



SHE LOVED ME.
I HATE HER.

WICKED

FALLEN ROYALS BOOK ONE

DREAMS

S. MASSERY

WICKED DREAMS

FALLEN ROYALS, #1

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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*Kylie,
For encouraging my dark side.*

CONTENTS

[Author's Note](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Blurb](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Also by S. Massery](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

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 Dreams is part of a trilogy and **not** a standalone.

Fallen Royals Series:

1. [Wicked Dreams](#)
2. [Wicked Games](#)
3. TBA

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

PLAYLIST

Born to Bleed - Red Hearse

I Just Don't Care That Much - Matt Maeson

Damned if I Do Ya (Damned If I Don't) - All Time Low

Bad Kind of Butterflies - Camila Cabello

Saturday Night's Alright For Fighting - Bon Jovi

Peer Pressure - James Bay (ft. Julia Michaels)

My Oh My - Camila Cabello

Heaven - Julia Michaels

Graveyard (acoustic) - Halsey

Good Things Fall Apart - Illium & Jon Bellion

Break Me - The Band Camino

As a kid, she crushed my dreams to dust.

She tore both of our families apart with one confession, ending any chance of happiness for either of us and setting off a ripple effect of chaos.

Now she's back as the new girl in school, and she doesn't suspect the war that's coming. She doesn't realize the anger I've been harboring.

I've been waiting for the perfect time to ruin her life, and it's finally here.

Because even traitors sleep—and I'm going to make sure she only dreams of me.

Then I'm going to destroy her.

*I*mpossible truth #1: My foster parents decided they didn't want kids anymore.

Maybe I should've suspected that. Their jobs were keeping them so busy: they stayed late at work, they left the house early. They were irritated when they *were* home. I figured the three of us were easy keepers, so to speak. We did our chores and stayed quiet.

Impossible truth #2: The social worker found a new home for me.

That's not the impossible part. The impossible part is that it's back in my hometown, just three streets over from where I used to live.

Before Mom got addicted to drugs.

And before Dad got arrested.

Impossible truth #3: I'm going back to private school.

Part of me is elated that I'm going back to familiar territory. But the majority of me is terrified. I'm sure things have changed, that the people I went to elementary school with have changed, but it's going to be... safe.

"Hurry up, now," my social worker calls. Angela stands on the edge of the new home's lawn, waiting for me to get out of the car.

I take a deep breath and open the door, hauling my bag with me. I was lucky enough to get a real backpack. Each other move had my stuff in garbage bags.

“Let’s go, Margo.” Angela taps her watch. “We’ll make sure you feel settled, and then I need to get to an appointment across town.”

The house is giant. Bigger than my old home used to be, that’s for sure. I think my eyes bug out when we walk up to the door, and it’s all frosted glass and dark wood.

“What are their names?” My voice comes out scratchy. I spent the night prior crying, and my throat is on fire. I got close to my foster siblings while with the other family. We thought it would be a permanent thing, because that’s what they always told us. No mention of adoption, of course, but we were guaranteed another eleven months together—until I turned eighteen.

Guaranteed. Ha. Joke’s on me.

“Robert and Lenora Jenkins,” my social worker says. “You’d be their first... no, second foster.”

I suck in a breath. “I don’t suppose I should ask what happened to the first.”

She purses her lips and rings the doorbell. “She aged out.”

Once you hit eighteen, you’re out.

The door swings open, and a tiny woman stands in front of us. She has dark-brown hair and bright-blue eyes. Her lips curve up into a smile, and she steps aside. “Welcome, Margo! It’s so nice to meet you.”

I smile back. “Thanks.”

“Angie,” Lenora greets. “Please come in.”

We walk into their large foyer. The need to run away hits me, and I eye the door.

“Robert is upstairs. Margo, do you want to come with me and I can show you your room? We can go grab him together.”

Angela follows us up the stairs, clearing her throat every time I pause to study the pictures. Their other foster daughter looks like Lenora. Dark hair with soft bangs, big blue eyes. She’s petite, too, framed between Lenora and a taller man.

“Margo,” Angela whispers.

“Sorry, sorry.”

Lenora glances back, and her face falls.

I stiffen.

“That’s our daughter,” she says. “She passed away a few years ago.”

Death is an ugly thing.

She shows me to my room, and I drop my backpack on the full-sized bed. It’s a nice room, simple enough. I just need to keep reminding myself: Eleven months until freedom.

Robert comes out of a room down the hall and grins at us. “Ah, you must be Margo! Lovely. Lenora showed you your room?”

“Yes, sir,” I mumble.

They seem like regular rich people, all sweaters and comfortable pants that look more expensive than my entire wardrobe. Their smiles seem genuine, and I pray that there isn’t any malice lurking under the surface.

We all sit in their living room.

Angela clears her throat again. “Margo just turned seventeen two weeks ago. We have about eleven months before she ages out of the system. You have kindly agreed to enroll her at Emery-Rose Elite School—”

“Robert works there,” Lenora says, reaching out and patting my hand. “It’s a good education, and the tuition was free.”

“Thank you.”

Angela glances at me. “Well, Margo was originally there on scholarship when she was younger. Is that correct, Margo?”

“The elementary school portion.” I shift back in my seat. “They accepted me back even though I’ve been in public schools?” Nine of them, to be exact.

While the last family was good to me, and I was there for two years, there was a period of about five years where I bumped around different families and group homes, and the changing location meant changing schools, too. I tried my best to make it seamless, but jumping into new curriculums every

year has pushed me a little behind, I'm sure of it.

"Yes," Angela says. "Congratulations, hon. You're going back to Emery-Rose."

I swallow. My stomach is a mess of butterflies. "When do I start?"

"Tomorrow," Robert says. "They only just got back last week, so it's perfect timing. You'll be starting as a senior, although they mentioned you may need to do extra work to graduate with the current seniors."

I blow out a breath. It's the same class I went in with. I draw up faces of kids I used to know, wondering if they're still there.

After a few more questions from my social worker, she stands and brushes off her pants. "Margo, call me if you need anything. Same with you, Lenora and Robert." She hands them her card, and then she's out the door.

We're left in silence.

"Are you hungry?" Lenora asks. "Tired?"

I nod. "I think I'm going to lie down, if that's okay?"

"Of course, honey. I'll knock when it's time for dinner."

As far as new homes go, the first day is always the worst. It's like learning a new dance, and no one really takes the time to teach you the steps. New schools are the same, except... everyone seems to know I'm the foster kid.

It's going to be worse tomorrow. They'll probably recognize my name. I'm sure there was a story when I vanished. My best friend at the time, Savannah, wrote me exactly one letter a week after I moved schools. She asked me if the rumors were true, if my mom was a coke-whore and Dad was her dealer.

I never answered.

I close my door and flop onto the bed, unlocking my phone. There are names I could stalk to prepare myself for tomorrow, but preparation never did me any good. Instead, I close my eyes and try not to think about where Claire and Hanna, my foster siblings, ended up.

Sometime in the middle of the night, I wake with a start. I'm filled with a restless urge and a gnawing hunger in the pit of my stomach. I look out the window, contemplating the climb to the ground.

They didn't wake me for dinner, which isn't surprising. I slept hard, the first good sleep in a long time. There were no dreams, no nightmares. Just... sleep.

I push open the window and slide the screen up, leaning halfway out. The house is brick, but there's nothing to grab on to. Nothing I can see, anyway. I pull myself back in and close the window, lowering myself to the floor. My phone's glow illuminates the room, the buzz of a text harsh in the silence.

Unknown: *Heard you were back.*

I tilt my head and give it a few seconds. Then I type back.

Me: *Yes.*

Unknown: *Watch out.*

I shiver and slam my phone back on the nightstand, facedown. It buzzes again, but I ignore it and crawl into bed. I block out the texts and the hunger, closing my eyes.

Sleep takes a while to come back. Before I know it, my alarm is going off.

Robert intercepts me on my way to the bathroom. "Coffee and breakfast downstairs." He's already dressed. "Did Lenora show you the uniform? It's hanging in the closet. The white shirt and dark skirt or pants."

I nod, not quite awake enough to speak, and fumble my way to the bathroom. I brush my hair back, braiding it with quick and nimble fingers. And then my face... mascara and concealer to hide the dark circles under my

eyes, a shade of pink lip stain on my full lips. I practice smiling in the mirror.

It falls short. I can't keep the tremble out of my hands.

I add eyeliner.

I get dressed quickly, sliding on my boots, and meet Robert downstairs. He slides a mug of coffee at me, and I smile at him.

"Figured getting up this early is hard enough without caffeine," he says.

"Thank you."

"We'll get your classes squared away first. Hopefully you'll just miss homeroom, and we'll get one of the kids to give you a tour."

I nod. "Okay."

We eat cereal in silence. We ride to the school in silence. It's a bigger building down the street from the elementary and middle schools, and it looms like a castle at the end of the road. My stomach is a ball of nerves.

"I figure I'll be giving you rides every morning," Robert says. "And we can meet at the car after. If you want to do any sort of sport or after-school activity, that's fine. Lenora or I can arrange how we want to handle the pickup. But don't feel restricted, okay?"

"Right."

I make the mistake of glancing at my phone as we walk up the steps to the front door. There's the text from last night still sitting on my lock screen, and I don't even have to open it to read its message.

Unknown: *You'll regret it.*

I shiver.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes." Alarming texts from an anonymous person, hours after my arrival? That's a fast way to get kicked out of a good home. When things seem too weird, some parents bail.

I don't blame them. I'd bail, too. In fact, I'd love nothing more than to

run home and tuck myself back in bed and throw my phone in the trash. *If only I had a home.*

Robert shows me to the office and introduces me to one of the guidance counselors.

She looks at me funny, squinting, then waves me into the office. “Margo Wolfe? Come with me.”

I perch on the chair next to her desk, watching her type.

“You have a lot of different schools on your record,” she says in a mild voice. “Why is that?”

“I’m a foster. Some homes didn’t work out.”

“Robert and Lenora are good friends.” She’s still typing, her nails clacking against the keys. “We were a little worried about them taking in a teenager, but...”

My eye twitches.

“You’re going to behave, right?”

I sit perfectly still. “Yes, ma’am.”

She flashes me a smile. “Lovely. Okay, here’s your schedule. I had to put you in a lower math class, but perhaps you can find a tutor.”

I nod. “Thank you.”

The bell rings, and I jump.

“End of homeroom. You’re going to be late.”

My schedule is a mess of numbers and words. My heart beats faster. “I don’t know where to go.”

She sighs. “Right. Follow me.”

We walk out of her office, and her whole body perks up when her eyes land on a boy filling out a form. And then I take a good look at him, and something in my chest loosens.

A familiar face.

His gaze snaps to mine, and his name comes out of my memories.

“Caleb Asher,” the guidance counselor says. “This is Margo—”

“Wolfe,” he supplies, grinning. “We’ve met.”

We’ve met. That’s a poor way to cover our history.

His gaze travels up and down my body, and his lips curl into a smile. There’s something off about it. “I’ll take her to class for you, Ms. Ames.”

“Thank you, Caleb.”

And then it’s just Caleb and me in the office, the clock ticking loudly on the wall.

“Well?” I ask.

He turns and stalks out the door, taking the pink pass with him. I hurry to follow, practically jogging after his quick steps. When we’re out of sight of the office, he pivots toward me. His sudden closeness has me taking a step back, and I stare up into his eyes. My shoulder blades hit the lockers.

“Why did you come back, Margo?”

I narrow my eyes. “I didn’t have much of a choice.”

He laughs, leaning down. He doesn’t touch me, but suddenly I’m ice-cold. His expression could stop my heart if he wanted. “You don’t stand a chance.”

I shake my head, moving to edge around him. His hands slam into the lockers on either side of me, caging me in.

“Margo Wolfe,” he whispers. “Haven’t you heard? I’m the king now.”

He walks away, and I stay frozen against the lockers for a minute. That isn’t the boy I knew. No, he’s been replaced by a monster. And I’m pretty sure he just smelled blood in the water.

I open the door. The teacher pauses, glaring at me.

“Sorry.” I pass her the note from the guidance counselor. I found it on the floor after Caleb disappeared.

The teacher, Mrs. Stonewater, scans the note and exhales. “We have a new student. Margo Wolfe.”

There are a few gasps, and the teacher raises her eyes from the note to glare around the room. They lapse back into silence.

“Take a seat,” she says to me.

My gaze catches on Caleb—the bastard *left* me, and it took me five minutes to figure out where the hell I was going—and the boys around him. There’s an open seat directly in front of Caleb or all the way against the windows. I start to move to the far one, but someone throws their bag on it.

I pause. *No more seats.*

Slowly, I walk toward Caleb. He raises an eyebrow. I sink down into my seat, my cheeks heating once I register his eyes burning into the back of my head.

When did he get so beautiful? Dark hair and light-gray eyes, muscles packed onto his lean frame. He grew, too. In elementary school, we were the same height. He’s got at least six inches on me now.

And hate.

Where did the hate come from?

“Ms. Wolfe?”

The whole class snickers.

I jerk. “Yes?”

“I was asking if you’d had a chance to read through the syllabus.”

I slink lower. “No, ma’am.”

She frowns, pausing by her desk. “See me after class.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“No, ma’am. Yes, ma’am,” the boy next to me parrots. “Such a fucking saint for a coke-whore’s daughter.”

More laughter.

I sink lower.

Coming back was a mistake. I should’ve insisted on public school. At least that way, the bullies wouldn’t know my history. They would’ve made fun of my secondhand clothes and haircut, but they wouldn’t have picked at my past. My parents.

“You planning on snorting up under the bleachers at lunch?” the boy whispers. “Like mother like daughter?”

I’ve become an insta-pariah.

I try to ignore him, but he kicks the side of my chair. I twist toward him, poised to say something—*anything*—but the words lodge in my throat. He’s almost as hateful as Caleb was.

I recognize him. Ian Fletcher. One of Caleb’s old buddies from elementary school.

I wonder if they’re still friends.

“Take a picture,” he suggests. “It’ll last longer than your memory.”

Slowly, I turn back around. I focus on the teacher, who starts talking about the Civil War. I open my textbook and try to find where we are, keeping my head down.

Blend in. That’s all I need to do.

And that's how I manage to stay alive until lunchtime.

I grab the packed lunch Robert had shoved in my hands before we'd left the house, dumping my books in my locker—which, again, took me too long to find. I thought I might be okay since I had been to the elementary school, but this building is a whole different beast.

I roll my shoulders, happy to have the weight off my back, and walk toward the cafeteria. Ahead of me, Caleb and his friends are making their way in the same direction. I automatically slow down, keeping my gaze on them. I hug the lockers and hope they don't see me.

It's ridiculous. I've seen some tough shit in public school, and with foster siblings, but nothing compares to the sheer arrogance that leaks out of these boys.

Someone loops their arm through mine, pulling me down a side hall. It happens almost too fast for me to protest.

"Wait—"

"Hush," the girl says. She weaves us in and out of stragglers. "Never go into the cafeteria with a bagged lunch. Are you insane?"

"Well—"

"Rhetorical question."

We stop in front of the library doors. They're locked, but she whips out a key and opens it, ushering me inside, then secures it behind us.

It's silent in here. I'm a little homesick at the sight of all the books. One of my foster families had books upon books, and the mom knew just how to stoke a sense of escapism through the stories. They were just a fleeting stop, but she had given me a book before I'd left. I read it a few times, then handed it off to Claire.

She needed it more than I did at that point.

"You're new," the girl says, stopping in front of me. "There are whispers about you."

I stick out my hand. "Margo Wolfe. Entirely undeserving of at least a

quarter of the rumors.”

She grins and puts her hand in mine. “Riley Appleton. Friends call me Riley.”

“Nice to meet you, Riley.”

“Aha! We’re friends already, I see. Come, come.” She leads me farther into the library, waving at the librarian tucked away in her office. There are cushioned chairs in the back, and she throws herself down into one. “So, you caught Caleb Asher’s attention already?”

I frown. “How’d you hear about that?”

She taps her temple. “I told you. Whispers.”

“I knew half of the kids here. I went to school with them until I was ten.” I shift, opening the bag and pulling out my sandwich. “Ian Fletcher seems particularly angry about my return.”

She snorts. “Yeah, he’s a bag full of piss on a good day.”

“What’s your story?”

“Me?”

“You’re intriguing already. A bagged lunch—an apparent no-no—and a key to the library? I don’t remember you from when we were kids.”

She stifles a smile. “You wouldn’t. I’m a junior. And anyway, I transferred in when my family moved here a few years ago.”

“Can you explain Caleb?”

Riley shakes her head, opening her own lunch. “He’s the captain of the lacrosse team. Everyone wants him—the girls around here would cough up a lung to get a chance to talk to him. You might remember his dad had his own company?”

“Yeah.” I never knew the specifics. And at ten years old, I didn’t really care.

“Well that company grew super-fast, and his dad sold it. Apparently, the family still gets royalties. Because of that, they’re *extra* rich. Caleb can do anything, and the school would bend over backward to kiss his ass.”

“Fun.”

“He and his friends are untouchable. Royalty,” she whispers. “His friends are Liam, Theo, and Eli. They love to terrorize... but everyone falls at their feet. Even the teachers.”

“They love to terrorize *who*?”

“Me,” she half laughs. “Only Eli, though. The rest tend to leave me alone. The golden boys have a dark side.”

I grunt. “And now Caleb has his eye on me.” I take out my phone, showing Riley the texts. “Do you know who this might be?”

She grabs my phone, her eyes going wide. “No, but that... that’s sketchy. Did you tell anyone?”

“Nope.” I look around and put down my sandwich. My appetite has fled. “If I make waves, my new family might decide I’m too much trouble. You know?”

“They can’t send you away,” she argues. “You just got here!”

“I know, but that’s the system. I have eleven months left until I’m eighteen, then I get to go.” Go where is the question, but Riley doesn’t voice it. I don’t, either.

The bell rings, and both of us flinch.

“Show me your schedule,” she says, putting her things back in the bag. “I’ll get you to class so you aren’t late.”

“Thanks.”

We go out into the hallway, and I run smack into a hard, muscled back.

Caleb Asher turns around, and my heart jumps into my throat.

His eyes go to Riley, then back to me. “Run along, Appleton.”

She swallows, staring at me. She pushes her shoulders back. “I need to show—”

“I’d be happy to help our friend get to class.” He scowls at her. “Go away.”

She stiffens and slowly backs away, casting an apologetic look in my

direction. I shrug at her. It isn't her fault he's an ass.

An ass that steps into my personal space, herding me away from his friends. "Wolfe."

"Asher."

"How's class?"

Everyone is pretending I don't exist or coughing mean names behind their fists.

"Missed you at lunch," he says.

I snort. "Yeah, okay."

He puts his hand on the back of my neck, his fingers soft for a second before they dig into my skin. I suppress a shiver. He uses pressure to steer me down the hall, into the throng of students headed for their classes.

In the middle of everyone, he gives me a light shove.

It's enough to send me to my knees. Everyone fall silent at the movement. Mortification rings through me.

"This isn't your school," Caleb says, leaning down.

I'm pretty sure he's amplifying his words on purpose, because now everyone is turned in our direction. His friends join us, circling around.

"Why don't you go back to the trash family that raised you? Leave the rest of us alone. Oh, I forgot. Your mom's probably high out of her mind in a gutter, and dear old dad is getting ass-raped on the regular in prison."

"Why are you doing this?" I whisper.

He leans down, grabbing my arm and hauling me back up. "Why? You don't really know anything, do you?" He sneers. "You're a sheep in a wolf's clothing. No threat at all."

Do not fucking cry.

"Run along now, little sheep."

He releases me, and I move, too startled to walk straight. My shoulder hits one of his friends, and it's like hitting a truck. It sends me off-kilter. Once I have my bearings, I push through the crowd.

It's only when I find a bathroom, ducking into it, that the tears break loose. I didn't do anything to deserve this. Hell, all I've done today is walk into a firestorm—one that my apparent departure seven years ago created.

"Margo?"

I sniff, wiping my nose on my arm. "In here."

Riley pushes open the stall, staring down at me. "That was..."

"A lot?"

"A drop in the bucket."

I wince. "Really?"

"The golden boys of Emery-Rose are nothing but nasty to their minions." She leans against the wall. "Sorry to break it to you. I've been the target of Eli's fury for years."

"Well, they can't get away with it."

"They can and they will." Riley sighs. "Their families are the richest of the rich. My parents are well-off, and I'm..." She shakes her head. "I'm the lowlife around here."

"You're not." I lift myself up, brushing off invisible dust from my skirt.

She hands me a wad of toilet paper, and I take a second to clean up my face. My eyes are bloodshot, eyelids a little puffy, but otherwise, I look normal. The bell rings, echoing in the bathroom. "Maybe we should skip."

"The rest of the day?" Riley glances around. "It's your first day—"

Ugh. "Okay, fine. Guess I'll just take the detention for being late."

We head back into the hallway; it's a ghost town.

She cracks a smile. "If you want, we can meet tomorrow before school. Everyone hangs out in the courtyard, and they don't let us inside till the first bell."

I return her smile, grateful that she didn't cut and run. "Safety in numbers?"

"Something like that." She glances at my schedule and steers me in the right direction. She drops me off, then jogs away.

For a second, I envy the way she can shake off everything. It sticks to my skin like glue: the negativity, Caleb's fury. I hand the teacher my schedule, and she clears her throat, motioning for me to take my seat without a word. I'm grateful that no one I know is in this class... until Liam walks in.

The teacher doesn't even stop talking, or spare him a glance.

He stops right next to me, staring down, and says, "Nice little show, Sheep."

I keep my gaze on the desk.

If I was wondering about nicknames, I guess we've found mine. *A sheep in a wolf's clothing*. Ha, ha.

Eleven months till freedom—but only nine until I graduate. I've made it through worse. I can survive this.

On Saturday, Riley arrives at the Jenkins house early. Early enough to interrupt brunch, which is apparently a tradition. She charms Lenora and Robert, sitting and helping herself to a pancake.

“I was hoping to take Margo to the mall,” she says, smiling at both of them. “Is that okay?”

“Oh, that would be excellent.” Lenora pats my hand.

She’s fond of that.

“I’ll get you some cash. You can pick out some new clothes if you want.”

I manage to smile.

On Friday, after a week of staring at me from afar, Caleb approached. I was sitting on the bench, tying my running shoes on for gym class. My boots and bag were next to me.

It wasn’t fair that he looks perfect in a form-fitting t-shirt and shorts. I felt like a bag of marshmallows beside him.

He lifted my boot, grimacing. “Did they give you these as compensation?” he asked.

I raised my eyebrow, choosing not to answer. Choosing not to start anything. Who knows what he’s talking about, anyway.

But apparently that was the wrong thing to do, because he dug his fingers into my boot and nearly ripped the bottom half of the tread off. I wore my

sneakers for the rest of the day, soaked from the rain we were running in.

So, yeah. New boots are in order. But I don't tell Lenora that. I tossed my boots in the dumpster in the school parking lot, and Robert didn't notice my disgustingly old sneakers when I met him by the car. He doesn't seem to notice much.

I wonder if he hears the rumors about me. He works in the art department. More specifically, painting and film. He teaches four different classes of various difficulty, and he likes to discuss what his students are doing over dinner.

Several times this week I've had to take a step back and evaluate how far I've come. I'm back in my hometown after seven years. I'm going to a fancy school that has classes like *Art and the Media* and *Film in a Digital Age*. My foster parents handed me two hundred bucks to go *shopping*.

Rose Hill is unlike any other place I've lived. Just three streets over, I used to live in the guest house of a mansion with my parents. Dad went to work like a normal person, and Mom was the family's personal chef. Things were normal. I ran with the other kids, got into the prep school on scholarship, loved life. Had friends.

And then things disintegrated.

What started as a dream childhood turned into a nightmare. One I couldn't wake up from.

Robert catches Riley and I before we leave. "Margo. Would you mind picking up a few paints? And a roll of film." He hands me a piece of paper with the details.

I tuck it into my pocket. It's the least I can do for him.

We pile into her car, and I look around it.

"Damn, Riley," I murmur. "You've been hiding your wealth on me."

She snorts. "No more than you've been hiding the Jenkins' wealth."

"What's theirs is not mine," I say.

She backs out of the driveway, and I turn up the radio. "It's always been

that way.”

“Eh, they seem pretty eager to share. But anyway, the mall is the place to be. Forgive me if you already know that. I know you used to live here, but—”

“It was a long time ago,” I finish. Some streets look familiar, like I used to drive them in a dream. Others... Well, things change, I guess. I’m getting a weird sense of *déjà vu*. “So, who goes to the mall on Saturday?”

“The most elite of Emery-Rose Elite,” she says, lifting her chin. “And us.”

“We’re on a mission,” I remind her. After a week of subtle threats—the nickname *Sheep* is sticking like Velcro, unfortunately—and a spike in the number of times my knees have hit the floor, I’m ready for some normalcy.

She turns onto the mall driveway, up a steep hill, and pulls into a parking space near a side entrance. “I need a birthday present for my mom. Something classy. Dad gave me his credit card.”

I shake my head. Imagine a world where someone handed me a credit card and said, *Pick something nice out for your mother*. We link arms and walk into the mall, and we’re greeted with loud pop music and a lot more people than I was expecting.

“Wow,” I murmur. Some people I automatically recognize from school. I duck my head, pulling Riley to the side. “I’m not ready for this.”

“You totally got this,” she says. “Head high, yeah?”

“I get the urge to turn invisible.”

She shakes her head. “This is your public debut. There are no golden boys here looking down on you—just mean girls and their boyfriends.”

I snort. “I think that’s worse.”

She shrugs. “Arguably. Let’s go check out the makeup. I loved that lip stain you wore the first day.”

I follow Riley from store to store, and the hours creep past. I’m hesitant to spend the money the Jenkinses gave me, but in the end I cave. I walk out of the shoe store with new sneakers and boots, tossing my old sneakers in the

trash and lacing on the boots.

They feel like my old pair, immediately soft and comfortable.

“Ready to eat?”

“Only if we can get froyo after,” I say.

For the first time, I feel light. I make a mental note to call Claire and Hanna, to make sure they’re okay. It’s been a week, and I don’t even know where they might’ve been placed.

“Do you ever think of seeing your dad?” Riley asks.

We grab food and find an empty table.

“No.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Okay, that was a snappy answer. So, you’ve obviously thought about it.”

I lift one shoulder. Mom’s been MIA for years, and I’ve known exactly where Dad is... until he gets released. And then I’m assuming he’ll be in the wind, too. “I don’t want to talk about this. Sorry.”

“Uh-oh, Margo,” Riley says. “Incoming.”

The temperature in the room drops by ten degrees.

I twist in my seat, staring at the escalator. Four gorgeous boys lean on the railings, in various poses, on the way down. Liam, Eli, and Theo are joking around... but Caleb’s already found me.

Somehow.

His eyes bore into mine, and I’m surprised at how much it hurts.

I turn back around, focusing on my food, and hold my breath.

It’s unnecessary, because they quickly join a group of girls. I zero in on Caleb again, who lifts a pretty blonde out of her seat and puts her on his lap. My heart spasms.

“Is that—”

“Savannah Dunley? Yep.” Riley sounds pained. Maybe because Eli is glaring at her, and Caleb is now completely ignoring my existence.

“She and I—”

“Used to be friends? I guess that was one of the rumors that was true.” She gives me a half-smile, shoving a bite of food in her mouth.

“Her and Caleb?”

“They used to date,” she says, covering her mouth with her hand as she chews. “It was a quick thing. Kind of unmonumental, if you ask me.”

I shift. “I haven’t seen her. Since I’ve been back.”

“I heard she was gone last week.” Riley shrugs. “Her family goes on random, luxurious and spontaneous trips. She’ll be back on Monday spinning stories of swimming with dolphins or having a private tour of the Taj Mahal.”

“That’s...” I wrinkle my nose. “Lavish.”

“She’s one of the lucky ones.” Riley sighs. “Trust me, if my parents could donate a building to the school, I’m sure they’d let me go for weeks at a time, too. She does half of her coursework online. Just watch, she’ll be here maybe four days of the five, every other week.”

“Why doesn’t Caleb do that?” I ask. “It’d certainly make our lives easier.”

I can’t help but turn and watch him. He leans in, talking in Savannah’s ear, and her cheeks are a pale shade of pink. Whatever he’s saying, she seems almost embarrassed by it.

Her eyes flash to me, hatred so blinding that I drop my fork.

It clatters to the floor, and I draw eyes. All of them.

“Fuck,” I mutter, diving for it.

When I straighten, Caleb is in front of me.

I have to crane my head back to see his face.

He doesn’t touch me, just stares. I can’t decide if it’s better or worse.

“You’re clumsy, Sheep.”

I scowl at him. “I—”

“You—what? No one asked for your excuses.”

“Jesus.”

He grabs my wrist, squeezing so tight my bones grind together. “This is

how you hold on to something. Go ahead. Try to break free.”

I stare at him, tugging on my arm.

His fingers hold fast. I stand up and yank, but he doesn’t let go. And then he’s walking me backward, twisting my arm behind my back. A twinge of pain travels up my arm, and I bend to relieve it.

“Caleb—”

“Beg.”

I stare up at him. “Are you serious?”

“You want it to stop?” He pulls on my wrist, inching me closer to him. “You want me to let you go?”

I shake my head. Helplessness crawls along my skin.

He yanks my arm up higher behind my back, until I’m doubled over in front of him. My face is level with his groin.

A sudden shot of fear bleeds through me.

“Please,” I whisper. “Please let me go.”

He drops my wrist, stepping back and grunting in disgust. Something flashes in his eyes—like he’s angrier that I’ve given in to him. And yeah, maybe I should’ve stayed strong. Maybe I should fight the bully next time and make an even bigger scene.

The whole food court is staring at us.

But will they reprimand him? *No*. He’s Caleb Asher, heir to a Rose Hill fortune. If his business up and moved out of the county, how many jobs would be lost? How many people would that devastate?

Just another thing I learned in my first week at Emery-Rose Elite.

He winds through the tables back to his friends like nothing happened. I glare at his back, hoping he can feel it like I feel his gaze. He’s unfazed. And when he sits back down, he leans into Savannah and kisses her.

Their lips part, and his tongue invades her mouth. They aren’t so much kissing as... he’s invading her.

Conquering her.

He must get off on that shit. Or he's doing it to drive another nail into my heart, because my whole body feels like I'm drowning.

I glance over at Riley. "We need to leave."

She smiles sadly. "Yeah, figured you'd say that."

"I just need to get the paint, and then we should go."

We do that, and I practically drag Riley to her car. He's probably still lordling over the food court, but I can't stop looking over my shoulder. My wrist is bright red, but my pride hurts worse.

"Hey, Applebottom."

Riley turns instinctively, her face shuttering when she sees Eli. Her grip on me is tight, her skin clammy.

"Where you running off to?"

"Just leave us alone," I say to him.

He's sinfully handsome, the ying to Caleb's yang. Dark eyes, light hair, pale skin. He's shorter than Caleb, bulkier. I wonder what position he must play, if he's as fast as—

Stop thinking about him.

"Come with me," Eli orders.

Riley casts a scared, wide-eyed look in my direction.

"Just you, Applebottom. I don't really care about your friend."

I scowl at him, but surprise radiates through me when Riley releases my arm.

"I'll be okay." Riley follows Eli around the corner of the building. She doesn't even leave me her keys.

I drop my bags next to her car, leaning against the bumper.

When she returns, her eyes are red and glassy. Her hair is a little messed up.

I straighten, going straight for her. "What happened?"

"N-nothing. He just wanted to t-talk."

"Uh-huh," I say. "What'd he want to talk about?"

“Nothing.” She straightens her shoulders. “Let’s go home.”

I sigh. I get it. I don’t want to talk about my encounters with Caleb after they happen, because sometimes it just hurts too much to relive it. Maybe in a few days she’ll spill. But until then, I’m not going to mess with her. Or our friendship.

*R*obert suggests I switch into one of his classes. Since I'm still in a smooth-everything-over mode, I readily agree. I don't necessarily think I'd be good at it, but painting is better than doing homework in a study hall.

Monday morning, bright and early, he slides a wrapped box across the kitchen island. "For you."

I unwrap it slowly, savoring the pull and release of tape. I can count on one hand how many presents I've gotten from people other than my social worker's obligatory Christmas present. When it's revealed, I can't stop the wide smile from spreading. It's the set of paints I had bought for him the other day, plus brushes.

"Everything you'll need," he explains.

"You were planning on me saying yes," I accuse.

He holds up his hands in surrender. "Guilty as charged. Some art will be therapeutic for you."

"Even if I suck at it?" I ask.

He smiles, holding the front door open for me. "Yeah, even if you suck at it. But honestly, I don't think you will."

I follow him to the office, relieved to not have to stand around in the courtyard. If Savannah is back, I don't want to talk to her. Or be confronted

by her. Or look at her.

Robert talks to my guidance counselor, having her switch me out of a study hall that was slowly boring me to death and into his class. He walks us out and claps. “Perfect! See you at the end of the day.”

“See ya,” I mumble, heading back to the courtyard. It took a lot less time than I expected. I doubt Riley is here yet.

I walk into the courtyard and stick to the edges. Caleb and his crew are throwing around a football, taking up a huge space. I spot Savannah and her new friends in the corner. Some of the cheerleaders are smoking, cigarettes dangling from their fingers. My eyes almost bug out at the sight of it.

She’s the *cool girl*. The one who rebels in the name of fashion. Short skirt, long legs, uniform shirt unbuttoned one too low. A hot-pink lace bra peeks out of her shirt. I imagine she has guys drooling over her, but all she can focus on is Caleb.

I have a niggling suspicion that she’s the mysterious texter. The texter who has blissfully remained silent for the past week. She may be the only one vicious enough to warn me away to my face. Well, except for Caleb.

I sit on a bench and pull out homework due at the end of the week. The bell rings with no sign of Riley, and I take a deep breath. I gather my things. My textbook slides off my lap and hits the gravel. I go to grab it, and a polished shoe steps on its spine.

“Hey—” I stop when I see who the shoe belongs to.

Caleb. There’s darkness in his eyes, and I want to crawl away from him. How many times do I have to remind myself that he isn’t the boy I knew? That something changed him for the worse, leaving this *monster* in his place?

“Thought I told you to leave.”

I grimace. “Did you?”

I tug at my book, but it’s useless. He leans his weight on it, crushing the spine.

Maybe he’ll do that to you, Margo. If you don’t listen to him.

I bolt to my feet, finding myself inches away from him.

“What’s your problem?” I demand. “Why are you such an asshole?”

He laughs. It goes straight through my chest, decimating me. His hand winds around the back of my neck, keeping me in place. It isn’t like I have anywhere else to go, with the bench right behind me and him at my front.

I shiver at his palm against the back of my neck. I hate it—I decide that I hate *him*, and it’s about time my body caught up to the anger he’s been dishing out.

“Go run to Savannah,” I mutter, staring at him. “Take whatever your problem is out on her.”

He chuckles. “I have, Sheep. I broke her, and she still follows me like a wind-up doll.” He tilts his head. “I have a feeling if I broke you, you wouldn’t do that.”

“What?”

“Let’s play a game.” He leans down, until we’re eye to eye. “First one to fold loses.”

“What—”

He pulls me forward by my neck, slamming his lips to mine. I fight him for a second. I struggle against the unyielding pressure of his lips on mine, but he captures my wrists behind my back with his free hand.

Hate radiates through me. He’s *kissing* me, but it’s all anger and fire. It’s hot and stupid, and I want to burst into tears. I want to back away, to scratch his eyeballs out. His hand squeezes the back of my neck.

He was the boy I used to love. I was ten. I was smitten. The thought of him was all that kept me afloat during the first year and a half of foster care. But now he’s someone else, and I want my old friend back.

I can get my old friend back. For an instant, I give in to the kiss. How can I not?

I’m strong enough to admit that I used to think about what grown-up Caleb would look like. What he would sound like, feel like. It’s nothing like

this bitter agony.

My body softens, letting him mold me. It's a relief for him to take over, for his lips to part mine. I wait for his tongue to sweep into my mouth, for the rest of the symphony to strike up in my mind. Him winning is bliss and sugar, and I'm drunk on it in less than a second.

And then he's gone.

He releases me, taking a quick step back. He winces and swipes at his lower lip.

"You lose, Margo." A glint of a smile flies across his face, but then it's gone. "You know what that means?"

My body is shaking.

I lost a game I had no chance of winning—big surprise. Caleb has given me a handful of punishments in the span of a week. I recognize that. Even kissing Savannah on Saturday was some sort of payback.

"It's going to cost you."

My knees give out. My ass hits the bench painfully hard.

He watches me for a moment, and then he leaves.

I can't stop trembling. I raise my hand to my lips.

That was my first kiss.

A first kiss, stolen away by a bully. By a boy I thought I used to like. By a boy I used to dream about. It rattles me more than I want to admit, and I stare at the ground for a long minute. He kissed me. Claimed me like I'm no better than an object he's writing his name on.

No.

It can't happen like that. I'm not a puppet, dancing when he jerks my strings. I'm not soft—my childhood has seen to that. I will not bend to him.

And I will certainly not break.

Eventually, I lift my textbook and shake off the dirt from his shoe. I stuff it and my notebook into my bag, skipping homeroom and heading for my first class. I lean against a locker, waiting for the bell to ring.

My phone buzzes in my pocket.

Unknown: *Stay away from Caleb.*

I groan. Of all the things—of all the people for my stalker to be obsessed with, it has to be Caleb. I don't bother answering it. Instead, I turn it off and put my phone in my bag. The bell rings.

In a matter of moments, the hallways are flooded with students. I wait until the classroom is empty, then slip into a seat. The golden boys come in after everyone else, but no one has taken their seats. They sprawl out in their chairs, laughing with each other.

Caleb is silent, burning a hole in my spine like normal.

The teacher comes in, closing the door with a purpose, and everyone shuts up. "We're going to start a history project that will carry us through the semester."

Someone raises their hand. "We get partners?"

"Do we get to pick?" another asks.

"The project? Yes. Partners? Maybe. I'll allow you to submit three names to me at the end of class, and I'll be making final decision on the partners at the end of the week. Moving on..."

"Better see my name on your paper, Sheep," Caleb says behind me. "We're inevitable."

I can't hide my shudder. It's stupid that I can still taste him on my lips. I drag the back of my hand across my lips, and he kicks the back of my chair. I do it again, and he kicks harder.

"Stop," I hiss.

"Make me."

"Mr. Asher," the teacher calls. "Are you paying attention?"

"Trying to, ma'am. Wolfe here is quite distracting."

The students snicker.

“Margo?”

“Sorry.” What else can I say? Nothing that would get me out of this.

The students’ attention slowly drifts back to the teacher, and the rest of the morning speeds by. I only see Caleb or his friends twice more, and I finally run into Riley in the hallway before lunch. She grabs my arms, hopping up and down.

“I’m so sorry I missed this morning,” she cries. “I overslept, and then my brother wanted a ride, and I had to have my mom call and get permission for me to come in at second period. Are you mad?”

I blink at her. “Mad? Why?”

She leans in. “For leaving you to fend for yourself.” She makes a face, her lips twisting. “Never mind. Your dad—er, Robert brought you in?”

“Per usual,” I say. “We switched around my schedule a bit. I’m taking a painting class of his now.”

She hums. “I don’t know anyone in that class. Maybe you’ll meet a cute, emotional artistic boy who will take you out for coffee with paint on his fingers. His idea of romance will be asking if he can paint you—”

“Fat chance of that.” I snort. “Have you noticed no one will talk to me? No one even looks at me unless Caleb is point me out.”

The fact is, my newfound invisibility doesn’t bother me. I’d guess he’s trying to ice me out, make me feel like he’s the only one in the world who would pay attention to me, but... I don’t care. I hate it when *he* sees me.

“I did.” She glances around. “Ah, well, it could be worse.”

“How’s that?”

“We could have to eat lunch in the cafeteria.”

I chuckle. “What am I going to do if you’re ever out sick?”

“Oh my god, you’re right. I should introduce you to Amy, the librarian.”

“You’re on a first-name basis with the librarian?” I ask.

She hustles me toward the library. “Amy is the best. She sometimes steals extra desserts and shares. Or if there’s ever cake in the teacher’s lounge...”

I stand by the door, fidgeting. She unlocks it and gestures for me to enter.

“Oh, I should mention,” Riley says, lifting a shoulder, “Amy is my cousin.”

“That’s how you got a key.”

“Yeah. Yo, Amy! You saw my friend Margo, right? Margo, Amy. Amy, Margo. If I’m ever not here, it’s cool that she still chills here for lunch, right?”

Her cousin stands from her desk and comes over, shaking my hand. “Nice to meet you. Yes, Riley, of course she can. Just knock, okay, Margo?”

“Yeah,” I murmur. “Thanks.”

We take our lunch to our chairs, spreading out our options. We’ve gotten used to trading items, because Riley’s mom likes her to be healthy, and Robert hasn’t figured out my favorites yet.

Lenora and I went grocery shopping on Sunday, which was an adventure in and of itself. I don’t think I’ve ever been in a fancy grocery store until that moment. Organic was the name of the game, even if I couldn’t figure out *why*. Lenora didn’t give the best explanation, either. She let me pick whatever I would want to have in the house: breakfast and snacks to school, lunch and dinner options.

It was just another piece that made me feel better about settling in.

“Salt and vinegar chips?” I ask.

“Yum.”

“Gross.” I laugh.

“Trade you for... the carrots?”

“Deal.”

We eat in silence, her crunching through the bag of chips and me snapping the baby carrots. After we eat, there should be enough time for me to pick out a new book.

“Eli, uh, was flirting with me,” she blurts out. “I don’t know why.”

“Flirting like...”

“He kissed my neck. It felt good, but I was scared, and he’s still mean—”

“He’s...”

“A golden boy,” she finishes. “High school royalty. I know. But like, I didn’t think I would want him to kiss me, and when he stopped, I was—” She turns tomato-red.

“Yeah,” I mutter. “He didn’t say anything?”

“He told me to run back to you,” she whispers. “And to not forget him.”

“Huh.” I shake my head. “I don’t understand them. Any of them.”

She sighs. “Only three more months of them being low-level insufferable. Once lacrosse season starts in the spring? We’ll be reminded of how much they *actually* rule the school. It’s okay in the fall, because people kind of forget. And then suddenly they’re playing and winning and sweaty and...”

I wave my hand in front of her dreamy gaze. She focuses back on me with a start.

“Lost you there for a second.” I laugh.

“You just wait,” she murmurs. “You’ll feel it, too.”

“Feel... what?”

“The carnal energy. No girl goes unscathed.”

I laugh it off, but my stomach twists. “It’s that bad?”

“Every girl loses their mind. Football is big in the south. But here, lacrosse rules. Well, actually, Liam and Theo play football, too.”

I hum.

“We could go to a football game,” she offers. “It’s a good introduction to the craziness, and I think their games start this Friday.”

“You want to go to a game?”

She bounces on her seat. “It should be fun. Besides, Caleb won’t be there.”

“You mean he won’t be *playing*.”

“Well...” She blushes. “Yeah. He’ll probably be holding court with Eli. But hey, I’m sure we can get into the party after.”

I stare at her. “Riley Appleton, who are you? Football games and parties?”

Her blush deepens. “I’ve never had a friend to take... and I’ve always wanted to go. But then there’s the whole courage thing, so... please say you’ll go with me? Please, Margo? You can sleep over my house—”

I shake my head. “I can’t sleep over. Foster rule.”

She heaves a sigh, her face falling.

“But maybe...” I throw her a bone, even if anxiety is slowly winding around my lungs. “Maybe Lenora and Robert will let you stay with me?”

She claps. “Yay! You talk to them, and I’ll... I’ll find out who’s house the party is at. I’d bet it’s at Theo’s. Word is, he has a giant swimming pool with a slide, and sometimes they jump in from the second-floor balcony. Cool, right?”

“What could possibly go wrong?” I mutter.

We gather our wrappers and toss them in the trash, making our way to the front of the library. Amy has her head ducked down into a book, and she raises her hand as we pass.

“Why does she lock the door during lunch?” I ask in a low voice.

Riley giggles. “I wouldn’t want to be interrupted during my only break of the day. Would you?”

“Probably not...” My voice trails off, and I look down the hallway.

Students are waiting to get into the academic wing. Caleb catches my eye, immediately frowning. His beautiful lips tip down, down, down, until I fear they might slide right off his face. Liam and Theo are horsing around, throwing a football, and Eli is in the middle of them trying to intercept it.

“Why’s he staring at you?” Riley whispers.

“Great question.”

“Caleb!” Savannah brushes past me, headed straight for him. She walks right up to him, *unafraid*, and touches his chest.

He glances at her, but his gaze switches back to me. His blue eyes sear a

hole in my soul.

He touches Savannah's shoulder and moves past her, zeroing in on me.

"Oh dear." Riley gulps. "Why—"

He stops right in front of me, impossibly tall.

"Where do you go?" he demands.

"What?"

"For lunch, Sheep. You vanish."

"Oh, I'm sorry, do I report to you now?" I cross my arms over my chest.

His eyes flick down, lingering on the opening of my shirt for a heartbeat before his eyes trail upward. His movements are slow and steady, everything in complete control.

In opposition, my heart is racing.

"You should," he says. "Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what?" I raise my eyebrows.

"That I'm the fucking king of this castle, Sheep. And you're just that... a sheep."

"You're ridiculous," I snap.

He grins. "Ridiculous."

"Yes."

"You think *I'm* ridiculous." His voice is getting louder.

Riley edges away from me.

"How?"

I stare at him.

He takes a step closer, invading my space. I try not to show any fear. It snatches at me the way wind grabs at leaves in a hurricane. Without remorse.

His face is carefully blank, but his eyes show the storm inside him. He's angry, unimaginably *pissed*, and it's directed at me. His fury, his fire... I'm on the receiving end of all of it.

It's easy to see that now, when we're inches apart.

He grabs my chin, twisting my head to the side. "Look at your friend," he

whispers in my ear. His voice is dangerous.

She's at the edge of the crowd and won't meet my eyes. She stares at his fingers gripping my face.

When did people start paying attention?

"She's the smart one, Margo."

I flinch. I'm the only one who can hear him this close, and I'm sure he likes it that way. I'm sure he likes to keep me off-balance.

