



I LOVED HIM.
HE BETRAYED
ME.

WICKED

FALLEN ROYALS BOOK TWO

GAMES

S. MASSERY

WICKED GAMES

FALLEN ROYALS #2

S. MASSERY

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*To those who don't stop
searching for the truth.*

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Fallen Royals Series (Dark High School Bully Romance)

#1 Wicked Dreams

#2 Wicked Games

#3 Wicked Promises

#4 Vicious Desire

#5 Wild Fury

#6 Cruel Abandon

Broken Mercenaries Series (Romantic Suspense)

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INTRODUCTION

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 Games is book two of a trilogy and **not** a standalone.

The first three are a trilogy, the rest are standalone.

1. [Wicked Dreams](#)
2. [Wicked Games](#)
3. [Wicked Promises](#)
4. Vicious Desire
5. Wild Fury
6. Cruel Abandon

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BLURB

He tried to ruin my chance of happiness, but I'm not going down so easily.

There are questions I need answered. Secrets that need to be brought into the light. And a king who needs to be taken off his throne.

I'm still the object of his obsession, but I can work around that.

They say all's fair in love and war. But if Caleb Asher taught me anything, it's that this is definitely not love.

What do you think, Caleb? Are you ready for one last game?

CALEB

It's done.

I expected a weight to lift off my shoulders, like it did every other time I did this. When I went in and systematically destroyed Margo's world.

The first time, we were twelve, and I took a taxi. I approached her foster mother with a rather twisted view of the truth, then hung around for the fireworks.

I paid the guy to sit there. We waited for Margo to come home from school, only to meet the social worker. Hell, the foster mom had been so disgusted, she didn't even want to be there.

Margo didn't cry.

That was disappointing.

She didn't cry the next time, either.

Each time she carted out her garbage bag full of clothes, she kept her shoulders back. Her chin up. I once sat in Eli's truck a house down from the foster's and tried to suck an ounce of gratification out of it.

It became a game. *How far can I push until she breaks?*

Ruin her in one way, and she might recover. Ruin her *every* way, and she'll be dust. Mind, body, and soul.

I began hanging around longer to see if she would lose control. Not close enough for her to see me—I'm not a idiot. I only got to her once, when she was torn away from siblings. Once in seven fucking years.

It felt good to see her cry, but odd, like something cracked inside my chest. Her breaking was breaking me, too. I had let her stay at that home for a

while. Two whole years of idyllic bliss while I tried to forget about Margo. Slept with her old friends, immersed myself in lacrosse. But I couldn't shake her. Senior year was approaching, and it was time for Margo to return home.

The Jenkinses were perfect. It isn't their fault I had that card up my sleeve. As I told the Jenkinses: they were a common subject of my aunt and her social circle right after the accident. They went to church and prayed for their family, but then they'd come back to my aunt's house and gossip like schoolgirls about where the drugs could've come from.

Was it true? Did Amberly kill their daughter?

Maybe.

Hell if I know.

This isn't about them—this is about Margo and her resilience.

Will she end up on the street? I doubt it. The Jenkinses are too kindhearted for that. They'd probably forgive her after a few awkward days. And my little lie about her being to blame for the video... I know Margo better than that.

I left, and Lenora was still crying. Robert rubbed her back to console her. I wish they'd waited until after I was gone to do that.

Eli: *You schmoozing the Jenkinses? Freaked Sheep out that you were there.*

I pause.

Margo saw my car? Did she hear? I'd figured Eli would take his sweet time getting out of there. He was supposed to offer to take them to breakfast or some shit. Give me time to cause some mayhem and leave.

Dickhead.

"Shit." I slam my hand against the steering wheel.

I dial her number and wait.

It goes to voicemail.

I dial again, just in case.

It must be off, because it barely rings once before it switches over to her breathy voice.

This plan... It was set in stone a while ago. Pulling her down piece by piece. But I'm not ready for her to fall—not yet. I'm not done with her. She can't break yet.

Seven years ago, she broke me. Now I'm just showing her what she

created.

A beast in my chest demands to be free—a beast that only wants Margo's blood.

I pound my hands on the steering wheel again, in rapid succession.

Slowly, I drop the walls around the demons I keep locked away. It's nice to let the darkness take over. Fury washes through me, but it's calm, liquid ice.

Margo Wolfe may have run away, but I'm going to find her and bring her back, even if it kills me.

We're not done.

Eventually, she'll shatter for me, and the game will finally be over.

MARGO

I couldn't go anywhere I knew he would find me.
Because he *would* find me.

I have no doubt that, as easily as he hurt the Jenkinses, he would come for me. Something broke him. Something fucked up in our past. For some reason, I can't fathom what it is. Whether I've been lied to, am misremembering things, or blocked it out of my memory...

Finding the truth will set me free.

It tugs at my memory. Something just out of reach.

I ring the doorbell and take a quick step back. A minute passes, then a voice shouts for me to hold on. The door swings open.

Ian Fletcher scowls down at me.

"You said you hated Caleb more than me," I blurt out. *So much for being strategic here, Margo.* "Well, now's your chance."

He raises his eyebrows. "My chance for what?"

"I hate him, too."

"And?"

"And..." I look away. God, am I really about to say this? "I'm what he wants. What he's fixated on. Use me against him."

We watch each other for a moment.

He could easily slam the door in my face, and I'd be screwed. Nowhere to go.

Instead, he pulls the door open wider.

I slip past him, trying desperately not to think about the last time he and I were alone together. He hurt me—gleefully so. My stomach cramps at the

thought.

Is this madness? Probably. But what option do I have against Caleb?

In the end, Caleb hurt me, too. Ian's wounds have mostly healed, but I doubt Caleb's betrayal ever will. It burns under my skin like a living thing. A monster slipping along my bones.

The house is nearly silent. We were here for a party once. Empty of people, it feels bigger.

Wasn't I told that his parents travel? *No, that was Eli.*

"This way." He leads me down a side hallway. He slides open a door to an office and enters, throwing himself into the chair behind the desk. "Why should I take you at your word, Sheep?"

I'm numb to it at this point—happily so. "Caleb thinks I'm to blame for the video."

Ian snorts. "Impossible."

"Why?"

"Because I know who took the video."

My mouth drops open.

He continues, "Did he blame you publicly? Honestly, I doubt anyone would believe it. You make some rather hot noises in it, but I didn't peg you to be an exhibitionist."

My face gets hot.

He tuts, leaning back and putting his feet up on the desk. "Why did you come here?"

"I had to go somewhere he wouldn't find me." I shrug, trying to keep my voice from trembling. Fuck, he's intimidating. "And I figured... here was good."

"After what I did to you."

I wince. "Especially after that."

He watches me for a long moment.

"You don't have a stupid fucking crush on me, do you?"

I snort. "God, that would make things complicated." I stand. "I'll go."

"Sit," he orders.

I grind my teeth and glare at him. I do not sit. "I'm really sick of people ordering me around."

I put my bag over my shoulder and find my way back to the front door, ignoring the way his attention stings.

Finally, he calls, "Wait."

I glance back.

“I have a guest room,” he concedes. “My parents go to Los Angeles for the winter, and they’re already there. They’ll never know.”

“What’s the catch?”

He snickers. “What makes you think there’s a catch?”

“Because your name is Ian Fletcher.” I cross my arms over my chest. “So?”

“I’ll let you stay... for a kiss.” He walks closer, circling around me.

“Why did you kick me in the stomach?”

His eyes light up. “Ah. Do you still have bruises? Can I see?”

“This was a mistake.” I can’t get away from him fast enough. Honestly—what on earth was I thinking?

I try to step around him, but he blocks me. I step around him again, and he follows me down a hallway, into the kitchen. It’s big and cold. There’s a sliding door that leads out onto the porch. I got drunk in this house. It was here that Unknown got that damn video of me.

“Kiss me and you can stay, rent free, for a month. If you aren’t discovered before that.”

He’s standing right behind me, while I’m frozen with my hand on the glass.

“And I’ll tell you who took that video,” he adds.

“Tempting,” I say.

“He kissed Savannah in front of you.”

I flinch.

“Multiple times, if sources are correct.”

My gaze wanders over his backyard. I could go somewhere else. Riley’s, maybe. She would hide me from Caleb.

“I don’t understand why you’d want to kiss me,” I say.

I turn around, and he’s *right there*.

He’s not Caleb. He’s intimidating, sure, but his presence doesn’t make me lose my shit. He crowds me, and all my body remembers is the pain.

He’s close enough to touch me, but he doesn’t. He stares into my eyes, a slight frown on his lips.

He leans into me. I put my hands on his chest and shove.

He laughs, going with the momentum. A second later, he traps my wrists in his hand and holds me against the sliding door. It rattles when I hit it, protesting the abuse.

“Let. Go.” I try to shake him off, but his grip just tightens.

He yanks my shirt up to my chest.

My stomach is still a kaleidoscope of bruises. It was a vicious move on his part, kicking me. It still hurts, but not as bad now. The first week? Forget about it. And after Caleb’s betrayal, it’s a drop in the bucket. Mentally, anyway.

“Got what you wanted?” I ask.

He runs a finger over my abdomen.

I shut my eyes. “Stop.”

“He calls you a sheep,” he says. “But I think you’re proving to be far from that.”

I open my eyes.

His attention is fixated on the bruises. There’s an odd expression on his face—a split second of remorse, maybe, and his damn finger on my skin.

“Stop touching me, Ian.” My voice doesn’t tremble like I thought it might.

He releases me like coming out of trance.

“Payment accepted,” he whispers. He clears his throat. “Take the room, Wolfe. Upstairs, first one on the left. Don’t ask me for anything else.”

I don’t push it. I slip past him and dart up the stairs, stepping into the room and closing the door behind me. I lean against it for good measure. My bag hits the floor next to me.

The room is huge. I mean, big surprise—the whole house is a freaking mansion. But it’s *pink*. A girl’s room, clearly, by the white-and-pink bedspread and the light-pink walls. The curtains on the two windows are white. A rug covering half of the hardwood floors, a low dresser in the corner... a vase of flowers on one nightstand and a lamp on the other.

Weird.

I’d imagine they must have a housekeeper, someone who keeps everything clean and fresh. The water in the vase is high and clear.

There’s no lock on the door. I inch toward the bed, exhaustion crashing over me. It’s not even ten o’clock yet. Was it only five hours ago that Caleb was inside me? He wasn’t professing love—I’m not *that* daft—but our sex...

I’m delusional. Clearly.

After a night of limited sleep, I could stay in bed for a week.

I lie down and stare at the tiled ceiling. My eyes won’t close, even though they feel like sandpaper. I can’t cry, either. I spent most of the walk to Ian’s

house swinging between stoicism and sobbing. No in between.

How could he do this?

There are questions that need answering.

I hop up and pull a notebook out of my bag. The way to get organized is to make a list.

Who is Unknown?

Why is Caleb set on ruining my life?

Tobias—Dad's attorney?

When I try to remember my past, nothing happens. It's like there's a wall in my mind. It isn't active unless I try to access the few months before I entered into foster care. I remember being with my dad in the park, but that's because Caleb practically forced the memory out of me.

Maybe...

No.

I look down at my list again.

There's more.

Where are Caleb's parents?

What happened in our past?

Who sent the video?

My head pounds. Ian told me he knew. I'll have to ask him again.

I lie back down and force my eyes shut.

Today's been a clusterfuck. Being in Ian's guest room... well, I can't say that really makes it any better. My phone is off, at the bottom of my bag. I can only imagine the texts and calls piling up: Riley, Caleb. The Jenkinses might call to inform me that Angela will be picking me up. I might come back and find my stuff on the curb.

That happened once.

Angela was waiting for me next to a plastic bag of all my belongings—a few shirts, underwear, pants, and a toothbrush. The foster family hadn't even given me *toothpaste*.

I prided myself on not losing my shit. I'd learned the hard way that tears solved nothing. They *changed* nothing.

Eleven-year-old Margo learned that bad things would continually happen. It was her new reality. I went into the system when I was ten, but for that first year, I was optimistic. I thought I'd go back to my mom and dad, that life with the Ashers would return to normal.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

MARGO

Past

The detective took my dad away.

A lady sat next to me on the bench and smiled. Even though she looked nice, she wasn't particularly warm and fuzzy. Not like Dad when he held my hand on the way here.

"Ready to go, Margo?"

Dad struggled against the handcuffs. It was quite the commotion.

"Where?"

She frowned. "Your dad was just arrested. I'm with Social Services. We're going to try and locate your mom, okay?"

My pulse raced. "Mom? No, she..."

Blank.

"I'm Angela," she said. She shook my hand and then wouldn't let go. She pulled me up and away.

I wondered if there were more police officers to arrest me, too.

"Come on, honey."

We were almost to her car.

Dad said never to get in the car with strangers.

I screamed.

Blank.

I screamed, didn't I?

Blank.

If I didn't scream, did I get in the car? Go with her willingly? Give up on my family?

Blank.

Blank.

Blank.



Present

I wake with a start. Pink walls. White curtains. Flowers a foot from my face.

A dream—maybe more real than not?

There are gaps in my memory. I think they're bigger than I realized.

“Who is Unknown?”

I roll over, gasping.

Ian sits on the edge of my bed, facing away from me. He has my notebook.

“Well, I think the point of the name Unknown signifies your lack of knowing who they are. Unless they call themselves Unknown? Hmm.” Pen scratches the paper as he writes something. “Why is Caleb set on ruining my life?”

“Why are you in my room?”

He glances back at me. “Technically it isn't *your* room.”

“You're prying.” I get off the bed and circle around it, stopping in front of him. “Give it back.”

“I'm most curious about this question. Why is Caleb set on ruining your life?” He taps his pen on his lip. “Dare I answer?”

“Knock yourself out.”

“You ruined his life first,” he reasons. “At least, that's the way my parents explained it.”

I stare at him. “What?”

“What part of that was confusing?”

“The part where your parents were talking about it.”

He chuckles, setting the notebook down next to him. “Ah. Caleb's aunt and mine are second cousins.”

“Holy shit. You're related? I didn't—”

“Distantly,” he says in a tone that ends all of my other questions.

He stands, and I take a quick step backward.

That door really needs a lock.

“You think he won't come here searching for you?” Ian walks to the door.

Does he realize that by standing in the doorway, he cages me in? Boys like him have all the power. I shouldn't be taken aback by that.

He's still watching me, and I realize he asked me a question.

“He might,” I admit. “He’ll probably search high and low for me.” Ian scoffs. “Well, I guess that’ll put you in a predicament tonight.”

“What’s tonight?”

“Party.”

Of course. It’s Saturday.

“We just had the ball,” I protest. “And you’re hosting a party? Here?”

He shrugs. “Yep.”

It must be a desperate bid to cure his loneliness. He’s all alone in this big house for the whole winter. I’d get lonely, too. And lonely people do dangerous things.

The predicament must be whether or not I’ll show my face. “Is Caleb going to be here?”

He smirks.

I groan, throwing my hands up. “You couldn’t have warned me before—”

“Before what, Wolfe? Before you got settled?” He looks pointedly at my bag by the door. “You didn’t even take off your shoes.”

True. It’s a runaway kid habit. Be ready to go in an instant.

I shake my head. “There’s not even a lock on the door—”

“You can hide out in my room.” He wiggles his eyebrows. “Just imagine if Caleb found you? How pissed he would be.”

He’s positively gleeful.

I narrow my eyes. “You’re not going to tell him?”

“Probably not.”

I groan and leave the room. I don’t trust Ian. Not that I particularly trust anyone at the moment, but Ian and Caleb are at the top of the shit list. I was hoping to go to bed early tonight, sleep in, and then figure out how the hell my mother was involved with the Jenkins’s daughter. *If* she was involved.

If I can find her, then I can prove her innocence—and in turn, *my* innocence.

The Jenkinsees will take me back.

Ian follows me down the hall, back into the kitchen. I open the fridge.

“By all means, make yourself at home,” he says. “There’s enough meal-prepped shit in there to last a month.”

I stiffen. “What?”

“Mother Dearest makes sure I’m taken care of over the winter.” He leans against the island, watching me. “A chef comes in and prepares meals once a month. It’s a big ordeal. Time consuming. The whole house stinks like a

restaurant for at least three days after.” He pauses. “Margo?”

I blink and take a quick step back. I froze, I think.

“Mom was a personal chef.” I clear my throat.

“I know.”

I glance at him. “Is that why you said it?”

He scowls. “No. I said it because it’s the truth. Why? Do you need things sugarcoated?”

“No.” I grab an apple out of the bottom drawer and take a bite. “It just took me by surprise.”

“That we have a chef? Completely different from your mom, wasn’t it? I mean, you guys lived in the Asher guest house. I’ve heard the stories. How she catered to Mr. Asher’s every whim—”

I chuck the apple at him.

It hits him in the chest, juice splattering on his shirt. He catches it before it falls, then shakes his head at me.

“Where’s your sense of self-preservation?” My face is getting hot.

“You just need a dose of reality, since Caleb refuses to acknowledge it.” He takes a bite of the apple, winking at me. “So anytime you want to face the truth, let me know.”

He tosses the apple back at me and strolls out of the kitchen.

“Wait,” I blurt out. “My mom...”

He stops in the doorway. “Yes?”

“How much do you know?”

“Definitely not as much as you wish I did.” He laughs. “I’d love to lie and say I could tell you what’s lost in your memory. But even I don’t know exactly what happened in the Asher house.”

My lips part. “How...?”

“Did I know you can’t remember?”

The one thing I respect about Ian is that we can talk about this fucked-up situation without pity or sympathy. He doesn’t show any emotion except faint amusement. Amusement doesn’t bother me. It’s everything else that tends to get...

Suffocating.

“You wouldn’t let Caleb near you with a ten-foot pole if you knew the truth,” he says, not waiting for my answer.

He leaves, and I stare down at the apple in my hands. My appetite has fled, along with my sanity.

I don't know where the hell my mother is—but now I'm even more convinced that she's the one with the answers. Step one: find her. Step two: hope her mind hasn't deteriorated enough to give me some goddamn answers.

And there's Tobias, too...

So many freaking questions.

Plus the leaked video, and Caleb's betrayal, and Ian decided to throw a party.

I set the bitten apple on the table and go back to the pink room. I flop on the bed and consider Ian's words. Slowly, I toe off my shoes, letting them fall to the floor.

You wouldn't let Caleb near you.

My head pounds. I drape my arm over my eyes, blocking out the light.

What's the truth?

What's a lie?

We may never know.

CALEB

I stalk into Riley's house.

There's a commotion above my head, so I go to the stairs. We came here once—Eli and I—when Riley was piss drunk. That was before Margo arrived at school, and Eli was still the source of Riley's misery. They've since shifted into something else.

Still, the layout isn't rocket science. It's hazily familiar. I climb the stairs and stop in front of her bedroom.

The door is locked.

I could pick it if I wanted to—if I had the patience for it. But patience isn't something I'm known for. Not now, with intoxicating anger flowing through me. I take a step back and kick, smashing her door open.

Eli and Riley are going at it, and she screams when the door flies in.

"Fuck, dude!" Eli yells. He doesn't even flinch at his nakedness, the arrogant asshole. He just puts his hand on Riley's shoulder and twists halfway toward me.

I glower at him, then shift my attention to Riley.

She's desperately trying to cover herself, but my friend is still impaled in her pussy. She couldn't go anywhere if she tried. I can't see anything, of course. Just Eli's white ass and her thigh. And her breasts. But they don't hold appeal for me.

"Where is Margo?"

Her red face suddenly goes white. "What?"

I lean against the doorframe, trying not to seethe.

"You're her best friend, Appleton. Where. Is. She?"

“I don’t know,” she says. “Can you leave?”

Eli shakes his head. “Margo run away?”

I glare at him.

His gaze moves from me down to Riley, a contemplative look on his face. He rotates his hips, and her eyes flutter closed.

He towers over her. “Tell us where she is.”

“I don’t *know*, Eli,” she moans. She keeps her eyes closed, but her cheeks are getting red again.

I’ve seen enough.

And, oddly, I believe her.

There are only a few places that Margo would go to avoid me. A few places she would either trust to hide her from me—big mistake—or that she’d think I wouldn’t hunt for her.

Savannah or Amelie, maybe.

Or Ian.

Riley was the obvious choice. I’m almost proud that Margo didn’t run straight here.

Riley’s screams follow me out the front door. I shake my head, grimacing.

My phone rings. I smother a groan, dropping into my car.

“You better be calling to tell me you left town,” I say.

“Hello to you, too,” Margo’s mother says. “I just—”

“If you’re about to ask for a favor, don’t.”

“Caleb, you don’t understand.”

I growl. Amberly is a distraction and a drug addict. She had her uses, but her *calling* me? Absolutely not.

“Your mom is looking for me,” she whispers.

I freeze. “What?”

“I don’t know what to do. Somehow she got my number—”

“Then *change your number*.” I stare straight ahead. My mother, Margo’s mother, the fucking Jenkinses. This mess is snowballing.

This wasn’t part of the game.

I hang up on her. Can’t really do anything about Mother, since she’s always been a wild card. Everyone else has a plan, motives, wants, and needs. She’s just crazy.

I try calling Margo again, but it’s still going straight to voicemail. If you had told me two months ago that the girl I had carried a grudge against for

seven *fucking* years would change me, I would've punched you in the goddamn face.

She's under my skin.

My next stop is Theo's house. As much as I'd love to barge into Amelie's home, it wouldn't do me any good. So I'm sending someone who can be a little more persuasive.

Theo and the Page girls have an interesting history. Amelie's sister goes to Lion's Head, where Theo and Liam attended school before they transferred here. One might say there's bad blood between Theo and Lucille Page, but they'd be underexaggerating the truth.

Theo meets me in the driveway, and I hide my smile.

"Margo's missing," I tell him.

He raises an eyebrow.

"She might be at the Page house."

He snorts. "She might decide to hide in a bed of vipers, too."

"You want to go find out or what?" I snap.

Time tugs on my skin. It's odd to feel utterly helpless. Every bone in my body needs to know where Margo is. She can't run away. She isn't in control. *I am.*

"Where are you going?"

"Dunley's, then Fletcher." I shake my head. "Maybe Ian's first. The fucker deserves to be hit."

Theo's eyes darken. "And the video?"

"Apparently it came from Savannah."

"Another reason to visit her first."

I sigh. Savannah and Amelie were Margo's best friends. They're causing more trouble than they're worth at this point. But unfortunately, we don't live in a society where I can just bury them in the backyard.

"Your uncle is going to be pissed." Theo crosses his arms.

"I'm giving you a shot at Page, and you're still flapping your lips."

His chuckle follows me back to my car. Fuck him. He'll help, but he'll do it in his own time. And maybe he's right: I should clean up the video. It spread faster than I anticipated, and Savannah's phone was just the catalyst. I know she didn't record it.

I dial a number I memorized a long time ago.

"Yes?"

"Do you have a death wish?" I ask.

They swallow.

“Get rid of it.”

“What?”

“Get rid of the fucking video—get it off every phone, every server, or so help me God, I will ruin your life.”

Silence.

Then, “You didn’t like the angle?”

I growl.

“Fine. Consider it done,” they say.

I know Margo isn’t with Savannah. Maybe she would’ve gone there if Sav wasn’t so hurt by my using her. No, she’d do anything to get back in my good graces—including tell me if Margo showed up.

That leaves one option.

I crack my neck. This is going to feel good.

Next stop: Ian Fletcher’s house.

MARGO

I wake up to Ian watching me. Again.
“This isn’t going to work.” I need to leave—or that door needs a lock.

The room is cast in shadow. Only the light from the hallway illuminates a vertical bar across his body.

“Relax,” he says. “I wasn’t here long. You were mumbling about your mom.”

I push myself into a sitting position and reach over, turning on the lamp. We both wince at the sudden brightness.

“You sure do sleep a lot,” he adds.

“I didn’t get much last night.” My face catches on fire almost immediately, and I cover my eyes. “Oh god.”

“Naughty. Anyway, here’s the key to my room. Keep it locked if you go to the bathroom or something.” He tosses it on the bed and stands, brushing off his legs. “People are starting to arrive.”

I jump up. “Already?”

He shrugs. “Well, it’s eight o’clock. There are always some early birds.”

“You’re being nice.” *And that makes me suspicious.*

“Don’t read too much into this, Wolfe.” He gets up and saunters out of the room, his hands in his pockets.

I stare after him for a moment, contemplating. He’s never nice. I need to hide out and then get the hell out of here. I grab my bag and shoes and straighten the bed, slipping down the hall. Voices carry up the stairs, giggling girls and a boy’s low response.

Ian's room is kind of what I would've expected. The walls are gray-blue; his bedding matches in darker tones. There's a lacrosse stick on his desk and a helmet beside it. The rest of his room is pretty much spotless. Closed black closet doors, plush carpet instead of hardwood.

I drop my bag and sit on the edge of his bed. Music kicks on downstairs, loud enough to vibrate the floorboards.

I slide to the floor and dig through the bag, pulling out my phone. I've avoided it, but now I turn it on. There are too many missed calls, and half from Riley. Another half dozen from Caleb. A few from Robert and Lenora. And texts. So many texts.

I click on my conversation thread with Riley.

Riley: *OMG, where are you? Caleb just burst in on Eli and I...*

My mouth drops open.

Me: *You had sex with Eli?!*

Riley: *Not what's important right now, Margo! WHERE ARE YOU?*

I bite my lip. I can't answer. What if she tells?

Me: *Somewhere not obvious... I hope.*

Riley: *I'm scowling at you right now. Just so you know.*

Me: *I need space.*

She doesn't respond. I guess that's space.

I've tried for years to avoid loneliness. To push away everyone and everything in an effort to fortify myself. I changed homes frequently. At ten, I made attachments wherever I went. By twelve...



Past

Angela was waiting for me when I got back to the DiMario's house. The bus dropped me off at the end of the street, and sometimes they waited for me in their car. If Mr. DiMario wasn't drunk, that is. If he was, then I walked to their house and tried to slip in undetected.

Anger. So much anger in one man.

I slip inside, braced for screaming, for broken glass, but there was only silence and my case worker. She seemed sad. Her lips were pinched, and her eyebrows pulled down in the middle.

She had a bag next to her full of my stuff. Four shirts, a package of underwear from Walmart, two pairs of socks. I only had the jeans that I had on. Nothing brings a kid down to earth faster than carting around their worldly possessions in a trash bag.

"Where to?" I asked her.

She just shook her head. "A respite home."

Respite. Temporary. A night, a week.

I glared at her. "What'd I do this time?"

"The family said you were stealing." She showed me a watch that belonged to Mr. DiMario. "I found this in your room."

My heart pounded. He wouldn't have called Social Services—he would've beat me silly. I'd been with the DiMario's for three weeks, but it was enough to instill fear.

"I didn't. I don't even like stupid old watches."

She rubs her eyes. "What am I supposed to do here, Margo? It's grounds for removal."

It's better this way. Mrs. DiMario stroked my hair until I fell sleep, but I was better off without them. Stronger without them.

I straightened my shoulders and snatched the bag from Angela's side, rifling through it. Everything was there and accounted for—except one thing.

"Where's the bracelet?"

She shook her head. "What?"

