*, Dad whispers in my ear. Besides the points of inexplicable rage, he was actually a good dad. He taught me some valuable lessons before he was taken from us. Did I fear him?

A decent amount. Especially at ten.

Did he hit me?

No worse than Uncle... and there was always a reprieve, where good things happened. It was almost better when he hit me and got it over with, because the following week was bliss.

Uncle has no such calm period after the storm. With him, the storm is always raging.

“You are under *my* supervision,” Uncle snaps. “And I think—”

“Well, technically, the Blacks were awarded guardianship in court,”

Coach says. His eyes go back and forth between Uncle and me, and...

My stomach flips.

Does he see what a monster my uncle actually is?

Worse than I've ever been. Worse than how Coach has ever acted.

"They sign all of Caleb's permission slips and are his emergency contact. Have been since..." Coach shrugs, but his eyes are gleaming. "Well, I suppose you know the catalyst of that decision better than most, right, David?"

Uncle leaps to his feet, his face turning a mottled red. "I will not be outdone!"

He storms out of the room.

A sick feeling coils in my gut.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Coach demands.

I stare at him. "I thought you knew."

For a while, Uncle's abuse was a rumor that flew over Emery-Rose like a flash fire. Everyone was talking about *poor little Caleb*. I had bruises and a cracked rib at fourteen years old. I'd already been living with the Blacks for a while, but it didn't matter.

Uncle picked me up from school one day. He had discovered my adventures all over the county.

And honestly, as much as I don't want to admit it, that day is branded in my memory.

## Past

Uncle David waited for me at the curb. It was the first week of school at Emery-Rose Elite. The high school version of it anyway. I was expecting to go home with Eli and his parents, but they were nowhere to be found.

“In,” he ordered.

I slowly climbed into his car. The door shut, and I just knew it was sealing my fate. He had a vicious temper, and I knew exactly what he had managed to find out.

He was quiet. He didn’t drive away, not yet. He wouldn’t until he’d said his piece. But right now, the silence was thick and cloying.

“Another home,” he finally said. His fist lashed out, connecting with my mouth.

It surprised the hell out of me, but it also *hurt*.

Blood filled my mouth.

“You think we don’t keep track of Ms. Wolfe?” he taunted. “Don’t know every fucking move she makes?”

I didn’t say anything.

He hit me again, and the blood sprayed out of my mouth. My whole body whipped toward the window. He grabbed my shirt collar, bringing me back toward him.

There was a dangerous look in his eye. Mostly crazy, but also... calculating.

“Because of the social worker?” I asked.

He released me.

I slumped against the door, watching him warily.

“You piece that together on your own, hmm?” he asked. His mouth made a straight line. “Smart boy. Maybe you’ll be *smarter* and leave the girl alone. Someone is bound to get suspicious, and Ms. DeVine said she can’t keep covering for you.”

“Irony, isn’t it?” I laughed to myself. “Her name is literally *divine*.”

Uncle fisted my collar again, pulling me forward and slamming me back. My head hit the blood-streaked glass, and white spots popped like fireworks in front of my vision.

“You’re going to cut the shit,” he ordered.

“Dear Uncle,” I said, biting back a groan. “I’m just doing what you

drilled into me.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Hating her,” I sighed. “Hating her so fucking much, she can’t be happy.”

He reached around me, opening the car door. I fell backward, my back hitting the curb. Pain lanced through my torso, and a moan escaped me. Everything was flickering between numb and pain.

I picked myself up in time for him to chuck my bookbag through the open door.

Then... he left.

And me? I was found by Norah Black. I had a loose tooth and split lip. Bruising across my jaw. A cracked rib. Fixable things.

Minor things.

I refused to say what happened. We’d already been over it—Uncle and I, that was. If I spoke out, I’d be painted a liar. I’d never see a drop of my inheritance. He’d move me to the most remote boarding school he could find, just so that I’d never have the chance to get my hands on Margo Wolfe.

That was all I wanted. All I could focus on.

*She* made this my reality.

But... no one ever thought to stop my uncle. Not even the Blacks were successful, although they sure as hell tried.

He had my entire inheritance to use on lawyers, and he liked to threaten to drain it before I turned eighteen. He had the upper hand *always*.

I picked myself up just as Eli’s mom pulled into the school driveway. I did my best to wipe the blood from my face, but my jaw and lip were hot to the touch.

“Caleb!” she yelled. She left the car and racing toward me. “Oh my god. What happened?”

I was living with them, and it was a small blessing. Nothing more.

She touched my cheek, and I winced.

“Uncle David had some choice words,” I mumbled.

She clucked. “He had more than some choice *words*. This is ridiculous. We’ll fight it.” She nodded, bolstering herself up. “You’ll be safe with us.”

Doubt it.

Guardianship would be as far as Uncle let the Blacks take it. I knew it already.

Up against him, it would always be a losing battle.





## MARGO

I FEEL him before I see him.

This time, at least, I know it's him. My neck prickles, and goosebumps race up the backs of my arms. I straighten with the pack of candy in my hand and turn to face him.

He walks toward me with his hands in his pockets. His dark hair is brushed back from his face, and his light eyes are tracking my movement. I scan his body just as he does the same to me.

White shirt, black jeans, a black shell jacket.

All that's missing is the aviator sunglasses to be considered a *cool kid*.

When my eyes get back to his face, I realize he's smirking. I shiver, suddenly wishing I was back in the waiting room. There are witnesses there, and...

He's been weird.

I've been weird, too, I know. I slept in his bed like a stalker, had sex, and then...

"You okay?" He stops in front of me. Close enough to touch, but not. His smirk fades, leaving only worry. "You're pale."

"Robert is in surgery," I say.

I touch the knife in my pocket, hoping it's an inconspicuous movement. I grab his hand, threading my fingers with his. I wonder, when I get up the courage to look at his knuckles, if they'll be bloody.

What would Caleb say if he knew that I knew?

I already know he didn't get much information out of him. Liam said as much. But there are so many more mysteries, and under all of it?

Hatred.

Why does Caleb get to beat up Matt for something that happened to *me*?

"I can't do this right now," I murmur, retreating behind my mental wall.

His hand tightens on mine. "You're running away."

"Just mimicking you." I glare at him and tug.

He releases me. "It's because I don't know how to help you."

I blink.

"You're hurting, for fuck's sake, and I don't know—" He turns away and runs his hand through his hair. "I'd like to think I know you. That you don't want coddling. But if not that, what?"

I shake my head. "A hug would be nice."

He yanks me forward, into him, faster than I expect. He wraps his arms around me, bone-crushingly tight.

"Like this?" he whispers into my hair.

It's tight enough to hold me together for a moment. Just like Riley's hug, but this one...

I relax into his hold, and his hand cups the back of my head.

"Now, if only we could stay like this," he says.

I don't say anything but slowly bring my arms up and circle his waist. My breath shudders out of me. Yes, I want to say. *This could be a forever kind of thing.*

"Do you remember what I said?"

I pull back just enough to meet his gaze. "You say a lot."

His smile is faint. "I'm always going to find you."

"I believe it," I admit. It scares me as much as it comforts me. "But what if you find me and we *both*..."

"Go dark?"

I nod. I can feel it crawling through me. It's a slippery feeling, addictive. And the worst part? It pushes out all my other emotions. I know he feels it, too. The rare times his demons have come out full force.

He lifts one shoulder. His grip on me eases, allowing me to take a small step backward. "So what if we do?"

I contemplate that.

"Ah, Margo, are you—?" Lenora stops in the middle of the hallway. "Caleb, glad to see you could make it. The doctor is going to talk to us, honey." She holds out her hand to me.

I release Caleb and go to her, taking her hand. She squeezes it.

Nerves flutter through me, and I realize this is the moment. The one where we find out if Robert made it or not. If he's alive or...

I take a deep breath. Breathing is important. How would it feel if one lung stopped working? If I started coughing blood?

I close my eyes for a heartbeat, and I replay blood spraying from Robert's lips. The way he rubbed at his chest, like he couldn't get enough air.

The car.

—*What did you do?*—

I don't realize I've stopped moving until Caleb puts his hands on my shoulders, propelling me from behind.

"This is a fear we need to face," he whispers in my ear. "But you're not in this alone."

I shake my head. "If he dies, I'll never forgive myself."

His lips touch the shell of my ear. "It isn't you who holds the blame."

No, he's right.

It's Matt.

The doctor is in the waiting room, Lenora already in front of her. I go stand beside her, leaving Riley and Caleb behind. There's another woman in the room, dressed in scrubs, that hangs back, too. I recognize her as Lenora's doctor friend.

"He's out of surgery," the doctor says. "He's in recovery right now, but we're hopeful that everything looks good. He's off the ventilator and should be waking up in a little while."

"Can we see him?" Lenora asks.

"Yes. I'll have a nurse come get you when he's back in his room, although he'll be quite groggy. We're going to keep him here for observation for another few days."

Lenora shakes her hand, and then the doctor leaves us.

I let out a long breath. "He's going to be okay."

"Sounds like it," Lenora says. She smiles.

We've been full of hugs today. Hugs and sadness and panic and worry. Too much worry.

The exhaustion hits me like a ton of bricks to the face.

"Do you want to head home?" she whispers. "You've had a long day."

"You've had a long week. I..." I can't go without seeing him one more time. To confirm with my own eyes that he's okay. "I'll get a ride home with Caleb or Riley after we see him."

She nods, stroking my hair. "You have an appointment to get these stitches removed soon."

"Monday." Almost a full week away. They're driving me nuts, but I try not to focus on it. On what it symbolizes.

How did I walk away with just a gash and some bumps and bruises, and Robert...

I cross the room and sit between Riley and Caleb. There are things I need to say to Riley... preferably without Caleb eavesdropping. So instead of speaking, I just let both of them take a hand, and I close my eyes.

"Wake up, love."

It's been mere moments, but my eyes are sandpaper. I straighten, shooting a quick glance at Riley. She's on her phone, her lower lip sucked into her mouth. My hand is still being held by hers.

Caleb has my other one. But he also has...

I shake my head. "Why am I sitting on your lap?"

"Because you started snoring about two minutes after you closed your eyes."

"I did not."

"You did," Riley confirms. "And you looked so uncomfortable, Caleb just *had* to fix it."

"Ha, ha." I put my hand on his shoulder and stand, ignoring the creaking feeling in my bones. "Is it time?"

Lenora and her friend are near the door, talking in low voices, but Lenora glances up at the sound of my voice. "Yes, he's back in his room."

I smile, then frown. Fear lances through me. *Oh God, what if he's...*

"Come now, honey," she says. "The sooner you see him, the sooner you can get back to snoozing."

"Very funny."

She grins. "I thought so."

We leave our friends behind and go down the hall, into Robert's room. The television is on, muted. The lamp in the corner burns dimly, casting deep shadows around the room.

"There's my girls," Robert mumbles. His eyes are half closed, but his head lolls in our direction. He smiles. "What an adventure we're on, huh, Lenny?"

"An adventure? You nearly gave me a heart attack." She goes to his side, brushing back his hair and kissing his cheek. "How are you feeling?"

“Dandy, dandy.” He smiles. “Had a nice chat with Josie.”

I freeze.

“Ah, there she is.” He looks right at me, and everything in me locks up.

*Does he think you’re his dead daughter?* No, no, no.

Can surgery cause amnesia?

Am I going to have to tell him that I’m not his daughter?

“Margo-girl, you had me worried,” he continues. “But you two stuck together, right?”

“We did.” Lenora straightens his blankets.

I venture closer. “I’m sorry for worrying you.”

He takes my hand once I’m close enough. “You’re okay?”

I’m really sick of crying. A lump forms in my throat at his blatant concern.

“You were just in surgery, and you’re worried about me?” I clutch at his hand with both of mine. “It’s...”

“My job as a dad,” he says. “Josie would expect no less of me and neither should you.”

I glance to Lenora, but her eyes are fastened on him. Her hand covers her mouth.

“It’s late,” I say, pretending to check the clock on the wall. I already know that it’s well past nine. The surgery went on for a long time, and I don’t think I can take much more of this hospital. “I’ll come see you tomorrow.”

I lean down and wrap my arms around him, gingerly. He rubs my back, then I stand back up.

“I’ll walk you out,” Lenora says. We go to the doorway together. “You’ll be okay with the Blacks?”

“They’re very nice.” I shift. “Once Robert comes back, I get to...”

“Yes,” she answers immediately. “You’ll come home, too. We’ll figure it out.”

I nod. Caleb has eyes on me—I can feel his stare from here—and I give Lenora one last hug before I go.

I pause in front of Caleb. “Riley’s bringing me home,” I inform him. “We have things to discuss.”

“Things,” he says. “Things you don’t want me to hear?”

“Yes.” I raise my eyebrows. “You don’t trust her?”

“I don’t trust anyone around you, love. Not anymore.”

I trace my bracelet. “But you trust me?”

He puts his finger under my chin, lifting it. I meet his gaze and frown.

“I do trust you.”

My heart skips. “Oh.”

“You don’t sound happy about that.” He smirks, then leans down and steals a kiss from my lips. “Little wolf doesn’t know what to do with trust?”

“Not in the slightest.” I shake my head, backing away from him.

I’ve seen Caleb possessive. Angry. Hostile. Ruthless. But... trusting? Not since we were kids. Not since we were young and innocent.

Look how far we’ve come.

How far we’ve fallen.

Riley waits for me at the end of the hall. She passes me my jacket, and we quickly make our way to her car.

“I’ve been worried about you,” she says.

“Well, you might still be worried when I tell you...”

She starts the car, then turns to me. Heat pours out of the vents. “Spill.”

I fill her in about Matt and his appearance at Eli’s house last night. How I think the boys interrogated him—without success. And then, keeping my attention on my shoes, I tell her my plan.

“You’re shitting me,” she responds.

I grin. My first true smile in how long?

“Nope.”





## MARGO

I SLIP INTO THE HOUSE. Up the stairs, down the hall, pretending I know where I'm going.

His parents are out of town, and my blood is boiling.

Riley dropped me off around the corner. It was easy enough to go under the gate and avoid the glow of the floodlights. People in these kinds of neighborhoods never bother to lock their back doors.

I find his room on the second try. It's mostly dark, but there's a glow from his computer monitors in the corner. I flick my flashlight on, not really caring if it wakes him up. I'm ready for a fight.

The rest of his room is neat. No dirty clothes on the floor, a school bag slung over the back of his chair, textbooks stacked on the edge of the desk. And another thing on the desk: something small and familiar.

A mermaid figurine.

I pick it up, unsurprised to find it plugged into his computer. Yanking the cord out, I stuff it in my pocket. And then I turn my attention to the bed and the sleeping figure under a pile of blankets.

I don't bother kicked off my shoes and step up onto the bed. It dips under my weight, rolling his sleeping form toward me.

One foot on either side of his thighs.

I drop to my knees, landing on him hard. It would be intimate if I gave a fuck about that, but... *I don't*.

He comes alive all at once and gasps when I slap my hand over his mouth.

"Don't move." I lean over and turn on the light.

Matt squints in the sudden brightness, and I take a moment to register the bruises on his face. Two black eyes. His nose looks like it was broken and reset. And then he realizes who I am, and he struggles.

I pull the knife out of my pocket, flip it open, and press it against his throat. It's enough for him to freeze.

*Do great and terrible things*, Liam had said. What is this if not great and terrible?

"You took me from the car accident. Drugged me. Brought me somewhere. Why?"

He winces.

"Margo, I swear, I didn't want to hurt you—"

The tip of my knife digs into his skin. "Doubtful."

"Listen, this is just a big misunderstanding—"

"The police said you had a fucking *alibi*," I growl. "What did you do? Hit Robert's car, drag me out and drug me, then go off somewhere to be seen in public?"

His hand wraps around my wrist.

"You were helping Caleb with the spy camera, weren't you? Was all that just a wild goose chase?"

"Which question do you want me to answer first?" He laughs, but it dies when I lean over him. The knife cuts into his throat, and the first few drops of blood ooze out.

I feel more crazy than not these days—it's about time someone noticed.

Besides, Matt wouldn't talk to the boys. I'd bet anything that Caleb remained in control of the situation. Calm, cool, collected. He only comes unhinged if it has something to do with me—well, more directly, anyway.

The way Matt ran off the property last night makes me think Caleb and his friends didn't try hard enough.

He eyes me like I'm going to suddenly stab him. "Okay, okay. No, it wasn't a wild goose chase. The person downloading the videos was doing it at the diner."

"It wasn't you?"

He rolls his eyes. "I wasn't that close to the... project."

I scoff. "Bullshit, Matt. I'm supposed to believe that you knew where the videos were being downloaded and turned on them? But only enough to give Caleb a clue. You were close enough to hit Robert's car and abduct me, but not—"

“It was part of the plan,” he blurts out. “To fuck with Caleb by going there.”

I raise my eyebrow. “Where was it, exactly?”

“A diner.” He spits out the address, and I commit it to memory.

He continues, “We had the data to back up my *findings*, but there were no plans to continue going back there. You’re not going to find who you’re looking for if you go there.”

“You don’t know what I’m looking for,” I snap. My mind reels.

Why lead Caleb to a diner to fuck with him? Why have Unknown go there at all? The whole thing could’ve been fabricated.

I push the thought out of my mind. “And the alibi?”

“My girlfriend,” he mutters. “She said I was with her.”

“She lied to the police.” I laugh. “Of course. What, are you that good of a lay? Fuck you, Matt.”

“Please don’t hurt me.”

I pause and examine the blade. The way it digs into his skin without cutting. It’s a slicing blade, so all I’d have to do is pull it down. He’d bleed out in minutes—maybe even seconds. The carotid artery is nothing to fuck with.

“What did Caleb ask you?”

“He wanted to know who I was working with.”

“And?”

His eyes are wide. “Margo—”

“And?”

“I didn’t tell them anything. They’re going to fucking kill me—”

A laugh bubbles out of me. “Why are you talking to me, then, Matt? Do you have a death sentence hanging over your head anyway? Did something bad to your boss?” I narrow my eyes. “Because apparently you’re not close to the project, and you don’t know what the fuck is going on besides abducting me.”

“I’m so sorry.”

I grimace. “It’s a bit late for that, don’t you think?” I tilt my head. “Caleb and his friends threatened you, but you didn’t talk. Why are you talking to me?”

His gaze drops to my hand, then back to my eyes. “Caleb wouldn’t kill me. But you...”

In order to get answers? I might push too far.

I reveal the mermaid. “Why did you keep this?”

He laughs. The movement drives the knife into his skin, and blood bubbles out. “Why? For a keepsake. To always remember you by.”

“Did you...?”

“Bring it with me? You fucking bet.” He laughs again, like he got away with something. Pulled one over on... *whoever*.

I yank the knife away from him before I do real damage.

His laugh dies, and he exhales, his hand going to his throat.

I switch the blade to my left hand and lean back. My fist snaps out, aiming for the tape across his nose. Pain explodes across my knuckles, but it’s worth it to see his eyes roll back.

His body relaxes under me.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, repeating the same words he told me. It’s a lie, of course.

Disgust crawls through me—but I got what I came here for. A few answers from an unreliable source. And I have my next move.

I climb off of him and shake his computer awake. It’s relatively easy to find the files downloaded from the mermaid, but they’re encrypted by a password.

Swearing, I yank out the cord that will connect to the mermaid and stuff it in my pocket. Hopefully they’re still on there. Unencrypted.

I’m not computer savvy. I can count on one hand the number of computers I’ve been allowed access to over the years. My phone is my key to the internet and... well, everything. Computer? No such luck.

I email the encrypted files to myself just for the hell of it, deleting as much of the evidence as I can—and then deleting the files themselves, too.

Feeling rather proud of myself, I turn off the light and jog out of the house.

And I run face-first into a body.

I take a few steps back, ready to run, and instead scowl.

Caleb glares at me, arms folded over his chest.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

A muscle in his jaw jumps.

“Silent treatment?” I continue. “Really?”

A nervous thrill races through me.

He steps forward, and I step back. I silently curse myself for it.

“Run and I’ll chase you, love.” A promise. A threat.

Yet, this is *my* find. I found Matt. Snuck into his room and got him to talk. Not Caleb.

I don't need him fighting my battles for me or getting in more trouble with the detective—who very well could've followed him here.

So, yeah. I turn and run, knowing that I just have to make it under the gate and to Riley's car.

I barely make it halfway there.

He grabs me from behind, and I have a flash of *déjà vu*. It abruptly ends when he twists. We land on his side, barely anything more than a graceful tumble, and he rolls me onto my back.

An animalistic urge surges through me. I kick at him, my knee coming very close to his groin. He lets out a huff and captures one of my wrists, bringing it above my head.

The panic is blind now. Too similar to having my wrists contained—*something I shouldn't remember*—and my fight doubles. He's flush against me in the grass, but I manage to slip the knife out. Flip it open.

He only stills when I press it to his throat.

*Great and terrible things.*

"Easy," he murmurs. "You going to kill me, Margo?"

I can't even fucking speak. I open my mouth, but no words come out. I'm being strangled by panic, my heart racing too fast. I keep tugging on my wrist, over and over. That and the knife. The sharpness of it indenting his skin but not cutting. He has more self-control than Matt. He hasn't moved or flinched.

*Little broken boy isn't afraid of pain.*

That thought comes out of nowhere. Someone said that to me, once. Or... around me.

I gasp, the sob breaking past my barriers. "Let—go—"

He does.

I pull my arm back to my chest, cradling it between us. I still can't breathe. I thought it might help, but he's still here, the knife is still in my hand, and a thousand pounds sit on my chest.

"Panic attack," I manage.

His fingers curl around the knife, moving it away from his throat. Slowly, his weight lifts off me, and then I'm in the air, curling into a ball in his arms.

"You're okay," he says in my ear. "Safe."

I laugh. "No such thing."

He carries me to a door next to the gate.

“How did you get in?”

“I jumped the fence,” he says. “But it’s easier to leave when the lock is on our side.” He’s quiet for a moment. Riley’s car is gone—he must’ve sent her away—and his car is in its place. “You’re trembling.”

“It’s cold,” I lie.

I’m freaked out. Not just because of Caleb, but the figurine in my pocket, Matt’s supposed alibi, and whatever’s at the diner.

If I ask, he might tell me. Or... he might lie, too.

Our relationship hasn’t been the most honest thing on the planet.

He tucks me in the passenger seat and quickly circles the car. Once he’s in, he cranks the heat. I lean forward, pressing my hands to the vents, and sigh. A jacket would’ve been good in hindsight, but I didn’t want my movements inhibited.

We get all the way back to Eli’s house before either of us speak. I have nothing to say, but Caleb... he’s building up to something. Whether out of anger or concern, his annoyance fizzes and crackles around him. Nearly impenetrable.

“Did you learn anything?”

I glance at him.

He reaches over and pulls my hair tie out, letting my dark hair fall in waves around my shoulders. He lifts a chunk, twirling it in his fingers. “Did you seduce him?”

I squirm away. “I threatened him.”

“With this?” He holds up the knife and examines it in the dim light. He flicks on the car’s light and frowns. “When did he give you this?”

“After you tried to beat up Matt.”

He chuckles. “I didn’t *try* to beat him up, love.”

“But you did try to get information,” I point out. “And that...”

“Was unsuccessful, for the most part,” he admits. “All I’ve learned is that he’s afraid of someone.”

“He said they were going to kill him.” I take the knife back, sliding it into my pocket. “Who would kill a high schooler?”

“Who would abduct one?”

Fair point.

“His alibi was his girlfriend,” I say. “She lied for him.”

He hums. His eyes turn on me. “Would you lie for me?”

“Probably.”

He smiles, and I smile back. *Dumbly*. Like I’m just another girl fawning over his looks. But his smile does something to me.

And then... his smile fades. “How long have you been having panic attacks?”

“Two in the last... twelve hours? Probably not a good sign.”

“It was me holding your wrist?” He reaches over and touches the scab. “I’m such an idiot. I didn’t...” He laughs, but it’s more at himself than anything. “I should’ve known. I found you—”

“Vulnerable,” I fill in.

He meets my gaze. “I’ve never wanted to hurt someone more than I wanted to hurt who did this to you. But your wrists aren’t bound now. You went in there and—fuck, I wish I could’ve seen it.”

I smile. “You wish you could’ve seen my crazy eyes?”

“I want all of you. Crazy, sane, sad, happy... lost.”

I lean over and touch his face. He lets me cup his jaw, slide my hand back into his hair, down to the raised scar at the back of his head. Lower, to his neck. I pull him toward me.

He obliges, pressing a kiss to my lips.

But that’s not enough.

I run my tongue along the seam of his lips, demanding entrance. He lets me. Everything in this moment is about my control. I recognize that in the back of my mind. His hands don’t stray, but mine does. It roams down his chest and back up, scraping lightly.

The kiss gets deeper. It sucks us in, and in no time, we’re panting into each other’s mouths.

I break away first, leaning back into my own seat. I tip my head back and close my eyes.

“I missed you,” I admit. “You felt... distant.”

“I was.”

My eye cracks open to glare at him.

He frowns. “I don’t know how to handle you. How to save you when your edges are cracked.”

“I’m not a porcelain doll, Caleb. Breaking and healing are part of life.”

Jagged edges and all.

He gets out of the car and comes to my door. I don’t protest when he leans down and scoops me up. I loop my arm around his shoulders. With one

finger, I turn his face toward me and steal another kiss.

It's soothing. A balm for the soul.

"You don't have to carry me in," I mutter. I can't imagine the questions Norah and Josh will have for us. For *me*. Then again... it's the middle of the night. Maybe they slept through two of the three teenagers in their house sneaking out.

He scoffs. "I definitely have to."

We make it over the threshold, the door closing softly behind us. Only a few more feet to go—to Caleb's stairs—to safety.

But the light flips on. Both Josh and Norah are in the doorway to the living room, staring at us. His arm is around her shoulders, holding her close, and...

"I'm sorry," I blurt out.

Josh just shakes his head, his attention over my head. On Caleb. "I expected better."

Caleb shrugs.

"Put her down," Norah says. "I'm sure she can walk to her room."

Caleb doesn't move a muscle. "She had a panic attack."

"Outside?"

"I went for a walk," I lie. "I couldn't sleep, and I thought it might help. But it just... wasn't a good idea. I'm sorry. Caleb came and rescued me."

His fingers tighten on my thigh and shoulder.

"Is that right?" Norah asks Caleb.

"Yes, ma'am."

She grunts. "Next time, let us know."

They both head back upstairs, and we exhale at the same time.

"That's enough adventure for one day," he says. "Got it?"

I wriggle, but he still doesn't put me down. He carries me upstairs, into my bedroom, and sets me on the bed.

He presses a kiss to my forehead before he goes. But then... he goes.

That part is inevitable, I guess.

Once my door is closed, I pull out the figurine. Part of me wonders if it'll still be transmitting.

I point the mermaid face at me and take a deep breath. "If you can hear me... I'm going to find you."





## UNKNOWN

YOU'VE GOTTEN BOLDER, Margo. It makes me wonder: is this Caleb's fault? Or a stable home environment? Has courage given you a new pair of wings?

But you're forgetting about the cage. The thing that traps you. Holds you hostage.

I'm impressed that you managed to get to Matt. That you made him talk when Caleb couldn't.

Oh, how I wish I could've seen them fight. The way Matt came back, broken nose and battered ego, was thrilling.

Things are fraying at the seams. Nothing is as it appears.

I guess that leaves the question: *Will* you find me? Will you succeed? There's so much more to us than you know.

We're in this together, Margo, to the bloody end.

And I think the end will most certainly be... *exciting*.

Will you tell me when you've had enough? When I can finally stop messing around and just show you what I've learned?

Evil doesn't always wear a devil's mask.

Even good people have a dark streak.

And anyone can break.

So just know this: I'm coming for you. And Caleb. And anyone you've ever fucking cared about. This started a long time ago.

Beat your wings against the bars, pretty little bird. It won't make any difference in the end.



## CALEB

THE LAST CLASS of the day used to be my happy place. Painting, Margo, and hell, even Mr. Jenkins made the day seem lighter.

Now it's cold and empty, and I skip it more often than not. I swing by the room, just to make sure I didn't miss anything. It's been four days since I caught Margo at Matt's house. Four days since Robert's emergency surgery.

Monday is cold and bleak.

There's a fresh coat of snow on the ground, giving the world a black-and-white quality.

But there's still a substitute teacher at the front of the class, and I know Margo isn't back yet. She's been hiding out at the house or visiting Robert with Lenora. Whether she's hiding because she's scared or for some other reason, I can't say.

The weekend had passed quickly. We made popcorn and watched movies. Riley and Eli even joined us, breaking Riley's avoidance streak.

Honestly, that was more to do with Margo than Eli. Eli and Riley barely looked at each other, even though they were in the same room.

Note to self: find out what the fuck is going on with them.

I head to the parking lot. Liam, Theo, Eli, and I have somewhere to be. They're all gathered between Theo and my cars, laughing about something.

But first things first...

Eli spots me before the others. "Hey, man, we were just discussing—"

I storm up to Liam and grab him by the throat, throwing him back against my car. He bounces off of it and shoves me backward, more than happy for a fight.

“What the fuck did I tell you about Margo?” I snarl.

He laughs.

*Laughs.*

“To keep your *hands* to *yourself*.” I push him, more than ready to punch his lights out.

“She was going to do something stupid anyway,” he says. “I just gave her something to make her feel safer.”

“Something stupid involved going to Matt’s house and threatening him.” I go for him again, but Theo gets in the way.

Liam’s eyes go wide. “No shit?”

“She could’ve been hurt—”

Theo walks me backward. “Calm. Down.”

“He deserves to be punched in the fucking face—”

He rolls his eyes. “What else is new? Just because he deserves it doesn’t mean you should do it.”

Liam laughs. “Listen to Mommy, Caleb.”

I shoot past Theo, but Eli steps in front of him.

“He’s being a dick because you are,” Eli says in an even tone. “So just cool it, would you?”

“Me? He—”

“Was trying to help,” Eli answers. His eyes narrow. “Are you trying to sabotage this before we even start?”

I groan. “No.”

“Right-o. Everyone, in the truck.” He claps, grinning. Back to his usual self in a matter of seconds.

Theo and Eli head for the truck, leaving Liam and I to regard each other. I could just do it. Fucking punch him in the face and be done with it.

But... maybe Eli is right. That he was just trying to help Margo. Not necessarily put ideas in her head.

I extend my hand.

Liam watches me for a beat, then shakes it.

“Now what?” he asks.

“Now...” I shrug. “We find out where a seventeen-year-old got a vehicle to hit Robert and Margo.” I assume it wasn’t registered to anyone connected to him, otherwise he would’ve been arrested—or at the very least, questioned as much as I was.

He grins. It’s a bit grim, but it suits his personality. “Let’s go, then.”



## MARGO

“THIS IS FOOLISH,” Riley says for the tenth time.

I roll my eyes. “Why did Matt tell him to go here? Why was Unknown downloading videos here in the first place? Why—”

“Okay, okay, I get it.” She kills the engine, and we sit in silence. “It looks shitty.”

The diner across the street is... not someplace I would expect Caleb and Matt to go. The sign’s lights flicker on, even though it’s the middle of the afternoon.

Riley graciously decided to cut class in order to accompany me on this adventure, but from the expression on her face, she’s regretting it.

“Lucky’s Diner,” I read. “I just... Expected something fancier.”

“Who do you think is in there?” she asks. “Are we going in as like, ‘Oh, just coming in for a meal, don’t pay us any mind!’”

I laugh. “You’d make a horrible spy.”

She flips her hair. I have a flashback to Amelie and Savannah doing similar moves, but I shove it out of my head.

“You know what’s horrible?” she asks. “That you’re graduating in a semester and I’m going to be stuck there for another year.”

“Yeah, that does suck. But I’ll probably still be around. Maybe I’ll get a job as the school janitor’s assistant. Then you’ll still see me every day.”

She snorts. “You’re ridiculous. You’re going to college, remember?”

I shrug. If I wanted to go, I’d have to apply.

And then get accepted.

And then come up with the money for tuition.

“Robert comes home tomorrow,” I say. “Today’s my last day to figure this out.”

She groans. “Okay, fine. Let’s go into *Lucky’s Diner*—which, for the record, looks pretty damn unlucky.”

We’re the only car front and center in the parking lot. There are a few parked in the back corner, but those are probably employees. In the few minutes we’ve sat here, no one has come in or out.

“Okay. Yeah.” I unbuckle and climb out.

Riley follows suit, and together, we walk toward the diner.

The back of my neck prickles, and I pause, glancing behind me.

“Catch up, tomato,” Riley calls.

I wrinkle my nose, scanning the area.

Nothing except for a deserted lot.

““Catch up, tomato?””

“Like ketchup?” She elbows me. “Dad used to say that to me all the time.”

I shake my head. “Absurd.”

“Gladly so.”

I let her go through the door ahead of me, hesitating before I enter. The niggling feeling of someone watching me hasn’t gone away. I look behind me one last time.

“Paranoia,” I say on an exhale. I’m glad I don’t see anyone. I don’t need any dark figures lurking around corners, waiting for me to misstep.

“Welcome to Lucky’s,” the hostess says.

That voice.

I slowly turn back around, pushing past Riley.

Lydia Asher... in the flesh.

Her mouth drops open. “Margo.”

First thought? Horror.

Second thought? Nausea.