"Let go of me."

"You're not having fun?" He drops his hand. He snags my wrist before I back away, reeling me in again. "Come now, Sheep. First one to flinch loses."

"I'm not playing games with you." I half expect him to kiss me again. I'm angry at myself for even contemplating such a thing.

"What makes you think we stopped?"

He releases me, walking back to his friends. They'd paused their game to watch us. Caleb gestures to Savannah. She steps forward, throwing her shoulders back and her breasts forward.

I shouldn't be surprised when he kisses her again.

This time it's savage, open-mouthed. She presses her whole body into him, her hands fisting his shirt at his waist. Their tongues fight, but it's a one-sided battle. Caleb is in charge.

Something shifts inside me. Heat floods through me.

That should be you, a voice whispers.

I stare and stare at their connection, and it takes me a minute to realize his eyes are locked on me. Even as he bites and sucks Savannah's lips.

I cringe at the realization.

He shudders, leaning into the kiss like she's a balm against a fire. This show—

His friends hoot and holler, my only indication that he's pulled away. I've lost sight of them, my gaze unfocused, but I snap back to the present when

the bell rings. The river of students flows around Caleb and Savannah. The former is watching me. The latter stares at him like he just impregnated her.

It hurts. I'm not quite sure *why* it hurts, because everything else he's done to me has been so much worse.

Savannah follows his stare. She blinks at me, surprised and then... *triumphant*.

Caleb

I sulk through classes, unable to pay attention. Two girls try to pass me notes, which Theo intercepts and reads. He does me a solid by answering them in his own crude way, little stick-figure drawings of people fucking doggy-style or upside down. He flashes them at me before flicking them back.

The second-to-last bell rings, and I unfold myself from the desk. Theo follows me out the door and down the hallway, slapping my hand in goodbye. I've done my best to keep this part of my life low-key, and my friends know better than to ask questions about my last class of the day.

I walk into the room, and Mr. Jenkins grins at me. I slide onto a stool at the back of the classroom. I've been drawing since I was twelve, but only recently he encouraged me to try other mediums.

"You might be surprised," he had said, winking.

Eh, how could I resist? Playing with paint for an hour soothes the wild anger inside me. It's either that or beat people to a pulp on the regular. Since my aggression can usually be handled on the lacrosse field, we breathe a bit easier in the spring. The rest of the time? Well, everyone better fucking watch

out.

The classroom slowly fills. Art students, I've learned, don't give a shit about the popular kids. It's a relief not to be considered a fucking royal here, in the brightly lit classroom, surrounded by other disinterested students. It's like the art department has a mind of its own.

And then Margo Wolfe walks in.

My blood boils before I even comprehend why.

She bites her lip.

My heartbeat thunders in my ears. I'm overcome with the urge to slam her against the wall.

Mr. Jenkins takes forever to talk to her, and she's lingering there. She doesn't even know I'm in the room, and it infuriates me.

Look at me, I want to yell. And if she didn't, I'd go up and wrap my hands around her pretty throat until she had no choice.

My dick hardens in my pants. I shift, but I can't take my eyes away from her.

Besides, if anyone glances back, they won't be staring at my pants. It's the face that's the money-maker, at least in a school uniform. Naked... whole different story.

Look at me.

She jerks around like I had spoken out loud, her eyes turning big as saucers.

I hate that she became beautiful.

She was a pretty child, a head of dark curls and big green eyes, but she's prettier without the baby fat. And the haunted look in her eyes?

It'd be better if I knew I was the one who put it there.

"Go sit, Margo," Mr. Jenkins says, giving her a little push.

She picks the farthest easel from me, and I narrow my eyes. Abruptly, I get up and gather my things, circling the room and dropping into the seat next to her.

“What am I?” I growl. “Chopped liver?”

She blinks at me. I should’ve called her Owl, because she’s always just blinking those big orb eyes.

“Welcome back,” Mr. Jenkins says to the class. “Let’s start on a fresh canvas today, one of the smaller ones.”

He nods to one of the kids, a smaller boy who’s flown under the radar for the most part. Tim? Tom? The kid picks up a stack of six-inch-by-six-inch canvases and passes them around.

“Quick warmup,” Mr. Jenkins says. “Let’s use one color paint, and I want you to depict the mood you’re feeling. Ten minutes, then we’ll move on.”

I open my paint set and squirt black onto my palette. I ignore Margo and dip a thin brush into it, getting to work. It’s easy to sweep the black across the little canvas, to project all of my locked-up feelings onto it.

And when I’m done?

Well, it’s a self-portrait.

A black monster escaping from the closet, its lower half a vortex of black smoke. The teeth are the best: white against its black face. White eyes.

Mr. Jenkins never looks at these. This is our form of therapy before the real work begins. It’s okay, though. I sign my initials at the bottom and put it off to the side to dry.

He claps, calling our attention back to him. “Excellent. We’re going to start our semester-long project. I know a lot of you are intimidated by oil paints.” There are a few snickers and gasps around the room. “Well, don’t be. Oil paints are persnickety things, but once you’ve mastered it... Beauty. And endless possibilities.” His voice is too fucking dreamy to be talking about oil paints.

Although an image flashes in my mind. Margo, covered in paint. Naked.

Hmm. Not a bad idea.

“A lot like life,” Margo says.

“Fuck no,” I snap. I shift on my seat, and the image pops like a balloon.

Mr. Jenkins ignores us and continues, “We’ll be pairing up and doing portraits. I expect you to look past the person’s exterior and bring out their best qualities.”

“Portraits?” Tim or Tom groans. “Like...”

I think he joined this class to work on his comic drawings, but the little shit would never admit such a thing.

“Like da Vinci,” Mr. Jenkins answers, “or Picasso.”

“Wildly different examples,” another student says.

“And I expect you to explore your options before settling on a technique,” Mr. Jenkins responds. “You’ll turn in one painting on the last day of class. It’ll be your entire grade.”

Margo groans. “Is this based at all on skill?”

“Yes and no,” Mr. Jenkins answers. “Whether you start working on that final piece today or a week before it’s due is up to you. Take time to improve upon skills or learn about your partner...” He shrugs. “Turn to the person beside you and introduce yourself. You’re going to get quite familiar with their face.”

I watch Margo look in the opposite direction, but her neighbor has already paired with someone.

I clear my throat, pulling my lips up in the best imitation of a true smile. “Buckle up, love,” I say. “We’re going to get quite... *familiar*.”

She swallows, and my pants tighten again. *Damn her*.

This is pure revenge—I’d do well to remember that. Toying with her, baiting her along...

She stares at me, the fear flashing across her eyes. *That’s* what I want: the fear.

But first...

“Scared?”

She shakes her head. “No.”

“You should be.”

“Please don’t make my life hell in this class,” she whispers.

I lean closer to her, not sure I heard her correctly. She should know better than to ask for favors. It makes me want to give her the opposite, time and again. We could do this all year. She’ll ask and I’ll deny.

Just like she denied me of my dreams seven years ago.

The old fury that I used to keep locked away stirs in my chest. It demands justice. Repentance. *Vengeance*.

I lean back on my stool, kicking out one leg. Around the room, people are dragging their easels to get a clear line of view of their partner. I just stare at her, trying to resist the urge to drag her out of the room and show her what *hell* is like.

Instead, I ask, “Why?”

She blinks at me. *Owl*. “B-because.” She looks away. Toward the teacher.

“What does Mr. Jenkins have to do with anything?”

She turns bright red. It’s fascinating to watch, really. The color crawls up her neck, over her jaw, and devours her face.

“I asked you a question, Sheep,” I say, tilting my head.

“Is this part of the game?”

“Yes.”

She shakes her head, appraising me. “You’re too curious, Caleb. I think that means you lose.”

I laugh. It’s been a while since someone has surprised me. But that’s the thing about Margo: she’s full of fucking *surprises*.

She doesn’t say anything, and her lips press together.

“Mr. Jenkins.” I draw him closer. “Margo isn’t feeling well. I think I should escort her to the nurse.”

He comes over and puts his hand on her shoulder.

She doesn’t flinch.

She doesn’t even *twitch*.

My eyebrows hike up, and I look from his hand to his face and back to

her.

He leans down. "You okay, hon?"

"Just a little woozy," she says. "I think the past week is catching up to me."

He nods, sympathetic.

I want to strangle him. Unusual for me, since I generally like the guy. He's down to earth and charming, a teacher without being a pain in the ass. People respect him.

But this goes beyond respect.

"Caleb will take you to the nurse. Let me know if you decide to go home, I'll write a slip."

She nods and stands.

I take her arm, pinching just above the elbow, and lead her out of the room. Instead of going to the nurse, we veer into the courtyard. There's a door in the corner that goes to the greenhouse, propped open by a rock.

Students come in here to pass the time. The smell of weed seeps out, but it's silent as we walk up. I guide her inside and let go, letting my gaze rake her up and down. We're alone in here. It's our own private world.

"My, my," I drawl. I clench my fists in an effort not to do something stupid. "Didn't think you'd have the guts to bone a teacher, Sheep."

She blanches. "Excuse me?"

"You and Mr. Jenkins. Mighty close. I can see why you wouldn't want me to *make your life hell*."

She snorts, turning away from me.

I grab the back of her neck, swinging her back at me and pinning her to my chest. I capture both of her wrists behind her back.

Her little body feels good on mine. Like temptation.

"Tell me, how good of a lay is he? Does he have a giant dick? Cuddle you after—"

"He's my foster dad," she snarls. She struggles against my hold. "Let me

go.”

“No,” I snap, just so I have a second to process. I reappraise her. “Foster dad.”

“Caleb,” she pants. She’s working up a sweat trying to get away from me. It turns me on that she’s such a wreck over being this close to me. I back her into a tree, her spine hitting it hard. Her eyes widen.

I release her wrists and trail my hand up, over the side of her breast, to her red, red cheeks. They’ll be redder when I’m done with her.

“You afraid, love?”

“Stop calling me that.” She tips her head away from me.

“I think you secretly like it.”

“Is this because I said you lost?” She wriggles in my arms.

I shove my hips forward, showing her exactly what I think about that. Her eyes widen, and she goes perfectly still.

“Remember one thing about me.” I lean down into her face. She’s tiny. Fragile. All the easier to break. “I don’t fucking lose.”

My head is spinning when I walk out of the greenhouse. Caleb follows close behind me, like a menacing shadow. He said he doesn't lose—but my heartbeat is stuttering and the fear is crawling up and down my throat.

I couldn't speak if I wanted to.

He stole my first kiss. And then to feel his erection against my belly...

You're not supposed to show fear to the enemy. Yet underneath it all, Caleb wasn't always the enemy. He was a boy who I liked. A friend. We were closer than even Savannah and I, running wild together as kids.

Somehow, we both changed.

For the worse?

"Come with me." He's gruff, but he doesn't touch me.

I follow him without a word, down the hallway to the nurse's station.

"Ms. Peters." He smiles at the nurse. "Margo isn't feeling well. Mr. Jenkins said it would be all right if I brought her home, but I just wanted to check in with you." His voice lowers. "I'm afraid she threw up a few minutes ago."

The nurse tuts at me. She doesn't do more than glance, because apparently Caleb's word is law around here—even for the staff. "I'll let him know, thank you."

I have no choice but to go where he leads.

“You aren’t serious.”

“Can’t a guy bring a girl home?”

I roll my eyes. “Not when the girl is me, and the guy is you.”

He snorts, unlocking his car as we approach it. I’m not surprised that it’s a fast, expensive Audi. Matte black. The leather interior is black with lime-green accents.

He waits for me to get in and closes my door, sliding into the driver’s seat.

“Well?”

I glance at him. “What?”

“Where do you want to go?”

“Back to school.” I glance back toward the doors we just came out of.

He snorts. “You’re a shit liar, Sheep. We’re skipping out on the last twenty minutes of the day. Don’t blow it.” His gaze turns contemplative. “Or do. After all, it’ll just make things more... interesting.”

I’m not afraid of him. Even with the posturing and the games. My head is spinning with everything that’s happened in the last week—at least that much is true—but suddenly, I don’t feel like he’s going to kill me.

And he knows it, judging from the expression on his face.

“Tell me,” he says. Dark and deadly. He’s back to how he acts in front of a crowd.

“Take me to your house.”

His face closes off. It’s the last thing he expected.

I feel like *I’m* the one disappointed. It rings through me like a bell in a minor key, too much dissonance to handle. How does he manage to make me feel so much with just a change of his mood?

“Now you’re playing the game,” he murmurs.

He guns it out of the parking lot, flying down streets that we used to run through. It’s surreal. It’s a dream-turned-nightmare.

“What if I don’t want to play?” I ask.

He turns onto a familiar road, easing into his driveway. He parks in front of the empty house and grins at me. It’s the smile that belongs to a madman, leaking darkness like an oil spill. “Sorry, love. You don’t get a choice.”

Caleb climbs out of the car. I take a deep breath and mirror his movements, following him up the front walkway. He unlocks the door and pushes it open, gesturing for me to go in front of him.

This place...

Memories sucker punch me. Chasing him around, eating dinner. My mother brushing my hair off of my forehead and kissing my temple.

“I changed my mind.” I back away, right into him.

He grips my arms and propels me forward, deeper into the house.

“Caleb, stop.”

“Who said we could stop?”

I dig my heels into the ground, but my upper body keeps moving forward. I take a step, then another, farther into the house that feels more like a ghost town than a home.

Room after room, furniture is covered in white sheets and dust.

“What happened?”

He laughs, squeezing my arms.

“Caleb.”

“I’m not sure a sheep should be so direct.” He talks above my head to the empty house.

We stop in the kitchen, and he shoves me forward.

The kitchen.

“I don’t want to be here anymore,” I say, turning back.

I try to slip past him, but he grabs me. Hauls me in. He lifts me and sets me on the counter, holding my hips.

I stare down at him. His eyes are level with my throat at this angle.

“Caleb, please.”

“Please?” He watches me. “Since when does *please* work?”

Please don't tell them, Margo.

His voice echoes out of the recesses of my mind, so loud that I flinch.

“One day I’m going to fuck you on this counter.” His voice is low.

My body is a live wire. One spark, and I’ll set this whole house on fire. One touch, and Caleb and I will go up in flames.

“You’re going to enjoy it,” he continues. “Even knowing what happened here. Because all you’ll be able to think about is my dick in your pussy, spreading you wide. Hitting every. Fucking. Nerve.”

One of his hands comes up and palms my breast.

I’m wet. It’s a new sensation, but Caleb is right between my legs, and I can’t move if I don’t want him to know.

He pinches my nipple, and I automatically try to lean away from him.

“Stop.” I hate how it shoots straight to my center. How everything inside me is alive in a way that it hasn’t been in a really fucking long time.

“You give in?” His eyes light up. “You like this, Sheep. Admit it and I’ll stop.”

He opens my shirt, inch by inch.

I bite my lip, refusing to play his game. It’s dumb, really. A tiny, terrified part of me is screaming to say whatever I need to in order to escape. To claim my sanity back, because he’s slowly walking us to the cliff’s edge.

Once we fall, there’s no going back.

“Admit you like it, and I’ll stop,” he repeats. He looks at my bra, tugging my shirt open wider. He pulls down the top edge of the bra cup. It exposes my breast, nipple hard under his attention.

Shame floods through me, but I press my lips together.

I can make this stop.

He leans down and touches his lips to the flesh just above my nipple. And then he bites, sucking hard, and my whole body stiffens. It’s pleasure and pain wrapped together, confusing my mind. Building until I can’t take it

anymore.

“S-stop.” I push at his head, and my skin pulls before he releases his teeth’s hold.

He steps away, grinning at me. “Are you afraid?”

“Of you?”

His eyes gleam, and he looks down. “I know you’re afraid of me. I don’t need to ask. Are you wet?”

I suck in a breath.

“Yes or no, love,” he says. “If you don’t answer, I can easily find out.”

“You wouldn’t—”

His eyebrow rises. I lift my hands to push him away, but he grabs my wrists and pins them against my chest. His grip is bruising. One of his hands slides up the inside of my thigh, under the edge of my panties. His finger strokes me, sudden and vicious.

I arch away from him, glaring holes in his head. It’s foreign and painful, but also... *not*. He thrusts his finger into me again, his thumb on my clit.

“Soaked.”

He pulls back, and I choke on a gasp. Tears prick my eyes at the violence of it. At the audacity.

“You won’t—”

“Get away with this?” He rolls his eyes, raising his finger to his lips. It glistens in the light streaming in through the window. “I almost wish you were right. But here’s a fact, love: everyone adores me. No one will believe you. Especially with the rumors circulating about your parents.”

I swipe at my eyes, desperate to not cry in front of him.

“Suck,” he orders, shoving his finger at me. “And I’ll take you home. Promise.”

The tears fall, and I try to blink them away. “Fuck you.”

He shrugs, sticking his finger in his mouth. He does a thorough job cleaning me off him, withdrawing his finger out with a *pop*. When he’s done,

he walks out of the kitchen.

I follow him on shaky legs out the front door. *We didn't get to the best part*, I almost say, but honestly—I'm done for today. Exhaustion settles over me, cold and thick.

He climbs in his car. Again, I follow.

Except, the passenger door is locked.

He rolls down the window, shooting me a wink. "Shouldn't have tested me, Sheep. See you tomorrow."

And then he leaves me. Rolls up the window and drives away, not even casting me another glance.

I sink to my knees, my little tears evolving into huge, hiccupping sobs.

From a first kiss to... *this*.

I regret ever being excited about coming back to Rose Hill. Not with a monster as the school's leader.

No one is home when I get there. They mentioned where they hid the spare key, but it still takes me a minute to find it and get in.

I grab a snack and head to my room, unwilling to hang around the living room and wait for their return. Sleep comes quickly, chased by dreams of my mother and me in a field of flowers.

A storm sweeps in, and we run for shelter.

Suddenly, we're in Caleb's kitchen, watching him eat me out. His head is hidden by my uniform skirt, and my body is rigid. I can feel him as I watch the scene.

The me on the table disappears, and Caleb licks his lips. He rises. Glancing behind me, I see my mother has vanished, as well.

"Turned on, Margo?"

He never calls me Margo.

He prowls forward and shoves me backward. "Wake up."

I wake with a start, flat on my back with my hand down my pajama shorts.

Oh my god.

I slowly retract my hand and roll onto my side. I don't want to dream about Caleb. I don't want to think about him or let him have any sway over my body.

This is unacceptable.

Uncomfortable.

I get out of bed and put on a pair of leggings, then go downstairs. Robert and Lenora are watching television, and they both perk up when they see me.

“Feeling better?” Robert asks. “You looked pale in class.”

I nod. “Yeah, I was just a bit dizzy. The nap helped.”

Lenora unfolds herself from the couch, coming over to where I’m hovering by the kitchen island. They have a big open-concept house. The kitchen is separated from the dining room and living room by a large island, and the other spaces are sectioned off by artfully placed furniture. Her style is impressive. She knows how to fill a home without overwhelming it.

“Hungry?”

“Starving,” I say, shifting my weight. She’s been nice—they both have. Yet the dream, plus past experiences with foster families, has me feeling particularly flighty. In the past, if I missed dinner? Too bad. Go hungry.

Lenora gestures for me to follow her, and she starts pulling out containers. “I’ll let you make a plate. Do you mind just putting the stuff away when you’re done?”

“I will.”

She puts a plate on the counter for me.

“Feel free to join us.” She heads back to the couch.

Once my plate is loaded and heated, and everything is back in the fridge, I sink down in the chair adjacent to the couch. I split my attention between the reality show they’re watching and the food. Halfway through, I lift my head. “This food is amazing,” I tell her.

Lenora smiles. “Thank you. Do you cook?”

I freeze. “Me?”

We cooked to survive. I know how to make rice and chicken, ground beef and pasta. How to thin out a can of soup to make it last an extra three days... but cook like this? Never.

“I could teach you,” she offers. “If you had any interest.”

I swallow. “Yeah,” I manage in a hoarse voice, “that’d be... that’d be great.”

She smiles. “I’d like that.”

“Me, too.” I wipe my face and clear my throat, pretending that I don’t have tears in my eyes for the fifth time today. At least they’re tears of happiness.

“Aw, honey.” She gets up and takes the plate from me. She passes it to Robert and wraps me in a hug.

It takes me a minute to unlock my muscles and hug her back. Touching is a weird thing in foster care. It gets to the point that you can’t really trust anyone, especially once you’re a teenager.

I survived all of that.

She rubs my back in small circles, and I lean my cheek on her shoulder. I close my eyes, absorbing her warmth. But then it’s over. There are tears in her eyes, too. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I should’ve asked—”

“It was just what I needed,” I say.

“Our daughter died in a car accident a few years ago. Since we had all of this...” she motions all around, “we felt guilty keeping it for the two of us.”

“You had a foster before me?”

“We did,” Robert says. “She was nice, but not quite a perfect fit. Not someone we might consider adopting.”

My lungs seize up. *Adoption*. The golden word. It isn’t just loving someone until they age out: it’s a forever commitment. It’s... everything.

“Oh,” I manage.

Lenora shoots him a look. “We want someone to be part of our family for a long time,” she says. “We’ve only known you for a week, and we want to take things slow. But we really enjoy your company, Margo.”

I sniff. “Thank you. I like you guys, too.”

They laugh, and we lapse back into companionable silence as we watch

the rest of the television show. Finally, my yawns are getting too close together to pretend I'm not exhausted.

"Go to bed," Lenora suggests. "We're headed up as well."

I grab a glass of water and wish them goodnight in the hallway, waiting for them to close their door before I open mine.

I let out a heavy sigh.

I close the door behind me, resting my forehead on it in the darkness. I set the water down on my dresser, ready to change back into my pajamas. I'm *not* ready to go to sleep and dream about Caleb, though. I'm not ready for...

Him to be in my room.

I tilt my head, blinking a few times in a row, but he doesn't vanish.

He just *smiles*.

"What are you doing here?" I whisper-shout.

"Did you dream about me?" He lifts my pajama shorts from where I had dropped them. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Get out," I snap.

I go back to the door, ready to throw it open and demand that he leave, but suddenly he's pushing me against the door. He leans into me, his arms on either side of my head, caging me in.

"I think you like the idea of me in your room," he says. "Isn't that right?"

"You and your fucking mind games." I shake my head. "Isn't tormenting me in school enough?"

He's solemn when he answers, "No."

"No?"

"It's not enough. Don't think it ever will be."

I let my head fall back. His eyes are dark, his face in shadow from the lamp behind us. "Why?"

His lips ghost along the shell of my ear. "Because you fucking deserve it."

He takes a step back, then another. He opens my window and climbs out,

vanishing down the side of the house. I creep toward the window and watch him jog across the front lawn, to his car parked in the street. Once he's gone, I close and lock my window.

I go to my dresser and down the water, inexplicably dry-mouthed. My head is spinning. He knows where I live. Is that why he let me walk home? Because he knew it would take me ten minutes at the most?

Or maybe he followed me.

It's only nine. I'm sure Riley probably isn't asleep...

I grab my phone and call her, hiding under the covers.

"Yo, you pulled a vanishing act today," she says.

"Caleb took me..." I clear my throat. "Home."

"Did he?"

Kind of.

"He just showed up in my room," I confess. "And he's scary and attractive and mean, and I don't know what to do."

She coughs. "Excuse me? I mean, I knew he's always watching you at school, but..."

"I asked why he couldn't just torment me at school," I say. "And he said it wasn't enough."

"Girl. I think he *likes* you."

"Doubt it."

"Guys in kindergarten pull a girl's hair if he likes her. Clearly Caleb never grew up."

I snort. "Riley. Are you listening to yourself?"

"I'm just saying, he's pretty chill with everyone except for you. In like a broody sex-god type of way, you know?"

I roll onto my back. If I close my eyes, I can picture how his body feels against mine.

I keep my eyes wide open, staring into the dark. "I hate him. I hate how he looks at me and how he makes me feel. God, I've never felt such..." *Fury.*

The same I saw reflected in his eyes, mirrored back at me. And on top of that, an aching helplessness.

I can't stop him.

I can't control him.

"What am I supposed to do?"

She sighs. "He's the bully. You're the victim."

"Is there a but in there? You're supposed to be my trusty advisor."

She snorts. "Yeah, well, you're not giving me too much help with Eli."

"You didn't say what exactly happened..."

The line goes quiet for a moment. I wonder if I've pushed my new friend too far. I haven't seen her since lunch, and before that, the weekend.

"I mentioned that he flirted," she mumbles. "He said I drive him crazy."

My eyes widen. "Whoa."

"Yeah."

"How do you..."

"Drive him crazy?" She laughs. "Probably stems from freshman year. We were on a debate team, and I was the only one who would correct him."

"That's not what I was expecting," I admit. "I thought it'd be something more... heinous."

Like what you did, Margo?

"Um, you haven't checked Instagram by any chance...?"

I sit up. "What? Why?"

Riley groans. "No, Margo, don't—"

I put her on speaker and open the app. "What am I supposed to be looking at?"

She stays silent, so I type in Caleb's name. Once his profile loads, my breath catches. He posted, ten minutes ago, a picture of him and Savannah. She's kissing his cheek, and he has a wide smile. There's no caption.

"So moody," I manage to say. "When he was just in my room?"

Riley sighs. "You sound upset."

“No,” I say. “No, this is just psychological warfare.”

“Right.”

“So... I need to fight back.”

She pauses while I scroll through the rest of his profile. It’s from another life: action shots of him playing lacrosse, photos with his friends, one of him in the middle of a backflip off the bow of a boat. That isn’t the Caleb Asher I know.

The one I’ve come to understand is dark and insufferable. He glares more than he smiles. His touch is brutal, his words are harsh...

“How are you going to fight back?” Riley asks.

“I need...” I search through my memories, picking out pieces like starlight in the darkness. “Something will put him off-balance.”

“Okay,” she says. “But... I don’t think I can be involved in that kind of war, Margo. Because that’s what it would turn into, you know.”

I laugh, the wheels in my mind spinning. *What would rattle Mr. Perfect?* “I’ll let you go. But just warning you: we’re not done discussing you and Eli Black.”

“Yeah, yeah. Good luck with your scheming.”

“Night, Riley.”

The next week of school, Caleb Asher ignores me. Not a glance. Not a whisper. No insults, no name-calling—nothing.

It rattles me more than I admit. I have to wonder if he somehow read my mind: maybe *he's* the one who just started a war, before I ever had a chance to act out a plan.

After a few days, Riley and I start to enjoy our newfound peace. We even creep into the lunchroom and claim a table in the corner, spying on the rest of the school. It's like we're camouflaged.

"You used to be friends with that?" Riley asks, pointing with her spoon toward Savannah.

She sits with her cheerleader friends at a table in the center of the room, taking up as much space and noise as possible. Today's a game day, which means the football players are wearing their jerseys and the cheerleaders are in their uniforms. They stand out against the monotonous sea of white shirts.

"Um, yeah, when I was like nine."

She snorts. "You had poor taste as a nine-year-old."

"Yeah, I was friends with Caleb, too."

"Like, *friends*-friends? Or, you went to the same school and kind of knew each other—"

"Definitely friends-friends," I say. "Let's not talk about that."

She perks up. “Have you come up with a plan?”

“Oh, my diabolical mind-fuck of Caleb Asher? Yes, yes I have.” I make her wait a minute before I say, “I need to find a boyfriend.”

Silence.

Shock.

“What? Who?”

I shrug. “I’m not too picky. I just need someone to hold my hand and maybe kiss me... Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Who’s kissing you, Sheep?”

I guess that explains the weird expression on Riley’s face.

I grit my teeth as Caleb lowers himself down next to me. He drapes his arm over my shoulders and winks at Riley.

“Earth to Margo.” He taps my temple. “Anyone home?”

I grimace and try to slide away from him. I should know by now that it’s useless.

“Almost full week of ignoring me.” I look at Riley. “We almost made it.”

“Aw, you noticed. I’m flattered. Have you met Savannah?”

“You’re not serious.”

“Nah, I’m *dead* serious. Let’s go. Excuse us, Appleton.”

He lifts me out of my seat and guides me over to the table where Savannah reigns over the other cheerleaders.

“Savannah, sweetie,” Caleb says, drawing... *all* of the eyes. Every last one. “You were out last week, you must’ve missed the news: our old friend Margo has returned.”

I stare down at my shoes. That’s really the only available option when her icy gaze lands on his hand that’s currently glued to my shoulder.

“Savannah,” Caleb prompts. He grins.

“Welcome back,” Savannah answers in a voice that—well, it’s downright frozen. And insincere.

If I ever wanted to stab someone with a pencil more than Caleb, it’d be

her.

I meet her eyes, and her smile gets more brittle.

“I’m sure you’d love to catch up with Margo, right?”

“Of course.” She feigns a frown. “Oh, but there’s no room at our table. Maybe next time, Margo, okay?”

Caleb sighs, and I have to remind myself that this is an act. However sincere he appears—he’s *lying*. Lying is what he does best. That, and he’s perfected the art of war. He sighs again and says, “Ah, you’re right. It’s okay. Margo can come sit with me.” He jerks his chin to the next table over, where his three friends and other guys are sprawled out.

Savannah pales. “No,” she snaps, looking around the table. “Stephanie, move over.”

“There’s no—”

“*Move.*”

The girl, who could be a freshman, stares at Savannah and tries to stop her chin from wobbling. She gets up and runs out of the cafeteria, the laughter of the cheerleaders chasing her.

Caleb is feeding me to the sharks.

“Sit.” Savannah points at the empty seat. “God knows you didn’t earn it.”

I glance at Caleb, who releases me one finger at a time.

“I’m so glad you two are getting reacquainted,” he says. “See you later.”

“See you,” Savannah replies, even though Caleb’s eyes don’t leave mine.

I don’t answer, just slide into the seat between two girls. A hush falls over the table as Caleb leaves, and I almost stand and bolt.

“Don’t you dare,” Savannah snaps, reaching across the table and grabbing my wrist. “You get up and then what?”

I snatch my wrist away and lean back. “Who exactly do you think you are?”

She shakes out her wheat-blond hair. “Me? I’m not the one who stomped in here thinking she could slip right back into her old role—”

“And what role is that, exactly?” I put my elbows on the table. “I was never mean to you. I didn’t try to step on anyone’s toes—”

“Oh, bullshit, Margo.”

I press my lips together.

“You want to steal Caleb away from me!” Her cheeks turn pink.

I get up from the table. “Trust me, Sav. You can have him.”

I walk away, and a little voice in my head chants, *Liar, liar, liar.*

Riley catches me in the hallway, her eyes wide. “Whoa. So *that* is why we avoid the cafeteria. Agreed?”

I bump my fist against hers. “Agreed. Yikes.”

She barks out a laugh. “Yeah. *Yikes.*”

The bell rings soon after, flooding the hallway with students. A cheerleader slams her shoulder into mine, knocking me into the lockers. She doesn’t even glance at me as she passes.

A second later, another one snags my fallen bookbag with her foot, kicking it across the tile. Papers and books go flying.

Riley gasps, grabbing my shoulders. “You okay?”

I force myself to laugh, even as a lump forms in my throat. We dart between students to grab all of my things, but everything is too scattered. By the time Riley and I have gathered everything, the hallway is deserted.

“Shit,” she mumbles. “We’re going to be late.”

“Go,” I tell her. “I...” I heave a sigh. “Honestly, I’d rather just—I should’ve expected her to retaliate. I didn’t even do anything.”

She squints at me. “No?”

I shrug. “You’ve been with me every day. I would’ve mentioned if I had a vendetta against Savannah or... Ah, fuck.”

Caleb and his crew saunter down the hall in our direction. Theo and Liam are in front, arguing about something. Their heads are turned in, toward each other, and they pass us without pausing.

I blow out the slightest breath.

Eli takes Riley's arm, pulling her along with him.

And Caleb stops in front of me.

"You enjoyed that, didn't you?" He raises one eyebrow. "The showdown?"

"No."

He leans in like a co-conspirator. "You're not going to thank me?"

"We both know all you did was open a can of worms for me," I say, stuffing the last of my papers in my bag. "Before, it was mainly just you. Now it's you and *them*, and then it'll be everyone else, too."

He straightens, his eyes wide. "Excuse me?"

"You didn't *want* the cheerleaders to hate me?"

"I wanted you to stand up to Sav."

Once I start laughing, it's hard to stop. *Oh, the nerve of this boy.* "That's not how this works," I tell him. "That's not—" I squeeze my eyes shut. "You kissed her in front of me."

He touches my cheek, once, fleeting.

I open my eyes.

"I don't really give a fuck, Sheep. Not about you, not about her. You're interesting. She was... but now she isn't." He lifts one shoulder. "This isn't personal."

Oh, how I hate him.

I give him my best glare, but it ricochets off his armor.

"You're lying," I declare. I'm bluffing, but the surprise on his face makes me think I might be on the right track. "You do care. You love the mind game and you love seeing how people react. Is that it? My reaction?"

He lazily starts walking. "Your reaction? Perhaps you're onto something there. Everything I do is because of *you*. Oh, please, Margo, forgive me. All I wanted was to get a reaction from the high and mighty *Margo Wolfe*."

He sneers, and I feel like I just walked myself into a spiderweb.

"Is that what you wanted me to say?"

I stare straight ahead and follow him. He's in my next class, anyway. What choice do I have?

"Ooh, the silent treatment." He stops and turns around, using his body to back me against the lockers.

It happens too fast for me to avoid it. One minute we're walking, the next he's looming over me. Excitement races through me. We're in the middle of school—between two classrooms, for God's sake. What's the worst he can do?

"Answer my question," he demands.

He's giving me whiplash.

Everything about him is hot and cold.

I look at his throat and say, "I don't know."

"That's not an answer," he growls. His hand trails up my arm, the column of my throat, and pinches my chin between his fingers. He jerks my head up and down, then side to side. "Yes or no, Sheep. You should've learned that in kindergarten."

"If I didn't, it was because you were too damn busy distracting me—"

His fingers tighten, and I suppress a yelp of pain.

He leans in close. "What did you say?"

"We used to be friends," I say to his ear. It's all I can bear to look at. And once this word-vomit starts, I don't think I'll be able to stop. "You used to be nice. I was taken from my family, and you turned into—"

"Taken away?" he asks, his voice incredulous. "Is that what you call it?"

I meet his stare. "What would you call it?"

"I'd say you threw a goddamn grenade into our lives, Margo. And you never thought about the casualties."

He releases me, stepping back like I'm on fire. I can't even move as he walks away from me, down the hall and around the corner.

I sink to the floor, wrapping my arms around my legs. I want to yell at him: *I was ten!* Had I known the ripple effect that was going to be set off, I

wouldn't have—

Please don't, his voice whispers.

I hang my head, the answer for his anger finally in front of me.

It's my fault. It's always been my fault.

Caleb

*A*rrrogant bitch.

She comes into class late, wiping tears from her eyes. Liam throws me a questioning glance, and I glare at him. It's enough to get him to leave me alone for a minute, and I can go back to watching her.

The teacher gives her grief—and extra homework—and sends her to her seat.

When she sits, she hunkers down low. There's a cheerleader behind her and one to her left, and they both shift away from her like she's poison.

Good.

I was actually starting to like her for a second there. A spark of the old Margo had come through, and ten-year-old Caleb had risen to her call. We used to be friends. More than friends. I had our whole life mapped out.

For a while, we were happy, carefree kids.

Inseparable.

I spend the rest of class staring at the back of her head, imagining what's going on in that little brain of hers. Wondering about the next bomb she'll drop.

A *game*. Playing games with her is almost as fun as lacrosse. Kiss her and see when she'll give in to me. Kiss her enemy and wait for her flinch. Fuck her where—

“Dude,” Liam whispers, elbowing me. “Class is over.”

I shake my head, banishing thoughts. Margo is gone, as is half the class. My best friend is staring at me like I did something fucking wrong, so I grab my bag and stand, leading the way out. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because...”

I raise my eyebrow. “Spit it out, why don't you.”

He groans. “Don't punch me for that shit, okay? But what's your issue?”

“With Margo?”

“See? You're on a first-name basis with her. That's fucked up, man. You won't even tell us why you hate her so much.”

I throw back my shoulders. “I don't need to tell you *why*.”

He sighs. We clash sometimes, like two idiots playing chicken. Most of the time, neither of us move. *Crash*.

“What?” I square up to him. We're a pretty even match. Coach often puts us on opposite teams for practice to even things out. Because as much as we fight, when we're on the same page? Magic.

He's the same height as me. Around the same build. If not for the wildly different features, people might think we're related.

“Oh, you asshole.” He shoves me back. “Get out of my fucking face.”

I crack my neck, grinning. “It's been a while since we've done this.”

His eyebrows rise, but he grins back. “Fuck you, man.”

I lunge for him, getting the first punch. His head snaps back, eyes wide as the blood flows from his nose. It's like a little switch flips in him. *Game on*.

Kids make space for us, some jeering while girls down the hall screams. It makes my blood hotter. He gets a hit in, his knuckles glancing off my cheekbone. I dive for him, a tackle better made for a football player than me,

and we go down. I'm mid-attack when a teacher hauls me back, slamming me face-first into a locker.

Fuck.

Only one person in the school is strong enough to do that.

"Sorry, coach," I say against the metal.

Coach's grip on my neck doesn't soften. "You think a sorry will cover this mess? In my office after school. *Both of you.*"

And then he's gone. He's as much of a legend as the rest of us, honestly. He went to Emery-Rose when he was in high school and captained the football and lacrosse teams. He was basically the original golden boy.

The disgust in his voice spears through me. I push myself off the locker and offer my hand to Liam. He takes it, letting me pull him up, and we both look in the direction Coach left.

"Damn," Liam mutters. "He's going to take it out on us with drills, isn't he?"

I sigh. "I don't even want to fucking think about it."

He brushes under his nose, smearing blood, and then glances at me. "I got you good. Split lip."

I laugh. "Better than my eyes swollen shut."

He grimaces. "Fuck you."

We go back to class. And I feel exponentially better—and worse.

I hate that the first words out of my mouth are, “You got into a fight?”

Caleb shrugs. The proof is in the pudding: his lip is fat, split open by—I’m assuming, here—his friend’s fist.

Boys are idiots.

“Should I add that to my painting?” I ask dryly.

He shrugs again.

I turn back to my canvas. It’s... blank. He’s been fiddling with his paintbrush for the last ten minutes. His paints are still packed away. I assume his canvas is just a long stretch of white, too. It’s a little daunting. The first stroke.

Robert—er, Mr. Jenkins—is circling around the room, and he stops behind me.

“Interesting,” he says. “Is that how you see Caleb?”

I glance up at him. “Can I just paint the whole thing black?”

Caleb chuckles. “Well, that’s a new one.”

“You wanted a window into his soul,” I tell Robert. “And his soul is—”

“Okay,” he says, holding up his hand. “I’m sure there’s more to Mr. Asher than what meets the eye. You’re our only pair that hasn’t even *started*. Why is that?”

“I have her figured out,” Caleb says. “It’s just a matter of finding the right way to portray it.”

I hum. “Pretty sure he’s blowing smoke out of his—”

“All right,” Robert interrupts. “New plan.” He claps, drawing all eyes to him. “This assignment is now homework.”

Cue: many groans. Including mine.

“We’re going to work on technique and smaller projects in here, and I expect everyone to have a masterpiece using what they’ve learned over the semester.”

I meet Caleb’s eyes, but he doesn’t seem mad about it. In fact, he’s smiling.

Ugh.

He raises his hand once Robert is done. “I have a very rigid after-school schedule,” he says. “Especially with the games...”

“Well, lucky for us,” Robert answers, “this project is due before winter break. As you know, our art classes aren’t for the full year. You’ll be filling the gap in your schedule in the spring with a different art class... or study hall.”

“Is that new?” one student demands. She pushes her glasses up on her face and frowns.

“Yes, new policy went into effect over the summer.” He shrugs. “I go with what the school board tells me. Now, there’s no use debating it with me, Ms. Addams. Let’s get back to the actual class, yes? Put those canvases aside, we’re going to work on something new...”

We all shuffle our easels around so we’re not facing our partner. Once Caleb’s eyes are off of me—albeit momentarily—I let loose a breath of relief. Staring at him for forty-five minutes is exhausting.

He leans into me. “You’re coming to the game.”

I jerk. “No,” I lie. “Why?”

“Riley’s going.” He smirks. “Eli confirmed that while you and I were...”

His eyes heat, and his gaze drops to my breasts.

I clear my throat.

“I’ll drive you.”

I shake my head. “I’m going with *Riley*, as you just deduced—”

“Riley’s going with Eli.”

“You’re bossy.” My palms are sweating.

“You’re a pain in the ass.” He shrugs. “It works.”

“What about Savannah?”

“What about her?”

I sigh. “You’re just going to kiss her again, aren’t you? Embarrass me in some way—” I stop when his smile just grows bigger.

“By all means, keep giving me ideas.”

I groan and turn back to the front of the room. Robert has his own canvas out, facing us. He’s demonstrating a new way to hold the brush and palette.

“I’ll pick you up at five,” Caleb whispers.

“No, you won’t.”

He tuts. “Arguing will do you no good, love.”

Ugh. “Fine.”

I can feel his smile, even when I’m not looking at him. We don’t speak for the rest of class—clearly, I’m no good to him once he gets what he wants—and he leaves as soon as the last bell rings.

I stop at Robert’s desk, clearing my throat. “I’m not sure I’m getting the hang of this painting thing. And being paired with Caleb—”

“Margo,” he says in a gentle voice. “We’ve known Caleb’s family for years. He may come off strong, but he’s a good guy.”

I sigh. Of course he’s already won them over before I’ve had a chance to make a case. This has been years in the making, and the luck of my foster placement. “He wants me to go to the game.”

“Oh? Making friends besides Riley? That’s great, honey.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, I don’t know if he’s a friend, but... I guess it is

good.”

He packs up his bag, and we walk to his car together.

“What time is he picking you up?” Robert asks.

“You’re on board with him taking me, even though he got into a fight?”

“Boys do that. Especially over girls.”

I ponder that as we climb into the car. Boys fight—*especially over girls*. Maybe that’s the angle I need to take. Get on his nerves by going after one of his friends.

Not Eli, of course. He’s smitten with Riley, even if he’d never admit it. She barely tells me as it is. And Theo is too... dark. Of the four, I’d go so far as to say he’s the most sinister of them. He barely speaks, never so much as looks at me. It’s like there’s a firestorm in his chest, and he’s just waiting for the perfect person to unleash it on.

I shiver.

That leaves Liam—the one Caleb got into a fight with, as a matter of fact. *Perfect*.

At home, I take a quick shower and apply fresh makeup. I go a little heavier on my eyes, because after all, I have to seduce Caleb’s best friend.

Riley texts me that she can’t pick me up, with many frowning emojis.

Riley: *But Caleb offered to get you!*

I want to laugh, knowing she’s not *really* sorry. She’s probably too excited and nervous at the prospect of Eli taking her.

Lenora calls up the stairs that my friend is here. *My friend*. I scoff at the mirror, straightening my sweater. It’s one of my newer purchases, and it’s as soft as butter. My other clothes are worn out in one way or another. A hole in the hem, a loose thread, a bleach stain. Luckily, the uniform at school hides my lack of clothes.

I go slowly down the stairs, not expecting Caleb to be right at the bottom.

He's wearing a long-sleeve black shirt with Emery-Rose's gold logo on the breast, dark jeans, and a black beanie. His hair curls out from under it, like the hipster version of Channing Tatum.

He grins at me, all charm, and Lenora sighs from the other side of the room.

"You weren't supposed to come in," I say through my teeth.

"What was I supposed to do? Honk from the curb?" He frowns. "That's not very nice of me."

"Exactly. You're not nice."

He takes my hand and puts it on his arm. I curl my fingers around his biceps, kind of hating the formality of this, and he takes me over to where Lenora and Robert are standing in the kitchen.

"Ah, honey, that sweater is beautiful on you," Lenora says.

"Thanks."

Caleb looks me up and down. "It is nice to see you outside of our uniform." And then he reaches out and shakes Robert's hand. "Nice to see you both," he says. "We'll be on our way. Does Margo have a curfew?"

There he goes using my name again. It does weird things to the butterflies in my stomach.

Lenora and Robert glance at each other.

"Oh," she says, "this is the first time we've had to discuss it. What do you think, Rob?"

"Midnight? Is that too late? Too early?" He laughs.

I shift on my feet, eager to be gone.

"Only too late if she's secretly Cinderella," Caleb says. "I'll get her back by then."

"Have fun!" Lenora wraps her arm around Robert's waist.

I barely have time to wave before Caleb has steered me outside.

I slide into the passenger seat of his Audi, trying to hold back my...

Anticipation?

Fear?

Whatever it is, it coils in my stomach like a living thing.

Caleb gets in the driver's seat. "Want to drive?"

"No."

"Why not?" He starts the car, the engine turning over with a soft purr. "Afraid you wouldn't be able to handle her?"

"It's not that." I look out the window.

"Tell me."

His hand touches my thigh. He finger-walks his hand higher, a devilish smile on his face. We're still in the driveway. My foster parents are *right there*, probably peeking out from the window.

"Stop." The coiling heat in my stomach moves lower.

"Do you mean that?"

I shiver.

"Margo."

His eyes are dark. They always seem to be dark when he does wicked things to me. His finger touches me through my jeans, and I clench my muscles at an unfamiliar ache.

"I can't drive," I blurt out. Anything to stop the movement. It's torturous, just on the edge of *not enough*.

He pauses. "Really."

"What, do you think a foster parent would've taught me?"

He withdraws his hand, and I relax into the leather seat. He pulls out of the driveway. He has a contemplative expression. Maybe he's going to ask—sooner or later, everyone asks.

What's it like?

Don't people want you?

Why hasn't someone adopted you?

He gets to the end of our street and turns in the opposite direction of the school. I look over at him, my eyebrows rising. "Where are we going?"

He shrugs. "Coach forbade me from going to the game."

I scowl. "You tricked me."

"No, I just..." He yanks off the beanie, tossing it into his backseat. "I couldn't not show up. Especially since Riley wasn't coming for you." He laughs as, unbeknownst to him, my dreams of seducing his friend go down the drain. "Imagine what a terrible third wheel you would've been. I saved you from that, love."