I ran back into my room. It was no larger than a closet with a twin bed on a low frame and a dresser against the wall. Everything was stripped, even the sheets. I jerked around, falling to my knees.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

“The bracelet,” I said. I was frantic. Blue and gold. Blue and gold. It had to be here somewhere. I should’ve never taken the stupid thing off, but it frayed. I was afraid it would snap if I wore it. Someone at school might see it and yank, and then he’d be gone forever. I was halfway under the bed when she grabbed me and yanked me out. “Stop,” she said. My attention was glued to the floor. “There wasn’t a bracelet in here.” Tears filled my eyes. “I put it—” “I’m sorry, Margo, but...” She glanced around, throwing up her hands. “I don’t know. We have to get you to the respite house.” She forcefully led me out of the house. I barely registered where we were going through the tears, but then I was in the car, hugging my belongings to my chest. Gone. It was gone. My life here? Easily erased. How did they manage to do it so efficiently? It’s evil the way kids like me could be wiped off the map. Didn’t like her attitude? *Boom*, gone. Like she never even existed in the first place.



Present

It's impossible to do anything except count cracks in the ceiling. The music is full blast, and the sounds of a million people layer on top of it. I tried scrolling Instagram, checking emails, listening to my own music...

Nothing drowns out the noise.

I stand and check my reflection. I look surprisingly okay for the day I've had.

I pull on a hoodie from Ian's closet—*the least I deserve*—and cover my head. There's not much I can do about my face, except let my hair half conceal it. Once my boots are on, I slip my phone into the hoodie pocket and crack the door.

The music is even louder in the hallway.

Remembering Ian's warning, I lock his door behind me and try to act inconspicuous. No one throws me a second glance—maybe I *am* incognito—until I get to the back door. I open it and step out onto the porch, inhaling a deep breath.

"Margo." Caleb leans on the house. He's in shadows, but I'd recognize him anywhere.

"Waiting to lay another trap?" It's amazing how quickly fury reawakens.

I wonder if that's how he feels when he looks at me, too.

"Trying to convince myself not to carry you out of here and show you how I really feel." His words are dark.

I shake off the chill. "How's that going?"

"I'm here, aren't I?" He straightens. "Why are *you*?"

I saw him this morning. My heart shouldn't be beating out of my chest like this. He's just a boy. He's just *Caleb*.

For a split second, I imagine hurting him. Punching him in the face or kneeing him in the groin. Anything to make him mirror the agony I feel on the inside. Because seeing him hurts in unexpected ways. There's broken glass inside me, pushing its way out.

"Margo," he repeats, walking toward me.

I stiffen, but I don't move until he's right in front of me. His hand comes up, sliding around my neck and into my hair.

It's too gentle.

"You just—" I shove him away from me.

His face doesn't show any reaction, like he's numb to this. God, I hate him. I follow him, hitting his chest. I can't stop, and he's not doing anything to make me.

—*fists against the door*—

I blink. What was that?

In one smooth motion, Caleb grabs my wrists and maneuvers us so my back is against the side of the house.

I'm not a violent person, but he just makes me so *angry*—

“Come back,” he says in my ear.

I start. “Let go.”

“So you can hit me again? Unlikely.”

“Weren't we happy?” I meet his gaze.

His fingers tighten on my wrists, which he keeps between us.

“We were happy—”

“No,” he growls. “You might be delusional enough to think—”

“Because you *tricked* me,” I screech.

He narrows his eyes.

I almost wish we were drawing attention, just to have an excuse to break free of him. As it is, my body is ignoring all the warning signs.

It's been less than a day. I miss him and I hate him.

“It doesn't matter.” He squints at me.

“How? In what world does it not—”

“You belong to me just as I belong to you,” he says.

“First to give in loses,” I whisper. “I guess that's my big punishment? Ruining my life?” None of this belonging shit. He ruined everything.

I can't go home.

I don't even *have* a home.

Maybe I should go back to the Jenkins's and get it over with. Let Angela take me out of this God-forsaken town once and for all.

“Even then, I'd find you.” He's a mind reader. “I'll never let you go. Which I think you know.” He touches the bracelet on my wrist. “And you'll never let go of me, either.”

I flinch. I forgot it was there. The metal is warm, digging in under his finger. And beneath the metal, the threads that wove us together when we were kids. Dressed up like a bride and groom, tying the bracelets around each other's wrists, a kiss to seal the deal.

Look how far we've fallen.

“Stop, Caleb.” I pull my arms down, trying to get away from him.

He releases me.

For a split second, I’m free, and then he’s back in my space, holding me captive by more than my wrists. His hips press into mine, and he leans his elbows on the wall on either side of my head. I have my hands, but he has my body.

“No.”

Simple. Effective. I’m pretty sure I hate the word—and him.

“You’re so hell-bent on destroying my life,” I snap. “Why not just drive the knife in deeper?”

He smiles.

He’s insane.

“You ran to Ian Fletcher. You’re wearing his sweatshirt. How am I supposed to react?” He leans forward. Our lips are so close.

“I hate you.”

His smile widens. “Right back atcha, love.”

I push him away, shaking my head. I am wearing Ian’s sweatshirt—through no fault of my own. He made me come here, where I had hoped he wouldn’t find me.

There’s a gleam in Caleb’s eyes that scares me. He’s out of his mind, and I’m only just now seeing it. Witnessing his demons take control.

I run to the door, getting halfway through the living room before Caleb grabs me. He slams me against the wall, hand on my throat.

The party falls silent. Even the music cuts out.

Caleb doesn’t tear his eyes away from me—and I can’t look away from him, either.

“What are you doing?” My voice is breathless. I don’t mean it to be. I want to come off strong, even though my body is thrumming with electricity.

One day isn’t enough to turn off all the emotions I feel toward him. And while I hate him, I think...

I blink. *Nope*. Not going there.

I wrap my hands around his. I can’t tell if I’m holding his hand to my throat or trying to get him to remove it.

“Party’s over. Leave,” he demands. He isn’t talking to me. He’s talking to... everyone else. He’s ending the party. Trying, anyway.

No one moves.

“Now!” he roars. He so rarely has to raise his voice.

Several people flinch, and it breaks the spell. It's a mass exodus, everyone just... stops what they're doing and rushes away. *He really is royalty.*

After a moment, I realize his thumb is moving along the underside of my jaw. Small movements that he might not even be aware of. His touch brings out goosebumps.

I close my eyes until everyone is gone, and we're entombed in silence. He's everywhere. In my past, my present. His scent in my nose. His voice in my ear. His hand at my throat, capturing every beat of my heart.

"You will break for me, little wolf," he whispers in my ear. "This is just the beginning."

I shudder. "Why?"

"You and I..."

I open my eyes. His gaze sears into me.

And his thumb still traces a pattern, back and forth on my jaw.

"We were happy," I accuse him. "Until you blew it up."

He grimaces. "Happy? No."

Games and more games. My head hurts. My lungs ache.

"You're mine, Margo. Forever. And you'll break for me—don't think that you won't."

This is just the beginning.

"I won't."

He leans down to kiss me. I press my lips together and turn my head to the side, exhaling through my nose when his lips land on my cheek. But he doesn't stop. His lips travel over my cheekbones, touching my eyelid, then my forehead.

And his hand tightens on my throat. White spots explode in front of my eyes.

A soft whimper escapes me.

"Kiss me."

I keep my head turned away.

"You bastard," I choke out. I can barely breathe. Fear winds through my chest. It'll make me do anything—including give in to Caleb. And that's just... *not an option.*

"What do I have to do to prove that you're mine?" he asks.

He tugs my pants down in one swift motion. He spreads my legs with his knee, and then he thrusts his finger into me.

I cry out, but the sound is strangled. *I'm* strangled. I push him, but he doesn't budge. It'd be like trying to move a boulder.

"Wet," he says. It sounds like an admonishment. "Kiss me, Margo, and I'll leave you alone. For the night, anyway."

Tears run down my face. I hate that I want him to keep touching me. That my hips move forward the slightest bit when his nail scrapes my clit. His fingers plunge back into me, stroking a spot deep inside me.

He kisses my cheek, his tongue darting out and catching my misery.

"You fucking love this," he says. "Don't pretend otherwise. Don't pretend that you don't wish it was my dick inside you. Maybe next time, I won't send them away. They'll get a live show—"

I grab his face and pull him to me. Our lips are magnets.

Make it a good one.

I taste my own tears as I part our lips, sliding my tongue along his. He takes over, slamming me back. My head thumps against the wall. His teeth tear at my lower lip.

He's still toying with my clit, alternating between rubbing and dragging his nail across it.

That, the kiss, his hand at my throat...

An orgasm comes out of nowhere.

I groan into his mouth, and he takes it all. The orgasm, my noises, the kiss. My anger. My frustration.

His hand loosens on my throat, sliding down. His palm stops on my chest, over my heart.

"Well?" I manage.

His dark-blue eyes watch me. "It's a start."

He backs away, his gaze lingering on my face. It seems like he's *disappointed*. I'm so glad there's a wall at my back, because my legs would've given out otherwise.

He leaves. It isn't what I was expecting, although it is what he promised.

Hate him, Margo, I tell myself. I pull up my pants slowly. My muscles ache.

Hair in place, hoodie straightened. Piece by piece, I reassemble myself. Caleb's a hurricane force, and I'm supposed to withstand him, and everything he brings with him.

I've got to be stronger.

I walk into the kitchen and almost jump out of my skin.

“That was quite the performance,” Ian says, lifting his cup. He sways a bit. “I can see why he’s into you. The noises—”

“You were *listening*? Did you see—?”

He snorts and waves. “God, no. Caleb would’ve probably murdered me. Although I’m sure he realized I was there... I dropped a bottle.” He points to a shattered beer bottle on the floor in front of the fridge.

“I didn’t—”

“You were a little preoccupied.” He winks. “And wearing my hoodie, too. See?”

I roll my eyes. “See what?”

He raises the cup to his lips, then smirks at me. “You’re not the sheep everyone thinks you are. You’re devious.”

“Ugh.” I shake my head. “You said whatever I felt was a manipulation. You were right.”

“Was I?”

He’s drunk. He wobbles, then saunters toward me. “Best run off to your room before I do something I shouldn’t.”

My stomach flips. He would do something. Kick me, kiss me. I don’t want to know. I back into the counter, knocking over cups. I feel my way to the door, glaring while he laughs.

Once I’m out of the kitchen, I bolt.

He doesn’t chase me, but I run like he is. I unlock the door to his bedroom with shaky fingers and grab my bag, slipping into the pink bedroom. I shove the dresser in front of the door and exhale sharply.

He shouldn’t be able to get in. No one should.

I survey my handiwork, then flop back on the bed.

I’ve had a night.

My emotions are all over the place.

Pushing everything down, I crawl farther up the bed and curl into a ball. Sleep will cure everything. *I hope.*

CALEB

I let Margo have the night. I'm not an idiot—I know what today cost her.

But the important thing is that we're on the same page. Neither of us are going anywhere. She needs to know how it feels to be systematically crushed.

And then we'll see how well she puts herself back together.

"I was going to call you." Theo leans against his car, and he straightens as I walk up the driveway. "But I figured you might be busy."

I stifle a laugh. "You find Amelie?"

He follows me into Eli's house. "She wasn't home."

I grunt.

"You found Margo."

"Indeed I did." I flick the lights on. I leave my shoes at the door and lead the way to the basement. "Why are you here?"

He shrugs. "Figured you might do something stupid."

"Like?"

"Kill Ian."

I chuckle. "I thought about it."

"Everyone's talking about how you kicked them out of Ian's house," he says, throwing himself down on my couch.

Margo and I sat there not too long ago. She was the last person down here besides me.

I shake my head. "We needed privacy."

"That usually includes a room, you know? A locked door."

“She’s turning into a ghost,” I say to my dresser. I yank out a clean t-shirt. “She needed reviving.”

“Is that what you were doing?” He scowls.

“I don’t think she even noticed it was a costume party.” I get changed, then flop down next to Theo. I stare at the television, which is currently off. “Video games?”

He shrugs. “Sure.”

I flick it on and hand him a remote. It isn’t the most intelligent thing for us to be doing. In fact, it kind of feels like a mind-suck after a while. I enjoy the empty feeling it gives me, so I let our playing time stretch from a few minutes into almost an hour.

I finally drop the controller and check the time. It’s past midnight.

“Do you ever sleep?” I ask Theo.

“Not really.”

I grunt. “Well, I do.”

He puts aside his controller and stands. “I can take a hint, Asher.”

He slaps my shoulder on his way out, and then...

Silence.

I lock myself in the bathroom, scowling at my reflection. I turn on the shower and wait for the steam to fog up the mirror. It only takes a minute, then I shed my clothes.

I hate looking at myself. My reflection. All I see is the scared little boy who Margo turned me into. Old rage works up my throat. I pound my fist on the counter.

I used to smash mirrors. My hands are covered in faint white scars, barely visible, from my time as an angry child. My mother once walked in on me punching the shit out of a mirror in the bathroom. She dragged me to the emergency room, where a doctor picked glass out of my knuckles for thirty minutes.

That was a hard lesson to learn.

Once I’m under the hot water, I relax. It’s almost hard to breathe with the amount of steam in the shower, and it reminds me of the way Margo’s pretty lips parted when I squeezed her throat. My dick gets hard at the thought of her.

I should’ve fucked her against the wall in Ian’s living room, even if the prick was eavesdropping around the corner. *Especially* because he was eavesdropping. I stroke myself, remembering the way she reacted to me

tonight.

Afraid.

Turned on.

Fiery.

The way her pussy clenched around my fingers when she came.

Fuck.

I pump faster, desperate to relieve my growing tension. It's the memory of her anger that does it. The way she fought. I groan and come, spilling on the tiles. Sparks zap through me.

This wasn't supposed to be this way. I wasn't supposed to let Margo get to me—*again*. But she has. I've let myself hate her for years, and it's easy. What isn't easy is admitting that every tear down her pretty face tightens my chest.

Bullshit.

I finish washing and get out, ignoring the mirror. Theo was a good distraction, but all I want to do is crawl into Margo's bed. I'm torn between making her pay and protecting her from the shitstorm that's brewing.

I could throw her out into the cold. It's already in motion.

Dad used to relate Newton's laws to human behavior. *An object in motion will remain in motion unless acted upon by an outside force.* His favorite was: *Every force in nature has an equal and opposite force.*

He meant to balance us out. Every decision carried weight. It was harder to make a change once a course of action had been decided on. He would know best of all. Selling his company, the shit he pulled with Margo's family...

My trajectory has been set toward Margo since we were children.

It's too late to stop.

But... she might just be my opposite—and equal—force. If she finds her spine.

I shake my head, water droplets flying. It's going to be a sleepless night, I can feel it coming like a freight train. The rattle of restlessness will keep me awake for hours. It leaves me with two options: fighting to keep my eyes closed or burning off energy and crashing.

Option two has always been my go-to.

I lace on running shoes and yank on a sweatshirt. Eli's parents are on the couch in the living room, the television screen flickering blueish light over their faces. They don't seem to notice me slip past them, out the front door.

As soon as I hit the sidewalk, I run.

There are a million ways to exhaust the body.

A million ways to burn energy.

Running is least satisfying, but it works... Until I find myself standing outside the Jenkins's house. I faintly register that I'm panting. I'll have to work on that before lacrosse season starts. If Coach finds out I've let myself slack even a little, I'll be booted from captaincy faster than I can blink.

Her house is dark.

Not that I should've expected otherwise, seeing as how it's the middle of the fucking night.

It doesn't stop me from scaling the side of her house with practiced movements. I never told her that Liam's family used to live in this house, and we snuck in and out all the time. It was hard when we were fourteen. Now, not so much.

Her window is still unlocked. I slide it open with one hand, then lift myself up. My entrance is nearly silent. I straighten and glance around the dark room. Her bed is made. Her uniform is crumpled toward the foot of the bed, a pair of running shoes just below it. She took her boots and high-heels with her.

I lie down on the bed, fluffing the pillow under my head. It smells like her shampoo.

She isn't a girl who wears a lot of perfume. None, except the soap she washes with. I think I like that best. Amelie and Savannah—and any other girl who got close enough for me to notice them—coated themselves in expensive shit like it was a layer of armor.

Not Margo.

She's true to herself... but she's hiding.

A wolf in sheep's clothing.

She forgets that I knew her as a child, too. It isn't a one-way memory. I catch her looking at me with regret. Maybe longing. And I know it's because she wishes she could untangle the mess she made. The knots bind us so tightly together, it's *killing* us.

Through the walls, one of her foster parents is snoring.

I shift around on the bed, leaving my mark. I have no doubt she'll notice it when she returns. And make no mistake: she is going to return. The Jenkinsees will find her and bring her back, even if it tortures them.

They're honorable like that.

Why couldn't Margo have been placed with someone else? A family less forgiving?

I'd call it fate that Margo was put with the Jenkinses, but unfortunately for them, fate operates by a different name: Lydia Asher.

My mother.

I pick myself up off Margo's bed. I still have a pair of her panties in my dresser. The pair I ripped. But I cast a glance around the room and I can't help but to think that this place doesn't feel like her home. She's inhabited the closet and the bed, a few drawers in the dresser. Beyond that... nothing. No pictures or posters on the wall. The same fucking bedspread that was probably there the day she arrived...

It's understandable why she doesn't call it her home.

And after what I did, it'll feel even less like it.

Keep her off balance.

I've been spinning off-kilter for years. It's justifiable to want the same for her.

How does it feel, Margo?

I run my finger over the top of the dresser, and then I step into the hallway. There's more risk out here. Robert or Lenora could come out any minute, half-awake and stumbling to the kitchen for a glass of water.

It's almost pitch-black in here, except the moonlight filtering through the window at the end of the hall. I lean close to one of the frames on the wall.

Robert, Lenora, Josie. One happy family—on the surface. Of course, this photo was before Josie got addicted to drugs and derailed her entire life.

And yet, they're not the only ones destroyed by Amberly Wolfe.

I lift it off the wall and unclip the back. I intend to take the picture—there are so many on this wall, it'll take them weeks to notice it gone—but there's a folded piece of paper in the back of the frame.

Intriguing.

I lift it off the back of the photo and slide it in my pocket. I keep the photo in place. No need to raise undue suspicion. Carefully, I place it back on the wall and cross back to Margo's room. I slip out her window, closing it behind me, and climb back down to the ground.

Anticipation licks at my skin.

But no: first, the punishment.

I shouldn't have come to the Jenkins's house in the first place.

Scrub out the weakness, son.

So I do. I'll run until I puke, and then I'll read the note burning a hole in my pocket. And maybe then, I'll be able to sleep.

MARGO

It's nice to wake up alone. No one staring at me, or glaring. No pressure to go to school—one, because it's Sunday, and two, because I'm definitely not going back with the video floating around.

And... I know I can't stay at Ian's house forever, but it sure is nice to stretch out and bask in the sunlight coming in through the window. I arch my back and do just that—stretch out. Until my hand hits something—someone.

I yelp, scooting to the edge of the bed and rolling over.

I expect Ian. Honestly, I do. Even with the dresser in front of the door, he seems like the type to figure out a way around it.

Amelie leans against the headboard. "God, you sleep like the dead."

"What are you doing?" I stand, grabbing the sweatshirt from the floor.

"I came to see if you were okay." She shrugs.

A thought hits me. "Did you...?"

"Spend the night?" She smooths her hands over her leggings. She has dark-gray argyle socks pulled three-quarters up her calves. A cream sweater and necklace with a heart pendant hanging against her collarbone.

She's picture-perfect, and it's barely eight o'clock in the morning.

Okay, I guess I did sleep like the dead.

"Ian and I aren't really a thing," she says. "And I wasn't..." She clears her throat. "Didn't feel like going home. His bed is a nice place to land."

I grunt. "Great."

"Anyway, you should've put something heavier in front of the door."

Her gaze goes to the dresser, which has been forcibly moved to the center

of the room.

“The fact that the Fletchers put all their furniture on sliders to protect their precious floors doesn’t help,” she adds.

“That’s...” I roll my eyes. It’s a little nerve-racking to have Amelie in my space. I know it isn’t *mine*, but... Still. “Are you going to tell the Jenkinses I’m here?”

“No, I’m pretty sure Caleb will take care of that.”

She stands, picking up her purse from next to the bed.

“Then why are you here?” I ask.

It’s like she’s been waiting for me to ask. She exhales.

“Caleb wronged both of us,” she says.

I squint.

“And you’re just going to let him control you like that?”

“No.” I cross my arms.

“Exactly.” She taps her fingernail on the dresser. “A united front, you know?”

“I thought you hated me.” *And this could be a colossal trap.* “Besides, I don’t trust you.”

Be a wolf, Margo.

“You don’t have to trust me,” she says. “What matters is that Caleb doesn’t win.”

I slowly nod. Even if I don’t like her, or trust her, she’s right. He’s been playing both of us to certain degrees. Why he chose to use her against me—and vice versa—I’ll never know. But right here, right now?

We could change the game.

“What are you proposing?”

Amelie goes to the window. “Your family is here.”

I flinch. “Foster family.”

“Right,” she whispers. “Whatever.”

I join her, looking down at the car pulling up Ian’s driveway. Angela’s car isn’t ahead or behind them. Most fosters wouldn’t come do the dirty work—they’d let the case worker clean up the mess. Even if the Jenkinses wanted to watch the show...

They get out of the car.

It’s just them.

“Breathe,” Amelie says, touching my shoulder. “I doubt they’re going to rehome you.”

“You’d be surprised.”

“You need to trust people more,” she says. “Seriously.”

The sound of a doorbell echoes through the downstairs, traveling through the walls. I flinch again, stepping away from the window.

This is it.

Ian’s cheerful voice floats up toward us, but I can’t make out what he’s saying.

Amelie grabs my arm. “They’re going to make you go back to school.”

“Yeah.”

“You’ll have to see Caleb every day. You’re in what, three classes together?”

I shrug. “Something like that.”

“Meet me in the greenhouse before lunch.”

I shake her loose. “Isn’t that place kind of obvious?”

She flips her hair back. “Isn’t the library a little obvious of *you*?”

Fair.

I follow her into the hallway. She goes toward Ian’s room, and I eye the stairs. Lenora’s and Robert’s voices are clearer now, but I can’t pick up the anger. Not yet. I force myself to go closer, perching on a step halfway down.

“She was scared,” Ian says.

“We appreciate the explanation,” Robert says, “but we’d like to see her.”

Someone sighs.

“Margo!” Ian’s voice is shockingly loud. His head pops around the corner. He’s not surprised at my closeness, and he smirks. “Ah, listening in?”

“Shut up,” I mumble. I hoist myself up and pass him, walking right up to Lenora and Robert. They seem the worse for wear. They look how I feel. “I’m sorry my mom killed your daughter.”

They stare at me for a second, then Lenora steps forward, drawing me into a hug. She bursts into tears.

My arms hang at my sides. Her reaction is...

Unexpected.

She holds me like I might evaporate.

“We were so *worried*,” she says in my ear. “Thank God you’re okay. And you’re here. And—”

“Let her breathe, Len,” Robert interrupts.

She steps back, keeping her hands on my shoulders.

I didn’t get a chance to hug her back. I’m sure I have a stupid expression,

because I was expecting them to tell me that I was leaving.

Anger.

Hate.

“Margo,” Robert says. “Your mother’s actions don’t define you. And they certainly don’t define us.” He exhales. “We feel horrible that you overheard Caleb.”

I feel horrible, too. Like my gut has gone through a blender.

“It doesn’t change anything,” Lenora says. Her hands push and pull my shoulders, so light I don’t think she realizes she’s doing it.

—head snapping back—

I cringe.

She releases me, eyes wide. “Honey—”

“Thank you.” I’m desperate to recover from that misstep. “Does that mean...?”

“We’re taking you home,” Robert finishes.

I manage to smile.

“I’m glad you worked things out,” Ian says behind me. He sets my backpack down. “I grabbed your bag.”

I take it, eyeing him. My mind goes to the catch. There’s always a catch with him.

“Free of charge,” he says under his breath.

I frown. There’s nothing I can do about it, so I pivot back toward my foster parents and offer them a small smile. “Angela didn’t come?”

Robert winces, bracing the door open with his back. Lenora slips out first, and I follow.

“Well, we didn’t tell her.”

My jaw drops.

“We hoped we could find you before it became necessary,” Lenora says. “I know it’s a bit unorthodox. And it could’ve backfired.”

“But the consequences would’ve been worse,” Robert adds. “You’re already labeled as a runaway risk. I’m sorry, but it’s true.”

I exhale. We climb into the car, and I shake my head.

“You didn’t tell her. She doesn’t know.”

Relief. Confusion.

It’s all white noise buzzing in my ears.

They saved me.

After everything.

“What now?” I ask in the car.

Robert pulls the car out onto the road. I shoot one last glance back toward Ian’s house. He wasn’t that bad—better than I expected with nowhere left to go.

“We’re going home,” he says. “And we’ll... we’ll figure this out. But you’re not going anywhere unless you want to. Do you?”

I blink. “Do I what?”

“Want to go to a different family?” He readjusts his grip on the steering wheel.

“No.” I bite my lip. It’s time to stop hiding behind fear and speak what I want into existence. “I want to stay.”

Lenora sniffs. “Good.”

We ride the rest of the way in silence. I’m exhausted from the past two days. There are too many emotions swirling around my head. The sudden switch from liking Caleb to *hate*—it’s left me cold. And confused.

And his body against mine last night, his fingers invading me.

I shudder.

Back at the Jenkins’s house, I shoulder my bag and make my way to my room. Everything is exactly the same as the way I left it.

I lie down, and Caleb’s scent surrounds me. Another tear slides down my cheek. I could sleep away the whole day. But after a few minutes of breathing deeply, I push myself up. I have to go to school with him tomorrow.

Where he’ll undoubtedly try to act like nothing has changed between us.

I switch into fresh clothes and scrape my hair up into a bun. There’s somewhere I need to go. There’s something I need to remember.

It’s clawing at the wall in my mind, desperately insistent to be acknowledged.

I find Robert in his office.

He looks up when I knock on the open door, a grin spreading. “Margo. I thought you might decide to rest today.”

I frown. “I was actually hoping... I need to go out.”

His eyebrow jumps, then settles. “Where?”

“Caleb’s house.”

He sighs. “Why?”

“There’s...” I spin the bracelet on my wrist. “There’s just something that’s been bugging me about my old home. And I was hoping to take one more peek...”

He stands. “Okay.”

He slips past me, down the hall.

“What are you doing?” I call.

“Driving you,” he answers.

My mouth drops open, and I chase after him. “You don’t have to. I can walk—”

“It’s no trouble.” He holds up the keys, winking at me. “We can stop and get a pastry on the way back.”

I nod slowly. The car ride is quick, and then we’re there. In the same driveway, staring up at Caleb’s empty house.

“No one lives here,” I tell him.

“I know.” He glances at me. “We recognized your last name when Angela was searching for a home. Most of the foster families in the town were aware of what had happened between the Wolfes and the Ashers.”

I frown. “I don’t really remember it.”

His smile is sad. “Trauma affects children differently. Some lash out. Some get quiet. We took a class on dealing with loss—”

“I didn’t lose anyone.” I cross my arms over my chest. “They’re both still out there.”

He twists toward me. “If you want to see your dad, Margo, we can arrange that—”

“I don’t.”

Mom left. Dad was taken away.

They’re still alive. And if I hadn’t done whatever it is Caleb thinks I did

—

I open the car door. The answers I want are in my home.