I guess those two kind of go hand in hand. And if we weren’t here for answers, well, I’d be out the door before she could say another word. Instead of running, I lock my muscles and really try to see her.

Because what happened to Caleb’s mom after her husband died?

Riley squints at me, then her. “You know Margo?”

“It’s been a while,” Lydia answers.

I can’t quite decide on her tone. It could be soft—it certainly sounds it.



But there are blades that are so sharp, they slice without pain. Not until after. And maybe that's her—honed too sharp by time and anger.

"Not long enough," I find myself saying.

"Then why are you here?"

"Hold on," Riley interrupts. "Huh?"

"Caleb's mom. Lydia Asher." I finally tear my eyes away from her and look around. The place is deserted. "Why do you work here?"

"Food tastes good" She picks up two menus from the host stand. "I assume you ladies are here to eat?"

"No—"

"Yes," Riley says, smiling sweetly. "Can we have that corner booth?"

Lydia watches her for a beat, then nods. "Of course."

She leads us down the aisle. It's a long and narrow diner, with a bar and bolted-in stools on one side, and a row of booths against the windows. The booths wrap around and end at the kitchen doors. Behind the bar, there's a window into the kitchen. It seems deserted back there, too.

"Busy day?" I run my hand over the counter.

I've never seen a restaurant so quiet.

"It picks up around brunch," she murmurs. "Here you are. Water?"

"Yes, thanks," Riley says, taking a seat.

Lydia hesitates next to me. "Why are you really here, Margo?"

I shrug. "Just hungry."

"All the way in Beacon Hill?"

"We were in the neighborhood. And I guess we were just feeling... lucky."

She narrows her eyes. "All right."

I sit across from Riley once she goes.

"Honestly," I whisper-yell. "What are we doing?"

"This has to be why Matt sent Caleb here. He can't be on positive terms with his mother if she left him to..." Riley presses her lips together. She's no doubt remembering the night we rescued Caleb from his uncle's house.

She's right, of course. His uncle is a monster, and his mother abandoned him.

Something crashes, and we both jump.

I twist around and catch a flash of dark hair through the window into the kitchen.

When Lydia doesn't reappear, I glance at Riley. "Should we check on

her?”

Riley shrugs. “Maybe? Give her a minute.”

We do. There’s another crash, and then the sound of voices.

“This is weird.” My skin crawls. “I have a bad feeling about this...”

Riley leans toward me. “You said your dad didn’t kill her husband. What if she had something to do with it?”

“Then... we’re alone with a dangerous woman.”

“No!” Lydia yells from the back room.

We both shoot to our feet, grabbing our stuff.

Riley yanks me toward the entrance. “Move, Margo. Come on.”

The kitchen door flies open, and my mouth drops.

I stop moving. Stop... everything.

Breathing.

Thinking.

My mother... in front of me at last.

She glares at me. Her hair is pulled back, mostly covered by a black bandana. Chef’s coat. Wrinkles across her tanned face. Thin. Angry. She raises her hands, and I’m pretty sure she’s about to shoo us away or, I don’t know. Flip me off, maybe?

I shudder.

Riley keeps guiding me away. Maybe she can see the family resemblance, or maybe she’s just freaked out about this woman’s sudden appearance.

“Margo,” Riley pleads.

Mom opens her mouth, but my shoulder hits the doorframe.

It knocks some sense into me.

Spinning around, I finally go with Riley. My feet move fast, almost outrunning my friend. We sprint to her car and fall into it.

“Go, go, go.” I stare at the entrance.

Mom bursts out just as Riley turns onto the street, and we fly past her.

Around the corner.

*Shit.*

“Who the hell was that?” Riley yells.

I laugh. I can’t help it.

Three *fucking* years, and I stumble upon her by accident.

“My mother,” I say through my giggles. “My stupid drug addict mother who abandoned me—”

I abruptly cut myself off.

“Caleb must’ve known she was there,” I muse.

Riley pulls onto the shoulder of the road. It’s one of the back ways to get between Beacon Hill and Rose Hill, and it’s deserted.

“That was your mom?” She cranks the heat.

My whole body trembles. “I’m so sick of surprises.”

She sighs. “I thought we were going to find Unknown. You know? Like in *Pretty Little Liars*.”

“I never saw that show.” I shake my head. “Were they threatened by a mysterious texter, too?”

She chuckles. “Yeah, they were.”

“Huh.”

She types on her phone. “I’m going to make a list. We’ve got to narrow this down.”

“Caleb said he might know who it is,” I admit. “But... I don’t know. Matt abducting me was a bit...”

“Of a shocker?”

“Right.”

She nods. “Yeah. He seemed nice at the football game. Okay, so... Unknown texted you before you started school. So they had to have your number somehow.”

I grimace. “I got that number when I was thirteen. Angela got the cell for me.”

“Angela—your social worker who lied about how your dad went to prison?”

“That’s the one.” I’ve never had a lot of contacts in my phone, just foster siblings I wanted to stay in touch with and new friends from school, Angela, and a lawyer who represented me when I was ten.

“They also had to see Ian dragging you off at school.”

I put my hand over my stomach, getting phantom pains just from thinking about it.

“Unknown said that was the only nice thing they would do for me,” I add.

“Asshole.” Her head is bent as she types. “And... there was the party. With the video.”

“Ugh.”

“What else?”

“They seemed to have insider knowledge. But... not inner circle stuff.”

Riley grins. “You’ve ruled me out, then?”

“Unless you have a secret phone I don’t know about...”

Her smile drops. “Shit. I didn’t even think of that. It could be literally *anyone* who picked up a disposable phone at the store. Paid minutes in cash...”

“Yep.”

“So you haven’t seen your mom since...”

“She’d stop by to check on me in foster care, but it was more about money than anything else. Quick visits on the sidewalk. That stopped when I was fourteen.”

Riley frowns.

“Please don’t pity me,” I say. “She’s a terrible mom, asking her teenage daughter for money. She gave me a present once, when I was... twelve, maybe? A little candy bunny for Easter.”

“That was nice,” she says.

“Yeah, nice. One of the other foster kids at the time stole it before I’d had a chance...” I sigh. “I wasn’t even going to eat it. I just wanted something to hold on to that let me know she was thinking of me.”

“Maybe that’s why she’s back.”

I shake my head. “Doubt it. Did you see the anger in her eyes? She always held a grudge for the secret I let slip.”

I fill Riley in about catching my mom and Caleb’s dad together. How Caleb told me he knew, begged me not to tell, and then we got caught leaving our hiding place. Mom said it was nothing, but...

That’s not quite accurate.

“So you went home and told your dad,” she fills in.

I lift one shoulder. “I think so.”

“You don’t remember that part?”

“Not yet. It’s coming back in pieces.”

She pulls back out onto the road, heading home. “You haven’t got any new texts, right?”

“Nope.” My phone buzzes, and I groan. “I jinxed it.”

**Lenora:** *Dr. Sayer had a cancelation tomorrow afternoon and wants to see you. Can you get a ride for 3?*

I grimace. “This lady is persistent.”

“Who?”

“My new therapist,” I grumble. “She wants to see me tomorrow. *And* Friday morning.”

Riley chuckles. “Maybe she’ll be able to help solve the mystery.”  
Doubt it.



## CALEB

IT ONLY TOOK fifty bucks to bribe the junkyard attendant. He showed us to the cars involved in the accident, then ambled away with his hands in his pockets.

Eli kicks at the ground. We've been staring at the wreck for the last two minutes, waiting until the employee was out of sight. The cars...

I go closer to Robert's car. What's left of it, anyway.

All the glass is broken. The windshield is still there, severely cracked and only attached in one corner. There's glass everywhere. All the windows are gone, and the roof of the car is crumbled.

"How did they survive this?" Theo asks.

He leans down on the driver's side, peering in. It's streaked with blood. Most of the door is gone, cut away by the rescue team.

"The car was upside down," Eli informs us, reading from his phone.

There was a little article about it in the paper, but I wasn't able to read it. Couldn't stomach the thought. And now I'm staring at the actual evidence, and I think I might puke.

"Margo was in the passenger seat," he continues. "And she wasn't found at the crash. When her foster mother and case worker couldn't locate her, she was reported missing."

I shake my head. "Matt dragged her out and left Robert behind."

I like the Jenkinses. They're good for Margo. Good people in general.

And someone tried to—

"Don't spiral," Liam says behind me.

I find him watching me instead of the totaled cars.

“I’m not.”

“You are,” he argues. “Going down the wormhole. Going to let the anger take over. Well, just—don’t.”

I grunt and try to listen to him for once. I take a deep breath, then another.

“Margo and Robert both survived this,” he continues. “Got it?”

“I fucking got it,” I growl.

I leave Robert’s car behind—I can’t look at it anymore—and head toward the other vehicle. It’s a maroon SUV better suited for moms and too many kids. It faired a lot better.

“Check this out,” Liam says, pointing to a few marks on the front of the SUV. “Was there a brush guard on it or something?”

There’s nothing on there now... and it would explain why this car is in much better shape than Robert’s. My anger flares, white-hot, but I push it down. There will be a time to deal with Matt—and whoever was giving Matt orders.

I raise my eyebrow. “That isn’t cheap. And not typically a rental.”

“I doubt it was a rental.” Liam circles it. His dad has always been into cars. I heard he once thought about opening his own shop. The family restored a few cars and sold them to folks in Rose Hill with too much money to burn, and I know for a fact Liam was just as involved in the project as his dad and brother.

He opens the passenger door and leans in, yanking off his gloves.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for the registration,” he says. The *jackass* he’d normally tack onto the end of such a statement is implied this time.

I roll my eyes.

He pulls out a piece of paper, grinning. “Not the Powerball, but no small potatoes, either.”

“Sorry, is that a lottery analogy?”

“Shut up.” He scans the paper, then tosses it across the driver’s side to me.

I open it slowly. It’s a receipt for an oil change, with the owner’s name printed neatly in the upper corner.

Lead stones drop into my stomach.

“Do you know who it is?” Liam asks. There must be something alarming in my expression, because he whistles for the other guys and comes around the vehicle.



He pries the paper from my hand and shows it to Eli and Theo.

“That name sounds vaguely familiar,” Eli comments.

“It should.” I take the paper back and stare down at it.

This situation just got a whole lot more fucked up.

“Tobias Hutchins,” I say, staring at the name. “Also known as Keith Wolfe’s public defender. The one my mother bribed to botch his plea deal.”



## MARGO

I PACE IN MY ROOM, practicing flipping open the knife. I jab the air, slice it, twirl around and pretend to stab it into someone's eye.

I debate practicing on a pillow but quickly dismiss that idea.

My actions slow when the garage door rumbles open. Josh and Norah are in the city for the day, which means Eli and Caleb have returned. The door downstairs slams shut. Voices drift upstairs. More than two.

I flip the knife closed, sliding it into my pocket, and slip into the hall. I was hoping to catch Caleb alone, but now...

Caleb is the first to see me when I walk into the kitchen. They're raiding the fridge and pantry. Eli is half hidden behind the door, tossing out snacks. His eyes narrow, moving up and down my body.

Oh, right.

I should've put something on over my tank top, but I'm too heated. *Literally*. It's work keeping the frustration off my face.

He could've told me about my mother. *Should've* told me about her. I mean, yes, he had mentioned she was in town, but—

"I need to tell you something," he says to me.

"It's a little late," I snap.

I march up to him, stopping a foot away. Close enough to touch, but I don't dare reach out. Neither does he.

"Margo—"

"No. We went to the diner Matt took you to, okay? I saw—"

"You *what*?" Caleb's face pales.

It's not often that I catch him by surprise. Almost never, I'd say. But

today—today is the exception.

I set my jaw. “You should’ve told me that my mother was there.”

“Oh shit,” Eli whispers.

I ignore it and focus on Caleb.

“I didn’t know,” he says. “I only saw my mom.”

“She’s working where?” Liam asks.

“Lucky’s Diner,” Caleb and I say together.

I blush.

“Okay, your turn,” Liam prods.

I raise my eyebrows, and then it occurs to me that all of them are acting suspicious.

“What did you do?”

“We’re not done talking about our mothers,” Caleb warns. “But, we went to the junkyard to see if we could figure out a connection.”

“The car Matt used to hit me? It was still at the...” I wince. I almost just called it a crime scene. I mean, it is a crime scene—but it’s a lot more devastating than that.

Theo clears his throat. “Maybe we should take this to... anywhere else.”

Eli snaps his fingers. “To the couch!”

Liam and Theo follow Eli out. I start to go, too, but Caleb holds me back.

“How was it?” he asks.

I tilt my head. “Which part?”

“Seeing them. I should’ve known she knew where your mom was, but I... believed her.”

“It was weird to see your mom. She was definitely shocked. I think mine is working as a cook there, which makes sense...” I shrug, looking away.

He grips my chin, twisting my head back around. “Don’t hide from me.”

I stare at him. “Seriously?”

“I can see you leaving as we speak.”

I push at his chest. “And where have you been? Lurking in the shadows. Following me and so-called *leads* around town.” My voice drops. “We should be doing this together.”

His face softens. “Is that what you want?”

“To work with you on this? To spend time with you actually doing shit instead of avoiding each other?” I roll my eyes. “Of course that’s what I want.”

He smiles, and it lights up his face.

My heart skips a beat.

*Damn you, heart.*

“Let’s go solve this thing, then.”

I pull out my phone. “Riley should come, too.”

He nods, then presses a kiss to my forehead. It’s sweet, and it shoots tingles through my whole body.

**Me:** *How soon can you be here?*

**Riley:** *Two minutes. I was heading there anyway.*

I grin to myself.

**Me:** *No texting and driving. ;) Did Eli invite you?*

The bubble pops up that she’s typing, then it disappears. It comes up again...

I bite my lip.

Oh god, if I’m the result of *another* car accident, I’m just going to... lose my goddamn mind.

**Riley:** *He’s an asshole.*

Well, fuck.

I shake my head, stuffing the phone back into my pocket. The guys are waiting for me in the living room, all of them looking like I have all the answers. Or maybe I’ll just have the most dramatic reaction to whatever they uncovered.

Who knows.

I take a seat in the armchair closest to Caleb, draping a blanket over my lap.

He opens his mouth, and I hold up my hand.

“Is this bad? Like, really bad?” I close my eyes. “I just need to mentally prepare myself.”

Theo chuckles. “Good thing you’re in therapy.”

I glare at him. “I start tomorrow, asshole.”

“As I said, it’s a good thing—”

“Shut it,” Caleb says mildly, leaning forward. His attention swings to me. “Ready yet?”

My fingers curl into the blanket. *No*, I’m not ready. But actually... “Just rip off the Band-Aid.”

“We figured Matt wouldn’t have been able to get his hands on a vehicle without help,” he says. “And since Masters didn’t question him outside of getting an alibi—”

“Bunch of shit,” I cut in.

“A fake alibi,” he amends. “We went to the junkyard to get our hands on the vehicle. It wasn’t impounded by the police because it wasn’t... I don’t know why they sent it there, actually.”

Eli growls. “Because Masters is after Caleb like a hound after a fox.”

My eyes go wide. “So, wait a minute. You’re saying you were able to stroll right into the junkyard and find out who the vehicle was registered to?”

Caleb shifts. “Right.”

“And whoever owns the vehicle probably had something to do with it.”

“Supposedly,” Liam says. “Assuming it wasn’t stolen.”

“And was it? Stolen, that is?”

Eli perks up. “We didn’t check.”

I facepalm. “You didn’t check.”

“It’s a quick search in the public records,” Eli mumbles. “Don’t you ever check those?”

I shake my head, not bothering to ask why the hell I’d do that. Instead, I turn back to Caleb. “And? Who did it belong to?”

“Listen, Margo, before I say it—”

“Aha!” Eli yells. He lifts his phone. “It was reported stolen about three hours before the accident.”

“Why are you cheering?” Riley asks from the doorway, holding a box. “That’s not a good thing.”

I jump to my feet, but something in Riley’s face stops me cold.

Eli slowly rises as well. “I have a feeling we should take this upstairs.”

“No,” Riley says through gritted teeth. “I’m not going anywhere with you ever again.”

He tilts his head. “Why’s that?”

“Because you’re...” She swallows and looks away. “You’re a miserable, lying asshole, and I can’t be around you anymore.”

My gaze bounces from her to Eli, whose face is a blank mask. I glance at Caleb, raising my eyebrow.

He shrugs.

“Riley—”

“Don’t!” she shrieks. She reaches into the box and pulls out a shirt, chucking it at him. “Take back all of your shit, Eli, and maybe I’ll finally be able to forget about you.”

He flinches.

“I’m sorry, Margo.” Her gaze goes to me. “I just, I can’t—”

She upends the box, spilling clothes and random knickknacks across the floor.

I take a step forward, but that just makes her bolt.

I chase her as far as the door, but she’s in her car and out on the street too fast. I can’t follow her. I’ve never wanted to be able to drive so badly.

“Leave her,” Eli says behind me. His voice is wooden.

I glance back at him, then out into the street.

He’s picking up his belongings, stuffing them back into the box, but his movements are robotic. I can’t tell if he’s pretending to be okay with her reaction or if he saw it coming.

“You okay?” I ask.

He finishes gathering his things and stands, putting it under his arm. “Me? Perfectly fine, Wolfe.”

I sit back down. He drops the box next to the couch and disappears down the hall, reappearing a moment later with what looks like expensive vodka.

“Nothing but the best for me,” he murmurs, uncapping it and taking a sip straight from the bottle. He makes a face. “Okay, proceed.”

His friends eye him, then turn back to me.

“Under normal circumstances, we’d probably be focused on what the fuck just happened,” Liam says. “But...”

Eli chuckles darkly. “Yeah. *But...* Margo and Caleb’s fate is a bit more important than my relationship going up in flames.”

“Do you know why she—?”

“If I had any fucking clue, I wouldn’t still be sitting here with you all.” Eli shrugs.

Caleb clears his throat. “Margo, I’m just gonna blurt this out.”

I wave him to proceed, my throat suddenly tight.

“The car belonged to Tobias Hutchins.”

I blink. And then... blink again.  
My mouth gapes open and closed.  
*What?*

“He was your dad’s—”

“I know who he is,” I snap. “I... Riley and I...”

Caleb narrows his eyes. “You *what?*”

I hesitate.

“See? Totally worth not going after Riley,” Eli whispers to Liam.

Liam elbows him.

I take a deep breath. Yep, all my sleuthing is about to come out into the light.

“We ran into him in New York City,” I remind him, “and you told me who he was later.”

Caleb’s eyes narrow. “I told you his name was Tobias, and that he was your dad’s lawyer.”

“Right.”

“And I know for a fact that there aren’t any online articles about it—”

“Correct,” I interrupt. “I know. *But*, there can only be so many Tobiases in New York City. And a lot of law firms actually list their lawyers on their websites with nice headshots, so...”

“You found him, I take it,” Caleb says drily.

“Went and visited him,” I admit.

His hand curls into a fist. “You did *what?*”

Eli laughs, waving the vodka at Caleb. “Want this? Might make the bad news easier to swallow. Pun totally intended.”

“Shut up,” Theo hisses.

“Anyway,” I continue, “he was pretty fucking shady.”

He doesn’t really seem *mad*, just irritated. And appalled. And... stumped. I, Margo Wolfe, have rendered Caleb Asher speechless. It’s about damn time I’ve had the upper hand.

“So he knows Matt?” I ask. “Obviously you didn’t just stop at finding the car’s registration or whatever—”

Caleb winces. “Tobias might not know Matt, but he certainly knows my mother.”

I go still. “From seeing her in court?”

“From before that,” he admits. “He and my mother have been friendly over the years. I think they went to undergrad together.”



“That had to have been a conflict of interest.”

Caleb sighs. “I think my mom paid him off.”

I shoot to my feet. “Caleb Asher, what are you saying?”

He stands, too, and steps toward me. “You have to remember this next part, Margo. I know you were there. You were hiding in my room from my mom and someone you didn’t recognize.”

I close my eyes, trying to think back.

It comes slowly, towing the memories from deep underwater. Voices. I was searching for Caleb.

*“You’re being unreasonable,” Mrs. Asher hissed.*

*“Me? I’m the unreasonable one?” A male voice, but not Caleb’s dad. “This is insane, Lydia. You can’t expect me to go along with this.”*

*“I can, and I will,” she snapped. “Lord knows we pay you enough.”*

*“There isn’t enough money in the world to help us if we get caught,” he answered. “Something I’m sure you’re well aware of.”*

I shake my head. “Your mom and Tobias were... why were they upstairs?”

He sneers at me. “Why do you think?”

Oh god.

The Ashers are wicked, wicked people.

How we ever got caught in their web is almost inconceivable. Dad should’ve known Ben wasn’t the same person he went to school with—that money had corrupted him.

Or maybe he was always corrupt, and Dad accepted it.

Still, in the end? It got Ben killed.

Dad in jail.

Mom addicted to drugs.

And Lydia... well, she’s an outcast.

“Did your dad cut your mom out of the will?” I ask.

Caleb stops short. “How do you know that?”

I hum. So the rumor Lenora heard was true. It made sense, what with everything we’re learning. “Lydia and Tobias were in bed together—figuratively *and* literally. She left you with your uncle and went where, to work in a shitty diner for the rest of her life?”

Theo whistles. “She’s finally asking the right questions.”

“Assuming Tobias and Lydia are still relatively close—does that mean she knows Matt?”

Liam and Theo are standing now, too, creeping closer. Our voices are getting softer. This type of thing, it's too big to talk about loudly.

I look over my shoulder, toward the front door. I closed it, but... maybe I should've locked it, too.

"She knew Matt," Caleb says. "He was my friend, she had seen him around."

"But does she know him currently?" I prod.

He stares at the ceiling, blowing out a breath. "Fuck."

"Oh, that's not an answer," Eli calls from the couch.

The miserable sap is drowning his sorrows in vodka, it seems. At this rate, I don't know if he'll be able to stand.

"Eli—"

Caleb wraps his arm around my shoulders, pulling me into his side. "I know you mean well, love, but just leave him."

"You were saying?" Theo asks.

"Right. Matt took me to the diner, and my mother recognized him. Greeted him by name."

"The plot thickens," Eli sings. "Fuck girls. Not you, Margo. Hey! We should go to a party."

"It's Monday," Liam reminds him. "And we're not partying."

He stomps over and snatches the bottle from Eli's grip.

"You want to be upset? Do it sober, for fuck's sake."

Eli tsks. "I could punch you for that."

Liam raises the bottle, squinting at how much is left. "Could you really? I'd like to see you try—"

"Nope," Theo cuts in, stepping between them. "Don't really want to test your theory, Liam."

Liam chuckles and comes back toward us. "Since we have nothing better to do than help you, what's next?"

"Matt's a dead end," I say to Liam.

His eyebrows go up, and then his gaze goes down to the pocket of my jeans. Slowly, a grin spreads across his face. "Atta girl."

"That was your idea?" Caleb growls.

"Nope!" I put my hand on his chest. "My idea."

"Just Liam's knife."

"We're going in circles," I groan and rest my head on Caleb's shoulder. "Matt, Lydia, Tobias, my mother, the mystery girlfriend—"

Eli gasps, almost choking on his own spit.

“You don’t think Matt’s girlfriend is Caleb’s mom, do you? The fancy old cougar—”

“Shut your fucking trap before I shut it for you,” Caleb threatens.

Eli just laughs.

I clap, getting their attention. All of them. We’re falling apart here, and besides the immediate questions, no one is in immediate danger.

Well, I might be, but that’s another matter.

Eli’s parents aren’t coming back until after dinner, which leaves Caleb and I just enough time to go find Riley. Or, more specifically, it leaves just enough time for Caleb to drive *me* to find Riley. And we could use the alone time.

“Someone put him to bed,” I say. “Caleb, we need to go for a ride.”

Caleb smirks. “Where?”

“Riley’s house.”

He grimaces. “No.”

“Yes.” I cross my arms over my chest. “You can’t just block me from seeing her after—”

“I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

“That’s why I said *we*.”

It’s a standoff. I’m not sure which one of us will win. He’s glaring at me like I’m a temperamental doll, and I can only hope my expression is just as fierce.

In a quiet voice, he says, “You leave tomorrow. Which means...”

*Last night together.*

“Yeah, I know,” I say. “Which means we need to get to Riley’s, and then after...”

Theo and Liam come thundering back down the stairs. “Boy’s passed out.”

“Good,” Caleb says. “I’ll see you guys at school tomorrow.”

It’s a dismissal, and everyone knows it.

They leave, closing the door behind them, and Caleb smiles at me.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” I laugh.

“You’re not mad at me?”

I take a closer look at his face, surprised when I discover that he’s being vulnerable. Open, for once in our lives. Well, recent lives. I used to be able to

read him like a book.

“I’m not.” I run my hand up his arm, to his neck. “And I’ll be less inclined to *get* mad if you kiss me.”

He leans down. “I think I can oblige.”

His lips touch mine softly. Butterflies erupt in my chest. We’re used to being greedy with our kisses, always demanding more of each other. Now, it stays honey-sweet. His tongue runs along my lower lip, but it isn’t demanding. It’s slow, and I feel it so much more, down to my toes.

Whoever said kisses could be toe-curling was clearly talking about *this* kind.

“So, to Riley’s house,” he says against my lips. “You sure?”

“Maybe I should just text her...”

He grins, moving down to kiss my neck. He hovers over my throat, expectant.

“Oh, you mean right now?”

His teeth nip my skin.

I laugh, but it’s more of a breathless sigh.

Still, he doesn’t move until I’ve pulled out my phone and dialed her number.

“H-Hello?” Riley answers.

“Hey. Are you okay? Do you want me to come over there?”

Caleb resumes his attack on my neck, and I bite my lip to keep from moaning into the phone.

“I’ll be okay.” Her voice is hoarse, and it tugs at my heart. “You have a lot going on, and I’m just going to be moping around.”

“Tomorrow. My house. Ice cream and action movies.”

Caleb’s tongue touches my neck, and I jump. I try pushing him away, but he just latches on with his teeth. *Evil man*. Each touch is an electric zap bouncing through my body. I’m ready to tear his clothes off right here in the living room, in front of the windows—

“Sounds good,” Riley says.

My mind is already a mile away.

“I’ll call you tomorrow, okay? And if you’re skipping school, come hang out with me.”

She manages to laugh, which I consider a win.

“You got it,” she answers.

As soon as she’s off the phone, I push Caleb away. “Stop, stop.”

He smirks at me, but it slides off his face when he sees my expression.  
“What’s wrong?”

He follows my gaze to the window.

“Margo. Do you...”

I get goosebumps.

And I swear, it isn’t because Caleb most likely gave me a giant hickey on my neck.

I race to the front door, flinging it open and bounding out onto the porch.

A car screeches down the street.

“What was *that*?”

“I keep feeling like someone is watching me,” I say. I hate, *hate* the fear in my voice. I thread my fingers with Caleb’s and hold on tight. “And that—”

“Unknown. You’re sleeping in my bed tonight,” he says firmly. “I don’t give a fuck if the Blacks have an objection, or if they find out. You’ll be safe with me.”

I blink back tears. “Thank you.”

“No thanks necessary,” he says, holding me close. “We’ll find them. I promise.”



## CALEB

MARGO IS FREAKED OUT. Information overload, plus Robert in the hospital and learning that her mom is only a town away...

Yeah, I'd probably find any excuse to lose it.

But she doesn't. She holds on to my hand hard enough to crush my fingers, and she sure does sound scared, but... she doesn't look it.

On the outside, she's strong.

I scoop her up and carry her down the stairs, and it's then that I feel the way she shakes. It's more of a shiver than anything else, but it doesn't stop even when we're downstairs.

Dusk has set my room in strange blue hues, making it seem all the more eerie. I turn on the lamp by my bed and lay her down.

"You always go straight to bed," she comments.

"Seemed the most logical," I answer. I pull the blankets up over us. "It's your safe place."

Her eyebrow goes up. "Is it?"

"After every incident, you come here—whether my choice or yours. It's just habit now. You'll relax."

"It's not your bed," she mumbles.

It has to be. After I found her in the woods, and then when I was out with my friends instead of being here for her—

"It's *you*," she says, lifting herself up. Defiance flashes in her eyes. "It's not this bed, Caleb. It's you and your presence and knowing that if you're gone, you're coming back *here*—"

Those words unravel my self-control.

I slam my lips on hers, pushing her into the mattress. I bite her lip, eliciting a fierce groan from deep in her throat. She fights back, surprising me by getting leverage under her and rolling us over.

I love the feel of her weight on me. Her hair falls around us, creating our own privacy curtain as she kisses me again. Deeper.

Her hips move against mine ever so slightly, calling to attention my stiff erection.

God, I need to be inside her. Right. Now.

She kisses my jaw, my cheek, up and over my eyelids and forehead. “You’re incorrigible,” she whispers. “And you aren’t perfect. So far from it.”

“I know.”

“And I hate that you keep secrets.”

“I know.”

She’s still peppering my skin with kisses, dragging her lips around. Her hands bury themselves in my hair, tugging my head back. She nips my earlobe.

“But there’s something you don’t know.”

I exhale in a huff when her tongue touches the shell of my ear.

“And that...” She stares down at me. “Is that I’m in love with you.”

My heart... yeah, it does something funny. Skips, twists, jumps for joy. Love? Me?

Sure, when we were kids. When my heart was whole. But that was innocent love.

This is... dirty. Raw. So painful I might just burst.

Fuck. Me.

She touches the corner of my eye. “Never thought I’d see the day when Caleb Asher shed a tear.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m just...”

“If you say you don’t love me back, I’ll call you a liar,” she threatens. “No other emotion would explain the psychopathic tendencies you sometimes exhibit.”

I flip her over onto her back, hovering above her. My weight settles onto her, showing her exactly what I think of this situation, and she exhales.

Carefully, I lift her hand. Kiss her palm, then down farther, to where her skin is so white it’s almost translucent. And the bracelet.

“I’m possessive,” I admit. “It’s a flaw.”

“The first step is admitting you have a problem,” she whispers.



I smirk, but it slips away rather fast. “I don’t know how you can proclaim love when there are so many missing puzzle pieces.”

The palm I just kissed cups my cheek. “What else could there possibly be to ruin this? Ruin us?”

I shake my head.

I don’t know, but I wouldn’t be surprised if something did.

Wouldn’t be the first time... and it’s just our luck to be torn apart. I think of my dad and her mom, the way they were drawn together and ripped brutally apart.

Maybe Asher men are destined to fall for Wolfe women.

It can’t be helped. And it can’t be stopped.

I’m following in my father’s footsteps—minus the wife.

And this time, I’ll just have to hope we have different endings. That I won’t ruin every good thing.

“If you’re not going to say it, show me,” she says.

I smile. Her hands are already on the button of my pants.

“That, I can do.”



## MARGO

DR. SAYER IS... not quite how I pictured her.

Long black hair in beautiful, intricate braids, dark eyes and skin. She wears a long flowing dress that isn't weather appropriate, but it's warm in her office. There's even a fireplace behind her.

The whole office has a cozy vibe. Dark wood walls and furniture, a cream-colored rug on the tiled floor. One whole wall filled with books and baubles. Some related to psychology and talk therapy, plus a healthy mix of classics.

I spend the first fifteen minutes of our session standing by those books, running my fingers along the titles.

"*To Kill a Mockingbird*?" I ask, the first thing I've said besides our introduction.

"Do you not like that one?"

I shrug. She's at her therapist chair, which faces a couch and a chair. I guess I could've got my pick of the two, but instead... here I stand, silently counting down the minutes.

"I found myself drawn to Scout's attitude," she says quietly. "There's a lot we can learn from a girl like her."

My finger travels next to *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. "Envy is dangerous."

"Are you envious?"

I sigh. "Isn't everyone?"

"Probably," she agrees. "It's why the book is so widely regarded. But it strikes each person differently."

“I’ve always been labeled the foster kid. And before that, the poor scholarship kid.” I pull the book out and flip through it. There’s writing on a few of the pages, tight cursive that I don’t bother trying to interpret. “Isn’t that... well, obviously it’s not racism. But being followed around shops just because I don’t really fit in, that’s not fun.”

Dr. Sayer stays silent.

“That’s not why I’m here, though,” I say. “I’m here because I was kidnapped.”

I put the book back on the shelf.

“We can discuss whatever you’d like.”

I exhale. “How many foster kids do you talk to in a week? Six? Ten? Thirty?”

She just watches me.

“I’m just the same as them.”

“I’m sure you share some qualities, but that doesn’t mean you’re the same. Isn’t that kind of like erasing your own identity?”

I finally sit. “I don’t think I really have my own identity.”

“Is that your own standpoint or one you might’ve had put on you?”

How did we get talking about this? Instead of thinking about the answer—a painful consideration—I shake my head. “You don’t want to know about me being kidnapped?”

“We can talk about it.”

I regard her. “I feel bad,” I finally say. “About it.”

“Why?”

“Lenora, my foster mom, shouldn’t have had to deal with that.” I rub my wrist. “Her daughter died in a car accident. And then I just imagine what she had to go through with her husband... Robert was in the car with me.”

“How is he doing?”

I brighten. “Good. He’s going home today, which means I get to go home, too. It’ll be nice to be back in a routine.”

“You’re staying with a family friend?” Dr. Sayer clarifies. “Your social worker mentioned they had been registered as a respite home a few years ago, so they were eligible. And your boyfriend lives there.”

I slowly nod. “Yes. Is that bad?”