"What do I have to do to stop you from calling me that?" Defeat rings through me. I'd probably do whatever he wanted tonight, just to get the world to stop.

It's too much. Lenora and Robert are great, but I miss my own parents. There was a time we were happy—Mom and Dad and me. We'd go to the park and have picnics on borrowed blankets, they helped me with my homework and tuck me in at night. Mom read magical stories to me, and Dad checked my closet for ghosts.

Or demons.

If only he was here to protect me from Caleb.

"Why does it bother you?" he asks. "It's just a name. Better than Sheep, I'd imagine. Although, dear Margo, I must say, you're still acting like a scared little sheep."

I shake my head. "I'm not. I'm standing up to you."

He chuckles. "I'll let you know when you *actually* stand up. Until then..."

We pull into the entrance of a park. It's the same one my parents used to take me for picnics. It's also...

I close my eyes.

It's where Dad was arrested.

"Why did you bring me here?"

He turns off the car. "To relive the past."

"But not all of it," I whisper. "Just the hard parts."

“Yes.” He gets out and circles around, opening my door.

He’s smart: I would’ve just stayed here.

He grabs my hands and takes me out by force. “Show me. I wasn’t here, after all.”

I shudder.

“You weren’t,” I agree. “It was...”

The worst day of my life.

Mom was already gone, and Dad must’ve wanted peace and quiet before the next step. Before the other shoe dropped on our family.

He releases me as I start to walk. It’s like there’s a ten-year-old Margo guiding me to the exact spot. We were sitting on a bench overlooking the pond. The running path was behind us. The sound of footsteps hitting the dirt wasn’t out of place in my memory.

It’s getting dark, but I find it with ease.

I sit on the bench. The pond has shriveled since the last time I saw it. Caleb sits next to me, his hands in his pockets. I haven’t been here since that day, and if I let down my guard, echoes of the past surround us. I can almost hear my dad again.

I haven’t heard his voice in six years.

“Speak.”

I take a deep breath. “We didn’t notice the detective.”

He nods.

“She came up from his side—where you’re sitting. Up the path. Sat down next to us. Told us...” I don’t know what she told us. “I was ten, and he had given me a handful of seeds for the ducks.”

“How kind,” he says.

“I looked back, and he was in handcuffs. An officer was taking him down the path, but he kept trying to get back to me. It took two... maybe three officers to force him away.”

A social worker had squatted next to me and introduced herself. When

she offered her hand, I took it. And that, really, was the beginning of the end.

“Why’d he bring you here, of all places?”

“It was our spot.” There are a few ducks in the pond now. I get up and grab a rock, lobbing it at them. They take off, flying low across the water. Away from us and toward safety. *Smart birds.*

“So? Your house was—”

“No,” I argue. “Our house was never *our house*. It was yours. Always.”

He lifts one eyebrow.

“Every inch of that property was yours,” I whisper. “We vanished like smoke. You probably never even realized—”

“Never *realized*?” he repeats, staring straight ahead. His jaw ticks. “Never realized what, exactly? That you were gone? That you wrecked my whole goddamn life?”

I cringe backward.

“Yeah, Margo. Run and hide like you always do.” He gets up and stalks toward me.

I back away, tripping over fallen leaves and twigs.

He catches me, like he always does.

“You cannot run from me,” he growls. “You can’t hide. And you will fucking pay for what you’ve done.”

My lip trembles. How do I focus on the hate when all I feel is fear? “I don’t know what I did. How am I supposed to make that right? If I don’t *know*—”

He covers my mouth with his hand. “Shut up. Shut up, shut up, shut *up*, you lying whore.”

Shut up, you lying whore.

I close my eyes. Those words—I’ve heard them, but not at me. Not out of Caleb’s mouth.

“Like father like son?” I say against his palm.

He leans in. “Don’t you dare speak about my father.”

I stiffen. “Caleb—”

He twists my wrist, bending me over. “I was almost starting to like you again,” he mutters. “And then—” He pats me down, his hand almost as violating as in the car.

I get my arm loose, pushing at his chest. “What the fuck?”

He grabs me again, finally finding what he’s looking for: my phone in my back pocket.

I snatch it before he can do whatever he’s going to do and take off.

Where, I don’t know. It isn’t like I can run all the way home. But once I get my phone back, my mind registers the awful glint in his eyes. He’s murderous. Dangerous.

He’s worse than a demon.

He’s the fucking devil.

I sprint up the running path, shoving my phone in my bra. I make it to the curve in the path, just before the trees break open.

He tackles me from behind, his arms wrapping around my middle.

He doesn’t cushion our landing, either. I don’t have time to protect myself, except to bring my arms in like tucked wings. We hit the ground hard, sliding and rolling down an embankment, and I immediately propel us sideways. We’re a wild tangle of limbs.

Caleb stops us, his weight crushing down on me. One of his legs has mine pinned, and he grabs my wrists and drags them above my head.

I’m stretched out and furious, trying to kick at him, when he leans down and kisses me.

Another mind game.

I bite his lip hard enough to draw blood. The sharp metallic flavor hits my lips, but he doesn’t stop. It fills my mouth, and then his tongue pushes inside, claiming all of my space. All of my oxygen.

I hate you, I say on repeat in my mind, if only to try to remind myself that I’m not this person. I’m not the person who falls for the bully. I’m not the girl

who falls to her knees when the handsome boy pays attention to her.

If I want to win his games, I'll have to remember that.

If I lose... I'll lose more than the game. I could lose myself, too.

"Kiss me," he growls against my lips, my only reprieve.

And then he's back on me, and damn it, the kiss brings out feelings my body doesn't know how to handle. His hand slides down my side, into my jeans. He touches me like no one has before, and I might just combust.

I arch my back, loathing myself.

"I used to dream about this," he says, leaving my lips and moving down my throat.

I don't think about how Lenora and Robert will react if I come home with a hickey. Okay, I do. I think it, and then the thought blows out of my mind at the first pinch of Caleb's teeth in my skin.

I moan. It's a little surreal: who is that on the ground, making sounds she's only heard in movies? Feeling things she didn't think she had a right to feel?

"How long should I deny you, love?" he asks.

A burning ache spreads through me, chased by a spark of something extraordinary. I shift. I curl my fingers into fists.

"Should I leave you like this? Spread out, begging for me?"

He rises up on his elbow, staring down at me while his fingers move on the most sensitive part of me.

"D-do you want me to beg?"

He grins. "Maybe. Or maybe I just want..."

His hand slides out of my jeans, up under my shirt. My eyes widen.

And then he takes my phone out of my bra, hopping to his feet.

My cheeks burn. Because, yet again, I'm an idiot.

And you let him touch you.

"Take me home." I climb to my feet.

"I want you to realize something." He starts walking down the path, back

to the car. “You’ll come when I say. You’ll beg when I say. You’ll give me your fucking phone when I say. Did you forget? This is your punishment, and I own you.”

“You don’t.” I stop walking, crossing my arms over my chest. I feel utterly exposed—but it isn’t my clothes flapping in the wind. It’s my soul.

He tilts his head. “Why on earth would you think that? You want me. Your heart beats for me.” He keeps walking. “Hell, I ignore you for a week, and you look tortured—”

“I’m more tortured when you *do* pay attention to me,” I mutter.

“I kiss Savannah and you flinch. I kiss you and you get wet.” He glances at me out of the corner of his eye.

Is he checking to see if I’m blushing? Because I am. My face is on *fire*.

“You’ve been mine since we were kids.”

I know.

“The only difference between now and then?” He unlocks his car. In the silence, he smirks at me. “Go ahead, ask.”

I’m too tired to fight. “What’s the difference?”

“Now, I don’t really give a fuck about... any of it.”

You've been mine since we were kids.

He drags me to a party. Well, he drives there and then disappears inside, letting me sit in the car and contemplate public suicide. Eventually, I work up the nerve to walk in the front door. I'm surprised at the loudness of the music. The neighbors must riot.

I can't be afraid. Small. I push my shoulders back and inhale, vowing not to take shit from anyone. Hell, if Caleb is the one to bring me here, I'll make sure people know it. With that in mind, I search for him.

He's in the kitchen with a red cup in his hand. He lifts it toward me, dark gaze lingering on my throat, but I shake my head. Getting drunk is the opposite of a good impression on the new family. I'd love to walk in there just before midnight, sober as a nun.

Eh, that probably won't happen.

Riley and Eli come in with a flood of other people, and she makes a beeline toward me. She hooks her arm around my neck, pulling me close. "Sorry. Eli said you guys weren't able to go. I didn't know. Ooh, is that a keg?"

She releases me and grabs a cup.

"Margo, are you drinking?"

"No," I say. "I—"

“Little Miss Perfect doesn’t drink?” Savannah saunters into the room, wearing far less clothing than I would’ve imagined for mid-September. “Surprise, surprise.”

I shake my head and turn away. Pretty sure I haven’t done anything to deserve the title *Little Miss Perfect*, especially since I’ve only been at Emery-Rose for three weeks.

She’s not worth the hassle. Not to mention, Caleb still has my phone hostage, and Riley has disappeared.

Savannah grabs my arm. “Margo.”

I twist back to her, tilting my head. “Can I help you with something?”

“Stay out of my way, would you?” She releases my arm, taking a sip of beer. She watches me over the rim.

All I can do is shrug. “Not sure what you mean, Sav.”

“I mean—”

Liam comes in the room. “Sav,” he greets her. He eyes me.

I don’t back down. I haven’t had a true interaction with him, and I’m desperate to make a strong impression on *someone*.

“Good game, Liam,” Savannah says. “That pass at the end? Brilliant.”

I roll my eyes. I’m surprised their coach let him play after he and Caleb fought. He has a bruise on his cheekbone that looks like smudged dirt.

“You miss it, Margo?” he asks.

Savannah sniffs. “She wouldn’t go to a game.”

I shift my weight. “Well, I was supposed to meet Riley there, but...” My gaze goes past Liam to Caleb. Do I want to admit that Caleb and I had a weird moment at the park instead of going to the game? Not in front of Savannah, that’s for damn sure.

“See? lame,” she says to Liam. “I’m surprised Applebottom showed her face with Eli.”

Liam shrugs. “I’ve got no part of that, Sav. And I’m not much for gossip. Excuse us.” He takes my arm and steers me away, deeper into the house.

“What are you doing?”

“Talking to you.”

I point at the bruise. “Is that from Caleb?”

He grunts, finding an empty room and gesturing for me to enter. He closes us in and leans against the door. “So. Margo.”

“Liam.”

He rolls his eyes. “What’s up with you and Caleb? Guy’s been acting cagey since you showed up. No offense, but do we have to worry about him being off his game?”

“His game, as in...”

“Lacrosse,” he snaps. “Special practice starts in a month. He’s the captain. If you’re fucking him—”

“He started it,” I interrupt, willing my face to not turn red. “I’m not really sure why you’re talking to *me*. I try to stay away from him.” Without success, I don’t add. Sometimes I feel like Caleb is attached to me by an invisible string.

I cross my arms. “Let’s just say, for example, Caleb saw you bring me in here. Should we test this theory?” I gesture for him to move away from the door and glance at my watch. “He’s going to—”

The door flies open. Caleb’s gaze swings between Liam and me, and all the space between us. His scowl deepens. “What the fuck?”

Liam shrugs. “I was just trying to talk—”

“You don’t go in a fucking closed room to talk,” Caleb snaps. “Come on, Margo.”

I stiffen.

His lip curls. “Be a good little sheep and *come with me*.”

When I don’t move fast enough, he stalks forward and bends down. I marvel at the softness of his hair as his head brushes my arm. And then his shoulder digs into my stomach, and his hands grip my thighs. He straightens and lifts me into the air. My hip digs into his shoulder.

I squeak. “Put me down!”

He smacks my ass. The sharp pain of it zips through me and my mouth gape open.

“You don’t really get to speak to me right now, love.”

I groan, raising my head to glare at Liam. Caleb carries me out of the room. “Where are you taking—”

He smacks my butt again, and I press my lips together. Liam laughs behind us, following Caleb down the hall and into the party.

Oh god. The party.

He walks through the crowd like it’s nothing. They part for him—they always do—but now there’s a silence that follows us. It’s eerie. He’s got me in a fireman’s carry, slung over his shoulders like a damsel in distress. His arm is hooked around the back of my knee, gripping my wrist.

My cheeks flame.

We pass the living room, and I catch Riley’s wide-eyed stare. Eli has a hold on her arm, but she doesn’t even notice. And then we’re outside, the cool air hitting my bare skin.

It would appear that I only have the courage to stand up to him in private, because my muscles unlock. I growl, “Put me down.”

He chuckles, and the sound goes straight through me. He leans forward, letting go, and I fall flat on my back in the grass. The hit is shocking. Cold dew seeps into my jeans and the back of my sweater, the grass pricking at my forearms.

He stands over me, seeming to contemplate something, and then offers his hand.

I blink at him.

“Just take it.” He sounds a thousand years old. Impossibly tired.

I do. My hand slides into his like they were made for each other. He pulls me to my feet and points to the car.

“Get in.”

“So freaking bossy,” I mutter, heading for the car. I’m ready for this night to be over. He’s probably tired from his mood swings—I know I am.

“You don’t touch him.” He’s right behind me. His arms slide around my waist, his fingers interlocking over my abdomen. He holds me flush to his back, and his breath hits my neck.

“I wasn’t going to.” *Liar.* Wasn’t that my plan? To use a boy against him? It would’ve been Liam. Hell, it would’ve been anyone who could stand up to Caleb for a fraction of a second.

His lips touch my ear, eliciting a shiver. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I wouldn’t.”

He bites my earlobe, hard enough that I jump, but his hands keep me in place. We’re just out of reach of the house lights. I let myself fall back on him as his hands explore, and I hate it. I hate that my heart remembers what my mind has tried to forget: that deep down, Caleb and I used to be friends.

He pinches my nipple, and I feel it in my core.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask.

I shouldn’t.

I know I shouldn’t.

This could end.

This could continue.

His fingers inch under my jeans. “Do you want me to stop?”

I can’t even say yes, because my breathing is loud and ragged.

“Are you turned on?”

He pauses, one hand edging under my panties. He hasn’t even really touched me, and I’m wet. I don’t have to be a virgin to know that he’s affecting me in strange ways.

“I’m going to find out one way or another, love,” he whispers. His lips tease the skin just behind my ear, his tongue flicking out and tasting me. “Last chance.”

“Caleb.”

His hand plunges down. I buck against him, but he shifts us so my chest is pressed to his car. He kicks my legs wider, assaulting my clit with a dangerous tempo. My heart races. We're outside.

Just like every other time he's done this to you.

"Oh my god, Caleb," I groan. I roll it to the side when his lips find my neck, biting and sucking. I have to brace my hand on his car as something builds up inside me.

"You don't fucking talk to him," he growls, biting my shoulder. "You don't fucking *look* at another guy, love, because you're mine."

His words, his teeth, his finger on my clit. It's sensory overload. I'm building and building, racing toward an unknown cliff, and I'm putty in his hands. I couldn't move—I'd do anything to make him stay.

"Okay."

His teeth ease, his lips and tongue soothing the spot, and his finger slips inside me. I groan.

"One day you'll be spread out in my kitchen, and I'll devour you," he promises. "I'm going to fuck your pussy, and you'll be screaming my name. But for today..."

His free hand slides up my stomach, and he pinches my nipple, twisting it in his fingers. It's pain and pleasure, and suddenly a wave crashes over me, knocking me off the cliff. I soar.

Stars burst behind my eyes.

He holds me as my body trembles. When I come back to myself, his nose is in my hair. His lips touch the top of my head.

"Don't forget what we talked about," he says, releasing me.

I turn around and look at him. His eyes are dark, appraising me. He smiles at something on my face, but it's too fleeting.

We get into his car, and he puts his hand on my thigh. I don't even mind it, because... I think I'm a bit out of my mind.

He's tormented me for weeks, and now he's claimed my body. He's a

bully...

He's *my* bully.

I hate you, I say in my head, just testing it out. It sounds weak, even to me. It's a half-hearted plea to my own self. *Hate him, damn it!*

He stops in front of the Jenkins' house and glances at me.

I lower the visor and check my face in the mirror, making sure everything is in place. It's as if nothing ever happened.

I slide out of the car, ready to close it, when he leans toward me.

"You forgot something."

I raise my eyebrow, and he takes my phone out of his pocket. He tosses it to me.

"Sweet dreams." He winks.

I shake my head, knowing that I'll probably dream of him. After that, how can I *not*?

He watches me walk up the driveway and into the house. It's only eleven-thirty, and I'm sober as a nun. Just like I wanted.

In the living room, Robert is reading a book with a blanket on his lap. He smiles and gestures for me to come over.

I fold myself into the armchair.

"You're early," he says. "Our daughter—"

I bite my lip. They haven't talked about her, only mentioned her those two times.

He sighs and continues, "She was a rule breaker. If curfew was midnight, she'd walk in the door at twelve-ten without fail. It drove Len crazy. And then our foster was different, but in the same way. She wouldn't show up at midnight. We'd be lucky if she came home by two."

I wince. "That isn't my style."

"I know, Margo. And we appreciate it."

I nod.

"We were worried about this transition, but you seem to have your head

on straight. How did tonight go?”

“It was fun.” I will my thoughts away from Caleb’s hands on my body and focus on my brief moments with Riley. “Nice to get into the school spirit again.”

He looks down at his book and removes his reading glasses. “We know his family. He’s had a rough...” He shakes his head. “Did you know him when you went to school here?”

“No,” I lie. I’m not sure why it slips out of my mouth, because the truth will probably come out eventually. “Not well.”

He nods. “All right. I’m done with the inquisition. Len and I drew straws to see who would stay up waiting for you. I’ll admit I’m relieved to see you back in one piece before midnight, so I can go to bed.”

We both chuckle, and I follow him up the stairs. I wave goodbye at my room and close the door quietly. I hesitate to turn around, wondering if tonight, Caleb will be sitting on my bed again. If he’ll come calling more now that he’s...

I finally turn, but my room is empty. The window is closed. What was it Robert had said?

He had a rough...

Rough what?

My phone buzzes in my hand. I’d forgotten I even had it.

Caleb: *Dream of me.*

The fucker slipped his number into my phone.

I drop it onto my nightstand and get ready for bed quickly, more than exhausted. When I dream, it isn’t of him. It’s a nightmare.

My mother clutches my shoulders, holding me close.

It isn’t loving. She shakes me hard, my head snapping back from the strength of it.

“What did you do?”

Tears fill my eyes. The world becomes blurry. She keeps shaking until someone rips her hands off me. I fall backward, my head smacking off the edge of our kitchen table.

“Margo, tell me!”

I can’t stop crying. My whole body trembles with the force of my sobs.

My head hurts.

My heart hurts.

Why?

“Why?” Mom screams.

I jerk upright, clutching at my chest. Sweat drips down my back.

That felt entirely too real.

I get up and lock myself in my bathroom, turning on the shower. Steam covers the mirror in seconds, and I’m grateful I don’t have to see my own expression. What would my face convey? Shock? Horror?

It had to be just a figment of my imagination.

The hot water burns away the crawling feeling of the nightmare. As I scrub my scalp, I realize I’m searching for something. My finger finds a scar on the back of my head, slightly raised and jagged.

I shiver.

Once I’m clean, I wrap myself in towels. One for my body and another for my hair. I climb back into bed and stare at the wall, waiting for sleep to come. It doesn’t. My eyelids grow heavy, but my mind is spinning like a top. I get out of bed and peek out my window. Slowly, like I’m still trapped in a dream, I unlock it and slide it open an inch.

And then I wait. But the devil doesn’t come.

The weekend brings new challenges. Namely: Caleb.
And paint.

“We need to work on our project,” he says, leaning against my bathroom door.

He caught me by surprise, bounding up the stairs before Robert had a chance to warn me.

I have one eye of makeup done. *One.*

He comes in and pushes my hand holding the mascara wand down, then raises his other hand. He blocks first one side of my face from his view, then the other.

I raise my eyebrows.

“You look nice without makeup on,” he says. “You smear black shit all over your eyes. And really, it’s not needed. Is it an insecurity thing?”

I push his hand away. “I like it.”

His gaze roams my face.

I expect him to smirk, but instead he shakes his head.

“Whatever floats your boat, Sheep.”

I grimace, letting him watch from the bathroom door. I lean close to the mirror and apply the mascara to my other eye, then eyeliner. Satisfied, I zip the bag closed and brush past him.

He grabs my wrist. "Slow down."

"I don't really like it when you call me a sheep," I say. "Especially not in my own..."

"Home?" He leans in. "You can call it that, you know."

I shake my head. *Can I?* Not yet. It's a house that I sleep in. Eat in. Have nightmares in.

"Let's paint, then."

Robert hovers for about five minutes until I shoot him a death glare. He raises his hands in surrender, chuckling, and mumbles something about being in his office. He lent us small easels that stand on a table. Spread across the kitchen island are Caleb's and my brushes and paint, laid out in neat rows on newspaper.

I stare at the blank canvas for a few seconds, then set my charcoal pencil down. I lean my elbow on the table and find Caleb watching me. He's in a similar pose.

"Why are you in an art class?" I ask. "You're smart. A sport god, apparently. And—"

"And those things don't correlate with art?" He smirks. "It's a hobby. Just like lacrosse."

I suppose he already knows where his future lies: with his father's company. Even though they apparently sold it, he still has an inheritance. A role he could grow into. It's okay for him to have hobbies.

"I can't do this. I can't paint *you*."

"Could you paint yourself?" he asks.

I think about that. Would I be able to show everything that I am? Good and bad?

My silence answers for me, and he frowns. "Why not?"

"You want to know why I wouldn't be able to paint myself? I wouldn't do it with any amount of accuracy."

He shrugs. "I could. I'm going to paint you and show every inch of you."

His gaze slides up and down my body, and fuck me, I get wet. One orgasm, and he owns my body.

“The good, the bad, and the ugly.”

I shake my head, trying not to make it obvious that I’m pressing my thighs together.

“But you have to go first.”

I twitch. “So I have to show you how I see you before...”

He grins. “I’m not in the mood to paint today.”

My sigh comes out slowly. “What are you in the mood for?”

“Guess you’ll find out once you’ve drawn me.”

I turn back to the canvas, switching my gaze between him and the expanse of white. I just need to make a mark, and then the rest will come easier. That’s what Robert says in class: the first stroke is the worst.

He’s burning me up. Every time I look at him, something in my chest gives out. I stare at his face. The strong brow, his dark hair that flips up on top and is short on the sides. His cool-blue eyes. Full lips—well, I know all about those lips—

“You’re staring,” he murmurs.

I shake myself. “You’re psyching me out.”

“What am I supposed to do, close my eyes?”

I brighten. “Yes. That’d make things easier.”

He stands and moves his stool closer, so his knees brush against my thigh. “What would you give me for it?”

How should I know what to give when I don’t know what he wants?

More mind games.

I lift one shoulder, biting my lip. I won’t ask him what he wants—I have a feeling his answer would be worse than anything I could come up with.

“You left your window open,” he says suddenly. “Why?”

Now there’s something I would never admit: that I still hang my hope on him.

“Tell me why, and I’ll shut my eyes,” he says. “I’ll keep them closed and not ask to see your painting.”

“Ever?”

“Ever,” he says. “Three...”

I tilt my head.

“Two...”

Ah, a countdown. I scowl at him.

“O—”

“I wanted you to come in,” I blurt out. “I thought if I left the window open...”

“Why?” Not angry. Not annoyed. Maybe a bit irritated at my clammed-up words, but he’s more curious than anything.

“Because—” A lump forms in my throat.

He edges closer, and I hate that I want him to comfort me. Hell, the fact that I need comforting at all has me on edge. He’s wicked *and* he’s nice. I can handle one or the other. I seem to crave one over the other.

Dark over light. Bad over good. God, I’m fucked up.

He runs a finger down my cheek, over my jaw, and down the side of my neck. He pulls the scarf away from my throat, eyes going to the dark bruises peppering my skin. They trail from my neck down my shoulder. There are more marks on my breast that I’ve been ignoring.

He presses his thumb into one of them, watching for my face to change. I keep my poker face until he pushes a little too hard, and I wince from the pain.

“You like these.”

It isn’t a question.

Add that to the list of infuriating things about Caleb Asher. Sometimes I think he sees more of me than I do.

His thumb traces small, soothing circles on my neck. My face heats up because at any moment, Robert could come back into the kitchen. Lenora

could get home from her errands and catch... *this*.

He's literally only touching me with a finger. It's enough and not enough at the same time. I lean into him when he stops me, his palm flat on my collarbone.

"Draw," he orders, sitting up straight.

And, damn it, his eyes close.

I wouldn't have guessed that I'd get him to do it. That telling him the truth would unlock a favor. A big one.

I take a deep breath and start. It's sloppy and not what I mean to draw, but that's the beauty of charcoal: it smudges off, and it'll all be covered by paint eventually. A thought occurs to me as I sketch the outline of his eyes from memory.

"Why wouldn't you want to see what I paint?" I clear my throat. "Aren't you curious?"

"Of course I'm curious," he replies. "But I agreed not to ask."

I hum. "Okay."

I get as far as I can—as far as I want to—and tell Caleb that I'm done for the day. I managed to put a background on the canvas, smoky grays and blacks, but the space where his face and upper torso will go is only faintly outlined in charcoal.

He opens his eyes.

"Great. Cover that up and let's go."

"Go? But..."

He snorts. "You think I need to look at you to paint you, love? You've been ingrained on my brain since the beginning."

I follow him through the house, to a door I have yet to see open. He knocks on it, tossing me a quick wink, before Robert calls for him to enter.

I walk in behind Caleb, surprised at the space. Sure, the house is big, but I didn't really consider what lay directly below my bedroom. One wall is all books with fancy spines. The type of shit I read wouldn't be found here,

that's for sure.

"Hey, Mr. Jenkins," Caleb greets him.

"You can call me Robert when we're not in school," Robert scolds. He's already mentioned that a time or two.

"Yes, sir."

He's behind a giant desk. Like, I could lie down on it and throw my arms and legs wide, and there'd still be space for two more people.

I wander closer to the books, reading the titles.

Philosophy of Law, Volume III. The Laws of Human Nature. To Kill A Mockingbird.

The last is a surprise, but it looks old and valuable.

"Ready?" Caleb asks, touching my shoulder.

I jump. "Huh?"

"Did you space out?" Robert asks. "Caleb just asked if he could take you to a late lunch and movie."

I nod. "Ah, sorry. Did you say yes?"

My stomach twists. Caleb's managed to finagle his way into my life in more ways than one: he's in my space in school, he's in my head out of it, he's in my dreams. Not that I'd ever admit it.

And now he's taking my time, too. Time that I would've laid on my bed and stared at the ceiling, fantasizing about him. *The real thing is better.*

Yeah, okay.

The real thing hurts more.

Robert laughs. "I did. Curfew is midnight."

Caleb takes my hand and leads me out of the room. In the hallway, he leans down and whispers, "I want to fuck you on that desk."

My gasp gets lodged in my throat.

"No witty rebuttal?"

"Have I ever had a witty rebuttal?"

He shrugs. "Sometimes."

His hand squeezes mine.

We clean the table quickly, putting the paint and easels away. He follows me into my bedroom.

“I really think I need to kiss you,” he says. That’s the only warning I get before he’s on me, his hands sliding around my neck. He holds me to him as he slams his lips against mine. He’s shockingly savage. I lean into it, winding my arms around his waist, and he walks me backward.

He uses his hand on my neck to lower me to my bed, chasing after me. His weight barely registers. He ravages me. He nibbles on my lips and leaves no inch of my mouth untouched.

I suck in a breath through my nose, hooking my leg around his hips and pressing him closer.

He breaks away, grinning at the dazed expression.

He taps the tip of my nose. “That was fun. Let’s try something else.”

He grabs my wrists and hauls me to my feet, then out the door. We barely have time to shout goodbye, and then we’re in his car.

I look over at him. “What are you scheming?”

“What are you afraid of?” he asks.

I wonder if me giving in was a bad thing. If he’d only like me for the chase.

“Margo.”

“I’m afraid...” I press my lips together. “Of my dreams.”

He snorts. “Of the boogeyman coming out of your closet?”

“There are things I don’t understand,” I say. “My mother—”

He glances at me sharply. “She was a drug-addicted slut,” he spits. A muscle in his jaw ticks, and his grip flexes on the wheel.

I look straight forward, and we’re suddenly going a lot faster. I grab on to the handle on the door. “Caleb—”

“You shouldn’t talk about her,” he says. “Shouldn’t think about her.”

I shake my head. “I can’t help who I dream about—” We speed around a

corner, and I close my eyes. “Please stop.”

“Stop? Stop what?”

We’re gaining speed. It’s a sunny day on a back road. We’re nowhere near other cars, other life. Hell, we could hit a ditch flipped over, and it might be an hour before someone finds us.

Why did we go this way?

“I’m afraid of *you*,” I blurt out. “When you get that look in your eye. When you do mean things. When you hurt me.”

He shakes his head, slamming on the brakes. The tires squeal, smoking as the car stops on a dime. He meets my gaze. “I don’t do anything you don’t deserve,” he says.

“I didn’t deserve you kissing Savannah. I don’t deserve these games.”

He shakes his head, taking a deep breath. Under his armor, he’s human, too.

Keep telling yourself that, sweetheart.

He pulls back onto the road, going a normal speed. We take a few turns, suddenly headed back toward my house. Or... his.

In the driveway, he kills the engine, then gets out without a word.

Per usual, I’m left to follow him. There are more cars in his driveway than I expected, and I walk in tentatively. Liam and Theo are in the front room, leaning over a chessboard. The furniture is still covered in sheets. Everything has a ghost-like quality to it, like no one *actually* lives here. Not the downstairs, anyway.

I hurry away from them, toward the sound of voices.

I find Eli and Caleb in the kitchen.

It’s hard to enter, knowing what happened last time I was in here. And before that...

“Ah, she’s arrived.” Eli smiles at me.

I frown, not a hundred percent sure I trust him. After all, he’s been hot and cold with Riley. *Kind of like how Caleb is with you.* “What’s up?”

Eli pops the cap off a beer and offers it to me.

When I shake my head, he takes a long swallow.

“We’re planning a party.”

Parties. I think I hate those. The public schools I went to had parties, but those were loud and obnoxious. The cops were almost always called, which is a disaster if you’re in the foster system and they catch you. And then the one where Caleb carried me out...

I can admit that I’m curious how the rich kids really party. The taste from the other night wasn’t enough to get a feel for it. “What kind?”

“Homecoming,” Caleb answers. His brows furrow.

I blink at him, my mouth popping open. “What?”

Eli shakes his head, snickering. “I think that’s a no, dude. Maybe she’d rather go with Liam—”

Caleb shoves Eli, so hard and fast I almost don’t register it. Eli hits the counter, snarling. I back out of the kitchen—a guilty relief—and into a strong pair of hands.

Theo scowls at me. Shocker.

Liam pushes between Eli and Caleb before the situation can escalate. “What’s this about?”

Caleb glares at Eli, while the latter glares at *me*.

“You’re an idiot,” Eli declares, looking back at Caleb. “You should just leave your history with her in the past. She and her family—”

Crunch. Caleb’s fist smashes into Eli’s nose, narrowly avoiding Liam.

Theo moves me to the side, helping Liam wrangle both of them. “Goddamn it,” Theo growls. He spins around and points at me. “Leave.”

I take two quick steps backward, then turn and run.

Instead of going out the front door, I take a side exit and find myself staring at the guest house next to the pool. With quick, sure steps, I race toward it. It’s unlocked.

I take a second to pray that no one lives here, and then I’m pushing

inside. It's just like I remembered it, plus three inches of dust. Ugly, pale-yellow paint in the kitchen, one of those retro green refrigerators at the end of the counter. There's still furniture. A cup...

I walk toward it, mesmerized, and lift it from its spot next to the sink. It sticks a bit, leaving a ring on the vinyl.

"Put that down," Caleb hisses from the doorway. It seems to pain him to step foot in here, but he does. He marches across the room, kicking up dust, and wrenches the plastic cup from my grip.

My fingers are wooden. I couldn't have held on to it if I tried.

He slams the cup back down in its spot and grabs my arm just above my elbow. When he drags me out of the room, something wild fractures in my chest. I shove him and manage to get loose.

I race down the hallway and push open a door, stopping dead in the doorway.

My things.

My bed and toys and clothes and drawings on the wall.

Oh my god.

Caleb grabs me from behind, dragging me out of the house.

I scream when we pass my parents' bedroom door. My legs give out, and my heels create marks through the dust on the floor. Once we're outside, he pushes me against the house and claps his hand over my mouth.

His breathing is out of control. His eyes suck me in.

"Stop," he says. "Just stop."

I find myself leaning toward him. My heartbeat is going to jump out of my throat. He keeps me against the wall with one hand on my chest. He watches me through narrowed eyes.

Did I do something wrong?

"You didn't—no one—"

"We left it," he says. "No one's gone in there since they took you away."

"Caleb."

My mother shaking me hard enough to snap my head back.

I flinch at the jarring thought. “My things. My childhood.”

All of my memories of my parents are in that guest house. In *his* house.

He steps closer to me. “You don’t go in there,” he warns. “It isn’t yours to take.”

It is mine. It’s my life that has come unraveled, and all I want is to roll it back up again. Now Caleb is the gatekeeper to my past.

My present.

Hell, my future.

“Please,” I whisper. I’m less than air, floating away. His hand on my chest, hotter than fire, is the only thing keeping me grounded.

But please is the wrong word to say.

His gaze hardens. His fingers dig into my skin, as if he’d like nothing less than to claw my heart out.

He leans in close, close enough that I could move forward just a bit and kiss him if I wanted to. Or bite him.

His eyes go from my lips to my eyes and back, burning fury.

One word decrees my death sentence: “No.”

I didn't have much interaction with Caleb until I was five years old. We went to the same preschool, and I had seen him in my kindergarten class, but boys were... *boys*. My mom pulled me out of my room one day and brought me across the grass to the Asher house, and I finally spoke to Caleb.

His mom was there, too, waiting with him in the kitchen. Our moms smiled at each other, while Caleb and I just stared.

To me, he was as odd as an alien. He ran around with boys twice his size and didn't flinch. I stuck close to Savannah and Amelie. We played with dolls and dressed up in their rooms—and we never came to my house.

"Say hello," my mother said, her finger pressing into my spine. She did it when I slouched.

I snapped my back straight, if only to relieve the pressure, and contorted my lips into a smile. "Hello, Caleb."

He shook his head, glancing at his mom. "She's a dumb girl."

I walked up and smacked his shoulder. "I'm not dumb."

Strange as it was, Caleb and I became fast friends after that. The way to a boy's heart is through physical violence, apparently. He still hung out with his friends at school, and I stayed with Amelie and Savannah. On the playground, if their ball sometimes rolled in our direction, I'd be the one to

climb to my feet and toss it back to him.

He'd give me a weird, appraising look and mutter a thank you.

He also sat with me on the bus. I hadn't realized how awful the bus was until he was next to me, and everything got better.

We carried on that way until we were eight. And then our friendship got a little more immediate. I ate dinner with his family. He helped me with my history homework, and I helped him with math.

"I'll only be friends with you if we play dress-up," I declared one day, holding a box of clothes in my arms. I snuck them from the drawer of costumes I'd been collecting from Savannah. They were hand-me-downs, usually with rips in the hem or holes in the pockets that my mom mended, but I didn't care.

Caleb sighed, putting his forehead down on the table. "Guess I don't really have a choice then, huh?"

He followed me to his room.

I pointed to him. "You need a suit."

"Why?"

"Because I said so!" I chucked a shoe at him for good measure, but it soared wide. If he threw it back, he'd probably nail me in the chest. His aim was a *lot* better than mine.

He grunted and left the room, and I put on the special dress I had snuck out of the house.

When he came back, he stopped dead. "What is this?"

I snorted. I smoothed the old white fabric with my hands. I'd been a flower-girl only a few months ago. My dad's cousin got married, and I was apparently the only one eligible to walk down the aisle and throw flowers.

"What does it look like?" I asked him.

He squinted at me, the tip of his tongue sliding out of his mouth with his concentration. And then he blinked. "We're getting married?"

I grinned and waited. He'd either be in or out—with Caleb, you never

knew. I figured this was a good way to solve my dilemma of how much he actually liked me.

You know: *friend-like* or *marriage-like*.

He straightened his tie and came closer. "I didn't get you a ring."

I shook my head and reached into my pocket.

"Got it covered," I said, showing him the two pieces of braided string in my hand. I'd made one that was equal parts gold and blue, and the other was blue with a single thread of gold. It was annoying, having to try to make something so small it would fit around my finger, so I gave up and made bracelets. "We're married until these fall off."

That was how those types of bracelets worked: keep them on until they fall off, or it's bad luck.

"Okay," he agreed. "But..."

"What?"

"Do we have to kiss? To seal the deal?"

My eyebrows crinkled. I hadn't thought that far ahead.

He grinned and walked closer, holding the pants—his dad's, I'd bet—so he didn't trip on the hem. "We could, you know."

"Kiss?"

"Adults do it."

My heart raced. "Do they?"

Mom and Dad didn't really kiss in front of me. They barely touched. *Did Caleb's parents kiss in front of him?* I'd seen it on movies, but I thought it was just that: fiction.

I knew the definition of fiction at age eight. I wasn't dumb.

Some things just weren't real: Santa, parents who really loved each other, my future with Caleb.

He picked up both braided pieces, which I'd left untied, and fisted the one with more gold. "I want this one. It reminds me of you."

And then he raised my left arm and tied the mostly blue one around my

wrist. He left it loose enough that I could've inched it over my hand, but I didn't. I slid it farther up, until it got stuck on my forearm. I didn't want to lose it so quickly.

"Now me," he said, shoving his bracelet at me.

I tied it with clumsy fingers, as loose as he had made mine. Who knew when these things would fall off? I suddenly wished I had made them out of steel.

"Kiss me, Wolfe," he said. "Make it official."

I leaned in, my hand on his wrist and my gaze on his mouth.

Our lips touched, just the barest of brushes. We both pulled back and stared at each other for a moment.

Then Caleb lifted my hand. "Wow. So this is what marriage feels like."

I shook my head. "I don't feel..."

And then it hit me.

The *bond*. We'd be linked, him and me, by our wrists and our lips, forever. I wasn't mad about it. I was selfishly glad that he was mine.

Mine and no one else's. I'd fight them, and he would come back to me. Because: marriage. Even if Mom and Dad's marriage sucked, and Caleb's parents' marriage was rocky, sometimes fiction and real life could be the same.

We'd be the happy couple when we got into our older years. Twenties, thirties, forties. Hell, he'd probably love me through gray hair and wrinkles. I knew it, and judging from the look in his eye, he knew it, too.

And then, two years later, our lives imploded.

Caleb

I meet the guys at Liam's place. They evacuated my house shortly after I dragged Margo out. I slink into the kitchen and grab a beer, and go find them in Liam's game room.

"That was fun," Theo grunts from his chair.

It's directed at me, I know. He keeps his eyes on the racing game they're playing.

I drop into the chair next to him. It's best that, for now, I stay the hell away from Liam. He's on the opposite side of the couch, next to Eli. They look over at me and raise their eyebrows, but all I can do is scowl at them.

"I don't want to talk about it."

Liam shrugs. "Fine."

"I just said—"

"He didn't ask you a fucking question, man," Eli snaps. "If you want to be a pisser and sulk in the corner, fine. We'll leave you the fuck alone."

"Fine," I growl. I pick up the extra control and opt into Theo's next game. Video games won't release the tension I feel. The anger swirls like a fucking hurricane in my chest.

After about ten minutes, I say, "You never knew her."

They exchange glances. "She left right before you transferred in, Eli."

His family moved here when we were eleven. I was an angry son of a bitch then, but no worse than I am now. Eh, no, probably less angry then.

It's grown under my skin in the years since.

"Okay," Eli says. "We do know this part of the story. The whole school's been talking about it."

I've kept this under wraps for a reason. It's personal shit. But I've got to say something to stop their squawking. "Yeah, but you don't know *my* side.

We weren't just acquaintances. She didn't just live with her family in our guest house. She *was* family. She was my best friend."

"And then all the drama with her family?" That comes from Liam.

"Something like that." I jerk the controller, smashing Theo's character out of the way.

I don't feel anything when I win—except for Theo's elbow jabbed into my ribs.

"So why do you hate her?"

I drop the controller on the counter and lean back, taking a long swallow of beer. I'll need six more of these before I share any more secrets about her. And how she's still getting under my skin after all these years.

"Did you see who's playing next week?" Eli asks, thankfully changing the subject. "Lion's Head."

"Oh, shit." I laugh. "Liam, you ready to get your ass whipped?"

Liam crosses his arms. "They're not *that* good."

"They're first in the fucking league," I say. "Makes me glad I don't play football. We don't have to deal with the embarrassment of coming in second place in lacrosse."

"Yeah, you talk a big game, Asher," Theo replies.

"It's because he doesn't like to wear tights," Eli cuts in. "And I, for one, totally agree. Cheers." He leans over Theo and taps his beer bottle against mine.

Theo scowls at us. "You're immature."

"You're the one wearing tights," Eli mutters.

"We can take this outside."

I grab Theo's arm, and he falls back in his seat. "Something got you in a twist, Theo?"

"No."

"Uh-huh." Liam rolls his eyes. "You're the worst liar."

"That girl goes to Lion's Head." Theo's eyes are practically black. "And

she's going to fucking show up at the game, and—"

"And nothing," I say, patting his shoulder. "You're worrying too much."

Anger rolls off him. "If I see her, I'm going to fucking kill her."

I grunt. "Okay, well, that's not good. Anyone want to go find something better to do than hang around here?"

Liam hops up. "There's that party tonight at Ian's house."

"Great. Come on." I haul Theo up, pushing him ahead of me. He's the silent but deadly type. Honestly? I'd feel sorry for the girl he wants to kill—if she steps foot in his way, that is.

Anger can be good from a distance. It'll make him a better football player, and any skills he learns on that field we can use for lacrosse.

The doorbell rings as we're piled in the kitchen, raiding Liam's snack pantry.

Through a mouthful of food, Eli says, "I'll get it."

We all came together when we were fourteen. Eli and I knew each other from middle school, and Theo and Liam joined us from a neighboring private school. Actually, they transferred from Lion's Head. I imagine that's where Theo's hatred started.

Anyway, all of us were angry in one way or another, and it was natural that we gravitated toward each other. We all made the lacrosse team, and even as freshmen, we were *good*. Good enough to start. By sophomore year, we were kings.

We walked through the halls worshipped by the other students. It helped that our families are made of money. Theo's dad donated to the athletic department. Liam's parents bought a fucking building. And me? Well, the school board knows to fear my last name.

They know what we'd do to them.

The sport made us not only untouchable—but *loved*. I'm not deaf. I've heard the whispers about the golden boys of Emery-Rose Elite. If people knew the truth behind our masks, they would shy away from us.

Eli comes back into the kitchen, followed by... Savannah.

I watch her, letting my mask slide back into place. It's one thing to use her—it's another thing entirely for her to come calling on *me*.

Her face is a mess of puffy eyelids and streaked mascara. Her chin is wobbling.

I don't give a fuck.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

She stiffens, then throws her arms around my waist. I raise my hands away from her body. I don't want to touch her more than I have to—and why would I want to, if Margo isn't here to witness it?

That's not part of the plan.

I don't like anyone's hands on me. Except Margo.

"Amelie is coming back," she sniffs. "Two months early!"

"And that's a... bad thing?"

Best I can recall, she and Amelie have been good friends since day one. Margo used to be in their mix, too. The fact that Savannah openly turned on Margo has been nothing short of delicious to watch unfold. Poor girl carried a torch for Margo for about a year, until the bullies beat her down. Eleven-year-olds are ruthless.

It's hard being the friend of a coke-whore's daughter.

"No," Savannah cries, using my shirt as a face-wipe. She nuzzles her head into my chest. "It's great, it's just, she's coming back early, and—"

My lip curls.

And in their friend group, Amelie is in charge. The captain of the cheerleading squad. The queen bee. She's been gone this semester, studying abroad. And in her absence, Savannah has stepped into her role almost *too* flawlessly.

I don't think she needs me to remind her that there are consequences for every action.

"So you're just upset that she's going to knock you off the top of the

pyramid?”

She pulls back, staring up at my face. She nods emphatically. “Yes, yes, that’s it. But I thought if... maybe you and I...”

I push her off of me. Enough is enough. “You came here to proposition me. To use me against your best friend?”

Devious little devil.

My friends have left the room.

“Well...”

I glower at her, and she cowers. I don’t usually let anyone but Margo and my friends see the demons under my skin, but I let them out for her. *She needs to know to be afraid of me.* “Bad idea, Sav.”

“We—”

I stalk forward. Satisfaction spreads through me when she takes a quick step backward, then another one. “We, what? We fucked once? You spread rumors about us dating, that I squashed inside of a week?” I sneer. “Tell me. How did that work out for you?”

She turns pale. “I’m sorry—”

“Get off your high horse,” I snap. “Amelie is coming back, and you’ll go back to being second...” I lift my eyebrow. “Well, now *third* best.”

She gasps. “What?”

“Amelie and Margo were friends, too. And while she didn’t defend Margo... she doesn’t hate her as much as you do.” *Probably because we only bullied you about being friends with her.* Of the two of them, Amelie is the traitorous snitch.

But I don’t say that.

Savannah lets out a ragged breath. “I’m such an idiot,” she moans. She turns and runs, slamming the front door closed behind her.

I wonder how Margo will react to the news that her ex-friend is back. If there will be fireworks when the two collide... Especially since Amelie still thinks we’re dating.

Part of me hopes the little sheep will drop the act and draw first blood. My dick stiffens at the thought of Margo going after Amelie. *Wild fantasy*. I doubt either girl would play fair in that fight.

Amelie is a means to an end... Margo *is* the end.

Theo wanders back in, his eyebrow raised. “Dude. What the fuck is it with you and crazy chicks?”

I laugh. “I wish I knew.”

Unfortunately, there’s only one crazy girl for me. And I only need to keep her long enough to watch her burn.

I avoid everyone except for Riley for a week. Caleb doesn't come looking for me. He doesn't even watch me from afar. The bullies return, climbing out of the woodwork. They hit my shoulder with theirs in the hall, kick my bookbag, mutter mean things.