“I’ll be back,” I tell him.

Down the driveway, through a door into the backyard, then the Asher’s guest house is in front of me. I should stop thinking of it as home, even though it’s the only one I ever knew. We were there for most of my life.

The door is locked, but we used to keep a spare key in the plant box under the window around the corner. I’m sure Caleb was the one to lock it. He’s the only one who would want to keep me out.

I find the key and brush off the crusted dirt. It’s dull, with rust spots, but it still works. The door opens under my hand. Absently, I pocket the key.

It’s like walking into the past—but not the past that I want to remember. Not the disrupted, angry place that I’ve forgotten. No, it’s like...

Sunshine.



Past

“Margo!”

I jerked upright. The sun had felt so good beating down on my face that I closed my eyes. It was just for a minute.

Mom burst into my room, gaze going straight to my face. “What are you doing on the floor?”

I shrugged.

Sundays were a big day for her, which meant her white chef’s coat was pristine. She meal-prepped lunches for the Ashers to take to work, and then she came home and do the same for us. Now she smoothed it down, a calming gesture for her.

“Lydia wanted to know if you would like to go to the park with them.”

I perked up. I wasn’t allowed to call Mrs. Asher by her first name, but Mom was. I guessed it was an adult thing. Caleb called my mom Amberly.

So maybe it was a *me* thing.

“When?”

“Now.” She laughed. She came over and held out her hands, lifting me to my feet. “If you want. I made sandwiches for a picnic.”

“Are you going?”

She shook her head. “No, I have some things to do around the house.”

I bit my lip.

“Your dad will be home later,” she said, reading my mind. “He just got caught up at the office.”

On a Sunday.

Even I knew it was unusual for him to work on a weekend.

“Okay,” I said.

She brushed her hand over my clothes, straightening my shirt and smoothing my hair. “Perfect.”

I smiled.

Lydia and Caleb were in the kitchen when we walked in. Caleb sat at the breakfast bar, dutifully finishing breakfast. I had eaten hours ago, pouring myself a bowl of cereal after I woke and discovered the house empty.

My stomach growled.

Mom tapped the back of my head like it was *my* fault my stomach was being loud.

“Good morning, Margo,” Lydia greeted me.

I smiled at her. “Hi.”

Caleb twisted around. “I lost a tooth.”

I climbed up on the stool next to him. He gave me a wide smile, showing a gap in his teeth. I grimaced. I hated plucking out loose teeth. The last one that wiggled, Caleb reached in my mouth and snatched it out.

He wouldn’t give it back for the tooth fairy, either.

My mom kissed me on the head. “Have fun. I’ll see you later.”

We watched her go back to the house.

“All right.” Lydia clapped. “Ready?”

She buckled us into our seats in the car. We were old enough to do it ourselves—that’s what Caleb told her, anyway, but she just smiled.

“You’re growing up before my eyes.” She kissed him on the forehead.

Something in my chest tightened and loosened at the same time.

Mom liked me. But she didn’t like me *that* much.

And Dad...

“Are you okay, Margo?” Lydia asked.

Mom would kill me if I told the Ashers anything, so I nodded.

We got to the park, and Lydia laid out a blanket. It was warm and sunny, and Caleb took off toward some of his friends. I sprawled out next to Lydia and closed my eyes again. The sun heated my body.

In the distance, Caleb and his friends were laughing.

Laughing.

Screaming.

Blank.

No, I need to remember.

Caleb and his friends were playing.

I sat up, confused. Alone.

Blank.

I screamed.



Present

I open my eyes, looking around slowly. I'm in my old bedroom, curled into a ball on the floor. How I got here is a mystery. One minute I was walking into the house, the next... a memory.

But it isn't as sharp as I need it to be.

It isn't as clear.

I stand and go to the dresser, acting on a suspicion. It's a shock more than anything to see a trail of disturbed dust.

Caleb and I were in here before, and then he shows up with the bracelet at the ball?

I had lost it.

I was helpless, scrambling across the floor of my makeshift room. Then Angela took me away. All that time, I thought a foster sibling had taken it, or the parents tossed it.

He stole it.

He brought it back here, set it on my dresser in a house that hasn't been touched in seven years.

Who's pretending now?

MARGO

Riley takes me to school. It's our first moment alone since I got out of Eli's car, and we sit in hers instead of joining the masses in the courtyard.

"What happened?" she asks. "All I know is that Caleb burst in on Eli and I—"

Her cheeks turn red.

"He was telling my foster parents lies about me." I sigh. "So I ran away."

"To Ian's house."

"Well, I couldn't go to *your* house," I answer, sending her a pointed glare.

She giggles. "True."

"I had hoped that it wasn't obvious." I look down at the muffin in my lap. Bribery at its finest. I'm not going to argue with her methods. We haven't talked about the video that was sent around the morning after the ball. I'd forgotten about it until this morning, when she gave me the muffin.

"For courage," she had said.

Yeah, right.

"Caleb..." I stop and try again. "We can't be a thing. He's toxic. And crazy."

She nods. "Yeah."

"He's not going to like it."

She throws her shoulders back. "You'll make him listen, Margo. If anyone can get through to him, it's you."

I shift. "I'm not so sure about that."

"You're probably the only one who can stop him."

I sigh. The bell ringing in the school is faint, but it's there. We climb out and make our way straight to homeroom. I can't help but keep my head ducked down, wondering when the laughter is going to start. The stares.

Nothing happens.

No one does a fucking thing.

"Is it me, or are we blending in more than usual?" Riley whispers.

"Um..."

My gaze lands on Caleb. He's leaning against the desk I normally sit at, a shit-eating grin on his face. He did this. I'd bet money on it that he made the video disappear. Still, how he erased it from everyone's eyeballs is a whole other issue.

"Morning," he says to me.

I ignore him and take a different seat. Ian's, in fact.

Savannah glances at me and opens her mouth, then seems to change her mind. A second later, someone leans over me.

"I don't much like being ignored," Caleb says.

"I don't much like being made a fool."

"They took you back." He puts his elbows on the desk.

Our faces are inches apart—but I'm not going to back down from this challenge. My gaze goes from his eyes to his lips and back again.

I've called him many things in my head.

Demon.

Monster.

Bully.

The most accurate? *Devil*.

Every word out of his mouth is a damn lie.

"I'm not doing this with you," I snap.

He smirks. "I think you will."

"We're over, Caleb." I flash him my bare wrist.

Yesterday, I removed it and set it back on the dresser, right where he had first placed it—and where he stole it again. I'm curious to see if he'll know that I know.

If he'll think to even look there.

I kept the key. It seemed more valuable than not, and it sits at the bottom of my bag. Better safe than sorry. And who would think twice about a rusted old key?

He grabs my wrist, his lips pressing into a thin line. He's still wearing his.

It doesn't appear feminine on him. Quite the opposite.

Who knew?

I let him push my sleeve up. Maybe he thinks it's a trick.

Nothing but skin, baby.

He growls under his breath. It could be an accidental slip because I got to him. Surprised him for once. Or it could be part of the game. Another lie.

This just in: we're playing *my* game now.

I smile. "We're done here."

He straightens, fingers slipping off my skin. "We'll see."

He returns to his seat, and I exhale. One encounter down... just a million more to go. But I can't help the smile that creeps across my face.

Margo: 1

Caleb: 0

The bell rings, and I stand. Savannah shuffles along behind me, muttering. Her attitude—feigned interest and then an abrupt change—piques my interest. I slow down in the hallway, waiting for her to pass me. Her class is a few down from my next one.

She hesitates next to me. "You're going to try and take down the golden boys?"

I raise an eyebrow.

"What's that look for?"

"Who told you that?" I ask in return.

She shrugs. "Amelie mentioned something."

"Not all of the golden boys need bringing down," I say carefully. I don't know what Amelie said. Again, my mind goes to the worst possible place: *Trap*.

This school is filled with vipers.

"Excuse me," I say, ducking into my classroom.

Caleb and Liam are already inside. Eli and Theo haven't arrived yet.

Show of strength.

I take my seat in front of Caleb, ignoring him. After all, we're *done*. I said it out loud, spoke the damn words into existence. I'll go to Hell before I go back on my word.

Be a wolf.

"How was your weekend, Margo?" Liam asks.

I rotate, ignoring the way Caleb's gaze goes straight to my wrist.

I force myself to smile. "It was great. How was yours?"

He fakes a yawn. “Exceptionally boring.”

“Hmm.” Caleb stretches out, his legs coming into my space. “Well, there was that girl.”

“Which one?” Liam grins.

I move my foot away from Caleb’s.

“The one who put your picture all over Instagram.” Caleb snorts. “Was that number two or three?”

“Man-whore,” Eli coughs. He comes up the aisle and falls into the seat beside me. Ian’s usual seat. “You gonna sleep with every girl who looks your way?”

Liam glances at me. “Nah, not all of them.”

My cheeks heat.

“Good,” I snap, trying to cover my sudden embarrassment. “I think I’d go blind if I saw you naked.”

They all laugh—well, all except Caleb. He just glares at me.

I turn away as the teacher raps her knuckles on the desk, calling us to attention.

Breathe, I tell myself.

Caleb disappears after class, and I don’t see him again. It’s unusual enough to give me chills. He used to wait for me at the door and walk me to my classes. Each time I leave and he’s not there, I throw back my shoulders and remind myself that this is a good thing. I wasn’t sure if Caleb would be able to respect boundaries.

Turns out, he does.

My palms grow sweatier the closer we get to lunch. I’m supposed to meet Amelie in the greenhouse, but I can’t bear to go alone. The bell rings, and I hunt down Riley and beg her to come with me.

“To meet... Amelie?”

“Yes.” I tap my foot. “Please.”

“Why?”

“Because... She doesn’t want Caleb to win, either.”

Riley stares at me. “What?”

“What, what?”

“Margo, when did your *relationship* become about winning?” She crosses her arms over her chest.

Students stream around us, but we ignore them all.

I shake my head. “He’s been playing a game with me this whole time. I

mean—”

“I get it.” she reaches out and laying her hand on my shoulder. “You’re still upset. You broke up with him, and he let you.”

“Riley...”

“I’m meeting Eli,” she says. “I forgot.”

I exhale. *I guess I’ll go alone.*

Riley leaves me at her locker, shoulders hunched as people continue to walk around her. I’m tempted to call out and apologize, but I stop myself. I don’t know why I would possibly apologize.

I’m in the right.

And just because I’m doing something scary... doesn’t mean I can’t do it alone.

Swallowing my nerves, I head toward the courtyard. Some students eat lunch out here in nicer weather, but the chill of November has driven everyone inside.

The greenhouse door is propped open. I slip in, trying not to recall when Caleb brought me in here. Light filters through the skylights. Contrary to popular belief, these walls are not made of glass. They’re plexiglass and canvas, letting in filtered light. *Privacy*, someone once told me.

Amelie leans on a raised box. It appears freshly planted, the soil dark and damp.

“About time,” she says.

“I was debating whether or not to come.”

“You made the right decision,” she says. “The whole class is whispering about how you snubbed Caleb this morning.”

“I was going to do it with or without your little pep talk.” I shrug, feigning indifference.

She flips her hair back. “Caleb’s been meddling in your life forever.”

“I know.” I move to lean on a box across from her. “This isn’t news.”

She squints at me. “What do you remember?”

“Of what?”

“When you up and left. We were ten. What do you remember?”

I shake my head.

—*head snapping back*—

I press my fingers to my temples. “I don’t want to discuss this.”

“The boys in this school,” she mutters. “They’re out to get us.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Caleb played us all, don’t you get it? He *seduced* us—”

I drop my hands and glare at her. This isn’t going how I thought it would. No, actually, it *is* going how I thought it would. I’d just hoped for something different.

“He didn’t seduce me,” I argue, although he totally did. He laid out a sticky web, and like an idiot, I fell right into it. “And anyway, it didn’t work, because he and I are done. And you know what? I think this conversation is done, too.”

She’s prying and invading, and *why didn’t I see this side of her before?*

I move toward the door.

“He charmed the pants off of me and Savannah,” she says quietly.

I stop in my tracks.

“You knew that, right? Him sleeping with her, then dating me? Well, if you can even call it *dating*—”

I spin around. “I don’t want to hear about how you fucked Caleb! God, Amelie. Really?”

She has tears in her eyes.

And I’m so over it.

“Why do you think he did it? Because he knew you’d come back. And you’re letting him steamroll you, Margo! Don’t be an idiot.”

I laugh. I’ve been an idiot. It’s true. I’m *still* making mistakes—such as letting Amelie stomp all over me. Right. Now.

“I’m done.” I walk away again, fully fed up with Amelie Page.

In the back of my mind, I acknowledge that we all grew up differently. I bounced around homes. She bounced around countries.

“Ask yourself this, Margo,” she calls. “How did Caleb find you in the woods?”

I know how he found me. Unknown sent me the proof—a picture of Ian dragging me across the field.

This is the only time I help you.

I shiver, but I don’t turn back around. I’ve been waiting for the right moment to look into Unknown—and so many other things. The number is blocked. There’s only so much I can do without getting more people involved.

She sighs. “Savannah sent him the text.”

I freeze, my hand on the knob.

“The picture. I know you’ve probably seen it. Did he tell you it was her?”

No. Savannah is Unknown?

Savannah—

“We’re not doing this,” I say through gritted teeth. I push through the door, into the courtyard. I struggle to take deep breaths as the world crashes around me.

Pull yourself together, Margo.

I can’t do this. I can’t—

“Margo?”

I blink up at Robert. Gravel bites into my knees.

“Up you go,” he says, his arms hooking under my armpits. He lifts me to my feet and guides me to a bench. “Are you okay?”

“I... I think I just got overwhelmed,” I murmur. I close my eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

“Come with me,” he says. “I just have to meet with a student and then I can take you home. Okay? This weekend was a lot.”

Even with my eyes closed, tears escape.

“Oh, honey, don’t cry.” He rubs my back in circles.

“I shouldn’t have run away.” It made everything worse.

Ian is being confusing, and Caleb is letting me push him away. Riley and Eli’s relationship is progressing almost too fast for me to track. Sooner or later, everyone else will leave me in the dust.

Maybe I’m better off there.

All of my fight is gone. I used it on Caleb and Amelie, and I don’t want to take it out on Robert. So I follow a half step behind him all the way to his classroom and sit at a desk in the back while he chats with another student. A sophomore, I think. She throws nervous glances in my direction.

I doodle profiles of boys with black holes for eyes.

“Ready?” Robert asks.

I jerk, crumpling the page. I’m not a fool—I realize I couldn’t stop drawing Caleb. And if Robert sees, he’d know, too.

“Thank you,” I say in the car. “For taking me to my old home the other day, and for bringing me home today...”

He smiles at me. “You seem lost. Don’t get me wrong—it’s perfectly okay to feel lost at seventeen. It’s Len’s job, and my job, to help you navigate to where you want to go.”

I bite my lip.

Am I lost?

“It can take time and soul searching,” he adds. “And reconnecting with your past. If you want to talk to anyone—”

“A therapist?” I shudder. I’ve talked to too many state-mandated psychologists for my liking. There was nothing wrong with them, except their soul-sucking nature and endless questions.

“Or your dad,” he says quietly.

I freeze.

“He’s only twenty-five minutes away,” he continues. “And we’d be happy to take you if you—”

“I’m not ready for that.” I look out the window and decide to admit one thing. One ugly feeling. “I tried to visit him when I was twelve. Angela said I was on the approved list. But we got there, and he had revoked it because it was no place for...”

Robert is silent.

I lamely finish, “A child. And technically, I’m still one.”

“You’ve grown up a lot since you last tried,” he says. “I can reach out to Angela, see if we can arrange something—”

“Please,” I whisper. “Not today.”

He pulls up to the curb. “Len will be home early today, okay?”

“I think I’m just going to catch up on homework and be antisocial for a while.”

“Perfectly acceptable.” He winks. “Go on, now.”

I climb out of the car, glancing back once. I push the door open, and then he leaves. And I’m alone.

Finally.

CALEB

Amelie smirks at me from her table at lunch. She came in late, her gaze finding me and lingering. Riley is at our table, down at the end with Eli and Liam.

They know I'm in no mood to be nice.

My bad mood isn't infectious, but it sure does stink. That's what Theo told me approximately ten minutes ago while I waited for Margo to return to sanity.

Riley's phone chimes, and my head automatically turns.

She glances from Eli to me, then frowns.

"What is it?" I snap.

Riley flinches.

I lean over Theo and snatch her phone away.

Margo: *Robert took me home.*

I growl under my breath and slide her phone back.

"Dude," Eli says. "Not cool."

"What's not fucking cool is Margo playing this cat-and-mouse game." I stand, my attention tripping over Amelie again. She's got a shit-eating grin—which means she's probably up to something. "Fucking hell."

She stands and meets me halfway, running her finger down my chest.

I grab her wrist, squeezing hard enough to send a message. *Don't fucking touch me.*

"You like using girls?" she asks, a slight shake to her voice. "I told her

where the text came from.”

I drop her arm like burning coal. “You trying to make your life miserable?”

She frowns. “I had to. She’s finally standing up to you—”

“You know nothing,” I growl. Margo standing up to me—my blood runs hot. Hotter, anyway.

I couldn’t have possibly predicted that I would *like* her fire. But damn it, I think I do.

I brush past Amelie, more than done with this conversation.

“Where are you going?” she calls after me.

Her and I both know the photo of Ian and Margo didn’t originate with Savannah. Whatever games she’s playing, I can do better.

And so can Margo.

I’m halfway down the hall when Coach steps out. He takes one look at me and scowls.

“Asher, with me.”

I gnash my teeth, but I follow him to his office.

“Sit.”

I do. It takes a lot of effort to not jig my foot or tap my fingers against my thigh. *Calm, cool, collected.* Coach takes lacrosse seriously. His whole career rides on it. If one of us screws up, we’re out.

It’s how it’s always been.

“You’re slipping.” He sits across from me, leaning his elbows on the desk. It’s covered in papers, but he doesn’t seem to care. The whole office is organized chaos.

“Not sure how you mean, Coach.” Grades are fine—better than fine—and I’m running again. We haven’t started practice, but I’ll be in tip-top shape soon enough.

Okay, it was just the one run. But we’re getting back into it.

Not that I ever really *lost* it.

“This girl.” He flashes a photo at me. The disastrous photo that caused half the school to turn on Margo. But hey, at least the video was scrubbed from the servers.

I did something right for once.

“What about her?”

“Is she going to fuck with your head?” He slams the phone down, grimacing. “Teenagers are brutal. But you’re not just a teenager. You’re the

captain.”

A golden boy.

School royalty.

“You’re not telling me anything new.” I lean back. Fuck Coach and thinking this sport gives him free reign over my life. Over what I do with Margo. “She isn’t a problem.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Oh? So you weren’t about to skip.”

“No one fucking cares, Coach.”

He lunges across the desk and grabs my shirt collar, jerking me up. “Don’t play that game with me.”

I glance down at his fingers curled in the fabric at my throat.

We clash sometimes. He’s the original golden boy—the original asshole who ruled Emery-Rose when he was a student. Football and lacrosse god with a temper to match his infamy.

“Fine,” I grit out.

“Smooth sailing,” Coach says. “Now until graduation. Your choice of schools, right?”

He releases me, and I slowly retake my seat. He does the same.

“Where are you applying?”

I shrug. “Mom wants me to go for Harvard.”

He snorts. “And?”

“And I’m thinking...” I don’t know.

It’s forever away.

“Deadlines are approaching,” he says. “You toured schools over the summer.”

“Have you been talking to my mother?” My anger is waking up again. How dare she call my coach? “Is that what prompted this whole fucking thing?”

He rolls his eyes.

“Coach.”

“Cool it, Caleb. I can see the smoke coming out of your ears.”

“Because she—”

“Loves you?”

No.

Because she’s worse than Uncle when it comes to twisting the world into her own masterpiece. No one else’s opinions matter.

“What’d she say?”

“She wants you to apply for Harvard,” he says. “Early decision.”

I cough. “Fuck, no.” That would lock me into it if I got in—and there’s a high chance someone would donate in the Asher name, and suddenly I’d be hiking my ass up to Cambridge, Massachusetts.

“Make a list,” he orders, standing. “I want to see where you’re thinking of going.”

I stand, too. I know a dismissal when I hear one.

I don’t wait for him to roll out the red carpet and usher me out. Instead of going back the way I came, I head for the boys’ locker room. There’s a door in the back, much like the girls’ locker room. I unhook the alarm and shove the door open.

So fucking done.

A quick trip later, I’m walking up the path next to my house. I unlock the door to Margo’s old home and turn on a light. We rarely came in here as kids. I think her mom preferred the luxury of the main house—or the solitude after we were gone.

Her parents’ room is a wreck. The door is still closed from the last time we went in there.

This house doesn’t affect me like it does Margo. But then again, these aren’t memories to me. They’re stories Keith Wolfe spun on the stand, begging for a not guilty verdict—until he took the plea deal. It’s easy to distance myself from them, especially with what happened after.

He got what was coming to him.

His lies encompassed all of us. Me, my parents, Margo, her mother.

She doesn’t know—but she might begin to unravel it. She’s digging. Trying to remember.

I open the door to Margo’s old room and cross to her dresser. That day she made me bring her here before the game played out again. I click on the flashlight on my phone, preferring that to the yellow glow of the lamp on her nightstand. The bulb would probably go if I tried it.

I close the door and touch the scratches in the painted wood.

She would’ve been panicked. Trapped.

What would make a ten-year-old *that* desperate to get out?

Old blood has dried to a dark brown.

I wince.

On the dresser is what I came for: the bracelet Margo refuses to wear. I palm it, holding it tightly for a moment before sliding it into my pocket. Half

of me wants to march back to her room and superglue the latch—then she really would be stuck with it.

But... that's not the right approach.

Patience.

I exhale. She's serious. She's furious with me. Or, she could be bluffing. Puffing her anger into something more.

Did I get what I want? Yes. But I also... misstepped.

Fuck.

I did what I wanted to do: I broke her. Getting caught wasn't part of the plan, and neither was her memory issue.

We belong together. I wasn't lying, but it isn't sinking in for her.

"Option B," I say to myself.

I can play it her way—I'll let her come to me.

I lost her once. I'll be damned if I'll lose her again.

MARGO

*M*y bed dips.

I don't flinch. I knew he would come. I knew he would figure out a way to get in, even if my bedroom window was locked.

Caleb's hand coasts up my arm.

Goosebumps break out, but I keep my eyes closed.

His thumb caresses the hollow point at the base of my throat. I swallow as his fingers wind around it. He squeezes softly.

"What—"

"Shh," he whispers. His lips touch my ear. "Don't fucking speak."

I open my eyes. He isn't applying enough pressure to cause a reaction, but the look in his eyes... My heart picks up speed.

Thump, thump, thump.

"Here's what's going to happen," he says in my ear. "You're not going to move. You're not going to make a sound." He withdraws and meets my gaze.

His thumb brushes over my lips.

"If you make any noise, they're going to know."

I glance at my bedroom door.

It's wide open.

Fuck.

The fact that it's the middle of the night doesn't mean anything. It almost makes it worse, because any little sound is amplified in the darkness.

He sits up, tugging my pajama shorts down in one swift motion. Fear—and something else—paralyzes me for a second.

I bite my lip. I know he's serious. And at the same time...

No.

His hands go to my shirt, and it wakes me up. I slap his hands away.

"Get away from me," I whisper-yell. I pull myself upright, shrinking back against the headboard. "I don't want you here, Caleb. I don't—"

He reaches out and lifts a strand of my hair. The softness of it gives me pause. And I notice that he's actually listened—he stopped.

"It's always been us," he says.

"It hasn't," I answer. "It's used to be us. Now there's nothing."

"Prove it," he demands. He shifts to his knees. "Prove there's nothing there."

I mirror him, rising on my knees. We're chest to chest.

"Why does everything need to be proven?" I ask. "Why can't you just accept—"

He kisses me.

I let him—but I don't kiss him back.

His tongue slides across the seam of my lips, and I just press them tighter together. His hand winds through my hair, holding my head still, and he tries to get a reaction out of me.

He makes a noise in the back of his throat.

I give him *nothing*.

"You're killing me," he whispers.

I meet his stare. We're still kissing-close. Our noses brush.

You killed me first. "Good."

He releases me.

"I want you to hurt." My chest aches, and I'd love nothing more than for him to know what I'm going through. "I want you to feel it."

"You want an apology?" he asks, shifting to the side and pressing his lips to my cheek. "You want me to say I'm sorry and beg for forgiveness?"

I will not bend.

Maybe he can sense the *yes* forming on my tongue.

"It won't happen, love. We're meant to be broken." He takes hold of my chin, tipping my head back until I meet his gaze.

I hadn't realized I looked away.

"You and I can't do happy or perfect or *neat* like you think you're going to get," he continues. His grip tightens. "Maybe you'll see that eventually."

"Get out," I breathe.

He drops his hand and stands. “Dream of me.”

I shake my head. “I won’t.”

It hurts. I’m pushing him away—and yes, he started it. He drove the first nail into this coffin. But now I’m the one being strong, and he... he won’t beg. I already know.

“We’re inevitable,” he says. “You’ll see.”

He walks out, back into the hallway. I guess that’s how he came in. Foolish of me to think that a locked window would keep the devil out.

He holds something up, but I can’t see it in the darkness. “I know you don’t remember, but if you want to... You know where I’ll be.” He tosses it onto my dresser and leaves.

My breath catches in my chest. I almost expect the stairs to creak, the front door to slam—something to alert the Jenkinsees of his presence. But he’s a ghost. Here one minute, gone the next.

I’ll give him one thing: he sparked my curiosity.

But to get up would be to give in, whether he’s here or not. He’d know. And me asking him for help? No.

Never.

I burrow back under my covers and close my eyes.

That lasts about... two minutes.

I pop out of bed and close my door, flicking on the light. *Ridiculous*, I think to myself. He knows how to get in my head, and I hate it.

My bracelet sits on the dresser. I’d returned it to my old house, and he... he knew. And he returned it.

I run my finger over the web of metal, shaking my head. I can’t do this right now. I can’t forgive him.

I leave it where it is and crawl back into bed. I don’t have the energy to try to deal with Caleb’s mental games. After everything that’s happened today, my mind hasn’t stopped spinning.

My conversation with Amelie about Caleb’s meddling... she thinks I shouldn’t let him get away with it. Well, I won’t.

And then the more devastating piece of news: Savannah texted him the picture.

My eyes pop open again. I can’t believe that I forgot about it. *Savannah is Unknown*.

I should’ve suspected her sooner.

I sit up and grab my phone, scrolling through past messages with

Unknown. I linger on the picture of Ian and me. Is it true? Does Savannah have that big of a vendetta against me that she'd try to ruin my life—and threaten me to stay away from Caleb?

She was at the party where the video was taken. And while she had some noticeable absences from school, I'm pretty sure she was there the day Ian dragged me into the woods. But...

Something doesn't feel right about it.

Why would she do such a thing?

I shake my head. Caleb's right: I need answers. But I doubt he has them. I never mentioned Unknown to him—whether that was a bright idea or not, I can't say.

Imagine if he's in on it.

That's another possibility.

I put my phone on the nightstand, flopping back.

The suspects are:

Amelie.

Savannah.