“Perhaps he offered you a bit of stability that a different respite home wouldn’t have been able to.”

“Right.”

“So, you feel guilty because Lenora was going through all of that alone.”

“Right,” I repeat. “I shouldn’t have gone to see my dad. That was where we were coming back from... The prison. It’s my fault we were out on that street in the first place.”

“But you were taken?”

“I was, but I don’t remember a lot of it. I was drugged with something, and... I don’t know. I think the detective has brushed my case off.”

I wait for her to say something like, *And how do you feel about that?* For once, I have an answer: angry. Angry that I’m forgotten about yet again, tossed to the side. We’re well on our way to figuring this out ourselves—shouldn’t a detective, with more resources, be able to do far better?

She doesn’t ask. She instead stands, crossing to her desk. “Have you talked to your foster parents about how you feel?”

I frown. “No. There’s been a lot going on.”

“Understandable.” She comes back with a composition notebook in her hand. She extends it toward me, and I reluctantly take it. “Maybe you feel like people don’t listen.”

“It isn’t that they *don’t* listen, it’s that they *won’t*.”

“Can you try something for me?”

I lean back, setting the notebook beside me and folding my arms over my chest.

“Hear me out,” she says, smiling. “I’ve found it’s easier to be heard when the words can’t be ignored. When it’s in black and white in front of them.”

“You want me to write down my feelings.” *I should’ve known.*

“Maybe put it in a letter,” she suggests.

“To who?”

Mom? Lenora and Robert? Dad?

“Whoever you want.”

I chew on that request for a moment. Bounce it around. Are there people who I could write a letter to, get the emotions off my chest, and move on from it? Sure.

But right now, that’s at the bottom of my list of priorities.

“It was scary,” I finally say. “Knowing someone had taken me away from Robert. The second before they knocked me out, they kept apologizing. Even when I was in the barn, and they were arguing...”

I press my lips together.

“How are you sleeping?” she asks.

“I’m... barely.” Every night is a struggle, although I haven’t told another soul that. I’ve scarcely admitted it to myself—that my sleep troubles might be a result of being taken. And the accident.

It doesn’t help that every time I close my eyes, I feel Robert’s arm across my chest, protecting me as we careened toward the ditch.

“I told my boyfriend I love him,” I blurt out. “Because I definitely do. But he didn’t say it back. I know he does, but I was really hoping to hear him say the words.”

She takes the subject change in stride. “First love?”

“Only love,” I say firmly.

She smiles. “When you know, you know. And maybe, since he didn’t just automatically say it back to you, it means it’ll be more special when he does.”

I hum. “That... makes me feel better, actually.”

“That’s what I’m here for.”

I raise my eyebrow. “Pep talks?”

Her smile turns into a grin. “Perspective.”

“Ah.”

She glances at her watch. “And now, unfortunately, our time is up. Try writing in the journal. Bring it back with you on Friday.”

My cheeks heat up. “Am I going to be reading it out loud?”

She shrugs, and I catch a mischievous gleam in her eye.

Honestly, it’s about time she showed some personality other than serene. Still, I take that to mean, *maybe*.

I suppose I can work with that.

Lenora is parked at the curb, waiting for me. She looks at me expectantly when I slide in, but I just shake my head.

“Right, right, I shouldn’t ask.”

I laugh and tuck the notebook into my bag. “It is supposed to be confidential.”

“Well, fine. But did you find it helpful?”

I think back on my conversation with Dr. Sayer. The more I think about it, the more I like her definition of her job: to give perspective. She’s not out to heal or fix me—not that I can tell, anyway.

“It was,” I decide.

“Good. Robert is home, eagerly awaiting our arrival.”

I straighten. “He is? Already?”

“Yep. He got a clean bill of health from the doctors. As long as he takes it easy, he should be okay to return to work next week. And you, too.”

I touch my forehead. The stitches came out yesterday morning, before Riley and I went to the diner, but they said to keep a butterfly bandage on it for another day. That came off this morning, leaving a tiny, shiny scar.

And I’ve never been so happy to wash my hair without inhibition.

It starts snowing when we’re almost home. My muscles tense, and I grab on to the door.

“Margo, are you okay?”

It was snowing when Robert and I crashed. It was easy to push down the fear of vehicles when it was Riley driving me, or Angela. The skies have been clear, the roads dry.

I lean forward, eyeing the side streets. A car could come out of nowhere and sideswipe us.

She slows our car until we’re crawling down the street. “Honey, breathe.”

I take in a ragged breath. It’s snowing hard and fast. I close my eyes.

“Can we just get home?” I whisper.

“Absolutely.”

She reaches over and holds my hand the whole way back, and it helps. It’s her form of a lifeline—and maybe she understands my sudden anxiety.

I wonder how long it took her to get into a car after Josie died.

“We’re here,” she announces, turning into the driveway.

I open my eyes and release her hand, embarrassment flushing my cheeks.

“I’m sorry.”

Her eyebrows crinkle together. “You don’t have to apologize.”

Nodding, I get out of the car. The embarrassment is replaced by anticipation, and I rush ahead of her to get in the house.

“Hey, kiddo,” Robert calls. He walks back toward the living room with a glass of water. “Let me just put this down...”

He sets it on a side table, then holds out his arms.

I dive into them, holding back a fraction for fear of hurting him. He wraps his arms around my back.

“There she is,” he says into my hair. “Good as new, the both of us, yeah?”

“You said that exact same thing before,” I mumble into his chest. “And then you almost died.”

“Ah, well. Old habits die hard. My father used to say that to my brother and me. We were always getting hurt.” He chuckles and pats my back.

I pull back, wiping at my cheeks. I'm ashamed of the tears there, but they're more happy than sad. He's home. I'm home.

*It isn't just a house anymore.*

My heart swells.

"Len, we should order Chinese and watch some movies."

She laughs behind me. "May as well. I don't have any food in this house. Margo, want to take this up to your room?"

I turn. She holds the bag I had packed for the Blacks'.

"Oops, sorry."

"I know you were in a rush to get in here." She winks at me.

I loop the strap over my shoulder and hurry to the stairs. Up to the second floor, where pictures of the Jenkinses stare at me. They've replaced some of them with new pictures, doing their best to make me feel welcome. Pictures of me and my friends, Caleb and I from the ball, a selfie I took with Robert and Lenora on Thanksgiving.

I smile at that last one, the three of us with our faces so close together. They frame me in, their arms looped around me. It's easy to see why they picked that one to display in high-definition color. We're so happy.

My first stop is the bathroom, unloading my toiletries and makeup bag, then I push open the door to my room.

It meets some resistance, like it's caught on something.

I frown, pushing harder, and manage to get it open most of the way.

But my room...

Horror radiates through me. Horror and disbelief.

I can't help it.

I scream.





## UNKNOWN

The game is in play, Margo.  
There's no calling this one off.  
Ready or not, here I come.



## MARGO

LENORA FINDS me in the hallway.

On the floor.

She falls to her knees beside me, grabbing at my shoulders. “What’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

I point toward my room with a shaky hand. The door has swung almost all the way closed, leaving just a crack visible. It’s all I can focus on, although I’d rather close my eyes. Scrub them out and forget I ever came back here.

*Home.* Someone clearly disagrees.

She stands and forces my door open farther, her hand flying to her mouth.

Robert makes it to the top of the stairs then, coming toward me.

“Robert,” Lenora gasps.

He helps me to my feet, and I follow him closer.

My room is a wreck.

Destroyed.

My mattress is off the box spring, ripped to shreds. Bits of foam and feathers from the sliced pillows coat the floor. The box spring is splintered, one leg completely demolished. And my bookshelf... Every book has been thrown off the case, some pages torn out, crumpled.

But the worst part is the red paint, resembling a murder scene. It’s splashed across the walls, the floor, the books. My desk. The window.

And on the wall, a message.

*Pretty bird, broken wings. Oh, what a glorious fall.*

He takes my hand. “Len, call the detective. Let’s just close this off...”

He tugs me out of the room.

I gasp for air.

Pretty bird.

Where have I heard that before? Who's called me that?

"Detective Masters, this is Lenora Jenkins..." Her voice fades as she goes down the stairs.

"Is this related to who took you?" Robert asks.

That would make sense. I struck at Matt, and I was virtually untouchable with the Blacks. Too many people always around. Here... the house was deserted for days while Lenora stayed at the hospital.

This was revenge? A warning?

Unknown calling me out for...

I shake my head. "I don't know."

"Let's go downstairs," he suggests, guiding me away.

I stop short at one of the framed photos. There's a faint spot of red on the glass, like whoever painted the message in my room came out here and took their sweet time leaving.

Robert doesn't notice my distraction.

"I'm going to the bathroom." I quickly withdraw. "I'll meet you downstairs."

He nods. "Take your time."

I duck into the bathroom until I hear him talking to Lenora. Then I back into the hallway and lift the photo from the wall.

Josie hid a note behind one of these. It could be irrelevant, but...

This particular photo is one of the new ones. It's Caleb, Eli, Riley, and me from the masquerade ball. One of the few where we weren't wearing our masks.

The red spot—a fingerprint, I realize upon closer inspection—is right over my face.

Erasing me completely.

*Pretty bird, broken wings. Oh, what a glorious fall.*

I tighten my grip on it.

How dare they come in here and threaten me? After everything—

I shake my head, knowing that line of thinking is foolish. They won't just *stop*. Unknown won't stop until they get what they want.

And... what is it that they want, exactly? To run me out of town. To stay away. And more specifically, to stay away from Caleb.

Why?

Because I might ruin his focus at lacrosse or turn him on a different path for his future? Because I might capture his attention, unlike Unknown?

“Margo?” Lenora calls. “The detective is here.”

I race into the hall and rehang the picture. If he notices, he notices. If he doesn’t, well...

“Ms. Wolfe,” Detective Masters greets me.

I shake his hand. He makes me nervous, even though I’ve done nothing wrong. Maybe it’s the fact that he arrested Caleb without any real cause, then *didn’t* arrest Matt.

“Did you find anything from the car that hit Robert and me?” I ask.

His stare is criticizing. “No.”

“Even though the driver was the one who took me.”

“It was reported stolen, and there were no prints in the vehicle. No anything. Our forensic investigators went through it with a fine-tooth comb, and then we released it to the junkyard.”

I look away. “Stolen from whom?”

“I’m not at liberty to say,” the detective answers. “Your room was vandalized? Would you mind showing me?”

I take a deep breath and point to my door. “See for yourself.”

Robert wraps his arm around me. “We’d rather not...”

“Understandable, sir,” the detective says. He puts on a pair of gloves, then gingerly opens the door. He sucks in a breath. “That sure is something.”

We wait in the hall as he takes a closer look. Lenora chews on her lower lip, more stressed out than I’ve ever seen her.

“I locked the door every time I left,” she said. “I just don’t understand it. We have an alarm!”

The detective reappears. “What’s your alarm hooked up to?”

“The first-floor doors and windows,” she says. “We only set it when we’re gone. Maybe that’s foolish, but—”

“There’s some scuffing on the outer edge of the windowsill,” he interrupts. “The vandal probably went in and out the window. Is anything else missing?”

“I’ll check our room.” Lenora slips past us, down the hall.

I try not to panic. Caleb came in and out of there so many times... if the detective finds even his fingerprint out there, he’ll automatically assume it was him.

“Why would someone do this?” Robert asks. “Target Margo?”

Masters eyes me. “You piss anyone off?”

“Just a stalker,” I say, half-joking. And then I realize what I just admitted... I had told the detective about Unknown when I was in the hospital. But, according to him, they couldn’t do anything unless they knew who it was. The messages weren’t threatening enough to warrant the phone company to release the blocked number, either.

I never told Robert, though.

“Excuse me?”

I wince. “I’ve just been getting some... unsavory texts.” *And phone calls. And I was kidnapped. And I’ve been feeling like I’m being watched all the time.*

No big deal.

“What can we do about this?” Robert demands.

“Margo filed a complaint in the hospital,” Masters answers. “So it’s on record. But until something—”

“Please do *not* be about to say something worse,” Robert snaps. “And what does your office plan to do about this?”

“We’ll have a cruiser do some drive-bys for the next week, to make sure you all are safe.” Detective Masters glances at me. “Has anything else happened?”

I cross my arms over my chest. What would I admit to, a creepy-crawly feeling occasionally?

“No.”

He nods like he expected that answer. “I’m calling in the police. They’ll take some photos, see if they can collect some evidence, statements from you all, and then we’ll go from there. Excuse me.”

He pulls out his phone as he heads down the stairs.

Lenora reappears. “Nothing is missing. Not even a hair out of place. Where did Jim go?”

“Downstairs,” Robert says. “We should all go down. Try not to... contaminate anything.”

Lenora shudders. “After this is over, we’re redoing that room. New window with many locks. Whatever furniture or paint you want. Anything —”

“It’s okay,” I whisper.

We go downstairs. I perch on a stool at the breakfast bar while Lenora

paces the kitchen. And Robert lowers himself onto the couch, groaning under his breath.

This really isn't fair. Not by a mile.

My phone has been silent. No new messages from Riley or Caleb—nothing from Unknown, either.

Detective Masters comes back inside. "They'll be here in a few moments. You don't have any idea who might've done this? Or what the words on the wall meant?"

I shake my head. "I thought it had to be someone from school, since they texted Caleb and warned him that Ian was taking me into the woods. And they were at a party at Ian's house, too. But lately..."

The car belonging to Tobias, who's a known associate of the Ashers, is just too coincidental.

"I don't know," I finish lamely.

"This is probably enough to find out the number that's been texting you," he says. "I'm going to head back to the station and work on that. I'll be in touch."

Lenora nods sharply. "Thank you, Detective."

We sit in silence for a moment.

Police aren't the bad guys in this situation. I've had my fair share of fear when it comes to cops—especially that one time I ran away—and Detective Masters does have a tendency to look down his nose at me, whether because I'm a foster or a teenager, I don't know.

Still. Worth a shot.

I get up and rush after him, outside without even a coat on.

He stops beside his car, eyebrows raising.

"Ms. Wolfe?"

"I have a... theory."

He waves for me to continue.

"How does a public defender rise to partner at a big law firm in two years?"

Detective Masters says nothing.

"When I asked Tobias Hutchins that very question—"

He holds up his hand. "You *know* him? When did you meet him?"

"Riley and I went to his office in the city. He defended my dad—badly. If you know anything about that trial—"

"I was a rookie," he says, softening. His eyes go to the sky. "Let's go



back inside. You've intrigued me."

Hope flares inside my chest. And hope? It's a dangerous thing. It can lift you up and drop you when you least expect it.

So I shove the hope away and remain cautious. Lenora and Robert both start to ask questions when I walk back in, but they're silenced by the detective's reappearance.

We go to the dining room. My painting of Caleb is on the floor in the corner, but he makes no comment about it.

"Okay," he says once we've sat. "Let's hear it."

"You know I lived with my parents in the Asher guest house. My mom and his dad were having an affair, which apparently everyone knew except me and..." I shake my head. "I was upstairs in Caleb's room one day—before I found out about the affair—and I heard Mrs. Asher talking to someone."

"Someone. How old were you?"

I wince. "I had just turned ten."

"Okay, so, we're dealing with unreliable memory."

"Yeah... I didn't know who she was talking to, but I remember the guy was upset about what she was asking him to do. She said she was paying him enough. I mentioned it to Caleb, and he told me it was Tobias. That's how, when Caleb and I ran into Tobias in the city in October, Tobias knew Caleb." I pause and suck in a deep breath.

"So you've established a relationship between your dad's lawyer and the Ashers. Go on."

"Why would he have a car in the city? Does he drive it a lot?"

The detective smiles. "You're asking the right questions, at least. And I'm going to humor you." He flips through his notebook. "I talked to Mr. Hutchins myself. He said the car was stored in a garage, and he was planning on a Sunday drive to visit family when he noticed it missing."

I grunt. "It's too neat. He reports it missing mere hours before it's involved in my..."

"Or it's *good* timing, and we avoided a lot of hassle because he did notice."

"You're supposed to be humoring me."

He sighs. "Margo, I'll humor you as far as logic will allow. But reaching for pieces of facts to make them fit your theory is bad detective work."

*Like you did with Caleb?* I bite my tongue instead of spitting out that

accusation.

“Okay, okay.” I bite my lip. “You don’t find it fishy that there’s a link from Matt to Lydia, and then *also* a link from Lydia to Tobias?”

“Matt, who allegedly kidnapped—”

“He did take me, Detective.”

His eyes bore into mine, then he nods. “Okay. I agree, there’s a connection there.”

“Aha!” I lean back in my chair. “Now what?”

“Is that your whole theory?”

I raise my eyebrow. “Honestly? Yeah. I have no idea who Unknown is, just that they’re probably my age. Which means they’re someone who knows Lydia—and maybe Matt—and goes to Emery-Rose.”

“Matt Bonner went to Emery-Rose,” Robert says from the doorway.

I jump.

“He transferred, but I suspect he knows quite a few kids at your school. Still friends, even.” Robert frowns. “Sorry, that’s unhelpful.”

“Quite all right,” Masters says. “How are you feeling?”

He lets out a small chuckle. “Like someone scraped through my insides with a blade. I’ll be fine in due time.”

“You’re welcome to join us.” The detective motions to a chair. “You knew Matt?”

“Not personally.” Robert lowers himself into the seat next to me. “What are you chatting about? Besides Matt.”

“He has to be working with Lydia,” I insist.

Masters shakes his head. “Where’s the motive? She moved away after the trial and would have no reason to... what, exactly? And the other factor: usually kidnappers call the family with demands. A ransom. That didn’t happen.”

“Because Caleb and Eli found me.”

“Caleb confirmed that *Matt* was the one who led them to your location.”

I pause. “Huh?”

“It’s why I ruled out Matt as a suspect.”

“That and his bullshit alibi,” I grumble.

Masters pats the table. “Lying about it would be interfering with an ongoing investigation, which *would* result in jail time if he was caught. We confirmed it with the girlfriend. Ran them through their stories separately forward and back. It was solid.”

“Margo, maybe you’re reading too much into this,” Robert suggests. “You’ve had a crazy few weeks.”

“You don’t think the person who has been texting me and who kidnapped me—apparently without an actual reason—was the one to do that to my room?” I shoot to my feet, except there’s nowhere to go.

“I’m going to go take some pictures,” the detective says. “I’ll dig around the Ashers, see if I can find anything suspicious, okay?”

“Is this the first time?”

His eyebrows scrunch. “The first time for what?”

“That anyone has ever looked into the Ashers?” I shake my head. “Caleb’s uncle has been beating him since he was a kid. But I guess it’s all too easy for the Asher family to sweep everything under the fucking rug.”

“If that’s true—”

“*Fuck your truth,*” I yell. I storm out and up the stairs, locking myself in the bathroom. I grab my bag on the way, sinking to the floor once I’m alone.

God, I just yelled at a police detective. He was going to help me, but I probably just ruined any chance of that.

I slide my phone out. I stare at it, debating calling Riley.

But wasn’t it me who said Caleb and I needed to work together?

That means relying on him sometimes.

**Me:** *You remember anyone calling me a pretty bird?*

**Caleb:** ?? *No. Why?*

**Me:** *Someone wrote it on my wall. It’s bugging me.*

His contact picture fills my screen, showing the incoming video chat request. I wipe at my face, then answer it.

He frowns at me. He seems to be walking down the hall, his phone held at a low angle. It shows off his sharp jawline. “Please tell me I read that wrong.”

“I wish.”

“Have you been crying?”

“Do I look it?” I fixate on the tiny picture of me in the corner, wondering if he sees something I don’t. My eyes do seem a bit puffy, and my face is

pale.

“You’re upset. I can tell that much.”

I sigh. I hear the detective moving around my room across the hall, so I lower my voice. “Unknown vandalized my room. Destroyed everything.”

He loses all expression on his face. “You’re joking.”

“Why would I be joking? Lenora called Detective Masters. He’s taking pictures right now.”

The phone drops, and all I can see is the black fabric of his shirt.

“Sorry to interrupt, Ms. Simmons. Liam, family emergency.”

He reappears a moment later with Liam just over his shoulder, scowling.

I shake my head at him. He repeats the same thing in two other classes, and finally, he raises the phone back up to his face.

“All hands on deck, right?”

“What the fuck, man?” Liam snaps.

“My room got vandalized,” I say.

A muscle in Caleb’s jaw clenches. “We’ll be there in five minutes. You guys shouldn’t be alone.”

Someone knocks on the bathroom door, and I freeze.

“Margo, it’s Detective Masters. I took some pictures of the room and am heading out. Just wanted to let you know that I’m going to look into what we discussed.”

“Thanks,” I call.

Caleb stares at me. “Can’t wait to hear what you *discussed*.”

“The police are supposed to be the good guys,” I whisper.

He just shakes his head. They’re outside now, and someone is yelling after them. Theo yells back, but the words are snatched away on the wind.

“We’ll be there soon, okay?”

I nod, and he hangs up.

My head falls back on the door. I don’t know what the hell we’re going to do. What *can* we do? We’re teenagers. Kids, really.

My eyes fill with tears. The whole situation is hopeless.

See what I said about hope? It can drop you.

Real fast.



## CALEB

“FOOD,” Eli demands. “We can be hospitable and bring food.”

Theo rolls his eyes. “How about delivery? That’s easy.”

“I’m in the mood for sushi,” Liam adds, “but only if someone else is buying. Or lobster.”

I twist around, looking him up and down. “Your mom isn’t doing the soup for every meal thing again, is she?”

He shrugs. “It’s all we can afford at the moment. Do you know how cheap it is to make a million different soups? They last us a while.”

“You’re starting to run more,” Eli points out. “Which means you need to carb up...”

“Winter sucks for us,” he mutters. “Always has, always will. Doesn’t mean we won’t get through it.”

“So, maybe Chinese?” Theo says. “The Jenkinses aren’t going to like us crashing their house.”

I contemplate that. Robert just got out of the hospital, and it’s the first night Lenora has been back, too. Anyone who saw them in the hospital would know she’s been sleeping there. It wasn’t rocket science.

Eli gets us to Margo’s house almost too fast. He drives recklessly at times, but right now... There’s a growing feeling of dread building up in my chest, and it’s going to explode if I don’t see Margo safe.

I jump out before the truck has fully stopped, jogging up the walkway.

Margo yanks the door open and launches into my arms.

I scoop her up, breathing in her scent, and she locks her legs around my waist.

“Thanks for coming,” she whispers in my ear. “I told them you all were on your way. I think Lenora is going to ask if I can stay with you guys again.”

I wince. “It’s that bad?”

She leans back into my arms, eyebrows raised. “It’s...”

I set her down, and we all enter the house.

Robert is on the couch, flipping through television stations, and he waves to us. “Hello, boys. I’d get up, but...”

“Please don’t stress,” I say, going over to shake his hand. “You look better.”

He laughs, and it turns into a cough. “Better than what? Being at death’s door?”

I shrug.

“I’ll take it.”

Eli nods at him, and Theo waves.

Liam’s eyes are wide. “I like what you’ve done with the place.” He walks farther in, peering into the kitchen. “This is new.”

Margo tilts her head. “Why are you acting like...”

“My family used to live here,” he says. “Although there used to be a wall here.” He mimes a wall that would’ve made the kitchen a lot smaller. “And the dining room didn’t open up onto this porch.”

We follow him as he wanders.

He goes up the stairs, pausing on the picture of Lenora and Robert, then into the bathroom. “That’s the same.”

He comes out and points to her door. “Your room, Margo?”

She grimaces.

“Caleb and I practiced sneaking out of here quite a bit in our youth.” He winks at me. “Dare I say that’s helped him out quite a bit in recent months.”

“Whoever did this came in through the window, too.” she shoves the door open.

My mouth drops, and I step into the room. My friends follow me, while Margo stays in the hall. Honestly, I don’t blame her. A tornado of fury went through the room, destroyed every good thing about it. The walls will need several coats of paint to cover the red, and the writing...

*Pretty bird, broken wings.*

I narrow my eyes. It’s chilling, but... wholly unfamiliar.

“What the hell is that?” Liam points to something on the ground.

"It looks like..." Oh god.

I cover my mouth. I've never been one to have a weak stomach, but this...

A white bird sits just below the words.

Dead.

*Oh, what a glorious fall.*

"Fucking hell," Theo growls. He herds us out of the room, slamming the door closed. "Did you see it?"

"See what? The writing?"

"The fucking dead bird," he says, eyes narrowed at Margo.

She blanches. "Excuse me?"

"It's a threat," I declare. "Calling you a pretty bird, then giving you a dead one?"

She bursts into tears.

Shame flushes through me, and I go to her. Cradle her head against my chest. "I'm sorry. This isn't your fault."

She grabs my shirt, holding me close. "I don't want to die."

"You're not going to." I shake my head. We know the connecting pieces—it's only Unknown who is still a mystery. But who's pulling their strings isn't. "You're coming with me. I'm sure they'll let you."

"You want to bring her home?" Lenora asks, coming up the stairs. "Honestly, that's... not a bad idea."

"You'd let me go?" Margo goes to her foster mom and takes her hands. "I almost don't want to leave, but—"

"This house doesn't quite feel safe, does it?" She sighs. "Not the warm and fuzzy night we had planned. The detective said we're free to start cleaning the room, so I'm going to have a service come in tomorrow. Anything you want to salvage?"

Margo's nose wrinkles. "I don't think I can go in there."

"I will," I say. "I'll see if anything is... untouched."

I slip back into the room, closing myself in. Once the fresh air is sealed off, the dead bird smell fills the air. It's a wonder the whole house doesn't smell like it.

I grab the tipped over trash bin and dump out the liner, using it as a barrier to scoop the bird into. Poor sucker. It appears to have had a quick, painless death. Hell, maybe Unknown stumbled upon it and just brought it in here.



Sure beats the alternative.

Her clothes look undisturbed in the dresser until I pull them out. Holes have been cut in the fabric of her shirts, her jeans have been cut, but whoever did it folded them back up.

One more *fuck you* toward Margo, apparently.

We aren't just dealing with someone who wanted to mess with Margo.

Somehow, she's made them mad. Worse than mad.

I ball my fists and walk out, giving her a quick shake of my head. "They ruined everything."

She exhales slowly, leaning against the wall.

"I called Dad," Eli says. "He okayed her return once I explained what happened."

"You have the knife, Margo?" Liam asks.

She nods.

"Good."

I roll my eyes. "Let's hope she doesn't have to use it, yeah? Now, let's get the hell out of here."

Downstairs, we wait by the door while Margo says her goodbyes. It's hard to watch. She latches on to Robert and doesn't let go for a long while, and he doesn't force it. In fact, his eyes are closed, and he hugs her just as tightly.

The crash affected them more than physically.

"Margo," Lenora says. "We'll pick you up at eight to go into school. The principal wanted to make sure we were on the same page about your schoolwork."

She nods, biting her lip.

I want to touch her.

Shield her from all this shit.

*God*, I was an idiot for ever wanting to break this beautiful, strong girl. She stands tall even as her world crumbles around her, while people are out to get her. In the face of tragedy and anger, she's collected.

If I had it my way, I'd take her far, far away. To somewhere no one could hurt her. We'd live a happy life away from literally everyone. Have outrageous sex everywhere, get her pregnant, marry her—maybe not quite in that order.

That dream *pops*.

I don't have my way. I have an inheritance controlled by my uncle for

another four months, no power, no control.

No fucking clue.

She walks toward me, and I focus on her dark eyes. They're glazed with unshed tears, but she still smiles at me and holds out her hand.

I take it and pull her close.

"Remember my promise," I say in her ear. "No matter where you go, I'll find you."

It used to be a threat, but now...

It's much more than that.

Norah and Josh give Margo two big hugs when we all walk in, and that seems to shock the hell out of her. She stands frozen for a minute, then relaxes into each of them.

"We're going downstairs," Eli tells them, giving his mom a peck on the cheek. "We ordered food."

She smiles and pats the side of his head. "You all deserve some happiness."

*I agree.* Especially Margo, who's beginning to resemble a ghost with her paleness.

I haven't released her hand since we left her house. Even in the car, and climbing out, I didn't let go. Her bag is over my shoulder, and I guide her downstairs. She comes willingly, squeezing my hand softly.

The boys appear a second later with drinks, passing out the sodas. We all flop onto the couch.

"Lydia is the connection," she blurts out. "I'm sorry, Caleb. But—"

I wave off my words. "I know."

"Why is she working at that diner?" she demands. "Lenora mentioned something about the will, but—"

I rub my eyes. "Yeah. That."

Eli grunts. "Story time."

"It's not that interesting."

"Sure it isn't," he counters. "Just your mom's entire motivation may rest on that one day. One moment where her life went..." He whistles, miming something falling and exploding.

I grit my teeth. "Fine."

And then... Well, I do what I've been trying to avoid for a long time. I remember.

## Past

Mom held me close. She hadn't touched me in three days, but today she was a leech. Sucking my energy out of my body.

That's what I told myself, anyway.

It was the day before the funeral, and all we had been wearing was black. My shirt was starched and scratchy under my suit jacket and pants, and the tie strangled me.

I didn't understand why we had to get so dressed up to read Dad's last words. They were just words on a piece of paper.

Uncle David and Aunt Iris came into the room. She ruffled my hair, which Mom immediately finger-combed back into order, and Uncle David knelt in front of me.

"How are you holding up?" he asked.

I shrugged. I just wanted to go home, but home was different now. Colder. Margo was gone, too, and I couldn't figure out why. Her parents were gone. Mom hadn't said a word about it, just locked the door to the guest house and... walked away from it.

She'd tucked the key into her pocket, and I wasn't sure where the Wolfes had hidden their spare. If Mom caught me digging around in the grass, in their planters, she'd yell and cry.

Margo's house was collecting dust, and my soul was, too.

It was dramatic. Ian would say I was being a sissy, but she had pulled a piece of me out when she left, and I was... abandoned to rot.

"Lydia," Uncle David greeted her, straightening up.

"Did you come all the way to Rose Hill for this?" She sniffed.

"Wouldn't miss this for the world." He winked at me.

I didn't know what that meant, but Mom yanked me closer to her.

The lawyer walked into the room and paused beside Mom. "Good to see you again, Lydia. I wish it was on better terms."

She nodded.

"My son is transferring to Emery-Rose next year." He looked down at me, then got on my level. "Would you do me a favor, Caleb? Keep an eye out for Eli Black. I'm sure he'll be needing a friend when he goes to a new school."

I nodded.

“Caleb might not be at Emery-Rose next year,” Lydia informed him.

Mr. Black shrugged. “Perhaps not. I guess we’ll see.”

He crossed to the table and opened his briefcase. There were chairs around the room, but no one was sitting. Relatives I didn’t know very well were scattered around, plus Uncle David and Aunt Iris. Mom at my back.

“No matter what happens,” Uncle David whispered to Mom, “you have a place with us.”

She stiffened. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Careful, dear,” Aunt Iris cooed. “The wolves may come out of the woodwork if you show... weakness.”

Mom glared at her. “How dare—”

Mr. Black started talking, silencing the room. It appeared that no one wanted to miss a word of this. “I, Benjamin Asher, am of sound body and mind...”

I zoned out. It sounded like gibberish, and my attention was on the window. On the way the light reflected through the prism hanging from the window lock, casting a pale rainbow on the floor.

“‘To Lydia Asher,’” Mr. Black read, “‘I leave only the dust beneath my shoes. You...’” He clears his throat. “‘You deserve nothing, not even our son.’”

Gasps filled the room.

I looked up at Mom, whose face was... horrified.

“No,” she whispered. “That bastard.”

“Mom?”

“It’ll be okay, honey,” she said.

Mr. Black cleared his throat. “‘To my son, Caleb Asher, I leave in a trust my shares of Prinze Industries, all monies and investments, and physical properties, to be matured when he turns eighteen years old.’”

My mouth dropped open. “What does that mean?”

“He left you... everything,” one of the relatives said.

“And finally, to my brother, David Asher, I leave the stewardship of Caleb’s inheritance and the board position, to guide and protect until it is transferred to Caleb’s name. This includes potential guardianship of Caleb himself, should David and family remain fit per state standards.”

Uncle David turned to Mom and me. “Well, that was... worth the trip, dare I say?”

Mom pushed me behind her. “You had a hand in this,” she snarled. “All

because—”

“You got into bed with the wrong person,” he finished. His attention moved to me. “I’ll be seeing you soon, I suspect.”

I glared at him, and it just made him laugh.

It was the last thing I heard out of Uncle David’s mouth as he walked away.

“Josh,” Mom said, shoving through relatives until we were up to the deck. “He can’t be serious. When were these changes made?”

He shuffled some papers. “July 5, 2008.”

She gasped. “He knew.”

“About your affair? I suppose he did.” He produced a sealed envelope and passed it to her. “He left this for you. And one for you, Caleb.”

I took the envelope he handed me carefully. “Can I read it?”

“Whenever you want.” Mr. Black raised his head. “Give us the room, please.”

People grumbled behind me, but I paid them no mind. Dad had always taught me that lesser people will always make more noise—it’s action that mattered.

I took a step away from Mom, who was... well, I wasn’t sure if she was *crying*, exactly, but she was definitely in shock.

I half listened to their conversation. “David and Iris aren’t fit parents,” she said. “But his will made it sound like Caleb...”

“He can’t take away your parental rights,” Mr. Black said.

“But I have nothing, is that right? Just a savings account in my name that I can...”