It's all very hit-and-run.

Riley corners me after school, telling a quick lie to Robert about having plans with me. "You're being weird," she snaps. "What happened?"

I can't tell her.

Instead, I ask, "What happened with you and Eli? He seems back to hating you."

It's a good distraction, because Riley's face falls. She hooks her arm in mine and leads me to her car. "Honestly, I don't even know. He's... weird." She brightens. "On the plus side, I heard that Caleb is allowed to go back to attending the football games."

I twitch. "How is that a good thing?"

"Because that means we can go... No?"

"No."

"Did he not carry you out of a party in front of half the school? In front of *me*?"

"Yeah, and now he's being a dick. So. No parties and no games and

definitely no golden boys.”

She snorts, unlocking her car. “I’ll agree with you about the golden boys. Pfft. Who needs them?”

We go to her house. It’s not a mansion like Caleb’s, but it’s nice. She has a huge room with a walk-in closet and four-poster bed. I perch on the end of it as she rummages for a change of clothes.

“You knew we used to live in Caleb’s guest house.” I may as well voice it into the air, because it’s something I’ve been avoiding. “Right?”

She turns around slowly, clearing her throat. She seems nervous. “Yeah.”

“Well... He took me to his house, and the guys were there. They got into a fight—over me, I guess, I don’t know—so I ran. It was instinct to go back there.” I shudder. “Everything was the same as the day we left. They hadn’t even gotten rid of our personal things.”

“Oh, Margo,” Riley whispers, coming over and sitting next to me. “So you ran in there, and it was like jumping back in time?”

“Besides the dust, yeah. My room was untouched. Like, still a pair of jeans on the floor from the night before everything happened.” I swallow my heartache. “And then Caleb...”

She winces before I even say it.

“He was furious. And he hasn’t talked to me since.”

“I’d say he’ll come around, but he was mean to you, right? Maybe it’s better that you’ve escaped his attention for now.”

I nod halfheartedly. “Yeah, maybe.”

It was only a matter of time before Caleb’s attention moved on to something a little more... stable. He said it himself, I was only a game. Savannah was only a means to an end for said game.

It isn’t until the next day at school that I realize how awful of a prediction my words were. Amelie Page, former best friend, stands in the center of the courtyard. She flips her golden hair behind her shoulder, smiling at the circle of people around her.

And Caleb...

He's smiling at her. She has a hand looped around his arm, and her fingers grasp his biceps.

"Amelie was studying in France as an exchange student," Riley whispers.

Shame seeps into my skin. It's a cold, vile feeling, and I almost turn away from them. I don't need to see Caleb with *another* girl who I used to like. Yet, I'm transfixed on her hand.

And then she's breaking away from the crowd, and murmurs chase her.

"Margo!" She has an accent.

I'd forgotten about that—or maybe it's more pronounced now that she's older.

"Welcome home."

I smile. I hadn't thought to ask about her, and now I'm unprepared for the warmth in her eyes.

"I should say that to you," I answer.

She waves me off. "Nonsense. I'm just glad that you're back. Have you been reintroduced? You've seen Sav..." Her perfectly sculpted eyebrow rises. "Oh, that isn't a happy face on our dear friend."

I follow her gaze to where Savannah looks like she's bitten into a lemon. Amelie leads me over to her, throwing her arm around Savannah's shoulders.

"Our friend is back," Amelie tells her. "We're welcoming her with open arms."

That's a decree from a queen if I've ever heard one.

"And you remember Caleb." She drags me over to him. "My boyfriend."

My whole world screeches to a halt.

I stare at her, unable to even look at him. His gaze is on me for the first time in a week, and my skin itches.

"What?"

"Darling, we've been dating since junior year," she says, laughing. She flips her hair back and leans in close. "Sure, you may have had him first..."

and Sav got her pound of flesh. But he's *not* yours anymore."

I swallow. "Interesting. I wouldn't have expected—"

She smiles. "The bell is about to ring. You know the way?"

"To—"

She drops my arm. "Let's go, Caleb. We're going to be late."

The bell rings, and I flinch. Everything about the past five minutes has been... *fake*.

My stomach twists when he offers his arm to her again, leading her away. The courtyard empties in seconds, as soon as the doors are swung open to admit them.

Long ago, I thought Caleb and I would have a happy ever after. Clearly... I was so wrong.

Riley finds me in the same spot Amelie left me. Seconds or minutes later, I can't tell.

"That was the most cunning and brutal thing I've ever witnessed," she says.

I swallow shards of glass. Pretty sure my insides are all hollowed out. "Yeah."

"Do you want to skip?"

I shake my head. "I really wish we had classes together," I mumble. "I shouldn't skip. I should go in there with my head held high..."

She chuckles. "Okay, well, I'll check on you after our first class. We'll see how you feel."

When I get to homeroom, I shouldn't be surprised that Caleb and Amelie are so close. She's practically on top of him, leaning against his desk while he sits there. Her hand on his arm, his hand on her waist.

My phone vibrates.

Unknown: *Told you to stay away. The weakest sheep get eaten by the wolf first.*

I frown, glancing around the room. Half of the people in class are on their phones.

Me: *Who are you?*

Unknown: *You'd like it to be that easy, wouldn't you?*

Yeah, I would. But I guess that would be too much to ask of an anonymous bully.

At least Caleb does it to my face.

I manage to successfully ignore the way Amelie brushes Caleb's hair away from his face, and the hooting of Eli, and their friendly ribbing. *Just kidding*, I hear it all. But it gets easier after my first two classes. I don't have anything to do with Amelie or Caleb until last period.

And because Robert decided to have us do our projects out of class, there's no reason for us to even look at each other.

"You okay?" Robert asks.

I realize that the whole class is empty. "The bell rang a few minutes ago. Did you even hear it?"

I stare at my paper. We had been working on blending techniques with watercolor paints, and it's a mess of muddled colors. "Sorry. I just had a bad day."

He drags a stool over and sits next to me. He points to one of my groups, where I'd managed to make green fade into blue. "You did this one right. You can see the blue and the green, but there's also the middle space where it becomes a new color entirely."

I nod. "Yeah, it's the only one I managed to do okay on."

He shakes his head. "No, it just takes practice. Like this?" He taps his pencil next to the orange-into-pink one. "We don't see the two separate colors. May I?"

“Sure.”

He cleans my brush and dips it in the pink. He pulls the brush down, the pink almost the same size as my little ombre square. He repeats the process for the orange, everything bigger... and suddenly I can see it.

“I was close.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to see the big picture when you’re so zoomed in.” He glances at me. “A lot can be said about taking a step back.”

“Like impressionism.”

He laughs. “Yeah, like that. Or relationships. How you see people, and how they see you.”

I mull that over. “Do you ever think you and Lenora are too... muddled?”

“Not often,” he answers.

God, is this my first relationship talk? With a father figure?

“I used to try to only see the good in her, but it doesn’t work like that. You have to accept every part of someone.” He taps my colors again. “Just like this. The colors are nice on their own, but if you only focus on the pretty parts, are they still beautiful?”

“I don’t think someone will accept all of my flaws.” I keep my attention on the paper, not ready to see whatever is going to come across Robert’s face next. They’ve been nice—more than nice, really. It feels like I’ve been welcomed into a complete family.

But maybe I’ve only been looking at the good pieces to convince myself that I belong.

“Someone will,” he says firmly. “And not just in a romantic sense. Lenora and I are lucky to have you, too. I’m sure Riley would say the same.”

I blush. “Maybe.”

He pats my shoulder. “Let’s go home, kiddo. The missus will beat us back at this rate.”

The school is a ghost town when we leave the classroom. We walk in easy silence back to his car, and I cast one look back toward the field where

the teams have started practicing. I can pick out Liam and Theo in their football jerseys, easy to spot with their last names on their backs.

At the top of the cheerleading pyramid is Amelie, smiling like a conqueror. On the second level, seeming pained with Amelie's knee in her back, is Savannah.

Interesting.

Only last week, she was the one on top. I give her credit where it's due: she's a good cheerleader. Except, clearly, Amelie is better. Brighter. Hell, she radiates joy even when she's not trying.

I take a mental step back. Maybe she *is* trying, and that's her secret.

And maybe...

"Margo?"

I stop, and my head snaps forward. I was about an inch from walking right into Robert's car. "Oops."

He frowns. "Did you think any more on trying out for a sport?"

"I don't know what I'd go for," I say.

He shrugs. "If you're into a winter sport, there's basketball or ice hockey—we have excellent women's teams in both. Spring, there's rowing, tennis, lacrosse..."

I perk up. "Rowing like... on the river?"

"Yeah, they get up early, though. I think they practice before school." He unlocks the car and shrugs. "I won't pressure you. There are a lot of things you can do, and we can arrange rides to get you to practice if you decide to go for rowing."

"I'll think about it." I pull up the sport on my phone, reading about it as he drives back to his house. Our house.

Rowing—also called crew—can be in a one-person boat or teams up to eight. I don't know what Emery-Rose Elite offers, but the videos of people skimming across the top of the water are fascinating.

"I think I want to try," I say, once we're out of the car. "Do you know

when tryouts are?”

“No, but I can find out.”

He opens the door, and we’re greeted with a wonderful smell.

“We’re home, Len. Your cooking spells wonderful!”

She rounds the corner wearing a bright-red apron. She grins at us. “Just in time.”

“For what?” I ask. It’s barely three-thirty.

“For you to help me.” She pulls something from behind her back, holding it out to me.

“My own apron?” I ask.

It’s light blue.

A lump forms in my throat.

“Yes, it has your name on it and everything.” She taps the embroidered *Margo* on the top left. “Come on, before I burn everything.”

I drop my bag and follow her into the kitchen, where there are a million bowls. Okay, more like six, but *still*.

“This is…” I swallow.

“Overwhelming?” She pats my shoulder and shakes out my apron, putting it over my head.

I take the ties and secure it around my waist.

“We take this one veggie at a time. I’ll show you how to chop an onion without crying and then we’ll move on to easier stuff.”

She shows me, and I’ll admit that she’s as good of a teacher as Robert. Maybe that’s why they’re happy together. She gets to work seasoning chicken and preparing the oven. We work in silence for a few minutes.

“What are we making?”

“I figured we would start with chicken parm,” she says. “But we need to make the sauce, so once you’re done with the onions, we’ll put them in oil with some garlic, then add our fire-roasted tomatoes and the can of sauce.” She lifts one shoulder. “I like to cheat a little.”

“Sounds good to me.”

The meal comes together quickly, and the afternoon flies into evening. An hour later, she hands me oven mitts and lets me retrieve the dish from the oven. Cheesy, saucy chicken greets us. The top of the cheese is a perfectly crisp and smells *amazing*.

“I didn’t think I’d be able to do something like this,” I admit. I carry it to the table and set it on a rack.

Lenora brings the salad we made over, along with a bowl of pasta and garlic bread. A full feast.

“I wouldn’t have been able to do it without your help,” she says. “My mother once told me to have at least *one* meal you’re good at. That you can make for potluck parties or holidays. If you have more than one, that’s fine. I always loved a good chicken parmesan. Something about it just tastes like home.”

I smile. “It’s a good one.”

“If you want to choose a meal to perfect in your own way, we can pick up the ingredients and make it next week,” she offers.

“That would be fun.”

Robert comes in, eyeing the table. “My mouth has been watering for the last half hour,” he admonishes. “And now that it’s ready, you don’t even call me?”

Lenora chuckles, kissing his cheek. “We were just about to, dear. Wash your hands.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

We all sit, hesitating for a split second before diving into the food. I put a bite in my mouth and groan. It tastes about ten times better because I made it.

“Food made with love.” Lenora sighs. “Always tastes good to the stomach and the soul.”

Robert tells her that I’m contemplating a sport, and I blurt out rowing. To my surprise, her smile widens.

“That was my sport in college,” she says. “It’s a lot of hard work, but so fun. I know the coach at Emery-Rose. In fact, we were on the same team in college. I’ll chat with her tomorrow and find out when tryouts are.” She wiggles her eyebrows. “Maybe you’ll want to rent a boat with me. I’d be happy to offer some pointers and see if it’s something you’d enjoy.”

“I’d like that,” I mutter.

This is a lot of family bonding. A lot of...

It’s hard to know love when you didn’t get it from your parents.

After we’ve eaten, I slip away to my room. There’s homework to finish and Caleb’s social media to stalk. I mentally add Amelie’s to my list as well.

It’s late by the time I pick up my phone and glance at the screen.

Unknown: *Don’t get too comfortable, drug princess. Once a stray, always a stray.*

I cringe, dropping my phone on the floor. There’s a drop of truth in the mystery person’s words. But... this came from ten minutes ago.

Did someone see me cooking with Lenora? Or maybe walk out with Robert?

I resolve to not look at the texts. I close my books and tuck them back into my bag, brush my teeth and change, then slip under the covers. Maybe some peace will come to me when I sleep.

My eyes open as my bed dips down.
There's a shadow looming above me.

I open my mouth to scream, but all that comes out is a hoarse wheeze before a hand clamps over the lower half of my face. Strong fingers dig into my skin.

"Easy, love," the voice whispers.

I blink a few times, trying not to hyperventilate, and finally my eyes focus on Caleb.

He pulls his hand away from my lips, raising one eyebrow.

"What are you doing here?"

"Am I unwelcome?"

"Y-yes," I sputter. I try to sit up, but he's lying on top of my comforter. It pins me in place. "Get out."

He seems to contemplate it for a second, then rolls his eyes. "No."

I watch him warily. He stands, kicking off his shoes. He pulls back the edge of my comforter and slides underneath.

"What are you doing?" I whisper.

He moves down so we're face to face. He puts his elbow on my pillow, propping up his head. "You never apologized."

I start. "What? Why would I apologize?"

“For going into my guest house without permission.”

I push up on my elbow, too, narrowing my eyes. “Excuse me, Mr. High and Mighty—”

His free hand shoots out, grabbing my throat and forcing me flat on my back. He leans over me, the picture of calm. “Do not test me.”

“It was *my*—”

His fingers tighten, and I automatically stop talking.

It takes me too long to realize the danger. That nice Caleb isn’t here tonight—his demons are.

“Caleb,” I squeak. I can barely suck air in. My face is on fire. “I’m sorry.”

He loosens his hold, but his face is still a calm mask. I don’t trust it one bit.

His hand moves over my collarbone and down the center of my chest. “You’re not wearing a bra?”

“It’s the middle of the night,” I breathe.

His finger flicks one of my nipples. My muscles clench in response.

He goes for the hem of my shirt. I try to fight him, but suddenly he’s hovering over me. He takes my arms and holds them above my head.

“Don’t move,” he orders.

My breath comes in sharp pants. “W-what are you going to—”

“Don’t *speak*.”

I press my lips together as his fingers return to the hem of my nightshirt. He raises it slowly, revealing my stomach, my rib cage, my breasts. He massages one breast in his hand, fingers rolling my hard nipple and pinching it. Pain and pleasure shoot through me. My back arches off the bed, and I close my eyes.

My heart skips when his hot mouth touches my other breast, clamping on my nipple. Every nerve is on fire, begging to be touched. But I can’t speak.

His tongue swirls on my skin. It’s the only warning I get before he bites

me. Hard.

I yelp, my hands coming down and shoving at his head.

He lifts his head, grinning at me. “I warned you not to move, love.”

He stands, sweeping my sheets off the bed. He grabs the waistband of my shorts and yanks them down, taking my panties with it.

I’m burning with shame and a little too much desire for this situation. He drops my shorts, holding my white lace panties in one hand. With the other, he traps my wrists. And then, using my underwear, he ties my wrists to my headboard.

I watch him with trepidation, but I let it happen. Part of me is excited to see what happens. *I have to know what happens next.*

He lies back down next to me, staring at my naked body. He trails a finger from the old bite mark on my breast, down my stomach to my core. He swipes through my folds, and I lurch in surprise.

“You’re soaked,” he murmurs. “Because I tied you up? Bit you?”

I can’t answer as he does it again.

“If looks could kill,” he mutters. He thrusts a finger into me without warning. “So fucking tight.”

“I—”

He seals his lips over mine, biting my lip hard enough to draw blood. I just get wetter. One finger inside me becomes two, taking on a rhythm that I try to match with my hips. It’s an alien feeling—and one that I need more of. *Right now.*

I bite him back, pulling against the restraint. If he weren’t kissing me, stealing my breath, I’d be making ungodly sounds. He’s working me up higher and higher, his thumb playing with my clit as his fingers plunge inside me.

I’m flayed open.

He kisses down my jaw, my throat. “Will you scream? Wake up your foster parents?”

There's something dirty about him being fully dressed while I'm naked.
There's something inexplicably aggravating about how helpless I feel.

"No," I whisper. I stare up at him. "I wouldn't scream. Not now. And certainly not—"

He pushes a third finger into me, analyzing my reaction. My lips part, words dying in my throat. I widen my eyes at the new stretching feeling.

His other hand goes to my throat, caressing the spot where I'm sure he can feel my pulse leaping out of my skin. His eyes gleam with a challenge.

"You—"

"Don't ask me to fuck you, love," he whispers. "Because when I do, you *will* be screaming my name." He latches on to my nipple again, sucking hard before his teeth scrape my skin.

I buck, fighting the feeling.

"Give it to me," he growls. He slams his lips back on mine and flicks my clit, hard enough to feel like a slap.

I jump, groaning into his mouth when the orgasm sweeps through me. My core pulses around his fingers.

He takes everything.

Everything.

And yet, there's a look in his eyes that says we haven't even started yet.

He lifts his fingers; they're glistening in the faint moonlight. He puts them on my lips.

"Suck."

We've done this before.

I open my mouth to tell him to fuck off, but he takes the opening. He shoves his fingers into my mouth, and the taste of *me* takes over my senses. Tentatively, I touch my tongue to his fingers. He presses down on my tongue, and saliva fills my mouth.

His gaze are fastened on my lips.

I bite down on his fingers, scowling at him, and he jerks back.

He grins. “Didn’t take you as one into blood play.” He flips me over so my back is against his front. He puts his hand on my stomach, pressing me into him.

It’s possessive, and I’m still irritated. The most surprising part: he has an erection. It touches my ass, and I can’t help shift my hips back ever so slightly, wondering at the feel of him.

His hand comes up and tweaks my nipple again.

I freeze.

“Careful, love, unless you *do* want to wake up your foster parents by screaming my name.”

I frown.

His slow chuckle vibrates in his chest. “Just sleep.”

And the most surprising part: I do sleep.

Caleb curled around me wards off the bad dreams, and I wake up once, in the middle of the night, to find that I’d flipped around in my sleep. My cheek is plastered to his chest, head tucked under his chin, and I’m wrapped around him like an octopus.

As much as it disturbs me, I let his quiet *shush* drag me back under.

In the morning, he’s gone.

I stretch out, flipping onto my back, and realize that he must’ve left through the window not too long ago. The spot he was lying in is still warm.

I shiver. It isn’t that I *dislike* what happened... it’s just that I didn’t ask for it. I didn’t ask for his attention or his torment. And even if I’m into Caleb, he’s twisted. He’s getting into my head. *And I need him out.*

This is exactly what I asked for the other night. I left my window open for the devil and was upset when he didn’t come.

My head hurts from the confusion of it all.

Riley picks me up for school, telling Robert—my usual, trusty ride—that we need girl-talk before school. Once we’re locked away in her car, an iced coffee in hand, she glances at me. “Are you going to spill, or what?”

“Spill about...”

“Everything, Margo. I think it’s time we talked about your secrets.”

I scowl. “Your bribery isn’t going to work.”

She rolls her eyes and reaches into her backseat, revealing a bag from the coffee shop. I open it, staring down at the muffin.

“Okay, the bribery might work,” I say. “I knew Amelie and Savannah in elementary school. And Caleb, of course.”

“Right. You knew more than just them, I’d reckon.”

“Well, yeah. But they’re the important ones. I just... Amelie said she’s dating Caleb? That he’s her boyfriend.” I gnaw on my bottom lip. “He snuck into my room last night.”

She gasps. “Excuse me?”

“He’s...” *Wicked.*

“That’s devious,” she says. “To be one way at school and another after? What is he trying to do? Confuse the hell out of you?”

“I guess. The bullying is getting worse. Sooner or later, Robert is going to notice.”

She winces as we park. “Eh, teachers don’t hear *everything*—”

“But they hear enough.”

Across the parking lot, Caleb and his friends walk toward the courtyard. He’s absorbed in a conversation with Eli. Amelie trots over and throws herself at him, a move he narrowly dodges. I’ll give him credit: he makes it seem like a happy accident.

He says something and she rears back, distain flashing across her face.

“Wonder what that’s about?” I ask.

We eat in the car, stuffing the trash in her backseat before we climb out. Dread climbs up my throat. We slip along the edge of the courtyard, finding an empty spot to stand. Riley drops her backpack on the ground, lifting her shoulders.

“The amount of homework they make us do,” she says. “I need a study

hall at the end of the day. That would solve so much.”

I shrug. “There’s always next year.”

“Are we going to that party on Friday?” Riley asks. “Eli mentioned it...”

Her cheeks turn red when I stare at her.

“What?” she mumbles.

“When did Eli mention it?” I can’t help the sly grin that crawls over my lips. “Is he being nice now?”

“I guess. He mentioned it while you were hiding away from the world. You know, ignoring your best friend and stuff.” She elbows me.

I shake my head. “Yeah, sorry about that. It just...” My voice trails off.

Ian Fletcher saunters toward us.

“What does he want?”

Riley finds who I’m looking at. “Oh no.”

“Hey, Sheep,” Ian calls.

I swear, everyone stops what they’re doing and stares.

“What’re you going to do now that your fifteen minutes of fame are over?”

My palms sweat.

Ian keeps coming. “You gonna move on to someone else?”

“Go away, Fletcher,” Riley snaps.

He scoffs. “I’ll tell ya, Sheep. Keep your whore pussy away from me and my friends. God knows you’ve caused enough damage.”

“That’s a new one,” I say.

He gets in my space, leaning down so we’re face to face. “I’ve been wondering what’d you do to make your coke-whore mom run away. But then I realized...” He pauses and grins at me. “It’s just a fucking personality defect.”

Images of my mother leaving flash in front of my face. My dad’s grip around my waist as I screamed and begged for her to stay.

Tears fill my eyes, and he laughs. I sprint out of the courtyard.

Riley calls my name, but it's easier to just leave everything behind. I run across the playing fields, up a path into the woods. Once I'm out of sight, I stop and lean against a tree.

"That was quite a show," Theo says, coming up behind me. "Although, to be fair, I only saw it through my phone."

I jerk around, pressing my hand to my chest. He didn't come from the direction of the school. I'd seen him walking in with Caleb, but he must've peeled away. To come out here...

He stubs out a cigarette against a tree and tosses it into the woods, winking at me. "Our little secret, yeah?"

He flashes his phone screen at me. Ian getting in my face is all I can see, and then he powers it off and stuffs it in his pocket.

"What do you want?" I ask, using my sleeve to dab at my face.

"Eh, I guess I want to know why Ian got such a visceral reaction out of you. God knows Caleb's been trying to do the same for weeks."

I shrug and look away. "He just touched a nerve."

"Your mom."

There's a gleam in his eye that I don't like.

I straighten and face him. "If you run back and tell Caleb that's my secret weakness, I will destroy you."

He laughs. *Laughs*. "I've always wanted to hear what it would sound like to be threatened by a toddler."

I turn away from him. "I came out here to be alone. Not..."

"Accompanied?"

I snort.

"I was just heading back. I should've offered you a hit before I tossed the joint." He comes up beside me, offering his arm. "Besides, isn't this just what you need?"

I squint at him. *Of course it wasn't a cigarette*. Their star football player wouldn't ruin his lungs like that. Instead, he's getting high in the woods

behind the school.

“Liam was going to make this offer, but I’m happy I beat him to it,” he says. “You want Caleb’s attention.”

I straighten.

“We walk in there together, pretend to date... It’ll get the cheerleaders of my back, and Caleb will put you on yours.” He grins. “Win-win.”

“Pretend girlfriend? That’s kind of a cheesy...”

“It’s a useful trick. Old-school play.” He shrugs, his arm still out toward me.

“Why are you being nice?” I demand.

He snorts. “Who said anything about *nice*? Liam isn’t the only one who enjoys getting on Caleb’s nerves.”

I haven’t heard him say more than one sentence to me, and now we’re having a full-blown conversation. About... *Caleb*. The one person I’d rather not talk about.

“Just admit that the idea of him and Amelie is driving you nuts,” he says softly. “And let’s do something about it.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Are you into her?”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you look kind of how I feel.” There’s something in his eyes, and I want to know him more. Is he as monstrous to someone as Caleb is to me? As Eli is to Riley?

“Amelie isn’t who I hate,” he answers. “But...”

I find myself leaning in.

“We’re not here to discuss her.” The wall he usually hides behind is back.

I can sense that he’s going to renege on his offer, so I quickly wrap my fingers around his biceps. “If this goes badly—it’s over.”

He winks. “Whatever you say, sweetheart.”

This is not going to end well.

He glances at his watch as we walk across the football field. “Not

necessarily the best timing,” he says. “But good enough for me.”

The doors are already open from the courtyard, and the hall packed. The silence comes in waves. First the people closest to us, and then the screeching halt of the rest of the school rolls down like dominoes.

“Pretend you like me,” he says through his teeth.

I swallow my apprehension and inch closer, smiling up at him. “You look like you swallowed a box of staples,” I mumble.

He laughs. It echoes down the hall.

And somehow, he manages to ignore everyone else around us. He leads us to homeroom, where Caleb and Amelie are perched in the corner.

Liam’s eyebrows skyrocket.

Eli is... unimpressed.

Dead quiet.

“You know,” Theo whispers, tipping his head toward mine, “you’re really putting a wrench in the middle of my friend group.”

“Did I walk into a trap?” I glance up at him. He’s quite a bit taller than Caleb. “Is your plan to say, ‘Ha, ha, I tricked Margo?’”

He smiles. “Not at all.”

And then Caleb is on us, shoving Theo away from me. The force of it must surprise Theo, because he staggers backward. I get the impression that Theo isn’t one easily moved.

Theo’s face transforms into a mask of anger, and he lunges forward. I don’t even think he’s *that* mad at Caleb—they just want an excuse to hit each other.

Someone pulls me out of the way.

I glance back, surprised at the firm grip that tows me out the door. Amelie.

Her lips are pressed into a thin line, and she doesn’t relent until we’re down the hall and around the corner.

“What was that for?” I snap.

“What are you doing?” She tosses her hair behind her shoulder, glaring daggers at me.

“Me? I walk into a room and your *boyfriend* goes nuts.” *This is what you wanted*, I remind myself. “Maybe you should’ve dragged him out here to ask *him* why he’s so bothered—”

“Oh, drop the act, Margo.” She looks away. “We all know that he only sees you.”

Her mean-girl bravado falls away, piece by piece.

“I don’t want him to.” I’m lying. It’s why I agreed to walk in on Theo’s arm in the first place. I knew it would bring trouble. Theo knew it, too.

If I’m throwing a wrench in his friend group, it isn’t without help.

Amelie just shakes her head. “It’s sad, you know?”

I tilt my head.

“That he would pick *you* over... Well, over everyone. You’re not worth it, Margo.”

I flinch.

She continues, “He didn’t fight for you. Remember that when he’s inside you.”

We both turn toward a commotion at the end of the hall, and she misses my quick step away. It’s not safe standing next to a viper—never has been, never will be. Anger and self-loathing mix in my stomach. I either believe her or I trust my gut.

But what happens if they’re telling me the same thing?

Caleb strides toward me, ignoring the teacher who’s following him. I expect him to go for Amelie. After all, they’re dating. Maybe he’ll shove her up against the lockers and kiss her right in front of me, just to drive the knife in deeper.

He touched me. He’s done wicked things to my body. To my mind.

And yet, he’s not mine.

He didn’t fight for you. Remember that.

I watch Amelie as he gets closer. She doesn't look afraid... just resigned.

And then he puts his arm around my waist and pulls me along with him. I squeak, suddenly moving, but he just snarls under his breath.

I cast a glance behind me. Amelie leans on the lockers, her head tipped back.

Then it's too late. We're out the side door, heading too fast toward the cars. He unlocks his and yanks the door open, shoving me inside. I start to scramble out—*this is kidnapping*—but he blocks my way and leans in.

Ooh, he's furious.

"Stay."

I roll my eyes but fold myself back in the car. He slams the door and circles it as another teacher comes out, the principal behind her.

"She's not feeling well," he calls. "I'm taking her home."

The principal has a blank expression. I get the urge to leap out of the car, but it's too late: he climbs in and locks us in, and in a matter of seconds we're flying out of the parking lot.

We stay silent. His anger takes up most of the oxygen, but the longer it remains, the madder I get.

He finally turns off the road at an overlook, and I leap out. He follows me, watching like a lion waiting to fucking pounce. I have electricity in my veins, energy that has to come out.

"Not cool." I rub my arms.

"Not *cool*?" He scowls at me. "What the fuck, Margo?"

I stare at him. "What the *fuck*? Like I'm supposed to just sit on the sidelines and watch you date my ex-friend? I have a life."

"Not with fucking Theo, you don't." He stops short, pacing in front of me. "I can't do this. I can't—"

"Oh, fuck you, Caleb." *Can't do it.* He's getting on my ever-loving last nerve. I kick at the ground, gravel scattering ahead of me. "Can't do *what*?"

He stalks toward me. "How did you crawl under my skin so easily?"

I back away, but he keeps coming.

“I’ll kill whoever touches you. I don’t give a flying fuck if they’re a friend, because all that matters is me. My touch. My words.”

I shove him away from me, my temper flaring. The jerk barely moves.

“That’s nice, Caleb. Be the big, bad control freak while you kiss your girlfriend a-and *cheat* on her!” I shriek. I’m so glad we’re alone, because I can’t lower my voice. “I’m not a puppet whose strings you can jerk around.”

His face is dark. “I don’t want to pull your strings, love. I want to cut them.”

He goes back to the car, the conversation apparently over. The slight fear of him leaving me here, like he left me at his house, gnaws at me. I get in the car before he can bark at me, and we’re once again entombed in silence.

Finally, I glance over at him. “You can’t just...” I stop, frustrated with myself. With *him*. What is he trying to do, isolate me?

Yes, that’s probably exactly what he wants.

“I’m not an island that you can fortify,” I murmur. “I’m a person.”

He glowers at me. “You might think so, love, but you’re *mine*. Stop fucking testing me.”

I don’t have anything to say to that.

Stop fucking testing me. Sure—as soon as he loses the girlfriend. Eh, even then... maybe not. Still, he might throw me out of the car if I argue, and weariness tugs at my bones. He drives me back to school, parking and escorting me to my class like a hulking bodyguard.

I slip into the classroom and into my seat, and no one says a damn word.

*A*fter school on Friday, my phone buzzes.

Caleb: *Come to the game with me.*

I grimace. *No way.* I'd get crucified. It would be *worse* than the time he carried me out of the party. At least then, people were able to wave it off as a one-time thing.

I've been ignoring him. He's been ignoring Amelie. It's only been two days, but...

Rumors have been swirling that she's been duped—and dumped. She sulks behind a wall of cheerleaders, who all send hateful glares in my direction. They've extended the same courtesy to Riley, even though Riley walks around like a shadow half of the time.

The girl's got some serious talent staying under the radar, that's for sure.

And Caleb? Theo? They've all been acting like nothing is wrong. Theo sends an occasional wink my way, and Caleb snarls at him under his breath.

He's worse than a feral dog.

Caleb: *Answer me.*

Caleb: *I know you're reading this. You won't like the alternative.*

Me: *You're with Amelie.*

I think. Honestly, maybe he did dump her.

Caleb: *That didn't stop us the other night.*

He has no boundaries.

Did I make him that way?

I bite my lip as I type out a reply. Sure, this could absolutely backfire on me. He could become worse than he already is. How, I don't know, but I'm sure he would think of something.

He's managed to get under my skin, and as much as I try to scrub him free, he isn't leaving. Hell, I don't think he ever left.

And he accused me of the same thing.

Me: *I'll go with you if I can see my old home.*

There's a long pause. My heart is pounding, so loud it's the only thing I can hear. I'm surprised at my body's violent reaction. My stomach twists, cramping, and I jump up. I think I'm going to be sick. I run to the bathroom and lean over the toilet, closing my eyes. I puke, and my whole body lurches. I gag, spitting, and wipe my mouth.

Full of shame, I brush my teeth and creep back to my room. I take a deep breath before I check my phone. He replied just a minute ago.

Caleb: *Deal.*

Caleb: *Get ready. I'll be there in ten minutes.*

I wince, then run down the stairs. I slide into the kitchen, where Lenora is making dinner. “Um, is it okay if I go to the football game?”

She glances up at me. “Are you going in your uniform?”

I glance down at my skirt and white shirt. Oops. “No, I didn’t have time to change yet...”

“Are you going with Riley?”

I’ve been in a bad mood for almost a week and a half, and Caleb has been nowhere to be found. I’d probably leap to the same conclusion.

The doorbell rings, and I curse under my breath.

“I got it,” Robert calls. A minute later, he says, “Ah, Caleb. Good to see you.”

Lenora raises her eyebrows at me.

I shrug, helpless. Caleb comes into the kitchen behind Robert.

“Found your friend,” Robert says to me. “Were you expecting him?”

“No,” I say, at the same time that Caleb answers, “Yes.”

I glare at him. “He asked if I would go to the game, and I was just asking Lenora...”

“Sorry, Mrs. Jenkins.” Caleb steps closer to me. Like the last time we tried to go to a game together, he wears the gold-and-black colors of our school, a black shell jacket over his Emery-Rose shirt. To me, he says, “It’s a bit chilly, you might want to change...”

I blush. “Right. *If* I can go—”

“Of course,” Lenora blurts out. “We don’t want to restrict your social experience, especially now as you’re making more—”

“Thanks!” I lean away from Caleb, shooting Lenora a look that I hope translates to, *Please don’t embarrass me*.

She smiles sheepishly.

It’s such a startling mom-daughter thing to do, it almost strikes me mute.

I race back to my room and change into black jeans. I find a gold shirt with the Emery-Rose logo on it and a black jacket. Belatedly, I realize that

Caleb and I are going to match.

You're dressed to support the football team, I remind myself. Of course we're going to match. Us and five hundred other people.

I touch up my makeup and yank on my boots. When I get downstairs, I find Caleb and Robert discussing the lacrosse team, from the sound of it. They both look over at me.

"Ready?" Caleb asks.

I nod, biting my lip. This feels like a trap, but anticipation swirls through me. I'm going to get to see my home again, more than just a glance.

He puts his hand on the small of my back, propelling me out of the house toward his car. "You're up to something," he murmurs.

I lift one shoulder. "Not sure what you mean?"

I get in the passenger seat, closing the door in his face.

Once he's in, he eyes me. "What do you want most in the world?"

I suck in a breath. "I don't know."

"I think you do." He speeds toward his house.

Once we arrive, I follow him down the side driveway. My stomach is cramping again.

This is where my parents used to park. This is where the bus used to drop me off, and I'd rush down the little walkway to get home. Later, Caleb and I would run through his house before our parents separated us for homework or dinner. It wasn't unusual to spend the entire day together.

I snap myself out of it as he opens the side gate. I can almost smell my mother's cooking.

I take in the grime on the windows, the weeds and vines crawling up the siding.

It's abandoned.

Just like me.

Even sitting in Caleb's family's backyard, literally yards away from their back door, my old home has turned into a graveyard of memories.

He unlocks the door to my old childhood home and then steps aside. “The past isn’t a happy place,” he murmurs. “Why don’t you want to leave it buried?”

He’s been tormenting me because of *this*. Because of a past that only he seems to understand. “Why don’t *you*?”

He exhales, shoving the door open. “After you.”

Stepping inside now hurts worse than before.

Before was shock. Spikes of pain. Relief that I remembered things the way they were.

Now it’s total annihilation.

I stop just across the threshold. Ghosts are here, bringing an icy chill with them. I can’t do this.

You have to face your fear.

I glance over my shoulder at Caleb, but he’s watching me with unreadable eyes. I step in farther, ignoring the dust collecting over every inch of the space. The wine-red rug under the kitchen table. The four chairs crowded around it, one of which has a loose leg. Dad used to stuff it with newspaper when company came over.

Company being Caleb, of course. Sometimes Savannah.

Never Amelie.

The cup is in the exact same spot, so I move past the kitchen. Caleb follows me like a second shadow, past the living room on our right and into the narrow hallway. Mom got a grippy material to put under the rug when I was six, because I slid headlong into the wall with the rug bunched around my feet.

I had been chased there, but I never said so.

The first door on the left is the bathroom, and my bedroom the next door down. Between them, on the right, is the door to my parents’ bedroom. I hesitate, brushing my fingers against the painted wood.

“It’s not going to bite,” Caleb whispers.

Yes it will. The memories will sink their teeth into me and never let me go.

I take a deep breath and push the door open anyway. What I see steals the air from my lungs.

It's a wreck. Vandalized.

There's a broken lamp on the floor next to the bed, cracked into three pieces. The lightbulb is smashed. Clothes... *everywhere*. It looks like a hurricane went through the room.

I take a step back, bumping into Caleb.

"What happened?" My voice is steady, even if the rest of my body wobbles.

He doesn't answer.

I turn. "Caleb, what happened?"

"This wasn't part of the deal," he says. "You wanted to come in here. You're asking questions you should already know the answer to."

I squint at him. "What?"

He shakes his head and takes a step back. "Move on."

I shut the door, leaving it untouched. And then I move down the hall to my old room, where I had run the other day. The door swings open under my fingertips like it remembers me.

I walk into the room and inhale.

When I was twelve, I had nightmares about being locked in this room. In the dream, I beat my fists against the door until they were bloody and bruised. After Caleb follows me in, moving a bit slower than I'd prefer, I close the door.

I don't expect to find anything.

Hell, it was just a dream that I had when I was twelve.

And thirteen.

And fourteen.

Angela, my case worker, made me see a therapist. The foster families I

was with were terrified of the screaming that happened while I was asleep. And with the therapist, I convinced myself it was just a dream blown out of proportion.

But...

There are smudges of blood on the white door, at my chest level. Scratches, too.

I stagger backward. "What the hell happened?"

He looks at me like I'm crazy. "You know what happened. You were *here*. You caused it."

I shake my head, sinking down onto the bed. "That's wrong."

He comes closer, trailing a finger over my dresser.

"Caleb, come on. Did I do that?" I examine my fingers. Would scratches in the wood like that have torn my nails? Whatever happened when I was ten... there's no trace of it on my skin now.

He lifts something from my dresser, tucking it into his pocket.

At my raised eyebrows, he just scowls. "Just something of mine that you stole."

"Why has no one come back here?"

He yanks the door open and points. "Time's up, love. If you want me to explain exactly what happened... that's another beast entirely."

"So you do know."

His nod is short and jerky. "I know pieces."

"I know pieces, too," I huff.

"Apparently not." He guides me out of the house.

A weight is on my chest, and it's hard to breathe. I don't know what I'm supposed to do with the pieces that I have. It's a puzzle that I'm trying to solve blind. I slowly sink down to my knees, black spots flashing over my vision.

"I can't breathe," I mumble.

Caleb stops beside me, squatting. "Hey."

“I think I’m h-having a p-panic attack.”

He touches my back, rubbing small circles. It doesn’t help. Nice isn’t helping.

I’m gasping for air at this point. My heart is pounding out of my chest.

“Margo.” Caleb’s voice breaks through the fog. Barely. “Look at me.”

I can’t really see anything except for the ground between my knees.

He tugs my hand away from my head—*when did I grab my head?*—and pinches my chin, forcing me to meet his eyes. “Breathe.”

A whole damn waterfall of grief and confusion is thundering down on me. It’s the realization that my nightmares have been real. Caleb will never be nice, or tell me the truth, unless I give him something in return. My parents are gone.

He lifts me suddenly, cradling me to his chest, and starts walking. I suck in short gasps as he rounds the house, setting me down on the hood of his car. And then he cups my face with both of his hands and presses his lips to mine.

I can’t respond—shock, the panic—until he bites my lower lip. The pain wakes me up.

I gasp against his mouth.

My horror falls away. The panic ebbs. I wrap myself around him, my legs around his hips, my hands on his biceps.

God, what kind of demon is he?

He pulls away, smirking at me. His hands are still on my face, gently holding my cheeks. It’s a nice act, except for the smirk—which seems to grow wider while my face heats.

He drops his hands from my face, and I release his biceps. We stare at each other for a second. He’s perfectly composed, the bastard. My lungs ache like I just ran a marathon.

He pats the bottom of my thighs, winking at me. “You want to stay here?”

Slowly, I lower my legs and slide off the hood of his car. “We’re going to

be late.”

“So?”

I snort. “So, I was hoping to slip in undetected...”

He’s grins. It’s like he’s established that I’m okay—well, not on the verge of passing out, anyway—and we’re back to where we started.

“There’s no such thing as undetected when you’re with me.”

“Oh, come on.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You think people wouldn’t notice me walk in to one of the biggest games of the year?”

“Hold up,” I say, raising my hands. “Biggest game of the year?”

He unlocks his car. “Well, yeah. It’s against Lion’s Head. Our biggest rival... number one in the division... You don’t pay attention, do you?”

I huff. “I’ve been too busy being mocked and tripped at school for people to talk to me.”

“Eh. Well, everyone is going to be there.”

I swallow.

“Get in, love.”

Once we’re on our way to the school, I glance over at him. “Is Amelie going to kill me for walking in with you?”

His grip tightens on the wheel. “Are you jealous? You threw in my face that I was cheating on her with you.”

“You can’t be serious.”

He lifts one shoulder. “Either you’re jealous or you’re not.”

I groan. “I just don’t want to be involved in your mess.”

He turns into the school parking lot, killing the engine in a spot right up front. It seems to have been left open just for him, because the rest of the parking lot is completely full. He twists toward me, meeting my gaze. “You want me to break up with her.”

“You haven’t?”

“Not yet.” He grins. “I had to get your thoughts on the matter.”

I shake my head. “She’s going to kill me for walking in with you. For even talking to you. You-you’ve been avoiding her for days! Why?”

He taps my temple with one finger. “I do love a good mind fuck.”

I climb out of the car, shaking my head. Amelie and I used to be friends, but now we’re the furthest thing from it. Hell, I’d go so far as to claim we’re enemies—if only because of Caleb Asher.

He stops in front of me. The football field is around the corner, just out of sight. Yet the smell of a food truck, the sound of hundreds of people, drifts toward us. “You want me to break up with her.”

No question.

I could probably say no—to ignore the jealous anger—and leave it at that.

I cross my arms over my chest. “Are you going to?”

“Let’s find out.”

“Caleb Asher, what the fuck?!”

I crane my head back as Amelie storms toward us. He’s had his arm around my shoulder for the last twenty minutes—about the time I started shivering in my coat.

We haven’t looked at each other in twenty minutes, either.

His fingers tighten on my shoulder, like he can sense I want to escape.

We survived until halftime. Granted, we showed up halfway into the first quarter, and the game’s been exciting enough to keep the crowd entertained. Meaning: they haven’t really noticed us yet. My plan of slipping in undetected has, so far, worked.

That’s about to end.

Caleb pivots us toward Amelie. I try to step back, and he gives me a stern look.

“What the hell, Caleb?” she yells, still yards away.

People turn toward us, and murmurs break out.

“Got a problem, Amelie?” he drawls.

He’s the freaking perfect picture of calm. His face betrays nothing, even if I can sense his excitement. He likes causing chaos.

Misery.

Where did the sweet boy I knew as a child go?

Keep asking yourself that, Margo. I have a feeling he'd no sooner answer that question than solve the rest of my puzzle. As much as I slide the pieces around, they just... don't fit together.

This Caleb thrives on darkness. Maybe I didn't realize it before, but I can see it like a rising tide inside him. He's ready to shatter Amelie's world. Thrilled for it.

"Do I have a problem?" she repeats. "Yes, I have a fucking problem."

"You're an attention-seeking slut." He shrugs as her face turns red. "I should've realized you were only after my reputation."

"How dare you? We're *dating*, and you show up with *her*?"

"Gee, Amelie, maybe you should break up with me." He steps forward, towing me with him.

Her gaze cuts to mine, but all I can do is stare at her. Helpless is my middle name.

"I'm not sure why you care so much. It isn't like you haven't been sleeping around with Ian Fletcher." He releases me.

I stumble away from him. He's focused on Amelie.

When he's mad at me, he gets physical. His hands on my skin. His tongue in my mouth. Every inch of him was built to punish me. And for that reason, I can't bear the idea of him touching her—even if it's out of anger.

It takes a moment for his words to sink in. She's been sleeping around on him.

I cover my mouth, holding back my laugh. Oh, the fucking irony.

Excluding the fact that Ian Fletcher is the *worst* human being in Rose Hill, I'm fairly certain that Caleb doesn't give a fuck about who Amelie's been sleeping with. Hell, besides the annoyance flashing across his face, she could drop dead at his feet and he wouldn't even stoop down to check her pulse.

She scowls at him, fear fluttering across her features.

"Who told you that?" she snaps.

He laughs. There's a circle around us, people eager to see what will happen with the king and queen of Emery-Rose.

Ex-queen.

I back away until I hit someone.

Eli murmurs in my ear, "He'll hunt you down if you aren't in his line of sight when he's done."

I grimace.

Riley grabs my other arm. "You came with Caleb? I thought you said you didn't want..."

"You're ridiculous," Caleb proclaims. "And I'm sick of you, Amelie. We're done."

She glares at him, her mouth gaping open and shut like a fish desperate for oxygen.

He turns and searches for me. Eli releases me quickly, giving me a light shove between my shoulder blades. I stumble forward, stopping before Caleb, and tilt my head to the side.

"That's one way to do things," I say.

There's a gleam in his eye that wasn't there before. My stomach flips.

"Just the beginning." He puts his arm back around my shoulder, hugging me into his side, and we walk toward the field. "One more thing."

The football players have returned to the field.

Caleb and I stop at the edge—closer than they let any student, really—and he brings his fingers to his lips. His whistle is sudden and sharp, catching the attention of our team and half of Lion's Head. Two players break away and jog toward us, tearing their helmets off.