Ian. Yes, Ian, even though he was the one *in* the picture. He could've paid someone to take it and send it to Caleb. He could've paid Savannah.

Caleb.

I grimace. His whole friend group is on my suspect list. Any of them could want me to stay away from him for his own sake. For his sanity.

And I'm also well aware that it could be no one on my list. It could be... literally anyone.

"Fuck," I whisper. I resign myself to a night of fitful sleep. Every so often, my thoughts circle back to the bracelet on the dresser, and Caleb's...

You're killing me.

Right back atcha.

He's confusing and complicated.

Eventually, I fall asleep. I dream of Caleb and my mother.

They're arguing in his house, just beside the screen door. I can see them from where I'm crouched. Caleb has gray streaks in his hair, and my mom is red in the face. Their hands wave. Their lips move, but I hear nothing. Spit flies from Caleb's mouth, and I instinctively hunch lower. Their anger scares me. I'm frozen in my hiding place.

I wish I could hear what they're saying.

She throws a glass. I scream, and both of them stare at me.

Someone yanks me backward.

I fall and fall and fall.

Caleb catches me. He squints. His face is young—fourteen instead of seventeen. “Be more careful, Margo.”

“You were just fighting with my mom,” I say, shaking my head. I look around. There’s nothing but high grass around us. “Where are we?”

“We used to come here,” he answers. He mirrors my actions, head swinging back and forth. “Don’t you like it?”

Don’t you like it?

“I don’t...” I don’t recognize this place. It’s just grass and bright-blue sky, the sun so hot on my skin. “Why were you fighting with Mom?”

His face hardens. “I wasn’t.”

He drops me.

I fall right through the ground, straight into darkness. Straight into my bedroom.

I lunge for the door, but it’s locked. Everything is blurry. Big fat tears fall down my face, and I pound on the door.

“Let me out!” I scream. “Let me out let me out let me—”

It flies inward, knocking me back.

“Dad?” I moan, rolling onto my side. “Dad, Mom—”

It’s not Dad. *Why did I think it would be Dad?*

“Wake up,” Mom snaps, pressing my shoulders into the ground.

I open my eyes, instantly rattled. Tears fill my eyes, and I fumble for the lamp’s switch. It felt real. Too real. And for once, I remember every second of the dream.

The sudden light blinds me, but I can’t close my eyes again.

There are pieces of my past trying to come out.

Outside, it’s getting light out already. A second later, my alarm goes off. Good timing, since I don’t even want to think about sleep for another sixteen hours.

My shower’s hot water helps shake off any residual chill from the dream, even as I go through it piece by piece. My mom and Caleb arguing... except he would’ve been young. Nine or ten, like me. So that doesn’t make sense.

And the field? Maybe that part really is fiction.

I shiver under the water thinking about my mother. I thought of her with fondness up until...

When was the turning point?

What did she do?

“Margo, you okay?” Lenora calls. “You’ve been in there for a while. You’re going to be late!”

I jump. “Ah, sh—sorry!”

Out of the shower, toweled off, into my uniform in record time. I glance at my phone, shocked that I won’t have time to eat breakfast, let alone put on makeup. I bite the inside of my cheek and rush out the door.

“Good morning,” Lenora says, coming over and planting a kiss on my cheek.

I try not to stiffen with surprise. My heart gives an extra-hard *thump*.

“Good morning,” I answer.

She hands me a banana and herds me toward the door. “You’re going to be late. Riley’s at the curb.”

I grab my coat and bag, balancing it with the banana, and walk outside.

There’s snow on the ground, and I pause. Winter has made a fast and furious arrival, apparently.

“It’s just a dusting,” Lenora says. “Go!”

“I wish it was summer.” Still, I continue on to Riley’s car, sliding in and slamming the door.

She laughs. “Your coat will work better if you put it on.”

I hand her the banana and my bag. Shove it at her, really. “Hold that.”

Once my coat is on, I take my stuff, and she pulls back onto the road.

“I had a weird dream,” I say. “And I can’t tell what’s real and what’s my imagination.”

She glances at me. “What was it about?”

“My mom and an older Caleb arguing, then Caleb and I were in a field, and then I was in my room...” I shake my head. “I feel like I’m misremembering.” That’s how dreams work. Let them sit in your brain long enough, and the finer details slip away.

“What were they arguing about?”

“I couldn’t hear.”

“An older Caleb—like his dad?”

I flinch. *Why didn’t I think of that?* “Oh my god.”

She bounces in her seat. “Okay, okay, so your mom and Caleb’s dad probably argued at some point.”

I hesitate. She was *really* angry in the dream. Angry when she burst into my room, too.

“Caleb stopped by last night,” I say. I left the bracelet on the dresser. Didn’t even think about grabbing it this morning. My wrist feels shockingly bare without it. “He wanted me to forgive him.”

Riley snorts. “Don’t.”

“I’m not going to.”

“And what did Amelie want? I’m sorry I didn’t go with you, I just... I don’t trust that girl.” Riley parks and shuts the car off. “You didn’t agree to do anything with her, right?”

“Um, no.” I make a face. “She was encouraging me to dump Caleb and tell her what I remember. And... you know those texts I showed you at the beginning of the school year?”

She tilts her head. “The creepy ones from the blocked number.”

“Yeah. Well, they didn’t stop.”

“Margo Wolfe! You never said.”

Heat crawls up my neck. “I didn’t want to freak anyone out.”

“Give it to me.”

I wince, then open my phone to Unknown’s conversation.

She scrolls through it, getting paler by the second. “Fucking hell, Margo. You kept this a secret?”

“I didn’t want to drag you into it,” I whisper. “I mean... I don’t know who it is.”

She blinks at me. “You suspected me.”

“Not directly.” I take my phone back and close out of my messages. The overwhelming majority of messages in that thread are from Unknown—my rare replies don’t seem to dissuade them. “I don’t think it’s you, Riley. Not anymore.”

“They were the ones who took the video? And leaked it.”

I sigh.

“And they sent the picture of you and Ian...”

“I don’t know why they did that.” I rub at my eyes. This no-makeup thing might work in my favor, because I have a feeling I’ll be scrubbing at my face a lot today. “They’re all about making my life miserable... but only on their terms, I guess. And they sure as hell don’t want me around Caleb.”

“They ask a lot of rhetorical fucking questions,” Riley says. “We know anyone like that?”

I laugh. “I doubt it’d be that easy... but Amelie said the text came from Savannah.”

Riley gasps. “Excuse me? I’m going to kill her.”

I grab her arm before she can lunge out of the car and ruin the start of my plan. “I don’t think it’s her.”

“Why?”

“Because...” I shrug. “I don’t know. It’s a gut feeling. Wasn’t she the one to stick up for me after I left?”

Riley shifts. “Yeah. Amelie is a dirty backstabbing snake. Savannah just kind of shunned you to survive. So maybe Savannah’s motive is—”

“Was she at the party?” I ask. “At Ian’s?”

“Um... No? I don’t remember.”

I groan. “There are so many questions and virtually *no* answers.”

We get out of the car and walk toward the courtyard. We cut it pretty close—the doors are going to open any minute. Even with snow on the ground, students mill around in sweatshirts. Some wear jackets, stomping their feet in the cold.

“They’ll probably start letting us go straight in,” Riley tells me. “The courtyard dramatics will be a thing of the past.”

“That wouldn’t be a bad thing.” Except today... today there will be dramatics. I realize that as soon as we round the corner and my eyes go to Caleb.

He’s standing with his friends—all of them except Eli, who’s absent—and Amelie. And four other cheerleaders.

His gaze lands on me, and he raises his eyebrows.

“Why is he looking at you like that?” Riley whispers.

“Probably because I told him we’re done.” I match her volume. “Multiple times.”

It’s like he can hear me, because his lips purse. He slips away from his group and walks toward me.

I hold my breath.

“Maybe he forgot,” Riley offers, covering her smile with her hand. “I mean, you gotta admit—he’s hot for you.”

I glare at her. “He sabotaged me, Ri.”

“Touché.”

“Margo,” Caleb greets me. He reaches out and runs his hand down my arm, lifting my hand. He pushes my jacket sleeve up to expose my bare wrist. His fingers are cold.

Goosebumps break out along my arms and back.

Disappointment flashes across his face, then the mask is back in place. How he slides it on so precisely reminds me of the masquerade ball. The cool gold against my skin.

“You know what you have to do,” he says. Then he drops my hand, stepping back. He turns and goes back to his circle of friends, offering his arm to Amelie.

And oh, my blood boils.

“Did he really just do that?” Riley hisses.

I look away. “He wouldn’t do anything with her.”

Except, I’m not so sure. We’re not together—she’s fair game.

The bell rings, the doors swinging open, and Caleb breaks away from Amelie. He’s swept away by Liam and Theo—intentionally or not, I can’t tell.

We don’t move while students push past us, eager to escape the cold.

Savannah weaves through the students, headed directly for... us.

“What do you think she wants?” I ask.

“To rub in her hatred of you? Or admit that she sent the creepy texts?” Riley asks. “Could be anything.”

Savannah stops in front of me. “Margo.”

“Savannah,” I reply.

“I have an offer for you.”

The need to ask her about sending the picture to Caleb is overwhelming. My desperation for answers is going to show at any minute.

I manage to only say, “Oh?”

She extends her hand. “I propose a truce. We’ll be friends again.”

I snort and glance sideways at Riley. “Is she serious?”

Savannah huffs, rolling her eyes. Her hand is still out, her fingers wiggling slightly. “Don’t worry, you’re not going to suck me down into your outcast circle. If anything, I’ll elevate your status... so it won’t matter if you’re on the outs with Caleb or not.”

The kids in this school can’t seem to make up their minds about who they hate. But at the moment, it’s me. And it’s wearing on Riley, too. She hasn’t said anything about it, but I picked up the comments made about her.

I hate it.

“Riley, too,” I say.

“Fine.”

I raise my eyebrow. “And why are you proposing a truce? Now?”

“Let me guess.” Savannah crosses her arms. “Amelie dove on you like a vulture on roadkill. Saying you guys needed to take a stand against Caleb, how proud she was that you broke up with him, yadda yadda.”

I stare at her.

“She pulled the same shit on me,” she mutters. “And then she started dating him.”

“You two stayed close,” Riley inserts. “If that hurt you, why—”

“I couldn’t let it affect me,” she says. “Come on, Riley. I would’ve been pushed off the cheerleading team if I went up against her.”

“But you’re trying to do that now?” I ask.

“Because history is repeating itself,” she says. “He’s going to watch you fall apart and use Amelie to do it—”

“The golden boys are cruel like that.” Riley rolls her eyes.

Savannah glares at her. “We’re going to be late.”

Riley and I exchange a glance and follow her into the school. She marches ahead of us, oblivious to our slowing pace.

“What do you make of that?” Riley whispers.

“I don’t know. But I’m going to have to sit in homeroom with all of them, so...”

“We don’t know what her intentions are. Amelie just made her stance pretty clear, hanging on his arm like that.”

I take her hand. “Thank you for taking my side. I think I’d be completely lost if you...”

“Other people may have had preconceived notions about you, Margo, but I always try to keep an open mind. And I saw a little bit of myself in you—the bullies targeting you automatically, just because of something you couldn’t control...”

“Is that why you grabbed me that day?”

“Well that, and you were kind of pathetic with your bagged lunch, trying to slip by unnoticed.” She squeezes my hand.

I snort. “I felt pathetic, too.”

We release each other at my homeroom, and I slide into my usual seat in front of Caleb. It’s hard to ignore him, so instead I focus on Savannah and Ian. He’s more sullen than usual, shooting glances toward Amelie.

Amelie was sleeping around on Caleb—with *Ian*. And now Caleb’s just letting her paw at him like a starving kitten.

Kitten. I hold back my amusement. She has more claws and strategy than

a kitten.

Even if I think Caleb's not paying attention, it feels like he's turned toward me. I'm always slightly off-kilter around him.

I glance over at Savannah. She's watching me. Slowly, I nod.

Even if we're in a truce, we're still enemies.

She flashes me a quick grin, then goes back to neutral. Ian's attention goes from her to me. I scowl at him, but it's the wrong move: it just traps his interest.

Savannah catches up to me in the hall after homeroom, pushing a note into my hand. I don't read it until my next class, scanning it then tearing it into tiny pieces. She wants to meet after school.

The day passes relatively quickly. I ignore Caleb and Amelie. Everyone else... well, that's another story. In Robert's class, Caleb sits across the room. I welcome it, because I'm getting sick of being ignored. And I suspect he's going to pay me a visit tonight, anyway...

Operation: Dethrone the King is going to be a work in progress.

Robert pauses by my easel. "How're you doing?"

"Fine," I say.

"Is Caleb leaving you alone?"

"Yeah." I try not to let my voice sound bitter. I wanted this. I need this.

I need to pull myself away from Caleb—our history *and* whatever fucked-up relationship we had.

"Is it okay if I have friends over after school?"

Robert's eyebrows go up, then he grins at me. "You said friends. Plural."

I blush.

"Okay, okay, I won't interrogate you. You catching a ride with them?"

"Riley, yeah." I look past my foster dad to Caleb, who is once again angled in my direction.

Thankfully, he keeps his eyes on his canvas.

"Good. I forgot about a department meeting after school. Time's almost up," Robert says. "If he gives you trouble, you let me know."

I frown. "Aren't you supposed to be impartial? Since you're a teacher?"

He offers me a small smile. "Yeah, the teacher in me should. But as a dad, I'm ready to knock his teeth in for hurting you."

I smile back, although inside... inside my lungs are shredding. Not as a foster dad—as a dad.

Don't read too much into this, Margo.

“Mr. Jenkins?” one of the students calls.

He winks and turns away from me. I watch him go, reminding myself to breathe. My attention drifts back toward the canvas. I’ll need to work on the rest of my portrait of Caleb soon, although I don’t want to. I may as well do it while the anger is fresh in my mind—because who else knows his soul better than me?

The person he only wants to destroy.

The bell rings, shattering my concentration. The room explodes into movement, everyone hurrying to pack up their belongings, while I sit still. What’s the hurry? The buses will leave, and then it’ll just be the upperclassmen in their cars. Riley isn’t aggressive enough to be one of the first out.

Caleb is putting his things together slowly—too slowly. I roll up my brushes and cover the palette with paint on it, stashing it in one of the drawers at the back of the class.

And then I get the hell out of dodge.

Riley’s waiting for me at my locker, her foot jigging. “God, I thought you might’ve gotten kidnapped or something!”

I laugh. “Who would kidnap me?”

She huffs. “I don’t know. Listen. We need to ask Savannah about that text. I don’t trust her with a ten-foot pole.”

“Yeah.” My stomach flips. “Savannah is going to meet us at my place.”

Riley grunts. “Lovely.”

We walk out to her car, and I nudge her with my elbow. “Where was Eli today?”

It isn’t common for any of the golden boys to miss school—it’s practically sacrilege. Theo and Liam were more subdued today, too. Only Caleb continued on as normal. Well, the new version of normal, where he ignores me and lets Amelie grope him in the hallways.

“He had a family emergency.” She links her arm with mine. “He had to fly to Chicago.”

“Hope everything’s okay.”

She sighs. “He was touchy about it.”

We head toward the Jenkins’s house, and I pull out my phone. “What if I text Unknown while Savannah is with us? If she answers, then that means she’s guilty, right?”

Riley taps the steering wheel. “Yeah, unless it’s like a burner phone or

something.”

“Then why go to the trouble of blocking it?”

“Fair point. Ah, shit, she’s already here. Okay, fine. You text her, and we’ll just wait.” She parks on the street behind Savannah’s car.

The three of us climb out and head up the front walkway. Savannah keeps flipping her hair back like a nervous habit.

Lenora isn’t home yet, and Robert sounded like the meeting might take a while. We spread our things out at the kitchen island, the two of them claiming stools while I grab drinks.

“You make yourself at home here, huh?” Savannah asks.

Riley chokes. “Excuse you?”

Savannah glances at her, cracking a can of soda open. “I mean…”

I cross my arms.

“I just…” Savannah struggles. “Okay, sorry, I’m an idiot.”

“This is my home,” I say quietly. I acknowledge in the back of my mind that this is the first time I’ve admitted it.

“I’m sorry.”

Riley shakes her head. “This was a mistake, Margo.”

Savannah glares at her. “I’m trying. I’ve had Amelie in my ear this whole semester—”

“You wanted this truce, or whatever this is,” I remind her. I’m not in the mood to get fucked over by Savannah Dunley, especially after the trick Amelie pulled.

She takes a deep breath, then sticks out her hand. “I apologize, Margo. Sincerely. And my friends call me Sav.”

I shake her hand.

Riley does the same, squeezing hard enough to make my old best friend wince.

“Okay,” Riley says. “Let’s get to work.”

Sav raises an eyebrow. “You two been plotting without me?”

I grin. “We’re going to dethrone the king.”

CALEB

Liam looks at me like I've lost my mind. And maybe I have.
“What?” My voice is low.
“Nothing,” he says, glancing away.

I clench my jaw. Amelie is heading back in our direction, a small smile on her lips. Margo got in Riley's car without so much as glancing over at us, so the ruse can drop—except Amelie doesn't get the memo. She sits beside me and drapes her arm around my shoulders, leaning into me.

She has on a jacket and boots, while we're in sweatpants and t-shirts. The snow melted during the day, but the air is still brisk.

I stand, knocking her away. “Fuck off,” I growl at her.

She blinks up at me from the ground. “What?”

“You heard me.”

Liam snickers.

I raise my eyebrow. “Unless you'd like Theo to remove you from my sight?”

Our practice is going to start any minute, so I don't know why she's even here.

I've been eager to blow off some steam. Having to wait for Margo to come to me has been excruciating.

She's mine. I know it. My friends know it. The whole school fucking knows it, no matter what she or Amelie say. The only one who isn't convinced is Margo Wolfe.

And what a little wolf she's becoming.

I catch Theo's eye. He's been talking to Coach about strategies. At my

head jerk, he breaks away and heads in our direction.

Amelie shoots to her feet. “Okay, okay. I’ll see you later.”

She hurries away just as Theo arrives. “What the fuck is she doing here?”

I shrug.

Liam coughs. “She knows she can’t have you, Theo, so she’s trying to get in Caleb’s pants instead.”

Theo laughs, and I turn and shove Liam. Asshole.

“All right,” Coach calls, blowing his whistle. “Get over here, you lazy gits.”

We jog over. There are most of the guys from last year, with a few exceptions. The big gaps come from last year’s seniors, which Coach will try to fill during freshmen tryouts at the end of the week. That way, we’ll have the whole winter to prepare for the season ahead of us. Coach will start spewing out things about team comradery and all that. Over spring break, we go away to a training camp—and then the real work begins.

As captain, it’s my job to keep the team together.

But my mind keeps straying back to Margo.

“Asher!” Coach snaps.

I jerk. “Yes, sir?”

“Take them for a two-mile run. When you get back, we’re doing drills.”

Easing us into it. I nod and lift my chin. “You heard him. Let’s go.”

Ten guys fall into step behind me.

The air is cold enough to make the run brutal. My lungs are on fire by the time we get back to the field. But no one complains. The freshmen will, but not us.

“Not bad,” Coach says. “Take five minutes, then line up.”

By the time practice is over, all of us are sweating messes. Coach holds me and Theo back while the rest go to the locker room.

“I’m making you two co-captains,” Coach says without preamble.

I scowl. “Why?”

“Because your head is up your ass,” Coach answers. “I got a call from your uncle yesterday. He thinks you need a little incentive to pay more attention.”

I grimace.

Theo shakes his head. “I don’t want it.”

“You take it or I’m picking Ian—and he won’t be co-captain, he’ll be *captain*. Period.”

Theo looks at me, then slowly nods. Yeah, it's a blow to my ego, but I can suck it up. Theo and I work well together without exchanging too many words.

"Head in, boys," Coach says. "I expect you both to be leaders at tryouts."

We nod. I've only taken a few steps when Coach calls me back.

"Where's your list of schools?" he asks. "We discussed this the other day."

Fucking hell.

"Did my uncle call to ask about that, too?"

He grunts. "I mean it, Caleb. Get your head out of your ass and think smart. Deadlines are approaching."

I shake my head. "That it?"

He appraises me. Sometimes I make him mad enough that I think he's going to take a swing at me. But then again, he's a teacher and I'm a student. Whose side would they take?

"Go on." He jerks his head toward the school.

Most of the team is done and gone by the time I get into the locker room. A quick, hot shower warms my bones. But I can't shake the feeling that pressure is creeping up on me. My uncle, my mom. They're prying.

Liam waits for me by my locker. "What'd he want?"

"Theo's co-captain with me now."

He shakes his head. "Shit. What'd you do to deserve that?"

I eye him. "Probably stuck my dick where he didn't want it."

Liam snorts. "That'd explain why he picked Theo instead of Eli or me."

Coach is all about the sport. No time for lust or mind games. No time for drinking, partying, girls.

"This is a serious sport!" he frequently yelled at us.

I'm pretty sure he lives alone and parties hard in the summer—when there's no lacrosse practice to worry about, no footage to analyze.

He's still in his prime. Maybe only thirty years old. Fit. Angry.

As I said: the original golden boy.

"How's Mar—I mean, Amelie?" Liam asks.

I shake my head. "I'm not touching Amelie. She's fucking delusional."

"You may not be touching her, but she sure as hell has no problem draping herself over you like a damn wet towel."

I roll my eyes, grabbing my bag. We walk out together. "She's got an issue with Theo and wants me to save her from it."

Liam shakes his head. “Not gonna comment on that.”

“And you?” I look over at him. “No girls you’re chasing?”

“Nope. Free as a bird!”

He’s a lying bastard. All of us are. It’s the glue that holds us together. That and undying loyalty. I might want to punch Liam’s face in sometimes, but I’d kill for him. He’d do the same for me.

“You have a plan?”

I shrug. “Maybe.”

Liar. He doesn’t say it, but his face sure does.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

We get to my car. His is in the shop—it’s always in the shop—so Theo and I have been taking turns getting him. If he didn’t live in the middle of nowhere, it would be a different story.

“I found something,” I tell him once we’re on the road. “A note.”

“A note,” Liam repeats.

“Yeah. Just shut up and fucking listen, would you?” When he doesn’t reply, I continue, “After Margo went missing, I broke into her room. I was going to take a picture of the family... I told them that Margo’s mom was responsible for giving their daughter drugs.”

“Isn’t that what happened?”

I narrow my eyes. “No.”

Liam huffs. “And I suppose you know the truth, huh?”

“Amberly hasn’t left town,” I mutter. “I was going to take the picture and go ask her...”

“Fuck, man. That’s a terrible idea.”

“I threatened her to leave, but she hasn’t. So she’s here for something.” I hate not knowing.

“Margo?” Liam asks.

“She might try to reach out,” I allow. “But after what Margo did... I don’t think that’s the reason.”

“And you don’t know?”

I grind my teeth. “She’s not at the same motel. I can’t find her.”

She called me and *said* my mother knew where she was. I could’ve moved her. Helped. But I didn’t, and now she’s gone. My leverage has vanished.

Liam’s driveway is long and winding. We finally get to his house on a hill, and I kill the engine.

“You’ll find her,” he says.

“Not without asking.” And I’m definitely not asking anyone who’ll know. He climbs out of the car. “Wanna chill?”

I shrug and get out, following him into the house. It’s old, the front door squeaking on loud hinges upon opening and closing. Liam’s family used to be made of money like the rest of us, but that changed a few years ago. He managed to stay at Emery-Rose by applying for scholarship, and he’s one of the few students who received it.

It’s hush-hush, though.

“That you, Liam?”

“Yeah, Mom,” he calls. We kick off our shoes. “Caleb brought me home.”

His mom rounds a corner and grins. She has flour on her cheek. “I was just making bread. Are you staying for dinner, Caleb?”

With Eli’s family out of town, I’ve been on my own. It hasn’t been half bad, actually. But someone offering to cook for me...

“I’d love to,” I say.

She smiles. “Wonderful. Jacob will be home soon.”

Jacob is Liam’s younger brother. He goes to the public school.

I follow Liam up to his room. “How is she?”

He grunts. “Stressed as always. Jake just got his license, and our parents splurged and got him a car. I think they forgot about the insurance rate for new drivers. He’s going to have to get a job if he wants to keep it, otherwise...”

“He’ll get there,” I say, even if I don’t believe it.

Liam nods sharply. “What’d Theo say about the whole co-captain thing?”

“Not much.” I flop into his desk chair and kick out my legs. “He deserves it.”

“That’s nice of you. Seeing as how you’ve held on to the captainship with a bloody grip since junior year.”

My phone rings, pausing my retort. I flash the screen at Liam, and his eyebrows jump up.

“Didn’t know your mom remembered your number,” he mutters. He stands and leaves the room, closing the door behind me.

“Yes?” I answer, leaning back in the chair. The front two legs lift off the floor.

“Caleb?” my mother asks. Like she’s not sure.

“What can I do for you, Mother?”

She huffs. “What a greeting. Where are you?”

“A friend’s house,” I drawl, gaze on the ceiling. Talking to her is painful, like going to the dentist to have a cavity filled.

“But not the Blacks,” she says. “Eli’s mother called to check in, said they were going to be in Chicago for another few days.”

Silence.

“You didn’t say they were out of town,” she finishes.

“I didn’t know you cared.” The chair slams back down.

“I’m in town.” Her voice is stiff, like she hates talking to me. “We’re having dinner at David’s house tonight. Six o’clock.”

I glance at my watch. It’s almost five thirty. “Thanks for the notice,” I say. They’re at least a forty-five-minute drive from Eli’s—longer from Liam’s. “I already have dinner plans.”

“Caleb Asher,” she starts.

“Sorry, Mother. If you want dinner plans, maybe you should’ve let me know sooner.”

I hang up, throwing my phone across Liam’s desk. There will be consequences for this. Not from Mother Dearest, of course. Uncle David will take it as a personal offense. And unfortunately, he has a bit more sway in my life than she does.

I leave my phone in his room and go downstairs, joining Liam and Jake at the table. They’re playing cards while their mother bustles around the kitchen, and I try to ignore the swooping feeling in my gut.

They used to live in the Jenkins’s house until Liam’s dad got demoted. Suddenly, their whole family was put on a shoestring budget. No more fancy house in Rose Hill with an expensive mortgage, and no more fancy private school for their son—until he got the scholarship, that is.

Still, he’s done the best he can. They converted their basement into a game room to keep the boys from going out and spending money, and they’ve always welcomed me, Eli, and Theo. The Morrisons are a blessing on lost boys like us.

“Your father is working late,” she says to her sons. She places a pot of soup in the center of the table. “If you could pause the game, boys, we’ll eat.”

We each get our own oval loaf of bread to carve out, and then we dump the tomato bisque into the bread bowls. The love that went into this meal makes me uncomfortable. I eat with Eli’s family most nights, but they have a

chef who prepares most of the food.

This was... There's still flour on Liam's mom's cheek from the bread.

Jake looks up and notices, his eyes softening. Liam worries about his brother, but as long as he's treating his mom okay...

I should know. It's the golden benchmark nowadays.

I'm lucky Margo doesn't know how I treat my mother—and hers.

Jake leans over and brushes the flour from her cheeks.

She smiles, touching the back of his hand for a brief moment.