I pulled out the letter and unfolded it.

*DEAR SON,*

*I am writing this in the event of my death. You could be reading this when you’re twelve or twenty-two, I don’t know. And for that, I apologize in advance. Things between your mother and I are getting more tense, and I’m not sure to what ends she would go.*

*Be strong. Everything is left to you. If you’re not yet eighteen, your Uncle David will take care of everything, including you. He’s a good man with a short temper—kind of like your old man—but I trust him to do right by you.*

*You’re holding up the Asher name on your shoulders, and that is no easy*

*task. Your fate in life is uncertain. To sell the shares, move away, become your own person with a healthy bank account? Continue as I was?*

*Choose happiness, whatever you do.*

*I love you, and I'm sorry.*

*Dad*

MY MEMORY of him did have dark spots—when his anger boiled over. But overall, he was good. He taught me important lessons without being too harsh, took me to the park when work allowed. He worked for the family.

His whole life was dedicated to building up our name.

And one night ruined it. Dragged it through the mud.

I ran my finger across his signature, folded the letter, and shoved it in my pocket.

When I turned around, Mom was still clutching her unopened one, arguing with the lawyer.

“We’re going back to the house,” she informed him. “It’s Caleb’s.”

“It’s David’s to control,” he corrected, shrugging. “I can’t stop you either way.”

She came to me, holding out her hand.

I took it.

“Goodbye, Josh,” she said. “Let’s hope we never...”

He just watched us. And when I craned around one last time, he winked.

## Present

I relay the story as best I can. I don't tell them the contents of the letter—I did have the thing memorized for a while, when I would read it under my sheets with a flashlight—but the gist of everything.

“Your mom was having an affair?” Margo asked. “With who?”

I shake my head. “It didn't occur to me to question her.”

Eli groans. “And your dad wrote you a tragic fucking letter. Of course.”

“It was comforting at the time.”

We lapse into silence.

Then Margo says, “Norah did say Josh being Dad's lawyer was a conflict of interest. But she had said him and your dad weren't on good terms. Why did he use Josh for his will?”

Eli leans toward her. “She talked about that?”

“I asked,” she says, sheepish.

“She's never bothered to answer any of my questions about it. I transferred to Emery-Rose soon after you had left, and Caleb sought me out—evidently because of Dad,” he adds with a smile. “But they both clammed up whenever I asked about...”

“Our dads were friends,” Margo says.

Surprise ripples around the room. Through me. I had never got that impression from our fathers' interactions.

“Norah said it was the three of them, and mine left... came back with Mom, engaged or whatever. And they had a falling out.”

“That isn't what we should be focusing on,” Theo interjects. “Unless Tobias is the one she was having an affair with...”

I snort. “Seriously?”

“How else would you get someone to risk their entire career?”

“Money,” Liam says. “So much fucking money. Enough money to swim in. Not that you gits would understand, since you already have that. But for someone like Tobias? Who started at the bottom? Yeah.”

“So, Caleb's dad suspected his death because Lydia was having an affair? That doesn't make sense.” Eli scowls. “Jesus. This is making my head spin.”

“Who would've known? Besides the parties involved who might lie?” Margo asks.

“Well, there was your parents and mine,” I list, “and whoever Mom was

sleeping with. I guess your dad would be the most impartial.”

“Besides the whole murder thing,” Eli says.

“He didn’t do it.” Margo glares at him. “And you know what? For the first time in this crazy mess—I actually believe it. Your mom had more motive than he did. Did the police even look into her?”

“I don’t know.”

She groans, but she leans into me. I hold her close. My chest fills with something light, because we’re actually doing this together. A place I didn’t think either of us would get to.

“You should talk to him,” Eli suggests.

She straightens. “The last time I talked to him, I—”

“We’ll go with you. In two cars.”

Her attention flips to my face. “What do you think?”

“I...” Fuck, I don’t know. Am I ready to see her dad again? To get answers? To judge for myself if he’s lying or not? “Yeah, we should.”

Liam pulls out his phone. “Visiting hours tomorrow are in the afternoon.”

I run my hand over my face. “I’ve skipped so much damn school. What’s another day?”

“I’ll be at the school in the morning,” Margo says quietly. “To determine when I’m coming back.”

“We only have two weeks left until Christmas break,” Liam points out. “They should just let you work from home.”

“That’s a rich kid treatment,” she mumbles.

“If that’s the sorry excuse they give you, they’ll have to deal with Lenora. And then me.” I crack a smile. “She’s fierce when she needs to be.”

Margo laughs.

It brings the whole mood up a few degrees.

“Food’s here!” Mrs. Black calls from the top of the stairs. “How much did you guys order? My god.”

“We’re growing boys, Mom,” Eli hollers back. We all stand. To us, he says, “At least we figured some things out, yeah? A game plan.”

“Visit Margo’s dad,” I repeat. “That’s... not much of a plan.”

“Worst comes to worst, you know where to find your mom.” Liam shrugs. “And apparently, she’s with Margo’s mom. Isn’t that a bit fishy? Shouldn’t those two hate each other?”

“Mom looked semi-decent,” Margo says. “Which... was surprising. Like she wasn’t using anymore, you know? I haven’t seen her clean...”



“She might be clean, but... let’s not count on that, okay?” I lead them upstairs.

I think back to meeting my mother outside the diner only a few weeks ago. I asked her where Amberly was, and I’m pretty sure she lied right to my face.

*Shame, Rose Hill isn’t good for that woman.*

I curse to myself. We weren’t *in* Rose Hill. Lucky’s Diner sat proudly just over the town line, in Beacon Hill, which made Mom’s answer not *quite* a lie. She knew. Margo’s mom was probably inside the diner as we spoke, making me the biggest fool on the face of the planet.

*“I’m curious if you saw your life going in this direction from the beginning,” I said. “I’m mostly curious about why you let your brother-in-law run the show?”*

*“Your father wants it that way.”*

Wants, like he was still around.

But then again, his memory was a pungent one, and the will left no wiggle room.

Could my mother have had something to do with it? She seemed more surprised than anything that the will had been changed. But if it was something that was done because she cheated on him, he wouldn’t tell her.

Money is a good motive, Liam said it himself.

Norah is opening containers across the kitchen island when we get up there. The guys move around me, grabbing silverware and plates.

Margo looks up at me, touching my cheek. “You okay?”

“I just realized...” I glance over at Eli’s mom. “Mrs. Black, did you know Mom before she married Dad?”

She frowns. “That’s an out-of-the-blue question, Caleb.”

I wait.

“We both went to Emery-Rose, although she was a year older. I didn’t really interact with her until we both started dating.” She glances away. “It’s disgraceful how far she’s fallen.”

Margo flinches.

“They had a falling out, right? Mr. Black and my dad.” I don’t wait for her response. “Yet he was the one who read the will.”

She nods slowly. “He did. It was Josh’s firm that held Ben’s will, and neither of them saw the sense in changing it once things got... complicated.”

“Complicated is an understatement,” Eli whispers.

“So for a while, you were friends. Or friendly.”

“Somewhat. She was a hard person to get to know. And then—” She stops abruptly. “Excuse me, I think I hear my phone.”

She leaves in a rush, and the five of us are left in silence.

“Why do I get the feeling she’s hiding something?” Margo asks.

Eli shakes his head. “Hopefully your dad will be able to fill in some cracks.”

She swallows. “Right. Tomorrow.”

Tomorrow, I will finally see the man who murdered my father. Look him in the eyes. My stomach ties itself up in knots. But honestly? I’ll do it for Margo.



## MARGO

LENORA AND ROBERT pick me up shortly after Josh and Norah leave for work.

I slide into the backseat and pull off my hat, grimacing. “When did it get to be winter?”

Overnight, we got at least six inches of snow, and I’m not prepared. I look at the seat beside me and smile. There’s a pair of fur-lined boots with a little Christmas bow on it.

“An early present,” Lenora says, winking at me in the rearview mirror. “Don’t worry, it’s fake fur.”

“Thank you so much.” I tug off my shoes and slip on the new boots. They’re a warm, perfect fit, and I sigh.

“Someone’s happy.” Robert frowns. “How many winters have you gone through without properly insulated boots?”

The ones I always wear are more hiking-slash-everyday boots, leather, and definitely not *warm*. “Um... A girl I was living with had grown out of hers and gave them to me. I was twelve? They were a bit big, so they lasted two seasons.” I smile to myself. “I gave them away when I outgrew them.”

They’re quiet. Contemplating how different our lives must’ve been, I’m sure.

“How are you feeling?” Lenora asks.

“Better.”

Except my wrists. I woke up this morning dripping blood down my hands. It seems like once I opened up a little wound, I now constantly pick at it. I covered the damage with a bandage and a long-sleeve shirt, but I doubt

I'll be able to hide it for long.

"My head doesn't even hurt much anymore."

Robert makes a face. "I wish I could say the same."

I lean forward. "Are you sure you're up for visiting the school?"

"I'm ready to see some familiar faces," he says, glancing back at me. "And besides, I'm not sure what sort of antics they'll try."

"We have a teacher and a corporate mediator," I joke. "Hopefully things will fall on our side. But... what kind of antics?"

"Just that you're not fit to come back to school. They'll probably try to push time off—but that will just hurt you in the long run," Lenora says. "Your case worker agreed that it was up to our discretion. Unless you don't want—"

"I'd like to return to normal," I interrupt. "Sitting around, moping and dealing with..." *Trauma*, I don't say. I clear my throat. "Yeah, normalcy is what I need."

Robert nods. "Exactly."

We get to the school and walk across the deserted parking lot, up the steps into the school. The secretary gets a little teary when she sees us—more Robert than me, I'll admit—and circles her desk to give him a hug.

And then we're shuffled into the principal's office.

She's a stern lady. Luckily, I haven't had too much interaction with her or the guidance counselor since the beginning of the year, and I *had* planned on keeping it that way. She analyzes me over the top of her reading glasses, which are perched on the end of her nose.

Lenora explains what's been going on at home. Between the craziness, I've managed to catch up on most of the work my classes covered. That appears to be the clincher, and the principal agrees I can come back tomorrow.

The principal sends me out, and I go stand in the hallway.

And... the bell rings.

*Figures.*

This part of the school isn't too busy unless students are coming to the office, so I don't worry too much about being seen. That is, until Savannah appears.

She hurries toward me—or, toward the office—and stops dead when her gaze finds mine.

"You're back?"

I shrug. "It would appear so."

"Rumor had it that you croaked." She stops in front of me.

I laugh. "I guess they got that one wrong."

"Hmm." She looks me up and down. "You might consider bangs."

My eyebrow jumps, and my face flushes. "Why, to cover the barely visible scar? I'm not that petty."

She smiles. "It might help avoid the staring, you know?"

I lean against the wall, crossing one ankle over the other. "I've been meaning to ask, how's life at the top of the pyramid? Still holding Amelie's spot until she gets back?"

She grits her teeth. "I'm not a placeholder."

"You're at the top because Riley and I helped put you there." I straighten, taking a step toward her. To my utter shock, she backs up. "Just remember that, Sav. Those who give can also take."

"Are you threatening me?" Her voice bounces around the quiet hall.

"Me?" I wink at her. "Am I crazy enough for that?"

"Freak," she says under her breath. She rushes around me, hurrying down the hall.

I'll admit: it was satisfying to watch her squirm. And I didn't even have to think too much about the buttons to push. She's always played second fiddle to Amelie, and she didn't have the guts to go after what she wanted alone.

The office door opening catches my attention.

Lenora and Robert walk out, saying their goodbyes.

Lenora grins at me. "Ready?"

"Absolutely." We head out. I almost expect something to have happened to the car while we were inside—someone keying it or popping the tires—but it seems the same.

I wonder when I should tell them about going to see my dad. If I should even mention it.

We make it all the way back home before Lenora smacks her forehead. "Should I have taken you to the Blacks' house? Would you prefer to be there?"

"No," I say, hopping out. "They're at work."

She nods. "Okay, great. I do have to head into the office for a little while today, otherwise I think I'll be without a job myself. But you two can finally have your movie marathon day."

“We stocked up on popcorn,” Robert tells me. “And a cleaning company is coming over this afternoon to take care of your room.”

I nod, swallowing. I just won’t think about the room or what’s written up there. I’m still trying to figure out where I’ve heard *pretty bird* before...

We go inside. I realize halfway through to the kitchen that I’ve been holding my breath. I let it out in one shallow exhale, reminding myself to breathe.

Robert is a bit slower on his feet, but we busy ourselves making popcorn and hot chocolate. A weird combination, but he insists that we can have both. And then we each take our separate corners on the couch, blankets on our laps, and settle in for a weird, happy day of movies.





## CALEB

MY DAY STARTS with a phone call from my mother.

The harsh buzzing managed to wake up only me, not the octopus wrapped around me. I hit the button to silence it, then managed to dislodge Margo's arms and untangle her legs from mine.

"Hang on," I say into the phone. I put it on mute while I yank on my jeans. I trot upstairs as quietly as possible, then unmute her. "Good morning, Mother."

"Caleb," she sniffs. "Something bad has happened."

I rub my eyes. "What happened?"

"M-my apartment was broken into."

"Really." I didn't even know she had an apartment. I mean, I should've realized. It's one of those things you don't think about until you have to think about it. Obviously she was staying *somewhere*. I just never spared a thought for whether it was an apartment, a house, a hole in the wall...

"Can you come help me? You're all I have—"

"What about Uncle David?" I can't help but ask. She's leaned on them pretty heavily over the years. I pull the phone away from my ear, checking the time. Not even five o'clock in the morning. The first floor of the house is completely silent.

I cross to the living room window, peering out. The sun is barely starting to rise.

There's a car parked across the street, its headlights glowing, and it drives away fairly quickly. Weird. At least this one didn't go screeching off into the night like the other night...

“Are you listening to me?” Mom asks.

“No.”

“I said, I need you to help. I don’t have anywhere to go. David is being horribly moody, what with his *house guests*, and I simply cannot fathom who else to ask.”

I tilt my head. “Wait, back up. House guests? Who?”

“Oh, never mind that. You know Aunt Iris is always trying to save people.” She scoffs. “It’d serve her better at the gates of Heaven if she served her own family—”

“*Mother*,” I snap. “Seriously?”

“Everything is gone,” she moans. “My jewelry, the money...”

“What, were you stockpiling cash or something?”

She’s quiet, and I feel my eyebrows lift almost of their own accord.

“You can’t be serious.”

“What? You can’t expect me to live like this forever. Like—”

Like someone who works. Who earns their paycheck instead of just sitting behind a desk and letting the money pile into their bank account.

With sudden clarity, I realize that I don’t want to follow in my father’s footsteps. I don’t want to sit behind a desk and order people around, or push paper, or—

“You’ve tuned out your poor mother again.”

I shake my head. “Listen, Mom. I’m seventeen. I can’t drive because of the concussion Uncle David gave me a week and a half ago. I don’t really know what you expect me to do before I have to be at school.”

“Forget it.”

Gladly.

“If you find my body tucked behind a dumpster, or beaten to death, or dismembered, or—”

“Why the hell are you talking like someone is going to murder you?”

“Because,” she whispers. “Someone is *after our family*, Caleb. Someone will always try to take what they can. And, oh, I’m afraid we’ve made some terrible mistakes in our lives.”

My stomach twists.

“Mom...?”

“Margo found out about Amberly, Caleb. She came into the diner, and I tried to get Amberly to leave, but she knew it was Margo out there. She—” She sucks in a ragged breath. “God, what am I doing?”

“Calm down,” I order. “Do you live with Amberly?”

“Yes, she came into town looking for a fix, and I couldn’t let that happen. It’s my fault she’s in this mess—my fault. I just wanted to get her clean.” Her voice cracks, and then her sobbing fills my ear.

I hate it.

Hate her.

And yet, I pity her.

“Mom... just breathe. What do you mean, it’s your fault?”

“She never should’ve got involved with my husband,” she says in a low voice, suddenly crystal clear.

“You’re obviously not in the right state, yourself,” I snap. “Stay put, okay? I’ll come get you.”

She tells me where she is, and I hang up.

*Fuck.*

No wonder she wouldn’t tell me where Amberly was when I asked. For a while, I was no better than her supplier. Giving her money was the easiest way to get her out of town. If I didn’t, she’d wash up closer to Rose Hill, each and every time. And eventually, closer to Margo.

I only found out Amberly knew where her daughter was when we were fourteen. Margo refused to give her anything—the brave, beautiful girl managed to stand up to her own mother. That was when I decided I had to be easy on her.

Move Margo one last time and make sure Amberly wouldn’t be able to find her. Give her enough to send her away—either out of town or on a nice, happy overdose.

Of course Mom has her.

Cleaned her up.

There’s some sort of leverage there, I just can’t see it yet.

I groan. I need a clean shirt, to brush my teeth, shoes. And to wake Eli up.

I wake him up first, calling him from where I stand.

“You know it’s not time for school, dickhead.”

“We have to run an errand,” I inform him. “Be ready to leave in fifteen.”

“Fuck.”

I hang up on him and go back downstairs. Margo has curled into a ball in the middle of my bed. I crawl across it and hover over her, leaning down to nuzzle her neck.

She makes the sweetest noise, reaching up and sliding her hand into my

hair.

I don't usually tell her, but I love when her nails scratch my scalp. I press a kiss to her neck, moving up to her jaw, then just under her ear.

She turns her face, catching my lips with hers, and smiles. "That's one way to say good morning," she whispers. Her hand leaves my hair, trailing down... "Caleb, why are you already wearing jeans?"

I steal another kiss. "Because I have to go."

"How much longer do I have?" she whispers.

"To sleep?" I glance at the clock. "Another few hours. Two."

"Good," she murmurs, rolling over and giving me her back.

I shake my head, grinning, and sweep the hair off her neck. I nip the shell of her ear, then whisper, "Dream of me."

It's hard to leave her, but I do it. She's breathing heavily by the time I grab my boots and jacket and climb the stairs.

I have to work hard to ignore the ball in the pit of my stomach.

"Where are we going?" Eli asks.

He's got a black beanie over his blond hair, black jacket, black jeans. He could be ready to rob a bank or pose for a freaking fashion magazine, and that irritates me.

"Mommy dearest called." I open the door. "Said some nonsense about her apartment being broken into and losing everything."

"So we're running to her rescue?"

"She also said she's been living with Margo's mom, getting her clean."

Eli's eyes widen. "Ah."

"And, apparently it's her fault Amberly got addicted in the first place? I'm eager to hear that story."

We climb into his car.

"Where's she staying? Maybe we can be back before my parents notice we're gone."

"Beacon Hill," I say, giving him the address.

He groans. "Or not."

"I'll buy breakfast."

He perks up. "Sold!"

It takes us about thirty minutes to get there. Mom is standing out on the sidewalk when we pull up, and she tears the sunglasses off her face.

"Sunglasses at six o'clock in the morning?" Eli asks.

I just shake my head, hopping out. She launches herself at me, wrapping

her arms around my shoulders.

“Thank you, thank you,” she cries.

I take a deep breath... of whiskey.

I draw back sharply, holding her by her shoulders. It’s no wonder she was wearing sunglasses. Her eyes are red and puffy—from crying or a hangover, I can’t be sure which is the dominant cause—and her skin is dull.

“Mom?”

“What?” She wrinkles her nose. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because... are you drunk?”

She lets out a shrill laugh. “Goodness, no. Hungover, maybe.”

“Mrs. Asher,” Eli greets her. “How are you?”

Mom releases me and stumbles toward him. She pats his cheek. “You must be Josh’s son. You look quite a bit like him, I must say.”

“Right, er, thanks. Can we... help you?”

She straightens. “Yes! My home was broken into. This way.”

We follow her down the street, into an alley. Eli and I exchange a glance before stepping into it. Something about this screams... *fishy*.

She unlocks a metal grated door, then another one inset in the brick building. She’s surprisingly agile on the stairs, around the landing, and up another flight. Then she stops dead in her tracks.

“In there,” she says.

I glance between the door and her. “This is where you’ve been living? This whole time?”

“Goodness, no. Just temporary.”

“Is Margo’s mother in there?” Eli asks.

“No!” Mom shouts. “She’s at Lucky’s already.”

I push open the door. There’s broken glass across the floor, a shattered vase, flowers, and water. Picture frames that’ve been knocked off the wall, overturned furniture.

“Where were you both when this happened?” Eli asks, picking his way through the small room.

It seems strange that they might’ve been in here when it happened—unless whoever did it...

I turn toward Mom and grab her wrist.

She cries out.

“You were here.” I stare down at the bruises on her arm. “You know who did this.”

“I do,” she moans. “But I didn’t think he would go crazy like this. H-he took Amberly.”

Eli’s head jerks up. “I’m sorry, you’re just telling us that your, I don’t know, *roommate* was abducted?”

Mom is full-on crying now. She falls to the floor, starting to gather larger pieces of glass in her hand. To herself, she mumbles, “This isn’t safe. You might cut yourself.”

“Dude,” Eli says, pulling me away from her. “She...”

“Yeah. Hey, Mom? Any reason you called me instead of the police?”

She lurches toward me, but this time Eli intercepts. He shoves her against the apartment wall, holding her there with one hand on her collarbone. She stares at him with wide eyes.

“Cut the shit,” he tells her.

And... she does. The stupid, sad expression slips off her face, replaced only by the mother I used to know. She tugs at her sleeves, putting them back in place, and glances up at me.

“Honestly, Caleb. This is a family matter.”

“Amberly Wolfe isn’t part of the family, Mom.”

Her attention goes to my wrist, then back to my face. “Dare I say, she will be?”

“We’re out of here,” Eli snaps. “Jesus, you people are fucking mental.”

He pushes on her chest and points in her face. “Stay.”

She laughs. “Am I a dog?”

“May as well be—”

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s go.”

She follows us downstairs, back into the alley. My skin crawls at the filth she’s been living in, and I pick up speed. I only take a deep breath once we’re back on the sidewalk.

“Caleb—”

“Stop.” I pause. My headache has come back full force, pounding behind my eyes. I blink a few times, trying to just see clearly enough to focus on her. “This is fucked up. You should call the police to help you.”

She lifts her chin. “Right.”

I shake my head. “Yeah, right. Okay. Bye, Mother.”

Eli’s already in the truck by the time I get there. Warm air blasts out of the vents, which just goes to show how long we were inside—the truck hadn’t even had time to get cold.

“That’s messed up,” Eli says. He catches me rubbing my eyes again. “Concussion headache?”

He would know. Last year, he and another lacrosse player collided. Knocked him out cold, which was an automatic ambulance ride. He was dizzy for a week.

“Yeah, or a tension one.” I force a laugh, dropping my hands into my lap. “School is going to be fun.”

“We’re leaving early, right? I love skipping last period. It’s just a freaking study hall.”

“I miss driving my own car,” I grumble. “But, yes. We’re going to see Margo’s dad.”

Eli hums. “Bet he’ll be interested to know that someone took his wife.”

“Ex-wife?” I glance at him. “They got divorced, I think.”

“Oh. You don’t seem overly concerned that she’s gone.”

“I’m not.” I sigh. “I should’ve blamed her from the beginning. You know, because it’s really her fault that everything happened. Instead, my uncle twisted my view on the subject.”

His *lessons* involved making me hate my best friend.

We get home in time for me to slip back downstairs and steal another kiss from Margo, make sure she’s awake, and then head to school. My stomach churns the entire day. Eli must say something to Liam and Theo, because they don’t ask. If anything, they double their efforts to keep people away from me.

Savannah comes up to me at lunch. Well, she tries to.

“Your girlfriend is fucking crazy,” she spits.

Theo chuckles, and she takes a step back. She’s a dog with a lot of bark, but no bite.

Easy to rule her out as Unknown.

That, and she’s not Theo’s biggest fan. Never has been, probably never will be. Thanks to Amelie’s sister...

Still, I perk up. “What did she do?”

“She *threatened* me!” She tries to push past Eli, but he won’t budge. “What? I can’t have a conversation with him?”

“You’re an evil bitch,” Eli retorts. “So... no.”

“Wonder how fast Amelie would come back if we called her up and told her the whole school had forgotten about her little... incident?” Theo asks. “We could call her and find out—”

“Ugh!” Savannah shrieks.

I smile, and she storms away.

“Two peas in a freaking nuthouse,” Theo says, shaking his head. “Not sure which is worse—Amelie or Savannah.”

“Where did Amelie go, by the way?” Liam nudges Theo and grins.

Theo just glowers at him. “Away, I’ve heard.”

“The pretty little princess couldn’t handle the shitty rumors.” Eli laughs. He grabs his lunch tray. “She’s finishing the semester at home.”

I squint down at the table. The headache hasn’t gone away, and the fluorescent lights aren’t helping. “Amelie knew where Amberly was,” I muse. “How?”

Eli shakes his head. “You’re just thinking about this now?”

“Been a little preoccupied, if you haven’t noticed...” I cover my eyes with my hand.

“What’s Amelie’s relationship with Amberly? Or, better yet, your mother?” Liam asks.

I shrug. “No clue.”

“She was fucking Ian,” Theo says suddenly.

I drop my hand and narrow my eyes. “Thanks for the reminder.”

“I’m just saying, Ian’s mom and your aunt are cousins. There’s your connection. We all know those old bats gossip more than schoolgirls.” Theo looks around, eyeing the cheerleader table. “Honestly, it’s not such a stretch to think Amelie overheard something she shouldn’t have.”

“So, what, Amelie and Matt?” I groan. “Impossible. She was already... wherever.”

“Yeah, but she might’ve been tempted to do whatever it took to get you back,” Liam points out. “Psycho, remember?”

Fair point.

“We’re in agreeance that Matt was the one to hit Margo and take her from the accident,” Eli says. “And that the car, which belonged to Tobias, was either stolen or... loaned out. Tobias and Lydia have history, and Lydia also knows Matt.”

“We’ve been over this eight thousand times,” Liam grumbles.

“But we’re nowhere closer to solving this puzzle, now are we?”

“What are they hiding?” I ask. “Mom’s apartment was broken into, and she now claims Amberly was taken. Refused to call the police. Why?”

“Because...” Liam shrugs.



Eli and Theo both shake their heads.

Because, because...

"Because Margo saw Amberly." I stand. "Which means whoever took Amberly very well might be targeting Margo, too. The room, the bird, the—"

They stand, too, quickly grabbing their things. "We'll cover for you," Theo says. "Take my car."

Eli catches the keys he tosses, and then we're gone. Through the athletic hallway, into the locker room. Someone has already propped open the emergency exit with a pencil, barely keeping it from closing, and we slip through it.

"You don't think Margo's in danger, do you?"

"She's at home, and normally I'd say there would be no way, but..."

Eli nods. "Happy to assist, man. Let's just get out as quietly as possible."

It has been rather quiet, now that he mentions it.

And that's never a good thing.



## MARGO

CALEB GLANCES AT ME. We drove Eli home and took Theo's car, so here we sit. In the prison's visitor parking lot, staring at the entrance.

It's just as nerve-racking the second time.

"Do you think they told him what happened?" I ask.

He lifts one shoulder. "I don't know."

"He hasn't called or anything."

"I don't—"

"Know, yeah. Got it."

He reaches over and laces his fingers with mine. "Nervous?"

"How'd you guess?"

"Because you're not really breathing. And you're snapping." He smiles reassuringly, but it doesn't do much to calm the buzzing in my veins.

I force myself to take a deep breath. "Right. Okay, let's go."

We walk into the prison shoulder to shoulder, and he visibly shudders once we pass through the gates. I take his hand and squeeze. It's hard to believe Detective Masters wanted Caleb to end up somewhere like this.

The paperwork with the guard is faster this time, and after we hand over our IDs, we go to a corner of the room and sit.

"You're not going to interrogate him, right?" My leg bounces.

"Interrogate him? No. I have some questions—"

"Some *nice* questions, since he doesn't have to tell us anything—"

"Relax," he says, putting his hand on my knee.

I stop jiggling.

"I'll be on my best behavior," he promises. "We just need to find out

about Tobias...”

“Imagine telling him his lawyer was a filthy rotten—”

A buzzing sound cuts me off. *Here we go*, I tell myself.

We stand with the few other people in the waiting room. Mid-week, it isn’t busy. The woman I met at the first visit isn’t here. Not that I expected her to be, but it would’ve been nice to see a friendly face.

Caleb walks a step behind me, letting me lead. Down the hall, to the door a guard is holding open. We pick a bigger table in the back corner, as far from the others as we can manage.

This time, we don’t have to wait long for another long buzz, and then, “Inmates entering.”

Dad appears in the doorway. His head swings around until he finds us, and then he frowns.

For an instant, I wonder if he’ll turn around and go back to his cell without seeing us. Without talking to me.

But that fear dissipates, because he moves toward us.

I rise, stepping past Caleb, and throw my arms around my dad. Dad’s arms come around me tightly, crushing me into him. One hand cups the back of my head, and I’m ashamed that the action reminds me of Robert.

“My girl,” he whispers in my ear. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

*So they did tell him.*

We separate, and Dad regards Caleb.

Dad extends his hand, an odd look on his face.

And Caleb... he’s white as a ghost.

I squint at him, but he seems like he’s in a trance. Finally, he blinks and reaches out, clasping Dad’s hand. The two stare at each other for a moment, the handshake suspended between them.

Maybe this is how Dad would’ve reacted to all of my boyfriends, if we had managed to stay a family long enough for me to get there.

Maybe I never would’ve had a boyfriend—just Caleb.

That thought warms my cheeks, and I quickly push it away. No use pondering what might’ve been.

“You taking care of my daughter, Caleb?”

Caleb winces. “I’m trying to now, Mr. Wolfe.”

Dad releases his hand and barks out a laugh. “Mr. Wolfe?” he repeats. “Jesus. You never called me that.”

“Well, we never figured on being here, so...”

I snort. "Can we sit?"

Around us, everyone else has settled down. We're the only ones still standing, and the guards are eyeing us.

Dad motions to the table, and we all take our seats.

"Margo, a detective came to see me after you left. Said—"

I take a deep breath. "Yeah, we have some... explaining to do."

He motions for me to continue, and I tell him what happened. The quick version, anyway: car accident, abduction, Caleb finding me and taking me to the hospital, his interrogation.

Dad is gripping the edge of the table by the end of it. His gaze goes to the scar on my forehead. "Is that...?"

"Glass from the accident, I think," I say. "And I still get headaches from the concussion..."

Caleb grunts. "Same."

Dad raises his eyebrows.

"Caleb's uncle hit him in the back of the head for standing up to him," I tell him. "I found him in a room... which actually brings us to our visit. We've been uncovering some strange things."

He rubs at his face. He's sporting a bit more scruff than I remember, and while the hair on top of his head is still dark, the beard is peppered with gray.

"They don't have any leads?" he asks through his hands.

"*They* don't," Caleb answers.

Dad drops his arms and glares at him. "What the fuck does that mean?" His gaze goes to me. "Tell me you haven't been pulling any cowboy shit."

I shift. "Well..."

"We have." Caleb pats my leg under the table. "And we found something which led us here."

Dad's eyebrow goes up. "I'm almost tempted to walk away, just because you put my daughter in danger—"

"Caleb saved me, Dad." I reach out, taking his hand. "He found me."

Dad touches the bracelet on my wrist. "I didn't recognize this the last time you were here, but this is the one you made, isn't it? One for each..."

Caleb shows him the bracelet on his own wrist.

"Inevitable," Dad murmurs.

"You think so?" Caleb slides his sleeve back down.

I check Caleb's expression. He's thoughtful, and not... not as judgmental as I would've expected.

“What happened between you and my dad?” he asks.

*And there goes that ‘not as judgmental’ thought.*

“Norah told us that you used to be friends,” I blurt out.

Dad’s eyes widen, then he chuckles. “So, you’ve been playing detective?”

I shrug. “Had to figure out the truth somehow.”

“Okay, Margo,” he says, nodding. “Ben, Josh Black, Phil Mardzen, and I were best friends in high school.”

“Wait,” Caleb interrupts. “You were best friends with *Coach Mardzen*?”

Dad smiles. “Is he coaching now?”

Caleb crosses his arms over his chest.

After a second, Dad shakes his head. “I moved away to go to college in Massachusetts, which is where I met your mother. When we moved back to Rose Hill, I was... significantly different. Unfortunately, I wasn’t the only one. Ben and Josh had split from Phil just after graduation. He wasn’t even in Rose Hill when I moved back. Ben and Lydia were dating, and things were pretty serious. Norah and Josh had gotten together, too. Everyone was shocked when I brought Amberly home, newly engaged.”

I tilt my head to the side. “What about you being disowned?”

A laugh bursts out of Dad’s mouth. “Yes, that’s true. My mother was not happy with my pick of a wife.” He sobers quickly. “She died a few months after our wedding. I only just found out about it after I was put in here.”

I sober, too. “I would’ve liked to have met her.”

He smiles sadly. “The last letter I sent her that she would’ve received was the one in which I told her Amberly was pregnant with you. I sent more after that, pictures and stories, but... The letters were never returned to me, so I assumed she read them.”

“How was my parents’ relationship?” Caleb asks.

Dad levels him with a look. “The adult perspective?”

“They argued a lot,” Caleb says, attention fastened to the table, “late at night, when they thought I couldn’t hear them.”

“They had some trouble,” Dad allowed. “Obviously, Margo’s mother didn’t help the situation any.”