"Yo." Liam grins at us. "You two a thing now?"

"Yes," Caleb clips out.

I stare at him, leaning away. "What?"

"I don't really care to hear your protests right now. And that means one thing." He points at Theo. "You. Don't you fucking touch her."

Theo salutes Caleb. "Yes, sir."

Caleb grunts.

There's yelling behind us, and one of the other football players runs over.

"Time to go," he tells Liam and Theo. "Or else you'll get benched."

Liam rolls his eyes. "Yeah, right."

Still, he puts his helmet back on, waving before he follows his teammate.

Theo glances from me to Caleb, scowling. "You haven't seen her, have you?"

Caleb shrugs. "Haven't really been looking."

"Well, keep an eye out, would you?"

Caleb just shakes his head. "Yeah, man. I'll keep an eye out."

And then Theo is off, running back to the huddle, and Caleb stares down at me.

"I don't know what dating you is supposed to feel like," I admit. "And I don't remember agreeing to it, either."

He smiles, and we head back to the bleachers. We'd been sitting off to the side, but now the king retakes his throne. We walk right up the center aisle, and people make room for us.

He's freaking *royalty* at this school. I didn't understand it until now. I'm still mystified by it, even as a younger kid asks if he needs anything, and Caleb actually says yes.

Minutes later, the kid returns with a bag of popcorn and two sodas.

"Hey, Asher." A guy in purple and black comes toward us, lifting his hand.

Caleb grins, reaching out and bumping his knuckles against the new guy's. "What's up, Bonner? You're not playing this year?"

He chuckles. "Nah, had to have surgery on my knee at the beginning of the summer. Coach wouldn't let me play."

Caleb shakes his head. "Sorry to hear that."

Bonner shrugs. "I've got the all-clear from the doc for lacrosse."

“Glad to know I’ll have another chance to beat your ass on the field.”

Bonner’s gaze sweeps up and down my body. “I don’t think we’ve met. Matt Bonner.”

“Margo Wolfe,” Caleb drawls. “And let’s not fucking look at her like that.”

Bonner laughs again, scratching at the back of his neck. “Hey, Asher. No disrespect. You got yourself a beautiful—”

“I’m *right here*,” I snap.

A muscle in Caleb’s jaw jumps. He glares at Matt, the niceties ending abruptly, until Matt nods and stuffs his hands in his pockets. When he retreats back to the Lion’s Head side of the bleachers, Caleb finally looks down at me.

I wait.

“I’m not apologizing for that,” he mutters.

“I didn’t ask you to.” I find myself leaning closer to him. “I don’t like people staring at me.”

“You don’t like *men* staring at you,” he clarifies.

“Nope,” I say, sighing. “I’d pass on all types of attention.”

He rolls his eyes. “You better get used to it.”

After that, we lapse back into silence. Besides the uncomfortable quiet around us, and the glances in my direction, it’s easy to block it out and enjoy the second half of the game.

That is, until Theo catches sight of someone.

“Shit,” Caleb growls. He looks back at Eli, who’s two rows up.

They’ve both straightened in their seats.

“Who is he—”

Theo rips off his helmet, stalking across the grass.

Caleb’s hand twitches against my shoulder.

“Are you going to stop him? He’s going to murder someone.”

“Not this time,” Caleb answers.

Eli hasn't moved, either.

I wince when Theo grabs a girl from the sidelines, her camera falling to the ground. He gets in her face, his face a smooth mask of fury. And then he shoves her back toward her friends, and stalks away.

"Well, that could've gone worse," Eli calls.

Caleb chuckles.

"How could that have gone worse?" I whisper. I watch the girl get lifted to her feet.

He tilts his head toward me. "Yeah. He could've done a lot worse." He shrugs. "He probably wanted to."

I meet his gaze. "What happens next?"

"With what?"

"Us."

He smirks. "You're admitting to us, then?"

I shift. "Seems inevitable."

"We are." He grabs my hand, raising it to his mouth. He kisses my knuckles, then sets it back on my lap. But he doesn't let go.

Butterflies erupt in my belly. It's easy to let Caleb hold my hand and pretend we're two nice people who happen to be dating.

We are the furthest thing from *nice*.

"Relax," he murmurs.

"This is very public. And you just dumped your girlfriend. Loudly."

He lifts one shoulder, his eyes on the game. "You told me to."

"I told you to break up with Amelie?" I did not. I mean, I kind of did. Not in a direct way.

Not like this.

Jesus, she keeps craning around from her spot in the crowd of cheerleaders, squinting at us. It's one thing for Caleb to crucify her in front of the entire school—hell, Lion's Head's students, too—but now she's glaring daggers at *me*.

“You did. Now just relax, and then we’ll go to the party after we win.” He tosses me a quick smile.

I’m not used to his smiling.

I cast a helpless glance back at Riley. Something happens on the field, because I’m suddenly jerked to my feet. Everyone around us cheers.

Caleb picks me up and swings me in a circle, grinning. “You’re good luck,” he says, kissing my cheek. “We just fucking won.”

A joyous riot of Emery-Rose students flood the field, surrounding the team, with Caleb and me at the center. This type of celebration—so very *male*—throws me off for a moment. They pound each other’s backs, fist-bumping. No one touches me, though. It’s like I’ve been encased in fire, and no one wants to get too close.

Caleb motions for me to get on his back, crouching. Suddenly I’m a head above everyone else, my arms wrapped around his shoulders and my legs around his waist. Over the sea of black and gold, I can see the purple-and-black Lion’s Head students. They’re slower to filter out.

Caleb’s body heat seeps into me, warming my chilled body. The sun set some time ago, dropping the temperature, and I’ve been shivering ever since.

A wide grin spreads when Theo takes off his helmet and reaches toward me. I let go of Caleb long enough to high five him. Liam does the same, and Caleb growls. He backs away from his friends.

I slide my hands inside his jacket, and he chuckles.

“Ready?” Eli asks, appearing at our side.

Riley is tucked against him, watching at me with wide eyes.

“Yep,” Caleb snaps. He leads the way out of the crowd, toward the parking lot. He turns and walks backward, eyeing his friends. “We’re taking a quick detour.”

Eli snickers. “Oh, yeah?”

“You got a problem with that?” he asks.

“I think you’re gonna go do dirty things to your new girlfriend.” Eli

laughs.

Riley elbows him, and I tuck my face into Caleb's neck. I don't have any desire to discuss sex—or lack thereof—with his friends.

Caleb spins back around, ignoring Eli, and stops at the passenger side of his car. He loosens his hold on the back of my thighs, letting me slip down. "Get in."

I'm grateful when he turns the car on and blasts the heat.

"So, where's the detour?"

He eyes me. "My house."

I shiver. There's something dangerous in his glance, hot and smoldering.

We drive toward his home and my heartbeat picks up speed.

"I can't," I blurt out.

It isn't that I haven't had sex before—because *that's* what I'd imagine happening—but all I'll be able to think about in that house is our past.

My past.

His.

They collided in an epic explosion when we were ten, and I'm trying to put everything back together. Caleb seems to have healed... but inside, there are still jagged edges.

Am I afraid of those jagged edges? Yes. Get too close and they may cut.

He slows the car, pulling onto a shoulder and putting it in park.

"What are you afraid of?"

I stare out the window, as far as I can see. Only yards ahead of us, the headlights bounce against trees. The rest is darkness.

"Are you afraid of me?"

I dare to look at him. "Do you think I am?"

His eyes narrow. "I don't know, Margo. Sometimes I think yes. Sometimes I think... hmm, maybe she's grown a backbone after all."

"I have a backbone," I scoff. "You don't go through the system without developing one."

“You break too easily.” He reaches out and grabs my face, forcing me to meet his eyes. “You cave. You lose.”

I jerk away from him. “Then why chase me, if I’m so boring?”

He laughs. “Even if you’re fragile, you’re far from boring.” He watches me for a second, then exhales. “Okay. Let’s go to the party.”

I beam, and an unexpected weight comes off my shoulders. I open my mouth, but he cuts me off with a hand on my thigh, squeezing.

“Don’t thank me.”

“Okay,” I whisper. It only means that something worse than his house is coming my way.

I look down at my phone, unsurprised to see a few missed calls and texts. But one stands out.

Unknown: *You’re in for a treat.*

Somehow, I don’t think they mean ice cream.

I click over to my conversation with Riley.

Riley: *Where are you? Amelie is storming around here like an angry bull.*

Me: *We’re on our way.*

Riley: *That was fast. *wink emoji**

Me: *Nothing happened. We just talked.*

Riley: *Pro tip: less talking, more kissing. Makes you forget about their bullying.*

I frown.

Me: *No chance of that.*

I put my hand over Caleb's, which has been slowly creeping higher up my thigh.

He grins. "You like it when I touch you. And you like it when I'm rough. So why stop a good thing?"

"Because we're about to go to a party."

"And those parties have dark rooms," he says. "In fact, the last *party* we went to, I found you alone with Liam. That won't happen again."

"I've had enough of your overprotective streak," I say.

He shrugs. "Easily avoided, love. Just don't talk to anyone."

"In a house full of people."

He smirks as he parks. "Is that too hard for you?"

I release his hand as he turns off the engine. To my surprise, he leans into my space. His lips touch mine, the briefest kiss before he sits back.

More.

A smile appears on his face. Maybe I said it out loud, because he ducks back in and steals another one. His tongue swipes along the seam of my lips. I push into him, grabbing the back of his head.

Kisses like these make me feel electric.

Like I could be lost in a snow squall but Caleb's lips would guide me back.

Once I'm properly breathless, he leans back. His smirk gets bigger. "I like you like this."

A confession for my ears only.

"Tussled. Horny. Did my kiss make you wet, love?"

I blush.

"That might be a yes." His eyes darken. "That's a mystery I look forward

to solving.” He gets out and circles around, opening my door for me.

I take the arm he offers, and we walk up toward Ian Fletcher’s house.

Never mind that Ian and Amelie have been sleeping together, and that Ian is a dirty bag bully, his house is *giant*.

“I thought you were rich,” I mumble.

Caleb laughs. “Yeah, but our wealth isn’t in the house. You know it’s been in the family since my grandparents bought it. Fletcher’s house is purely new money.” He scowls. “I’d rather just take you home and sneak into your room, but...”

Some football players rush past us, calling Caleb’s name.

“That,” I answer, “is why we have to make an appearance?”

He shrugs. “It’s more for Theo and Liam. This is just football, love. Wait until the spring.”

I shiver in my jacket. “It gets... bigger?”

Half the school must be here. Music and lights pour out of the house, and our classmates are everywhere. On the front lawn, around back, in the house. Through the window, couples are dancing in Ian’s front room.

“Bigger?” Caleb snorts. “You haven’t seen *anything* yet.”

I swallow. And then we’re inside the house, his fingers lacing through mine. We weave through the crowds, finding Eli and Ian talking in the kitchen. Riley is nowhere to be found.

“Sup, man,” Ian says, slurring slightly. “Epic game, right? Listen, I’m sorry about fucking around with Amelie. She’s a real hot—”

“Better shut up, Ian,” Eli warns.

Caleb watches Ian with a blank face.

“Oh shit,” Ian laughs. He backs away, pointing at me. “You fucking downgraded, you know? To a coke-whore’s—”

Caleb lunges forward, his fist snapping out faster than I can follow. Ian’s head whips backward, and blood pours down his face.

“What the fuck?” Ian yells. He swipes his hand under his nose, then dives

toward Caleb, swinging wildly.

Caleb uses one hand to push me up against the wall, and he ducks Ian's attempt to hit him. He rolls his shoulders back. "Come on, Fletcher," he growls. "I've been wanting to hit someone all fucking semester."

He's all amped up energy and muscle.

"You're going to defend her?" Ian howls. "After she—" He jumps away from Caleb's attack.

The way Caleb moves is brutal. He's restricted by the jacket, but the fabric stretches across his back as he goes for Ian. Eventually, their little boxing match dissolves into something less human.

Eli's gaze goes to me, and he raises his eyebrows. "You having fun yet, Margo?"

I shake my head. Blood flies when Caleb gets another hit in on Ian's face. He suddenly has him pinned to the floor, his elbows coming up before his fist hammers down. I wince at the sound of his knuckles meeting flesh.

And Eli seems perfectly fine with letting it happen.

"Caleb," I say, stepping away from the wall.

We have an audience once again, but they're smart enough to stay the hell back. He doesn't hear me. "Caleb!"

I put my hand on his arm, and suddenly *I'm* the one pinned. He jumps off Ian and leans into me faster than I can comprehend. His hot breath hits my cheek, and I realize I've turned my head away. He smells like blood.

"You're playing with fire," he whispers. He bites my earlobe.

Heat floods through me.

"I don't know if I'm scared of you or impressed that you defended me," I mumble. His teeth are still in my skin. We have an *audience*. It's dead silent besides our breathing and my pulse in my ears. If the music is still playing, I can't hear it.

"Be both," he growls. He picks me up, his hands on my ass lifting me higher.

I wrap my legs around his waist.

“I want to drag you into a room and fuck you senseless,” he tells me.

The way he’s holding me, his erection brushes my core. We’re in the perfect position—minus the crowd around us. My body is hot, and butterflies erupt through me.

He trails kisses along my jaw, and I tilt my head to give him better access.

“Enjoy the party, love. Because tonight, you’re fucking *mine*.”

Someone drags Ian off to nurse his wounds.

Theo, Eli, and Liam threaten to kidnap me unless Caleb goes with them to clean the blood off his face. That gets him to relent.

And suddenly, I'm alone.

But not for long.

The music kicks back on louder than it was before. It vibrates in my rib cage.

I grab a cup and pour a healthy dose of vodka into it, topping it off with soda. I'm not one to drink, but tonight calls for a little buzz, I think.

I take a sip and wince at the burn. Fire spreads through me, different than the sort that I feel because of Caleb. Numbness follows it. I take another swallow, eager to wash away the emotional fatigue from the day.

My old home. The disastrous breakup at the game. And now, the fight.

I'm ready for a nap.

"There you are," Riley says over the music, coming in through a side door. "People are afraid to step in here."

I lift my cup. "But here's where the alcohol is."

She shakes her head, sidestepping a few drops of blood on the linoleum. "I missed the action."

"Ian's face looked like raw meat." I take another sip.

Riley giggles. “You don’t usually drink. Did the fight inspire this...?” She pulls my cup toward her face and sniffs. Her nose wrinkles. “Vodka soda?”

I mirror her laugh. “The fight, going in my childhood home, him breaking up with Amelie...”

Riley frowns. “Your childhood home? What?”

I shake my head.

“Okay, okay. We’ll come back to that. Caleb seems to like the attention.”

I shrug. “Don’t think he can avoid it.”

We move into the living room, close to the doors that lead out to the porch.

“I didn’t know you were going to the game,” I say.

Riley winces. “Yeah, I’m sorry. Eli asked me, he said you already had plans... I’m not sure why I believed him, frankly.”

I go to take another sip, but my cup is empty. When did that happen?

Outside, boys are circled around a bonfire. The leaves are starting to drop, even if half of the trees in the county haven’t changed colors yet. The damp leaves catch the fire, and it seems like the whole lawn is moving.

A girl catches my attention on the edge of the yard.

I step closer to the glass, so close that my breath fogs it up. By the time I swipe it away and look again, she’s gone.

“Margo?”

I jerk back toward Riley.

“What did you see?”

“Someone I thought I knew...” I shake my head and almost fall over. “Whoops.”

I catch myself on the glass.

“Oh, you’re a lightweight,” Riley says.

“Maybe? I don’t drink.”

“You don’t, do you? You sure drank this one fast.”

The room sways a bit, and suddenly Riley and I are on the floor. My legs simply folded underneath me, and I must've brought her down with me.

"You want some water?"

I roll my eyes, letting my head fall back on the glass. "No."

"It'll make you feel better."

"I don't think anything can make me feel better."

"We call this self-destructing," Caleb says above me. He bends down and scoops me up.

I latch on to his neck and peer into his eyes. They're so blue, I could fall into them.

"I'm not," I promise. "Just..."

He exhales. "Just what?"

"Washing away today."

His face shutters. "I'm taking you home."

Riley bolts to her feet. "She can't—"

"I know." He carries me out of the house, down the driveway.

Hoots and hollers follow us.

"People are mean," I mutter. I crane my head down. His is wrapped around my back, fingers curled on my rib cage. "Your knuckles are bruised."

He frowns. "I've been hurt worse."

"This is self-inflicted," I argue. "Maybe *you're* the self-destructing one."

He chuckles darkly, setting my feet on the ground as he fishes out his keys. "Are you going to puke in my car?"

"No." I cross my arms, indignant, but I have to uncross them a minute later so I don't topple over. My balance is *gone*.

Shot.

"If you do..."

I raise my eyebrows, leaning against the car. He frames me in and smirks at me.

"You'll what?" I ask. "Spank me?" I shiver, picturing how that might

feel... and unable to hide the goosebumps that break out across my body.

“Margo?”

I blink up at him.

Caleb smiles. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” His fingers trace up my sides, pushing the hem of my shirt up, too. “A little pain with your pleasure? Does it turn you on?”

“I—”

His hand slides into my pants, cupping me. “Soaked,” he murmurs. “How drunk are you?”

I shrug. “There are two of you.”

He exhales and moves me to the side, opening my door. “Get in. Before I do something I shouldn’t.”

Turns out... doing something he shouldn’t means kissing me in the driveway, both of us straining to get closer. He lifts me and slips his hand into my pants again. Doing something he shouldn’t means putting my hand to his erection, letting me feel him through his pants.

I need more. His tongue, his hands, his dick—I’m hot with the urge to jump his bones. In public. Against his freaking car, where anyone can see.

He pulls away.

“You’re drunk, Margo,” he whispers. “And I’m not a good enough guy to tell you no.”

“Then don’t,” I mumble. Outside of our bubble, the world could be exploding for all I care.

He nips my throat.

“Caleb.” I wrap my arms around his neck, trying not to whimper.

He nearly throws me into my seat, glaring at me. “This is the last time I’m going to tell you no.”

A dose of reality comes back for a second, and I slouch. “Maybe you should take me home.”

“That’s the plan,” he says, exhaling.

We start driving, and I kind of zone out while his hand traces patterns on my leg. Before I know it, he's scooping me out of the car and carrying me up a walkway.

"They're gonna see," I moan. Lenora and Robert are going to freak *out* if Caleb carries me into the house.

But he doesn't stop to knock. He pushes the door open, and I crack my eyes enough to realize I'm not about to be confronted by my foster parents. We're not even at *his* house. Yet he knows his way around and goes straight to the basement. I force my eyes to open. The basement has been converted into a bedroom.

"Where are we?" I mutter.

"Shh," he whispers. "If I bring you back to the Jenkinses like this, they'll crucify me."

"So this is a self-preservation thing." I close my eyes again. He's warm.

He sets me on the bed and tugs at my clothes.

"Caleb Asher, are you trying to get me naked?" I'm not against it. I let him pull my jacket off, and then my shoes.

He pushes me back into the mattress. "You're so fucking drunk. On one drink?"

I lift my shoulder. "In my defense, it was mostly vodka."

"A cup full of vodka." He snorts.

"And a dash of soda."

"That must've tasted great." He sits next to me, the bed dipping. He brushes the hair away from my face gently.

I'm suddenly reminded of my dad doing the same thing.

My lungs stop working.

"Stop." I knock his hand away, covering my fear with annoyance. When I open my eyes, he's staring down at me with confusion. "God, don't get soft on me."

"Sleep, then," he offers.

“I have a curfew.”

He strokes my hair again and grabs my wrist when I try to bat it away. “You have two hours before curfew. And let me fucking be nice to you.”

I hold still as he picks up strands of my hair. He seems determined to touch me, and I can’t relax.

“What’s the issue?” he murmurs. “You’re more tense now than...”

I scoot backward, clumsily, and pat the mattress. I can’t open my eyes and bear to see emotions on his face—whatever sort of emotion that may be. Anger. Annoyance. Curiosity.

Not today, Satan.

He lies down next to me. “Didn’t think I’d ever have a girl fully dressed in my bed,” he mumbles.

I reach out blindly and stroke his cheek, curling into him. “Just a little nap.”

His chuckle is the last thing I remember before I drift off.

I wake up as he’s tugging me out of his car. I cringe, grabbing on to his wrists, and look around wildly. “What—”

“You were out,” he mutters. “And we can’t wait any longer, unless you want to be grounded for an eternity.”

I sigh. I’m suddenly on my feet, my arm looped over Caleb’s shoulder, and he leans down into me. We walk toward my house.

“Can you pretend to be more sober?”

“Aren’t I?”

“Aren’t you what?” He’s irritated.

We’re almost at the front door, I think.

“Sober,” I answer. Probably not, judging from his grunt.

“Your eyes are closed.”

“I’m just resting them.”

“How about you open them until I can get you up to your room?”

We somehow make it into the house, and I smile at Robert, who is

waiting up for me without fail.

“You’re an hour late,” he says.

I cringe. “Uh-oh.”

He gets up and comes closer, and I tighten my grip in Caleb’s shirt.

“Are you drunk, Margo?” Robert asks.

“Not *drunk* per se,” I say. “I mean, it was just—”

“I’m going to get her upstairs,” Caleb says, pinching my side. “Sorry, Mr. Jenkins.”

Robert shakes his head. “Fine. We’ll discuss this in the morning.”

Caleb scoops me up and carries me to my room, laying me down on my bed. “You’re gonna have a hell of a hangover.”

I snort, touching his face again. “Yeah, maybe. Rescue me from the Jenkinses tomorrow. I’m gonna need it.”

“You got it.” He leans down and kisses my cheek, and then...

It’s cold in his absence. But in a matter of moments, it doesn’t really matter. I’m back asleep.

Caleb

Amelie is sitting on my bed when I get home.

“What are you doing here?” I raise an eyebrow. I’m all for a little excitement, but things are finally going smoother with Margo. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t thrilled to finally get her to trust me. If I wasn’t positive Margo was passed out in her bed—the bed I just put her in—I’d be more inclined to drag Amelie out by her elbow.

She pushes her shoulders back and her chest forward. “You’re not happy I’m here?”

“I was looking forward to finding an empty bed.” I cross my arms and lean against my doorframe.

Her fingers play with the buttons on her blouse. “Quite the scene you made tonight.”

“Which is why I’m particularly surprised at your visit.”

She shrugs. “Thought you might want to know someone from our past found you.”

I tilt my head. “Let’s cut to the chase, Amelie. What do you want?”

“I want...” She gets up and comes closer, touching my chest. “You.”

I laugh. I can’t help it. Even if I wasn’t all-consumed with thoughts of Margo, Amelie leaves a bad taste in my mouth. “Not gonna happen.”

Her hand winds into my hair, and she pulls me down to her. I indulge her kiss for a second, watching her closed eyes. She makes some noises in the back of her throat.

I don’t feel anything. I shove her away.

She stumbles back, falling on her butt, and bursts into tears.

I sigh and open my phone, shooting off a quick text before recrossing my arms. “Who’s found me?”

Amelie pushes to her feet, glaring at me. “Who do you think?”

I shake my head. There’s only one person who Amelie would know about... one person with whom Amelie would know I don’t want involvement.

“Get out,” I snap.

“But—”

“No buts, Amelie.” Anger floods through me. “If you don’t leave right now, you’re going to wish you never set foot in here.”

She throws her shoulders back. “Don’t worry, Caleb. I already wish that.”

She stomps past me, up the stairs, and slams the front door shut behind her.

Eli comes down a split second later, whistling. “Wow. You doing Amelie behind Margo’s back?”

I grunt. “Fuck, no.”

“Then what did she want?”

I shake out my limbs. I need to go to the gym, work off some of this sudden anxious energy. *She could ruin everything.*

“Caleb.” Eli waves his hand in front of my face. “What did Amelie want?”

“To warn me,” I reply dryly. “Pretty sure she was looking for any excuse to come down here.”

Eli laughs. “Yeah, man. Sure. Warn you about what?”

I heave a sigh. May as well tell him. After all, I pretty much owe him for the rest of my life. Oh, but he’s going to freak out. “If you say a word of this to anyone, I’ll kill you.”

He nods. He’s used to my threats—takes them in stride and thinks something is off when I don’t threaten him.

“Margo’s mom is back in town.”

Eli pales. “Fuck.”

I nod, but it’s jerky. “She’s going to get in the way. I told her—”

“Doesn’t matter what you told her, man,” he answers. “You’re going to find out what she wants and escort her the fuck back out of Rose Hill.”

Yeah. Because it’s *that* easy.

If she finds out about Margo...

Game over.

My social worker, Angela, is in the kitchen when I come down the stairs.

I freeze for a second, eyes widening, before I force myself to keep moving. My head hurts, my stomach is rolling, but all in all—it could probably be a lot worse.

“Good morning,” Angela says to me.

I smile at her. “Been here long? You could’ve woken me.”

She cocks a brow. “I heard you had a late night. Stumbling in after curfew with a boy, drunk...”

The blood rushes away from my face. “Did they call you to take me away? It was one mistake—”

“No one is taking you away.” Angela rises from her chair and comes closer. “This visit was scheduled with them since last week. Okay? Calm down.”

I exhale.

“But...”

“Angela—”

“We’re concerned,” she says. “What’s up with this behavior, Margo? Does it have to do with your d—”

“No!” I pass her and open the cabinet, searching for a mug. Once I’ve

poured and doctored a cup of coffee, I take a seat at the table.

She joins me, watching me with concerned eyes.

“Where are the Jenkinses?” I mumble.

“They elected to give us some privacy,” she says. “It’s just you and me. How are you doing?”

I heave a sigh. “Good, I think. It’s weird being back at school, with people I used to know...” I shake my head. Now’s not the time to get sidetracked by thoughts of Caleb. “I’m still getting used to the Jenkinses being so *nice*.”

Angela laughs. “From what I’ve heard, they think the world of you.”

“Probably not after last night.” I focus my gaze out the window.

“They know teenagers make mistakes.” She touches my wrist. “Apologize, and things will be fine. Don’t slip again.”

“I won’t,” I promise. I shift. “I do have a question for you.”

“Shoot.”

“Claire’s phone disconnected. I haven’t been able to reach her. Could you give her my number if I wrote it down?”

Claire, Hanna, and I were together at my last foster home. Claire is sixteen, and Hanna is twelve. They’re real siblings, which means... well, there was a higher chance that they wouldn’t get separated. The foster system *wants* them to stay together.

We knew, toward the end, that I would not be going to the same new home as them. There was no way. Two teenage girls are one thing—three are nearly impossible to place together.

Angela’s lips thin. “I can’t make any promises, Margo. But yes, if you write down how to get in touch with you, I can try to pass it along.”

I smile. “Thank you, Angela. Seriously.”

“No promises,” she repeats. “But I’ll do my best.”

We stand, and she wraps me in a hug. We’re usually a limited-contact type of relationship, and the moment surprises me. I hug her back, inhaling

her warm vanilla scent.

She's been the only stable person in my life for seven years.

"Take care," she says. "And no more drinking. This is your only warning. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am." I hold back the urge to salute her.

I lock the door after she leaves. I lean against it, letting my head fall forward. I'm an *idiot*. Letting Caleb get me drunk—okay, well, that's not really fair. Getting drunk and letting him take me home—that's the mistake.

One that will *not* happen again.

I'm sitting on the couch when Lenora and Robert get home. They're armed with groceries, and once the bags are put on the kitchen island, they come in and sit with me.

"You saw Angela?" Lenora asks.

I nod, biting my lip. Uncertainty wars inside me. Do I just blurt out an apology? Ease into it?

"Did you have any concerns? With us?" Robert's eyebrows crinkle.

"No," I say. "I just—I'm so sorry." *Blurting out an apology, it is.* "I've never drank. I've never been drunk—"

"Margo." Lenora frowns and reaches toward me.

"I feel bad. I don't want to put you in that position."

"It's okay," Lenora says.

Robert shoots her a look. "Well, not *okay* like, you can do it again. But... you're owning up to a mistake, and we appreciate that."

I nod quickly.

"But we can't let it go unpunished," he adds. "So until further notice: school and home. No exceptions."

I swallow. It's fair. Some other foster homes would've locked their kid in a room for a week. "I understand. Thank you."

We all stand, and I retreat to my room. They could've slapped me with chores... cut the Wi-Fi... a lot of things. I set my coffee down and glance

around, marveling—*again*—at the luxury of this house.

My phone vibrates.

I reach for it, half hoping it's Riley or Caleb.

My heart sinks.

Unknown: *Made a big enough fool of yourself?*

Unknown: [video attachment]

I click on the video and hold my breath. It's me...

Oh god.

Someone was watching Caleb and me as we left the party last night. There's a clear view of me falling backward against his car. His hand going into my pants. And...

I drop the phone, covering my mouth with both hands. It lands on the bed facedown, but the video keeps playing. Over the music from the house, and people talking, there's breathing.

That noise will haunt me for a while.

My phone rings, cutting off the video. I jump a foot and slowly flip it over. If it's Unknown, suddenly *calling*, I may lose it.

It's a number I'm not familiar with, so I ignore the call and go back to Unknown's conversation. They've sent me another text.

Unknown: *Now... what to do with that? So many options.*

Me: *What do you want?*

Unknown: *That would be too easy.*

Unknown: *Keep your phone on you. I'll be in touch.*

My stomach heaves. I rush to the bathroom, falling to my knees in front of the toilet. When I'm done, I stand on shaky legs. My mouth and throat burn from the acid.

Lenora is in the doorway, frowning at me.

"Just another reason to not overdo the alcohol," she murmurs.

I cup my hands under the faucet and rinse out my mouth, ignoring her for a moment. I spit and clear my throat, then straighten. "I'm sorry."

She hands me a towel. "We can only discipline you so much. There are consequences you'll learn on your own. Are you feeling hungover?"

I shake my head. "I was okay up until now."

A little white lie never hurt anyone.

She pats my shoulder. "Well, you've only got homework to do today. Guess you get off easy."

I shrug, and we move into the hallway. I force myself back into the room, and she heads for the stairs. Fear constricts my lungs. I close myself back in. I should delete the video and any evidence of Unknown.

They could ruin everything.

My life at school. Staying with the Jenkinses.

What if *they* saw it? It'd be icing on the cake. One mistake is just that: a mistake.

Someone has a video of Caleb putting his hand down my pants.

The funny thing is—it wouldn't even blow back on him. He'd be lauded as the guy who got some action from the drunk outcast. And me... I'm the drunk outcast in that scenario.

I contemplate begging Unknown to delete it. But the more I think about it, the more I know it's a bad idea. They've been out for blood before I even started going to Emery-Rose. And now they finally have a blade sharp enough to cut.

My phone rings, and I jump again.

It's the same unfamiliar number as before. This time, I answer it.

“Margo?” The voice is familiar.

I sigh in relief. “Oh my god, Claire! I just asked Angela—”

“She dropped it off,” she interrupts. “Things have been crazy here. I wanted to reach out, but...”

“How’s Hanna?”

“As well as can be expected,” she says. “It’s been a hard transition. We loved—well, you know.”

I do.

It’s hard to get attached to a family. But once you do... something usually comes along to fuck it up. That’s why I want to keep the Jenkinses at arm’s length. I like them. But if I were to be ripped away, right this moment, I wouldn’t be *that* devastated.

Okay, maybe I would.

It’s the grief of losing families—over and over and *over*—that kills your spirit. I’ve seen it happen too many times to let it happen to me. I’ve got less than a year left, and I need to escape intact.

“Are you near Rose Hill?” I ask.

“We’re in the next town over. They put me in the fancy-as-hell high school. It’s been a trip.” She chuckles.

“That’s good.”

“Yeah. I’m ready to get the fuck out of here, though.”

I sag on the bed. “Maybe since you’re close, we can meet up one day. I’d love to see Hanna, too.”

“We’d love that,” Claire answers, her voice noticeably lighter. “We’ve missed you, Wolfe.”

“Oh, shoot.” I smack my forehead. “I’m grounded, Claire.”

“What on earth did you do to get grounded?”

“Came home drunk,” I say in a low voice.

Her laughter gets louder. “Priceless. Got any videos of that? I’d love to see you drunk—”

“No.” It comes out a little harsher than I intended. “Sorry, Claire. Little touchy about it.”

“What’s going on with you, Margo? Are the new foster parents that bad?”

“They’re great.” I flop sideways, my head hitting the pillow. “I just... I’m worried, okay?”

“Listen.” Claire has never been a rational one. Her ideas are half-crazed most of the time. Of the two of us, she’s been the instigator. The troublemaker. “Sneak out and meet me on Friday. At lunchtime.”

Yep. She’s crazy.

“I have to be back for last period,” I tell her. “My foster dad is my teacher.”

“Brutal.” She clears her throat. “Anyway, let’s meet at the mall! Friday. You’ll be back before anyone notices.”

There’s no use arguing with her. Claire with an idea is a girl on the warpath.

“I don’t have a ride,” I try.

“Get one of your friends to drive you,” she says. “Or the guy who got you drunk.”

I shake my head. Maybe Riley will do it if I bribe her...

“I’ll let you know. Okay?”

“Love ya, sis,” Claire says, making a kissy noise into the phone.

The line goes dead before I can respond.

I walk into the courtyard and spot Riley almost immediately. She has a bubble of space around her, which is unusual. The golden boys are the ones who get breathing room—not us.

As I make my way closer, the courtyard slowly drains of noise.

It's so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

Riley's eyebrows crease, and Savannah is suddenly in my path.

"Following in Mommy dearest's footsteps, Sheep?" She laughs. "It only took a few weeks for your true colors to come out."

I shake my head and push past her. Stares follow me.

Riley rushes toward me, towing me back in the direction we came. Out into the parking lot.

"Oh my god, Margo!"

I flinch. "What? Why is everyone acting so weird?"

She bites her lip, pulling me farther away from the courtyard. Even as kids filter in, they throw me weird looks.

"Um, everyone got an email this morning..."

I shake my head. "I didn't."

"It's..."

My stomach drops at the expression on her face.

"Riley," I snap, "spit it out. Please."

She opens her email and passes me her phone.

It's a picture. Much like the video Unknown sent me, this has Caleb and me in high-definition. His lips are on my neck. His hand is clearly down my pants. My eyes are closed, lips parted. Hell, I look like I could be orgasming. I'm... *disgraced*.

There's no more air in my lungs.

She grabs my shoulder, and suddenly I'm sitting on the ground.

"Breathe," she says, rubbing my back. "It's okay. It's not even..."

"I can't," I choke out. "I can't do this. I can't go in there."

How could Unknown do this to me? Especially since I did nothing to them. *Nothing*. And with a single email, my life just got ten times worse.

"Given the circumstances, I think they'd understand if we skipped... oh no."

I lift my head.

Caleb storms toward us. His face is impossibly angry.

He doesn't stop until he's right in front of us. He pulls me to my feet by my wrists, although I'm not sure I can stay standing. My knees wobble.

"She's hyperventilating," Riley says.

He touches my cheek.

I can't stop gasping. Something heavy has planted itself on my chest. I grab at his shirt, my eyes wide.

"Panic attack," Riley says. "Honestly, I don't even blame her. But it's going to be okay, Margo. It's just a picture."

"Give us a minute," Caleb growls, not tearing his attention away from my face.

I feel like a damn fish gaping for air.

"Margo."

I shake my head. "I can't—"

He slams his lips to mine, cutting off my words. My body automatically relaxes into him. His tongue forces my lips apart, taking ownership of my

mouth.

I shudder against him, finally sucking in a deep breath through my nose. Then another. He's not kissing me—he's resuscitating me.

He finally takes a step back, and his eyes search mine.

He's still holding my wrists.

"Wow," Riley mutters, a few feet away. "That was hot."

"I'll find out who sent it," he says. A mask slips over his features.

"Mr. Asher!" The principal comes toward us. "Mr. *Asher* you are suspended!"

He drops my wrists and faces her. "I know."

"So what on earth are you doing here?"

He shrugs, keeping me mostly behind him. Maybe he thinks she'll turn her wrath on me, next. Or maybe...

Oh my god. Did she get the picture, too?

"Don't worry, I'm on my way out," he says. "See you Wednesday."

She sniffs, turning on her heel and marching into the school.

Caleb turns to me, tapping under my chin until I meet his gaze. "You'll be fine. Ignore them."

I nod. "Right."

"I'll see you later."

He heads to his car, and I slowly rotate toward Riley.

"That bodes well," she says.

"Why is he suspended?"

She heaves a sigh, linking her arm with mine. The bell rings, which means we've successfully avoided the courtyard.

We walk in, and she says in a low voice, "Ian's parents complained. Threatened to sue if they didn't do something to curb Caleb's reaction."

"He's been getting in a lot of fights," I mumble. "Did Ian—"

"He's around here somewhere," Riley pulls me closer.

All eyes are on me.

I try to do what Caleb says—to ignore them—but it’s hard when the hallway gets quiet again. Riley stays with me until we get to my homeroom, and she throws me a sympathetic look.

“I’ll be okay,” I tell her.

She nods once.

I slide into my seat and keep my head down.

Someone kicks my bookbag as they pass, the contents scattering across the floor.

A cheerleader stops, one foot hovering over my fallen phone. She looks around, then laughs. “I expected more condoms, slut. Opening your legs to anyone who gets you drunk at a party.”

I shake my head. “That’s not—”

“Why else would Caleb go for you? An easy target.”

My cheeks burn.

She scoffs, using her toe to send my phone skidding across the tile. Away from me. “Oops.”

It continues like that throughout the day, only growing in intensity. I try to focus on the good: Caleb will be back on Wednesday, and I’ll get to see Claire on Friday. Although, I need to figure out how I’m going to get to the mall... I’ll have to both escape Caleb’s clutches *and* get out of school for a few periods.

Should be interesting.

When I walk into my last class of the day, I’m defeated. Someone spilled chocolate milk on me after lunch, and my shirt smells sickly sweet. It sticks to my skin.

Robert takes one glance at me and motions me aside.

The teachers haven’t been acting any differently, which makes me believe it was just sent to the students. How *that* miracle happened, I’ll never know.

“Are you okay?” He leans down, careful not to touch me.

We’ve kept our school relationship professional. Although, I know if we

were home, he'd be tempted to hug me. He was gruff this morning, but now only concern radiates off his body.

"I'm fine," I say.

"You seem..."

I sigh. "It's been a long day."

He squints at me. "Are you being bullied?"

"Nothing I can't handle."

I wonder what would happen to a rat. The tormenting would increase, I'd imagine.

The cheerleaders were the driving force today. Amelie and Savannah watched while their minions pinched me, ruined my things. My locker had been filled with mud. The back of my arms are bruised from fingers biting my flesh.

I've never been so tense.

And it's probably because Amelie and Savannah both want Caleb—and here's the proof that he wants *me*.

He's not even here to stop it. Won't be until Wednesday.

"Okay, take your seat." He does reach out now, putting his hand on my shoulder for a brief moment.

I manage to smile at him. I tuck myself away in a corner for the rest of class, letting my mind wander. I thought I saw someone familiar at the party. But I still can't put my finger on who it was. Maybe they're the culprit.

Or it could be... literally anyone who went to the party.

I need to figure out who Unknown is, and what their endgame is. If I can uncover their motive, maybe I can stop them or tell someone who can help me.

The bell rings, shattering my thoughts. Chairs scrape back, and my classmates perform a mass exodus.

I stay where I am, wondering if I can just wait everyone out.

Robert starts picking up, casting me a glance or two before setting down

the canvases and approaching. "Something is wrong."

"It was just a tough day."

He sits on the stool next to me. The one Caleb usually takes. "Did something happen at the party?"

I flinch. "No. It's fine. Please. I've got this."

He exhales. "It hurts to see you like this, Margo. I just... if you need anything, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Thanks, Robert."

He packs up his bag, and we head toward his car.

Unsurprisingly, Caleb is waiting for us.

The whole school emptied out fast. Besides cars belonging to students staying late for sports, the parking lot is deserted. He rises from where he was leaning against his car, parked next to Robert's, and shoots us a smile.

"Mind if I steal her?" he asks Robert.

My foster dad shrugs. "I think she could use some cheering up. Even though she's *technically* grounded."

I wince.

Robert chuckles. "Just be back before Len gets home, okay?"

"You got it, Mr. Jenkins," Caleb says. He opens the passenger door for me, lifting my backpack off my shoulder.

We sit in his car and wait until Robert drives away.

"Today was hell," I say.

"You're a fighter."

That might be the first time he's ever paid me a compliment.

"I'm sure it wasn't anything you couldn't handle."

"I don't want to handle it," I snap. "I just want—"

He twists toward me, his eyebrows rising.

"I don't know," I finish lamely. My mind is a jumble. "I have to do this again tomorrow?"

"Maybe something more interesting will crop up." He winks at me, then

finally puts the car in drive.

We head in an unfamiliar direction. When he turns into a driveway and parks, I have no choice but to follow him up the front walkway.

“Whose house is this?”

“Eli’s,” he says. “He’s busy. But since you have an hour, I figured I could make your day a little better.”

The house feels oddly familiar. Like I came here in a dream.

We go into his living room, and Caleb throws himself onto the couch. He pats the space next to him. “Sit.”

“You just let yourself into his house?”

He nods. “Yeah. His parents are pretty cool. They travel a lot, though.”

“Gotta love absentee parents,” I answer.

His face shutters for a second.

“Why did you attack Ian?” I need to change the subject.

“Just protecting what’s mine.” His hand wraps around the back of my neck and pulls me to him.

Our lips touch softly at first, barely moving.

I open my eyes.

He’s watching me. His free hand sneaks up my shirt, dancing across my back. He unhooks my bra at the same time that he lowers me to the couch.

“Wha...”

“One choice,” he says, his lips moving to my jaw. He palms my breast. His fingers find my nipple, rolling it and pinching. “If you want this—if you want *me*—just say the word.”

One choice.

It’s not just *one*. It’s a series of choices that could lead to catastrophe...

Or happiness.

God, that seems like a possibility right now, with Caleb’s breath in my ear and his hands on my skin. He could play me like an instrument, make me sing. I’ve never felt this way about anyone else. No one has ever bothered to

try to touch me.

And then it comes back to me that we're in his best friend's living room.

I push his face away, staring up at him. "I do, but not here."

He laughs, and the walls that he let down for a split second are resurrected. "If not here, where?"

If not now, when?

He picks himself up off me and leaves the room. My silence must've spoken for itself.

With shaky fingers, I reclip my bra and straighten my shirt.

He comes back with his jacket on. There's a new set to his jaw, and a smirk on his lips. "My place. If you don't want to here... and you're not going to tell me where, then I'll choose."

I shiver.

But I can't say I'm against it.

The drive to his house is quick. It's more silent than a graveyard in his house.

As we pass the front room, I point at the covered furniture. "Why is this place so..."

"Haunted?"

I run into Caleb. I hadn't realized he'd stopped walking, and I almost fall backward.

He grips my upper arms, keeping me stable. "A lot of ghosts in this house, love."

I meet his gaze.

"Let's banish a few." He leans down and kisses me.

It's more ruthless than the kiss in Eli's house. Something has shifted. He's released the monster inside him.

I shudder at the infiltration. My heart cracks open as he backs me against the wall, taking my wrists and holding them above my head with one of his hands. His other continues his exploration of my body like we never stopped.

His tongue slides into my mouth.

I push his tongue out with my own. He tastes like honey and cinnamon. He growls, the sound resonating deep in his throat, and tears his lips from mine. He latches on to my neck, biting and sucking.

Electricity flows through me. I lift my leg, wrapping it around his hip and pulling him flush against me. “Caleb,” I moan, my head falling to the side to give him access.

He drops my wrists and unbuttons my shirt. I shrug it off, letting it drop, and he unhooks my bra again. His lips move down, off my neck. He draws one of my nipples into his mouth, teeth grazing it.

Stars burst in front of my eyelids. I wind my fingers through his hair, holding him to me as my whole body tenses. The pain feels good. He could do this to me for an eternity, and I don’t think I’d ever get sick of his touch.

He was made for me.

Pain and pleasure.

He carries me through the doorway and deeper into the house. I stare into his eyes, trying to memorize everything. I’m drunk on him.

He sets me on the counter in the kitchen, dragging my lips back to his before I can register where we are. He kisses me like he’s been starving and I’m his favorite dessert.

Completely.

Savagely.

He pushes my skirt up and tugs on my panties. I flinch at the sudden *rip*.

“Did you just—”

He raises my torn panties, winking at me.

“Caleb—”

“Don’t worry, love,” he says, “I have a feeling you’ll like what’s coming next.”

He plunges a finger into me without warning.

My abdomen clenches, and I arch my back. He’s between my knees,

forcing me open wider, and I lean back on the counter.

He taps my chin with his free hand. "Watch me."

I shudder when he lowers himself, his head going between my thighs.

Just like my dream.

He puts my legs on his shoulders. And then he pauses, staring at me with an odd expression.

"Caleb—"

He bites my inner thigh. I yelp, trying to close my legs, but his shoulders block the movement.

His tongue swipes up my slit, swirling on my clit. His finger is still inside me, picking up a brutal pace while his tongue pays attention to my bud of nerves.

I groan. It feels too good. Unbearable, even. I try to shove him away, but he doesn't budge.

His teeth graze my clit.

I cry out and try to squirm away.

He grips my ass, dragging me to the edge of the counter. "Make as much noise as you want, love."

His tongue plunges into me, and I whimper.

Something animalistic claws out of me. I roll my hips into it. His finger takes over where his tongue left off, and he sucks hard on my clit.

I shatter.

The orgasm explodes through me, white spots dancing in my vision. I grab his head as he sucks and sucks. My whole body trembles in the aftershock.

But instead of stopping... he keeps going. His finger pushes in and out, a steady, quick rhythm.

"Stop," I moan. My arms are jelly. I let myself fall back on the counter.

"No," he says, hauling me upright.

He undoes the button of his pants, and we both look down at his erection.

There's a bead of liquid glistening on the head of his cock.

He rolls on a condom and kisses me at the same time that he thrusts into me.

The pain of it is... *shocking*. Eye-opening.

I gasp into his mouth, and he only pauses for a fraction of a second.

Virgin, I'm sure he thinks.

Shame bubbles through the euphoria.