I shift in my seat. Affection is something that's been a little sparse in my life... except Margo. I don't think I've ever had anyone care as much as she does, even if she tries not to. Even if she pretends otherwise. Even if she's fucking *pissed* at me.

That's one thing I'll continue to be jealous about: Liam has a mom who gives a shit.

"The soup is delicious," I tell her.

"Thank you, dear. Old family recipe."

She asks Liam and Jake about school and sports, then turns her attention on me. I answer her questions the best I can—how I'm getting on and dealing with school and whatever. And then dinner's over, and I go retrieve my phone from Liam's room.

"Sorry about the interrogation." Liam picks up a lacrosse ball. He tosses it from one hand to the other.

"It's nice that someone cares," I mumble. "I gotta go."

My phone has three missed calls—one from my mother and two from Uncle David.

Once I'm in the car, I call him back.

"My house. Now."

I sigh. "I was invited to dinner by my friend's mom. I'd already accepted by the time Mother called to ask—"

"It's perfectly acceptable to tell them that your presence has been requested—"

"Request makes it sound like a choice," I interrupt. I don't have time for this. I'll pay for it later, but right now, I don't really give a shit.

"Let me remind you who your legal guardian is until you're eighteen," he growls. "Do not make me—"

I hang up on him, turning onto Margo's street. There are cars in front of her house. Riley's is easy to recognize... but Savannah's is a bit more

surprising.

I park down the street and slip across the front lawn, quickly scaling the side of her house. The light is off in her bedroom, the window unlocked. Almost like she's expecting me.

I'm pulling my leg through just as the front porch light flickers on, and girls' voices drift toward me. Talk about good timing.

"See you tomorrow," Riley calls.

"Bye," Margo answers.

Savannah doesn't say anything, but she waves and walks to her car.

Interesting.

I sit on her bed and pick up the sleep shirt she left on her pillow. She might hate me, but I can't stay away.

I've tried—but life is so much more exciting with Margo around.

MARGO

Sav suggested rumors. Evil, irrefutable claims that will turn the school against anyone.

Riley wants justice through more proper channels. *Rising above* and all that shit.

“No,” I say. “We can’t go easy. We...” I shake my head. “Total annihilation.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” Riley asks.

“What throne do the king and queen sit on?” I pull out my phone as I speak. Savannah isn’t really paying attention, and I hit send on a pre-typed out text to Unknown.

Me: *Why did you help me with Ian?*

I place it face-down on the counter, my hand trembling.

Sav frowns. “You’re not thinking what I think you’re thinking...”

Riley looks back and forth between the two of us.

This brings back memories. Good ones. Bad ones.

Sav and I always had a wicked streak. We always knew how to push the buttons of every single person around us. It’s what made me a bad foster kid, because even after I was taken from my home, I didn’t know how to stop that side of me.

After my third home, I learned.

The black eye and bruised cheekbone taught me well.

“We go after them where it counts,” I say. “Friends. Sports.”

Riley groans. “You’re talking... like... destroy them.”

I shrug. “Caleb wanted to destroy me. And Sav? You know Amelie doesn’t care about you.”

To my surprise, her eyes fill with tears. “I just didn’t expect her to be a backstabbing bitch,” she whispers. “We were so close up until junior year. Then she started dating Caleb after basically convincing me to stop sleeping with him, and I...”

Her eyes snap to mine like she’s realized her mistake.

And yeah, the thought of Sav sleeping with Caleb makes me want to throat punch her. But I channel Riley. *Rising above.*

I lift one shoulder. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not. I’m jealous of you, too.”

She stands, but I grab her wrist.

“No.” I narrow my eyes at her. “Reality check, Sav: you only hate me because *he* made you hate me.”

I’d finally figured it out. After I left, Savannah tried to stick up for me. And Caleb led the mob to lynch her. *And me.*

Amelie’s role? She did nothing. She was a friend, but now she’s on top of the pyramid.

“You wanted a truce,” I point out. “Something must’ve made you snap beyond Amelie doing the same thing to me that she did to you...”

I glance at Riley. Sav hasn’t gone for her phone. It hasn’t made a peep since we’ve been here.

Sav sighs and drops her face into her hands. “I’m an idiot,” she groans. “I got used to Amelie not being around. I liked that she didn’t make snide comments—”

Riley leans forward. “I gotta know why you approached us now. Did they say something to you?”

Savannah lifts her head. “Promise you won’t tell?”

Riley and I exchange a glance. Secrecy was tradecraft amongst foster siblings, ingrained in me since I realized how much I needed allies. There was either unbreakable trust or... *not*. I hold out my hand, my pinky finger extended.

Riley hooks her finger with mine, and Sav joins, too.

“Okay,” I say, “now tell us?”

She sucks in a deep breath. “When I was a sophomore, I dated a senior.”

Riley and I both stare at her. “Okay.”

“I was fifteen... he was eighteen.” Sav’s gaze bounces between Riley and me, then she blurts out, “We had sex, okay? And even if it was consensual—which it *was*—”

Riley makes a face. “Did someone threaten to tell?”

Sav bursts into tears. “Amelie told me to stay away from Caleb and his friends, or else she’d tell everyone what I did. She promised she would have Will arrested and labeled as a sexual predator.”

Riley’s eyes widen. “Holy shit. William *Alistair*? Theo’s older brother?”

Savannah wipes her eyes, trying to control herself.

I grab a tissue and pass it to her, tilting my head. “Do you still like Will?”

“I m-miss him,” she hiccups. “It was a secret. No one knew except for Amelie. But I broke up with him... But he t-took me to the masquerade ball, and Amelie threatened to expose us again.”

“Do you believe her?”

She swallows, composing herself, and nods. “I believe she’d follow through on it. She’s big on threats... especially when she’s feeling threatened.”

“Wow,” Riley mutters. “You two pranced all over school last year, acting like the best of friends. It was a lie?”

“We *were* friends... for the most part. Unless I did something Amelie didn’t like.”

This is becoming more than just about Caleb—Savannah’s vendetta is about Amelie. It’s relieving to turn our attention away from the golden boy none of us can stand. Caleb’s brand of bullying is vicious. Amelie is eviler—and of the two of them, she needs to be put in her place more.

I grimace. “Okay, so any takedown can’t directly involve any of us, unless we want to deal with Amelie’s wrath. Which, I personally don’t.”

I hadn’t thought of Amelie very much in the years after I left. Savannah and I were best friends, and Amelie joined in. Once I was gone, she took my place and kept her head down. Savannah renounced me, and Amelie welcomed her back into the inner circle with open arms. Her beauty and lethal charm have kept her on the top of the food chain for too long.

And the same could be said about Caleb.

“Ah,” Sav says, glancing at the clock on the wall. “I’ve got to go. My parents will be expecting me.”

Riley stands. “Me, too.”

“We didn’t really decide anything.” Sav shrugs. “But if the name of the

game is sabotage—baby steps, right?”

“Right,” I repeat.

I see them out, then go back to my phone. Unknown hasn’t replied, but I have a new text from Lenora.

Lenora: *Robert had to work late, so I’m picking up dinner. Will be home around seven!*

Me: *Okay, take your time*

It’s seven thirty. Clearly my words are unnecessary, because they’re not home yet. I clean the kitchen, putting the empty glasses in the dishwasher and running a wet rag across the island. Leaving a space how I found it is one way of staying out of trouble.

Even if Savannah, Riley, and I fail at the revenge we’re plotting, I can’t deny that it’s nice to have another friend.

I grab my backpack and trek up the stairs, slipping into my room and closing the door behind me. I whirl around, half expecting Caleb to be there. My window is cracked, a cold breeze blowing inside.

I cross the room and slam it shut. The snow is gone from the front yard—meaning any evidence of Caleb sneaking in is nonexistent. I let out a sigh and flip on the light. May as well do homework.

Robert gets home a while later and comes upstairs, knocking on my door. “Did your friends leave?”

“Yeah, Sav had to get home for dinner.”

He nods. “Lenora said she was going to pick up dinner, but I think she got sidetracked. There’s an outlet store right next to the pizza place.”

I snort.

“Hungry?”

“We snacked,” I say, shrugging. “I’m good for now... and I need to catch up on this stuff.”

“All right, back to work then.” He taps the door, then closes me back in.

I look around the room, pulling my leg up to my chest. I wrap my arms around it and put my chin on my knee, closing my eyes for a minute. It isn’t that I want to be the queen bee—to take Amelie’s place. I just want her to

realize how wrong she's been.

She needs to fall... and Caleb does, too.

He's been hoping to break me, and he took his best shot. But it just isn't happening.

I'm strong.

I close my books, turn off the light, and stretch out flat. It takes a long while for the energy to sap out of my muscles. In that time, Lenora comes home, her voice floating up during her conversation with Robert, and she peeks her head into my room on her way to hers.

I lie perfectly still, not in the mood to chat with her.

I relax at her small exhale, the door closing behind her.

Sleep comes in small pieces, dragging me under and then waking me with a snap.

My mind swings from Josie to Caleb, back and forth like a pendulum. I don't know why she's haunting my thoughts tonight, but I can't get the ghost out of my mind. I let her marinate in my head for a while: a girl I've never met, will never meet, and can't shake.

I wonder if she lived here. In this room.

Something taps my window.

I flinch, scrambling upright. I expect Caleb's face to be staring back at me. Instead, there's nothing except moonlight.

The tap comes again, harder, and I creep closer.

Three hours have passed. It's midnight.

And Caleb stands below my window. His arm winds back, and he tosses something toward me.

A little pebble hits the glass.

I jerk open the window, sticking my head out.

"Come for a midnight stroll with me," he says.

"Are you crazy?" I whisper-yell. "How?"

"You could sneak out the back door," he says. "Or climb down..."

I roll my eyes. "No."

He spreads his arms wide. "Come join me, Margo. Or I'll join *you*."

I swallow. One encounter at night is enough, thank you very much. Especially with Robert and Lenora just down the hall. They can probably hear our conversation.

"Five minutes," he calls, sticking his hands in his pockets. He wanders away, toward the street. His car is parked in front of a neighbor's house.

I grimace. This isn't the first time I've snuck out of a house—but it would be the first time I did it to meet a boy.

To do it or not.

Going back to bed—that would be the smart choice. Lock the window and the doors, hunker down. Avoid Caleb.

That would be letting him win, though. Past Margo would've let him come to her, just to prove that she didn't feel the magnetic fucking allure of Caleb Asher.

No. No more intimidation. No more being forced into doing things in fear of fucked up consequences. I'm making the choice to see what he wants.

I'm pulling my boots on, silently cursing my resolve. I try to tell myself that going down to meet Caleb isn't giving in. His true victory would be if I *didn't*.

Him stealing into my room, pressing me into the mattress...

Stop thinking about it, I order myself, grabbing my jacket. I creep down the hall and to the back door. It squeaks the faintest amount, but then I'm through, and it closes silently. Through the mudroom. Outside.

I freeze when the sensor light clicks on, illuminating the backyard. The light catches snow falling.

They could think it's anything, I reason. A racoon, an owl.

Not their foster daughter.

I edge along the house, keeping to the shadows, until I spot Caleb.

He smirks at me, lifting himself off the hood of his car.

"What do you want?" I demand.

His smirk widens. "Couldn't resist, huh?"

"I'd prefer you not be in my room," I answer.

He doesn't look any the worse for wear, unfortunately. Full lips and eyes that pierce through me. No one ever said the devil was handsome, but he is. Devastatingly so.

"For what I have planned, your room wouldn't have sufficed."

I swallow. It sounds ominous, and I realize how stupid I am to have come out here.

He pulls his hand out of his pocket and tosses something to me. I catch it on reflex, then glance down at the keys in my hand.

"What is this?"

"Car keys," he says, like it's obvious.

I mean, it *is* obvious that they're his car keys. But why he would give

them to me is anyone's guess. I'm tempted to chuck them into the bushes behind us. That'd serve him right.

"Why?" I ask.

"Just get in the car, Margo." He turns and sits in... the passenger seat.

I shake my head. He can't be serious. A heavy feeling comes over my limbs, making it hard to open the driver's door and lower myself into the car.

"Adjust the seat."

When I don't move, he leans over me and does it for me; a little button on the side slides the seat forward and up.

"Keys in the ignition." He's still close, his head tilted so he can meet my eyes.

I try not to inhale. The car smells like his cologne—the same scent in my bed. It's familiar and distant at the same time. It carves a hollow space in my chest where my heart should be.

He sits back, watching me like this is just another fucking game.

"Why?" I ask.

"Because it's cold out, and if we're just going to sit here, I'd like to be warm." He shrugs. "Your choice."

That didn't answer anything. I stick the key in and twist.

His hand snakes out, covering mine. "No need to hold it there. Gentle with this baby."

I release the pressure on the key, and the engine catches, purring. Heat pours from the vents.

"A nighttime driving lesson," I murmur. "Probably not the greatest place to start."

He lifts his shoulder. "Even if we don't go anywhere, I figured you'd be more comfortable in the driver's seat."

I keep my eyes on the dash. "Why?"

"Because you're in control." His voice is low.

A secret admission.

I tighten my grip. It's confusing—one minute he's brash, angry, spiteful. And the next he's trying to get me to kiss him back and telling me I'm killing him, and giving me control...

Which version of Caleb is the truth?

"I can't—" I grab the door handle. I need to get out of here and sort through my feelings on my own. Away from his influence.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know," he says. "But only tonight."

Only if you stay.”

I twist toward him, shaking my head. “There’s always a catch.”

He smiles. “No catch. Not tonight.”

I drop my hand into my lap, and lean back, getting comfortable. I remind myself that this is my choice—even if it isn’t—and I can go back inside at any moment.

“Why did you mess with my previous foster homes?” I ask.

“I didn’t want you to be happy.”

I roll my head to the side, looking at him. It’s no surprise that he’s already watching me. I don’t think he’s taken his eyes off of me. “Why?”

“Because I haven’t been happy since you told.”

“What did I—”

“Careful, Margo,” he murmurs. “I’ll tell you if you want to know. But there are some things you probably aren’t ready to hear.”

I press my lips together. “Was there a field of tall grass that we used to go play in?”

“Not that I remember. Just the park. Why?”

“I had a dream,” I say. “You and my mom were arguing. No—it wasn’t you. It was your dad. Mom got so mad, she threw a glass.”

“You were hiding outside.”

I blink at him. “That was real?”

“Yes. They argued sometimes. Chefs are known to have hot tempers... and my dad had one, too.”

I gulp.

“What else happened in the dream?” His fingers twitch on his thigh.

“Mom came into my room and shook me.”

He nods. “She held in a lot of anger.”

“Because of something I did?” I don’t want to know. I decide that the instant the words come out of my mouth.

Caleb’s lips part in slow motion. He already gave me the warning that he would answer any question.

I lunge across the seat, slapping my hand over his lips. “I don’t want to know.”

His lips move against my palm, and his eyes crease. A smile. Even if I can’t see it, I know it’s devious.

Slowly, I remove my hand. I brush my thumb along his lower lip, and his smile fades. He doesn’t come toward me like he might’ve before.

Something's changed between us in just a few days.

"Kiss me," he whispers.

I shake my head. There are more questions, but right now, every beat of my heart is screaming at me to lean forward and touch him more. And every ounce of my brain begs me to run away.

The heart can only win so many times.

I fling the door open and jump out, running back toward the house. It's easier to sneak in. I kick off my shoes and jacket in the mudroom and grab a glass of water—a plausible excuse if I've ever heard of one.

And it's a good thing, too, because Robert appears at the top of the stairs.

"Everything okay?" he asks.

I nod, plastering on a smile to hide my alarm. "Yeah, I just woke up with a dry throat." I lift the glass as evidence.

"Okay." He turns and ambles back to his room.

I follow him.

Back in my room, I scan it and close the door. Would I put it past Caleb to come in? Not in the slightest.

I cross to the window. His car is still there, idling. But as I watch, it pulls out onto the street and speeds away. I exhale and close my curtains, falling back into bed.

Savannah, Riley, and I have a plan—well, an idea of a plan. I just need to focus and not let Caleb suck me back to him.

MARGO

The rest of the week is non-eventful. There's not much happening at school. Football has moved almost exclusively to away games, and no other sport has begun. We catch glimpses of the lacrosse starters getting back into shape for the season, running around the field even when it snows.

The school whispers about tryouts. Freshmen stick together in the hallways, groups of boys with gangly arms and legs who want to make a name for themselves here. The competition is tough, Sav tells me. Only a select few get to stay on the team permanently—valuable assets that Coach handpicks. The golden boys, obviously, plus Ian and a few others. The rest of the team spots are free game.

And oh, I never realized how bloodthirsty teenage boys could be.

Caleb comes up to me when I'm at my locker on Friday. "Come to tryouts."

I snort. "No."

Once you get in the habit of standing up for yourself, it gets easier and easier to *keep* standing up for yourself. Because not letting people run over you feels good. Great, even.

"It's a big thing." He ducks his head toward me. "Half the school shows up like they're fucking college scouts. It's a party."

"I've never heard of that being a thing," I say.

He shrugs. "Ask anyone. Even your new friend, Sav."

My gaze cuts to him. "What do you know about that?"

"Just people talking about how *nice* it is. You know, the two who were

torn apart by tragedy finally found their way back to friendship.”

“You’re joking.”

“So, tryouts. They’re today after school.”

“Good luck,” I say absently, grabbing the last book I need and slamming the door shut.

“Wait—”

I pause and turn back around. “What?”

“Why are you telling *me* good luck?” He gets closer and squints at me.

“I hope you make the team.” I shift.

“I’m on the team. I’m a captain.”

A nervous thrill runs through me. It’s fun to push his buttons, I’m realizing. I give him my best smile. “If you say so.”

He narrows his eyes, but I hurry away. I make it to class right before the bell rings, slipping into my seat. It’s the one class I have with no one else. The teacher is talking to one of the students at the front of the room, so I open my group chat on my phone.

Me: *He wants me to go to tryouts.*

Sav: *Cheerleading tryouts are at the same time.*

I bite my lip.

Me: *Sav, you have to be at the cheer one. Riley, come with me.*

Riley: *Are you doing this just because you’re curious or...*

Me: *I want to see the implosion.*

“Let’s get started,” the teacher calls.

I stuff my phone into my bag, wondering how the hell I’m going to pull this off. There’s a note, along with a picture, tucked alongside my notebooks. And while I cringe to think of his coach looking at it... it’s the best chance to dethrone Caleb.

Riley finds me before lunch and nudges me. “Did you do it?”

“Not yet,” I mutter.

“Give it to me.” She holds out her hand.

I give her the envelope, my stomach twisting.

“Now’s not the time to back down.”

We get to the library, where Sav is waiting at the door, then Riley slips back into the flow of students headed for the cafeteria... which is conveniently next to the gymnasium and sports coaches’ offices.

“You wimp out?” Sav plops down on one of the chairs and takes her lunch out of her purse.

“Riley offered.”

“Nice of her. Probably better if you don’t get seen down there, anyway.”

“And have you solidified your plan for Amelie?” I ask, biting into my sandwich.

She grins. “Yep. She’s drinking a laxative as we speak. According to my mother, it’ll move through her system in about four hours.”

I wince.

“She’s gonna either be shitty at the top of the pyramid or... you know.” She winks. “But she’s gonna figure it out. It’ll blow back on us.”

“But you’ll be captain,” I say.

“And Caleb will be brought down to one of the average folks when he’s kicked off the team,” she finishes. “All will be right in the world.”

“Have you spoken to Will?”

Her face closes down. “I mentioned Amelie’s threat like an idiot. He said he couldn’t risk it.”

“It being...”

“A relationship. I just got him back, too.” Tears fill her eyes. “Amelie’s going to know it was me and tell everyone—”

“I’ll take credit,” I blurt out. Footsteps alert us to Riley’s return. “That was fast—”

It isn’t Riley.

Ian saunters toward us, a weird smile on his face. “Caught you.”

Sav stands. “What?”

“I knew you two were up to something fishy. Where’s Applebottom?”

“It’s Appleton,” I snap. Since staying in his house, my fear of him has dwindled. Weird how that happened. “And no one invited you to stick your nose in our business, so get out of here.”

He circles around us and picks up my apple. Falling into the chair Riley normally sits in, he takes a bite and grins. “I think I’d rather take the blame

for whatever you plan on doing to Amelie.”

“Why?”

“Because she was just sleeping with me to get Caleb’s attention.” He takes another bite and speaks with a mouthful. “Well?”

Sav and I exchange a glance.

“What’s in it for you?”

He sighs. “I’m assuming you did something to Caleb, too? I’ve got to admit, no one will see this coming. The cheer princess and the sheep... and the nobody.” He points to Riley, who has appeared silently. “It’s creepy how you ghost around this school.”

She glares at him.

“What did Caleb do to you?” I ask.

“I admire the way you got under his skin so easily,” he says to me, as if I hadn’t just asked a question. “It’s the kind of move I wish I had more finesse in. Because you were buried in there and when you left, you damn near ripped his heart out.”

My mouth drops open, but Savannah just nods along, biting her lip.

“I don’t think you understand how cruel a hurting boy can be,” he adds. “And I’m not going to rehash everything, but let’s just say—he was a feral animal until Eli, Liam, and Theo came along. Somehow they managed to get him under control.”

“They don’t control him,” I say. “They just...”

“They get it,” Riley says. “Eli—”

“Oh, bore.” Ian pretends to fall asleep. “Your first love is a twisted son of a bitch, ain’t that right? Caleb found his tribe and left the rest of us in their wake.”

He stands, dropping the half-eaten apple in my hand on his way out. “We know you like sloppy seconds.”

I grimace, tempted to chuck it at his head, when Sav grabs my hand.

“Don’t,” she whispers. “He has motive to hate Amelie, too, for using him.”

“The people in this school are sick,” Riley says, clutching at her throat. “I thought I knew the extent of it, but I had no idea.”

Savannah crosses her arms. “It’s because the administration is slave to the families who donate. And you can guess who those are: The Ashers, the Blacks, the Fletchers, the Alistairs.”

Caleb, Eli, Ian, Theo.

“What about Liam?” I ask.

She scoffs. “He hides his poor roots well.”

Riley chokes. “That’s not nice, Sav.”

“It is what it is. No one talks about it because he’s a golden boy. But you just watch—he follows the rules a bit closer than his friends, because the school can take his scholarship away like that.”

She snaps her fingers, and we flinch.

“You’d be the same way, Margo. If you were still living with your parents in the back of Caleb’s house.”

I shake my head. “If I was still there, everything would be different.”

Sav rolls her eyes. “Maybe.”

But maybe not. I can hear it in her voice—the doubt. It’s more of a gut feeling on my part, and I don’t bother explaining. If our families hadn’t cracked apart, I don’t know if we’d still be living there. But there wouldn’t be the animosity in Caleb’s eyes.

I know I put it there.

Somehow.

I stand. “Ian’s going to take credit for Amelie’s... accident. Riley and I will go to the game and see how Coach reacts. You act normal at cheer...”

“Great.” Sav takes the apple from me and bites into it.

What is it with these people and stealing my apples?

I gather my things and throw my backpack over my shoulder, walking into the hallway just as the lacrosse coach storms out.

“You,” he barks at me.

I jump.

“With me. Right now.”

“I have to get to class...”

“I’ll write you a fucking note,” he growls, stalking toward the cafeteria.

The bell rings, and students evacuate from the cafeteria.

I do my best to stay right behind him, wondering if this is it—if Coach saw right through the note we put on his desk, and now he’s going to expel me.

Students automatically part for us. It must be the scowl on his handsome face—I’m allowed to think the lacrosse coach is beautiful in a rugged, older man way, right? No, okay. Maybe it’s a little weird.

We pass the principal, whose gaze locks on to Coach, then jumps to me. “Ms. Wolfe?”

“She’s with me,” Coach snaps.

We get into the cafeteria, where the only lingering people happen to be the cheerleaders and sport teams.

They all go quiet at our arrival. Although it has less to do with me and more to do with Coach.

“Asher!” Coach roars.

Everyone stops moving—except Caleb. He slowly rises and walks toward us. His brows pull together, the only indication that he’s not sure what’s happening.

Coach turns, and I trail after him. I feel Caleb behind me like a shadow. Down the hall, past students—including Sav and Riley, who stare at me with wide eyes. Into the athletic wing and right into Coach’s office.

“Shut the door.” He takes a seat behind his desk. “And sit down.”

I hurry to one of the two chairs, sitting on the edge of it. Caleb follows more slowly, shutting the door and dropping into the seat next to me. He kicks his legs out, then leans back. His arms fold over his chest.

“Not sure what this is about, Coach,” he says.

I shake my head. “And you think I do?”

His eyes cut to me. “Well, you were chasing after him—”

“Quiet.” Coach leans forward. “Do you know what I had on my desk today? Hmm?”

Caleb shrugs. “No, sir.”

Coach looks at me, and I shake my head quickly. It’s a lie, but I’m hoping my sudden terror—*I wasn’t supposed to be dragged into this*—masks it.

He throws a picture across the desk. Caleb grabs it before it slides off and hits the floor, taking one glance at it. He winces. He doesn’t even show me—he just tears it in half, and then in half again.

“I got rid of this,” Caleb says in a low voice. “Where—”

“A note,” Coach says. He holds up the piece of paper that accompanied the picture. “I’ll read this out loud, and you can tell me what sort of bullshit we’re dealing with.”

He clears his throat.

“Coach Marzden,” he reads. “Your teams are held to a high standard. I, along with the rest of the school—faculty and parents included, I’m sure—find this admirable. We’ve watched the determination and focus of your football and lacrosse teams go to national championships because they avoid distractions.

“Parties. Girls. Drinking. You understand best of all how detrimental this is to our athletes.

“I’m disheartened to report that your star lacrosse player, Caleb Asher, has been seen doing all three of the aforementioned distractions. His scandalous fling with Margo Wolfe was even caught on camera, as seen by the evidence. This photo was passed around the school, right under the administration’s noses.

“If this is what student leadership is, then I am ashamed to attend Emery-Rose and be represented by such monstrous boys. Get your team under control, Coach.

“Sincerely, Unknown.”

Caleb scoffs. “They didn’t even sign their name?”

I swallow. It sounds worse read out loud, my name coming out of Coach’s mouth. The foul accusations...

You wanted this.

“What do you have to say for yourself, Ms. Wolfe?”

“I’ve been harassed by someone via text messages for months.” I pinch the bridge of my nose. It wasn’t in the plan to admit this. “Their number showed up as Unknown. It seems fishy that this person would sign their name as Unknown, too...”

“You’ve been getting *harassed*?” Caleb whispers. “What the fuck, Margo?”

“Language,” Coach snaps. “Show me.”

I bite my lip and slide my phone to him. He scrolls through the messages, his scowl deepening.

“What happened with Ian?”

I jerk. “What?”

“The last message is from you. ‘Why did you help me with Ian?’”

“Um...”

Caleb’s gaze is on me, too.

I suppose I dug myself into this hole. “Ian...”

“Beat her in the woods,” Caleb finishes, not looking away from me. “And I found her.”

He was gentle.

My stomach still hurts if I move the wrong way, but I’m mostly okay. My skin is still tinted yellow from fading bruises, and the bite mark on my wrist scabbed over. I keep it covered. With everything that’s happened, I forgot

about the attack—and the aftermath.

I blink back tears.