“You say it with such ease,” Caleb says, finally raising his head. He leans forward. “You say that your wife was cheating on you like it doesn’t even bother you, when in reality, you’re in here for *murder*.”

“Let it out, son,” Dad says, motioning for Caleb to give him more.

“How do you live with it? I found Dad in his room—” Caleb sucks in a

ragged breath. “When I look at you, all I can see is my father’s blood.”

“We were friends. I’ve never laid a hand on him, and I certainly didn’t kill him.”

It’s about as serious of an admission as... well, as admitting to murder. He’s already in prison. He doesn’t have anything to lose.

Caleb stares at the ceiling, blinking rapidly.

I hate that he’s so bothered by this.

“Dad, when did you first meet Tobias?”

“After I was arrested. Amberly had just...” He shakes his head.

“Mom had just *what*?”

“We received a suspiciously large deposit in our shared bank account, so the police froze it. I had nothing after I was arrested. I met Hutchins after they read me the charges and I asked for a lawyer.”

“You hadn’t seen him... at the house?”

Dad squints at me. “What are you saying?”

“We’re definitely not accusing Lydia of paying him off, convincing you to get a shitty plea deal, *right*?” I lift my chin. “And we’d never insinuate that the person who hit me and Robert—and then abducted me—borrowed the vehicle from Tobias.”

Dad closes his eyes. “You cannot talk about this.”

“Why not?”

“Margo,” he warns.

“Five minutes,” the guard by the door calls.

Breath hisses past my teeth. “You can’t tell us to drop this. I have a stalker, and every *fucking* piece of it is connected.”

“The Ashers—” Dad stops, glancing at Caleb.

Caleb’s jaw muscle jumps, but he doesn’t say anything.

“Ben lost his wife the minute he invited mine into his bedroom,” Dad murmurs. “And everything that resulted from it is on his shoulders.”

Caleb locks up next to me. “Mom knew?”

Dad gives Caleb an odd look. “Have you forgotten? She knew... everything.”

*Well, then.*





**CALEB**

## Past

I WAS SUPPOSED to be sleeping, but there was a weird noise coming from downstairs. It was like...

Laughter.

There was never laughter around here anymore, not unless it was coming from Margo.

I crept to the first floor, inching down the hallway. It was completely dark except for a light coming from the kitchen.

Giggling.

I twitched, but curiosity drove me all the way to the threshold.

Dad and Margo's mom were on either side of the counter. She was cutting strawberries. And Dad... he had his sleeves rolled up, stirring something in a bowl. There was white powder caught in his beard.

Mom appeared silently beside me, raising her finger to her lips. When she held out her hand to me, I took it.

She guided me down the hall, into the library.

"You should be in bed," she said, kneeling in front of me. "Why are you awake?"

"I heard..." I glanced toward the door.

She frowned. "Never you mind them."

"Why is he happy around her and not us?"

"Because she's something new." She rose to her feet. "And because she's not his. Not yet, anyway."

## Present

The memory of witnessing Amberly and my father, then what my mother said about it, snaps to the forefront of my mind.

*Not yet, anyway.* What did that mean?

“Caleb?” Margo touches my arm. “You okay?”

I wince. It’s too bright in here, and my eyes sting.

“I do remember,” I say to Margo’s dad. It’s hard to look at him, but I force myself to meet his gaze. “I had just... forgotten.”

“You remember Lydia knowing?” Margo asks.

“I went downstairs because I heard a noise, and Mom pulled me away. She said he laughed around her because...”

Keith clenches his jaw. “Go on and say it, son. You won’t hurt my feelings.”

I let out a sigh. “Because she was new and not his. Not yet.”

He nods. “Your father always did like to have the best toys.”

“She said that? Not yet?” Margo asks, latching on to the important part.

I knew she would. She’s whip-smart when she wants to be.

“Right. Implying...”

“That she knew her husband,” her dad finishes sourly. “Shocker. I knew the bastard, too.”

“Dad!”

He presses his lips together. “I’m sorry. I know what you believe, and how long you’ve believed it. But I did not kill your father.”

He sounds sincere.

That’s the most dangerous part. He could be telling the truth or he could just be a fantastic liar.

“If you didn’t, who did?”

He drops his head into his hands. “I swore I wouldn’t speak of this, *especially* not to—”

Margo leans forward and yanks his hands away, trying to get him to look at her. “Dad. Please.”

“Okay.” He lets out a ragged breath. “Caleb... your mother orchestrated the whole thing.”

My stomach drops into my shoes.

I let out a laugh. “She what?”

“Time’s up!” the guard yells.

Around us, people rise and say their goodbyes. Margo and her dad do, too. She hugs him while I sit there dumbly.

She knew.

She orchestrated the whole thing.

*Not outside the realm of possibilities.*

“Caleb,” Keith says, his hand on my shoulder.

I rise automatically and flinch when he hugs me. When’s the last time I was hugged by a man? Certainly not Uncle David.

My eyes burn.

“It’s okay, son,” he whispers. I’m barely taller than him. “And I’m so, so sorry.”

He pulls away, cups my jaw like a father might, and then...

Well, he just walks away. Toward the guard, through the door.

I shake off the chills.

Margo takes my hand. “Well, now we both have allegedly murderous parents.”

“That only counts if they commit two separate murders, I think.”

My girl leads me out, to our locker to retrieve our things and then into the cold. I take a deep breath in, the sharpness of the air waking me up a bit. I needed this like a slap in the face.

*Wake up.*

“I never asked... how did he die?” Margo asks.

I blink. “What?”

She stamps her foot into the snow-dusted road, pausing by the back bumper of Theo’s car. “I didn’t even know he was dead. What was I supposed to ask Dad—‘How did you kill him?’ No thanks.”

“I...” I shake off the memories. Battle them away. In as monotone a voice as possible, I say, “He was stabbed.”

She reaches for me.

“I can’t, Margo,” I say quietly. I step away from her.

She sets her jaw and comes for me anyway.

I never thought I’d be the one running, but here I am. Backing away from her like she’s fire and I’m ice.

My shoulder hits the car’s side mirror, and she pushes me against the door.

“No running,” she says, eyes narrowed.

I start to shake my head, but she presses her finger to my lips.

“You can’t run from me—and you definitely can’t run from whatever you’re trying not to remember.”

A snowflake lands on her head, and more follow. I follow them with my eyes, contemplating. Her finger is still on my lips.

I talk through it. “If my mom did it—”

“Yeah.” She drops her hand. “Then this is bigger than either of us.”

“We should get back,” I say in a low voice.

Robert and Lenora weren’t exactly approving of me whisking Margo off, but they softened when she said where we were going. And they don’t know the half of it... but they’re doing their best.

When Eli and I had arrived mid-afternoon, a cleaning team was dealing with Margo’s room. She and Robert were both dozing on the couch, mirror images of each other on different sides of the couch.

She nods, stepping away from me. And then she comes rushing right back, hands wrapping around my neck. She has to stand on her tiptoes to reach my lips, but her kiss is forceful. Aggressive and... short-lived.

I pause as she pulls away, and she grimaces at me.

“That’s for trying to run.” She watches my mouth.

I lick my lips, surprised to taste blood.

“You bit me.”

She just grins.

“Little wolf.” I smile. “Thanks.”

She just lifts one shoulder. Her smile falls pretty fast once we’re in the car. She stares straight ahead, and I take a moment to realize...

“Oh fuck. Is it because it’s snowing?”

She nods.

“We’ll be okay,” I promise her.

“You shouldn’t even be driving.” She closes her eyes. “God, Unknown could’ve followed us here—”

“It’s like lightning striking the same spot twice.” I reach over and take her hand. “Improbable.”

“You didn’t say impossible,” she whispers. She clutches my fingers like I’m a lifeline. “Okay, okay. Let’s just go before it gets worse.”

We’re the last car out of the parking lot, and the road is deserted.

I drive more carefully than I’ve ever driven in my life. I check each intersection three times, barely make the speed limit... and the entire way,

Margo just holds on to my hand. Her eyes are closed, and she looks pale.

My tongue touches my lower lip again. I'm still shocked that she bit me and I didn't even feel it until after. It feels bruised now.

Bruised like my mind was after I relived walking in to find my dad's body. And here I go again, about to replay it in my mind for the thousandth time—although this time, maybe I'll remember something new.

Something to exonerate Margo's dad.

## Past

Mom and I walked into a silent house.

She muttered something and dropped her purse on the side table, striding away from me.

Dad should've been home. There was always a hustle and bustle in our home—whether it be Amberly in the kitchen or Dad in his study, on the phone, or playing music to cover up the sounds of Amberly's...

We heard that exactly once before Mom put an end to it.

I checked the kitchen, but it was empty. Mom appeared in the doorway of Dad's study, shaking her head. So he wasn't in there, either.

"Did he go out?" she asked herself. She met my gaze. "Honey, go upstairs."

"But Margo—"

"Keith's car is gone," she said. "And so is Amberly's. I doubt she's home."

I nodded and went to the stairs. I should've gone to my room, but I didn't. My parents' door was open, and a lamp was on.

A lamp in the middle of the day.

It drew my eye, and I went toward it like a moth drawn to a flame. Couldn't help it.

"Dad?" I called.

Nothing.

Up here, I couldn't even hear Mom moving around downstairs.

I steeled myself and pushed the door open.

It was stupid. He was going to be coming out of the bathroom or dozing in the chair they kept in the corner of the room for reading. A chair neither of them used for anything except not-clean-not-dirty clothes.

But my imagination told me that he'd be in that chair, and there he was.

Except his eyes were open, fixed on the ceiling, and...

"Dad?"

Silence.

So much silence, it reverberated in my ears.

I stared and stared, trying to make sense of what I was seeing.

He was covered in blood, but it wasn't bright red like in the movies. It didn't pump out of the hole in his neck or abdomen, between his fingers that

were over his stomach.

It was dark. Still. Like it had flowed and then stopped when his heart finally gave up.

I couldn't blink. Couldn't move from the single step I had taken into the bedroom.

"Honey, did you find—" Mom grabbed me, pulling me backward. "Oh my god," she shrieked. She covered my eyes, holding me to her chest.

My body was already wooden.

Dad was dead, or it was a trick. An awful trick.

I tried to get away from her, but I had lost my chance to check him. To shout, *Joke's on you, Dad! I'm not falling for it.* She held me fast.

It was ketchup smeared across his face, that had run in rivers down the chair. It was soaked into the carpet, even, around his feet.

So much blood.

A whole body's worth, spilled out of him.

"Don't look," Mom whispered into the top of my head.

My eyes were burning, but I couldn't *not*.

"I'm sorry, Caleb."

A groan worked its way out of my chest. The first noise, but certainly not the last.

She picked me up, grunting with the effort, and carried me downstairs. I was starting to come back alive then, the puppet cutting his strings and becoming a real boy.

My eyes were on fire, but I didn't cry. I just sat at the breakfast bar, turned toward Margo's house, and wished on every stupid thing I could think of that she'd be home soon.

She would understand, even if she didn't go through this kind of thing. She hadn't lost a parent, but she would know what to say to make it better.

"We have a chef," Mom told a detective behind me. "She and her family live in our guest house. Her husband and her have always had some marital problems, but we tried to offer support as best we could..."

I glared at Mom. She was forgetting the part where Dad's version of *support* was his—

"Caleb," Mom warned, like she could read my thoughts.

Maybe the ugly truth was written across my face.

"Can you wait outside, please, honey?" She turned to the detective. "I just don't want him to hear..."



“Understandable, ma’am.” He was an older man with a full head of gray hair and a mustache to match. “My partner can go sit with him outside, if that’s all right?”

His partner was young, bald, and probably as freaked out as I was.

“We could both use the fresh air,” he said. He motioned for me to hop down, and I led the way to the patio furniture outside. “You know the Wolfes well, son?”

I flinched. “I ain’t your son.”

He raised his hands in surrender, settling across the table from me. “I meant no offense.”

I thought about it. “Keith is nice. Margo’s my best friend.” I grinned, forgetting the horrors of the house now that we were in the sunshine. “I’m going to marry her.”

He smiled at me. “And Margo’s mom?”

I frowned. I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to keep the secret that she and Dad were... more than friends. So I decided on, “She and Dad were close.”

He nodded like he knew what I was saying.

“Where is Margo?”

The older detective slid open the door. “Come on, Masters. We’ve got work to do.”

Mom came outside and knelt beside me. “We’re going to go on a little trip, okay? Just while they figure out what happened to Daddy.”

I hadn’t called him Daddy since I was six, but I kept my mouth shut.

She took my hand and led me around the side of the house, putting me in the car. I hadn’t realized the older detective had followed us, but he stopped Mom in front of the car.

I cranked my window down an inch.

“Caleb mentioned Amberly Wolfe and your husband being close,” he said.

“Close? They do talk often.” She blinks. It seemed she was coming apart at the seams at a faster rate than before. “But, what does that have to do with anything?”

“Ma’am—”

“My husband wouldn’t cheat on me,” Mom swore. She covered her mouth just before she burst into tears. “He was just *murdered*—”

The detective shuffled backward. He handed her a handkerchief, and she took it, sparing him a smile. I watched in utter disbelief as she dabbed at her

eyes, then offered it to him.

He shook his head. “Keep it. Don’t leave town, all right? We’ll be in touch.”

He extended her a business card, and she shoved it into her purse.

She nodded, standing in front of the car until he turned and went back into our house. Then she got in the car and met my eyes in the rearview mirror. “You told them they were *close*?”

I shrugged.

To my surprise, she smiled. “Good. That will set them on the right path.”



## MARGO

CALEB IS pale by the time we get back to my house.

I reach over and stroke his cheek, frowning. It does the trick. He shakes his head and comes out of whatever trance he was in.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

He frowns. “I was just remembering...”

Ah. If he had to relive finding his dad, that’s on me. I’m the one who brought it up. I put my hand on his arm. “I’m sorry.”

He meets my gaze. “It’s not your fault. And besides... I actually realized a few things.”

I lift my eyebrow. “Yeah?”

“Masters was the detective’s partner on my dad’s case,” he says.

I jerk back. “You’re just mentioning this now?”

“It only just occurred to me.” He grimaces. “Masters knew Theo’s mom. I wonder if he went to school with our dads.”

*Our dads.* It’s so weird to hear him say it like that. Up until this year, we had no idea they were anything beyond acquaintances. Two men burned by Amberly.

“The police made the arrest quickly, right? Within the day?”

“An open-and-shut case,” he answers. “So they thought.”

“I just wish I could remember what happened after—” I press my lips together. “There’s still the blank wall that I can’t get through. I go back home and then what? My memories skip to being at the park.”

His expression borders on sympathetic. “I don’t think your memory alone will free your dad. We need proof.”

My stomach twists. “What would the implication be if he *did* go to school with them?”

“He wasn’t in charge, so I don’t know how much he could’ve swayed. And it would depend on their relationship, you know? People didn’t really like my dad. He was known as the developer.”

Real estate. Insurance. His dad did it all, and happily—until he sold his company to the highest bidder.

Caleb snaps his fingers. “Yearbook!”

“What?”

“I know Mom kept her old yearbook from high school. And your dad might’ve kept his from their year. Maybe we can go back to your house—”

I grab his hand before he can put the car in reverse. “It’s no use, Caleb. Everything is gone.”

He pauses. “Huh?”

*Oh shit.* Did I not tell him?

“My house,” I say slowly. “It was completely cleared out except for my parents’ bedroom.” A giggle bubbles out of me. “All this time, I thought you did it just to keep it away from me. That you had everything in a storage room somewhere—”

“Margo, no,” Caleb murmurs. His hand slides around my neck, into my hair. “I had no idea.”

His hand is grounding.

“It’s your house,” I remind him. “Who else would do that?”

“I have a few guesses.” He puts the car in park, killing the engine. “Unfortunately, none of them will be forthcoming unless we’re sneakier about it. Let’s go inside.”

I zip my jacket tighter and follow him to my front door. Robert and Lenora are both on the couch, curled up together, when we come in.

“Have a good visit?” Lenora asks. There’s unveiled concern shining in her eyes.

“We had a good conversation,” Caleb says.

I nod.

I loop my arm in his, pulling him toward the stairs. My room is clean, albeit stark. We got a new bed frame and mattress, and a white dresser, but everything is in limbo. We plan on painting and going shopping for new decorations once the weekend hits. The two coats of primer cover the red almost to the point of invisibility.

*Pretty bird, broken wings.* I shudder to think about it.

“Who do you think did it?” I whisper on the stairs.

Caleb pauses next to the picture of me and him. The detective never did notice the red fingerprint, but he hones in on it. “Was this—?”

“Yes.”

“It’s right over your face,” he says in a low voice. “You didn’t think to mention this?”

“It isn’t like it’s a threat.”

He gives me an exasperated look. “It *could* be, since everything Unknown does seems to have hidden meaning.”

I don’t have a response to that. Because, yeah, he’s totally right. It could be a threat, as subtle as it may seem.

“They wrote on my wall,” I point out. “Isn’t that a bit more...”

“Precise?” He scowls.

“I think I’m going to paint the room light blue,” I tell him, walking into my room. My things—what was salvaged, anyway—are neatly stacked on top of the dresser. The primer is a creamy white color. It’s not awful, but it isn’t my first choice.

“Is that, ‘Oh, what a glorious fall’ from something?” Caleb asks. He plops down on my bed, smoothing the blanket. “Or do you think they made it up?”

I sit next to him. “I’ve been stewing over that myself,” I admit. “And at the same time, it infuriates me that I’m even wasting the brain power on it.”

“Fair.”

“Pretty bird, though... it reminds me of something just out of reach.”

He lifts a lock of my hair, twirling it. “It’ll come to you. Is that the painting?”

My attention goes to the canvas in the corner of the room, leaning against the wall. Small mercies that it wasn’t in the room when it got destroyed.

I still need to finish it, now that my view of Caleb has changed once again.

“It’s due soon,” he reminds me. “And my eyes are blank.”

My cheeks heat. “Yeah, I haven’t really had much time...”

“You’re right. Me neither. Luckily, I finished mine weeks ago.”

I stare at him. “Seriously? And you didn’t show me?”

He leans forward, kissing my forehead. It’s way too sweet for... him.

He’s not sweet.

Or kind.

Or *nice*.

But... he has been. Unfailingly sweet and supportive and gentle.

*What on earth is wrong with me?*

"Is this the new us?" I blurt out. "You being nice?"

He smirks. "Is this not what you want?"

Is it? Not if it isn't real.

He seems to realize the seriousness of my question, because he leans back and drops the piece of hair he was still twirling. "Margo. I think our situations in the past few weeks have called for niceness. Would you prefer...?"

"Caleb the jerk?" I laugh, looking away.

His thumb brushes my cheek, catching a tear I didn't even realize was falling.

"I just want a little stability, you know?" I whisper.

"I'm starting to think you never deserved anything I did to you," he admits. "It was so black and white, and then you just... changed everything in a matter of months."

I nod. "Your uncle?"

His jaw sets.

"It's okay. We'll undo whatever he did."

I kiss him softly. Honestly, I meant it as a peck. But his hand cups the back of my head, trapping me there, and he deepens it. His tongue slides into my mouth.

I groan and fist his shirt in my grip.

"Margo, you have visitors!" Lenora calls from downstairs. "I'll send them up."

We break apart, and he grins at me.

It's a little devious—a hint of the old him.

I shake my head, straightening my clothes. Caleb just leans back, doing nothing to fix his shirt or the way his hair sticks up in every which way. Did I do that?

My door flies open, and Hanna bursts inside. She takes a minute to gape at the room, then shoots into my arms.

"Ah, hi, Hanna," I laugh, hugging her to me.

She squeezes tight enough to steal my breath away.

Claire follows, but she doesn't come all the way into the room. Her attention goes to Caleb. "Sorry, are we interrupting something?"

I glance at him, but he says nothing.

“No,” I manage. “No, it’s great to see you.”

Hanna releases me. “Claire drove us! Our foster parents finally said she was good enough to drive me.”

Caleb squints. “Did they, now?”

“She drives fast,” Hanna tells him. “But she lets me sit in the front seat, and I like to ride with my hand out the window.”

Maybe he’s remembering that I don’t know how to drive, because he says nothing. He barely even looks at Claire, and her stare is hot enough to melt plastic.

“So, to what do we owe this visit?” I ask her, slightly moving so I break her line of sight.

She’s always been boy obsessed, but she can’t be obsessed with *this* one.

She blinks, like she was dozing, and grins at me. “Well, we were out for ice cream and decided to check in on you. Hanna got an A on her final project in math.” She makes a show of looking around the room. “I’d say I like what you’ve done with the place, but...”

“It was time for a change,” I lie. “This is just the beginning stages of me making this place feel like home.”

“Oh?” She ventures farther in, touching a little clay pot Hanna had made me last year. It holds a few beads, an earring—lost things.

Forgotten things.

*So they wouldn’t be misplaced anymore.*

I almost cried when she gave it to me, because I know she meant *me*. I was the lost and forgotten thing. And so was she. And so was Claire.

*We’re not lost anymore*, I almost say. It’s on the tip of my tongue.

“I’m thinking of painting it blue.”

She picks up the canvas. “You’ve been working on this forever. Are you going to finish it?”

“You should paint it orange!” Hanna says, throwing herself onto the bed next to Caleb. She scoots all the way back, until she can lean against the wall. “Orange is my favorite color.”

“Silly girl,” Claire murmurs. “An orange room would practically glow when the sun rose.”

“Exactly.”

“Is your room decorated in orange?” I ask Hanna.

“Yeah, orange and pink. The best combination!” She bites her lip. “It’s



nice when the rest of the house is creepy.”

“It’s not creepy,” Claire says. “It’s just old and big.”

I ruffle Hanna’s hair. “I’m sure it’ll feel like home soon enough.”

“Do you go back to school before the holiday?” Claire asks me. “If I were you, I’d push for all the time off I could.”

Caleb tilts his head. “Because of the accident?”

She ignores him. “Did you know we found out about your *kidnapping* on the news? The freaking news, Margo!”

I wince. “I’m sorry. It was...”

“Traumatic,” Caleb finishes. “And she shouldn’t have to tell everyone about it.”

She flinches, then rushes to my side. “I’m sorry.” She picks up my hands, squeezing. “God, I didn’t mean it like that. It was just surprise... and worry.”

“You could’ve called,” Caleb said. “Instead of...” Barging in here and interrupting our kiss? That’s where it sounds like he’s taking this conversation.

I shake my head. “I should’ve reached out.”

Claire pats my cheek. “I forgive you.”

Caleb stands and moves toward us. His gait is slow, lazy almost. It’s just a few feet to cross the room. But somehow, he makes it feel predatory.

His gaze locks on Claire. He circles around her, then stops beside me.

“Let me get this straight. You forgive Margo, who was in a car accident and then abducted, and in the hospital for three days, for not calling you?”

Claire’s face turns red. She presses her lips together, staring up at him.

“He’s right,” Hanna pipes up from the bed. “A bit rude.”

I snicker. Leave it to the twelve-year-old to call it how things are.

“You’re right,” Claire says, barely able to look at Caleb. Her whole body trembles. “I’m sorry, Margo. That was insensitive. I was worried, and it came out wrong.”

She throws her arms around me, burying her face in my neck.

I pat her back awkwardly.

Hanna jumps off the bed and throws her arms around both of us.

“Together again!” she yells into my arm.

Claire and Hanna leave soon after that. It would appear that they just wanted to check on me. Caleb and I eat dinner with Robert and Lenora, and then he, too, leaves.

The three of us settle on the couch. I go back to school tomorrow, so

we're soaking up the last night of no homework. Robert puts on a movie, and Lenora makes popcorn in the kitchen. I drag a blanket over my lap in the armchair, bringing my knees up to my chest.

When Lenora comes with two bowls of popcorn—one for me and one for them—Robert pauses the preview.

"We want to talk to you now that your friends are gone," Robert says.

Worry immediately knots my stomach. *A talk* is never a good thing.

"You look panicked." Lenora reaches out and offers her hand.

I take it and suck in a deep breath. "Maybe a bit."

"Lenora and I have been discussing adoption." Robert smiles at me. "Our main concern is whether you'd be open to such a thing."

"We want you to be part of our family permanently," Lenora adds, squeezing my hand.

My mouth drops open. Yes, they'd said as much before the accident, but...

My heart tears itself in half.

It happens between beats. One minute it's whole, and the next, it's broken and I'm being pulled in two different directions.

Dad is innocent, and we just need to prove it to get him out.

And Robert and Lenora... they want to make things official. A home with two stable parents who love each other, who don't fight. Who would've thought they'd pick me?

I don't know how to stitch myself back together again. How to make my heart halves beat in sync.

My eyes burn, but I don't cry. There's a weight on my shoulders; it lands heavier than I would've thought I could handle.

"Thank you," I say over the lump in my throat.

Any minute, I'm going to lose it.

"It's a lot to process," Lenora says. "And this is your decision."

I push the blanket off and stand, wrapping my arms around Lenora. She gives much better hugs than my mother ever did.

An image of Mom standing in the diner flashes through my mind, but I shove it away. She left me alone, to fend for myself. And when I did see her? It was only about money to feed her habit.

Lenora rubs my back. "You're shaking."

"Just trying to forget about my mother." I lean back and wipe at my face.

All I've done lately is cry. I hope I run out of tears soon.

“Should we watch the movie?” Robert asks.

I smile. “Yeah.”

*As good a distraction as any.*

My chest hurts. I wrap the blanket around me, sinking into the armchair.  
It’s nice to zone out at the screen for a while.

Adoption means my dad would have to give up his rights. I’d have a family, but I would lose him.

How the hell am I supposed to choose?



## CALEB

“WHY AREN’T WE GOING INSIDE?” Eli asks me.

“You can go,” I say. “I’m waiting for Margo.”

He glares at me. “Margo, who’s arriving with Riley.”

They haven’t talked. *Still*. And while I’m curious, there have been other pressing concerns stealing my attention.

I exhale, watching my breath make little clouds.

“Okay, fine,” he snaps. “I’m going in.”

I flip him off.

He salutes me with his middle finger back, then saunters toward the building.

No sooner is he gone than Robert’s car arrives, and Margo climbs out. She grins when she sees me, and I pull her in for a kiss. Foster dad be damned.

She smiles when I linger.

“Let’s go in,” she says. “It’s freezing.”

“I thought you were getting a ride in with Riley?”

She shrugs. “She said she was running late. Not sure what she has planned.”

I roll my eyes. “Did she say she was planning something?”

“No, but she’s never late—”

“Ms. Wolfe,” the guidance counselor calls. “Could you join me?”

I reluctantly release her. “I’ll see you in homeroom.”

She gives me a brave smile, then disappears into the office.

Savannah walks past, her fur coat held tightly closed in her hand. She has

such a thick layer of makeup caked on her face, it's like she's wearing a mask.

She doesn't acknowledge my presence, and my eyebrow jumps.

"Hey, man," Liam calls.

We slap hands, and he yanks off his hat. His blond hair goes everywhere. He runs a hand through it, messing it up further, and I shake my head. Girls love that untamed look.

"Margo's back?" he asks.

"They called her in." I hook my thumb toward the office.

He grimaces. "She's an old coot. You're waiting?"

"Figured I would."

He nods, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "Kid gloves."

I narrow my eyes. "What?"

"You're treating her with kid gloves." He shrugs, smiling innocently.

"It's okay. I'm sure Margo appreciates you not leaving her alone..."

I shake my head. "You're just..."

Jealous?

No.

If anything, Liam's attitude is more of a brotherly nature—to me *and* Margo. I try not to think about the time I walked in on them at the party. She was across the room from him, but still.

"It's going to be a long week," I say.

He laughs. "Yeah. See you in homeroom."

Margo appears just as the bell rings. She sticks out her tongue. "So much for meeting you there, huh?"

I put my arm around her shoulders. As we walk, people part for us. They do it more for me than her, but judging from the glances she gets, I would say they're curious about her. Word must've traveled quick.

"You know what's interesting?" she asks under her breath. Without waiting for my answer, she continues, "Since you found me, I haven't heard from our mystery stalker. Besides the writing on the walls—literally."

I sigh. "Unknown called me right before the police came. Everything they're doing is escalating."

She shivers. "What's next?"

More dead birds in her room?

My mood plummets. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

That's a fucking promise.

The rest of the day passes quietly and quickly. Between the four of us, we keep tabs on Margo. Riley showed up after second period, looking a bit worse for the wear, and she silently joins the team.

It isn't like I think something is going to happen to her. I don't. I just... am worried that I might be wrong.

I come up behind Margo and loop my arms around her waist, pulling her back against my front. She gasps, stiffening for a moment. Once she realizes it's me, she relaxes.

My lips touch the tip of her ear. "Did I startle you?"

"No," she lies.

I let her get away with it.

"It's Robert's first day back," she says. "I wonder how he's doing."

"Well, we won't have long to wait." I close her locker, and together we walk to the art wing. Everyone has been more subdued, and I'm blaming it on my friends. God only knows who they threatened to make the entire school act... normal.

We slip into Robert's classroom, and he shoots us a smile.

"Hey, guys," he says. His desk is a wreck. Papers everywhere, folders, various tubes of paint and brushes. "How's your day?"

"Peachy," Margo answers. "You okay?"

"Oh, the substitute teacher probably wishes she had another week to get things more organized." He rolls his shoulders back. "I'm just still trying to get everything sorted. Plus it's the end of the year, and final projects are due. God, every year I think I should stagger the classes—"

"Mr. Jenkins!" one of his students squeals, coming in with a few others. "You're back!"

"Yes, hello." He motions for them to take their seats. "You, too, please."

I take Margo's hand and pull her toward the back of the room.

"He seems frazzled," Margo whispers.

"I would be, too, if my desk looked like that."

She hides her laugh behind her hand.

"We're getting to the end of the semester." Robert closes the door. "And I would like to take this opportunity to remind you that your final project, the portraits, are due at the beginning of next week. Can I see a show of hands to who's already completed theirs?"

Half the hands in the room go up, including mine.

I was done a while ago. And in fact, Robert already graded it.

I didn't breathe a word of that to Margo. I was already mostly done by the time I tried to hurt her relationship with the Jenkinses. It was only after, when she started standing up to me, that I revisited it. I changed a few things—the feeling behind it, but not necessarily anything physical.

For my first oil painting, I was impressed with myself. And I got an A on it, of course.

Margo frowns at my raised hand.

"What?" I mouth, holding back a smile.

I saw my eyeless self immortalized on the canvas yesterday, and I can imagine how conflicted she is. To paint me with a scowl? A dead look in my eye? It's how most of the world sees me nowadays. But she's always been able to see deeper.

And that's where her struggle comes in.

Robert gives us an assignment, a bowl of fruit set up on a table in the center of our circle, and goes back to his desk.

It occurs to me that the end of the semester brings something else besides holidays and a weeklong break: college application deadlines.

I lean over to her as she's putting paint on her palette. "Did you apply yet?"

"Did I apply for what?" She glances at me and pushes hair out of her face.

"School."

"When would I have had time to do that?"

I roll my eyes. "You were out for over a week."

"Because I had a head injury." She readjusts her stool. "Seriously."

"Don't you want to go to NYU? There are other schools if you didn't like that one—"

"I liked it just fine." She shakes her head. "Haven't we been over this? I can't afford it, and I can't ask the Jenkinses—"

"Because they'd give it to you," I say under my breath.

I mirror her earlier movements, putting little dabs of paint on my palette. It's rough wood on the underside, old dried paint smoothing the top. A lot of other students took the plastic ones, but I prefer this. It doesn't let me forget I'm holding it as it scrapes against my hand.

"I'd give it to you, too," I add.

"You would not."

I watch her until she spins her entire body toward me. She's rigid, and her



eyes are wide.

She's cute when she's alarmed.

"Caleb. You can't waste money like that."

"Do you know how much I'm inheriting?"

She pauses. "Why would I know that?"

"I'll be a multimillionaire at eighteen, and I didn't earn a penny of it. So if I want to pay for your education so you don't have to graduate with debt, I'm going to." I set my jaw.

She stares at me, and I realize... maybe she *didn't* have any idea what I'm going to be receiving on my eighteenth birthday.

*Four months to go*, a voice in the back of my head whispers.

"Did I just scare you?" I ask.

She forces a laugh. "Me? No. No, I totally... expected it. You know, with the crazy uncle controlling your money and the house left empty and your mom not getting a penny. That makes perfect sense."

"Mom did something," I say. "Something that made Dad hold a grudge."

"And I doubt she'd actually tell you, right?"

"Right."

She shakes her head and turns back to the canvas. "If we both don't even get our brushes dirty, Robert will ground me and send you..."

"To detention?" I smirk.

She grins. "Maybe."

We lapse into silence, and I put my best effort into the... bowl of apples and oranges. It passes the time quickly, and it feels like minutes later Robert is clapping, giving us the five-minute warning.

We pack away our things.

"Are you bringing me home?" she asks.

"We're back to conditioning for lacrosse," I say. "A five-mile run is in my future."

She nods.

I snag her hand. "Maybe today would be a good day to go over my uncle's house?"

Her eyes widen. "Really."

"They're out of town." I grab my phone and pull up a photo my aunt posted on Facebook. The picture is of her and Uncle David on a beach somewhere. He's moody—a remnant of his drowning modeling career—and she's beaming.

“How can she look so... happy with him?”

I shrug. “I’m pretty sure she’s acting.”

She frowns.

I lean in close, until my nose touches hers. “As long as you never put on an act like she does, we’ll be okay.”