"You've always been mine," he says against my lips. "This just fucking confirms it."

I wrap my legs around his hips. We're at the perfect angle. The perfect height.

And the fact that he didn't just freak out on me lifts a weight off my chest. I didn't realize I had been worried until now.

After a few seconds of discomfort—an alien feeling—he moves.

"I don't want gentle," I say, holding on to his biceps.

"Good thing, because my self-control is about to go out the window." He slams into me, filling me completely.

In the back of my mind, I knew we wouldn't be able to do *easy*. Just like we wouldn't be able to do *slow*.

We're fast and reckless and wild.

I dig my nails into his skin. He relentlessly hammers into me. A tingling feeling picks up in my lower abdomen and my teeth tear his lower lip. My heart is beating so fast, it might take flight.

"Scream," he orders. He flicks my clit.

This orgasm is violent, a tsunami force. Better—or worse—than the first one. I open my mouth, but no sound comes out.

He presses on my clit again, still thrusting into me.

I let my head fall back and I do. *I scream*.

I yell his name, my thighs tensing around him, until my voice disappears.

He quickens then stills, spilling inside me. We stay like that for a long

moment, wrapped around each other.

His pulse hammers through our connection.

He pulls out slowly. There's blood on the condom, on my thighs, on the counter.

He touches my cheek, smiling sadly. His finger swipes under my eye. "You're beautiful."

I slide off the counter. My muscles quake. "I need a minute," I say in a low voice.

He inclines his head, and I slink away to the bathroom. It takes longer than I would expect to put my pieces back together. My resolve goes here, my dignity goes there. Inch by inch, I rebuild who I was.

Who knew sex would destroy me?

I clean myself. When I come out of the bathroom, Caleb holds out my bra and shirt.

I stare at the kitchen island.

"I'm going to fuck you on that counter," he had promised. "You're going to enjoy it, even knowing what happened here. Because all you'll be able to think about is my dick in your pussy, spreading you wide. Hitting every. Fucking. Nerve."

Horror washes through me.

He spoke the truth. I did forget. I let myself fall into his madness, and now...

"Caleb," I choke out, grabbing my shirt and hugging it to my chest. "How —"

"How could I?" His eyes are dark. Glittering. He leans down until we're face to face. "Have you learned nothing?"

I close my eyes. Tears fall hard and fast down my face.

He yanks my shirt out of my grip and puts it on me. Forces my arms through the sleeves and buttons the front. He takes my bra, my panties from where he dropped them, and slides both into his pocket.

“Let’s go.” He puts his hand between my shoulder blades and guides me out.

“You got what you wanted,” I say once we’re in the car. There’s a chill in the air, and my nipples harden under my shirt. I want to dive out of the car and walk home rather than let him see.

“Yeah, well, it’s not all sunshine and fucking roses up here.” He taps his temple.

We ride back to the Jenkins’ house in silence. I get out and jog to the front door without looking back, my backpack thumping against my shoulder blade. Lenora’s car isn’t in the driveway, and I manage to slip up to my room undetected.

I go to my window in time to watch Caleb’s car pull back out into traffic, slipping away like he was never there.

The haunted feeling I got when I walked into his house is still surrounding me, thicker than smog. He wanted to banish a few ghosts.

I guess that includes me.

I loop my arm through Riley's as we walk toward the library. "I need a favor."

She tilts her head. "Like bury a body type of favor, or want to stop and get coffee before school type thing?"

I snort. She unlocks the door, and we slip inside.

It's been an exhausting week, but the good news is: it's Friday.

Once Caleb returned to school, he made a show of being extra nice to me. He glared at anyone he saw making rude comments. That alone seemed to quell most of the bullying. It was a weird turn of events, considering how we left things Monday afternoon. Half of me expected him to pretend I didn't exist and throw me to the wolves, as cliché as that sounds.

"Like a... drive me to the mall type of favor."

She drops into her chair. "Easy enough."

I don't sit.

"Wait... do you mean now?"

"Just... miss lunch and maybe the next class."

She squints at me. "Why do you need to go to the mall?"

I give in and sink down into the chair next to her. "My foster sister, Claire, asked to meet me. She knows I'm grounded..."

"Of course," Riley groans. "And I'm the friend with a car."

I reach over and grab her arm. “Please, Riley,” I beg. “I miss her. I haven’t seen her or Hanna—her sister—since we were taken out of the home...”

I don’t have to fake the tears that spring into my eyes. “I should’ve asked you yesterday, or—”

“You didn’t even mention her.” Riley looks up at the ceiling, blinking quite a lot. “God, stop crying. You’re going to make me ruin my makeup.”

I sniff.

She finally stands. “Okay, fine. One hour. I meet your foster sister. And then we come back so Mr. Jenkins doesn’t fry my ass.”

I nod. “Yes. Perfect. Thank you.”

I throw my arms around her shoulders, and she stiffens. She pats my back awkwardly until I release her, then she lets out a small laugh.

“Okay, follow my lead.”

We walk over to her cousin’s office. Riley taps on the door, and Amy jumps.

“Amy,” Riley says. “Margo is feeling super sick. Can you write us a pass to the nurse?”

Amy squints at me. “You’re sick?”

I put my hand over my stomach. “Yeah.”

“Are you pregnant?”

I pale.

She snorts. “Just kidding, of course. Humor. I can write you a pass...”

“Both of us? Amy, come on,” Riley pleads. “And...”

“Oh my god, what are you going to do? You look... devious.”

I bite my lip to hold back a frown. This isn’t going to work.

“Can you write us a pass *back* from the nurse, too? I’ll bring you Mom’s cookies on Monday.”

Amy’s eyes light up. “Her homemade chocolate chip?”

“Yes,” Riley agrees, nodding emphatically. “So...”

Amy sighs. "Okay, fine. One second."

"Leave the time blank," I cut in.

Amy glances at me, rolling her eyes. She hands us the slips, and Riley hugs her.

We sneak out a side door and crouch-run to her car. It's probably more suspicious that way, but this is the first real time we've skipped a class. As soon as we're on the road, we burst into giggles.

"Tell me about Claire," Riley orders.

I smile. "She's sixteen. Smarter than me, for sure. Her sister, Hanna, is twelve. They both came to my foster family a few months after I got there. We became thick as thieves."

She glances at me. "Sounds nice."

"Claire's a wild child," I say. "Always coming up with harebrained ideas. Hanna and I were more similar. Quiet... grounded."

Riley snorts. "Shy."

"Yeah, that."

We get to the mall in record time. At the food court, I look around eagerly for Claire while Riley breaks away to get lunch. I finally spot her on the escalator.

I wave frantically, catching her attention, and rush toward her. We crash into each other, hugging and laughing.

I pull away first. "It's been, what, a month? You're grown up."

Her blonde hair, long when I first saw it, is short and curled. She has cat-eye sunglasses perched on her head, light eye makeup, and dark-red lipstick.

She manages to seem more adult than I feel.

"I missed you, Wolfe." She hugs me again. She's small enough that she can tuck her head under my chin. "We have so much to catch up on!"

"How's Hanna?" I ask.

"Brilliant," Claire says. "Foster family loves her, of course. There's a brother in this one. I'm thinking they might be keepers."

My eyes widen. “That’s amazing.”

She shrugs. “If they keep *me* is a whole other issue. They’re infatuated with Hanna—not her adventurous older sister.”

“You two are a package deal.”

“I’d rather her secure a home that loves her. I’ll be fine.”

Riley approaches with a tray of food, and Claire’s head shoots up.

“Who’s this?”

“Claire, this is my friend, Riley. Riley, Claire.”

They shake hands, and we lapse into silence. Riley passes me a carton of food.

“So, how’s things been back at Emery-Rose?” Claire asks. “Run into Caleb?”

I blush. I’ve managed to keep our sex a secret from everyone—Riley, even. But it’s no secret that we’re... different. I don’t even know how to classify us. Are we dating? His possessiveness has ramped up ten degrees. He literally *growls* at anyone who so much as glances in my direction. Yet, I haven’t seen him outside of school since Monday afternoon.

A stolen kiss or two before class, his hand on my thigh at lunch... other than that, nothing.

“Ooh, Riley, she’s turning red. What is happening?” Claire leans forward.

“They’re dating,” Riley tells her. “After a tumultuous start.”

Claire grabs my wrist. “Really? Margo, that’s great!” She squeezes hard enough to bruise. “After all, you never shut up about him. It’s like you willed this to happen against the odds.”

I smile, pulling my wrist away. I put my hands under the table. She knows about my history with him, but her reaction isn’t quite what I thought.

“What about you?” I ask. “Any new boys at your new school?”

“Where do you go?” Riley asks.

“Lion’s Head.” She grins. “There’s some cute guys there, Wolfe. They’re deliciously rich.”

“Is that all you care about?” I laugh.

“No, the size of their—”

“Claire!” I squeal.

Riley snorts. “I suppose that’s an important factor.”

“Our girl wouldn’t know,” Claire confides, leaning across the table toward Riley. “She’s never had sex.”

Riley shrugs. “That’s not a bad thing.”

“It is if the guy you want is the hottest piece of ass in school...” Claire raises her eyebrows. “Isn’t that right, Margo?”

I tilt my head. “What do you mean?”

“Just that... you know, I’d expect to be his girlfriend, he’d be quite demanding in bed and all. And I know you aren’t really comfortable...” Claire pops a piece of gum in her mouth.

“We should go.” Riley flashes me the time on her phone.

“Ah, shoot.” We both stand, and Claire rises a beat later. “It was good to see you, Claire.” I shake off the last bit of our conversation. “They mentioned I would be ungrounded soon. Hopefully that means we can get together on a weekend with Hanna.”

Claire grimaces. “My weekends are pretty packed. But Hanna would love to meet up! I’m sure you two can arrange something.” She darts around the table and wraps her arms around my waist. “Good to see you, sis.”

Riley and I walk back to the car, and she elbows me.

She says, “You didn’t tell her about any of the bad stuff.”

I shrug. “Why worry her?”

“The girl didn’t seem worried about you.”

“Because I didn’t tell her that Caleb was an epic bully and got everyone to call me Sheep...” I roll my eyes. “Some stuff is better left unsaid.”

“Sure.”

We park and hurry back to the side door that we had left propped open, slipping back into the women’s locker room. It was a weird way out, I’ll

admit. But it's one of the only doors that isn't monitored, since the gym classes usually go in and out through the gymnasium entrance.

I grab our bags from my gym locker and pass Riley's back to her. We walk out, and I grind to a halt when I register who's waiting for us.

Caleb.

"Skipping class, love?" He pouts. It's dangerous. "Without me?"

Riley edges around us, shooting me an apologetic look. "Talk to you later."

Leaving me alone with the devil.

"I had somewhere to be." I dig my pass out of my pocket. "It's fine anyway."

"Ooh, a pass. Riley's librarian cousin, no doubt."

I blink at him. He appears relaxed, but I feel the tension between us.

He's *pissed*, but he's hiding it well.

"How do you know Amy is her—"

"Cousin?" He lifts one shoulder. "It's no secret."

We walk down the hall.

"Where'd you go?"

I shake my head. "You really want to know?"

"Well, I'm not asking just to hear my own voice."

At the door to the academic wing, he holds me back. "Are you still getting picked on?"

"Are you asking because you're concerned?"

He slides his hand through my hair. "I've decided that the only person who can be cruel to you is *me*."

"It's better," I manage.

I am absolutely livid that he can be callous and turn me on at the same time. My body reacts to him like a tightly wound wire. One touch and I come alive.

"I'll see you tonight," he says, releasing me. "And maybe you'll answer

my questions.”

“What’s tonight?” I follow him up the stairs, toward my next class. “Caleb.”

He winks. “You don’t want to tell me where you went? Two can play that game, love.”

I suffer the anticipation through the last two classes—including the art class, with Caleb sitting stiller than a statue beside me. Getting answers from him is like trying to squeeze blood from a stone. Pointless and impossible.

He goes up to Robert near the end of class, whispering something.

Robert nods slowly. “I suppose. I’ll need to speak with my wife.”

Caleb returns to his seat. He smirks at me.

“What was that about?” I whisper.

“Nothing to worry about,” he says. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

The bell cuts off any further interrogation. Caleb slides off his stool and strides out the door, leaving me behind. No backward glance, no hovering like the last few days. He’s just... *poof*. Gone.

Robert clears his throat. “Ready?”

“What did Caleb ask you?”

He shakes his head. “Just had a personal question.”

He’s not going to tell me. I try not to let that sting too much.

Once we’re home, I retreat to my room. My phone has been unusually silent. No Caleb, no Riley... no Unknown.

I do have a text from Claire, though.

Claire: *So great to see you, Margo!! Really missed you. Hanna sends a kissy face. Want to meet up next weekend??*

I grin at my phone.

Me: *I’ll double-check, but it should be fine! Yay!*

I set my phone down to change out of my uniform. It chimes again, and I grab it, already smiling. The smile slides off my face when I see who this new text is from.

Unknown: *Do you ever get tired of being fake?*

My good mood plummets like a stone in the ocean. Down, down, down.

Unknown: *How does it feel to lose your virginity to a monster?*

I choke on my gasp. How do they know?

I certainly didn't tell anyone...

Which means Caleb did.

Lenora knocks on my door. “Hey, honey. We’re going out. Will you be okay on your own?”

I sit up and look at her. I’ve been struggling through homework for the last hour. Math used to be my favorite subject, but I haven’t been able to concentrate this semester.

Too many other things pulling my attention, I guess.

“Where are you going?”

She grins. “Robert got a reservation to a nice restaurant. He surprised me, and since it’s a Friday...”

I mirror her smile. “That’s awesome! Date night?”

“Exactly. And as of tomorrow, we’re lifting your grounding.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You’ve been good, and we didn’t want to make this a drawn-out thing. Besides, it’s your senior year. You should be able to have fun with your friends.”

“Thank you.”

She ventures deeper into my room and sits beside me. “We need to talk tomorrow. Robert and I wanted to check in with you after Angela’s visit, but things just got a little crazy...”

“It’s okay.” I fiddle with the blanket on my lap.

Between Lenora working late and my inability to do anything except for homework, I've had a few movie nights with Robert and a few nights of crashing early. In reality, I've barely seen Lenora this week.

"We'll do a brunch tomorrow. I found a new French toast recipe that I've been eager to try. Will you help me?"

I grin. "I love French toast."

"It's a date."

Robert calls Lenora's name from downstairs, and she pats my wrist.

"I'm being summoned," she says. "Have a nice quiet evening."

"See you tomorrow."

She tentatively leans forward, wrapping her arms around me. "Is this okay?" she whispers.

"Yeah." I hug her back, resting my chin on her shoulder.

It feels... nice.

She releases me when I drop my arms, and then they're gone. I listen for the front door to close, then shove my homework off my bed. I flop backward and close my eyes.

My mother flashes in front of my closed eyelids.

"What did you do, Margo?" she asks. She looms giant in my memory, gripping my shoulders.

I don't answer, and she shakes me back and forth.

"Mom," I cry.

"Margo."

I thrash, trying to break her bruising grip.

"Margo!"

"Stop," I moan.

"Wake up!"

My eyes snap open, focusing on Caleb.

His eyebrows are creased.

I try to remember what I was dreaming about. It seems impossible that I

fell asleep, but the clock tells me an hour has passed.

“You were crying for your mom,” he murmurs.

The scene zooms back to the forefront of my mind.

I lunge up and throw my arms around him, bursting into tears.

“I-I-I can’t remember what I did to make her hate me,” I hiccup. “Why did she leave me?”

I know the answer. She loved drugs more than her daughter. She was declared unfit to parent—that’s what Angela told me. I don’t remember much of the hearing with the judge, except that Mom never showed.

Dad was already gone at that point.

There was no one left to take care of me... so into the foster system I went.

Caleb rubs my back. “It’s okay.”

It isn’t. It won’t be until I find the answers I need.

I don’t know which questions to ask, though. I don’t know where to begin to look for Amberly Wolfe.

“Will you help me?” I sniff. “You...” To say he was there would be a lie. After Dad was arrested, I didn’t see Caleb for seven years. He wouldn’t know where my mother is, and he sure as hell wouldn’t *care*.

“No.”

His answer stings, but I get it.

I ask, “What are you doing here?”

“I told you I’d see you tonight.”

I squint at him through my unshed tears. “Did you get them the reservation?”

He smiles. “I might’ve been planning it for us, but you’re still grounded. So... yeah, I offered it up to get them out of the house.”

“Devious,” I mutter. “And arrogant.”

“And ruthless,” he adds, kissing my cheek.

“And wicked.” I turn my head slightly, catching his lips on mine.

“What are you going to do about it?” he asks.

“I’ll beg you to make me forget about it.” I kiss him again, harder.

Losing my virginity to Caleb is confusing. My body likes him—almost too much, I think—and I don’t know what to make of it. I don’t know what to make of *him*. They say that you forge connections when you lose that piece of yourself.

I didn’t believe it. I still don’t, to a certain extent. Caleb and I have been connected by an invisible string forever. The sex just made it better. *Or worse*. Any chance of escaping him has gone out the window, because now I don’t want to run.

He said only he was allowed to be cruel to me.

The sick part is, I’m looking forward to it.

His fingers on the waistband of my shorts brings me back to the present. I raise my hips for him to tug the fabric down.

I unbutton his pants, freeing his erection. He pauses undressing me only long enough to toss a condom on my stomach. I tear it open and roll it on him carefully, half remembering past health class lessons. He groans into my neck.

My shirt is gone, and he stares down at me for a second before dropping more weight on me. I feel him at my entrance as he kisses my collarbone.

“This is going to hurt,” he warns me. He rocks his hips forward, pushing into me.

I didn’t realize how sore I was from Monday until right this instant.

I tense, and he freezes.

“Relax, Margo.” His tongue flicks out against the shell of my ear.

I loosen my muscles, one at a time, and he slides in deeper. I lift my hips to meet his thrusts, marveling at the feel of him hitting a deep spot inside me. I’m more sensitive than I could’ve imagined.

He nips my earlobe, following it with his tongue. Who knew ears could be so... hot?

I dig my nails into his back, hugging him closer.

This feels different.

And then the front door opens. It's easy to hear—the hinges squeal.

We both freeze. "Um, Caleb? Did you invite—"

"Margo, we're home!" Lenora calls. "Want to watch a movie?"

Her footsteps pound on the stairs.

"Caleb," I whisper. "You need to move."

He pulls out of me, grimacing, and hops up. "Where?"

"Um..."

"Margo?" Lenora calls. "You awake?"

"Closet!" I jump up, grabbing my shorts and yanking them back into place. I manage to get my shirt on and I push him toward my walk-in at the same time, closing the door behind him just as Lenora cracks my door open.

"Oh, you're awake!"

I spin toward her. "Sorry, Lenora! I called back but I don't think I was loud enough."

She smiles.

I lean against my closet door, crossing my arms. "You're home early."

"Well, the restaurant was lovely. Service was a little too fast." She shrugs. "We're naturally homebodies, Robert and I. Decided we could go out to see a movie... or come home and snuggle on the couch."

I force a laugh. Sweat is trickling down my spine—and I don't think it's from the sex that she just interrupted. "Well, makes sense."

She grins. "I'm going to change. Come down and join us if you'd like. Robert is making popcorn!"

"Sounds good."

She closes my door, and I sag against it. A second later, my body moves as Caleb forces it open.

"That was close," he says. He's fully dressed again, and he holds up my bra. "Figured you might want this back."

I double take. “That’s the one you took on Monday.”

He shrugs. “I’ve got a replacement.”

“You also kept my torn panties,” I say. “You like to keep little trophies of your conquests?”

He chuckles. “No. But I do like help remembering your scent when I’m jacking off at night. And no offense, Wolfe, but bras don’t really do the trick in that department.”

I gape at him, my face getting hot. “You’re not—”

“Serious?” He smirks. “Deadly.”

Lenora taps on my door, and he ducks back into the closet. She doesn’t open it, though. Just asks, “Coming?”

“Be there in a minute!” My voice is an octave too high.

Caleb cracks the door, silently laughing at me. “I’ll just show myself out... via the window.” He winks.

He opens it and climbs out. And then he’s gone; the only trace of him is the scent of sex in the air.

Oh my god. I’ll just have to pray that Lenora didn’t notice.

I leave the window open and put on a sweatshirt, then go downstairs. I could use a distraction—and a movie sounds like the perfect one.

Caleb

I pull up outside the motel. The neon No Vacancy sign flickers sporadically. There are lights on in half the rooms at this time of night. Any one of them could hold *her*. It took only a few calls to figure out which motel she'd booked. Calls I made before I showed up at Margo's house.

Margo almost erased the pressing need to come here... but then her foster parents got home early.

And the compulsion returned.

I force myself to relax, blowing air out through my mouth and sucking it in through my nose. I have time, but patience is another issue.

My phone buzzes with an incoming text. A second later, my passenger door opens, and Amelie slides into the car. I glance over long enough to take in her dress: red, leather, tight. Her breasts are pushed up to her throat. Her lips are coated in bright-red gloss.

I have a flash of Margo wearing the same color as a kid, threatening to kiss me.

"What are you doing here?" I ask Amelie, unlocking my phone.

Eli: *You need backup?*

Me: *No. I'll handle it.*

"Thought you could use some help." Amelie shrugs. "Especially since the expression on your face means you probably don't know which room she's in."

Amelie and I were a brief fling, yet she still seems to reap the rewards of

our past. Like knowing I probably wouldn't hurt her for getting in my way. I could change that.

It's about damn time Amelie's felt something toward me besides lust.

Fear would look much better on her face than this hungry, desperate wanting. My skin crawls at the way she's staring at me.

I grit my teeth. "And you do?"

She smiles at me. "I wouldn't be *useful* if I didn't."

"And what do you want in exchange?" I only ask because... well, I don't want to make any more phone calls, and bribing the motel front desk would leave a trace.

I'm not going to like this. Amelie is slipperier than a snake in oil.

She puts her elbow on the center console, moving into my space. "Just give me a... secret."

I sigh. "What kind of secret?"

"What happened to Margo's dad? Where's *your* mom? Why—"

"Enough," I snap. I grab her by the throat, shoving her against the passenger window.

She makes a gurgling noise, fingers scrambling on my hand.

"You're going to cut the fucking shit, Amelie, and then you're going to leave." I lean in, trying to curb the urge to squeeze until she turns purple. "And if you don't, I'll tell everyone *your* dirty little secret."

Her eyes widen.

The fear I've been craving flashes across her face.

Honestly... it doesn't do as much as I thought it would. Margo's ruined me.

"Okay," Amelie wheezes. "Room thirty-one."

"That was easy." I release her, then lean around her and open the door.

She falls out of my car, landing on her back with her feet in the air.

I snicker. "Run along, Page."

She climbs to her feet and purses her lips. Without a word, she storms off.

Slowly, I get out of the car and find room thirty-one. It's on the second floor. The lights are off.

I bang on the door anyway. It's late. Maybe she's sleeping.

"Caleb?"

I turn. Amberly Wolfe stands at the top of the stairs. Her hair is in a high bun, and there's dirt smudged on her forehead. She wears an absurd amount of layers, so she looks like the Pillsbury Dough Boy.

"Thought that was you." She comes closer, shuffling her feet.

I step back and let her unlock the door.

Her fingers tremble on the painted wood. She's frailer than I would've thought. Her eyes are sunken. Her cheeks are sucked in.

We enter the room and she unwinds her scarf.

I bite the inside of my cheek. There's a ring of bruises around her neck.

Handprints.

It strikes me that I should feel concern—or at the very least, an ounce of sympathy. I don't. Disgust travels up my throat.

Even through the addiction, the similarities between her and Margo are obvious. They have the same hair, the same smile. Same face shape, even though Margo's still has traces of her childhood in her cheeks and her mother's is extreme in the opposite direction.

"What brings you here?" She goes to the mini-fridge, kneeling and pulling out a bottle. She offers me one. "Come to steer me right, son?"

"Don't call me that," I snap. I shake my head.

She giggles. She removes her jacket, revealing a sweater that she probably got from a thrift store. It's two sizes too big and hangs on her frame. She starts taking off the sweater, too, still giggling under her breath.

"You're high." I should've known. Should've anticipated it.

She takes a seat on one of the two beds, now only in her leggings and long-sleeved shirt. She twists the bottle in her hand.

Slowly, I mirror her movements. After sitting for a few seconds, I cross to

the fridge and help myself to a beer. May as well, trying to reason with Margo's mother.

"Why are you back?"

She grins. "I asked you that."

I shrug. "I came to ask you why you're back. Are you going to answer?"

She's irritating. Infuriating. The woman who used to be my family's chef has disintegrated into *this*.

"You look so much like your father," she says. "I miss him."

"What about your own husband? Rotting away—"

"Don't, Caleb." She shakes her head, folding forward. "Don't bring up the past."

She rocks back and forth for a moment, winding her scarf around her hands. Finally, she sets it down and straightens. Her cheeks are wet. She switches beds, sitting right next to me.

I hold perfectly still as she stares into my face.

There's kindness buried in my bones.

But... not for her.

She wipes the tears on her cheek with the back of her hand, running her arm under her nose. It's hard to be around her and not feel anger.

Hate.

"I just want things to go back to normal." She latches on to my arm and lets out a sob. "Why did you come here?"

"To tell you that you need to leave Rose Hill. Tonight."

"My money is gone. I have nowhere to go—"

"I don't fucking care, Amberly."

She flinches.

"You promised you wouldn't come back. That you wouldn't..."

"Interfere," she mumbles. "But—"

I shove her off me. She tumbles to the floor, landing in a curled position.

"There's no fucking *but*!" I roar. "You're endangering everything by

being here.”

I dig my toe into her ribs, flipping her flat on her back.

She stares up at me. Her mouth opens and closes. She’s in shock—or succumbing to the coke she probably shot into her veins. The tears spill out again, flooding down her temples and into her hair.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I just...”

I shove her sweater sleeve up, just to prove to myself that she’s still the drug addict I remember. The track marks are dark, angry red. Infected, probably from dirty needles.

My skin crawls.

The kids at school call Margo a coke-whore’s daughter. And they’re right: Amberly Wolfe has taken another lover. And there’s nothing more alluring to her than her drug of choice.

“Here’s what’s going to happen.” I pull out my wallet, dropping money onto her chest. “You’re going to go anywhere but here. Upstate. Down south. Who the fuck cares. And if I hear that you step back in Rose Hill, you’re done. I’ll kill you myself.”

She shudders.

“Leave tonight, Amberly.”

She grabs my boot as I walk past her. “Please. I got a call—”

I shake her loose, my lip curling. I pause with my hand on the knob and drain my beer, dropping the empty bottle on the floor. It tastes like piss water.

Figures.

I slam the door behind me, hoping that Amberly got my message.

But... part of me hopes she’s stubborn like her daughter. I would love to teach her a lesson. It’s one both Wolfe women need to learn.

*I*ntervention time.

Or... something like that. Maybe it isn't an intervention, but the way Lenora and Robert are staring at me, it sure feels like something momentous—and catastrophic—is going to happen.

The only sound is the clock ticking on the wall behind Robert's head.

We chose to sit at the dining room table, Robert at the head and Lenora and me on either side of him. And they're just... waiting for something.

Finally, Robert clears his throat. "How are you doing, honey?"

"Doing? Like..."

"In general," Lenora supplies. "Or specifically, if you want."

"I'm good." I shrug, forcing a smile at both of them. "I mean, I'm sorry for the other night. When I got drunk."

The late-morning sun streams in through the window behind me, warming my back. Caleb successfully snuck out through the window, and I made an appearance for movie night. It was nice. No talking. Just sword fights and British accents.

When I woke up, I was filled with inexplicable trepidation. I could barely move.

My body hurt. I discovered a trail of hickies and bruises on my neck, down my chest. I pressed my thumb into one, and pain hit deep. But it wasn't

bad. It was the kind of pain that made me want to keep pushing on it.

And then I remembered the chat we're supposed to have.

So here we are, food in front of us that I'm too nervous to eat.

My mouth waters at the smell of bacon, but my flipping stomach prevents me from reaching out and taking a slice.

"We understand that these things happen," Lenora says. "We're just hoping that you'll make good decisions as you get older. Going forward."

I nod.

"Angela mentioned that your dad is in jail," Robert says. "He's actually quite close—"

"No." I want to crawl out of my skin at the thought of my dad in an orange jumpsuit.

"Are you angry with him?" Robert asks. "I can't imagine how you must feel, and we just want to understand—"

"I can't do this right now," I whisper. "Did Angela bring this up?"

"We know your mother is—"

—my head snaps back—

"I'm doing okay, aren't I? Going to school, making friends. My grades are good." *Ish*. "You're letting me be a normal teen with... not a lot of worries, really." I manage to smile at them. "Thank you for that."

Somehow this turned into a heart-to-heart.

"We love having you here," Lenora says.

I meet her gaze. "I love being here."

She snuffles. "Okay, enough of this. As long as you're content, and we're doing a good job... let's eat."

"And you're officially ungrounded," Robert adds.

I beam.

"How's your painting coming along?" he asks.

I start loading my plate. My anxiety has eased, and suddenly I'm ravenous. They've prepared a feast of breakfast foods.

And then I register his question and slowly set down my fork. “Oh, um...”

The answer? Not great.

Not only have I pushed it so far to the bottom of my to-do list that I’d forgotten about it, but I’m pretty sure it’s going to come out awful.

“Do you need help?”

I squint at him. “Are you allowed to help me? Being the teacher and all?”

Lenora laughs. “Probably not, but that won’t stop him.”

“I can give feedback,” he allows. “And maybe point you in the right direction. Just like I would do for every other student who asked for help.”

“I do need to work on it,” I allow. “I’ve been preoccupied.”

He nods. “I’ve noticed.”

Guilt crawls over me. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean—”

He waves. “Stop. You’re allowed. But if you want to work on it, I’m around today.”

Once we’re done eating, I run upstairs and change into clothes I don’t mind getting paint on. I need to figure out exactly how I’m going to capture Caleb. He’s a riddle I haven’t found the answer to yet, always shifting pieces and parts. A mirage.

I cart down my canvas, my box of paints, and brushes under my arm. Robert has already laid out newspaper on the dining room table, along with a small easel.

He comes in as I’m setting up.

“Do you know why I picked oil paints for this assignment?” he asks.

I shrug, staring at the vague outline of Caleb. “Because it’s a difficult medium, and you wanted to challenge us?”

He nudges me, shaking his head. “Because it’s forgiving.”

I tilt my head. We’ve been working with a bunch of different paints—watercolor, acrylic, oil. I haven’t picked a favorite.

“You make a mistake? Go over it. Erase it. Hell, do a painting and then

repaint it the next day. You can't do that with watercolors."

"Ah."

"You've barely touched the surface here, Margo," he says. "You've painted an interestingly mute background... and that's it."

That's all I had the nerve to do last time Caleb and I sat down together.

Robert leans his hip on the table, meeting my eyes. "You don't need him in front of you to paint him. In fact, I think you'd capture his essence better when you're *not* looking at him."

He leaves me alone while I stare at the canvas. Sooner or later, I'll have to start.

I take my time putting the paints on my palette, preparing my brushes, lining up the charcoal and turpentine. I mix a few different colors together, trying to find the right shade to match Caleb's skin.

But nothing is perfect, so I just...

Put a stroke on the page.

So what if it isn't beautiful? He's not beautiful—not on the inside. He's broken, just like me. It comes out in the way the colors clash on the page. I take Robert's advice and redo the background. The blues and purples I had originally painted, trying to go for a *nice* look, don't work.

His jaw comes to life with dark slashes.

I leave his eyes blank for now. I'm tempted to paint them completely black, honestly. Yet, that wouldn't quite do.

"Wow," Robert says over my shoulder.

I twist around. "How am I doing?"

"Fantastic emotion." He leans closer. "Once this dries, you can go back with an artist's eye and clean up some of the lines. Make every stroke purposeful."

I nod and glance at the clock. I've been sitting here for two hours.

"What do you have planned for his eyes? And lips?"

I shrug. "I haven't decided." I can't see it yet.

He chuckles. "That boy is in trouble."

"I think I'm the one in trouble." I stare at Caleb's face. It isn't exactly in his likeness—it's a little too abstract for that. Plus, there are the blank gaps: his eyes, his lips, his eyebrows. To capture the scowl or make him smile...

"Speaking of," Robert says, going to the window. "He just pulled up."

"Distract him!" I grab the canvas. "I need to hide this!"

He chuckles as I dash around, but he distracts Caleb long enough for me to get it put away. Caleb walks into the dining room. I'm cleaning up my paints. Robert showed me how to preserve them, covering the palette with plastic wrap to keep the air away from the paints.

"Working on our project?" he asks.

I grin. "Yep."

He makes a show of looking around the room. "Where is it?"

"Hiding from your nosiness," I retort. I brush my hair off my face and sigh. "What's up?"

"Didn't you say you were ungrounded today?"

"Did I say that?"

He lifts one shoulder, smirking at me. "Not sure where else I could've heard it, love."

"Maybe that's true."

I try to slip past him, but he moves too fast. He frames me in against the wall, just out of sight of Robert. I know he's eavesdropping on the other side of the wall.

"You running from me?"

"No," I breathe.

He hums. "I think you are. Let's change that."

"How?"

His fingers dig into my hip. "Come to the masquerade ball with me."

I blink. "Um, a dance?"

"That's what a ball is, Margo."

"I don't dance."

His eyes glitter, and he leans closer. His lips are right above mine.

Not fair, I want to complain. He knows how to make my body react. Always has.

"Come with me."

"Okay." I lean in slightly.

His lips brush mine, but then he's gone. Straightening and stepping back.

"That was easy." His grin is devious.

"Caleb—"

He strides away, into the kitchen. He mentions the ball to Robert, confirming that I'm going with him.

"That's great, Margo," Robert says when I walk in. "It's hard to go to the dances alone, but from my time as a chaperone, the kids always have a lot of fun."

"Are you chaperoning this year?" *Please say no, please say no.*

He shakes his head. "I didn't volunteer this year. Lenora gets a little pissy if I'm out partying with the high schoolers past our bedtime. Besides, she doesn't like to give candy out alone."

Caleb laughs. "I'm sure you're a reckless partier, Mr. Jenkins."

"That I am, my boy."

My boy. Jesus.

"Wait, when is the dance?"

Caleb eyes me. "In two weeks. Don't worry, you have time to find a dress."

Bastard. "Yeah..."

"Lenora would love to help," Robert says. "We never got to go dress shopping with..."

I look at my shoes.

Robert clears his throat. "I don't mean to bring up the past."

Caleb goes over and pats his shoulder. "It's okay, Mr. Jenkins. I

understand.”

My foster dad nods at Caleb slowly. “I know you do. But anyway, I’m sure you two have better things to do today? It’s Margo’s first day of freedom, after all.”

“It’s only been a week of being grounded,” I say pointedly. “It isn’t really *freedom*.”

“Just go with it,” Caleb murmurs. “I was actually going to go run an errand in the city.”

New York City is only about an hour and a half away. By a stroke of pure luck, I didn’t end up in the NYC foster system. That would’ve been hopeless.

Because I lived in Rose Hill, which is part of Hillshire County, I got looped into that particular foster system. There are enough homes and group housing around here to keep me within an hour radius.

And that meant I avoided New York City.

“What errand?” I ask, perking up. “I haven’t been—”

“Since you were a kid?”

Robert tuts. “We could plan a day trip, Margo. I didn’t realize it was something you might want to do.”

I shrug. “I used to watch all the holiday events on TV. The tree lighting and the parades...”

“I was hoping you would come with me,” Caleb says. “It’s still too early for the Christmas vibe, but...”

“Can I go?” I ask Robert.

“After that spiel? How can I say no?”

I run upstairs, changing into nicer clothes. We’re going to the *city*. It’s luxurious and daunting all at once. I’ve heard horror stories about people getting mugged, pickpockets, insane taxis. But over all of that is the shiny appeal of Times Square. Central Park. Horse-drawn carriages and big floppy slices of pizza.

Caleb comes upstairs before I can start putting makeup on.

He intercepts me on the way to the bathroom, taking my makeup bag out of my hand. “You don’t need this. Not today.”

I scowl. “I want to feel pretty.”

“You can feel pretty without it.”

I try to snatch it back, but he raises it over his head.

“Caleb,” I snap.

“Stop.”

I jump for it.

“Goddamn it, Margo,” he snarls, shoving me back against the wall. “Just—*stop*.”

His hand stays on my chest. His fingers are dangerously close to my throat, splayed over my collarbone, and his thumb brushes my nipple.

I suck in a breath. I’m an idiot. My face gets hot.

“In the car,” he orders. He puts my small makeup case in his jacket pocket and strides away.

I wave goodbye to Robert and Lenora, who has returned home just in time to see us leave.

Robert stops me, handing me a few folded bills. “Have fun.”

“Thank you!” I wasn’t planning on spending more than I could afford—which wouldn’t have been much at all. I tuck the money in my wallet and race after Caleb.

I climb into the car, and we’re on the road in a flash. There’s a mischievous look in his eye that I can’t place. I bite my lip instead of asking about it, and soon enough we’re on the highway.

Up, up, and away.

“Why is makeup so important to you?” he asks. “You don’t think you’re pretty?”

“It’s hard to have self-confidence when everyone is trying to bring you down.” I rub my hands together. Halloween is approaching.

I stop. “Is the masquerade ball *on* Halloween?”

“Of course.”

“Of course,” I repeat. “Great.”

He shoots me a glance. “What’s wrong with that?”

I refuse to meet his eyes. “Bad things happen on Halloween.” I can’t believe I’ve been back at Emery-Rose for less than two months.

“Like what?”

There are skyscrapers in the distance.

“Getting chased by a foster brother with a machete. He threatened to cut off my hair.” I grimace. “Being locked in a closet for trying to take a piece of candy meant for the other kids.”

He keeps glancing at me.

“Having my costume ripped the morning of Halloween by a foster family’s kid. She didn’t like that I got to be a unicorn.”

“How old were you?” His voice is dark.

“Something happened almost every year.”

“And the last two? With your supposed good family?”

I shrug. “Hanna ate a Snickers, and her throat swelled shut. We spent the night in the ER. And then the next year, our foster mom let us all go, but she took our candy when we came back. Said she didn’t trust us not to eat it all in one night.”

“I thought you liked her.”

“They were strict.” I shrug. “Everyone is strict at first. Except—”

“The Jenkinses,” he guesses. “You like them.”

I hope they keep me.

I almost say it out loud.

But wishes and hopes are dangerous. They inflate us, make us buoyant. And in the end, it just makes a harder fall.

I know better.

“We can find complementary masks,” he says. “Something fit for...”

I raise my eyebrows.

“A king and queen.”

He can’t be serious.

“We aren’t *royalty*,” I sputter. “This isn’t—”

“My word is law. Eli, Theo, Liam, me... we’re it. We rose up in the school.” He chuckles. “It may not seem like it now, but come spring, everyone will be reminded.”

“Lacrosse,” I mutter.

“People like their football, but lacrosse rules around here.”

“And you rule the game.”

He cracks a smile. “Yes.”

“The school... people treat you differently in the spring?”

“We remind the students why we’re the best in the league.” He drums his fingers on the steering wheel. “There’s a good costume shop off of Times Square.”

“What’s the errand you have to run?”

He shrugs. “Just have to sign some papers.”

“And you decided to take me along?”

“You haven’t been to the city. Besides, this type of conversation can’t be had with just myself.”

I roll my eyes. “Right.”

He glances over. “You don’t believe me.”

Not really.

“The teachers don’t ever yell at me, give me detention, call me out for being late or skipping.” He puts his hand on my thigh.

Hate to say I like it, but...

“You got suspended.”

“For fighting Ian, who’s dad is a massive dick.” He winks. “I don’t blame her for suspending me. Easier to do that than get on his bad side.”

I harrumph.

“You’ll see,” he promises.

His words from my first day of school come back to me.

Margo Wolfe. Haven't you heard? I'm king now.

What does that make me?

“*A* fair lace mask for the pretty girl?”

I glance up at the shop owner. He’s been hovering, pointing at various costumes and accessories. None have been quite right. Although, I’m not quite sure what I’m looking for. I don’t have a dress, and Caleb, who seemed to have a plan, has disappeared.

The shop owner holds out a delicate, pale-pink mask. It’s meant to cover half the face, not both eyes.

“No,” Caleb says, coming up behind him. “I found it.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Where is it?”

“You have to wait outside.” He grins. “I think it’ll be better if it’s a surprise.”

“Seriously?”

The shop owner appraises us.

Caleb narrows his eyes at me. “Out.”

I raise my hands in surrender. “Fine. I’m going to get coffee.”

I leave the shop, contemplating circling back and trying to get a glimpse of whatever Caleb is buying. Instead, I resist the urge and cross the street. There’s a cute little coffee shop directly across from the costume shop.

Playing nice, I order myself a latte and Caleb a black coffee.

We were both obsessed with tasting coffee when we were young. It never

failed to wrinkle our noses. But at the time, coffee was synonymous with caffeine. And what better to help two ten-year-olds stay up past their bedtimes than caffeine?

I shake the memory out of my head as Caleb comes into the shop. A paper bag dangles from his fingertips.

“I got you one,” I say.

“Is this bribery?”

“No.” I roll my eyes. “Not everything has a string attached.”

He shrugs. “You’d be surprised.”

We sit and drink our coffee, and I try my hardest not to even look in the direction of the bag.

He glances at his watch and straightens. “We have to go. My appointment is soon.”

“You said you had to sign papers? For what?”

He winks. “Just boring business stuff.”

“Your dad—”

“Just leave it, Margo.” He rubs his eye. “Can we go ten minutes without questions?”

He doesn’t say please, but I imagine the plea chasing his request.

“Fine,” I murmur.

I’ll just have to observe and see if I can figure out what Caleb Asher is hiding.

We take a taxi. It drops us off in front of a tall building, and Caleb winds his hand through mine. He leads me into the lobby and points to a group of armchairs in the corner.

“Sit.”

Since I promised no questions, I keep my mouth shut and take a seat.

Caleb approaches the front desk and leans toward the receptionist.

She nods, pointing to a bank of elevators to her right. He pushes through a turnstile, goes down a hallway to the elevators, and waits. When he glances

back at me, I pretend I wasn't watching.

He steps onto the elevator a second later, and I shoot to my feet.

"Hi," I say to the receptionist. "Can you tell me where he was going?"

She raises her eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"I just—"

"We can't give out that information," she says, lifting her chin. "Are we going to have a problem?"

I take a step back. "No."

As I slink back toward my seat, I scan the placard of companies and the levels. Where would Caleb go to sign paperwork?

There aren't too many names listed. Half of them take up several floors. There's a PR firm and a real estate office that might be promising. Besides that, there's a law firm, a plastic surgeon, and an investment firm. Oh, and insurance.

I shake my head and sit.

Caleb reappears twenty minutes later. He comes over to me and offers his arm.

"That took longer than expected," he says.

I slip my arm through his and shrug. "It's okay."

"Do you want to do anything else? Or should we call it a day?"

We'd already walked around Times Square, took a selfie together under the glowing screens, and found masks. The day catches up to me, and I yawn. "Food, then home?"

He nods. We round the corner, almost smashing into a man walking toward us. He freezes, staring at Caleb. His face goes pale.

"Mr. A-Asher," the man says.

"Tobias." Caleb inclines his chin, staring at the man with cold eyes.

"I wasn't aware you were in the city."

"I wasn't aware I had to notify you when I wanted to get away from Rose Hill for an afternoon."

Tobias shakes his head. Once he's started, he doesn't stop. His whole body trembles, like a strong wind is rushing through him.

My curiosity is officially piqued.

Caleb glances down at me, and Tobias follows his eyes. He flinches when he registers me.

I tilt my head. "Do I—"

"Don't," Caleb snaps. He puts his hand on the small of my back, propelling me around the frozen man.

"I'll call you later," Tobias says to our backs.

Once we're half a block away, I force us to slow down. "Who was that?"

Caleb shakes his head. "I thought we were still not asking questions."

"You can't just—"

His eyes flash. His hand slides around my neck, threading through my hair. He yanks my head back, exposing my throat.

"I can," he murmurs.

There are still bite marks under my scarf and two layers of concealer.

He tugs the fabric away from my neck, eyes heating. "You covered them up."

Slowly, he puts his thumb in his mouth and then rubs at my skin.

"There." He releases me, grinning. "Now the world will know you're mine. Don't fucking hide it next time."

We'd managed the day without him going all dark on me. And here we are...

I press my thighs together, ignoring the impact of his words on my body. Especially because we're in the middle of the freaking sidewalk in Times Square.

People move past us like we're rocks in the middle of a river.

He's hungry, and I can't help but feel the same. Like we've unwittingly been starving ourselves.

He touches my neck again, and then he straightens. He smirks at me.

He *knows* what he does to me.
My phone buzzes.

Unknown: *How's it feel to be so small in such a large city?*

I choke on my gasp, shoving my phone back in my pocket.
Caleb raises an eyebrow. "What was that?"

"Riley trying to be funny." I clear my throat. *Please don't call me out on that lie.*

He narrows his eyes but doesn't question it.

We eat pizza at a diner on the second floor of a building. It overlooks the street. The people below, on the sidewalk. They're a sea of grays and blacks. When the sky opens up, suddenly every single person seems to have a black umbrella.

Caleb frowns. "I'll call the car."

We had left his at the edge of the city, then took a black car into Manhattan. The driver didn't say a word to either of us, although I caught Caleb slipping him folded bills.

We sit in silence at our table, ignoring the looks from the waitstaff, until a car pulls up to the curb and Caleb's phone chirps.

"Ready?"

The pizza was delicious. The diner was cute. The city is impossibly big and daunting and everything I could've imagined.

I can see how people would come here to chase their dreams. And I can see how the city would chew up anyone not a hundred percent committed.

"Yes." I take his offered hand. "Let's go home."

Caleb opens the car door for me, letting me slide into the backseat first. He follows, closing us in, and scoots close to me. God, he's a giant in this small space. I didn't realize it before—no, I was *ignoring* it before—but his presence sucks up all the air in the car.

The driver glances back at us in the rearview mirror. "Have fun?"

Caleb smiles. "It was refreshing."

The driver navigates back toward the outskirts of the city, and Caleb traces patterns on my leg. I try not to look at him, but soon, my body aches. One touch has me burning up.