Coach grunts. I have the feeling he doesn't often deal with girls, much less crying ones.

"The note is a lie," Caleb says. "The photo—"

"Blackmail," Coach finishes. He shakes his head and slides a travel pack of tissues to me.

I grab one and blow my nose.

"Still, this is the type of thing you need to avoid." Coach leans back in his chair. "You're to be the picture-perfect lacrosse captain."

Caleb shakes his head. "I don't party. I don't drink. And Margo—"

I glance at him. Margo, what? What lie is he going to spin now?

"We're dating," he finishes smoothly. "What happens outside of that is our business."

Coach Marzden appraises us, and it's hard not to squirm.

"You two didn't break up?"

Caleb raises his eyebrows. If Coach wasn't analyzing our expressions, I'm sure he'd be smirking at me.

Gotcha, he seems to say.

Except... he's underestimating me. *Again*. He's expecting me to save him—but the whole point of this was the opposite. To ruin him.

"We did break up, Coach." I stand, straightening my skirt. "I've told him repeatedly, and he doesn't get it. Frankly, he borders on stalkerish sometimes."

Coach's mouth drops open.

"And your—how did they say it? Star lacrosse player?—is a liar." I snatch my phone from the table and shoulder my bag, leaving his office.

It feels good to walk away from them. It didn't unfold the way I imagined—I had more of a direct hand in his destruction, unfortunately—but it's still... I'm lighter. I slip into class and shrug apologetically at the teacher.

I was supposed to go to tryouts and watch Caleb get reamed out by his coach. Maybe he'd even be forced to try out, too, and suffer the consequences of being a total asshole. But I should've expected that Coach Marzden wouldn't follow the rules. Sav mentioned he was once held in as high regard as the golden boys are. He was a legend back in his day.

And now... he shapes other legends.

He's going to let Caleb get away with it, I can feel it in my bones. No

matter what I say, Coach and Caleb have more of a bond... or something. I don't fucking know.

Amelie will get brought down by Sav's side of the plan. But me?
I'm afraid I might be on the receiving end of Caleb's anger.

CALEB

“*A* liar, hmm?” Coach asks me. “What am I going to do with you?”
I grunt. “I wasn’t lying. We’re dating. She just doesn’t want to see reason.”

Every fiber of my being chants, *She’s mine, she’s mine*. It isn’t my fault she doesn’t see it. That she doesn’t agree. She eventually will. And I can’t even be mad that she’s finally showing a spine.

Not such a little sheep after all.

No, Margo’s becoming a wolf, and God does that turn me on.

I’m a sick fucker, thinking about Margo while Coach is glaring at me. I think he realizes that, because his face contorts.

“Do I strip you of the captaincy?”

I stare at him.

“Maybe call your mother?”

He’s fishing for a punishment that will hurt the most.

“Your uncle would probably have something to say,” Coach says. His eyes gleam, showing me a side of him that he rarely lets out. He’s as twisted as me.

“Coach—”

“You’re going to make me the list of colleges that you’re applying to, and I’ll have a chat with your uncle about your behavior. You’re coming off the rails, son.”

Ridiculous. I stand. “That it?”

He stands, too. “The list by the end of next week, or you’re off the team.”

My eyes widen. “What?”

“You heard me. I’m sure the guys will be able to pick up the slack.”

I bite my cheek. “You got it.”

“Oh, and Caleb? Don’t bother going to tryouts. I don’t want to see your face until next week.”

He’s dead serious.

My whole body gets hot. I storm out without looking back, doing my best to control my fury. Everything is slipping out of my control. Instead of going to class, I go to the greenhouse and pace. Uncle is going to retaliate against me—it’s just a matter of time. The longer he takes, the more I’m going to fixate on it.

The bell rings, and I head toward Mr. Jenkins’s class. Margo will probably avoid me, and that’s for the best.

I stop dead.

If I go into that class and she doesn’t so much as fucking look at me, I’m going to lose it.

“Caleb?”

I spin around, meeting Margo’s gaze.

“Are you...?”

“Okay?” I finish. “Just dandy.”

She moves around me, and I follow. Again. I can’t help it.

“You didn’t tell me you were being harassed.”

She glances back. “I thought it might be you.”

“What convinced you it wasn’t?”

“Nothing,” she says. “It could still be you.”

I grunt. “It isn’t.”

She spins around, pushing me against a wall. I widen my eyes, breath caught in my throat. *Damn it, that was sexy.*

“Savannah texted you the photo of Ian and me,” she says. “True or false?”

“True.”

“Unknown sent me the same picture.” She bites her lip. “I don’t think it’s Savannah. It can’t be.”

I shrug. “I can’t help you.”

She leans into me, rising on her toes to meet my gaze. “Why not?”

Because I have an idea of who’s texting you, and it might kill you.

I lift my hand, wrapping it around a lock of her hair. “You’re beautiful when you’re mad.”

She frowns. "I'm not."

"You are," I argue. Her hair slips through my fingers. I touch her neck, enjoying her slight shiver. I doubt she even notices. But she's letting me run my fingers down her shoulder and back up.

I cup the back of her neck, and she just exhales slightly.

My chest aches.

I lean down, stopping just before my lips brush hers.

"You wrote the note," I whisper.

She tries to jerk back, but I hold her fast. I might be backed up against the wall, but we've traded control.

"You wrote it hoping to get back at me, didn't you? You wanted to pin it on the person texting you because it's the most believable lie." I lick my lips, and my tongue touches hers, too.

Her whole body hitches.

"I did," she says. "I wanted you to feel—"

"The pain you felt?" My grip on her neck tightens. "Newsflash, little wolf. I've been carrying this feeling around since I was ten. And you just—"

"I forgot." She looks away. Tears fill her eyes, spill down her cheeks. "I don't want to forget. I want answers."

"I know." I reach up with my other hand, catching tears on my thumb.

When she tries to pull away, I let her. She takes a few quick steps back. Her eyes are wide, like she can't believe we actually had a conversation. I gave her answers. She gave them back.

Maybe not in the way either of us was expecting, but...

The bell rings, shattering my thoughts.

Poor Margo flinches again, then reaches for my hand. "We're going to be late."

She tows me down the hall to Robert's class. We slip inside, and Robert stops talking mid-sentence.

"Margo. Caleb," he says in a low voice. "You're late."

"Sorry," she says, releasing me. "Won't happen again."

He shakes his head but motions for us to take our seats. There are only two spots left, and they're not close to each other. If we'd gotten here on time, I might've been able to switch. As it is, her foster dad is glaring at me like I just ate his pet.

We make it through class unscathed, and I catch Margo in the hallway.

"Don't go to tryouts," I tell her.

“Didn’t you invite me?” she asks. “Or do you not...”

“He told me not to go. So.”

She sighs. “Good, because the thought of sitting outside in the cold sounded miserable.”

I laugh. Yeah, it is miserable if you’re not moving around. The students who go to watch will probably notice my absence—another win for Coach and Margo—and interrogate me about it on Monday.

As it is, we’re catching questions on why Eli hasn’t been in school. Add me to the mix, and everyone’s curiosity is going to double.

“I’ll tell Riley,” she murmurs. She hurries away from me without looking back.

I head to my car, pulling out my phone. May as well give my friends the heads-up that I won’t be at practice.

Me: *Coach banned me from tryouts. Got fucked over.*

Theo: *Bummer.*

Liam: *What’d you do?*

Me: *Just some bullshit. I’ll be back to practice on Monday.*

Eli: *Me, too. Flying home tomorrow.*

I breathe a sigh of relief. It’s been a little weird having Eli’s entire house to myself. I contemplated throwing a party just to cure my nightly boredom, but I didn’t want to deal with the clean-up and aftermath.

Once back home, I kick off my shoes and head to the basement.

I make it halfway across the room when something hits me from behind.

My legs buckle, and I go down, barely avoiding slamming my head into the floor. A heavy weight presses on my spine, and a hand grips the back of my head.

“You little shit,” my uncle breathes. “Can you do anything right lately?”

I exhale. “Uncle—”

“Shut. Up.”

His knee digs between my shoulder blades, and I freeze.

“Here’s how this is going to go. You’re going to pack a bag and stay at my house for the weekend. We’re going to work on your fucking respect.”

I stay silent.

He gets off of me. “Up.”

I do as he says, moving slowly. I climb to my feet and pivot.

He looks at me like I’m worse than a cockroach. His nose wrinkles. His eyebrows pull down, and his lips twist. “You have five minutes.”

And then he walks out.

Consequences. I knew they were coming. But I didn’t expect them to all happen at once.

I grab a duffle bag I use for away games and shove clothes into it. My running shoes. A jacket and hat. It doesn’t take me long, so I linger for a moment with one of my shirts in my hand. Margo wore it once, and it still smells faintly of her.

I take it with me and jog up the stairs and out the door. I lock it behind me, wondering only briefly at how my uncle was able to get in. I imagine the housekeeper let him in, or the Blacks gave him a key when I first came to live here.

Either way, I wish he didn’t.

The car is idling at the curb. He never drives—just part of his fucking persona—and his driver opens the backseat for me. I hand him my bag and slide in, closing the door behind me.

Uncle David glances over at me. “Coach had a lot to say. And you’ve been disrespecting your mother.”

“I—”

His backhand comes out of nowhere. My head whips to the side, my cheekbone catching fire almost immediately. I don’t move except to straighten my head.

He’s breathing hard. I don’t think he’s had anyone to push around in quite a while—not since I lived with him and Aunt Iris, anyway. It was one of the reasons Eli’s parents said they could take me in. Because I showed up to their house for Eli’s birthday party with bruises on my wrists and a black eye, and Uncle said I just fell down the stairs.

I press my lips together, keeping my hands in my lap.

Only a few more months until I’m free of him. My birthday is in April, and then... no more chains holding me down. No more dealing with my family’s bullshit.

“I was *hoping* Coach Marzden would be a good influence on you. Guide you the way we couldn’t, since your mother was against our methods.” His jaw tics. “It’s only by your mother’s grace that we didn’t transfer you to Lion’s Head after—”

“I’m sorry.” *I don’t mean it.*

Uncle grunts, pulling out his phone. It’s clear enough: conversation over. My cheek throbs. I’m in for one hell of a weekend.

MARGO

“It was spectacular,” Sav gushes. “She scrambled down the back of the pyramid and ran away, clutching her stomach. Our coach was so pissed at her.”

Riley and Sav look at me. At my unimpressive non-reaction.

“This was your idea, Margo,” Savannah says. “Why aren’t you happy?”

“Because I expected payback.” I rub my arms. The whole weekend, I kept expecting Caleb to accost me. But there’s been nothing. Not a whisper or text from him.

“The whole cheer team is mad at Amelie. Maybe it didn’t go down the way we envisioned with Caleb’s coach—”

“Because we put my name in the letter and Coach interrogated *me* about it,” I say. “You saw it. The whole school did. So what if Caleb didn’t go to tryouts? He’s still on the team.”

Riley and Sav exchange a glance.

“Well...” Riley shrugs. “I guess. Eli didn’t go, either. Then again, he had a good excuse. Family emergency and being out of town.”

“Is he back?” I ask.

Riley blushes.

“Ooh,” Sav teases, elbowing Riley. “Spill.”

“He came over yesterday.” She shrugs. “I don’t know. Sometimes he’s nice and sometimes he’s...”

“A bully.” I raise my eyebrow.

She laughs. “Yep. How’d that happen?”

Savannah grimaces. “Will has a dark streak, too,” she murmurs.

“Seems like we all fall for the bad guys,” I say. “And now we need to do homework.”

Robert pops his head into my bedroom. His gaze goes around the room, then lands on me. He’s been hovering more since Caleb and I walked into class together on Friday.

And speaking of Caleb... I can’t believe I got in his face. Admitted the things I did. Got the *answers* that I did.

He knows who Unknown is, I can just feel it. And he won’t help me.

“You girls having fun?” Robert asks.

“We were just about to start homework, Mr. Jenkins,” Savannah says.

He smiles. “Good, good. Margo, don’t forget about your painting. It’s due before Christmas break.”

Less than a month to go. And only a few weeks of classes in December, then we’ll have holidays and the new year, and suddenly we’ll be into the spring semester. Time flies when you feel like your foster parents aren’t going to eject you from the home.

Caleb tried to get rid of me and failed.

“Earth to Margo,” Riley calls.

I shake my head. “Yeah, sorry. I’m going to work on it next weekend.”

He nods and retreats, closing the door behind him.

“Where’s your mom?” Sav asks. “Er, foster mom.”

“She had a business trip,” I say. “She forgot about it and left on Thursday. I think she’s coming back tonight.”

“What does she do, again?” Riley pulls books from her bag.

“Some sort of corporate liaison for merging companies.” I lift one shoulder. “She explained it once, but it kind of went over my head. There’s a lot of legal stuff she deals with, but also I think she acts like a therapist for the CEOs losing their jobs.”

“Did she work with Caleb’s dad’s company?” Sav asks.

I blink. “Huh?”

“When his company was bought out. Was she the one who helped negotiate the Ashers’s jobs?”

“I’m sorry, Sav, I don’t really even know what happened with that.” *But it might be useful.*

She clears her throat. “Benjamin Asher was a big insurance and real estate mogul. He basically had a foothold in most of Rose Hill. His insurance company was bought out by Prinze Industries, but they kept him on as a vice

president of something or other after the merge.” She shrugs. “Mom always said that it was kind of like... a sympathy job. They didn’t really want him around, and I’m sure he didn’t do shit. But it was a nice paycheck.”

“How do you know all that?” Riley asks.

“Mom and Dad get chatty after a few glasses of wine,” Sav says. “Plus, dinner parties? Mom is the biggest gossip.”

“So Caleb’s dad sold the company and negotiated to keep a well-paying job, on top of a payout.”

“Well, yeah...” Sav pulls her leg up to her chest. “You didn’t know.”

“I don’t remember my parents talking about it,” I say faintly. I’m sure they must’ve discussed it. The Ashers would’ve rocketed from wealthy into billionaire status. A personal chef—ha, they could’ve hired four personal chefs.

“We were like eight or so. And then everything went kaboom,” Savannah adds.

Me. I caused the explosion. Caleb’s said as much. And my dreams have indicated that something isn’t quite right.

“What did I do?” I whisper, more to myself than them.

Riley shakes her head, and Sav just stares at me with sympathy.

“No one ever said,” Savannah tells me. “Just rumors, and no one knew what was true.” Her phone rings, startling all of us. She climbs to her feet and goes into the hall, her voice muted.

“I don’t know what to believe,” I whisper to Riley. “About the past, the present. It’s all just so confusing.”

“What about your dad?”

I jerk back. “What about him?”

“I mean, your mom left, right? She was a drug addict. It’s what people at school say.”

“That’s true,” I admit.

“And your dad’s in prison.”

“What’s your point?”

She holds up her hands, and I realize... I’m snapping at her. It’s a sensitive subject.

“Sorry,” I mutter.

“What did he go for?” she asks. “And before you get defensive, I’m only asking because maybe there’s a chance he didn’t want to leave you.”

My eyes fill with tears. I rub at my face. “Um, he went to prison for

something to do with drugs. My case worker said he was dealing, probably got my mom addicted.”

Riley’s silent, and when I look up, there’s pity smeared across her face.

“No,” I order. “I can’t deal with pity.”

“It isn’t—”

My glare stops her short.

She hangs her head. “I’m sorry. It’s a shitty situation, and I don’t know how you deal with it all without being a mess. I admire you for it. But it also hurts.”

I soften and reach out to grab her hand. “I’m sorry, too. I’m just used to pity... not sympathy. Or even worse, empathy.” I smile.

She laughs. “Never pity.”

“Thank you.”

Savannah reenters the room, attention going to our hands. “Am I interrupting a moment?”

“Only a bit,” I say, releasing my best friend. “But there’s only so much of it we can handle. Right, Ri?”

“Yep.”

“That was my dad on the phone,” she says. “I’m being summoned home for dinner. Apparently, Mom has big news.”

“Ah.” Riley stretches out her legs. “Hope it’s something good.”

“As opposed to, what, cancer?”

Riley’s face goes carefully blank—but I don’t think Savannah notices. She breezes past and picks up her books, shoving them into her bag.

“See you later.”

The front door slams shut. I go to the window, tracking Sav’s movements. When she’s finally gets in her car and pulls away, I turn back toward Riley.

“What was that?” I ask.

Riley shakes her head. “What?”

“She mentioned cancer, and you reacted weird.”

She bites her lip. “Yeah, Mom had it. But she’s fine now. In remission.” She forces a smile. “She has six-month checkups, but for a while it was a big thing.”

I sit next to her. “The school knew?”

“I missed a lot of school my freshmen year. Someone found out and spread it around that Mom was going to die.”

I wince.

“It faded.”

“Still,” I say under my breath.

“It’s time for a subject change,” she says. “Let’s do homework so we can watch a movie and eat popcorn.”

“Deal.”

And that’s just what we do. She stays late, finishing off a carton of mint chocolate chip ice cream with me and Robert. Lenora comes home and joins us, murmuring how glad she was to finally be back.

Riley leaves, and I go back to my room. I expect Caleb to be waiting for me, but the room is empty. My window is shut, the curtains drawn like I had left them.

Unexpected disappointment coasts through me, and then relief a moment later. He’s probably planning something—a way to make me pay for the stunt I pulled.

I get ready for bed, then slide under the covers. My whole body tingles with expectancy. If not tonight, when?

He doesn’t come—and it isn’t the first time I’ve felt let down by him *not* breaking into my room. Stupid heart. Stupid childhood.

Stupid bracelet, glaring at me from my dresser.

I stand and walk over to it. I lift it, intending to put it in my drawer. *Out of sight, out of mind*. But once it’s in my hand, I can’t let it go. He really did find someone to do a good job. The threads are protected by the cage. For the first time, I think of the irony.

Did he get it?

That we’ve imprisoned each other in a life sentence of heartache.

I keep the bracelet in my fist as I lie back down, closing my eyes. My heart and my mind are at war—to love him or to hate him. How can I possibly choose which one is right?

MARGO

Winter has arrived early, it seems. Not in snowfall—luckily what little we had melted over the weekend—but in windchill. The temperature has dropped into the teens, and the ground is frozen solid.

Lenora puts a hat on my head, patting my cheeks and smiling faintly. She opens her mouth to say something, then seems to think better of it.

Robert drives me today. He gets to go straight to his classroom, while the students have been shuffled from the courtyard to the cafeteria before school starts. He waves goodbye at the door.

Someone's feeling a little cheeky.

The cafeteria is a place I like to avoid. In the back, toward the windows, are the popular kids. Amelie is noticeably absent, but Savannah is there with her cheerleaders, leaning against one of the football player's arms. She looks at me and then away, and it's... *message received*.

The downfall of Amelie a success—albeit a temporary one—and Savannah is back to being a popular girl.

It's fine.

I search the room for a friendly face, but Riley hasn't arrived. And Caleb hasn't, either.

I'm still hunting for either of them by the time the bell rings.

First period, no Caleb.

Second, nada.

Between second and third I find Riley. She almost doesn't see me, walking by with her head down, so I grab her and tow her into the nearest

stairwell.

“Where were you this morning?” I ask.

She widens her eyes. “I’m sorry. I overslept, and then Eli picked me up. He’s back, did you notice?”

“Yeah, but Caleb isn’t here, and Savannah is back to...”

“The top of the pyramid, so to speak?” Riley shakes her head. “I thought I heard that. There’s a cheerleader in my first period class, couldn’t stop talking about how Amelie had run back to France until spring semester.”

“It didn’t sound that bad,” I mumble.

“Well, *Sav* left out the part where she told everyone Amelie was shitting herself on some diet.”

I cover my eyes. “Stop.”

“Yep. So much for Ian taking credit.”

I drop my hand. We’re going to be late. “Have you seen Caleb? Or heard anything?”

She hesitates. “No.”

Why is she lying to me?

I stare at her for a minute, then decide to drop it. “Okay.”

“I’ll see you at lunch,” she says, rushing away.

I hurry to my next class and keep my head down. I still expect Caleb to magically appear in the hallway, dodging students and sauntering up to me. I crane my neck trying to see past taller students, but he’s nowhere to be found.

And it’s daunting.

Right before lunch, I spot Theo. I rush up to him, stopping right in front of him.

“Little wolf,” he greets me.

“Where’s Caleb?”

A muscle in his jaw jumps.

I fold my arms. “Come on, Theo. Don’t make me beg.”

His eyes darken, and I involuntarily take a step back.

“Don’t mistake our moment in the woods for kindness,” he says. “And as for Caleb, it’s none of your business. He’s taking a sick day.”

“A sick day,” I repeat, my abdomen clenching. When has Caleb ever been sick? As a kid—never. Since then, I don’t know.

Theo brushes past me. “Leave it alone, Margo.”

I shake my head. If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s *not* leaving something alone.

Riley waits for me outside the library, her foot tapping. “Eli invited us to sit with them,” she says. “Caleb isn’t here, so I figured—”

“It’s fine,” I say, walking by her. The encounter with Theo has me thinking... and plotting. “What’d you bring?”

“Figured I’d get hot lunch today,” she mumbles. Her cheeks turn red.

“Look at you, Riley Appleton.” I laugh. “Eli’s influence, huh?”

“He might’ve offered to buy it. And who am I to mock hot lunch, when it means I don’t have to eat another tuna fish sandwich made with ‘love’ from my dad?”

“Fair enough.”

She’s been griping about tuna for weeks. It’s about time she’s done something about it.

We go to the lacrosse table. Only a few weeks ago, I was welcomed with open arms. The guys don’t exactly roll out the red carpet this time, but Liam shuffles to the side and pats the seat next to him.

I sit, emptying my bagged lunch, while Riley slides in across from me. Eli already got their lunches, and the table is suddenly full. Ignoring Theo’s pursed expression, I turn to Liam. “Where’s Caleb today?”

Liam coughs. “Um, sick.”

“With what?”

“Huh?”

“A cold, the flu, pneumonia...?” I shrug. “There are just so many things, some more serious than others.”

“Drop it, Margo,” Theo snaps.

I raise my eyebrow. “Eli?”

He lifts his head.

“Why’s Caleb out with a mysterious sickness?”

Riley groans. “This is why you didn’t even hesitate—”

“You live with him, for God’s sake,” I continue. It shouldn’t bother me this much, but it’s just another mystery that I don’t want to deal with. I need answers. Crave them as much as I crave Caleb’s touch.

When did I become a junkie? Addicted to Caleb—no better than my mother and her drugs—no matter how bad he is for me.

It takes his *lack* of attention for me to realize it.

I’m such an idiot. My heart is winning the argument.

“I’m not sure he’d want me to tell you,” Eli says. “And that’s all you’re getting out of me while he’s laid up in bed—”

“Ah, so he’s not at the hospital or anything?” I give Eli my best worried face.

Theo groans, punching Eli’s shoulder. “You idiot.”

I shrug and stand. “Thanks, Eli. I’m glad *someone* is helpful.”

And then... well, I don’t really have a plan. I walk out of the cafeteria and keep going, straight outside. I don’t have a car, but that can’t stop me. I’ll walk there if I have to. Come up with an excuse for Robert later—

“Wait,” Riley calls, jogging up behind me.

I look at her.

“Why didn’t you wait for me?” she asks.

“Didn’t Eli pick you up?”

“Yeah, but—”

“So, you don’t have a car,” I finish.

She rolls her eyes and holds up a set of keys. “I happen to know someone who does. And that person might not have realized I stole them out of his bag, so we should probably hurry.”

I laugh, grabbing her hand. We run across the lot to Eli’s truck, and it feels a bit like we’re breaking the law. We stay hunched as Riley fires it up and backs out of the spot, then guns it out of the driveway.

“Do you want me to wait?” she asks. We’re not even there yet.

My hands shake.

“Margo,” she says. “Do you want me to wait for you?”

“Oh, um, no. Can you just tell Robert that I had an emergency?”

She exhales. “Yeah, sure. He’ll see through it, but...”

“Maybe I’ll be back sooner than expected,” I say. “I’ll call a taxi or bike or something.”

She nods, pulling into Eli’s driveway. *Caleb’s* driveway. I have to remind myself that he lives here—it’s his home, too. Even if his real house is a few blocks away, filled with ghosts and dust.

She hits the button for the garage door. “You can get in that way,” she says. “And Margo... good luck.”

I grin at her. I tremble—from nerves, fear, I don’t know—but I need to do this. I have a sick feeling in my gut that something is terribly wrong, and his friends’ answers didn’t set me at ease. I wouldn’t be here if I could just ignore it and focus on schoolwork. But *no*, Caleb’s stuck at the front of my mind like superglue.

More like crazy glue.

I jump out of the truck. She waits until I get the door open to back out of the driveway, and then I'm in. The door from the garage leads into a mudroom, then the kitchen. It's silent up here, and I kick off my shoes to move quietly through the house.

I get to the top of the basement stairs. There's a light on at the bottom, but everything else is in shadow. Television noises float up. I swallow, then take a deep breath.

Courage, Margo.

I go to the bottom of the stairs, cracking the door.

He's on the bed. I can make out his shape in the dimly lit room, but he doesn't react to my appearance. I steel myself and creep closer and closer. Blueish light from the TV is the only source of light, and it flickers constantly.

My heart seems to jump into my throat. I get close enough to see more than just a blob of shadow. He's on his stomach, his head turned away. Instead of a shirt, there are bandages wrapped around his chest.

What happened to you?

I'm afraid to touch him, but I do it anyway. I put my hand on his shoulder, as gently as I can.

He reacts like I hoped he wouldn't.

He comes alive, twisting and grabbing my arm. He hauls me over him and pins me to the mattress between him and the wall. He grips my wrists with an iron hold.

"Caleb."

His eyes are open but unseeing, and his whole body is tense. Tremors run through him. He doesn't see *me*, just whatever nightmare he's trapped in.

"It's okay," I whisper. I rise and put my forehead to his. "Come back to me."

He said those same words to me. *Come back*. Earth to Margo.

Slowly, he crawls out of the darkness. He blinks rapidly, eyes going from my lips to my nose to my eyes. "What are you doing here?"

I manage to smile. "I came to check on you."

He leans away, wincing. His hands slide off my wrists.

I stay where I am. Part of me is still in shock. That whole ordeal took a minute at most, but it feels like we were in that position for a lifetime.

"You're hurt."

He stands, shaking his head. "You shouldn't be here."

“Why?”

He turns off the television, and the room goes dark. A second later, he flicks on the lamp on his dresser. The bandages around his torso are wide, crisp white, and cover most of his back. He moves stiffly toward the bathroom, shaking his head.

I finally scramble out of bed, following him. “Why shouldn’t I be here, Caleb?”

He glares at me. “I wanted the Jenkinses to kick you out.”

I flinch, but he’s not done.

“I wanted your life to be ruined. To make you fall in love just to squash it—your heart—like you did to me.”

His face is a mask of fury—but I don’t believe it. For once, I can see the liar in him. Every word that falls from his mouth is a goddamn lie.

Enough is enough.

“You’re mad that you want me,” I say, heading toward him.

His eyes widen, and he steps away. I back him farther into the bathroom, until he hits the counter. And I don’t stop until I’m right between his legs.

I slide my hands up his chest. I pause over his heart, reveling in the steady *thump-thump*. My own pulse is out of control. One hand stays on his chest, and I let my other continue up. Over his throat, which bobs, to his jaw. I sweep my thumb across his lower lip.