She sucks in a breath, and my heart skips. I could listen to her little reactions for the rest of my life and be happy.

Her dark eyes meet mine. “As long as you don’t put on your mask, we’ll be okay.”

“You just want me vulnerable.”

“Yep.” She pops the *p*, then winks.

The bell rings, and she flinches.

Students flood out into the hall, but we remain where we are. She takes a step back and crosses her arms. She’s trying to hide again, but I know she’s afraid to go into my aunt and uncle’s house.

“They’re gone. The house will be empty,” I reason. “And since I have practice...”

“God,” she moans. “I hate you.”

Robert clears his throat. “Are you waiting on me, kiddo?”

She spins around. “Oh, um, no. Riley is going to give me a ride. I think we’re going to do homework at her house.”

He smiles. “Okay. Just let Lenora know, okay?”

“Will do.”

I follow her down the hall and tug her to a stop outside of the athletic wing. “I’ve gotta go.”

“Right.”

“I’m just going to get changed. We’ll discuss this in a few minutes.”

She nods curtly, and I leave her standing there. She’ll need to be brave—but I have a feeling Riley will be able to help with that.

Besides, we need answers.

I get changed quickly, meeting up with Theo. Eli and Liam are in the far corner.

“Eli said he wasn’t in the mood for whatever bullshit I had in mind,” Theo says. “So, you’re with me.”

Lucky me.

“What suicide run are we doing today?” I ask, lacing my sneakers.

He just grins.

Coach walks into the locker room, pounding on one of the metal doors to get our attention. “Remember: do not run alone. I want five miles, and you log what time you come back on this sheet. Got it?”

“Yes, Coach,” we all call.

“Great. Now get out of here.”

I flip off Eli as they leave. He returns the gesture, laughing.

“We need to make a pit stop,” I tell Theo.

His eyebrows go up, but he says nothing. We shove the door open and head around the building. It’s easy to spot Margo and Riley by her car.

Margo clutches her jacket tighter around her, frowning at me. “It’s freezing out here.”

I shrug. “We need to get in shape.”

Coach’s voice in the distance drifts closer on the wind. I would’ve thought he’d stay inside, but I guess he wants to make sure we actually run. Theo and I need to get moving before he spots us chatting—otherwise we’ll end up with another two miles on our plate.

I tilt her face toward me and steal a kiss. She rises on her toes, trying to deepen it, and I grin against her lips. “I have to go.”

She huffs. “Fine. I’ll see you later.”

I stuff a folded envelope in her hand. It has the key to my aunt and uncle’s house, as well as the code to their alarm system.

“Tonight,” I promise. I’m going to take her on an actual date—nice clothes, flowers. The whole thing. I’ll pick her up and take her to the fancy restaurant, and we’ll drink fizzy cider and pretend it’s champagne. It’s a surprise I’ve been holding on to for a few days now, and I’m proud of myself for not ruining it.

After all, we deserve a spot of happiness in our senior year.

“Come on,” Theo groans.

I touch her cheek, smiling to myself, and turn away. That kiss will keep me warm.

Theo and I head off, quickly finding a pace that both of us can sustain.

“I’m thinking the old mill road,” he says.

It’s a dirt road, winding and long, with a giant hill in the middle.

Kind of perfect... kind of awful.

I grunt, then catch his grin out of the corner of my eye. Bastard.

Coach’s one rule is that we have to stay together. It’s why I don’t generally run with Liam—he likes to go slow, then sprint toward the end. Eli

and I run best together, but Theo... when I need a push, he's my guy.

Even now, he speeds up a bit. I lengthen my stride to match his long one.

"I'm gonna be in pain by the time this is over," I tell him.

"That's why I like this route," he tells me. "Once we get over the hill, it's all downhill. The first half is just a bitch."

"Speaking of bitches..."

He rolls his eyes. "Nice segue."

"Have you heard anything about Amelie?" I ask. "I never thought to ask her how she knew about Margo's mom."

He nods. "Right. She knew where Amberly was staying."

"Kind of a weird thing for her to know..." I roll my shoulders back.

We turn onto the dirt road. It takes us a few strides to adjust to the new texture under our feet, and both of us slow a fraction.

"What are you thinking?" he asks.

"Matt knew people from Emery-Rose," I reason. "So it wouldn't be crazy to think Unknown goes to our school."

"But..."

"But my top suspect was Amelie, since she has her sticky fingers in everything. It wouldn't have been a stretch for her to tell Savannah to send the picture of Ian and Margo to me."

"What are you and Margo going to focus on once this is over?"

I glance at him. "You and your love life, of course."

He bursts out laughing. "Fuck you, man."

"Come on. You don't think you and—"

He elbows me. "Focus on Eli and Riley. They need more immediate help."

"Truth."

They've been weird. Not that it's really any different from their past, but it's a cause for concern. And Eli refuses to talk about it. I'm sure Riley isn't talking, either, otherwise Margo would've made some big play to fix it.

We quit talking and focus on running. We've reached the hill, and it's taken us almost thirty minutes to get here.

I check my watch, which tracks distance, and groan when I see we've already run four miles. I'm going to kill him for almost doubling our running distance—but it's too late to turn back now.

Both of us are breathing hard by the time we make it to the top a few minutes later, and I motion to stop. I bend over, elbows on my thighs, and

suck in air.

“That was like a mile-long hill,” I gasp. “Fucking hell.”

There’s a reason I don’t come this way. It’s also the reason Theo’s in better shape than I am—he runs this route a *lot*. Eli and I prefer flatter roads.

“You gonna live?” Theo asks.

I shake my head, tempted to flop over. “Maybe not.”

He slaps my back. “Walk it off.”

And then he takes off, continuing down the road. At a walk, at least. But still.

I catch up to him easily enough, sucking in deep breaths. “Okay. Let’s get this over with.”

“That’s the spirit.”

And off we go.

We’re near the bottom of the hill when a car comes up behind us. We scoot to the side, Theo jogging directly in front of me.

I move farther over when the car behind me doesn’t pass us. There’s a whole stretch of road to our left, but... some drivers are weird. Overly cautious.

The vehicle comes up next to us, keeping pace until I glance over at them. Margo’s foster sister.

She waves at me, frantic, until Theo and I stop. The car shoots ahead of us, then the tail lights illuminate. The car rocks to a stop.

“The fuck?” Theo says.

I walk up to the passenger window, my brow furrowing. “Claire?”

“Caleb, I’ve been trying to find you! Margo was in an accident. Lenora asked me to come find you. You weren’t answering your phone...” She covers her mouth with her hand and shakes her head. “I’m sorry.”

My stomach drops into my feet. My phone is safely tucked in my gym bag in the locker room. And I *just* left Margo not too long ago.

“Is she okay?”

“I don’t know.” Her eyes fill with tears. “They wouldn’t tell us anything.”

I glance up and down the street, but it’s quiet. The need to get to her is insane, spiking adrenaline through my system. I could run back to school, but we’re almost two miles out.

“Go,” Theo says, reading my mind.

I yank her door open and slide inside.

She gasps. “What are you doing?”

“They took her to the hospital?”

“Y-yes.”

“Take me there,” I urge. “Please.”

She hits the gas, and I’m thrown back against the seat. I pull my seatbelt on and turn toward her, ignoring the guilt I feel at leaving Theo alone. It’s against the rules, but this trumps Coach’s stupid rules.

“Claire. The hospital?”

She blinks, wiping the tears off her cheeks. “She never saw it coming.”

“You didn’t say what happened. Or how.” The car is picking up speed. My stomach is in knots.

The hospital is ten minutes away from here, fifteen at the most.

Where did Margo get hurt? It must’ve been closer to the hospital than here.

When Claire doesn’t answer, I look around the car. It’s clean to the point of newness. Not a speck of dust on the dash or the floor. The fabric mats are free of dirt—except what’s come off from my shoes.

I almost feel bad leaning on her leather seats. Sweat rolls down my chest under my sweatshirt, and my back is soaked.

*Who runs in the middle of winter?* I can hear Margo’s voice in my head.

“Was it Riley’s car?” I ask. “Did she get in a car accident—”

Two in one month? What would the odds be on that?

Or maybe it was Unknown. They could’ve taken her. Something more violent, like with a gun—

Claire glances at me, then away. “You care about her so much. How? She told me how you hated her when she started school.”

I shake my head. “Hate is temporary. Love...”

We pause at the stop sign, and her grip on the wheel flexes.

“Love,” she repeats. Sighs. “That is just... the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.”

There’s a moment when I think she might be up to something. Left is the hospital, and right... the road to the right goes out of town. Away from Rose Hill and toward the freeway.

“You love her, too.”

When did I become a person who discussed *love*? It’s easy to see the way Claire cares. She came all the way out here to find me, after all. Why do that if not for Margo’s sake?

She shakes her head. “A foster sibling’s relationship is complicated.

Sometimes I think she hates me. But, as you said—hate is temporary.”

She turns left.

“Lenora and Robert—did they get to the hospital already?” I probe. “How did you find out?”

“I was there for bloodwork.” She pushes the sleeve of her sweater up, showing me the rolled gauze taped to the inside of her elbow. “Happened to see them all rush in, and Lenora and I had met before. They didn’t want to leave her.”

“Right.”

She lets out a ragged breath. “I just hope she’s okay.”

“Me, too,” I murmur. I look out the window and will Claire to drive faster. I could be nice and ask her about herself—when she learned to drive when Margo still didn’t, where her sister is, how she found me on a random side road miles from school...

But instead, I keep my mouth shut and just hope that whatever happened to Margo, she’s still fighting.

*I’m coming for you, Margo.*





## MARGO

I WATCH Caleb jog off with Theo. The sky is clear, ice-blue, and the wind has died down. As he pointed out before he left, *Now's as good a time as any.*

I tuck the envelope into my jacket pocket.

"They have to stay in shape," Riley repeats. "Dumb boys."

I shrug. "Did you want to talk about your thing with Eli?"

I follow her line of sight to where she's picked Eli out of the trio of lacrosse players running down a different road.

She snorts. "No."

"He's bound to be planning something. Like, a way to get you back." In fact, I had heard as much. Eli swore me to secrecy, but he isn't my best friend—Riley is. So I add, "There's nothing he can do to fix... whatever it is that happened?"

"Fat chance." She shakes her head. "Where are we going? My place or yours?"

"Actually..."

She gives me a look. The one that says, *You're about to drag me into some shit, aren't you?*

"Caleb's aunt and uncle are out of town," I blurt out. "And we think there might be something in that house that can help us with everything."

"Something that can help with *everything*? What is everything? Do you actually know what you're searching for, or are you grasping at straws?" She sighs. "You two have got yourselves so wrapped up in this mystery—"

"Riley," I interrupt. "We didn't choose this. It's been haunting us, and with everything happening with Unknown..."

She pulls me into a hug. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean how it sounded. I’m just worried about you.” After a second, she leans back and visibly steels herself. “Okay. So, Caleb’s aunt and uncle’s house.”

“I have the address in my phone.”

It takes us almost twenty minutes to get there. The last time we were there... I shudder, remembering the state I found Caleb.

“What are we looking for?” Riley asks.

I fish out the set of keys Caleb gave me, and we hurry to the side entrance. I cross the entrance to the alarm panel, but it’s already been deactivated.

“Weird,” she whispers. “Maybe they only put it on when they’re home?”

I squint at her. “Why on earth would they do that?”

She shrugs. “He really wanted you to get in here, huh? The key, the code...”

“He’s busy, and this couldn’t really wait.” I glance around. “Should we split up?”

“No.”

I raise my eyebrows.

“You still haven’t told me anything about what we’re looking for.”

I nod. “Right. Sorry. We need to find anything Lydia might’ve kept—an old yearbook, preferably, or pictures from high school.”

“Lydia, Caleb’s mom?”

“Right.”

She shakes her head. “Isn’t most of her stuff still at their old house? Why —”

“Caleb suggested to start here,” I interrupt. We’re still speaking as quietly as possible, and I clear my throat.

She hums. “Okay, fine. May as well start in the bedrooms, right? Upstairs?”

I nod, then hesitate. “Or his uncle’s study...”

“After,” she says.

We go to the stairs, jogging up them with light footsteps. I don’t know why we’re moving like we’re thieves in the night—no one is here.

At the top of the stairs, there are two immediate doors: one to the left and one to the right. Farther down, there are more doors.

“Start at the back and work forward?” Riley points to the end of the hall.

We creep along and pass four closed doors before we get to the last one. I

push it open, almost expecting Caleb's uncle to be sitting there, waiting for us.

It is the master bedroom, although it's empty.

Riley goes to the nightstands while I hurry across to the bookshelves built into the wall. They frame a huge flat-screen television and an armoire below it.

I run my finger across the book titles, but nothing with Emery-Rose's gold-and-black colors or its sigil jumps out at me.

"Nada," Riley calls. "Just some lube, and I could've happily gone my entire life without knowing that was there."

I stick out my tongue. "Gross."

I take the next room down on the left, and Riley opens the door on the right.

"Bathroom." She appears in the doorway. "What's in here?"

It must be a guest room. Everything is in shades of white and gray. The drawers in the dresser are empty, the bed made neater than a pin.

"Moving on." I ignore the discouraging feeling twisting my stomach. It isn't just foreboding—that we're intruding on a dangerous family's home—but also... like something bad is going to happen.

This is a *literal* gut feeling.

I grab Riley's hand, pulling her to a stop. "Maybe you should be lookout."

There's a narrow walkway next to the stairs that goes to a window. From there, she'll be able to see to the driveway and the front door. She sighs, then goes to the window. We parked across the street, which will hopefully not tip anyone off that anything is amiss.

I crack the second to last door and pause.

I was expecting something more masculine, a room Caleb would've stayed in as a kid. Instead, it's feminine. The walls are a blush color, and the comforter on the bed is pink and orange flowers.

Slowly, I leave the doorway and walk farther in.

It's not as neat as the monotone room we just left. This one is... lived-in. Papers on the desk, a pile of dirty clothes in a hamper in the corner. One of the dresser drawers is cracked open, denim sticking out.

Spooked, I back out into the hallway.

"What is it?" Riley asks.

I shake my head and go to the last bedroom, shoving the door open.

Blues and purples. An unmade bed. More clothes.

“Do they have a kid?”

I go to the desk. It’s white, not inexpensive, with a blue chair on wheels tucked in. A laptop sits on top, plugged into a power strip.

Fuzzy pens in a cup.

A mouse pad with the picture of a dog.

The desk itself is pushed up against a window. To the left of it is a bulletin board. I stand in front of it, putting my finger on the one of the pins.

Newspaper clippings.

Cut-out articles.

*Fatal Two-Car Accident on Elm Street and Drunk Driver Kills Teenage Boy and Rose Hill Child Fatally Struck.*

“What is this?” Riley asks, just behind me.

I can’t breathe.

The board is filled with them. So many car accidents, dating back at least four years, all over Hillshire County.

“Margo,” Riley snaps. She grabs my shoulder, pulling me around. “You look like you’re going to be sick.”

Because my stomach is a roiling mess.

“I didn’t know they were—”

The front door slams, and both of us duck.

“Shit,” Riley whispers. She runs to the door and closes it most of the way.

“I’m home!” a familiar voice yells. “Matt gave me a ride since you were sick.”

Hanna.

“We’re standing in Claire’s room,” I say in a low voice.

Riley slowly pivots back to me. “Excuse me?”

“I didn’t know this was where they—”

Footsteps on the stairs interrupt me.

“Claire?” Hanna calls.

Sweet, beautiful Hanna.

I only pray her sister left her *out* of this mess.

“Closet,” Riley whispers, hauling me across the room.

We slip into it, and I take a moment to be thankful for the size. She closes the closet with the tiniest *snick*. We both back away. I spin around. The closet is deep and narrow, with Claire’s clothes on both long sides. In the back is a few rows of shelves, sparse except for the boxes at the top.

Claire's bedroom door flies open. "Claire, I asked—"

My heart cracks. Wherever Claire is, Hanna expected her to be here. And now the twelve-year-old is alone in the *big, creepy house*, as she called it. I take a step toward the door, ready to reveal myself.

Riley grabs me from behind, covering my mouth with her hand.

"Please, be quiet," she whispers in my ear.

My lungs stop working.

*I'm so sorry.*

I thrash my head, clawing at her arm.

She holds on tightly. "Stop, stop."

"Claire," Hanna sings, her voice farther away. "Are you downstairs?"

Riley releases me, and I fall out of the closet.

I land on my hands and knees, gasping for air.

She crouches beside me. "Margo, I'm sorry. I didn't think that would... I'm an idiot. We have to be quiet. Claire lives here—does that mean she's involved?"

It takes a minute for me to regain my breath, but then I grab Riley's offered hand and stand. "She's obsessed with car accidents."

Riley nods slowly.

I go to her desk, yanking out the chair and taking a seat. Her computer is bound to be password protected—but at least it's more proof that she has a laptop. *Portable computer.*

"It can't be her," I mumble.

I open the drawers and riffle through loose paper. At the bottom of the last drawer, there's a wooden box.

I pause. Whatever is in this box was worth her hiding it—or it's nothing.

If I don't open it, the contents can't hurt me. Claire remains innocent.

"What?" Riley takes the box from my hands and flips it open. Inside is a folded picture of me and Caleb. She pulls it out and flattens it.

I gasp. I can't help it.

She's...

"That bitch scratched your face off." Riley's tone is appalled.

I shudder.

"We need to get out of here." She looks over her shoulder. "And fast."

"We still need the yearbook. What if Masters is in on it?"

"Can't we just trust the police for once?" Riley retorts.

I shake my head, then snap a picture of the photo with my phone.

She puts the picture back in the box, dropping it in the drawer. “Come on.”

I start to follow her, then freeze. “Riley! The boxes.”

Her eyes narrow. “What?”

I slip back into the closet, standing on my toes to reach the boxes on the top shelf. Riley is suddenly beside me, taking the one I hand her so I can grab the second.

We bring it out and set them on the carpet, ripping the lids off.

Sure enough...

A box of jewelry with the initials L.A. engraved in the velvet, a few different baubles, a...

“Is that a mermaid?”

I pick up the glass figure. It looks remarkably similar to the one Caleb found in my room. There’s another one made of porcelain, and a third...

“She collected them,” I say slowly. “And Claire must’ve just needed something to use.”

Riley grunts. “I always had a bad feeling about that girl. But this seems bigger than just her.”

I nod my agreement, and we focus on the second box.

Against one of the sides is a black-and-gold hardcover book.

The yearbook.

I choke on my laugh. “Holy shit, we found it.”

“Great,” Riley says. “Now we need to get out of here before we’re discovered by a twelve-year-old.”

“Right.”

She puts the lid back on, but a notebook catches my eye. I stop her, removing it. I quickly take pictures of the box and then nod. We tuck everything into place, take a look around the room, and creep into the hallway.

The notebook and yearbook are under my arm. We make it almost all the way down the stairs before Riley hits a creaking step.

“Shit,” she whispers. “Go, go.”

We bolt.

Out the door—I close it as quietly as possible behind me—and off the porch. We cut across the grass, sprinting to her car.

“Fuck, fuck,” she yells.

“Riley, go,” I snap.

I dial Caleb's number.

Straight to voicemail.

I call again, just to be sure.

"Wait, wait," I say, just as we get to the end of the road.

She pulls over, turning toward me. "He's probably still running."

"Yeah." Still, that bad feeling I had? It only gets worse.

Maybe I'm panicking over nothing.

I call Theo.

"Wolfe," Theo answers on the first ring. "You okay?"

"I... me? I'm fine." I shake my head. "I was looking for Caleb."

"Um... Like, you're fine, as in, they're releasing you from the hospital?"

I jerk back. I put the call on speaker, because maybe Riley will be able to make sense of what he's saying. "Theo, I'm not at the hospital."

"Oh. Girl must've been overreacting. She was crying like you were on the verge of death."

In as calm a voice as I can manage, I say, "Theo. Where is Caleb?"

"We were on the run, and Claire came by. Said you had been in an accident—I'm glad you're okay, by the way. She was taking Caleb to the hospital."

I close my eyes. "I wasn't in an accident."

He's quiet.

"Riley and I went to Caleb's uncle's house searching for something. And..." *Just spit it out, Margo.* "Claire is the one who's been harassing me."

"Fuck." Something crashes in the background. "You're telling me I let him get in the car with a psycho bitch?"

"I'm sure he made the choice himself," Riley mutters. "Bullheaded boys."

"I *heard* that, Applebottom," Theo snaps.

"Okay, enough." I glare at the phone. "We'll find them."

"Keep me posted," he says.

The line goes dead. The fear working its way up my throat is going to bubble over at any moment.

"We can find him," she says. "You know your foster sister—"

"Clearly *not*." I drop my head into my hands. "How long has she had him? Twenty minutes? An hour? Is she going to hurt him? Kill him?"

Riley pinches my arm, hard enough that I flinch away from her.

"Stop it." She pats the same place she pinched, a silent apology. "We just need to think."

“I may not know her as well as I should,” I say slowly. “But...”

“Hanna,” Riley and I say at the same time.

She makes a U-turn and pulls into the driveway. “You want me to come in?”

I frown. “No. I’ll talk to her.”

I go back into the house that has started to feel much more terrible than I originally thought. It holds too many secrets and too many grudges.

I follow the sounds of the television to the living room set toward the back of the house. It’s one of the more lived-in rooms. I stop in the doorway.

Hanna is on the couch, a blanket across her lap, and a bowl of ice cream hugged to her chest.

It makes me smile.

“This is what you do when you’re home alone?” I ask.

She jumps. “Oh my god, Margo!”

She puts down the bowl and races toward me, colliding into me.

I wrap my arms around her and push down the panic. The need to immediately question her. Hanna is a sensitive soul. The first to cry when someone yells or start at a loud noise. The foster system hasn’t been kind to her—but she’s still good.

I try to hold on to that.

“Hanna, I need to ask you an important question.”

She releases me, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“Do you know where Claire is?”

A frown flits across her expression, there one minute and gone the next. “Did you just come to see her?”

I take a deep breath. “No, hon. I’m sorry.” I guide her to the couch and sit next to her. “But I think she knows where my friend is.”

Hanna perks up. “Caleb? He’s all she ever talks about. She said she was going to date him when you were gone.”

I exhale. “When I’m gone?”

She shrugs, leaning over to grab her ice cream. “I dunno. She seemed pretty convinced that he was going to fall in love with her.”

*Bitch.*

I shove away my anger and fear, and instead put my hands on her shoulders. “Can you do me a favor, Han?”

She looks at me with wide eyes.

“I just need to know if there’s somewhere special Claire might’ve gone



after school.”

“Well...” Hanna glances around. “She does like to go visit her boyfriend.”

I pause. “She has a boyfriend?”

“Matt! We had to play a silly game and act like strangers at the football game. Isn’t that weird? They said it was like role playing.”

I blink a few times as more pieces of the puzzle click into place.

*Of course.* Who else would lie—or was it even a lie? She said she was with him, and for all I know... she could’ve been behind my abduction.

“She has a boyfriend but she thinks Caleb is going to fall in love with her?” I make my tone light. “That’s kind of greedy.”

She giggles.

“Come on, Hanna. She wouldn’t take Caleb to Matt’s house, right?”

Hanna’s smile drops off. “She took Caleb?”

“I don’t know.” I shake her shoulders lightly. “Think. Where would they go?”

“I don’t—stop!” She bursts into tears.

Shocked, I release her.

Oh god.

I’m no better than my mother, shaking a child.

I jump to my feet, ready to bolt.

“T-the diner,” she says through her tears. “She’s always talking about hanging out with her future mom.”

Lydia.

The diner.

My mother.

I take a step forward—to hug her, to thank her—but she flinches away from me. It stops me dead in my tracks.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper. “But Caleb...”

“Yeah.” She swipes at her face. “You and her are the same. Only focused on him.”

*Only focused on him.* How did I miss that about her?

I run out of the house, down the steps, and straight into Riley’s car. “You remember how to get to Lucky’s Diner?”



## CALEB

TIME IS A TRICKY THING. Sometimes it moves slowly, like when I realized Margo had overheard my conversation with the Jenkinses, or walking into my parents' room and finding Dad covered in blood. It inched along every second Margo was missing.

Other times, it moves too quickly: racing like the clock can't withhold it anymore.

Time.

The only thing that could possibly save me is working against me.

I count down the seconds, eyes glued to the dash, and too soon, handfulls of minutes have passed.

Claire asked if I remembered her, and I didn't have an answer. But the truth?

Yes. I did, and I wished I didn't.

## Past

Margo had just left for school. It had been a while since I was here. I had been trying for almost a year to scrub her from my brain. Since living with the Blacks, my mindset changed the slightest bit.

She wasn't the boogiemani I had to fear, like my uncle always pushed on me.

She was just a disease to be eradicated.

I watched her disappear down the sidewalk, into the mist. There was a bus stop around the corner. At the beginning of the year, I checked the Stone Ridge paper to see where she might take it. What time. I wondered at the commute length, if students on the bus would pick on her or leave her alone.

I climbed out of my car and crossed the street.

The door flew open before I could ring the bell, and a young girl stared up at me. Her mouth dropped open.

Another girl appeared. She was closer to Margo's age.

I silently cursed myself for not waiting just another moment.

"Caleb," the older girl blurted out. "Right?"

My lip curled. How did she know my name?

Their foster mother appeared behind them. "Girls? What—oh, hello. Can I help you with something?"

"I just wanted to speak to you," I said.

Foster siblings.

*Interesting.*

How attached did she get to them?

Cindy, the foster mom, huffed at me. She was in a certain state of distress: her hair still had curlers in it, her makeup seemed mostly finished, but she still wore pajama pants.

"Come in, then," she said.

She called to her husband, and suddenly the three of us were in the kitchen.

I looked down at the table we had gathered around. There were dirty bowls—only two of them, one was by the sink—and a half-drunk glass of milk. The husband was a bit frazzled, too, with his hair sticking up straight and his tie loose.

"I must commend you both on taking on such a problem foster," I said to

them.

“Problem foster?” Cindy asked. She turned to her husband, raising her eyebrows. “Claire?”

My eyebrow ticked up.

“You don’t mean Margo,” the husband, Jeff, said. “She’s been a saint.”

“She’s a good actress,” I lied.

I pretended to this family that I knew her. That I could see right into her soul and know the truth.

The foster parents were worried. I saw it in the lines creasing between their brows, and the way they glanced at each other.

“She gets jealous easily,” I said.

Cindy’s hand was resting on her stomach, and I went with my hunch.

“She can dissolve into fits of rage. I saw it happen a time or two. I can’t imagine what she would do if there was a baby in the house stealing all the attention.”

Jeff shook his head. “How do you know that?”

“We used to be friends.” I shook my head. “But she caused my father’s death and broke apart her whole family. She’s destructive. Dangerous. Even if...” My lips twisted. “Even if she acts like a saint.”

“Two years,” Cindy said faintly. “Two years we’ve had these children, and Margo...”

I watched her. It only took an ounce of doubt to infect her viewpoint. She was already classed as a runaway—what next?

“Thank you for letting us know,” Jeff said. “But why now?”

I glanced away. Part of the act. Shame, guilt. “I lost track of her, and honestly? I thought she might get better. But then I saw her the other day, and she was acting just the same as she used to.”

I never saw her. Today was first time I even glimpsed her in a year, and it was the back of her head.

*It wasn’t enough.*

But soon, she’d be back. Time was running out, and a certain foster home had opened up in Rose Hill.

Did I have a hand in it? No.

Did my uncle? Well, he never denied it.

It was my time to leave. Cindy and Jeff didn’t strike me as particularly trusting people, and they were starting to eye me. It may not be an immediate decision to make Margo move on, but as I said—an ounce of doubt was all

they needed.

Just out the door, and Margo's foster sister—the older one—was waiting for me.

“You are Caleb, aren't you?” she asked.

I raised my eyebrow.

She grinned at me, eyes wide. “You're more handsome than she said.”

“She shouldn't be talking about me.” I let my gaze run up and down her body. “And you shouldn't be talking to me.”

“I've never been one to follow the rules.” She winked. “Nice meeting you, Caleb. I'll see you around.”



## MARGO

THE DINER IS FOREVER AWAY. While Riley drives, I flip through the yearbook. There's nothing connecting Masters to the Ashers. In fact, it would appear that he ran in an entirely different circle. Until I get to the last page, which appears to have student-submitted photographs.

"Holy shit," I whisper.

It's Jim Masters, and his arm is hooked around my dad's neck. They're surrounded by other students in some sort of academic competition. There're wearing the school uniform from back then, and one of the girls in front holds a trophy.

"What?" Riley asks.

"He knew my dad."

"This is all sorts of messed up," she mutters. "I looked in the journal while you were inside. The most recent entry was from a few days ago, and it's seriously twisted."

I close the yearbook and reach for the notebook, skimming through until I get to the last page with writing on it.

*Why is she so obsessed with him? She hasn't done anything to deserve his attention. She doesn't deserve him.*

The last line is underlined three times, and it seems like she wrote over each sentence three times.

"Lydia wrote this?"

Riley shrugs. "It sounds weird, right?"

I go back to the beginning, turning the pages slower.

"Wait..." The car slows as we come up to a red light, and I show her the



page. “Does this handwriting look different?”

“What do the earlier ones sound like?”

I open to a page dated mid-2010 and read, “Ben was not happy with my admission. Unfortunately for him, he doesn’t have a choice over my body and what I choose to do with it. I fear our marriage won’t overcome this.” I squint at the page. “She moves on to talking about some art project Caleb brought home from school.”

“So, they didn’t have the happiest of marriages.”

I scan the pages, finally finding one from July. “Okay. Oh god.”

“Read it!”

I clear my throat. “It had to happen. My poor baby. It was easy enough to hide from the kids, but Ben... I fear he’s never going to look at me the same. I know he’s taken a lover to get back at me. The betrayal stings. I thought he would be better than this.”

“Shit,” Riley says.

We’re both quiet for a moment.

Then she asks, “What do you think she means by that? What had to happen?”

“Something she hid from me and Caleb,” I guess. “Which could be anything.”

“We’re almost there.”

I grab her arm. “Park around the corner. Just in case.”

“Roger that.” She glances at me. “Should we call someone?”

“Like the police?”

“Well... *yeah*.”

I bite my lip. She parks near the diner, and we both hop out. I draw my jacket closer around me. The wind is fierce downtown, funneled between taller buildings.

“We don’t know if anything is wrong,” I eventually say. “Unknown—*Claire*—has been targeting me this whole time. Why suddenly take Caleb?”

“Classic villain move,” she murmurs. “He’s the bait.”

We get to the first window of the diner, and I hold her back. Carefully, I push up on my tiptoes and peek inside.

I don’t see Caleb, but Claire is pacing up and down the main aisle. I crane even farther. Maybe he’s sitting in the short row of booths, just out of my sight.

Claire turns toward the window, and I duck.

“Did she see you?” Riley hisses.

“I don’t think so. I couldn’t see Caleb, either.” I steer Riley back around the corner, to safety. “There’s always a back entrance, right? For safety?”

She stares at me. “You’re not seriously—”

“She has Caleb.” I’m firm but also shaking. My hands tremble. “And if she does anything to him... Yeah, absolutely not. I can’t just sit out here.”

“Fine.” She pulls out her phone. “I’ll call them.”

“Good idea. May as well tell Eli’s dad, too. I have a feeling at least one of us is going to need a lawyer.”

She groans, but I ignore it. I jog around to the alley and slip into it. The street is deserted, which is the weirdest part. Not a single car has passed us. Then again, this area of town is run-down. Old and tired. The corner of the brick building is chipped and crumbling, and the alley is gross.

I stop in front of a large metal door. Someone put a *Lucky’s* sticker on it. A big leprechaun with a green hat, the name of the diner in thick yellow script, and it’s skewed to the left.

The door very well may be locked.

Claire could have Caleb at knifepoint or something.

Taking a deep breath, I twist the door handle. It opens easily, and I pause. Listen.

I can’t hear anything.

*Here goes nothing.*

I slip in through the back door, careful to shut it soundlessly behind me. I creep through the kitchen and realize that everything in me has gone quiet. My hands aren’t shaking, my heart has slowed.

The sound of sirens is faint, but it raises goosebumps along my arms.

I duck down next to the fridge when Claire appears in the window.

“Get over here,” she snaps. “Who the hell called the police?”

“Oh, maybe anyone who walked by and saw you waving a gun around,” Caleb answers. “Not your brightest move.”

*Holy shit.* Grateful for that piece of information, but also—where the fuck did Claire get a gun? I wouldn’t know the first place to look for one, or how to use it.

She pivots. “What was my brightest move?”

“Hmm... probably using my mother the way you did. I can only assume you pushed her into this.”

“Me?” She laughs. “I was *elated* when I discovered whose house we were going to. David and Iris Asher. They have pictures of the family on the wall, you know. David caught me staring at your photo one day and asked if I knew you. The whole story just poured out—”

“Whole story? What, that you saw me once, a few weeks prior?”

My heart goes into my throat.

What am I doing, just crouching here? I came in to make a difference. To save Caleb from the evil bitch I thought was my foster sister.

“Claire,” I call, rising. I shove through the swinging doors. “Don’t shoot me.”

She’s behind the counter, just where I thought. And Caleb, between us, is on the floor. He leans against the wall, his wrists duct taped.

His eyebrows go up, but other than that, his face stays blank.