We park next to Caleb's Audi, and the driver climbs out, opening my door for me. He even offers his hand. I take it, letting him help me to my feet. Caleb scowls at him over the top of the car, and the driver releases me.

"Mr. Asher," the driver says, inclining his head.

"I'll call you," Caleb answers. "Can you do that errand we discussed?"

The driver smiles. "Of course, sir."

I look back and forth between them, but Caleb turns away before I can dissect the conversation further.

We get into Caleb's car. Without warning, he reaches over and grabs the back of my neck, yanking me toward him. Our lips slam together, lips parting. His tongue slides into my mouth, invading my senses. I groan and press against him, forcing his tongue out of my mouth and into his. We've spontaneously combusted, igniting more heat than I could've imagined.

He tugs me over the center console and onto his lap.

I run my hands up and down his chest, then venture lower. I palm his dick through his pants, and he growls.

He's hard.

I unzip his fly and reach in, fully grabbing him and pulling it out. It jerks in my hand.

I lean back a fraction. Our mouths are a hairsbreadth apart when I whisper, "Who's Tobias?"

He glares at me. "You want to do this now?"

I stroke him, meeting his glare.

"You're not going to like the answer," he warns, exhaling sharply. "Fuck, Margo."

He likes my hand on him. We've had sex, he's gone down on me, but I've never... touched him like this. How selfish am I?

Selfish enough to resort to this to get answers.

"Tell me." I lick my lips. We're still close enough that my tongue touches his lips, too.

He tries to scowl, but shudders at my nails raking up and down him.

"Tobias was..." He shakes his head. "I can't believe I'm fucking telling you this. Tobias was your father's attorney."

I freeze.

"What?"

He grabs my face, holding me in place. If he didn't, I probably would've bolted. Away from him, out of the car.

I've been filled with ice.

I pull my hand away from his erection, but he just watches me.

Tobias was my dad's attorney.

The one who couldn't stop him from going to jail.

The one who is on a first-name basis with Caleb Asher.

My dad's attorney, who is going to call Caleb Asher later.

Why?

This is what self-destruction looks like. I fell for a monster.

I try to retreat, but his fingers just dig into my skin. He has me trapped against his body and the steering wheel, his hands on my face. His thumb caresses my cheek, just below my eye. Once, then twice.

He's blurry.

Am I crying?

"Why?" I manage. "Caleb—"

"Do not ask me," he warns. He leans forward and steals a kiss.

Steals my breath.

I can't breathe.

"I need to know *why*—"

“You don’t.” His voice is deadly. He’s deadly. He kisses me again, biting my lip.

I hate that he’s using this to distract me. To revive me.

I’m so fucking cold.

“Come back, Margo,” he says against my lips. He presses kisses along the edge of my mouth, my jaw, my throat.

“Did you put my father in jail?”

I close my eyes, letting my head fall back.

His teeth nip my throat. His lips chase away the pain, back up, up, up. My jaw. The spot just below my ear. My earlobe. My temple.

How can he destroy me and make me feel better at the same time?

We’re fucked up.

I’m fucked up for enjoying this. For letting him melt me down to liquid again and again.

His lips touch my eyelid. His tongue flicks out and tastes my tears.

This is more than just... him trying to ease the pain. Him trying to erase what happened in our past.

My heart is splintering.

His lips find mine again, but everything is soft. His touch. His tongue, sweeping along the seam of my lips.

I exhale a long, shuddering breath.

When I open my eyes, he’s watching me. Maybe he’s trying to figure me out. If I’m stable, or if, once he releases me, I’ll run.

I would if my legs didn’t feel like jelly.

“How could you?” I whisper. “Was it your idea?”

He shakes his head. “We’re not doing this right now.”

I move back into my own seat, clicking my seat belt into place. My desire for answers chews at me, but he’s right. We can’t do this now. Not after that.

He starts the car. I close my eyes. Whether I actually fall asleep or just doze, I couldn’t say. But what feels like minutes later, he’s lifting me out of

the car.

I keep my head tucked under his chin. Everything hurts.

“Is she okay?” Robert asks.

“She just fell asleep in the car,” Caleb answers. His voice is soft. “I didn’t want to wake her. I’ll just put her in bed...”

I snake my arms around his neck as he’s laying me down. He chuckles in my ear, his hands sliding along my forearms.

“I hate you,” I mumble, “but I still want you to stay.”

He exhales. “Your foster parents wouldn’t be happy with me.”

I adjust my grip, plastering him to me. It isn’t really fair for him—I have the leverage.

He lies next to me, petting my hair. “Okay, Margo.”

I sigh and inch closer. I still feel broken.

It’s unexpected. It’s sharp. If I move the wrong way, my heart may start bleeding. Best to stay completely still and hope that I heal overnight. That I can wish away all the bad pieces of Caleb—and me.

I fall asleep with his hand in my hair and my nose against his throat.

Amelie and Savannah have pulled a disappearing act.

It's not surprising, Riley informs me. They like to take trips, and the school is resigned to accepting their halfhearted attendance. After all, their parents make considerable donations each year.

It's because of the masquerade ball, they went to Paris to find dresses and masks.

Always a step above us little people, I suppose.

"Who are they going with?" I ask Riley.

She shrugs. "Last I heard, Amelie and Ian were going together. Not sure about Savannah."

Ian Fletcher. He's been keeping his distance, but I feel his stare like a hot coal against my skin. Why he's taken such an interest is anyone's guess.

"We need to pick out dresses," she says.

We walk into the library. It's remained our safe haven. So far, Caleb and Eli haven't come searching for us. A few times Caleb has shot me questioning glances as I slipped into the class right after lunch. But he never asked, and I never mentioned it.

It's been three days since Caleb and I went to New York City. He kept his distance on Sunday—letting me sort my emotions, I guess—and on Monday we were back to normal. As normal as we can be, anyway. And

unsurprisingly, people have stopped making so many remarks. The picture drew attention at first, but they've all but forgotten it now.

"Lenora wants to go shopping this weekend," I tell her. "Want to come?"

Riley grins at me. "Absolutely."

The door to the library creaks open. We can't see it from where we sit in the back, so both of us automatically slink down. Students aren't supposed to be in here—let alone with food. It's only because of Riley's familial relationship with Amy that this is even possible.

A few times, we've had to hide in the stacks because the principal came in to speak with Amy. But those are rare days.

Caleb appears with Eli right behind him.

I groan. "There goes our safe haven," I mumble to Riley.

Caleb looks down at me. "Are you hiding?"

"No."

"We just like the quiet," Riley says.

Eli grunts. "You're another matter entirely."

Yikes.

"Let's go," Caleb says.

I shake my head. "The last time we went with you, bad things happened."

He raises his eyebrow. "And if you don't come with me now, *worse* things will happen."

I lean back and cross my arms. "No."

He sighs, but I can tell he's enjoying this. My stomach flips.

Caleb exchanges a glance with Eli, and then he's leaning down, hauling me over his shoulder. I squeal as he rises. I'm upside down, my ass in the air.

"Oh my god." Riley laughs.

"Are you going to come quietly?" Eli asks her.

"Yep," she mutters, rising. She touches my arm. "Sorry!"

Caleb moves. I grunt, holding on to his shirt. His arms are banded around my thighs, keeping me in place. The four of us pass Amy's office. She

glances up, but quickly buries her head back in her book.

Traitor.

Caleb walks right into the cafeteria with me over his shoulder. My face gets hot, but I know begging won't stop him. Things have to be done his way. Always.

Without Amelie and Savannah here, the cheerleader table is quiet. No one wants to step up and own the bullying or their hatred of me. Still, they all whisper when Caleb and I pass. Eli and Riley follow us, and the whispers double.

Caleb pats my ass, then lowers me back to my feet.

I glare up at his grinning face. "Not cool," I mutter.

He shrugs. "I gave you a choice."

"Not really." I shake my head. "It's not a choice if the end result is the same."

His grin turns sly. "You could've walked here on your own two feet. Instead... I enjoyed the view."

Theo and Liam are already at the table. Eli and Riley sit next to Liam, and I slide onto the bench next to Theo. Caleb comes over with two trays of food, setting one next to me. He shoots a glare at Theo, then sits on my other side.

Theo grins at me. "Thanks for bringing my girlfriend out of hiding, Asher."

I snort and grab Caleb's arm before he can do anything crazy—like punch his best friend. *Again*.

"Watch it, Alistair," Caleb growls.

"Calm down," I snap. "He was joking. Right, Theo?"

Theo appraises me with dark eyes. "Right."

"See?" I turn to Caleb, triumphant.

Caleb's face is still shuttered. He puts his hand on the back of my neck and leaves it there for the rest of lunch. The others joke around. Eli and Riley share a few looks and smiles. It's weird being part of their table—at the

center of it, really—but so separate. Is it Caleb’s doing or mine? I’ve never fit in. And I suspect, even though Caleb could charm a snake, he doesn’t try it on his friends.

They accept him as the monster he is. And me, I guess I’m just the possession he’s been trying to acquire. They ignore it, or they’re comfortable in it. Comfortable with their own demons, with the thrones they sit on. The golden boys of Emery-Rose Elite are cherished from afar... because no one wants to get close to them.

The bell rings, and Caleb takes his time getting up. His hand is still on my neck, holding me to him. I like the feel of his fingers on my skin. The way his short nails bite.

My heart beats faster.

I have to skip going to my locker to make it to class on time—not that he cares. He leaves me with a smirk and a brush of his lips on my temple.

The afternoon is quiet. I stop at my locker before Robert’s art class, which is on the opposite side of the school. I’m halfway there when the hallway empties out and the bell rings.

It’s silent for a beat. Two.

My heart pounds, and I quicken my steps. I wonder if Robert will give me detention for being late, or if he’ll let it slide this time.

I just got ungrounded, after all. Who knows how far he can be pushed? His patience. His kindness.

Someone slams into me from behind.

I go flying forward, falling to my hands and knees. My backpack slides away from me.

Hands yank me up, pushing me face-first into the lockers. The cold metal kisses my cheek.

“Wrong place, wrong time, Sheep.”

The hands turn me around, keeping me pinned.

Ian Fletcher’s face is wild with excitement. He’s been waiting for this

moment—I can tell. A moment where I’m alone, unguarded.

Caleb would be in Robert’s class by now. How long would he wait before coming to find me?

“What do you—”

My words are cut off when he pulls me forward and shoves me back again. My head cracks against the locker. I must’ve bit my tongue, because blood fills my mouth.

“No talking,” he whispers. “You and me are going for a little walk.”

His fingers dig into my arm. He drags me down the hall, through a side door that leads out toward the soccer fields.

I don’t make a sound. Fear stirs in my chest as we skirt the field, headed toward the woods. The path that the cross-country runners use. I ran into Theo out here once, but I doubt I’ll be that lucky a second time.

It’s darker in the forest. We’re ten steps in, and suddenly the world is a whole lot more sinister. Muted sunlight flickers through the trees. It’s cloudy today, so even the golden leaves of autumn don’t make it a happier—or warmer—place. We could be standing in a graveyard.

He releases me.

I don’t know why that surprises me more than anything. Maybe I thought he’d reveal a knife and slice me open. Or hurt me in some other way.

“You,” he says. “You’ve managed to ensnare Caleb Asher. How?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know.”

He pushes me backward, his face contorting.

I stumble and hit a tree, and it’s the only thing that keeps me upright.

“You. Margo Wolfe. He *hated* you for how many years? Six?”

“Seven.”

“Seven.” He laughs.

Birds take off to our left, a great flurry of motion.

I flinch.

“He uses people,” Ian warns. “Whatever you think you feel... it’s a lie. A

manipulation.”

I cross my arms over my chest. Maybe it'll protect my heart from his words. “Why are you telling me this?”

His hand coasts over my jaw, his fingers gripping my chin and moving my face to the side. It's painful, but I don't make a peep.

His eyes latch on to the bite mark on my neck. It's mostly faded—enough that I only put a light layer of concealer on it—but the makeup must've worn off.

“We were friends,” he says. “And then high school starts, and he becomes a lacrosse god. Once I filled my use, I was kicked to the curb.”

“You showed him,” I respond. “You stole his girlfriend. Had her cheat on him—”

“Fat lot of fucking good that did.”

“Your problem isn't with me.” My voice is low. The fear is strangling me the closer he gets.

Heat pours off his body. He's too close.

He laughs. He releases my chin, and I turn my face to the side. I don't want to see whatever madness is on his face. His hand wraps around my throat.

“My problem is most certainly with you, Sheep.” He squeezes.

I keep my hands at my sides, but I meet his eyes. If his goal is to make me beg, he has another thing coming.

“You're the key to getting back at Caleb. I think he may even love you.”

It's hard to breathe. Swallow. Panic claws at me.

I can't answer him. I won't.

Caleb Asher does not love me.

“It's a game to him,” I wheeze.

Ian frowns.

If he wasn't a maniac, he might even be handsome. He sure got Amelie's attention.

“Please,” I mumble, finally bringing my hands up to his wrist.

He grunts, releasing me, and I slide to the ground.

This seems familiar.

Déjà vu.

Ian squats next to me, grabbing my arm. He yanks it toward him, shoving my sleeve up. “Something to remember me by.”

He pulls out a permanent marker, biting the cap off, and writes a word across my forearm.

I watch in horror as he puts his teeth to my skin. He bites hard. The pain travels up my arm like an electric shock. It’s nothing like what Caleb has done to me. This is fear and disgust wrapped in one. I’m *dirty*. The need to step out of my own skin is almost overwhelming.

Tears flood my eyes. There’s an instant bruise forming just above my wrist bone.

It’s more violating than I would’ve thought. Than I could’ve guessed.

“Who do you hate worse?” I ask him. I can’t look at my arm, which has a pulse of its own. “Me or Caleb?”

Ian sighs. “I don’t like you,” he says. “But I *hate* Caleb Asher. And this... you’re the easier target. The button to push to make Caleb feel something other than self-righteous.” He lifts one shoulder. “Pity he wasn’t there to protect you this time.”

He stands, and something cold slides over his features.

I have an instant to prepare before his foot snaps forward, connecting with my stomach.

Pain and helplessness explode through me. He kicks me twice more, and I fall to the side.

I wrap my arms around my middle, moaning into the ground.

Ian’s foot pushes me flat onto my back. He leans over me, a scowl marring his face.

“I meant what I said before.” He raises his eyebrow, daring me to

remember.

I don't. There are so many awful things he's said, that I've pushed out of my mind.

"You're nothing, Sheep. A girl from a trash family. You're so fucking out of place."

He walks away. I watch him from my position on the ground, in a fetal position, until he disappears from view.

I spit on my arm, scrubbing at it furiously, but it's permanent marker. It holds fast. I can't even see the word through my tears.

My throat burns. My arm throbs. My stomach is on fire. I curl further into a ball, giving into the misery rattling around my chest. A sob bursts out of me, the tears falling faster. I can't face Caleb now, or even Robert. I can't walk into school like this.

My fingers dig into the dirt, into the already-fallen leaves, and I scream. It's a poor way to try to expel my emotions. Dirt fills my mouth.

I pant and lie there and contemplate screaming again.

How long I'm here, I don't know. My eyes close, and I just try to make myself breathe normally. In through my nose. Out through my mouth. Spit out the dirt. Inhale, exhale.

A branch snaps, and suddenly Caleb is there.

"What happened?"

I can't move. My muscles are locked, stiff. My stomach is agony, and so is my throat. I couldn't even pull down my sleeve to cover the evidence of Ian's more noticeable cruelty.

Caleb tugs my wrists away from my body.

He takes in the tears on my cheeks, and God knows what else. I stare into his eyes. Maybe he'll take the pain away for good. Set me free.

In one motion, I'm lifted into the air. I wrap my arms around his neck, and he pauses. His eyes focus on my forearm.

"Who?" he grits out.

I shake my head and try to climb higher. He drops my legs and fixes his hold. One of his hands touches the back of my head.

I wind my legs around his hips like an octopus.

Or a leech.

One of his arms slides lower, supporting me, and the other stays on the back of my head. He starts walking.

“Ian,” I whisper in his ear.

We’re chest to chest. His exhale is loud and sharp.

The growl reverberates between us.

“I’m going to kill him.” He turns his head, pressing a kiss to my temple. “He’ll pay for this, love.”

There’s something to be said about having my own personal monster. I know he’ll avenge me.

He puts me in his car. Tells me to stay. Locks me in and disappears back into the school.

Maybe he’ll go find Ian.

My mouth still tastes like blood; the coppery taste never quite left.

I focus on my knees. They’re a bit scraped up, but I don’t know when that happened. There’s dirt on my legs. The pantyhose we wear with our skirts, part of our uniform, are ripped on my calf. When I move, dirt falls from my shirt. My eyes keep filling with tears. I make fists out of my hands, my nails pinching my palms.

I blink furiously.

Caleb returns, tossing something into the backseat. He slides into the driver’s seat and looks over at me, then jerks back to the steering wheel. “Just hold on.”

We go to Eli’s house. Maybe it’s because Caleb doesn’t want me to see his parents and Eli’s are away—I don’t ask. I don’t really want to see his parents or go back to that house, either.

He comes around and opens my door, scooping me up. In silence, he

carries me into the house and down to the basement. It's vaguely familiar down here. There's a couch and a television mounted to the wall, a bed in the far corner.

He sets me on the edge of the bed, kneeling next to me.

"I'm thinking there's more to this than your arm," he whispers. "Am I right?"

I nod.

He unbuttons my shirt, slowly pushing it off my shoulders. It falls behind me, and he leans back slightly. He presses his lips together, rage flickering over his face like candlelight.

I follow his gaze down.

My stomach is already a map of bruises. I'm surprised they showed up so fast.

He traces one. "Did he kick you?"

I force myself to nod again.

"I'm going to kill him," he repeats. His eyes meet mine. "What else?"

I touch my throat.

"Fuck," he whispers.

He lifts my arm.

Ian's teeth left a red, angry mark. And right above it, the word I couldn't bring myself to read: *whore*.

"I'm sorry," I say over the lump in my throat. "I'm so s—"

Caleb leans forward and kisses me.

It's infinitely sweeter than the emotions I know he's feeling. I can taste his guilt, and I want to cry again.

"Do not apologize." His voice is low. "You're staying here tonight."

My eyes widen. *It's against the rules*, I almost say. The lump in my throat blocks all noise, but he reads my mind.

"Fuck the rules, Margo. You're staying."

He storms off. The door to the basement slams closed, and then I'm left

alone with my silence.

My breath hitches. It hurts to inhale, it hurts to move... I examine my arm.

We need to clean the bite. Get the marker off.

Whore.

It mocks me. My mother. My past.

I scratch at it. There's dirt under my nails.

I notice it with vague detachment. In fact, I'm feeling rather removed from it all. I mindlessly scratch at my arm, trying to get the ink out of my skin.

Caleb comes back. He tucks his phone into his pocket and rushes over, grabbing my wrists. "Margo."

He hauls me up, ever so gently, and carries me into the bathroom. He sets me on the counter, flicking on the light.

I wince when he takes my wrist and pulls my arm straight. I've managed to gouge my arm. Blood trickles down my hand, dripping off my finger.

"We'll get it off," he mutters. "I told Robert something bad happened. I ran out of his class when you didn't show up."

There's guilt in his eyes.

I felt it on his lips. That was one thing, but seeing it?

Not ready for that.

I quickly look away, focusing on his shoulder.

"He said the way to get to you was through me." My voice is raspy. I don't have to tell him I'm not talking about Robert. "I'm your soft spot."

He flinches.

I keep my attention on his face as he gets a washcloth soaked in warm, soapy water, and runs it over my arm. I let him care for me. God knows I can't do it myself.

He takes his time cleaning my arm. And then he runs the washcloth over my shoulders, up my neck. Down my chest. He unclips my bra, tossing it

over his shoulder. Resoaks the washcloth.

Water runs down my body, and I shiver.

He washes away Ian's harshness. His hand on my arm, around my throat. His Italian fucking leather loafer in my stomach.

And when Caleb's done, he steps between my legs and kisses me softer than I could've imagined.

But... we're not meant to be soft.

I lean into him, stifling my moan of pain. He holds me back, hands featherlight on my shoulders.

"Kiss me like you mean it," I demand.

He hesitates.

"Make me forget." I won't beg him. Yet, I told myself that with Ian, and I caved. I didn't want a rich asshole to kill me in the woods.

Caleb's lips part. I press forward, catching his lower lip in my teeth.

And.

I.

Tug.

He lets out a groan.

But... he doesn't give in like I hoped. Instead, he pulls back, shooting me a look.

"You're trouble." He shakes his head and motions for me to stand. His gaze goes to my chest.

I forgot I was shirtless.

Slowly, I bring my arm up and cover my breasts.

He frowns, but for once, he doesn't argue. He goes to his dresser, fishing around in a drawer for half a second before he's back with a t-shirt and a pair of shorts.

I take the clothes, bringing the shirt up to my nose. I don't know why I do it with him watching me. Maybe I secretly like keeping him off guard.

Maybe it isn't a secret.

His lips twitch when I inhale.

It smells like him. I slip the shirt on, the fabric concealing my face as I raise my arms. It hides my wince. He leans against the doorframe. I drop my skirt and slide his shorts on. If I wasn't hurt, I'd be enjoying this more.

As it is, Lenora and Robert are probably going to kill me.

"What did you say to the Jenkinses?" I ask.

We both sit on the couch. There's light coming in through the narrow windows toward the top of the basement walls. The windows are ground level. The curtains are open. I forgot, momentarily, that it's still daytime. School is probably only just now getting out.

He smiles. "I actually called Eli. He's going to have Riley talk to Lenora. But I told Robert in school that you and I were leaving."

"I should get my phone. Make sure Riley's okay with it. Lying."

"I think you need rest," he murmurs.

He puts his arm around me, and I lean my head on his shoulder. He turns on the television, some mindless reality show about an international race, and we both kind of zone out. Every once in a while, he leans over and wipes a tear from my cheek.

I don't know why I'm still crying.

"Painkillers." He jumps up minutes or hours later. "I should've thought of that. Are you hungry?"

It feels like my internal organs went through a meat grinder.

I shake my head, and he frowns.

"Soup?" he asks.

"I'll try." The truth is, I might throw up. It could go either way.

He returns with Ibuprofen and a bowl of chicken noodle soup for me, and a sandwich for him. I sip the broth so he'll stop staring at me.

Boys eat a lot. I knew that in the back of my mind from the past. Temporary foster brothers, boys at other schools I went to. But seeing Caleb inhale a sandwich, while I can barely keep down broth? With his physique, it

just isn't fair.

He's got abs. The V that girls rave about. A trim waist and *muscles*. Hell, his face is gorgeous, too, but it's the body that sells the whole package.

And he's sitting next to *me*. How'd that happen?

"When's the other shoe going to drop?" I ask.

He blinks. "What?"

"This is nice. Like, you're being *nice*. Something is bound to go wrong."

He shakes his head. "It doesn't have to go wrong."

I straighten as much as I can. "So, what? We'll live happily ever after and get married and have babies—"

"Whoa," he says, taking the bowl from my hands. A little had sloshed over the edge, onto my fingers. "I think you're afraid."

I jerk back. "Afraid of what?"

"Happiness?" He scowls.

"Do you even *like* me?"

I think he may even love you.

Ian's voice in my head is the last thing I want to hear. I hit my temple with the heel of my palm. Once. Twice. It's automatic. The urge to get him out of my memory is startlingly strong.

He may even love you.

It's on fucking repeat. I smack my head, my ears. Anything to forget Ian Fletcher's voice.

"Margo," Caleb says. "Stop."

He grabs my wrists, but it isn't enough.

One meltdown just became two.

I wrench myself away, almost falling off the couch, and then...

Caleb moves too fast. Faster than my mind can comprehend.

He stretches himself out on top of me, pinning me to the couch. He catches both of my wrists, yanking them up over my head.

It pulls on my stomach, my abs, and I cry out.

He doesn't relent, though. This is the Caleb I know—the Caleb I deserve. His face is angry. Hell, furious. He leans down, his hips digging into mine.

"You don't get to beat yourself up," he whispers. "You don't get to be cruel to yourself."

"I can't—"

"I don't know what you fucking think you can't do," he growls.

His face is right over mine. Our legs are tangled together. His hands hold my wrist, but I can barely feel it.

Even when he's angry, he's gentle.

I meet his gaze.

"Face it, Margo. You're a lot stronger than you think."

I shift my hips.

He smirks. "You trying to proposition me?"

"It would be a good distraction." I sigh.

"Is that what you want? Just a distraction?"

I ponder that. *No*, I don't think I want just a distraction.

The answer must be written on my face, because his expression clears. He releases me and hops up. "What you need is sleep."

I glance out the window. Sometime between us sitting and now, the sun set. "Is it even eight o'clock yet?"

He rolls his eyes. "Does it matter?"

No.

I push myself up and walk toward the bed. There's a picture on the dresser of Caleb and Eli. It makes me do a double take.

Am I really that dense?

"Caleb... do you live here?"

He stops behind me.

It would explain the sheets covering the furniture at his house. But then... what about his parents?

His finger runs down my spine. "The basement is mine, yes. If and when

I ever need it.”

“You took me here when I was drunk.” I pivot until I face him.

“Well, I hate to break it to you, love. You kind of have a bad reaction to my house.”

I shudder. *I do.*

“Bed.” He looks pointedly at the mattress.

I climb in and lie down, pulling the blanket up to my chin. It smells like him, the same as the shirt. I almost bring it up again—why he’s living here, why he’s being nice—but I can’t do it.

He crawls in beside me, lying flat on his back. His eyes close.

“Sleep,” he says.

If I close my eyes, I might see *him*.

Caleb exhales and tucks me into his side. I cling to him and force my eyes shut.

“I’ve got you,” he whispers into my hair.

I relax. And eventually, I sleep.

Lenora rushes out of the house, down the steps. She throws her arms around me, holding me close. The scent I've come to associate with her—orange blossom from her shampoo—envelops me.

Tears prick my eyes.

She pulls back and looks at me. "Robert said something bad happened, and then you didn't want to come home?"

Caleb didn't let me out of his sight until I was safely tucked in Riley's car. Now, Riley stands awkwardly behind me, fidgeting.

"I'm sorry," I say.

Today, there are new bruises. My stomach looks terrible—worse than yesterday, even—and my neck... there's no hiding the marks on my skin. Caleb got the marker off my arm, but the bite? That's going to stay for a while.

I showered this morning, moving slowly. I almost vomited at the thought of reaching up to wash my hair. But then Caleb came in, eyed me, and took over.

The memory of his hands massaging my scalp will keep me warm tonight, that's for sure.

"My dear girl." Lenora cups my cheek. "I understand that sometimes it's better to have a friend's comfort. Especially since you two have become so

close.” She gestures for Riley to come closer and loops her arm around Riley’s shoulders. “Thank you for taking care of her.”

Riley shifts from side to side.

I widen my eyes at her. *We’ve been over this.*

I’m not sure how Robert and Lenora would react to knowing I was at Caleb’s house overnight. Well, Eli’s.

Does Riley know Caleb stays at Eli’s house?

When I tried to question Caleb about it again this morning, he wouldn’t answer me. I’ve abandoned the topic for now.

“I already called Emery-Rose,” Lenora says. “And I think you should see a doctor. At least to make sure...” Her gaze falls to my stomach.

I swallow.

“My best friend is a trauma doctor,” Lenora says. “I asked her to stop by on her way in today.”

“So it’s already decided,” I mumble.

Lenora shrugs. “Riley, you should head to school.”

My best friend snaps to attention. “Yes, ma’am.” She gives me a quick hug, then retreats.

Lenora and I walk into the house. I go to my room and shrug off my jacket, quickly switching Caleb’s shirt for one of mine. I stuff his under my pillow.

I exchange my skirt—couldn’t exactly wear his shorts home—for comfortable pants.

Lenora closes the front door as I come back down. “Riley forgot she had this,” she says, lifting my backpack.

I manage a smile. “Thank you.”

“Couch? Soup?”

I nod and collapse on the couch, grabbing the remote. A day to do nothing but recover? I’m okay with that.

It’s early in the morning. There’s the rest of the day ahead of me.

Once Lenora is done hovering—she brings me water and soup, which is lovely—I dig into my backpack. I can’t just sit here and do nothing, as peaceful as that sounds.

I find my phone at the bottom of my bag. Reaching in, I scroll through missed calls and texts from Caleb and Riley. My attention settles on one text from my mystery texter. The timestamp shows that they sent it yesterday afternoon. My hands tremble.

I click on the text before I wimp out.

Unknown: *This is the only time I help you.*

Unknown: [image attached]

It’s a photo of Ian towing me across the field. Did Unknown send it to someone to help me? Caleb, maybe? He found me awfully fast...

I shudder.

There are too many people pulling strings in my life. It makes me angrier than I could expect.

Lenora’s doctor friend comes over, a portable ultrasound machine in tow, to inspect my stomach. Both women gasp when I raise my shirt. There’s a lot of probing—ow—and she finally rocks back on her heels. She fires up the ultrasound machine and squirts gel on my stomach, like they do for pregnant women.

I cringe at the idea of being pregnant.

“The ultrasound is clear,” she says. “It seems like deep bruising. Have you been nauseous? Vomited at all?”

I shake my head.

“If you do, or if the pain travels into your back, call me. If there’s blood in your urine—call me.” She raises her eyebrows. “Understand?”

I jerk my head up and down. “Got it.”

“Ice on and off. Nothing strenuous.”

“Okay.” I force a smile. “Thank you for checking on me.”

They both rise, and I lower my shirt. I lie down, covering myself with the blanket, and close my eyes. Still, I hear Lenora’s friend say, “I’d keep her activity down for at least a week. I’ll write a note for you to send into the school.”

I push myself upright. “Wait,” I blurt out. “The dance—”

“Halloween is still ten days away,” Lenora says gently. “I’m sure you’ll be recovered enough by then.” She raises her eyebrow at her friend.

The doctor smiles. “I’ll come back on Sunday and check on you.”

For the rest of the day, I drift between consciousness and sleep and try to forget Ian Fletcher.

When I wake up, it’s completely dark. The television is rolling through end credits of a movie I completely missed, and I’m impossibly groggy. I grope around for my phone, and my hand lands on... skin.

I snap my hand back. Caleb is reclined in the chair adjacent to the couch, his eyes closed.

My heart does this awful thing: it softens.

I must’ve touched his hand, dangling off the chair’s arm.

Slowly, I sit up and readjust. I smooth down my hair, ensuring my shirt is in place. And by the time I look up, Caleb’s gaze is on me.

“Feeling better?” he asks.

“Not really.” The melted bag of ice slides off the couch. “Did you...?”

Caleb frowns. “Find Ian? Do anything? No. I’ve been warned not to cause many more waves at school.”

I grunt.

He leans toward me, tucking a chunk of hair behind my ear. “Lenora said you should be good to go for the dance, though.”

I manage a smile. “I hope so.”

“I know it.”

He turns on the lamp. I squint, blocking the light with my hand as he switches seats and slides in behind me. I lean on him while he inspects my throat.

“He’s not going to touch you again. Even if I need to get the whole fucking lacrosse team to keep him away from you—”

“Isn’t Ian on the team?”

Caleb rolls his eyes. “Yeah. But he’s a twat.”

Clearly.

“Where are Robert and Lenora?”

“They went out. They’ve been hovering, making sure you were still breathing. Or snoring, like you were when I came in.”

I elbow him.

“You’ll be back to school next week,” he promises. “And then the dance. And after...”

He wiggles his eyebrows.

I break into laughter. “What are you going to do, rent a hotel room?”

He grins.

My heart skips. “Did you?”

“Where’s the surprise in that?”

“Haven’t I mentioned that I don’t like surprises?”

He laughs. “No.”

A new movie comes on, and Caleb and I fall back into silence. I actually stay awake this time, getting through most of it before the front door opens. Lenora and Robert enter in a flurry, dropping their bags and shedding coats. They come over to me, feel my forehead, pat the top of my head.

It’s nice to be cared about. Suffocating and completely unfamiliar... but nice.

Caleb rises. “That’s my cue. I’ll see you later.”

Robert and Caleb shake hands.

When Caleb’s gone, the place feels a bit colder. I try not to let it show,

though, because Lenora takes his seat almost immediately.

She puts the back of her hand on my forehead again. “How do you feel?”

I shrug. “The same.”

Everything hurts.

She shakes her head. “If you want to tell us who did this, we can go to the school.”

“What?” I would’ve guessed Riley told her. Hell, the whole school probably knows already. The big bully, Ian Fletcher, takes out his anger on Margo. Again.

“We know Caleb found you, but no one will tell us anything.” She wraps her hands in mine. “Please, honey, tell us so we can put an *end* to this. I don’t want you to feel scared—”

“I don’t,” I say. “I’m not scared.”

It’s a bald-faced lie. I’m terrified.

She seems to analyze my face. Eventually, she nods. “Okay.”

I stand. “I’m going to go upstairs. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Feel free to sleep in,” she tells me. “I’m leaving pretty early for work.”

“Okay. Goodnight.”

I hobble up the stairs—at this point, walking doesn’t totally hurt, but I’m indulging my melodramatic side—and slip into my bedroom.

“’Bout time,” Caleb whispers.

I jump.

“What?”

I shrug, staring at the window. It’s cracked, letting in a biting chill. All the better to cuddle, I guess...

“Thought I locked it, is all.”

He smirks. “I unlocked it when I got here.”

I sigh. The idea of not going to sleep alone feels pretty damn good right about now. I can suffer my nightmares in silence, but now I don’t have to.

He already has his shoes off.

I take a step toward the bed and freeze when he reaches under my pillow. “Planning on keeping this?” he asks, holding up his t-shirt.

I snatch it back, cradling it to my chest.

He just chuckles.

“Sleep, Margo,” he says. “I’ll keep an eye out for you.”

I lock my door and drop his shirt on my dresser. I venture closer. Somewhere between the beginning of the school year and now—only two months, if that—I stopped being afraid of him. I step between his legs, putting my hands on his shoulders. His eyes are level with my breasts, and he looks at them before tipping his head back and meeting my stare.

“Take my shirt off,” I whisper.

His hands are cold against my skin, lifting the hem of my shirt. He pulls it off me in one fluid motion, ruffling my hair as it drops.

My bra falls, too. My nipples stiffen under his hot stare. His hand between my shoulder blades keeps me from jerking back as his thumb skates over my nipple. He focuses on the other one, leaning forward and flicking it with his tongue.

I groan.

“Does that hurt?” His thumb is still making lazy circles on my skin.

“I like it when it hurts.” The words slip out before I can stop them. I’d be mortified if I wasn’t enthralled with the way Caleb is touching me.

His eyes narrow. “Be specific.”

A shiver racks up my body.

His palm flattens against my stomach.

It’s a light touch, but my breath catches.

“This?”

I shake my head.

His hand goes down, slipping into my panties. He presses on my clit, and my lips part. His lips tip up in a smirk at my reaction. One finger slides inside me.

“This?”

I put my hands back on his shoulders, if only to make sure I remain upright.

“Caleb—”

“I asked you a question, love.” His finger pushes in and out of me.

I can’t do much standing in front of him. One of his hands is on my back; one causes chaos inside me. His nail scrapes along my clit.

I shudder.

If I admit it, he might stop. This is just to prove a point, after all.

Three fingers.

His fingers curl inside me. I groan at the new feeling, widening my stance. I close my eyes.

Mistake.

His teeth are on my skin, biting my breast. He doesn’t do anything to soothe me. It’s just a trail along my chest, little spikes of pain. It’s maddening.

“You’re fucking soaked,” he whispers. His eyes are impossibly dark. “You get wetter each time I do something to your body. So I guess that answers my question.”

I whimper when he pulls out.

“The doctor said no strenuous activities.” He smirks at me.

Bastard.

I grip his shoulders tighter and lower myself onto his lap. His erection brushes my thigh.

“Do you care what the doctor said?” Need and desire overrule common sense.

“I care about you being well enough to fuck you all night long after the ball,” he replies.

My core tightens.

“Like that idea, do you?”

“I—”

“Lie down.”

I do, shimmying off his lap and stretching flat on my mattress behind him. He twists on the bed and sprawls out next to me, so we’re arm to arm. He draws the blanket up over us and rolls onto his side.

He watches me.

“Sleep,” he says.

I sigh, trying to ignore the throbbing desire in my core. I could be petulant and throw a fit. Reach down and finish off the job myself—a scary proposition with Caleb right beside me. Beg him some more.

Yet, I doubt any of that would work.

I point to the shirt I had dropped. “Can I have that?”

He retrieves it for me, helping me sit up enough to slide it over my head and down my back.

I flop backward.

It’s been a day.

“Thank you,” I mumble.

“For what?”

“Chasing away my nightmares.”

He leans forward and kisses my forehead. “Any time. Sleep now, love.”

Caleb

None talks to me in the courtyard. Going to school when Margo is lying at home, *hurt*, just sets my teeth on edge. Theo, Liam, and Eli create a buffer. The doors open, and we walk down the hall, and they run impeccable defense.

I'm not sure what it is about us that attracts girls like bees to honey. The metaphor should be the other way around: we're the ones who sting, not them.

Eli heads off Amelie, grabbing her shoulders and spinning her away.

If I find Ian, I'm going to beat his fucking head in. I've already done it once this semester. Already got in trouble for it, too. The principal gave me a stern talking-to about how I couldn't touch a hair on his pretty little head... but I'm not against ulterior strategies.

Theo glances at me out of the corner of his eye. He's the darkest fucker I know. It isn't a surprise that he can tell I'm boiling on the inside. It's why we're friends—there's a madness in him, too.

We file into homeroom, and I nod at him. Ian is leaning against Amelie's desk. He doesn't so much as look up as we enter.

Waiting for homeroom to end is torture. Each tick of the second hand buries itself in my eardrums.

Finally, it's over.

Liam grins at Eli. "Race you."

They bolt toward the door, and Liam's foot catches Ian's bag. Ian scowls, then collects his things. Theo and I linger and exit the room just after of him. We follow him toward his next class, and I look over at Theo.

"You ready?" he asks.

I roll my shoulders.

Liam and Eli are coming back toward us.

The bell rings, making the five of us officially late.

Ian raises his hand toward my friends, and they stop in front of him.

“Thanks for making me late, dick,” Ian says to Liam.

Liam shrugs. “All part of the plan.”

Ian shakes his head. “What?”

“Our plan,” I say.

Ian spins around. “You so much as touch me—”

“You’re coming with us,” Theo says. He crowds Ian’s space. They’re friendly on a good day, but today... today isn’t a good day.

For any of us.

As much as it pains me to admit it, my friends have gotten attached to Margo. And that means they’re in this with me.

Ian holds up his hands in defeat.

Eli leads us through the courtyard, into the green house. Liam and Theo follow right behind Ian, and I slow my pace. I clench my jaw. This isn’t about violence—this is about scaring the shit out of him so he never so much as thinks about Margo the wrong way.

I walk in. Eli and Liam grab Ian, hauling him against the wall.

Theo paces in front of him.

“Just fucking hit me already, Alistair,” Ian taunts. “We all know you’re smitten with the Page girl—”

Theo slams his fist into Ian’s stomach. Ian grunts, lurching forward. Eli and Liam hold him upright.

I sigh.

“Fuck—”

Theo punches him in the jaw. “Shut. Up.”

Apparently, I’m not the only one Ian’s pissed off.

“No faces,” I tell him. I stand back and let Theo get his anger out. After all, the principal only told *me* not to hit him.

Theo readjusts, but as soon as Ian coughs up blood, I stride forward and grab Theo's arm.

Liam and Eli release Ian, letting him fall to the ground.

"How does that feel?" I ask, crouching next to him. "Kind of like a kick in the stomach?"

He glares up at me.

I wrap my hand around his throat, pinning him flat to the ground. I see red at the idea of Margo in this position, him hovering over her.

I squeeze until Ian grabs at my wrists. He can't pry me loose.

He grins. His teeth are tinted red.

"Caleb," Eli warns.

"You don't touch her," I say to Ian. "You don't look at her. You don't—"

"This isn't really about her," he wheezes. "She's just your soft spot, Asher."

I dig my fingers into his neck.

I'm not myself.

His face turns red, and I still don't let go.

I can't, when he's staring at me with a fucking challenge in his eyes.

He'll have bruises around his neck... much worse than Margo's, I'd reckon.

His eyes flutter shut. Theo and Eli grab my arms, pulling me away from him.

I struggle for a second.

"Any more and you'll kill him," Liam admonishes, shoving me away. He kneels next to Ian, who's passed out.

Theo drags me to the door, shoving me against it. "That wasn't part of the plan."

I shake my head. "I know."

"You lost it."

"I know."

He grunts. "Go. We'll take care of the rest of this."

I roll my eyes. "You lost it, too."

"Nah, he had it coming."

I shake my head. Yeah, Ian has a lot coming. *Had*. With lacrosse looming, we need to figure our shit out sooner rather than later. A broken team won't bring championships.

I go to my car and slide in. Skipping isn't something that I push often, but no one ever says anything. A few other students indulge in the same luxuries. Theo could mail in his final and still get straight A's.

Lenora is at work, and Robert is at school, which means Margo is alone.

My phone rings halfway to her house. One glance at the caller ID, and I frown.

"Yes?"

"What a lovely greeting, nephew. Are you not in school?"

I shake my head. "Had to run an errand."

My uncle is silent. "We heard about your old friend's unfortunate incident."

Now I'm quiet. How the hell did my uncle hear about Margo? I've taken care not to mention her.

He chuckles. "Relax. We're not doing anything... yet."

"Aunt called Amberly, didn't she?" It all snaps together. Loose pieces that suddenly make sense. "Which means she didn't leave town."

"I really don't appreciate you threatening people, Caleb. I thought you learned to be better than that."

To maneuver better.

Yes, I thought I had, too.

Margo has me all twisted around.

"What can I do for you, Uncle?"

"Stop by the house after your... *errand*. And keep it between us."

"Got it." I hang up on him. He's not the most sociable person. I'm

surprised he didn't hang up on me first.

I sit in the driveway for a second, then get out and walk into Margo's house.

It's interesting how the Jenkinses have made her feel so at home, but she's unwilling to call it that. She's gotten used to moving around so much, she seems to have forgot what stability looks like.

Maybe she never had it to begin with.

She's asleep on the couch, curled on her side. I close the door quietly and kick off my shoes, then go and kneel next to her.

There's a furrow in her brow. Her lips are pinched.

Even though she's sleeping—I can tell she isn't having a good dream.

I smooth back her hair and smile as she exhales.

"I'll keep you safe," I tell her.

I don't know if I'm telling the truth or not.

My feelings are all mixed up.

When I look at her, I see... *her*. But I see our past, too. Every fucking moment reminds me of the day she ruined our lives. One confession.

I begged her not to, but she did it anyway.

She whimpers in her sleep.

I loosen my grip in her dark hair, smoothing it out again. I should go, but I can't stop touching her.

She blinks and focuses on my face. The smile that spreads across her lips rips my heart out. Even so, tears spill down her cheeks.

"Why are you crying?" I swipe the tears away, but they keep falling.

I almost tell her that Ian's been taken care of, but I don't want her to stress about it. As he said: it was never about her. It was me.

"How did you know to search for me?" she asks.

"Someone sent me a text."

"A picture," she says.

I meet her gaze again. "Yes."

“Who?”

I shake my head. “Don’t, Margo.”

“Who texted you, Caleb?” She reaches out and grabs my wrists.

“A blocked number,” I finally say. It’s not the truth, per se. I only have an idea of who sent it. Why they’d block their number to send it to me... It makes sense.

There are traitors at Emery-Rose.

Her face falls. She collects herself in record time, pushing up onto her elbow. “Shouldn’t you be in school?”

I grunt. “Maybe I just wanted to see you.”

She pats the space next to her, but I shake my head. I stand and pick her up—her and the blankets draped over her. I sit, keeping her on my lap. She runs her hand over my chest, tucking her face into my neck.

I kiss the top of her head.

It’s sappy. I feel impossibly guilty, even as my abs tighten and my dick hardens in my pants.

Margo and I aren’t destined for a happy ending, even if we both want to pretend otherwise. Our destiny is to crash and burn.

Wednesday afternoon is my first outing.

It's been a *week* of nothing but staying home, trying not to move. Riley and Caleb visit, but they have other obligations. School, for one. I've been doing my due diligence on the homework, keeping up with my classmates even while I'm away. It staves off some of the boredom.

Now, I'm *free*.

Tomorrow I'll return to school—a daunting idea that I refuse to think about.

Riley and Lenora frame me in as we walk toward the dress shop in the mall. This particular store carries special, one-of-a-kind dresses. Some are unusual, but there are diamonds in the rough.

That's what Lenora said, anyway.

We walk in, and I immediately start to doubt her. The first six dresses that catch my attention are horrible: bright colors and ruffles, gaping holes in the sides, velvet and shoulder pads.

"Don't judge," Lenora admonishes, touching my shoulder. "We'll find a gem."

I told them that Caleb had picked out a mask for me, but I didn't know what sort of dress I wanted. Lenora had swooned at that—*literally*, she thought it was adorable and charming of him. I'm not sure how he got on her

good side so easily.

And Riley... she got a mischievous gleam in her eyes. When I questioned her in the car, she merely shrugged. "I've been sworn to secrecy. But I'll let you know if you're going in the wrong direction."

I grit my teeth and went with it.

Dress shopping is weird. We spread out around the store. I run my hands across fabrics I have no right to be touching. Some are soft, some are shimmery.

When I was a kid, at the age where my parents could've dressed me in whatever cute outfits they wanted, it was overalls and sneakers. I ran, skinned my knees, played pee-wee baseball with the boys at eight. Minus the one time I forced Caleb to play dress-up with me...

I pause in the corner of the room, my hand on my chest. It's overwhelming. If only my parents could see me now: Shopping to go to a *ball* with a *boy*. And not just any boy—Caleb Asher.

"Find anything?" Lenora asks behind me.

I turn around, blinking rapidly.

She must see the expression on my face, something like panic and dread, because her smile drops. She steps closer. "What's wrong?"

"I just..." I swallow. "I never saw myself doing this."

She nods. "You didn't have much opportunity before this?"