His eyes are dark.

“You’re mad that I see you,” I whisper. “All of you. And I’m not backing down. I’m here because you can’t get rid of me, even if you threaten me.”

I’m in.

Two words and a mountain worth of clarity. It’s always been Caleb. It’ll always *be* Caleb.

He hasn’t moved, and his words from his car come back to me. He handed me control, and I still have it. His hands rest on the counter, supporting some of his weight. His eyes are on my face.

It’s my decision.

“Touch me,” I demand.

He doesn’t react. If anything, his eyes get darker. I suppress a shiver. His finger edges under the waistband of my uniform skirt, untucking my shirt. He slowly unbuttons it, tugging it wide open. And then he just... looks at me.

“Caleb.”

He shakes his head. “You want to know what’s fucked up?”

I raise my eyebrow.

“I don’t want you to get hurt anymore—caught up in my mess.”

I touch the bandages. “What happened?”

They’re held in place by two metal clips. I release them and unwind it. He lets me, holding perfectly still.

I pass the roll behind his back and under his arms. There’s gauze stuck to his back, and I pull it loose carefully. He releases a hiss of breath, but he doesn’t stop me.

His back...

My heart shatters.

It’s worse than my stomach. Black and blue bruises. Welts and a few round burns. The gauze pad has splotches of pink-tinted liquid on it.

“Who did this?” I ask, keeping my voice level. I’ve never quite experienced the rage that I sometimes see on Caleb’s face, but it’s coming at me now, faster than a hurricane. My hands shake.

He takes the bandages from me and sets them aside. He lifts my hands, kissing my fingers. “You caring means a lot,” he says.

“Was it your dad?” I can’t stop thinking about the dream—the argument between my mom and his dad. The glass she threw. They had a temper, I’ve figured that much. Both of our parents.

“Margo...”

“Just tell me.” I gnash my teeth. “I’m so sick of the bullsh—”

“My uncle,” he says. “Okay? Happy? He wasn’t thrilled at my behavior recently and decided he needed to teach me a lesson. Something that wouldn’t affect my game.” He laughs, but it grates against my ears. “I’m pretty sure he cracked a fucking rib, but that shouldn’t stop me.”

My eyes fill with tears.

“Do not cry for me,” he warns.

“I won’t.” I sniff. I turn away from him. *Ugh*. His uncle did that to him—his uncle *beat* him. Facing the wall, I ask, “Is that where you were this weekend? At his house—”

His hands slide up my arms, and I press my lips together. His chest is hot against my back. I close my eyes, because this is what I wanted. This is what I asked for.

Touch me.

When his lips ghost along my neck, I shudder.

“You’re crying,” he whispers.

I lean into his chest, letting my head fall back. He meets my gaze. His small frown grows bigger by the second.

“Sorry that I care.” I rub at my eyes, willing my composure to return. “You left me alone all weekend...”

“Ah, and your mind jumped to abandonment.”

“Or death,” I murmur.

He hugs me from behind, and I die of shock. Caleb Asher is *hugging* me. He’s wrapped around me like an octopus, infusing heat into my suddenly cold body. It’s a little surreal—like the devil has shed a few layers, and he’s not actually that bad.

I’ve discovered a bigger monster—his uncle.

“I need to get these covered again,” he says against the top of my head.

I turn in his arms, dying to hug him back but afraid of hurting him. My hands twitch at my sides. Just when I think he might kiss me—he’s got that *look*—he takes a step back and tosses the gauze to me.

“Okay. Yeah, I can do this.”

He snorts. “Not much choice, since you unwrapped it to begin with.”

Fair.

I manage it, and we walk out of the bathroom.

“You should leave,” he says.

I spin around. “What?”

“You don’t think I noticed you came here in the middle of the day?” He picks up his phone and sends a message, then tosses it back down. “It’s cute. You skipping school.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” I sit on the couch. “Can’t I just stay here?”

“I’m just imagining the wrath of your foster family.” He shrugs. “On second thought, maybe you should stay.”

“Now you’re just being an ass.”

“I already called you a car.”

I pull out my phone, wincing at the time. “This is what I get for trying to be nice.”

“After you were so cruel?” He sits beside me, too gingerly for my liking, and bumps my arm with his elbow. “Hot and cold, little wolf.”

My cheeks heat up.

“Fine,” I say, shaking my head. I can take his dismissal, especially masked as concern. “Is the car here?”

“Probably.”

I stand and tuck my phone into my pocket.

“Hey, Margo?”

I turn back to him, quirking my lips.

“Might want to button your shirt.”

My whole body catches on fire. Caleb’s laughter chases me up the stairs. I close my shirt and tuck it back into my skirt. *Nothing even happened*, I try to convince myself. I just discovered Caleb’s uncle is probably a sadist, and I’m way more head-over-heels for Caleb than I thought.

You win, heart.

CALEB

Eli brings reinforcements after school. His parents are still in Chicago, but he begged to come back. I can't fathom why—besides maybe a certain junior girl who has his dick in a vise.

Liam and Theo are the first in, turning on every damn light in the basement. I grimace and throw my shoe at them, not caring who it hits. Lucky me, I nail Liam in the chest.

He grunts, catching it before it drops.

"You had Margo freaked out," Liam announces. He lets the shoe fall from his grasp instead of throwing it back.

That's how I know Eli spilled the beans. He was probably the one who said something to make Margo suspicious in the first place.

"I know," I say. "Because she showed up."

I can't say I'm mad about it. Not at her. It makes me actually *happy* that she came to me—a buzzing in my chest like a million wasps. But I am pissed at my friends for being so fucking transparent.

Eli shrugs. "She's a feisty one."

"Interrogated all of us." Theo flops on the couch. "Guess who gave in?"

"Eli," Liam, Theo, and I all say at once.

Eli groans. "Look, man, she just was pouting, and then Riley was staring at me—"

"Softie," Liam says through a fake cough. "So... You wanna talk about it?"

I roll my eyes. "About the hell weekend? Not particularly."

"My parents will be back soon," Eli says. "This shit won't fly."

“It will until I’m eighteen,” I mumble. “If I want to see a single dime, I have to do what he says.”

“Or what? It’s in *your* name.” Eli glares at me like this beating was *my* fault. And honestly, it kind of is.

I instigated my uncle’s behavior. Pushed his buttons. Set fire to his carefully constructed plans with glee.

Every action has an equal and opposite reaction.

Consequence.

Punishment.

It isn’t like he kept me locked in the basement. It was a little subtler than that. Dinner with my mother, aunt, and uncle in near silence. Mother is thinner than normal, makeup creased under her eyes in an attempt to hide the dark circles. She picked at her food, much to Aunt Iris’s disdain. I was surprised to even see Mother there. Usually she made a quick appearance—a day, two—and then vanished.

Uncle David grilled me relentlessly.

I didn’t give him anything except hoarse wheezes while he put his cigar out on my flesh.

“Dude.” Eli waves his hand in front of my face.

I jerk back, shoving him away.

“Easy,” he mutters. “Lost you for a second.”

Come back to me. Margo often went down the rabbit hole of memories, worrying me the way her face got blank. I must’ve looked the same.

“April fifteenth,” I say, shaking out my arms. My back pulls, but I lean into the pain. Pain means I’m still alive. “I just have to make it until then.”

“Five months,” Liam says. “Easy.”

Right.

“What was the ultimatum?” Theo asks.

I tilt my head, surprised he went there. His family is fucked up, too. He understands on a level Eli and Liam might not. Eli has absentee parents and a large extended family. Liam’s got his parents and brother piled on top of him in a small house, where no one gets away with anything—but there’s love there.

“Stay focused on lacrosse and college,” I say.

And forget about Margo. I don’t have to voice that part aloud. It doesn’t matter, anyway: it isn’t happening.

Especially after her visit this afternoon.

If I wasn't half out of my mind on painkillers, I might've done more to make her stay. But we've turned over a new leaf. She's mine—she'll *always* be mine—but she has to come to me.

I broke her, and she needs to learn to walk on her own again. And walk *to me*. She already is. Again: bees in my chest.

“Fuck,” Liam grunts.

“It's fine.” I pick myself up. “You bring home food?”

“We ordered pizza on the way,” Eli tells me. “How do you—?”

“You're *not* about to ask how I feel,” I interrupt. “I'd rather go back to my uncle's than answer that.”

“Fine.” Eli crosses his arms.

“Fine.” I glare at him.

Still, I admit that the company is a nice change. I take my medication on time and eat as much pizza as I can, topping it off with ice-cold water. They fill me in on everything that happened at school and practice. The party on Saturday was a big fat bummer.

All in all, I didn't miss much.

Except Margo. She admitted—or close to it—she wished I had come to her over the weekend. And even if she didn't say it, I could see the hurt in her eyes.

We have a push-and-pull relationship. She shoves me away, I reel her back in. Always.

She's not getting rid of me, even if everyone wants to keep us apart.

Once my friends leave, and Eli retreats to his room, I slip on shoes and grab my keys. My back stings, but I ignore it. I don't like how things left off with Margo, and I'm determined to fix them.

I park outside her house and get out of the car. It's barely seven o'clock, so I stroll up to their front door. Who's going to be more upset by my presence—Lenora or Robert?

I ring the doorbell, tucking my hands in my pockets.

Lenora opens the door. Her eyes widen, and she goes to close the door in my face. I block it with my foot, trying not to smile. It's a mother's instinct—pure protection. Margo probably doesn't see it, but I do. They care about her. It's sweet.

“What do you want?” she asks. Her gaze goes to my foot blocking the door.

“To talk,” I say. “To Margo.”

“Hmm.” She stares at me for a moment. “You hurt her. *Us*. Tried to come between our family.”

“I did.” I roll my shoulders back, letting the pain radiate down my spine. It keeps me from getting distracted. “And I’m sorry.”

Her lips press into a thin line. “Tell me why I should let you in.”

“Who is it?” Robert calls.

She glances back and tells him, “Caleb Asher.”

She opens the door wider, revealing her husband.

“I think it’s best you leave, son,” he says. “After all—”

“Caleb?”

They both turn. Margo stands behind them, bare feet, sweatpants, one of my t-shirts. I tilt my head, wondering when she took that. But it must’ve been the day after the masquerade ball.

A lead weight falls into my stomach.

“Let him in,” she whispers.

Lenora frowns. “No—”

“You don’t have to,” Robert finishes. “It’s unavoidable to see him at school, but here? This is your safe place.”

Her eyes fill with tears. “I know you don’t get it, but he...”

Push and pull.

“I regret it,” I tell them. “It was none of my business. Just because I suspected, didn’t mean I had to tell you.”

Lenora swipes at her cheek. “It was heartbreaking. But not for us. We’ve done our best to put Josie’s death behind us. Our hearts broke for *Margo*, that she had—”

She shakes her head, looking back at Margo. I wonder if they’ve had this heart to heart before, or if I’m the catalyst.

Robert steps out of the way, waving me inside. “No use letting the heat out.”

I slip in and go to Margo, cupping her cheeks. Times like these, she wavers between fierce and ethereal. The girl I knew as a child lived up to her last name, but not now. I just need to pull her string until she unravels. Until she finds her center.

“Hold tight,” I say under my breath, and then I turn toward Lenora and Robert. They’re not going to like this. “I have something for you.”

They watch me warily.

I take the folded note out of my pocket, handing it to Lenora. “It was in

the back of a picture frame.”

She shakes her head and doesn't take it.

My hand hangs in the air, the note pinched between my fingertips, while I wait for her to move.

“How did you find it?” She crosses her arms. “There's only one—”

“It's a note from Josie.” I ignore Margo's quiet gasp behind me.

Robert reaches out and snags it. “Give us a minute.”

I nod, taking Margo's hand. I guide her away, up the stairs.

“What are you doing here?” she whispers. “I thought—”

I tap the last picture before her bedroom. The smiling Jenkinses. “While you were missing, I snuck up here. I was going to take this picture and see if I...” There's not a good way to explain this. “I was going to show it to your mother and see if she remembered Josie.”

Her gasp is a knife between my ribcage.

“You know where my mother is?”

I look at her. “I did.” *Now I don't.*

“Where is she?”

“She was at a motel.” I herd her into her room, shutting the door behind us. “She's not anymore.”

She goes straight to the window, holding herself. Is she searching for her mother out there? Wondering if she's watching, waiting for the right chance to take her back?

I get angrier by the second. Amberly doesn't want Margo back—far from it. She still holds resentment for her daughter. Gave her away when she was ten, before her dad even got arrested. She just woke up and decided, *I'm out.*

And now Margo thinks she's come back for her?

“Your mother is a drug addict,” I say. “She came for money and nothing else.”

She flinches like I hit her.

“She comes back every so often to beg at the shoes of the Asher family. Doesn't matter who. Once we find out she's in town, we do whatever we can to make her leave.”

She presses her hand to the windowpane. “Stop it.”

“I'm telling you the truth now, Margo. You asked for it.”

Stupid girl, chasing answers she has no stomach to withstand.

“And I've been trying to save you from it.” The words out of my mouth surprise even me. I've been trying to get her to remember. But this particular

instance? Watching Lenora and Robert shaken over a note from the past, and then Margo's instant grief at her mother being back in town?

Maybe I have a heart after all.

"What did the note say?" She glances over her shoulder at me. "I'm assuming you read it."

I shake my head. I did read it—had to know what it was, if it was of any importance. And turns out, it was. Isabella 'Josie' Jenkins hid her last goodbye. "She got high and drove on purpose, hoping something would happen. She wrote that letter just in case she was right."

Margo covers her mouth. "What?"

"So there went any blame laid at your mother's feet."

"Why did they call her Josie if her name was Isabella?"

"That, I don't know." I step closer. "You want answers, don't you?"

"Sometimes I'm afraid of the answers I'll find," she admits. She inches toward me, too, until we meet in the middle of the room.

I lift her hand.

She's wearing the bracelet.

My heart screeches to a stop. I can't breathe.

"Why did you put that back on?"

"Because I won't let you go," she answers, meeting my gaze. "Okay? So do terrible things, and I've decided I'll just hold on tighter. God, sometimes I hate you, but I can't help myself."

Triumph, plus something else. A white noise in my ears. Goosebumps.

I lean down and do what I've wanted to since I saw her this afternoon, pinned under me. I grab the back of her head and touch my lips to hers. She pushes up into me and deepens the kiss. I nip her lower lip. She groans, sliding her hands up my arms. Her fingernails scrape the back of my neck, into my hair.

She walks me toward her bed, and we both go down without tearing our lips away from each other. I hover over her. My dick hardens at her tongue stroking mine. I want to be inside her, foster parents be damned.

She lifts her hips, gasping into my mouth when she feels me. I shift, the head of my cock rubbing through our clothes. It's too damn good, and it isn't even the real thing. Her breathing changes, and I move against her. It takes all my willpower to stop myself from letting my dick take control. From tearing her sweatpants down and pounding into her.

I lean to one side and push my hand into her panties, sliding my finger

through her wet folds. She arches into me, her head falling to the side.

“My—”

“Hush,” I whisper, my teeth grazing her earlobe. It’s been too fucking long, but I’ll have to wait a bit more. I work her higher, alternating between thrusting my fingers into her and stroking her clit.

She tucks her face into my neck, her whole body shuddering as she comes. She bites my shoulder, her fingers digging into my biceps. And then it’s over, and her body relaxes. She blinks up at me, frowning.

A fierce emotion goes through me—one that I’m not particularly familiar with—and it unnerves me. She’s dug her way under my skin, buried herself in my bones.

She reaches up and grips my chin, forcing me to look at her.

“Don’t do that,” she says. “Don’t hide.”

I watch her face. “I’m not.”

“You’re trying to hide,” she argues. “Don’t.”

I should’ve seen Margo’s transformation coming. I broke a follower—the sheep nickname we mocked her with—and she turned into a wolf.

Her phone buzzes, and fear flashes across her face.

“Who is it?” I ask.

She shrugs, pointing to the nightstand, and I roll over to grab it. Pain flares up my back when it hits the mattress, but I focus on Margo. I swipe open her phone, going to the messages.

Unknown: *What will you do now that Caleb’s out of the picture?*

I stare down at the words, then slowly scroll through the rest of the messages. They’re taunts, every single one of them. She replied occasionally, but never to any degree of success. I knew she was getting messages. I told her as much. But I didn’t know they were *this* extreme.

She grabs the phone from me, reading the message then clicking off her phone.

“You said you knew,” she says in a low voice. Now she’s the one leaning on an elbow, looking down at me. “But they seem to be operating on old information.”

I frown. “You’re right.”

“Please don’t tell me it’s my mom,” she whispers. “I don’t think I could take that right now.”

“I don’t think so,” I say, tracing her jawline.

“It could be Amelie. Or Savannah...”

I sit up, forcing her to move back. “Have they threatened you? Physically?”

Her eyes go wide. “N-no... do you think they will?”

“Tell me if the messages get worse. It could just be someone jealous at school, but if it isn’t...” It could be someone from my family. I wouldn’t put it past my mother or uncle to try to play mind games. But seeing them written out, my earlier suspicions are doused.

It’s too sporadic. Late at night and early in the morning. Midway through school. Whoever saw Ian taking Margo across the field had to be at school that day, had to send the picture to Savannah, who sent it to me...

“She was out of the country when I first got to school,” Margo supplies. “If your mind jumped to Savannah like mine did.”

I grunt.

“Margo? Caleb?” Lenora calls.

We both scramble off the bed. She smooths it out and perches on the edge, and I move to the window, trying to cool my skin.

Lenora opens the door, sticking her head in. “Maybe keep this door open when you have a boy up here, Margo?” She smiles, but it’s shaky. “And Caleb...”

I straighten.

She blows out a breath. “Thank you for the note. Although I can’t imagine how you found it.”

“He was going to show my mother the picture,” Margo blurts out. “To find out the truth. But then...”

Lenora comes in and sits beside Margo, wrapping her arm around her shoulder. “Honey, I’m so sorry. Robert and I talked, and we’re afraid that our past with Josie has affected our relationship.”

“It has,” I cut in.

Lenora glares at me.

“*But*, you should feel safe and secure in this house,” she continues. “You’re not going anywhere. I wanted to reiterate that.”

Margo sniffs. “Thank you.”

“Now, it’s late. And a school night. Caleb, I think it’s time for you to head out.” Lenora stands, brushing off invisible dust from her thighs.

Adults always do that, like a nervous habit.

I say *adults*, like Margo and I aren't on the cusp of adulthood.

"Sure thing, Mrs. Jenkins." I go to Margo and lift her hand. I ignore Lenora's burning stare and press my lips to Margo's knuckles.

Margo sucks in a breath, and it's the last sound I hold in my mind as I walk back to my car. Even through the pain in my back and the heaviness in my chest. She's worth it.

MARGO

Lenora smiles at me, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue. “You forgive him, don’t you?”

“I don’t know when it happened, but yeah. I think so.”

She grimaces. “He looks at you how I always hoped someone would look at Josie. But he hasn’t always treated you well, has he?”

I shake my head. “Our relationship is complicated. But... I’m done letting him try to walk all over me.”

“Robert and I just want to be a good example for you.”

“You are.” I manage to give her a smile, but my heart is pounding out of my chest.

Caleb only just left—the distinct sound of his engine revving is unmistakable—but loneliness stretches out in front of me. Being dependent on him isn’t what I had in mind when I told him I wasn’t going anywhere.

She touches my cheek. “Okay, I’ll leave you alone. Get some rest.”

She rises and goes to the door, and something makes me stand, too.

“Wait,” I say. “What did the note say? Are you okay?”

“She apologized.” Lenora’s voice is faint. “And she said that the note was hidden in that picture because she was sure we’d try to erase her memory soon after her death—and then we’d get answers. Silly girl.”

“I’m sorry.” I bite my lip. It’s easy to feel like an intruder in a foster home. There are kids who came before me and after me, and each one leaves their mark. In a way, it’s comforting to know that I’m not the only one. That I won’t *be* the only one.

Here, there’s no echo of past children. There was only one foster child

before me, and they aged out. Lenora and Robert never talk about them.

Just another mystery.

“It’s all right, honey,” she says. “Sleep well.”

Except sleep doesn’t come easily. I toss and turn all night, wondering about the marks on Caleb’s back. If someone changed his bandage—Eli, maybe—and if he’s hurting because of it. And when I do sleep, I have insane dreams.

My mom, half erased by time, stands at the foot of my bed. She eyes me with suspicion.

My dad in an orange jumpsuit, frowning at me.

I can’t move from the bed.

Caleb’s dad. He walks up to me and ruffles my hair. Crouches until we’re eye level. “Leave my son alone,” he says, and it echoes.

Leave my son alone.

My son alone.

Alone.

Alone.

My fingers sting. I lift them, examine them in the dim light. My nails are torn, and blood drips down my hands. A drop lands on my cheek, and I unfreeze.

I fall through the floor, into an office.

Angela sits across from me, behind a desk. “You can’t see him,” she says. “He was arrested.”

“B-but why?” I sob.

“He did something bad and now he’s paying for it.”

I don’t ask what he did. I don’t care. I just want my dad.

“Margo?”

I glance up at Angela.

“A new family is going to take you. We’re going there now.”

We dissolve into smoke.

A distant beeping sound drags me up. Up, up, out of the dream world and back into reality.

My eyes open, and I lie there for a second. I try to catch my breath. My heart is racing—so much that I can feel my pulse thundering through my body. Whether it was a dream or broken memories, it’s given me an idea. My dad holds the key. He’s the only one who might talk to me, give me answers.

What he did and what I did... they must be related.

I grab my phone, texting Riley to come early, and then shuffle into the shower. The dream slips away, as they usually do, but I can't forget the sound of my own sobbing because Angela refused to let me see him.

I'm still getting dressed when Riley knocks on my door and steps inside.

"What's the nine-one-one?"

I make sure the door is shut, then blurt out, "I had a weird dream."

She rolls her eyes. "Really?"

"No—I think it was more than that. I was a kid sitting in my social worker's office, and she wouldn't let me see my dad. She wouldn't even tell me what he did."

She cocks her head. "I thought you said it was something drug related."

I nod. "Yeah. I thought Angela told me, but I also remember seeing Lydia at a later point, and she mentioned it, too."

"And Lydia is—"

"Caleb's mom."

"Ohhh," she says, exhaling. "I smell something fishy going on." She sits on my bed, pulling out her phone. After a few minutes of frantic typing and scrolling, she exhales. "He's been in prison since you were ten?"

"Yeah." I gnaw on my lower lip. It has me unsettled this morning.

"That's seven years," she mutters. "Was it a felony charge?"

I stare at her.

"I'm just searching general sentencing," she explains. "It's confusing without knowing what he was charged with. But unless he was found with a lot of drugs..."

"He was arrested in a park," I say. "He was with me."

"What about his lawyer?"

My eyes widen. "Oh fuck."

"What?" She drops her phone and stares at me. "Margo?"

"You remember when we went to the city? Me and Caleb?"

"Yeah..."

My legs give out. My knees hit my rug, and Riley reaches out. Her hand on my shoulder steadies me.

"How could I forget? We ran into a man—he was petrified to see Caleb... and then me. Caleb said he was my dad's lawyer."

"What the fuck," she whispers. "You're in the middle of a freaking conspiracy here."

"I know."

“What was his name?”

“Tobias. I don’t know his last name.”

“I could probably find from the media coverage on your dad’s trial.... Or not.” She flashes me her screen, and what she had typed into the search bar: *Keith Wolfe trial*.

No search results.

“How is that possible?”

She shakes her head. “I’ve heard that results can be removed from search engines. That would take a lot of time... or deep pockets. Maybe your social worker would know? Or Caleb?”

“There’s got to be another way. I’ll get on one of the school computers at lunch and see if I can dig deeper.” I slide on my shoes. “In the meantime, we just need to act normal.”

“Right.”

“Oh, and my mom is apparently in town,” I add.

Her jaw drops. “Maybe you should’ve *led with that!*”

I wince. I still don’t know how I feel about it. She’s in the same town as me—and if not Rose Hill, she’s definitely in the county. “She doesn’t want to see me.”

“What?”

One thing about being a foster amidst ‘normal’ kids—they take for granted having parents. Maybe that isn’t quite true—Eli’s parents are absentees, and Caleb’s family is insane. But a mom who rejects you outright? Goes so far as to give up parental rights?

It leaves a scar.

“She hates me,” I tell her. “So... she’s here for some other reason. But Caleb told me last night.”

“Wow.” Riley wisely doesn’t say anything else about it until we’re in her car, armed with buttered toast from Robert. “I just can’t imagine.”

“Your parents are cool.” I take a bite of toast. “It’s easy for the alternative to be hard to swallow.”

“Okay, so let’s just make sure I have this right. Savannah double-crossed us. Your mom’s back in town. We need to find your dad’s lawyer. Caleb and you are back together—”

“Ish,” I cut in.

“Back together-ish,” Riley amends. “Whatever that means. You forgave him.”

“Yeah.”

“And what about your dad? Are you going to visit him...?”

I flinch. “I don’t know. Why would I?”

“Because from how your face gets weird when you talk about him—and I can count on one hand the number of times you’ve actually *mentioned* him—it sounds like you still...” She shrugs, pulling into the school’s parking lot. “Like, I don’t know. He was the good parent, wasn’t he?”

“Forcibly taken away instead of choosing to leave me?” I laugh. “I guess. Except he *chose* to deal drugs. Or take drugs and get caught. However it happened. So, yeah. Even if it doesn’t appear like he decided to leave, he did.”

I can’t think about this now.

“I’m going to the computer lab at lunch.”

“What are we going to do about Savannah?” she asks. We get out and head toward school. “I mean, she totally thought that if you got on Caleb’s bad side and Amelie was taken out, she could just swoop in and steal Caleb.”

I whirl toward her. “*What?*”

Riley snorts. “You didn’t see that coming? I’ll admit that I didn’t either—until she took credit for Amelie running away...”

“Ah, fuck.”

She elbows me. “But you and Caleb are back together-ish.”

We walk into the cafeteria and stop dead. Savannah is sitting as close as humanly possible next to Caleb. To his credit, he looks unamused. His attention lands on me.

“Why isn’t he moving away?”

“Maybe he’s waiting for her to make a fool of herself.”

I glance at Riley. “Unknown finally made a reappearance. Seemed under the impression that Caleb and I were done for.”

“And last Savannah knew, you and Caleb were on the outs...”

“Last *anyone* at school knew,” I admit. “Seeing as how I don’t think anyone knew we borrowed Eli’s truck so I could see him.”

Savannah stands, raising her arms above her head. Her cheerleading uniform stretches across her breasts, her stomach bare. Some schools require the cheer team to be covered from shoulders to mid-thigh, but apparently Emery-Rose’s dress code is slacking.

One of her manicured hands reaches out, grazing Caleb’s face. He shakes his head and leans away from her, but it’s too late.

I see red.

“I’m going to do something stupid,” I warn Riley.

She only has time to raise her eyebrow, and then I’m off. I weave through the tables, stomping right up to Caleb. I’ll have none of that bullshit with Savannah, Amelie, *anyone*.

“Hey,” I say, catching Savannah’s attention. Caleb’s gaze hasn’t left me, but I surprise her.

“Margo!” She puts her hand on Caleb’s arm. “We were just—”

“Back off.” I grab her by her wrist and fling it away.