I hate that she’s made him put the mask back up.

“Well, well, well.” She sounds like she’s quoting a bad movie. “Look what the cat dragged in.”

“Apt analogy, since apparently you like to think of me as a bird.”

She grins. “I knew you’d understand.”

“You wrote about it,” I continue. “Where you thought we wouldn’t find it.”

Her expression drops. “You went in my room?”

Always so possessive.

Any feeling of sisterly love I was holding on to drains away. Claire will kill us all if she’s allowed to continue.

“I did. Found your newspaper shrine, the picture...”

Am I purposefully instigating her?

Yep. Anything to get her away from Caleb.

She stalks toward me, shoving the gun into my chest. “Sit down.”

Cold fear pulses through me for the first time. There’s a look in her eyes that I haven’t seen before. It makes me think she’s been dreaming about this moment for a long time.

I start to sit next to Caleb, and she screams, lashing out. She shoves me away, still shrieking.

“You don’t get it! He’s not yours anymore!”

I raise my hands in surrender. “Okay, okay.”

Her head lifts. The sirens are getting louder—not just coincidence anymore. They’re screaming toward us.

Her eyes fill with tears, and she crouches next to Caleb. “Did you call the cops on me, Margo? Afraid I might hurt your precious boyfriend?”

“I didn’t call the police.”

She clicks her tongue. “Change of plan. Up. Into the kitchen.”

I rise from my half-crouch, risking a glance at Caleb. His eyes are on me.

Claire shoves me into the kitchen, seeming unconcerned about Caleb behind her. She presses the gun into my spine, and I leap forward, getting away from her.

“What started this?” I ask, glancing back at her.

She just scoffs. “*You* started this.”

“How on earth?”

“Come along, Caleb, or I’ll shoot Margo in the spine. Probably won’t kill her, but she’ll sure as hell never walk again.”

He growls behind us. “This isn’t the way to do things.”

“Just get in here,” she snaps. She grabs my shoulder, pulling me back against her.

I grit my teeth, seriously regretting my decision.

“Sit down next to the stove,” she orders him.

He slips past us and lowers himself to the floor. He’d probably do anything to protect me—including listening to whatever she said. *Fuck*. Maybe he has this handled.

Maybe Claire is going to kill us both.

“This wasn’t all you,” I try. “Right? You had help.”

She sighs. Her breath hits the back of my neck. “Six months ago, I was just a girl with a crush on someone I’d never even met. The way you talked about him when you were kids...”

She leaves me standing in the middle of the galley and crouches next to Caleb. He doesn’t move as she runs the tip of the gun down his temple.

“Stop touching him,” I snap.

Caleb’s jaw tics.

“You’re not in charge here,” she says. She trades the gun for her finger, sliding it down his jaw. “Is she, Caleb? Tell her she’s not in charge. *I*’m the one with the power.”

“Power. Is that what you think Caleb is going to give you?” I shake my head, balling my hands into fists.

*I could just charge at her.* But then she’d probably shoot me, or maybe Caleb.

I run my hands up and down my thighs, and freeze when my palm hits the clip of the knife Liam gave me.

*Shit.*

We're lucky she didn't see it. Didn't pat me down and freak out.

Slowly, I pull it out and slip it into my jacket pocket.

And meanwhile, Caleb's eyes are tracking my every movement. Claire... her nose is in his hair.

She stands and laughs. "Power, you said? Hmm, what an interesting idea."

"What, then?"

The gun is loose in her grip, and she waves it around as she looks between Caleb and me. "I was a girl with a crush, and then he became someone real. He came to our house to destroy us—but he only destroyed *me*. Look at you. You're fine. A rich family that gives a shit—"

"And how did he destroy you?"

"Bet he didn't expect Cindy and Jeff to kick *all* of us out. Hanna and you got good deals. Families. And me..."

"You live with Caleb's aunt and uncle," I blurt out. "With your sister. How—"

"She is *not my sister!*" Claire shrieks. "She belongs with them."

I tilt my head. "You read Lydia's journals? That's why you started writing in them. Because you'd read about—"

*My poor baby.*

Twelve years ago, Lydia did something so awful, Ben wrote her out of his will. Something awful that she hid from us. And in revenge...

"Is Hanna Caleb's half sister?"

Claire's lips twist. So she came to the same conclusion I did, but she has no relation to the Ashers. Not through Ben. And that's not how custody works, anyway. You don't drop off a kid with her mother's deceased husband's brother.

"David and Lydia?"

"What?" Caleb chokes out.

Claire laughs. Tips her head back and lets it pour out of her. "Isn't it ironic that you got Caleb's dad killed for sleeping with your mom, and meanwhile, Caleb's mom was fucking his *brother?*"

"More like fucked up," I whisper.

Caleb shakes his head, faster to process than me. "Where do you come

into play, Claire?”

“My parents adopted Hanna,” she says quietly, hopping up onto one of the counters. “Apparently my birth caused some complications in the form of a full hysterectomy, and Mom wasn’t ready to be done. Hanna never knew. One minute we were a family, and the next, they were carrying in a newborn.”

“Does she know now?” I ask.

“I’m sure.” She laughs. “We went to a group home, and some man came in to meet us. They DNA tested her. Came back soon after, said she was coming with him.”

“She made them take you, too.” Caleb scoffs. “Of course. She’s nice and you’re...”

“Not,” Claire finishes. She grins. “We complete each other’s sentences.”

I bite my tongue so I don’t say something I’ll regret.

The phone on the wall rings, and all three of us jump.

She stares at it. “They’re closed. Why is it ringing?”

“It’s probably for you,” Caleb points out. “You know, to negotiate.”

Her eyes light up. “Margo, answer it.”

I approach it slowly, like it’s going to attack me. “Hello?”

“Claire Evans, this is the Beacon Hill Police Department. My name is—”

“Um, this is Margo.” I lick my lips. “She made me answer the phone.”

“Margo—”

“Ms. Wolfe,” Detective Masters says, seemingly taking over the phone call. “You weren’t supposed to go in there.”

“She needed someone to talk to.” I glance at Claire.

She waves the gun at me. “What do they want?”

“Can you tell us if anyone is hurt?” Masters asks.

“No. Caleb and I are okay.”

“We just want to resolve this peacefully.”

“What is he *saying*?” Claire snaps.

My temper is fraying. “If you wanted to know, you should’ve answered the damn phone.”

She comes over and snatches it, shoving me away. In the years we lived together, she never laid a hand on me. Now it’s twice.

I go to Caleb, immediately ripping at the tape on his wrists. It’s useless. She wound it around so thick, I’d need scissors to break through it.

“You okay?” He leans his forehead to mine. “You shouldn’t have come in

here.”

“Don’t.” I glare at him. “If something happened to you—”

His taped hands come up and grab the front of my shirt, hauling me to him.

He slams his lips against mine, fast and furious.

When he pulls away a second later, I narrow my eyes. “That better not have been your way of saying—”

“Margo,” Claire says.

Caleb’s grip slips from my shirt, and I straighten.

I raise my eyebrow. The phone is back on the wall, and she saunters toward us. My attention goes to the gun, which she’s slowly raising in my direction.

“Step away from Caleb,” she orders. “He isn’t yours anymore.”

“Like hell,” I mutter.

She slaps me.

My head whips to the side, pain exploding across my cheek and jaw. She just *hit* me.

“You’re lucky I didn’t shoot you,” she says. “Maybe I just should and get it over with.”

She cocks the safety, and my heart stops.

And then Caleb is between us. His closeness forces me to step back, and we keep going until my hip hits one of the counters.

“Always the freaking knight in shining armor,” Claire says. “Saving her again?”

“Saving you,” he answers. “How do you expect to walk out of here if you shoot either of us?”

Her eyes round.

“Besides, we were having a conversation. Remember?” He rolls his shoulders. “How did they know Hanna was my mom’s kid?”

Claire purses her lips. “I don’t know.”

He takes a step forward. “You’re smarter than most. You didn’t figure it out?”

She lifts her chin. “Lydia had kept papers of the adoption contract. Once the Ashers discovered them... It was just a matter of time before they took her back.”

Dirty little sneak.

“And then I found her diary, and it was painfully obvious what had

happened.” She hops back up on the counter. “She documented all of it.”

Caleb glances back at me, raising his eyebrow.

He’s asking, *Did you find that?*

I barely lower my chin. The most silent yes I can manage.

“Then what, Claire?”

I admit, I want to know, too. I try not to show it—leaning backward and crossing my arms instead of leaning in. His hands are still bound in front of him, but somehow he portrays *sincere* so much better than me.

My wrists itch just thinking about the duct tape residue, and I dig my nails into my palms.

“Then...” She shrugs, smiling.

I’ve seen that face before. Devious, cunning Claire, who used to lie through her teeth when it suited her. How many times had Hanna and I covered for her when she snuck out? She’d serenely tell our foster parents that she was just in the bathroom when they checked, then laugh behind their backs.

My stomach twists.

“Did you blackmail her?” I ask.

Her gaze hardens. “Blackmail? I just told her what I knew. It was *her* idea to break you apart. After the scheme your mom and her tried went wrong—” Her lips press together. “Oops, I wasn’t supposed to tell you that.”

“Our moms were planning something?” Caleb takes another step toward Claire.

She lifts one shoulder. “I don’t remember.”

Slowly, I pull the journal out of my pocket. “Would this help you remember?”

She pushes off one of the counters. “Give that to me.”

The phone on the wall rings.

“Shut up!” she screams at it. “I just need some freaking quiet!”

I shrink away from her, snatching at the back of Caleb’s shirt. He shouldn’t stand so close to a lunatic. I tug, but he doesn’t budge.

“Have Margo answer it,” Caleb suggests.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

“Trust me,” he replies through his teeth.

I do. There was once a time when I would’ve said I didn’t, but that seems far in the past.

Claire grabs at her hair. The gun is abandoned on the counter behind her,



and it's all I can focus on.

"Margo, do it," she snaps.

I slip past Caleb. I could go around Claire, down a different aisle—and put the kitchen's center countertop between us—or... I walk toward her. My heart hammers, and I keep my eyes wide.

Looking fearful—of Claire, and also what I'm about to do—isn't an act.

She moves to the side.

The phone keeps ringing and ringing.

Two feet away, then one. She groans, her hands releasing her hair and sliding down her face.

*This is your moment*, a voice in my head whispers.

It's a combination of Dad and Caleb. Liam and Riley and Robert and Lenora.

I throw myself sideways, into Claire. We topple, but I grasp the counter to keep from going down.

She shrieks as she falls, her fingers sliding against the smooth material of my jacket. She locks on to my wrist and yanks me down with her.

Forget the gun.

I fall on top of her. My elbow digs into her stomach, and she lets out an *oof*.

But that can't just be the end of it. She's a fighter.

She grips my hair, yanking my head back, and we flip. My scalp stings at the pressure.

I flail. My elbow vibrates all the way down to my fingers when I make contact with bone—shoulder or head, I can't tell. She punches me, her fist skating across my jaw. My cheek cuts into my teeth, and blood fills my mouth.

I scramble to my knees and dive for her, pinning her arms above her head. Once I've straddled her, I lean to one side and spit out blood.

"Let go of me, you freak!" She thrashes. "You're ruining everything! You're dead, you hear me?"

"I've had enough of your bullshit," I answer. Just like with Matt, I cock my fist back and let it fly. I'm readier for the pain that skitters across my knuckles.

Her head snaps to the side.

We never fought when we lived together, but she sure did know how to get on my nerves.

This was a long time coming.

Caleb grabs me under the arms, hauling me up and away. “That was hot.”

I glance at him. His arms are free. He pulls the rest of the tape off, his eyes on me. I turn to Claire, who is slowly climbing to her feet.

“You’re going to pay for that.” She wipes blood off her mouth with the back of her hand, then looks around.

I find the gun at the same time she does, and we both go for it.

Her fingers graze the barrel, but I’m faster.

I yank it away and swing around. She stops dead when I level it at her chest. My thumb flicks the safety off.

“Just try me,” I warn. “You’ve been harassing me for months. You put a dead bird in my room. Where did that even come from? Pretty bird?”

She stares at me. It would appear that she’s unafraid of the gun. “You don’t remember?”

I stay silent.

She tips her head back and laughs. “Oh, the irony. The answer is in your *hand*. In your past, too. And I couldn’t resist—it was so much fun ruffling your feathers.”

Caleb grimaces. “You weren’t at Emery-Rose. How did you get that inside knowledge?”

Claire grins. “Amelie was more than happy to assist.”

“I doubt that,” I say.

“You’re right,” she answers. “She was more than happy to assist *after* I blackmailed her.”

“With what?” I glance from Claire to Caleb, hoping to unspin the mysteries. My head is starting to hurt with all the new information, but... adrenaline keeps my focus on the present.

Claire shrugs. “I can’t give away *all* my secrets. What’s to stop them from bursting in here?” She rubs at her eyes. “You’re the one with the gun in your hand. Are you going to shoot me, Margo?”

“I might,” I whisper. “You’d deserve it.”

“I’ll go away for whatever crimes they can pin on me, but I didn’t do anything bad.”

“You *kidnapped* me!” Left me for dead in an abandoned barn.

I could do it.

I could shoot her.

All I would have to do is pull the trigger.

My vision tunnels onto Claire. She appears innocent, but she's not. She's going to walk out of the interrogation room and hurt someone.

"You don't feel anything, do you?" I ask her.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" She pinches at her skin of her arm, twisting it. "Do you think I feel pain? You could find out. Watch me scream. Come on, Margo, it's easy. I know you're thinking about it."

I readjust my grip on the gun. I've never hurt anyone, but she's under my skin. Pulling me down with her.

It's easy to let her manipulate the situation. To get drunk on control. *I'm* the one with the power.

"Am I still in a cage, Claire?"

Caleb touches my arm. He's such a presence at my side, my whole body hums with awareness.

"Come back to me," he whispers.

I shudder. My eyes are fastened on Claire, but she's slowly backing away. Her face is pale, and she... she looks young.

So much younger than she did a moment ago, when our lives were in her hand.

He slides between us, taking the gun out of my hands and setting it on the counter. I let him. It slips out of my fingers easily, and I exhale once I'm free of it.

He tips my chin up, inspecting my face.

Claire isn't a threat anymore. Somehow the tide shifted when we fought, and she's retreating.

I stare up into Caleb's light-blue eyes, wondering when I'll come back to myself.

The back door flies open. It crashes into the wall.

He wraps his arms around me, pulling me down.

Someone screams, and the police flood in. We stay crouched together as they sweep the area.

They're a river of dark-blue jackets and weapons.

"Mr. Asher and Ms. Wolfe," a familiar voice says.

I meet Detective Masters' eyes.

"You're safe." He offers his hand.

I let him help me up. Caleb rises with me, keeping one hand on my hip.

The detective's attention goes to Caleb's wrists. He points out the obvious: "Duct tape."

“Claire bound me,” Caleb says. “It’s a long story.”

“No doubt. Josh is waiting for you both outside, as are your foster parents, Margo.” He lifts his chin toward the door into the main diner. “Let’s go out the front.”

“That’s it?” I ask. I can’t help it. “It’s over?”

“Claire tried to run. She’s in custody. We have some questions for her, and then... we’ll figure out where she goes from there.”

“She said she didn’t act alone,” I blurt out, stopping. The journal is back in my pocket, safely tucked away. What kind of evidence will it actually be? Anyone could’ve written in it.

I can see Robert and Lenora huddled together by an ambulance, and my stomach twists.

I continue, “There are things you don’t know. Big-picture things.”

Masters nods. “There’s a time to figure all that out, okay? Right now, I’d like to see a happy reunion. Don’t want to keep them waiting, right?”

Caleb laces his fingers with mine, squeezing my hand.

Masters walks out the front door, holding it open for us, but Caleb keeps me back.

“Whatever dark hole you crawl down,” he says, pressing a kiss to my temple, “I’ll drag you out of it.”

Tears fill my eyes.

That’s exactly what he did.

And he’ll have to do it again, because I’m still there. Drowning in the past that’s suddenly right in front of my eyes.



## CALEB

I WRAP my arm around Margo's shoulders. She's shaking like a leaf, but I don't think she even realizes. Her expression doesn't change from the worried scowl when we go outside, crossing the street to where the ambulances have parked.

Robert and Lenora rush toward us. They surprise me by not waiting until we're separated. They throw their arms around both of us, so it's like a weird, crying huddle.

I pat Robert's back, but my gaze is on Margo.

There's something in her expression that has me on edge.

The concern, more than anything, is the driving force pushing away my anger. She went into the diner when she *knew* Claire was dangerous. I could've handled it, but Margo played right into Claire's hand. Of course Claire wanted the three of us in the same room, with herself in control.

The EMTs check out Margo and I as soon as Robert and Lenora release us. We sit on the back step. Margo's hand is loose in mine.

She's still not here.

"Caleb," Mr. Black calls. He puts his hand on my shoulder once he gets to us. "Thank God you're all right."

"We made it out in one piece," I say.

Margo shakes her head. "Did we?"

"I think Uncle David has Amberly," I tell him. "Can you tell Detective Masters?"

Mr. Black's eyebrow raises. "What makes you think that?"

"Mom called this morning. Eli and I went over, and her apartment had

been ransacked. She didn't say as much, but..."

"Got it." He crouches next to Margo. "You okay?"

"Fine, Mr. Black, thank you," she says.

"That's a good girl."

She looks up at the EMT hovering nearby. "When can we go home?"

"I just need a statement," Masters answers, approaching with Eli's dad close behind.

"A statement," Margo repeats.

"Can this wait, Detective? They just went through a traumatic experience —"

"Which means we should go over it while it's fresh," Masters finishes.

I really hate that man.

"Can we do it now?" I ask.

Masters scans my body, taking inventory of my bumps and bruises. "Okay. Come with me."

We both stand, but he waves at Margo. "No, just one at a time. That's how this works—I get you to tell me what happened, then Margo's version. Then Claire's."

I grunt, slowly releasing her hand. "I'll be right back."

She doesn't react. Her attention is fixed on her hands.

He leads me to his car. "Get in."

"The back?"

He chuckles. "No, front's fine."

I slide into the passenger seat, and he cranks the heat.

"So. What happened?"

I recount the events. Claire showing up on my running route, telling me about an accident. She pulled out the gun when I questioned her about a wrong turn, and... everything went downhill.

"Did you think about getting the gun away from her?"

I shrug. "I don't know anything about firearms, sir."

"Sir." He chuckles. "Haven't heard that out of an Asher's mouth in a while."

Time for some honesty. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"You went to Emery-Rose, right? Did you know my dad?" I have a feeling that's the reason behind the weird anger he directed at me. Caleb Asher, son of the infamous Benjamin Asher. The expression, *like father, like*

son exists for a reason, doesn't it?

He sighs. "Yeah, I knew of him. I was friends with Keith."

I sit up straight. "Keith Wolfe."

"Fresh out of the academy, and my first case was your dad's death. The lead detective followed the lines right to Keith." He shakes his head. "I'm sorry you saw your dad like that. I knew they were friends, even though Ben was always a bully in school."

"A bully," I repeat. "To you?"

"No. Not to me. Other guys in school. The random girl." He shifts. "Keith was good. At least, I thought..."

"He's innocent," I blurt out.

When did I start believing that?

*Probably around the same time you fell in love with Margo.*

I shove *that* thought neatly to the back of my mind.

"Do you have evidence to back that up?"

"I don't. But Claire admitted that Amberly and my mom were scheming. And Hanna—"

"Evans? Claire's sister?"

"Right. She's actually my mom's daughter. I'm sure you can verify that through adoption records." I'm making a plea. Practically begging the detective to listen to me. I'm holding his attention, but it might not last. "I don't know what Margo's mom and mine had planned, but I think they wanted to get back at my dad."

His expression turns thoughtful. "The case was very cut-and-dried. Fingerprints on the knife he used..."

"A knife that anyone in the house had access to?" I twist toward him. "Tobias Hutchins, his lawyer, screwed him over."

"Proof, Caleb. If your goal is to exonerate Keith, I need more."

I run my hand over my face. "I just... we know he's innocent. He got caught up in a shitstorm."

He exhales. "Okay. We'll talk to Amberly and Lydia, see if anything comes of it. They're involved in this, one way or another."

"Right."

"So," he prompts, "Claire drove you here. Then what?"

"She was ranting." I close my eyes. "She duct taped my wrists, and all I could think about was how worried Margo was going to be when I didn't come back."



“Claire has been living with the Ashers,” Detective Masters says. “We did a background check on her. She has a full and colorful file, to say the least.”

“And my uncle is an abusive asshole,” I grumble. I can’t believe I just said that out loud. “What happens if he’s arrested for... literally anything?”

“Happens with what?”

“He presides over my inheritance,” I say. “But I’m pretty sure the clause in there says only if he remains in good standing with the law.”

Wait.

*Maybe Dad knew what kind of devil his brother was.* So why entrust the money to him?

I fling the door open. “Sorry, I’ve got to talk to Mr. Black.”

I rush toward where Mr. Black is waiting with Margo and blurt out, “You presided over my dad’s will.”

He squints at me. “Are you okay?”

“You presided over my dad’s will. You know what it says—your firm has the papers.”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“I need to see it.”

Margo reaches out and hooks her index finger with mine.

She’s with me.

Mr. Black shrugs. “Okay. Let me just tell the detective that he can get Margo’s statement at the station tomorrow. I also informed the police that Amberly’s whereabouts are unknown. They’re going to look for her. Wait right here, I’ll be back in a flash.”

Robert and Lenora press closer. They’d been silent up until now, blending into the background.

“Margo?” Lenora asks. “You okay, honey?”

She shrugs. “Just...”

She’s shutting down before our very eyes, but her finger is still gripping mine.

“Is it okay if Margo comes with me and Mr. Black?” I ask them. “I’ll have her home before eight.”

Margo sucks in a breath, but she doesn’t say anything.

Lenora strokes Margo’s hair. “Is that what you want?”

“I’d like to stay with Caleb,” she answers.

Mr. Black comes back. “We’re good to go.”

Margo rises, letting Robert and Lenora hug her again. She withdraws rather quickly, looping her arm through mine. She hugs my arm tightly, fingers digging into my biceps.

Worry tugs at me.

In the car, we both sit in the back seat. Eli's dad gives me a look, but after a second of watching Margo in the rearview mirror, he nods.

I trace patterns on her leg.

"We're going to the city?" she asks, lifting her head.

"Yes, my office is downtown," he says. "I grabbed you a water bottle, Margo."

I take the bottle he holds over his shoulder, and she takes a few sips.

"What's going on in that head of yours?" I whisper.

She shifts, pulling the small journal out of her pocket. "Claire never did get her hands on this."

She flips it open, seemingly searching for something.

And then she sucks in a breath, handing it over to me.

*AMBERLY WAS SINGING TODAY. She never mentioned having a voice, but it's surprisingly good. I stayed out of the kitchen and closed my eyes, trying to remember the last time the house was full of happiness.*

*Well before I destroyed it, that's for sure.*

*I asked myself if she was singing to Ben, and it almost killed me not knowing. I crept through the house and finally gave in, peeking around the corner. I felt like Caleb on one of his spy missions.*

*It wasn't Ben—it was Margo. Amberly had her daughter on the counter while she worked bread dough beside her.*

*She was singing Blackbird by The Beatles.*

*Telling her daughter to escape this house, maybe?*

*"Take your broken wings and learn to fly." The line Margo was later repeating to herself in the yard.*

*She looked at me and asked why her wings were broken, and I hated to say it was because of us. What Amberly and I were doing to our families.*

*What I had already done.*

*What did I say? Something like, "You're a pretty little bird, Margo. Our wings let us fly, but they're also fragile. Protect your wings."*

*She seemed to like that.*

I SHAKE MY HEAD. “She *was* scheming.”

“Pretty little bird,” Margo says. “From Lydia. From my mother.”

“Claire read it. The whole thing, probably. Whatever happened between our parents... I don’t think it was your dad’s fault. Or yours.”

“You’re right.”

I meet her eyes. “I... am?”

She sighs, tipping her head back. “Yeah. Let me tell you what really happened.”



**MARGO**

## Past

I FIDGETED BY THE SINK. Dad was at the kitchen table, reading a newspaper, but he kept glancing at me. It was rare that he wasn't working in the middle of the afternoon. Nice, too. I crept back home. The door to Mr. Asher's office was closed when I passed it, and Mom's car was gone.

"You seem off, kiddo," Dad said. "Everything okay?"

After Mom left me in Caleb's room, Mr. Asher had rounded on me and demanded to know what I saw. I tentatively told him all of it.

And Caleb hadn't been surprised. That was the worst part. He had a dead look in his eye while I spoke, and after...

He had come alive, grabbing my shoulders the same way Mom had. *Please don't say anything. It'll ruin everything.*

I shook my head, and then I remembered Mom's plea.

"All good," I managed.

He set down the paper and twisted toward me. "The truth, now?"

The gate opening drew my attention. Mom nudged it closed with her foot, her arms full of brown paper bags. Any minute now, she was going to walk in and see the expression on my face.

The look that was one hundred percent guilt.

Dad saw it. A flash of fear.

"You saw them?" he asked in a low voice.

I jerked toward him. "I d-didn't mean to."

Mom came in and stopped short. Her gaze went from my face to Dad's. "Margo, what did you do?"

Dad stood. "Amberly."

The bags fell from Mom's hands in slow motion, but the way she moved wasn't slow at all. She was suddenly in front of me, her hand on my chin. She forced my head up, until I met her eyes.

"Tell me what you said."

Tears filled my eyes, but I kept my mouth shut. I didn't say anything. I was going to keep her secret.

"Margo!" she screamed. Her fingers dug into my shoulders, and she shook me. Violently. My head snapped back. She yanked me toward her and away, movements brutal and jerky. "What did you do?"

For a second, everything was still and quiet. Her voice rang in my ears.

And then Dad was there, prying her away from me.

I fell backward. My head hit the edge of the table, and white spots exploded like fireworks in front of my vision. My head throbbed, pain radiating over my skull. I could barely keep my eyes open, but I saw Mom looming above me.

Dad shoved her—the first act of violence I’d ever seen from him—and lifted me into his arms. He carried me down the hall, into my room, and set me on the bed.

In the other room, Mom was screaming. She must’ve been throwing things, because the sound of breaking glass came through the doorway.

“Stay here,” he ordered. “Please, Margo.”

I touched the back of my head. My fingers came away wet with blood, and I burst into tears.

There was so much yelling.

I ran to my door—to escape, to take the blame—but the knob wouldn’t turn.

“*You ruined everything!*” Mom screamed.

I flinched away from the door.

“I ruined everything?” Dad yelled back. “You cannot seriously be pinning this on me, Amberly.”

“Like hell I can’t. I had a plan! A way out of this godforsaken *home!*”

*Crash.* Then... silence.

“Daddy!” I screamed, beating at the door.

No one came for me. I beat and scratched at the door, kicked it, slammed my body against it. It didn’t budge.

I backed away, then looked down at my hands. They were covered in blood. Then the pain came, edging through the numbness.

I had kept her secret, but Dad *knew*. He knew, and she blamed me.

“Mom,” I moaned and sunk to my knees. “I didn’t tell.”

Ages later, the door swung open. Dad came in and knelt in front of me, picking up my hands. He inspected the damage.

His whole face was eons of sadness.

“Want to go somewhere happy?” He scooped me up. “Let’s clean your hands off.”

He carried me into the bathroom and gently cleaned my hands, wincing for me at the shredded nails. They stung under the warm, soapy water, but I didn’t say anything.

I didn't ask where Mom was.

Or where they both had been.

"Up you go," he said.

I was in his arms again, hugging him like an octopus. He carried me to the car, and then we went to the park. I didn't see Mom, or anyone else. Not until the detective and social worker showed up.



## Present

"I didn't do it," I finish lamely. I'm back to inspecting my nails, like I'd be able to see a trace of the past in them.

He's been staring at me while I relayed what I remember, but now...

"God," he chokes out.

This is where he says it was only revenge, and now that the need for it is suddenly gone...

I lick my lips, imagining I can still taste his goodbye kiss on my lips. We could've died. *He* could've died. That was where things were heading. After all, Claire was disintegrating before our eyes.

How long would it have taken for Caleb to bleed out if she shot him?

"Stop," he orders.

I blink at him.

"Your thoughts are turning bleak, love."

Josh has been listening in silence, but now he says, "We're coming up on it now."

I lean toward the window. "This feels... familiar."

Caleb smirks. "Because we came here when we got our masks."

"You left me in the lobby."

His smirk widens into a grin. "Yep."

Josh shakes his head.

We park in a garage, circling down until we get to an empty row of spaces. One of the spots has a placard engraved with, *Josh Black, Esq.*

"Fancy," I say.

"Beats hunting for a spot," he answers.

We all pile out and into the elevator.

"What did you come here for before?" I ask.

"Any time David wants to make big changes, Caleb signs off on them," Josh answers. "While it first appeared that David had full control over Caleb's assets, there were strict rules implemented to keep everyone honest. It requires continual upkeep."

"Until now," Caleb mutters.

His firm is a lot like Tobias's. On a high floor, with huge windows letting light stream into offices and the bullpen. No one is around at this time of evening. The sun has set, casting everything in a twilight-blue hue.

He flips on the light, and we head to his office.

I sit on the couch, pulling my legs up so I can wrap my arms around them. Josh goes to his filing system, locating a thick envelope. Caleb and him go to the desk, and they both pore over it.

Finally, Caleb taps a paragraph. “I knew it!”

I sit up straighter. “What?”

He grins at me. “If Uncle is arrested, all assets immediately revert back to me.”

I bolt to my feet. “You—”

Josh shakes his head. “I’m sorry I didn’t notice this sooner, or even remember—”

“Caleb!”

They both jerk toward me.

“Your dad had to know that David was Hanna’s father, *and* that he was a monster. You...” My features soften. “You could’ve taken power back from your uncle all along.”

His face falls, and his gaze goes back to the will. At the bottom of the page is his dad’s signature, the looping *B* and spiked *A*.

He makes a call.

Josh and I trade a confused glance.

“Detective,” Caleb says.

My eyebrows hike up.

*He’s willingly calling Detective Masters?*

“I’ll do whatever has to be done.”

Ah, hell. I sink back onto the couch, dropping my head in my hands. Caleb’s slowly turning into the good guy, willing to do anything to set things right. Why does that make me think our troubles aren’t over?



## CALEB

DETECTIVE MASTERS ARRIVES in Josh's office in under an hour, accompanied by a woman who he introduces as Detective Carver with the NYPD. She carries a small soft-shell case.

"Brought her in because this is a jurisdictional nightmare," he tells us. "Claire started talking. She mentioned you had a notebook of hers?"

Margo blushes. "Yeah. It was Lydia's, and then Claire started writing in it."

He grunts. "Can I see it?"

She rises, pulling it out of her coat. He takes it carefully, flipping through it.

"We'll get this back to you," he tells her. "But I need to take this as evidence."

"I don't want it back," she says faintly. "If it helps..."

He nods, then turns to me. "Ready?"

"Can I...?" I motion for the journal. "Maybe Mom wrote about Tobias."

I skim through it. She *had* to have written about him.

Margo reads over my shoulder, and her hand shoots out. "There. T.H."

"He's still at work," Carver says, reading something off her phone. "We should go now. Ready?"

On the phone with Masters, I did something a little stupid. I volunteered to go talk to Tobias while wearing a wire.

I don't know how long it usually takes to obtain a warrant, but apparently there's enough evidence for them all to want to move with haste.

Carver reveals the thin piece of cord and medical tape, motioning to me.

I take a deep breath and remove my shirt. They work quickly, taping the microphone to my chest. I carefully pull my shirt back on, and Carver disappears into the hallway, her phone pressed to her ear.

“Testing?” I joke.

“You need to get him to admit to taking a bribe,” Detective Masters says. “And whatever else he tells you will be icing on the cake. Okay?”

My smile fades. “Got it.”

“Am I going?” Margo asks.

“Yes,” I say.

“No,” Masters says at the same time.

We glare at each other.

“She’s coming with me.” I’m not letting her out of my sight.

He sighs. “Fine. If anything goes south, you just say something about the weather—like, ‘I hear we’re going to have a hot summer.’ Some shit like that. Got it?”

“Yep.”

“What if he brings up the weather?” Margo asks.

Detective Masters groans. “Get creative.”

Josh frowns. “I don’t have a good feeling about this. What do you think will come of this?”

The detective’s gaze bounces around the three of us, then finally settles on Margo. “Claire told us that your mother’s affair with Ben Asher was planned between her and Lydia.”

I squint.

“Because of Hanna,” Margo says. Her voice is so low, we almost miss it. “This whole thing started because Lydia couldn’t keep her legs shut?”

I hide my smile behind my hand. My little wolf is coming back to herself.

“Ah—”

“Don’t answer that, Detective,” Josh says. “Let’s get this show on the road. I’d like nothing more than for this day to be over.”

We make the short trek to Tobias’s law firm. It’s just two blocks away, but Josh and the detective insist on driving. Carver nods at us from an unmarked car parked on the street. The van just ahead of her is probably filled with police officers. Or maybe it’s just one lonely tech listening to my breathing.

“You’re on your own from here,” Masters says. “Remember—”

“Weather means help,” I say. “Got it.”

“Good luck,” Josh says.

I take Margo’s hand as we walk into the building. “I can’t believe you came here without me.”