"No boys paid attention to me," I say. "It was like they were all afraid to touch the foster kid." I tried not to let it bother me. But sometimes, your only friends are the ones you're in the trenches with.

Riley comes over, oblivious to our conversation. She has a few dresses draped over her arms and a wide smile. "Listen, I grabbed a few for you and some for me because half the fun is trying them... Are you okay?"

I wipe at my face. "Yeah, I'm good."

Lenora smiles. "Let's see the dresses!"

Riley holds up the first one. It's pale blue, tight-fitting past the hips, and

then it flares. Silk with lace covering it, it's...

"You could try it on," Lenora says, nudging me.

"What else?"

Riley laughs. "This one is my favorite." She doesn't lift it up, though. She just shoves it into my arms and propels me toward the dressing room. "Trust me."

I exhale. "Fine."

There are no mirrors in this dressing room. I manage to close it and let my hair fall over my shoulders. I take a moment to look down at the dress, the color of thunderclouds.

Here goes nothing.

I step out, and they immediately jump up. Riley bounces, a wide smile splitting her face.

"That good?" I ask.

Lenora steers me to the three-sided mirror, and I'll admit: even my heart skips.

It's... perfect.

The top is fitted, with mini glass beads sewn in spirals around the waist. It flares out gracefully and stops at my knees. The neckline is high enough that I feel secure, but the fact that it's backless is sexy. I spin, giggling, because the dress floats around me.

"Beautiful," Lenora tells me. "Do you like it?"

I stop and stare at myself in the mirror. I try to imagine what sort of mask Caleb picked to make Riley suggest this dress. But honestly, I don't know. I couldn't guess.

I feel beautiful. Maybe with my hair up in a braid...

The tag dangles under my armpit. I glance at the price, and my eyes nearly pop out. Anger floods through me. "No."

"You... don't?"

I glare at Riley. "Why would you pick such an expensive dress? I can't

—”

Lenora comes over and leans down, reading the price.

Tears prick my eyes. I like this one. I feel pretty for once in my freaking life. And yeah, maybe I shouldn't have fallen in love with a few yards of fabric, but...

“It's okay,” Lenora says. “I've got it.”

“What?” I whisper. I can barely see.

“I'm buying it.” She tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “So wipe those tears, Margo girl. You're getting the dress.”

I stare at myself in the mirror.

It's a lot.

My own mother would've swatted me away from this whole store. Wouldn't she? We wouldn't have gone to the mall in the first place. She was a personal chef. Money was always tight. I got new-to-me jeans and shirts at thrift stores. Shoes on clearance. Toys that had been donated.

We lived in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods, yet we struggled to fill our fridge.

And Lenora tells me she'll buy a five hundred dollar dress that I'll wear once. She does it without batting an eye.

Riley pulls me back into the changing room. I step out of dress, still in a state of shock. I blink and blink and can't think of anything to say.

“This is how they operate,” she whispers. “She's trying. Money is nothing to them.”

I twitch. “Where does their money even come from? How much could they possibly make on her salary and Robert's?”

Riley grins. “Clearly, you don't know your foster parents.”

I raise my eyebrow, but Riley just shoves my clothes at me and slips out the door.

By the time I'm in my clothes, she's in another changing room. Lenora has my dress bagged and over her arm.

Lenora grins at me, tapping my nose. “I wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“Thank you,” I murmur. “I really, *really* appreciate it.”

Riley’s door cracks open, and she slips out.

We both *ooh* at the same time.

The fabric is slinky, hugging her body like a glove. She’s as thin as the popular girls, even if she hides it most of the time. The black dress has a deep, plunging neckline and widens below her hips.

She does a little shimmy. “What do you think?”

“It’s beautiful.” Lenora winks. “And spicy.”

Riley tosses her hair back. “I think I’ll knock Eli’s socks off.”

He officially asked her while I was home recovering, apparently. And she said yes, amongst a sea of jealous onlookers. It was quite the spectacle. Singing, a marching band, the lacrosse team surrounding Riley and lifting her.

Still, she tries on two more dresses before she declares herself satisfied with the first. We walk out of the store with our arms linked—the three of us, me at the center. There’s a warm feeling in my chest, and it’s easy to ignore the pain in my abdomen.

We get pretzels and browse around a few stores. I hesitate picking out jewelry. There are some things of my mom’s I could get. I’m sure they’re in her room in our old house. Going in to get them would probably give me a panic attack, but...

It would be nice to wear her earrings or necklace. Feel closer to her.

Riley holds up a stunning necklace dripping in crystals. “I’m getting this,” she announces. She tries it on, holding her hair up and turning every which way.

“I love it,” I tell her.

She grins at me.

As we’re leaving the store, someone shouts my name.

A blur shoots past Riley and knocks into me.

Someone latches on to me, their arms around my waist. All the breath is expelled from my lungs. It takes me a few seconds to comprehend that the small person isn't a stranger—it's Hanna.

I laugh and wrap my arms around her, rocking back and forth. Screw the searing pain in my stomach. It's *Hanna*. My expectation of seeing her again was lower than low.

Claire jogs up, panting. "Jesus, Hanna," she admonishes. To me, she says, "She saw you and took off."

Hanna takes a step back, and I brush back her hair. She's only a few years younger than us, but I babied her more than Claire ever did. Probably because I hadn't had a kid sister for more than a few months at a time.

"How are you?" I remember my manners suddenly and turn to Lenora. "This is my foster mom. Lenora, this is Claire and Hanna."

Lenora's nostrils flare—or maybe it's my imagination. She smiles at Hanna and Claire, reaching out to shake their hands.

Claire stares at her outstretched hand and doesn't move.

Embarrassment creeps up my neck in the form of a blush. I've been telling Lenora and Robert about my foster siblings, how much I missed them, and here Claire is, shoving that all out the window.

Hanna steps forward and takes Lenora's hand, shaking it up and down enthusiastically. It makes up for the iciness of her sister.

"Can we steal Margo?" Claire asks. She glances at Riley, then away. "We were hoping to see her this weekend anyway."

After Lenora bought me a dress, and Riley and I are spending time together? I automatically feel guilty for even thinking that I could break away and go with Claire and Hanna.

I start to turn her down. "Claire—"

"It's okay." Lenora shares a look with Riley.

Riley shrugs.

"You go spend some time with them. I'm going to put our stuff in the car,

and we'll meet you in the food court? In an hour?"

Guilt.

It's all I feel.

I start to say no again, but Hanna grabs my hand.

"Come see this shirt Claire's gonna buy me!" she says, hopping from one foot to the other. At my nod, she drags me down the hallway.

We end up in a kids' clothing store, following Hanna around. She excitedly tears clothes off the racks to try on. I glance at Claire, who now smiles openly.

"We get an allowance," she tells me. "And we've been saving up for a shopping spree."

And my foster mom bought a five hundred dollar dress without flinching.

Now *I'm* the one trying not to flinch.

Claire follows Hanna toward the dressing room, making her come out after each shirt. They end up selecting three, all from the clearance rack, and a pair of jeans.

I try not to let it bother me.

Money, friends, love.

It's all luck of the draw for us.

"Ice cream?" Hanna asks.

Claire frowns. "We can split a cone."

Lenora had given me a twenty-dollar bill earlier. I feel it in my pocket and smile. "My treat."

Hanna screams. It's high-pitched and intense. Even after she's stopped, it bangs around my head.

But Claire just chuckles, rubbing Hanna's head. "She got into this excited squealing in school. All her friends do it."

"Right."

My own screams echo in my ears.

I shake my head.

We go toward the food court, and Claire grips my arm.

She bites her lip. “Remember how you used to talk about Caleb all the time?”

I blush. I didn’t talk about him *all* the time. But if we were talking about our pasts, which we did often—trading war stories, as it was—then... yeah, I mentioned him.

She gives me a knowing look, and then she’s right back to watching me with an odd expression. It takes a minute to place the emotion on her face, because she so rarely shows worry or concern. But now both are flashing across her features.

We watch Hanna skip ahead of us, then circle and come back.

“I didn’t realize...”

I glance at her. “What?”

“I recognized him.”

Her words aren’t computing. “Huh? From what?”

“I... I don’t know. I’ll keep trying to remember, but it’s weird. I saw a picture of you and him on Instagram, and he just seems so familiar.”

“There’s a picture on Instagram? Of us?”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah. Some girls at Lion’s Head are obsessed with the Emery-Rose lacrosse team. They have a fan page for them. Anyway, they reposted it...”

My mouth drops open. First, that he’d post a picture of us. Second, that he has a *fan page*. What?

“That’s... weird.”

She shrugs. “He has some pretty rabid fans, if you ask me. Just search his hashtag.”

Hanna slams into me again. I failed to mention my stomach, so maybe it’s my fault that I suddenly can’t breathe. But then Riley is in front of me, gently prying Hanna off.

I inhale, but it’s shaky.

Lenora is slower to come up, glancing between us with concern. “You okay?”

“Yep.” I straighten.

“We’ve got to get going.” Claire takes Hanna’s hand, tugging her backward a few steps. No hug goodbye for us, then. “I’ll talk to you later.”

They make a beeline for the closest exit. They’re pushing out the door, and it occurs to me that I didn’t get to ask her more.

What hashtag? Rabid fans? Where have you seen Caleb before?

We pile in Lenora’s car. I let Riley take the front seat and stare out the window the whole way home. It starts raining halfway there, and I remember to check Instagram. I pull up his profile, biting my lip until it loads.

He posted a photo of us that someone else took a couple weeks ago. His arm is around my shoulder at a football game, and we’re both... we seem happy. That’s probably the most shocking part. I’m grinning, leaning into him, and his eyes are on me.

His eyes are always on me.

I stare at it like it’ll give me the answers I need.

Where has Claire seen you before, Caleb?

Friday.
Halloween.

The masquerade ball starts at seven o'clock, which means...

Six hours to go.

Only four before kids start trick-or-treating, but I refuse to think more about that. I'll be upstairs getting ready with Riley, suppressing flinches every time the doorbell rings.

Lenora picks us up from school after lunch. Most of the girls in the junior and senior classes are leaving early, so it isn't *that* unusual. Still, it's fun to follow Lenora down to the arts department wing. She has a goofy smile, and she admits that she wishes she could visit Robert in his 'natural habitat' more.

His whole face lights up when she knocks on his door.

A quick peek into his room, a kiss, and then we're off.

"I booked you a hair appointment," Lenora tells me in the car. "It's at the same time as Riley's."

My lips part. "What? You didn't have to—"

"I want tonight to be great." She pats my thigh. "So just let me pamper you, damn it."

Riley and I both laugh.

It's a whirlwind from there. I quickly sift through pictures for the hairstylist and point to something a little more extravagant than I would've been able to do myself. When in Rome, right?

The stylist is a master, making a braided crown intertwined with ropes of gold and pearls. Curled ringlets frame my face.

I'm same, yet different.

Once we're back at the house, Riley and I lay out our makeup in my bathroom. Our dresses are hanging on the door. I wipe off the day's makeup and think about a plan. It's setting in that this is real. This is happening.

The doorbell rings, and luckily I'm still removing my makeup, because I almost jump out of my skin.

Riley throws me a curious glance, then crosses the hall into my bedroom. She returns and says, "The trick-or-treaters are starting to show up."

I shudder.

"Do you not like it? Halloween?"

"Just some bad experiences," I say. "I don't really remember them all."

After a while, just the association with fear is enough to make me want to hide.

I hold up my hand as she opens her mouth. "No pity, please."

"Got it. So, music?" She pulls out her phone and opens the music app. "Some fun pop, coming right up!"

Justin Bieber starts playing, and I laugh. "How'd you know I had a crush on him when I was twelve?"

She winks. "Didn't every girl?"

We do our makeup in silence, occasionally belting out lyrics. Robert or Lenora must be sitting on the porch, since the doorbell has stopped ringing. In fact, the house is almost *too* quiet for a while.

Riley and I take our time on our makeup. I decide to take Caleb's words to heart, and I don't pack on the eyeliner like I'm inclined to do. Instead, I fish out my palette of eyeshadows and create a muted, gray-blue smoky eye.

It pairs nicely with my eye color, which can be described as warm chocolate on a good day and shit on a bad one.

I coat my skin with a light layer of foundation, contour the hell out of my cheeks, and add shimmer to my cheekbones and eyelids.

Riley is done at nearly the same time as me. She gets close to my face and swipes lightly just under my left eye. “Perfect. Want to see my mask?” She puts the finishing touches on her lipstick, which is so dark red it’s almost purple.

“Of course!” I’m shocked she didn’t show me earlier.

We go into my room, and she rifles through her bag, finally pulling out a box. She had bought herself the black dress. She lifts the mask to her face, and I grin. It’s *perfect*.

It’s delicate black lace, patterned like flowers. One side is bigger, sweeping up and back. The other side angles down, ending in dainty lace curls.

I love it.

I tell her as much, and she bursts into giggles.

“Thank you. I think Eli got the white half-mask from *Phantom of the Opera*.” She pouts behind the mask. “We’ll make a great pair.”

I hug her. It’s impulsive. Since when am I the hugging type?

“I know you will,” I say.

Lenora knocks on the door, pushing it open. “Ah, you girls look so pretty! Riley, that mask is gorgeous. We’ve got about fifteen minutes before the boys show up.”

Riley jerks. “Fifteen minutes? Shoot. Len, we didn’t even get to eat anything!” She rushes out the door, down the stairs.

I chuckle, shrugging. I hate to admit it, but as soon as she mentions food, my stomach growls. The week has been an ongoing saga against food. Or for it, depending on the day.

Lenora’s doctor friend came back with her ultrasound machine after I

threw up one morning, but she couldn't find any internal bleeding. Everything else seemed okay.

Riley returns with a plate of crackers and cheese.

Lenora winks. "I bought that yesterday. Just in case."

"You're the best." I grin.

This plate will be gone in a matter of minutes.

She chuckles and raps her knuckles on the door. "You know what? Keep the guys waiting. Anticipation is half of any romance."

Riley and I exchange a glance. She's the first to crack, covering her mouth as laughter sneaks out.

"I have a feeling they'd come up and drag us to the dance..." She tips her head back, laughing harder. "Imagine showing up half-dressed!"

"No shoes." I snort.

We get quiet, sitting on my bed and stuffing the crackers and cheese into our mouths. We haven't eaten since lunch. Whose idea was that?

"Let's get dressed." Riley closes and locks my door, then unwraps her dress from the plastic. "We're going to dance our butts off."

"And where did Caleb say we're going after?"

She rolls her eyes. "The school hosts an after-party. They lock us all in a building with games and stuff. It's very... well, lame. No alcohol or anything."

"When do we get let out?"

"Hypothetically, seven in the morning."

My lips part. "They'd keep us there until seven? A full, what, eight hours?"

She laughs. "Yeah. It's ridiculous. Hence why we're not going..."

She turns away from me and strips, quickly sliding her dress on. "Zip me up?"

I venture closer. She has a tattoo on her shoulder blade. It's the outline of a bird.

I tap it, not bothering to ask, because she immediately sighs.

“Long story.”

“Okay.” I zip her dress and hook the little catch at the top.

She smooths the fabric and spins around.

I love it just as much as when she tried it in the store.

“Your turn.”

What I didn’t think of—that I definitely should’ve—is that this dress is backless. Backless means no bra. My breasts are pretty small, so that isn’t a concern. What *is* a concern is the fact that Riley brought little sticky circles for my nipples.

It’s embarrassing, but I guess I’d prefer them to showing everyone how cold I am...

I shake my head. “I’m gonna need to figure this out in private.”

She laughs and tosses me the pack. “Have fun.”

I take my dress and the stickies into the bathroom, staring at myself for a minute. I haven’t done my lipstick yet. If I knew what my mask looked like, it could help me decide. Still, I think Lenora might be onto something. The anticipation of finding out is almost unbearable.

Once everything is situated, I slide my dress up over my hips. It has a higher neckline, like a wide crew neck, and the straps over my shoulders are wide. The whole thing dips low in the back, cutting just inches above my tailbone.

It’s dangerous, but I secretly love it. And the *beading*. I run my fingers over the intricate swirls along my waist. They curl up toward my breasts and down lower, onto the skirt. The dress is seriously perfect.

I cross the hall back into my room, revealing a few different lipsticks. “Since you apparently know what my mask looks like... what color?”

“You’re beautiful.” She plucks the matte red one and holds it up. “This one.”

I raise my eyebrow. “Really.” I was expecting a light pink or a nude.

“Do it.”

“Girls,” Lenora calls. “Caleb and Eli are here!”

That was fast.

Time is picking up speed, hurtling us toward... *Social anxiety*.

“We got this,” Riley says, grabbing my hands. “Put that lipstick on, and let’s dazzle them.”

I smile. I swore Riley to secrecy about my dress, just in case Caleb decided to interrogate her while I wasn’t around. I’m not too worried about matching him. Something tells me he’ll have that handled.

After my lipstick is in place, Riley and I strap on our heels. She picks up her mask. And... off we go.

“I’m suddenly nervous,” I admit.

She nods. “Want me to go first?”

“Please.”

At the top of the stairs, I lean against the wall and take a few deep breaths. Riley heads down, and the conversation below screeches to a halt.

“Wow,” Eli mutters. His voice has a way of carrying. “You... that’s beautiful.”

I imagine her raising the mask, pouting like she did in my room.

“Where’s Margo?” Caleb asks.

“Oh, she’s coming,” Riley answers.

He grunts.

“Okay, Margo,” I whisper. I shake out my arms and remind myself to keep breathing.

The heels—gold—aren’t tall enough that I’m going to have trouble. But I still feel off balance as I grip the banister and walk down the stairs.

I hit the landing, round the corner, and my eyes lock onto Caleb.

I come closer, and he holds out his hand to me. There’s fire in his eyes, and I break out in goosebumps. There’s no one else in the room—just him and me and the sudden tension between us.

I slip my hand into his.

He smirks at me and squeezes once. His suit is dark, dark blue. And his tie? Spun through with muted gold and royal blue. It's subtle enough to escape attention at first glance. But I have a feeling that the two of us together will bring the color out.

It'll send a message that we're a pair, him and me.

Someone gasps, and his spell is broken.

I blink and realize he and I have crept closer and closer. My chest almost brushes his. I take a step back, but his hand tightens on mine, keeping me from retreating too far.

Fair enough.

Lenora and Robert are by the kitchen, arms wrapped around each other. And Riley and Eli are staring at us like we're crazy.

"You're stunning," Caleb says in my ear.

I blush.

"And later," he continues, his voice lowering, "I'm going to fuck you senseless in your dress."

I shake my head. He's so inappropriate. Yet, my whole body hurts from the way my muscles clench.

"Would you like to see your mask now?" He grins.

I straighten. Anticipation floods through me. "Yes."

He presents a familiar box.

Carefully, I undo the tape on each side and lift the lid.

Damn.

The mask is shining gold, with negative space cut in a similar pattern to the beads on my dress. It's inlaid with pearls, highlighting the eye space. There are tiny gold chains that loop along the bottom of the mask, made to drip down my cheeks.

It's stunning—the same word Caleb used to describe me. A word that is *much* better suited to this accessory than me.

“And yours?” I ask.

He opens his own box and shows me a matching gold mask. It’s masculine, though: the cutout spaces are smaller, more of a honeycomb pattern, with a single crystal between the brows. It covers the entire upper half of his face.

“Pictures,” Lenora says, stepping forward. “We’ll do a few with and without the masks.”

I don’t have time to react to his mask—to *him*—other than a smile. Lenora ushers us over to the fireplace, and the four of us strike a pose. And then another. She gets a few of just Riley and Eli, who matches her in his all-black attire.

“Masks on,” Robert suggests.

Caleb gestures for me to turn around, and he ties the mask’s ribbons behind my head. He secures his own, and then his finger trails up my spine. It’s quick, probably unnoticed by anyone else.

I shoot him a look. It’s weird only seeing his eyes, the quirk of his lips.

We pose for pictures, and I’m too aware of him at my back.

“We should go,” Caleb finally says.

Lenora exhales, lowering her camera. “I’m sorry, I think I got carried away.”

Robert wraps his arms around her shoulders.

“It’s just, our daughter would’ve loved this.” Tears fill Lenora’s eyes.

My heart skips. I feel the urge to go over and hug her, but I don’t dare move.

She waves in front of her face.

“I’m so sorry.” She rushes away.

Robert rubs his hands together. “Sorry about that. She’s happy for you, Margo. It’s just a little overwhelming.”

I nod.

Caleb frowns. “We’re going to head to the dance.”

Robert smiles. "Have a great time. Text me when you get to the after-party. And then we'll see you home in the morning."

"Will do!"

On our way out, Riley loops her arm in mine. "Do you think he's going to check the log? For who signed in?"

I pause. "Oh god."

"Already taken care of," Caleb says. "I've got someone who will add our names to the list."

We pile into Eli's truck. Riley starts to get in the backseat with me, but Caleb stops her. He slides in next to me, his hand on my thigh. We have a whole bench, but we're pressed close together. Our legs touch, hip to knee, and I lean into him.

"I have something for you," he says.

I raise my head. Our masks are off, on our laps. My phone and ID are in a clutch that I totally plan on leaving in the car, because it doesn't match anything. Being maskless means he sees my eyes widen.

"Nothing bad," he promises.

I roll my eyes. "I hope not."

"Just close your eyes."

I watch him for a moment, but he doesn't move. Slowly, I close my eyes. He shifts, then takes my hand and turns it so my palm is up. He puts something hard and flat on it, supporting my hand with his underneath it.

"Open."

I do, looking down at the kind of box you'd put a necklace in. At least it isn't a ring.

"Buying me jewelry already?" I quip.

"Open it."

We pull into the hotel parking lot. The dance is in one of their ballrooms, apparently—and I'd bet our room is in the same building. He hasn't said as much, though.

“Dude,” Eli says. “Quit staring at your girl. We’re here.”

Caleb doesn’t tear his gaze away from me. “Leave us. We’ll be there in a minute.”

Riley and Eli get out. I’m not sure why I’m nervous, but my heart rate has spiked.

I flip it open, and it feels like Ian’s kicking me in the stomach all over again.

There’s no oxygen in here.

Sitting on a bed of foam is a bracelet. The hand-braided thread has been strengthened with a cage of sterling silver. I lean closer to get a better look at the work, because it’s familiar. Like a dream or a long-lost memory.

The braid is blue with a single thread of gold. In the fading light, it’s hard to make it out, but the gold glitters.

“I... I made this,” I whisper. “A version of it, anyway.”

“You did.” He lifts the bracelet. It’s been lengthened by chain. Altered. “Do you remember when?”

“I made two.” I shake my head. It is a memory. One I’ve dreamed about recently. Still, it seems to be coming at me from a long way off.

We’re married until these fall off.

He shows me his wrist. There’s the other one, also fortified with metal.

“You—”

“I remember.” His eyes are dark.

God, I used to hate him. And now—I’m pretty sure I just fell in love with him.

Again.

“You fixed them?”

He fastens it to my wrist. Surprisingly—or maybe not, since this seemed to be his color scheme all along—it matches everything. The dress, the masks, my shoes.

“I don’t want them to fall off.”

There goes my heart.

“Let’s have fun, yeah?”

I shake my head. “And then sneak away early?”

His eyes dance. “If you’re persuasive enough.”

“I can do that.”

He opens the door, taking my thin clutch from my hands and tucking it into a pocket in his jacket. Then he holds his hands out for me.

After we tie on our masks, he offers his arm again.

I take a deep breath. The bracelet is all I can concentrate on. That, and what it might mean.

Does Caleb love me, too?

We're dancing. I don't think we've *stopped* dancing.

It's an excuse to touch Caleb. And to feel his hands on my bare back. Each tiny stroke of his thumb under the edge of my dress, inching closer to my ass, sends sparks through me. It's dangerous and dirty, and I desperately want him to take me upstairs, already.

Tonight has been an exercise in ignoring Amelie and Ian, who always seem to be in the corner of my eye. She came in with a gorgeous black mask that has feathers and jewels, and a tight, *tight* red dress. Ian matches her: red mask, black-and-red suit.

I wonder if anyone's compared her to the Queen of Hearts. *Off with their heads!*

Luckily, Amelie doesn't have that much power.

Savannah brought a new boy to the dance. His mask obscures too much of his face, but people are whispering.

The slow song ends, and I step away from Caleb. My feet ache.

"Thirsty?" he asks.

I nod, searching for Riley. After a moment, I find her and point. "I'll be over there."

He grins. There's a spot of red lipstick on his lip, and I start to rub it off for him.

He stops me. "Leave it. I like your mark on me."

I grin, shaking my head. Of course he does.

Halfway to Riley's table, a girl approaches. She grabs my arm and pulls me out a side door, into a hallway.

"Excuse me," I snap.

She lifts her mask.

Claire.

"What are you doing here?" I gasp.

She rolls her eyes. "Nice seeing you, too, sis."

"Sorry. I just wasn't expecting you to crash the party."

"Yeah, well, I wasn't expecting you to ignore my phone calls."

"I'm not. I haven't got any from you."

She scowls.

"Seriously. And my phone is in Caleb's jacket..."

"I have something important to tell you, Margo."

I hold up my hands. "Okay, okay."

It must be bad if Claire is willing to travel all the way to Rose Hill to tell me something. Bad or good, I guess. My bet is on the former. And as I think that, my stomach twists.

"I was worried about you," she said. "And you know how we met your foster mom the other day?"

Last week, at the mall. How could I forget?

My face answers for me.

Claire sighs. "She was familiar—but like, in an 'I have a bad feeling about this' kind of way. You know those moments where you just want to follow your gut?"

"I... guess." I don't like where this is going.

"Remember when we lived together, and you found my stash?"

Of newspaper clippings. Yes.

Her parents died in a car accident, and for a while, she was obsessed with

other kids who lost parents in accidents. If there was a newspaper write-up about it, you could bet that Claire had it cut out and pressed into a notebook.

“Some of them had pictures, you know? Like of the family mourning.”

“Okay, and?”

“Your foster mom seemed familiar.”

I roll my eyes. “You said the same freaking thing about Caleb!”

“He still is familiar,” she mutters. “But that’s not what we’re talking about right now. The point is: I figured out your foster mom!”

I squint at her, finally untying my mask. I pull it off. “From... your newspaper clippings?”

“Yes! Her daughter died in a crash like, five years ago. There was a picture of her and her husband at the grave site.”

“That’s awful, Claire. And, for the record, I knew she died.”

“No, but look.” She pulls a paper from her pocket, shoving it into my hand. “Just read that!”

“Margo?”

I spin around, crumpling the paper in my fist. Caleb walks toward us, gaze bouncing back and forth between Claire and me.

“I don’t recognize you,” he says, his eyes on her. “A friend of Margo’s?”

I glance back at Claire, but she has her mask firmly back in place. She takes a few steps backward, shrugging. “See ya later, Wolfe.”

“You good?” he asks.

“Yep.” My dress has small pockets. They aren’t big enough for a phone, but definitely for a scrap of paper. I tuck it in and retie my mask.

Caleb hands me a cup of punch, and we go join Riley and Eli.

Claire’s warning is swept away in the excitement of the rest of the evening. Eventually, Caleb’s hand on my back is too much for me to bear. The room is slowly emptying out, and I find myself leaning on him more and more.

We’ve done our part. We showed up, we danced, we were seen and

admired. The last two things were just what I figured Caleb wanted. We talked with Theo and Liam, who both opted to come alone.

At one point, Theo stole Amelie away from Ian and whisked her around. They both actually knew how to do more than sway, which was... impressive. I didn't figure him as the type to fall for her charm.

Caleb chuckled at my expression. "He's using Amelie."

"For what?"

He just shakes his head.

Now, I lean against Caleb and try to telepathically tell him that it's okay to leave.

"Tired?" he asks.

I nod, emphatic.

He tuts and leans down. "Poor thing. I thought our night was just getting started..."

His words undo me.

I press my thighs together, turning so my lips brush his ear. "Tired of being surrounded by people," I clarify.

He smirks. "If you insist."

He takes my hand, lacing our fingers, and pulls me up. I come closer to his height in my heels, but he still manages to feel... bigger. Infinitely more imposing.

"We're out," Caleb says, slapping Eli's hand. "See you tomorrow."

We say goodbye to Theo and Liam, too. The latter has found a girl, and he keeps her in his lap as we walk by.

The music is much fainter in the lobby. He hands me my clutch and withdraws a keycard.

Our bags should already be in the room. This morning, Riley and I tossed our overnight bags in Caleb's trunk. We all figured it was easier to explain it away than have Lenora and Robert ask me a million questions.

The elevator ride is quick, shared with another couple, and Caleb and I

keep eyeing each other. Once we're in the hallway, he takes my hand. We stop in front of a door, which he unlocks, and he quickly scoops me up. I throw my arms around his neck, suppressing a yelp, and he carries me over the threshold.

"Cute," I say.

He just smiles.

He doesn't set me down. He walks down the hall and into the room. But it isn't just a room. It's a whole freaking suite. There's a living and dining room, complete with a giant oak table. A door with locks on it on the right, which I assume means it can connect with another suite, and the bedroom and bathroom on the left.

There's a giant vase filled with flowers on the table.

"Wow."

He shifts, lifting me higher. "It's worth it."

"Bedroom?"

"As you wish." He strides toward the bedroom and places me on my feet.

I have a second to get my balance before he's on me, pushing me against the wall. I arch into him as his lips meet mine. He teases me, brushing his lips against mine.

"Remember what I said?" he asks.

"Yes," I breathe. He's going to fuck me senseless.

His hands slide up my legs, lifting my dress. Slowly, he drags my panties down. He kneels, keeping a hand on my hip while I step out of them. He grasps one of my ankles and puts it over his shoulder.

God, I'm wet from just thinking about what he's going to do to me.

"Hold on tight," he warns, then he leans forward and puts his lips on me. He sucks on my clit, hard.

I buck, trying to get away.

It—it *hurts*.

My hands grip the skirt of my dress. I wriggle at the feel of his teeth on

me, but he just bites my inner thigh.

I moan. The back of my head hits the wall.

He pulls away, groaning, and suddenly I'm in the air. I hold on to his shoulders while he carries me to the bed, tossing me on it and following.

I swallow, moving backward.

"You like it when I hurt you." He pushes my dress up again. "You're going to come with my tongue inside you."

My shoulder blades hit the headboard.

He goes back down on me, his tongue sliding through my folds. My back comes off the bed, pleasure spreading through me. The bite on my thigh pulses. He thrusts his tongue into me.

"You're wicked," I whimper.

He trades his tongue for fingers, and his mouth goes back to my clit, biting and sucking.

It doesn't take long for the sensation to build and build and build.

He thrusts into me with his tongue again, fucking me with his mouth just like he said he would.

I shatter, moaning his name. It's unbearable.

There's a gleam in his eye.

He's not finished.

I collapse back as two fingers slide into me, hitting my G-spot with deadly accuracy. I can't control my hips, which begin to rock into him. My eyes close, and I lose track of where he is.

That's my mistake.

He pushes in another finger, spreading me wider, and licks my clit. It's so fucking slow, every stroke makes me tremble.

"Caleb," I groan, trying to push his head away. It's too much. My legs tingle.

"Give it to me," he growls.

His finger, wet from being inside me, slips back, teasing my asshole. He

pushes inside at the same time that he slides his tongue into me.

The sensation is overwhelming. Another orgasm crashes over me, and my legs shake. I keep coming.

“Oh my god,” I whisper, turning my head to the side. He just stuck his finger in my...

He smirks. “You can call me that, if you want.”

“Ass.” I’m panting. I’m pretty sure I can’t move.

“Wasn’t that worth waiting for?”

Who would’ve thought two weeks was a long time to go without sex? And not just sex—any orgasms. My stomach is still bruised, but it doesn’t hurt much anymore. The limited activity order has done wonders.

“Yes,” I manage.

He gets up and hauls me up, too. “Get naked.”

I gulp.

More?

I unbuckle my heels, more than happy to be rid of them, and my dress follows. It puddles on the floor around me. I throw it on the back of the chair.

Caleb comes out of the bathroom.

I go in and pee, then contemplate taking down my hair. It’s a little messy from the dancing and what just happened. Still, it’s not a bad look. I analyze the rest of my body. My stomach’s bruises are yellow and green, with some spots still light purple or red. There’s a bite mark on my breast.

I’ve had Ian’s bite mark on my wrist covered with makeup. The scratches on my arm have healed, except for a few deeper gouges that scabbed over.

In another few weeks, I’ll be whole again.

Caleb opens the door, meeting my eyes in the mirror. He’s naked.

He comes and stands behind me, touching his own mark on my breast. When I told him I liked pain. His hand glides down my arm, closing over the bracelet on my wrist. He wears his on the same arm.

“I’m really fucking glad you decided to wear your own version of a

crown.” He kisses my neck.

I tip my head to the side. I guess I didn’t think about that implication. But the more I think about it, the more... *I like it.*

He peppers kisses down my shoulder, lifting my arm. His lips hover over the bracelet.

“Did you mean it?”

I shake my head. “Did I mean what?”

“That you wanted to marry me. When we were nine.”

“We were eight,” I murmur. “And yes, I did mean it. I wanted a future with you.”

Our eyes collide in the mirror again, and this time...

“You have stickers on your boobs,” he says.

I jerk, then burst out laughing. I had forgotten about them. I peel them off, then slip past him. I grab a bottle of water from the mini-fridge in the living room and cross to the windows. We’re high enough that there’s no chance of anyone spying the naked girl.

Top floor.

Caleb’s reflection appears behind me again. He uses his foot to widen my stance, and he bends me forward. I automatically put my hands on the window to keep my balance.

He pushes into me without a word.

I bite my lip, trapping my whimper behind my teeth.

Two can play that game.

There’s always a game between us.

He thrusts faster, stoking something hot between us. His hand reaches around me, and his fingers find my clit again.

It’s sore. Everything is sore.

I bite my lip harder. He can’t win this, too.

I push back to meet his pace. His finger on my clit, rubbing fast little circles, is insistent.

His other hand slides into my hair, keeping my head up. I see us in the reflection, my whole body moving with every slam. And beyond us, a city that couldn't give a damn. Students filter out below us.

He changes angles, rolling his hips, and I can't take it anymore. I let out a whimper.

His hand moves from my hair to around my neck. He pulls me so I'm almost upright, then growls and picks up the pace. "So. Fucking. Perfect."

"I can't," I pant.

"Fuck," he growls, biting my shoulder. "Scream, Margo."

I do. I tip my head back and scream his name, abandoning all self-control. My legs tremble while the orgasm rolls through me. I squeeze my eyes shut.

He slams into me at a whole new angle, grunting into my neck. He jerks forward, burying himself all the way inside me, and comes with a hiss of breath.

We stand like that for a long moment. Eyes closed.

I'm so tired I can barely move.

He pulls out and takes off the condom.

Slowly, I sink to my knees.

Caleb returns and comes over to me, lifting me up easily. "A nap, then maybe we'll try this again," he says.

"Great," I mumble. "I can barely keep my eyes open."

He tucks us into bed and turns off the light. We're still naked—a fact he takes advantage of with his wandering hand. I press closer to him, raising my head.

"Kiss me," I say.

He places a soft kiss on my lips. It's exactly what I need.

I exhale, wrapping my arms around him, and within seconds, I'm out.

Our alarm goes off at six-thirty.

Caleb rolls over me, smacking the ‘off’ button, and blinks down at me.

He’s adorable when he’s sleepy.

I don’t dare tell him that, but I take a mental snapshot and file it away.

And then he shifts, and his erection brushes my leg. I stare at him, spreading my legs. It’s too early for chitchat, but it isn’t too early for this.

He looks over at the nightstand. I don’t know why he does—we both already know there aren’t any condoms left.

We woke up after a short nap and had sex. Then again a little while later. That time, he stayed inside me until he got hard, and the whole thing repeated. We didn’t sleep for long. I went down on him, but that... that turned into him fucking my mouth.

I didn’t think almost choking on his dick would be *hot*, but it was.

“Just pull out,” I whisper.

He hesitates a split second, his gaze darting around my face, then plunges into me.

We both groan.

It’s quick and dirty. He flicks my clit until I fall apart, then pounds into me with fervor. He stills for a split second, then jerks back and comes on my

stomach.

I reach down and stroke him, eliciting a groan from him. His cum is hot liquid on my skin, and it's smeared between us as he drops down on top of me.

"You felt fucking amazing," he whispers. He kisses the hell out of me, his tongue invading my mouth.

We kiss until a pounding at the door interrupts us.

He scowls in that direction. To me, he says, "Get dressed."

He tugs on a pair of shorts and closes the door behind him.

I pause for a second, then rush for my clothes. Underwear, leggings, sports bra, t-shirt. It's all on in a matter of seconds, and I make sure my hair isn't crazy before I step out. The strands of pearls were yanked out sometime during our second fuck. I twist my hair up into a high bun, frowning at my reflection.

After brushing my teeth, I walk into the living room.

Riley sits on the couch, biting her nail. "Oh my god, Margo! First, amazing room. Second, this is an emergency—"

"Slow down," I mumble.

"Where's your phone?"

It was in the clutch. Where said clutch ended up, I don't know. "I'd have to look around."

She huffs, then whirls on Caleb. "I need to take her."

He raises his eyebrows. "You can keep the room, Ri. I've got an errand to run, anyway." He comes over and kisses the top of my head. "I'll check out, so don't worry about it. Eli can give you a ride."

"Okay."

He grabs his bag and reappears fully dressed. *Men*. I need at least a half hour to get my act together. He leaves, and Riley follows me into the bedroom.

She immediately starts laughing. "Jesus."

“What?”

“Smells like you had a *lot* of sex.”

I roll my eyes. “Gross. But... true.”

I collect my stuff, throwing it in my bag while Riley watches. I save the dress for last, smoothing it as I fold it over my arm. My fingers touch something that crinkles, and I suddenly remember the paper Claire had given me. I never even thought to mention it to Riley.

I pull it out and slip it into my leggings pocket, vowing to read it later.

Finally, I place the dress in my bag and zip it shut.

“Okay, I think that’s everything.”

“Except your phone.” She’s still gnawing at her finger.

“Did you try to reach me last night? Did something happen with you and Eli?”

“What? No. No, he’s waiting for us in the lobby.”

I shrug. “It was in the clutch with my ID. Maybe in the living room?”

We scour the place, and I finally find it under the dining table. How it got there, I’ll never know. I’m about to get my phone, but Riley lays her hand on top of mine.

“Stop,” she blurts out.

I stare at her. “You’re acting *weird*.”

She shifts. “Remember that picture that got emailed around?”

Oh no.

“Um... there was a video.”

Oh no.

I don’t tell her I know there’s a video. That would open up a whole different can of worms—particularly because, while she knew I got a strange text when I first started, I haven’t told her about any of the following texts.

“It’s bad,” Riley whispers. “It’ll be okay, though. I just... your phone might be blowing up, and I don’t want you to freak out. In fact, you should probably just turn it off.”

I shake my head. “I don’t understand.” It’s more for myself, for Unknown, than Riley.

What did I do to push them over the edge?

“Who got the video?”

She hesitates.

I have to physically stop myself from getting angry at her. She’s just being a good friend.

“Everyone,” she blurts out. “Like, the school. And someone posted it on social media. And—”

I’m going to be sick.

The noises from that video—noises *I* made—play on repeat in my mind.

I rush to the bathroom, falling to my knees in front of the toilet. I throw up. The acid burns on my tongue, but my stomach doesn’t settle for a few long moments.

Finally, I’m able to straighten. Riley hands me a glass of water, giving me a sympathetic look.

I shake my head. “Don’t do that,” I say. “Don’t pity me.”

She grabs my toothbrush and toothpaste from my bag, placing it on the counter. “I’m not trying to pity you, Margo. You know I love you. I just hate that this is happening. *Again*.”

I nod. “Yeah. I just—”

“I’ve already reported the video. Eli did, too—”

“He saw it?” I drop the toothpaste and cover my eyes. I don’t want to know how many people are watching me get finger-fucked by Caleb Asher. But if people I’m close with are seeing it? I can’t show my face. I can’t go back to Emery-Rose after that.

“He didn’t,” she says. “Once we realized what it was... No, we didn’t.”

I let out a shuddering breath.

She wraps her arms around me. “Let’s get you home, yeah? No need to worry. The Jenkinses will probably let you take a few days off, and the

school board can get it removed...”

“Yeah.” I find myself nodding along with her plan. “Good idea.”

She smiles. “I’m full of good ideas.”

We leave and I lift my hood, just in case there are more students in the lobby. I’m not ready to deal with anyone’s comments.

The lash out from the photo was bad. I’m afraid the video is going to be even worse.

Eli has his truck out front, and I practically dive into his backseat. He throws me a glance, eyebrows raised.

“You okay?” he asks.

I force myself to smile, although I think it’s more like a grimace. “Yes.”

I wonder if Caleb knows yet. I doubt he had a chance to check his phone before he ran out of the hotel room. He would’ve told me.

Right?

I spot Caleb’s car in the Jenkins’ driveway as we come up the street.

“Keep going,” I tell Eli. Shock and dread twist through me.

He glances back at me. “What—”

“Keep. Going.” I can’t breathe. I’m automatically expecting the worst. I shouldn’t, because it’s *Caleb*. The man who reminded me that we were fake married, who reminded me that I loved him as a kid. Who...

Riley twists around. “Is that—”

“Yes. Eli, drop me at the corner.”

He groans. “What are you planning?”

“Nothing.”

He pulls over, and I grab my bag, hopping out before they can advise against it.

“Keep your phone close, Riley. I’ll call you later,” I add.

She nods, and I slam the door. Eli drives away. I cut through the neighbor’s backyard, into the Jenkins’ backyard. I slip into the mudroom, crouching. There’s a door that leads into the kitchen, but I’m betting Caleb

might be in there.

Sure enough, as soon as I press my ear to the door, I can hear what they're saying.

"We appreciate you trying to be candid, Caleb," Robert says. "But you haven't quite told us *why* you're trying to warn us about Margo."

"And forgive us for thinking so, but we thought you enjoyed Margo's company," Lenora adds.

Warn them about me?

My heart hammers.

"I'm sorry for not being direct," Caleb says. "It's just that... I thought her and I were it. And then earlier today, she put out a private video trying to destroy my credibility."

I cover my mouth with both hands. The bastard thinks *I* leaked that video? Like the picture, I'm sure he's going to be lauded for it.

"So this is revenge?" Robert asks.

"Not at all. Honestly, I was going to let sleeping dogs lie. This just proves that she isn't the girl I thought she was."

Silence.

"Your daughter..." Caleb pauses. "She died in a car accident, right?"

"That's right," Robert answers. His voice is faint.

"My aunt liked to gossip," Caleb says. "She said the car accident was caused by a drug overdose."

"We've never hid that fact," Lenora says. "She was troubled. That's why we foster teenagers, because sometimes they're troubled—"

"Was it cocaine?"

I wish I could see the expression on Caleb's face. If he regrets what he's saying. But I'd bet his face is the picture of innocence, because that's who he is: a good fucking liar.

"The fact of the matter is... your daughter's death is Margo's fault."

My heart stops.

“What? How?” Lenora demands. “Margo would’ve been *twelve* when Josie died—”

“Margo was the cause of her mother’s drug use,” Caleb says.

Each word is a dagger in my heart.

“And because of her parents’ split, Amberly had no choice but to resort to selling drugs. Cocaine, specifically. She sold it to anyone who had cash. College kids, high schoolers. She preyed on innocent lives because Margo—”

Lenora wails.

It’s a haunting sound. Chills break out across my body, and I really, *really* wish that I couldn’t hear it. I’d love nothing more than to scrub that noise from my brain.

“Margo’s mom was responsible for your daughter’s death,” Caleb finishes. “I thought you’d want to know who was sleeping in your home every night.”

I’ve heard enough.

I lift my bag and creep back outside. Hidden on the side of the porch, I pull out the newspaper clipping.

The headline reads: *Isabella Jenkins in Fatal Car Crash*

Late Saturday night, Isabella Jenkins of Rose Hill, New York, was found in her flipped vehicle. Firefighters and EMTs pulled her out and brought her to a local hospital, but she was dead on arrival. Isabella has had problems with substance abuse, and doctors confirm that this was the cause of her accident. Her parents, Lenora and Robert Jenkins, request privacy during this difficult time.

That’s it.

A paragraph and a picture of the three of them. In fact, it’s the same photo that’s on their wall, the one that caught my attention my first day in their home.

And my mother was the one who put them there.

They’re never going to want me back now, because what Caleb said has

to be true: my mom sold drugs to a teenager, and that teenager *died*. What're the odds that I'm placed with their family?

It's a sucker punch straight to my gut.

I heave my bag higher and run through the neighbor's backyard. I don't have anywhere to go, but I sure as hell don't want them to find me snooping around their yard.

Not after that.

I get to the corner and grab my phone. It's the first time I've looked at it since before the dance.

Riley was right: it's blowing up. There are too many numbers texting me crude things.

I sniffle, but there's too much shock to cry.

Caleb just...

My heart isn't working right.

I sink to my knees at the curb as his words replay.

It hurts like a knife burrowing into my chest. I can't stop it. I can't fight him.

Let's play a game, he told me. First to give in loses.

I lost, Caleb. My heart folded first. I thought it might be the kiss, but that... that was just the beginning.

I find a text from Claire from the middle of the night.

Claire: *Call me.*

And when I didn't respond, she sent another.

Claire: *I realized where I recognized Caleb from. He was talking to our foster parents before they got rid of us.*

I shudder. The betrayal digs deeper. This isn't a new thing for Caleb...

he's done this before. He's unwound my life, piece by piece.

Has Caleb ever let me out of his memory? Or is he responsible for every single transition, every bully, every fucking family that's passed me along?

His fucked-up games didn't start when I got back to Emery-Rose.

No, they started the minute I left.

I get a new text—this one from Unknown. I almost drop my phone. Even they couldn't have predicted Caleb's tricks. His betrayal. He's single-handedly ruined the best home I've ever known.

Unknown: *Run away, little sheep.*

Way ahead of you, Unknown.

THE END... FOR NOW.

The story continues in *Wicked Games*. [Preorder now!](#)

Want to know what Caleb was up to the day of the masquerade ball? Find out in an exclusive bonus scene, which you can [download here!](#)

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Xoxo,

Sara

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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