“What was I supposed to do? Ask you to accompany me while I ask him about my dad?” She shakes her head. “You didn’t believe me.”

“I do now,” I say. “Ever since I talked to him. Maybe even before that.”

She glances up at me. “Really?”

“Yes. I want your dad out of prison. I swear it.”

She smiles. “Thank you.”

I call elevator, and the doors slide open immediately. I hit the button for the law firm’s level, and the doors close. Silence descends. I’m too aware of the tape on my skin. The way Margo keeps sucking her lower lip into her mouth. If she wasn’t holding my hand, she’d be scratching her wrist. And... the silence is getting to me. Maybe my nerves are frayed from the day we’ve had, because a strange feeling is bubbling up inside me.

“I’m in love with you,” I blurt out. It’s about time I told her.

She freezes. “Huh?”

The elevator chimes, and the doors open.

*Way to ruin it.*

The floor is basically empty. We go past the receptionist’s abandoned desk. There are a few lawyers in the bullpen, at their cubicles with their heads bent. Some people never stop working. They’re itching to get ahead, so focused on the future that they forget to have lives.

They don’t notice us gliding past them.

I’m determined not to be like them. Not to shutter my gaze away from what’s happening around me.

Margo takes the lead. She’s been here before, and she seems to remember where she’s going. Around the cubicles, to one of the offices against the far wall.

Without knocking, Margo turns the knob and bursts inside.

Tobias Hutchins makes a choking noise in surprise. “Ms. Wolfe? What are you doing here?”

“She’s with me,” I say, stepping into the room.

He’s been afraid of me for a while. Since Mom once slipped that she knew him as *more than a friend* as she shuffled him out of Uncle David’s house. At the time, I thought they’d met at Keith’s trial. It was the natural connection.

But... I know the truth now.

"Ah, Mr. Asher," Tobias says. "What brings you... here?"

Margo pulls out the journal. "Do you recognize this?"

He says nothing—which is an answer in and of itself.

I take it from Margo's hand and stride closer. "She's quite a detail-oriented woman, my mother."

His eyes widen.

"She took note of every meeting, every chance encounter with our family. When everything goes sideways, who do you think will take the blame?"

"This is ridiculous—"

"You botched my father's trial," Margo snaps.

"It wasn't my idea." Tobias loosens his tie. "You think I ever wanted this for myself? That I thought I'd be sitting on..."

"On what? Guilt?"

"Blood money."

I lift my chin. "Who actually told you to do it?"

"Your mother was conniving." He goes to the window, yanking his tie completely off. "She said no one would know. No one would find out. The knife had his fingerprints on it."

Margo takes a step closer to me.

I tilt my head to the side. Rage has always felt strangely comforting to me. Like a security blanket I could wrap around my shoulders. I try to draw upon it now, but all I can muster is confusion.

Margo inches forward, until she's half blocking me from Tobias.

"Lydia pinned the whole thing on you."

*I wonder when she learned to lie so well.*

"Are you saying that isn't true?" She crosses her arms. "Look. We just came for the truth. If you can't give us that... I guess we'll see you at your court date." She shrugs and pivots on her heel. "Come on, Caleb. We were just trying to help. But apparently he thought of everything."

I follow her to the door. Doubt creeps up the farther we get, but I'm just about to step out when he calls, "Stop!"

We reenter the room.

"Sit. Please." He gestures to the chairs in front of his desk, then slumps into his own seat. Once we're comfortable, he gives me a look. "You know I had no choice."

"Do I?"

“Your uncle is a monster. He threatened to take away *everything* if I didn’t comply.”

I scowl. “How did he get to you?”

Tobias shifts. “I didn’t use legal methods to get through law school. I was a defender on a case his business partner was involved in, and he...” He clears his throat. “He got to me then. When this case came up, he and Lydia suggested I volunteer.”

“That’s my dad’s *life* you threw away,” Margo says. “Like it was nothing but saving your own ass.”

“And a payout, I’d imagine,” I say, leaning my elbow on the arm of the chair.

He glares at us. “Aren’t you listening? I didn’t have a *choice*.”

Margo opens the journal, practically tearing the pages with her force. “Two days before Caleb’s dad died, you were there. Lydia writes, ‘Tobias stopped by. He was nervous for what needed to be done. For our childrens’ sake, we’ve decided that I’m going to take them out.’ The next day: ‘Keith nearly ruined everything, but in the end, it worked out better than we ever could’ve imagined.’”

She lifts her head. “You killed Benjamin Asher.”

He hangs his head. “I wish I had never gotten roped into this. David and Lydia forced my hand.”

I jump to my feet. Screw the fucking wire, and the police listening in—he just admitted to *murder*. “You stabbed him and left him for me to find.”

“Lydia was supposed to find him,” he says quietly.

“Caleb,” Margo says behind me. “Easy.”

“It was your car that Matt used to hit Margo and her foster parent. You gave him the keys because of David—or was it my mother? Sweet talking her way into your—”

“Fine! Yes, it was your mother.” He grabs at his hair. “She didn’t tell me —”

“Bullshit,” Margo mumbles. “We need to leave.”

*Get in and get out.* Last minute instructions from Masters before patting my back and sending us in here.

“You’re fucking twisted,” I tell him. “And you’re going to prison.”

“How’s that, Caleb?” Tobias asks, straightening the papers on his desk. “Do you have more proof than just a notebook that could be filled with lies? No one is going to know that I was the one to kill Ben and get paid for it in



more than just cash. No one will know that your mom and uncle were the orchestrators of the whole thing—including the so-called affair. Well, no, actually..." He winks at Margo. "The affair was just a plot between your mothers to bring down an angry, rich man. See how well that worked out?"

I pull up my shirt, exposing the wire. "Looks like the sun's going to come out tomorrow. Unfortunately... I don't think you'll be around to see it."

Tobias is calm for a moment, his eyes on my chest. And then he yells, lunging around the desk for me.

I yank Margo behind me, bracing for Tobias's charge.

He stops short when Detective Masters bursts into the room, the door cracking against the wall.

Masters sneers. "Game over, Hutchins."

He nods to me, and I guide Margo out of the room. She's not reacting the way I expected her to—*again*. It means something dark has taken root in her mind.

This was too much for her.

We pass by the police who are filtering in from the elevator, and I opt for the stairs. We get down three levels before I tug her to a stop.

"Look at me," I say.

She doesn't see me. Her gaze goes to my face, but she's not here.

I walk her backwards, until she hits the wall.

She blinks up at me, squinting. "What are you doing?"

"Searching for you." My lips touch the corner of her mouth.

She lets out a little breath but doesn't move.

I move to her jaw, peppering kisses down the column of her throat. She's immobile, letting me do whatever I want.

Until my teeth graze her skin, followed by my tongue. She tastes sweet.

I bite harder than I should.

*Wake up.*

She pushes against my chest. I soothe the tender spot with my tongue, and her pushing becomes pulling. Her hands fist in my shirt, dragging me closer.

I pull away from her neck, going for her lips. She's ready, arching up. Her hands slip under the hem of my shirt, sliding—

"Are they still listening?" she whispers.

Shit.

I rip the tape off and lean down, until I'm almost touching the microphone. "I'm unplugging this so you can't hear me kiss my girl."

She huffs.

A small smile flickers across her face when I yank the mic apart and stuff it into my pocket.

“Better?” I wink.

I lift her hand. Her knuckles are bruised, and she winces when I prod it.

“Where’d you go?”

She looks away. “All of this could’ve been avoided if I had just *remembered...*”

“Or if I had paid closer attention.” I place my finger under her chin and turn her head back toward me. “We can’t blame ourselves for our parents’ actions.”

She shudders. “How do you stop blaming yourself? I feel physically nauseous.”

I consider her question. A lot of it is my fault—she didn’t realize anything was so vitally impaired until I brought it to her attention. A worm of guilt cuts through me, but I push it away.

“What would your therapist say?”

She makes a face. “She’d probably say some bullshit about forgiveness.”

“I forgive you,” I say automatically. “Do you forgive me?”

“I didn’t hold it against y—”

“Do you forgive me?” I ask again, slower. Darker. I run my finger along the top edge of her jeans, grazing her stomach.

She responds well to my darkness. It makes me think that maybe I succeeded in my mission to make our edges align.

“I do.”

I smirk, dragging my finger lower. I dip into her jeans, past the hem of her panties.

“See what it feels like?” I ask.

She bites her lip, staring at me. She puts her weight on the railing and lets her legs fall open.

*Fuck me.*

A door above us bangs open, and she leaps up, smacking her forehead.

“Ow.”

I chuckle, grabbing her hand and tugging her down the stairs. “You forget you were in a fight earlier today?”

“Easy to forget,” she mumbles. She trips over her feet, nearly bringing both of us down.

“That’s it.” I scoop her into my arms and push through the door onto whatever the hell floor we made it to. I hit the button for the elevator with my elbow.

“Kiss me,” she says.

I inspect her face. She seems better. But maybe I should just check...

She grins, reading my mind, and pulls my face toward hers. And the rest, as they say, is history.



## MARGO

THE LAST TWO days have been a whirlwind. I've been kept at home with the Jenkinses, and Caleb hasn't left my side.

Claire is going to juvie.

Masters and Carver worked together and found a property in Aunt Iris's name. It was a condo in an older part of Brooklyn. Inside, they found my mother. She was surrounded by her past. A near-identical replica to the house I grew up in.

She admitted to conspiring with Lydia, who first got her addicted to drugs and then used that power against her. Drugs were the reason she cheated on Dad, and the reason Lydia then felt a responsibility toward her.

This is all second-hand information from Detective Masters, who called me down to deliver my statement and sign it.

There's a certain sense of shame that comes with finding that out. Knowing Lydia was desperate to avenge the daughter she was forced to give up...

I set the pen down and meet the detective's gaze. "So, what now?"

"Our team is serving warrants as we speak. I expect an arrest to happen any day now."

I swallow. *Good.*

"And my dad? Tobias admitted to killing Benjamin Asher."

That's another thing. The Jenkinses know, unequivocally, that my dad is innocent. It wasn't just me saying it anymore—it was the police admitting it. The state. The county.

The district attorney, even.

While I wanted a family to want me... I think I'm getting something a little different.

"The judge has set a hearing for tomorrow," Masters says gently. "Is there anything else you want to talk about?"

I lean back in my chair. "Actually, yes. You were never able to pin anything on Matt Bonner, right?"

He leans forward in his chair. "Claire was his alibi, as I'm sure you're aware by now. It means we're going to reopen an investigation into him."

"I have some evidence that may prove useful." I pull out the mermaid figurine I had stolen from his house. It feels like weeks ago.

I place the cord that connects to his computer next to it.

"This disguised a camera that was planted in my room. I found it in his house. There are encrypted files on his hard drive, but I also emailed them to myself." I tap it on the table. Her little tail makes a satisfying ticking noise. "You can check my email, see where it originated. Right?"

He motions for me to hand it to him, and I do. After inspecting it, he sets it carefully on the table. "I'm not going to ask why you were in his house or how you emailed yourself those files."

I grimace. "Yeah, better not. I definitely didn't break in and re-break his nose..."

"And if he comes in saying you did?"

"Self-defense?"

He opens the door for me. "I'd have to believe it. Oh, your mother is going into a rehabilitation facility in lieu of serving time. Her drug test came back positive for opiates."

I shake my head.

Part of me wants to hate her for what she did.

An officer is escorting Lydia into the building as we come out of a side hall. I stop short, backing into the detective.

She doesn't so much as look in my direction. I doubt she sees me, because she's arguing with the officer. She's handcuffed—another thing I never thought I'd see.

"Lydia," someone calls.

I jerk to my left, where Mom has emerged from another interview room.

Mom's gaze stays on Lydia, who scowls at her former friend. And then...

My mother's attention skips to me, drawn like magnets.

"Do you want to speak with her?" Masters asks.

I sigh. “Yes and no.”

She heads in our direction, trailed by another officer. She seems weak, but better than any of the times she’s showed up outside my foster homes asking for money. And she seems more relaxed than she did in the middle of the diner.

She stops just out of my reach. “I’m so sorry, honey.”

“You put yourself over literally everything else.” I shrug, looking away. “I’ve had seven years to cope with you being a shitty mother.”

She winces, then recovers. “I’m willing to try and make things right. I’m going to get clean, and—”

“And nothing.” I shake my head. “I have a foster mom who loves me. I don’t need...” *Whatever this is.* You.

I glance at Detective Masters, then make a beeline for the exit. I know who’s waiting for me on the other side, and it spurs my movements faster.

Past the officer at the reception desk, down the hall. Out the doors into the sunshine. I pause for a fraction of a second as warmth sinks into my skin.

And then I smile at my foster parents and run into their arms.

“All set?” Robert asks into my hair.

“Yeah.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I grin.

“What’s that smile for?” Lenora asks.

“I just... don’t feel any dread when my phone goes off.” I didn’t realize it until just this moment, but it’s true: Claire is gone. A weight has lifted.

**Caleb:** *Can I come over?*

I relay the question to my foster parents, and they nod.

**Me:** *Is that even a question?*

Robert frowns. “I feel like an awful parent for not realizing what you were going through.”

We walk slowly toward the car.

“I hid it well,” I admit. “And you’ve only known me for a few months. I got a text from Claire—Unknown, as I referred to her—the night before I went back to school.”

Lenora loops her arm with mine. “Didn’t Angela say she needed your number?”

I pause and tilt my head. “She did... But I think that was just something Claire said to cover her tracks. My number didn’t change between homes. Claire might’ve had it memorized or written down.”

“How do you feel?” Robert asks.

“I don’t know.” It’s the only answer I can give. I suck my lower lip into my mouth, biting down hard. Sometimes I feel myself slipping back into the darkness that wanted to hurt people: Matt, Claire. I didn’t use the knife Liam gave me, but... I *punched* them. I held a gun to Claire’s chest and seriously contemplated pulling the trigger.

Who *am* I?

In the car, heading home, I contemplate the situation at hand. My whole body trembles with the words bouncing around in my head.

*Just say it, Margo.*

“You guys can’t go through with the adoption,” I blurt out.

Lenora, at the wheel, snaps her eyes to the rearview mirror to see my face.

Robert nods, looking back at me. “Because your dad is innocent?”

I lift one shoulder. There’s a lump in my throat. “Because even if he wasn’t, I still wouldn’t have been able to give that up. I love you both...”

Robert reaches back, snagging my hand. “We love you, too. Adoption just makes things official. And, truth be told, we talked about this last night. You’re welcome in our house for as long as you want. And when your father gets out of prison, we’ll do what we can to help him, too.”

The burning in my eyes gets worse. “Really?”

“Yes,” Lenora says firmly. “No question.”

“Wow. How’d I get so lucky?”

Robert grins. “All it takes is a spark of luck to connect the right people.”

“Or the wrong ones,” I say.

He nods. “That, too.”

The rest of the trip passes quickly. My mind jumps from what’s going to happen to David and Lydia, to my mother’s words, to Dad in prison. He’s going to get out and have to start over, but he’s not alone.

Caleb’s car is idling out front when we arrive home.

I grin, meeting him on the walkway. The grass is covered in two feet of snow we got in a sudden snowstorm, and Caleb... I scan him as he comes



closer. It's no wonder he gets all the girls fawning over him. With his black beanie, black jacket, and black jeans—he could be a fashion model or a bank robber.

“Hi,” he says, leaning down and pressing a kiss to my lips.

“Hi.”

He said that he's in love with me. I think about it often: the way his eyes widened a moment before he said it, like it was an unstoppable force.

“What are you thinking about?” he asks, pushing a strand of hair behind my ear.

“You.” My cheeks get hot.

And maybe I misspoke earlier. He hasn't been by my side the *entire* time. Today, for example, he left a few hours before we went to the station. He had a meeting, but he wouldn't say what it was.

“I have a surprise for you,” he says. “And I'm pretty sure you're going to be pissed.”

I snort, then burst out laughing.

“You're happy.” He smiles, too.

“Everyone is getting justice.”

“Except Hanna. She's...”

The smile slides off my face faster than I can blink.

*Shit.* How could I forget about her? She slipped through the cracks. Her one advocate—her sister—is a psycho. But me?

“I'm an awful person,” I mumble.

“Not... quite.”

He motions behind him, and the back door of his car swings open.

Out emerges Hanna.

I squint at her. “What are you doing here?”

She runs toward me, locking her arms around my waist. Even if I'm horrible, she's happy to see me.

I let out a breath and hug her back. She's not wearing a coat. Was she the neglected child in the Asher house once Claire started playing her games? Was she excluded?

Or maybe worse: she was included.

“Iris is the only one left,” she says, looking up at me. “We've been eating pizza and watching funny movies every night. She said the only way to get over what happened is to move on.”

I nod slowly. “She lost her husband and you...”

Her face drops. "Claire was mean to you."

"She did some bad things." I cup her cheek. "But I'm happy to see you. And I'm sorry how I last spoke to you."

"It's okay," she says. "I get it. Claire took Caleb."

Lenora sticks her head out. "Ah, Hanna! Want to come join us inside?"

Hanna glances at Caleb, who nods.

Once she's gone, Caleb meets my gaze. "I told Aunt Iris I just wanted to get her some fresh air."

"She really didn't have anything to do with it? Your aunt, I mean?"

He shrugs. "She's denying it, and no one's implicated her. She's nice enough. Probably only stuck around the marriage for Uncle David's money, though."

I nod. "Is that the surprise I'm not going to like?"

"No." A mischievous expression comes over him. "That was the balm before I tell you that I got us an apartment in the city."

My mouth drops open. "Why would you do that?"

"Because we're both going to school. You're going to apply to NYU and get in. And I already applied early decision to Columbia."

I look up at the house I've been calling *home* for the past few months. "So, what, we're going to finish high school and just... pack up and leave?"

"It's only an hour away," he says in a low voice. "Leaving doesn't mean forever."

"You said you were in love with me."

He watches me. "I did."

"You haven't said it since," I point out.

He wraps his hands around my waist, yanking me closer. One hand slides up my back, into my hair. It's loose today, cascading in waves over my shoulders. Slowly, he lowers his mouth to mine, stealing a quick kiss before his lips move to my ear. His tongue flicks out, and I shudder.

"I'm so in love with you, Margo Wolfe. The person you were and the person you've become. You're the only one I want for the rest of my life."

I can't stop the sudden tremble running through me.

I turn my head, catching his lips and leaning into it. This kiss is slow and hungry. It's soul-demolishing. His tongue slides against mine, eliciting a groan from deep inside me.

When we break away, we're both breathing heavy. I tip forward, resting my forehead against his.

“I’ve been in love with you forever,” I whisper. “And I’m so totally in love with you right now, I might just float away.”

“Forever,” he repeats.

I laugh and wave my wrist. The bracelet shines in the sunlight. “It was my idea to get married.”

His eyes darken. “When we get married for real, you’re getting something better than a braided bracelet.”

“When, huh?”

He pulls me closer, then guides me toward the front door.

“Yes, when,” he says. “There’s no escaping us.”

I rest my head on his shoulder. “I can live with that.”

**FIVE MONTHS LATER**

## CALEB

I UNLOCK the door and stride inside. The apartment has been furnished to my specifications, but it looks better than expected. I run my finger along the kitchen island, which is the only thing separating the kitchen from the rest of the open space.

It's small, but it'll do.

Keith Wolfe walks in, eyeing me like I'm crazy.

"This is mine?" he asks.

"Free and clear." I bought this small apartment complex back in January and spent the next month bringing it up to code—and fashion. Well, my contractor spent the next month renovating it. Margo picked wall colors and flooring, but she didn't know the half of it.

There are six apartments in this building, tucked in a cozy neighborhood in Brooklyn. It's two blocks from the *other* building I bought.

Real estate mogul at eighteen. Who would've thought I'd end up following in my dad's footsteps after all?

Josh helped me. Once David was arrested, my inheritance was given to me without restrictions. Still, seventeen was a *bit* young to be buying property. I waited until April rolled around, eyeing the market, and then made my move.

Two properties.

Ten apartments between the two of them, and eight are already filled with tenants.

The least I can do is give one to Margo's dad.

He got a job in the city and has been commuting from Rose Hill. He joins Margo, Robert, and Lenora for dinner every Friday night. On Wednesdays, Margo goes to his Rose Hill apartment, occasionally accompanied by me.

But we're moving to the city as soon as we graduate Emery-Rose.

"Does Margo know?" He's at the window, staring out at the street.

"Not yet."

He runs his hand through his hair. It's gotten longer since his time in prison. When I look at him, I feel guilt.

Guilt that I harbored all this unnecessary anger, that I wasted years of my life festering in it. But if I hadn't, I might've moved on from them. From Margo.

“You should forgive yourself, son,” Keith says. He stops in front of me. “If you need forgiveness from me, you’ve got it. But... I never held anything against you.”

I suck in a deep breath. I was less nervous negotiating a price for this place than I am talking to him. “I am guilty for believing their lies. If only I had—”

“No.” His hand lands on my shoulder. “You were ten. Innocent in all of this.”

“Margo got into NYU.” I pull out the acceptance letter. “Robert and Lenora intercepted it so I could surprise her.”

His eyes fill with tears. “My baby girl got into college?”

“Full ride scholarship and everything,” I say, handing him the letter.

He turns away and slips it from the envelope, reading it silently. His shoulders move as he takes a deep breath, and he turns back around with a smile. “You grew up.”

“I did my best under the circumstances.”

Keith pats my shoulder. “Thank you. Seriously. Not many people would go to the lengths you have, first securing me a job, and then buying an apartment and not charging rent?”

“Buying the whole damn building,” I correct. “Do you ever feel like you’re... going down the wrong path?”

He straightens. “I hope you’re not referring to my daughter.”

“No, no. Just...” I gesture around. “Maybe I should try to separate myself from him.”

“It’s okay to miss your dad, Caleb.” He looks away.

We’re both bad at heart-to-hearts, apparently. But besides Josh, he’s the only one who’s ever been close to a good male role model.

“He was a good man. He helped me out, too, after my mother cut me off. We hadn’t spoken in a few years, but he was glad to offer his home to Amberly, Margo, and me.” He exhales. “I forgave him for sleeping with my wife. He told me a few weeks before he died. It wasn’t you or Margo who ruined the ruse—he died when your mother decided it was time.”

My breath comes out shakily. “Margo had said as much. That you knew, and she didn’t tell.”

He nods. “I wasn’t aware of the extent of her memory block, or what you knew or didn’t know. It’s only good to uproot the past if you’re prepared to deal with the trauma.”

“Margo wouldn’t have been ready if she didn’t talk to you.” I grab the keys I had left on the counter for him. “I have one last thing I want to ask you.”

## MARGO

I shift each and every way, analyzing myself in the mirror.

My hair is longer. My skin clear and glowing. My makeup is flawless.  
And yet, something feels... off.

"The dress," Riley says from the doorway.

I jump. Caught staring at myself like a fool.

"Huh?"

Riley chuckles. "The dress doesn't match the vibe. Which is fine—I brought you one." She holds up a plastic bag covering a black dress.

"I never thought I'd be going to prom," I admit. "And you're sure you don't want to go?"

"As much as I'd love to watch you slow dance with Caleb, I think I'm going to pass. I'd rather just help you get ready, then go home and watch *The Breakfast Club*."

I roll my eyes. "Eli's still...?"

Well, I wouldn't know exactly what he's still doing, since she's refused, for *months* to talk about it. She suffers in silence.

"Try this on," she orders, shoving the bag into my hands. "This is going to be so much better than the masquerade ball for you."

I raise my eyebrows. "Is it?"

"Yeah, because Caleb is in love with you and you're in love with him, and things have been... Good. Like, painful to witness good."

She has a point—about the painful to witness part, anyway. Dad was released from prison shortly after David, Lydia, Tobias, Claire, and Matt were arrested. Mom was sent to a rehabilitation center, where she remains to this day, and Claire is in a juvenile detention center until she turns eighteen. Tobias surprised us by turning on everyone viciously, supplying evidence he had stored over the years.

Turns out, the ex-public defender knew just what to keep in order to incriminate... just about everyone.

It was impressive.

I stayed with Robert and Lenora. It was a decision the four of us made tearfully in the living room. All of us were a crying mess by the time the conversation was over. But the way they accepted Dad into the fold like he was part of their family, too? It broke my heart and healed it at the same time.



And Dad...

I let out a sigh, closing myself in the bathroom.

He knew me as a child. Ten years old, seeing only the good in the world. Now he has a seventeen-year-old daughter.

I've been through the foster system and survived.

Came out ahead, if you ask me.

Caleb is a stage five clinger—and I mean that in the best way possible. Once we returned to school, everyone magically backed off. He'd cast a magic spell. That... and lacrosse season had officially started.

He was right.

Fall semester was nothing compared to the spring.

*All Hail King Caleb.* I snorted at the first person who said it, but it was a thing.

The entire school turned out to the first lacrosse game. Riley and I sat together, and she laughed at the awed expression on my face when everyone cheered for them.

Not going to lie, my blood runs hot when I remember how he looked racing across the field, in total command of his team.

"Margo," Riley calls, knocking on the door. "Do you need help?"

I jump. Whoops.

"One second." I change into the dress, pulling the straps into place and struggling to zip it on my own. It fits like a glove—small miracles, since Riley is a size smaller than me.

When I open the door, her mouth drops open. "Damn."

It's a halter top with a deep V neckline, similar to the one Riley wore to the last dance we attended. This one is beaded, glittering. From my hips up, it's skintight. The silky fabric goes to the floor, but it's the slit that ends halfway up my thigh that's the real showstopper. Paired with skinny, strappy heels?

I kind of feel like a warrior princess. But also—

"I feel like I'm going to throw up. How many people are down there?"

"Just..." She rolls her eyes. "Don't think about it. It's just Caleb and Hanna, Iris, your foster parents and dad..."

I swallow. "Is that all?"

Iris has suddenly found herself in our circle. Along with the shocking revelation that Hanna and Caleb were half-siblings, and Hanna was pretty obviously attached to me, everyone involved decided that she shouldn't be

kept away from us. Caleb and I have been including her on our weekend dates.

What started as Iris waiting in the car, staring stoically ahead, soon became her getting out of the car and chatting with Robert and Lenora on the porch. That transitioned into staying for a drink or dinner. And it wasn't too surprising when Iris dropped off Hanna to go out with Lenora and Robert.

"Lipstick," Riley suggests, showing me a few different options from her purse. She has a mental debate, then hands me one. "Here."

I know better than to try to argue, so I take it from her hand and swipe it on. I'll give my best friend this: she knows how to pick her lipsticks.

"Thank you," I say quietly.

"Thank *you* for giving me this distraction." She smiles. "Besides, I'll go to prom next year once all of you are gone."

"What are you going to do without me?"

She throws her arms around my bare shoulders. "Don't get me started. Graduation day, I'm going to be a wreck with a capital W."

I hug her back. "It's not too late to come."

"It's definitely too late." She steps away. "Ready?"

"Yes."

She leaves before me, and it's oddly reminiscent of the masquerade ball. Except then...

Then, I wasn't half the woman I am now.

I take a moment to look at myself in the mirror.

*Strength comes from being pushed to your limits and surviving.* Dad told me that the day he got out of prison and straight into my arms.

*And, my girl, you've survived.*

I fix the edge of my lipstick and flip my hair over my shoulder, then go to the stairs. Down I go, reliving the *déjà vu*.

Caleb is waiting at the bottom of the stairs just as I knew he would be. His gaze sweeps up and down my body, and his eyes darken. I take a moment to relish it before my cheeks heat up. Goosebumps scatter down my arms.

He offers his hand, and I take it. The soft squeeze tells me I'm not alone.

I look around, but... we *are* alone.

"Where'd they go?" I whisper.

"They're giving us privacy." He taps under my chin, unable to withhold his grin.

In the past few months, both of us have started smiling more. The smiles

come freely, with wild abandon. It's the result of levity after months—*years*—of guilt and shame and anger.

Claire may have said I was just going from one cage to another, but that isn't true.

In the end, the truth has opened our doors.

We just need to fly away.

"You remember the apartment?" he asks me.

I frown. "The one in Manhattan."

He was renovating. It wasn't just an apartment he *got*, it was an entire apartment building he *bought*. And then refinished. I helped him pick out colors and finishes, but every time I asked if it was ours, he said no.

"Yes," he says. "Well, one became two."

I suck in a breath.

"It was always our plan to move there, right?"

I squint at him. "It was our plan that we'd both be going to college in the city. Well—that was *your* plan. Except you got into Columbia weeks ago, and I'm just going to be a fast-food worker, or a receptionist at the company you own, or—"

"Easy," he murmurs. "You don't think you got in?"

"Literally *everyone* has heard about their schools except for me."

He removes something from his pocket.

An envelope.

I take it, unfolding it slowly.

"This is my mail." I look up at him. "You know it's illegal to open someone else's mail, right?"

He laughs. "Call Masters on me, then."

I roll my eyes. "I don't have to call him. I'm sure he'll be checking in on Iris before the night is over."

He freezes. "What?"

"Nothing. Just young love." I return my attention to the envelope. My hands are shaking, but I pull open the paper and read it slowly.

I got in.

"I..."

"Dear Ms. Wolfe," Caleb recites, his eyes burning into mine. "Congratulations! We're pleased to inform you that you have been accepted into New York University."

I cover my mouth, choking on a sob.

I thought... I had definitely stowed away any hope, coming up with the worst excuses: they misplaced my application or were so horrified by my personal letter that it wasn't deemed worth a reply.

But those are just lies my mind made up

"I'm going to college."

"She's going to college!" my dad hollers, emerging from the dining room.

He's wearing a purple-and-white NYU t-shirt. Lenora, Robert, and Iris are close behind him, and they, too, are wearing the school's colors. Riley and Hanna appear with a hand-painted sign that says, *Congrats on being accepted to NYU!*

"Don't make me cry." I blink rapidly at the ceiling. My eyes burn. "Thank you all for the surprise, but I can't..."

"They gave you a full ride," Caleb says in my ear.

My mouth drops open. "What?"

He just shrugs, grinning.

I squint at him. He wouldn't have paid for it upfront, right? He's not *that* crazy...

He is.

I reach up on my tiptoes and kiss his cheek. "Thank you."

"One more thing," he says.

I cough. "You're kidding. This is just prom... What on earth are you doing?"

There's a black velvet box in his hand.

"Are you *proposing* to me?"

He looks around. "Why not? We're surrounded by everyone who loves us."

"Because—"

"You promised me forever," he says, kneeling. He takes my hand.

His thumb skates just below the bracelet on my wrist, eliciting a shiver.

"I just want to make it even more official."

"You..." I suck in a deep breath. "You're impossibly infuriating sometimes."

His brow furrows.

I continue, "And you just assume that I like surprises. Which, for the record, I don't. And you're bossy. And—"

"Are you just going to list my worst attributes while I'm trying to propose?"

“I’m just getting this off my chest, okay? It was my idea to marry you eight years ago. This isn’t a new idea. And you’ve picked up some bad habits along the way—”

Riley snorts.

“But it doesn’t mean I don’t love you.” I shrug and wiggle my fingers in his hand. “I don’t want to know what *not* being in love with you feels like. So, okay. I’m ready.”

He smirks. “You take things to an extreme, love.”

“Yes.”

“Will you marry me? And love me until we’re old and gray?”

I can’t help it. In the eleventh hour, seconds left on the clock—we’re doing sports analogies here, people—I glance at my dad.

Did I think he was ever going to walk me down the aisle, let alone be able to witness the man of my dreams propose? No.

He nods at me. A barely there movement.

He isn’t surprised.

*He knew.*

And my heart... it just explodes with happiness. Because Caleb knew how much this would mean to me.

A lump forms in my throat.

“Yes,” I answer. “It’s not even a question—”

He rises almost too fast for me to track, lunging like a shark diving out of the water. He scoops me up and spins me around, holding me tightly to his chest. I hold on to his shoulders, laughing as we twirl.

“Not that I had any doubt,” he says in my ear. “After all we’ve been through.”

“You asked my dad?”

“I did. And Robert and Lenora, just to be safe.”

I pull back so I can look him in the eye.

He’s dead serious.

To hell with having an audience. I grab Caleb’s face and kiss him. It’s the only way to express how I feel.

I get to live my happily ever after with my best friend—my devious, loving, wicked man.

**THE END**

Not ready to say goodbye? [Grab Margo & Caleb's Bonus Epilogue here.](#)  
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

What a wild, wicked journey we've been on. When I first started writing Margo and Caleb's story, I didn't think it would change my world in the ways that it has. This story has brought me new friends and readers, a new appreciation for all things dark, and most of all... the knowledge that even wicked men can be redeemed.

I've been in their heads since December, crafting this world, the mysteries, and I'm not going to lie—I got a little teary at the end!

Thank you for coming on this journey with me. We explored the highs and lows of two souls hurt by a past they didn't understand. Thank you for your excitement, and for celebrating this adventure with me.

The messages I've received about Margo and Caleb, Unknown, Riley and the rest of the golden boys, have made me thrilled for the future.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S. Massery is a romance author of varying subgenres. She lives in Western Massachusetts with her dog, Alice.

Before adventuring into the world of writing, she went to college in Boston and held a wide variety of jobs—including working on a dude ranch in Wyoming (a personal highlight). She has a love affair with coffee and chocolate. When S. Massery isn't writing, she can be found devouring books, playing outside with her dog, or trying to make people smile.

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