“Excuse—”

“Yeah, excuse you,” I snap. I’m boiling over. She *touched* him like—like

—
“Easy, little wolf.” Caleb snags me around my waist and pulling me between his legs.

Savannah stares at us like we’ve grown three heads. “But, you were ready to kill him...”

“A lot has changed.” I look her up and down slowly. All she did was want to replace Amelie. It shouldn’t have surprised me that she took over Amelie’s underhanded bitchiness, too.

Once a mean girl, always a mean girl.

Caleb leans forward and presses a kiss to my temple. He’s enjoying this, the bastard. Probably let Sav stay just close enough to get a rise out of me.

My ex-friend lifts her chin, glaring daggers through me. She slowly backs away, into her group of cheer friends. They’re all staring at Caleb and me, but I don’t give a fuck.

I turn and smack his chest lightly, frowning. “What was that?”

He grins. “I like seeing your possessive side.”

“If she so much as touches you—”

“No one will.” He grips my chin when I try to look away. “Hear this, Margo. I don’t take your promise lightly. Our game is between you and me.”

“That didn’t stop you before,” I whisper.

Something flashes across his face, but I don’t recognize the emotion. “That was then. And while you were always mine...”

Yeah, I didn’t want anything to do with his crazy ass. But now I do.

God help us.

He kisses my lips, then releases me. “Tell whoever your ride home is that I’m stealing you away after school.”

I nod, unable to speak. Part of me still hates him, and I don't know how to grapple with the loathing that rises like bile in my throat. It comes out of nowhere.

I step away from him and clear my throat. "I'll see you later."

The rest of the day, I have the inexplicable urge to avoid him. He's everywhere. Leaning over my chair in first period, his lips on my shoulder. Watching me move down the hall with Riley after second period, then third. Haunting my locker before fourth.

And I know, I just *know*, he'll be waiting for me before lunch. I duck out of the class five minutes early, claiming to have cramps—it shuts up the teacher nicely—and hide in the bathroom outside the computer lab until the bell rings.

I wait until it's silent, then tiptoe out. For a split second, I'm shocked that Caleb isn't leaning against the door, my plan foiled.

Nope. Empty hallway.

I open the door and slip inside, scurrying to the back row of computers. Time flies by as I turn on a computer and begin my search. I pull out my lunch, giving it a fraction of my attention.

I'm lost in the interwebs when the computer lab door opens, and I instinctively duck down.

"It's just me," Riley says, laughing. She closes the door behind her and drops into the chair next to me. "Why are you in here with the lights off?"

"I figured Caleb would come searching for me," I murmur. "And keep your voice down."

I picked the last row strategically. Even if Caleb were to pop in here—which he wouldn't—we're out of sight of the window. I'm not taking any chances.

"Did you find anything?"

I shake my head. "There are fourteen attorneys named Tobias who practice in New York City. I'm going through the law firm websites right now, trying to find their pictures."

Riley turns to the computer next to me. "Give me half, we can work through it until we have to go to class."

I grin, pushing the paper between us. "You start at the bottom?"

"Deal."

We work in silence. She has me glance at pictures when she finds them. By the time we get through the list, there are two who don't have headshots

online.

I stare at the two highlighted names. Tobias Hutchins and Tobias E. Rodrigues.

“What now?” Riley whispers.

A shadow falls across the narrow vertical window on the door, and we both duck behind our screens. It disappears after a second, and we both sigh.

“He’s kind of a stalker.”

“If that was even him,” I answer. I know it was, though. After this morning, he probably assumed I would hide. Luckily for me, I still have tricks up my sleeve. Including hiding in places he’d never think to check.

Riley groans. “Did you eat?”

“Yeah, I ate with one hand and Googled with the other.”

We gather our things slowly. The bell is going to ring any moment.

I grab Riley’s arm. “I need to get to New York City.”

She swallows. “And I’m guessing you don’t want Caleb to find out?”

“Something like that.”

She sighs. “Okay. Great. Let’s do this.”

MARGO

Past

I tapped on Caleb's door. It swung open without resistance, revealing an empty room. His bed was made, the pillows smoothed. And no sign of the boy I was searching for.

Instead of calling out for him, I left the doorway and crept down the hall. Voices were coming from his parents' room. I paused, unsure for a split second, then continued on.

"You're being unreasonable," Mrs. Asher hissed.

I froze again.

"Me? I'm the unreasonable one?" A male voice... but not Caleb's dad. "This is insane, Lydia. You can't expect me to go along with this."

"I can, and I will," she snapped. "Lord knows we pay you enough."

"There isn't enough money in the world to help us if we get caught," he answered. "Something I'm sure you're well aware of."

She sighed. She often sighed at Caleb and me. We did ridiculous things just to get a sigh out of her—her whole body moved with it, an exaggerated slump. She was an actress in a former life, she often told us.

"We've come too far to turn back." Her voice got louder. The door pulled open.

With a start, I realized I was in the middle of the hall, about to be caught eavesdropping. I ran back to Caleb's room, pressing myself against the wall behind his door.

"Lydia, I don't think—"

"Quiet."

I held my breath.

Her footsteps came closer and closer to Caleb's room, slowing down. She was visible through the crack between the door and the wall. She paused, taking a step into the room and vanishing from my sight. Any second, the door would fly closed and my hiding spot would be revealed.

"Mom?" Caleb called.

Mrs. Asher retreated into the hallway. "Ah, there you are. Where have you been lurking?"

"I was getting a snack. Amberly said it was okay."

Lydia hummed at the mention of my mom. “Fine.”

“Nice to see you, kid,” the man said.

He flashed by the crack in the door as he walked past Lydia. His footsteps hammered down the stairs. And then he was gone, and Lydia was retreating, too.

Caleb walked into the room and swung his door shut. He stared at me, frowning. “What are you doing?”

Fear wrapped around my throat. “Shh!”

“Were you hiding from Mom?”

“No!” *My first lie.*



Present

“Parker, Wheeler, and Smith. How can I help you?”

“Can I speak with Mr. Rodrigues?” I twirl a piece of my hair in an effort to keep calm.

“Are you a client?”

“It’s regarding an old case,” I say.

Riley sits across from me, her eyes wide.

“Name?”

“Margo—er, Appleton.”

Riley hits me with the back of her hand. “Hey!”

“Sorry,” I mutter.

“Hold, please,” the receptionist says. There’s a click, then classical music fills my ears.

“She put me on hold,” I relay.

“Naturally.”

The music cuts out, and the receptionist says, “I’m transferring you over to Mr. Rodrigues’s line now.”

“Thanks—”

A click, and then more ringing.

“Tobias Rodrigues. How can I help you, Ms. Appleton?” He sounds old, snappy. He probably doesn’t have too many years before retirement, and he’s ready to make the most out of every minute.

That, and this phone call isn’t billable.

I grab the notebook Riley has on her lap and clear my throat. “I was wondering if you could help me. My friend’s dad had a public defender about eight years ago, and all she can remember is the name Tobias—”

“I’m sorry, young lady. I worked for a prosecutor in Oregon before I transitioned to defense, and I’ve been at this office for fifteen years.”

Not a public defender, then. I close my eyes. “I’m sorry to have wasted your time. Thank you.” I hang up and drop the phone, falling back on the bed. “Well, that leaves... *one*. Not very good odds.”

She shrugs. “One is all we need. You’ll recognize him?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, let’s go to New York City then.” She stands, pulling me up with her.

“Wait, now?”

Riley snorts. “No. I’m sure we’ll figure out a time to sneak away.”

My phone rings. Caleb’s name flashes across my screen, and I promptly turn it facedown. I’m not avoiding him, per se... but we’re investigating why he knows my dad’s lawyer.

I don’t want to lie to him, and I can’t exactly tell the truth. What if he tries to stop me?

He could. He has the power to stop me in my tracks, at least temporarily. Nothing could stop me for good. And so, we’re avoiding. Big time.

“He’s going to get suspicious,” Riley says.

“I’ll deal with it later.”

Her eyebrow lifts. Almost as soon as my phone goes quiet, Riley’s starts up.

“Hey, babe,” she says.

I stare at her. *Babe?* When did that happen?

“Um, yeah, she’s with me—”

“No, Riley—”

She hands me the phone, looking apologetic. “Caleb.”

“Obviously,” I mutter. I take the phone and put it to my ear, announcing, “You’re interrupting girl time.”

“Girl time.”

My breath hitches. I haven’t heard that dangerous edge to Caleb’s voice in a while.

And yet, I continue on. “Yep. Riley and I were enjoying the peace and quiet. Catching up after a long day at school—”

“Where were you at lunch?”

I flashback to the first time he asked me. Then, it was to embarrass me.

Let’s play a game.

“Busy.” I grind my teeth together. “Why?”

I can practically hear his shrug. “Let’s say I care.”

“That’d be a new one.”

“You’re on dangerous ground here, Margo.”

I roll my eyes, turning away from Riley. If I push Caleb to his breaking point, I’ll know where we stand. “Maybe I like dangerous ground.”

It strikes me that I did something similar when we were kids. Showing up at his house in a white dress, asking him to marry me... The motive was the same. I push until he gives me a definite answer.

He's silent. Thinking, perhaps.

"Enjoy your girl time."

The line goes dead, and I blink down at it. He just hung up on me without an argument.

My pushing didn't work.

"Did that backfire?" Riley laughs at my expression. "You shove him away and he'll just hold you tighter."

"He said to enjoy girl time." I hand her phone back, shaking my head. "I never know what to do with him."

"Enjoy the ride," she says, nudging me. "Oh! Margo! This is actually perfect. I have an idea."

"What?"

She grabs my hand and tows me downstairs, into Robert's study.

He looks up at us and smiles. "You seem a bit on the mischievous side, Riley. What's up?"

"My parents are taking me to the open house for NYU next weekend," she says.

My heart seems to drop into my feet.

"So I was thinking that Margo should come with us. You know, get to tour a college." She glances back at me, ignoring the panic I'm sure is on my face. "She hasn't really spoken much about it, and deadlines are coming up."

"Riley." I slip my hand from hers. "I'm not going to college."

Robert and Riley both pause.

This has been a reality since I was ten years old. Before then? I had a plan. A loose one, of course, but a plan nonetheless. Kid-Margo was a planner, but that side of me got destroyed by the foster system. Now, the best plan is no plan.

"What are you going to do after you graduate?" Robert leans forward on his desk and watches me closely.

I shrug, shifting. "Well, you're only obligated to keep me until I'm eighteen. And then I'll apply for community housing closer to the city and find a job. Maybe I'll be a waitress. They make good tips."

"No."

I blink at my foster dad. "Huh?"

"No, I'm sorry." He stands and brushes past me. In the hallway, he yells, "Len! Come here, please." And then he's back, and he glances at Riley.

"Right, er, okay. I'll see you later, Margo." She pats my shoulder and

scurries out.

Robert and I stare at each other. I made him mad. I'm not quite sure how—maybe insinuating that I'd last a whole year here?

More like nine months.

"What's wrong?" Lenora asks me. She reaches out and touches my cheek. "You're flushed. Are you okay?"

"She doesn't want to go to college," Robert bites out.

This is the first time I've seen him upset like this.

It scares me.

I shrink away from both of them, rubbing my arms. "So? It won't be your problem."

Lenora clucks her tongue and goes to one of the plush chairs in front of Robert's desk. "Let's start at the beginning. Sit down, honey. Both of you."

We do. Robert perches on the edge of his chair, and I sink into the one next to Lenora. I guess it's about time we discuss my plans for the future.

"All I said was, once I'm out of the system, I'll apply for community housing and get a job." I pull my leg up to my chest, wrapping my arms around it. It's safer that way. "I don't have the money to put myself through college. They require the tax forms filled out ahead of time, so I guess I could take a few classes the following year..."

"Unacceptable," Robert says. "You are bright. You have a future ahead of you that I refuse to see you throw away."

I shake my head. "I get it. You wanted the best for Josie. But me? Once I leave, I have nothing. I'll be starting over—*again*."

Lenora puts her hand on top of mine. "You don't have to leave."

The whole world screeches to a halt.

"What?"

She smiles at me, but it's tentative. "We want you to stay."

"Even when you age out," Robert adds. "And..."

"If you want to go to college, we're going to support you." Lenora reaches out and wipes a tear from my cheek.

I didn't even realize I was crying, but everything is blurry. My chest is tight.

There's a very specific decimation of a foster child's hopes. The kid I was knew my parents would've taken me to visit colleges, helped me fill out the form, co-signed on a loan. They would've urged me to get a job to help fund it, maybe given me rides or taught me how to drive.

And then Mom abandoned ship and Dad was taken away.

The first foster home I was put in was horrific. Eight kids, severe rules, no freedom. No friendships. School and home. No dinner if we were bad. The older kids made lunches for the younger ones, tucked us into bed.

I don't remember their names.

Another home, and then another. Some were abrupt, some were only meant for short periods of time. Angela was my saving grace, or the devil that I didn't want to see coming. She represented change.

Caleb almost destroyed my relationship with the Jenkinses. And only a few weeks later, they're asking me to stay... *permanently*.

"I don't..." I don't know what to say. How to react.

My heart pounds. And, surprisingly, there's a large amount of fear in me, too.

Because this could end. They could change their minds and send me away.

"We would never want to come between you and your father, Margo," Lenora says, "but we would adopt you if we could."

I shake my head. "It's only been a few months. How do you know? Why..." *Why do you even want me?*

"You're smart and kind," Robert says. "And you fit in with us. You've had a hard life. We want to be your home, kiddo."

I shake my head. "What do you mean, come between me and my father? We don't have a relationship."

Lenora and Robert exchange a glance. She raises her eyebrows at him, and he frowns.

"You could if you wanted to." Lenora holds up her hands. "We're not pushing this on you, Margo. But if you wanted to see him, we're supportive of it. You haven't seen him since the trial?"

I close my eyes. "I wasn't allowed to go to the trial. The last time I saw him was at the park when he was arrested."

Do I want to see him again?

Behind bars? Seven years older?

No.

I stand. "Thank you both. For... everything."

Robert stands, too. "Do you want to go to the NYU open house?"

I bite my lip. It'd be an excuse to go into the city—then Riley and I wouldn't have to think of another reason. And as much as I hate to admit it,

I'm curious.

"I think so." Even if I can't get in, or afford it, I can live in the pipe dream for a day.

"Great. It's settled, then. We'll all go."

My mouth drops open. "Us?"

"As a family," Lenora supplies. "I went to NYU for graduate school. It'd be lovely to go back."

I grin. "So you'll know your way around? And the best place to get coffee?"

"Yes. Oh, this will be so much fun!" Lenora claps and jumps up. "I'm going to get dinner started."

"I have homework to finish," I say.

"Me, too," Robert adds, looking down at the stack of papers. "Who knew an art teacher would assign homework? How terrible of me."

We laugh, and Lenora hooks her arm around mine. She pulls me out of the room, leaving Robert back to his silence.

Once I'm back upstairs, I grab my phone. Since the text from Unknown asking me what I'm going to do with Caleb not interested in me anymore, there's been radio silence.

I only hope it lasts.

CALEB

I climb out of my car and circle to the front hood. I lean against it and wait. It only takes a minute for the other car to arrive. It pulls up next to me, and Mother gets out. She comes toward me, spreading her arms, but I shake my head.

She sighs.

“I’m curious if you saw your life going in this direction from the beginning,” I comment, staring at the diner across the lot. It’s run-down. Only regulars venture in, and I’m sure some stay all day. It’s the kind of diner that’s open twenty-four hours, the neighborhood’s only gleaming beacon in the middle of the night.

Her life has certainly changed.

“It really picks up for brunch on Sundays,” she says. “Surely this isn’t the reason you wanted to meet?”

I shift. “I’m mostly curious about why you let your brother-in-law run the show?”

She glances at me. “Your father wants it that way.”

“What a fucking joke.”

“David and Iris have done more for our family—”

My glare cuts her off. Honestly, I’ve had enough of them. Uncle David holds my entire life over my head. He’s been interfering with lacrosse, which hasn’t even started yet, and he will not shut up about fucking *college*.

I need space. And unfortunately, space is something Mother can help me with... by delivering a message.

But first, I need answers.

“Do you know where Amberly is?”

Margo’s mother has been eluding me for too long, but not without help. She straightens her maroon uniform shirt. “Is she back in town?”

“We both know the answer to that.”

“Shame,” Mother comments. “Rose Hill isn’t good for the poor woman.” I shake my head.

She cups my cheek, forcing me to meet her eyes. Mother looks rough: circles under her eyes barely concealed by makeup, loose skin hanging off her frame. She lost weight recently. It’s been falling off slowly in the past seven years.

Guilt has a way of doing that.

“Tell Uncle David that I only have one college on my list.”

She raises her eyebrow.

“Columbia,” I inform her. I step back, letting her hand slip off my skin. It hovers in the air between us for a moment, then falls. “Bye, Mom.”

MARGO

*M*y floorboard creaks.

I open my eyes just as someone presses down on top of me, a hand wrapping around my throat. Caleb doesn't squeeze. There's barely any force applied to my skin.

I'd recognize him even in the pitch-black. As it is, moonlight filters through my curtains, casting strange shadows across his face. We don't speak. He peels back my comforter, and I put my hands on his wrist. My fingertips catch his quick heartbeat.

He drags my shorts and panties down my legs. I kick them off, unable to look away from his face. It isn't just the shadows—there's darkness in him tonight. His fingers find my center, sliding into me.

"Soaked," he whispers.

It's an automatic response to him. Always.

"Did you enjoy girl time?"

I don't answer. Can't, since his hand squeezes my throat for a second, then goes back to the gentle hold.

I release his wrist and go to his pants. I unbutton them and shove them off his hips. He stands, removing them, then comes back. A condom packet lands on my chest.

I tear it open with shaky hands, casting a quick glance to the door. It's closed this time, at least. He doesn't climb back in bed like I expect. Instead, he pulls me to the edge of the bed by my thighs. I sit up and roll the condom onto his hard length. It bobs a bit under my touch.

Caleb releases a hiss of breath.

And then it's on. He holds my thighs and plunges into me without warning. This new angle makes me arch off the bed. He stares down at me, and my cheeks heat. It's dark, but I think he can see everything. He slams into me over and over again, our skin slapping together. I hook my feet behind him, lifting my hips to meet him.

It's also...

Not intimate.

I reach up and grab his shoulders, pulling him down. He pauses, staring at me.

"Come here," I whisper, scooting away from him.

He exhales, but he does. He crawls over me, our bodies pressed impossibly close. And when he pushes into me again, we both shudder. I wrap my legs around him, holding him against me.

"Your plan failed," I say in his ear. I nip his soft lobe. "Lenora and Robert want to keep me."

I kiss his neck. He stays completely still except for the slight roll of his hips.

I move up his jaw, along the edge of his lips.

"*You* failed to get rid of me," I say.

He lets my lips explore his cheek, his temple. Over his eyelids and nose.

I'm learning him all over again.

"I didn't want to get rid of you," he finally whispers back. "If you thought that was my goal, you haven't been paying attention."

We took his darkness and put it into a new shape.

Me.

I let my hand wander up inside his shirt, over his muscled abs, to the bandages still wrapped around his chest. I wish I knew why someone would do such a thing to him. Why family can be so cruel.

"Kiss me," he says.

I lift my chin, aligning our lips. He tastes sweet, and he kisses me like he can't breathe without help. Sometimes I feel like that, too.

His hips move again. His hand slips between us, finding my sensitive spot. He knows how to play my body like an instrument, winding me tighter and tighter until I explode. His tongue dances with mine, our lips, his finger against my clit.

It's all too much.

He swallows my moan, chasing it a second later with one of his own. I

rake my nails up his ass, and he pounds into me, faster and faster. He flicks my clit, and the sudden sharpness of it sends me over the edge. He follows, stilling inside me, and we both don't move for a moment.

"That was overdue." He brushes my hair off my face.

He hops up, removing the used condom and folding it in a tissue. He glances toward the window, and my heart stops. He's just going to leave?

Screw me and abandon—

"Stop," he whispers.

"Stop what?"

"You're overthinking. When have I left you?"

"Um, do you want a list or an essay—"

"Have I left you when you didn't want me to go?"

I'm quiet. There have definitely been times I wanted him to go—and he has gone. And there have been times I wanted him to stay... and he stayed.

He takes my silence as an answer and yanks his boxers back on, climbing into bed. He hugs me to him and closes his eyes.

"Robert and Lenora want to keep me," I say again. "Like... for real."

I glance up and find him watching me.

"We're going to NYU for an open house this weekend."

His smile is quick. "New York University, huh?"

"It's a starting place. But there's no guarantee I can get in—or if I'd even like it. Maybe I want a small school."

"What about—" He stops, shaking his head. "You know what? Never mind."

"Tell me."

"They're *keeping* you... adopting you?"

I frown and roll onto my back. "No. Dad still has custody."

"You don't think he'd forfeit his rights?"

"I don't know if I want him to." That would be the last straw. Dad giving up on me—*willingly*, after everything else that's happened.

"He's in prison, Margo." Caleb's voice is hard. "Why do you still care about him?"

This is the first time we've talked about him, and all the animosity Caleb used to throw at me is now back in his voice. I barely suppress a shiver.

"He's my dad."

He grunts.

"Caleb?"

“Come here,” he says.

I turn back on my side, and we face each other. His finger runs up my arm, over my shoulder and along my neck. His thumb brushes my pulse point. Slowly, he leans forward and kisses my forehead.

My heart flutters.

“Sleep,” he orders. After a long moment, he adds, “We’ll discuss the pitfalls of your father later.”

That doesn’t sound good.

CALEB

Early morning, Margo's phone buzzes. It wakes me out of a sound sleep.

My eyes snap open. Her cheek is pressed against my biceps, her arm slung across my chest. Her legs are tangled with mine. Slowly, I reach out and feel for her phone.

Unknown: *Do your foster parents know Caleb sneaks into your room at night?*

Unknown: *That he fucks you while they sleep down the hall?*

What the hell?

Another text comes through while I'm holding her phone.

Unknown: *There are things you need to know about the Asher family, Sheep. Things only I can tell you. Do you know who you're letting into your bed?*

Rage coils in my throat. I want to yell, to throw the phone. I had a hunch who Unknown is—I've had a hunch since she mentioned the texts to Coach. But this flagrant disregard for their lives has my blood boiling.

Me: *I don't know who you are, but I will find you and put an end to*

this.

Silence.

I delete the whole thread. Margo doesn't need to see this kind of filth on her phone. Unknown is getting out of control, and I'm going to put an end to it.

Unknown: *Hello, Caleb.*

I stare at the text, then jump out of bed. Margo moans, rolling over, while I stare around her room. I'd understand if we were on the ground floor—at least that would explain a peeping Tom. But this?

Maybe a camera.

I move things, lifting baubles. I'm well aware that people make tiny cameras nowadays. It could be anywhere.

"Caleb?"

I glance behind me. "Shh."

"What are you doing?"

"You have another hour to sleep," I tell her, pushing books aside on the shelf. My eyes lock on to a ceramic mermaid. Lifting it, I contemplate if it's actually heavier than it should be, or if I've officially gone crazy.

I look back at Margo. If she's asleep, I'll leave it alone.

She's not. She's risen on her elbow, hair a mess, and she watches me with wide eyes.

"Where did you get this?"

She tilts her head. "I don't know."

"Margo, it's important." She's not the mermaid type. Someone must've given it to her.

"I don't recognize it. Where'd you find it?"

"On your bookshelf." I breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth. Years of therapy didn't do shit—except teach me how to breathe like a lunatic. A *calm* lunatic. I'm going to find this stalker and beat the living shit out of him.

She just stares at me, so I toss her the phone. She reads the single message, and her lips twist. I resume my inspection of the mermaid. I don't know tech. But I do know that ceramic figures shouldn't have wires coming

out of the bottom.

I stuff it into my bag and cross the room, planting a kiss on her lips. “I’ll see you at school.”

Once I’m dressed, I go out the window, down the side of the house. I jog across the lawn and down the street to my car. I have a contact who can help me, but he doesn’t like to see me. Our friendship only works so long as no one *knows* we’re friends.

I leave the mermaid in my car, wrapped in an athletic sock, and lean against the door. He answers on the second ring.

“Bit early, Caleb.”

“I found something weird,” I tell him. “Mind if I stop over?”

“Fine.”

I smile and hang up, knowing he’d never voice the million questions he wants to ask over the phone. I drive in silence, not even playing music. Who knows what’s inside that thing?

Finally, I pull up to a mansion at the top of a hill. The gate swings open ahead of me, and I park off to the side.

Matt Bonner, Lion’s Head’s star lacrosse player, meets me at the front door. He’s still in his sleep clothes, irritated.

“This—”

I hold up my hand, silencing him, and he waves me in. Once we’re in his room, I show him the mermaid. I don’t know if we’re dealing with audio or a camera.

He takes it from me and gets to work.

I sit on the floor by his desk, watching him.

It takes a lot not to hover, but I know he’d punch me for it.

Matt and I became friends in middle school. His parents were going through a nasty divorce, and he was put at Emery-Rose’s middle school for a year while custody agreements were sorted out. He fell in with my new group: Liam, Eli, Theo.

His dad owns a cyber security firm, and Matt either picked up the skill through genetics, osmosis, or some weird idea that he had to be good at computers to impress his dad. Who knows. Either way, it came in handy to track Margo down. How else was I supposed to find her, if not to hack into the social worker’s computer and find Margo’s file?

Eventually the divorce went through, and Matt’s dad relocated to a new house. This one, actually. Unfortunately for Matt, the closest private school

was Lion's Head.

We hype up the rivalry under a microscope, but we're still cool. Who gives a fuck if I can't stand his teammates or we crush them on the field?

"Just a camera," Matt grunts. "Where'd you find this?"

"Margo's room. How does it work?"

He swivels toward me. "That chick you were with at the football game."

"Yeah."

"Interesting. Weren't you dating Lucy's sister?"

Amelie.

I snort. "Hardly." I motion toward the figure in his hands. "Explain this."

"It connects to WiFi periodically and sends the video it collected. I think it's motion activated, which is pretty standard."

Freaking hell.

I rub my eyes. "Can you find out where it was sent? And what the last video was?"

"It has a setting in here to send a data dump once a day, then it erases. Pretty nifty, actually, but quite ordinary. It'd be a higher-end piece in any tech shop in the city."

"How am I supposed to find out who's been *spying* on us?"

Matt shrugs. "Silver lining?"

I stare at him.

"The person would've had to connect it manually to their WiFi. First, whoever put it there would obviously need the home's password to get on, and then they'd have to set up this figure to connect."

"So, someone she trusts?"

"Yep."

I grunt. "She has a small network of friends. Only one of which recently... went off the rails."

Savannah and Amelie play dirty games. At least Amelie is out in the open about most of her shit. Savannah likes guerilla warfare.

Then again, she learned from the best—the people who relentlessly bullied her after Margo was taken away.

I think both of them have been trying to play Margo. Most recently, Savannah used Margo to get Amelie off her game. And our newest head cheerleader likes her spot at the top. First it was disrupted by Amelie's return from studying abroad, and now Margo.

There's a sinking feeling in my chest.

Unknown, Amelie and Savannah... *I'm* the bad guy of Margo's story. No one else.

This has to end.

"Can you track it?" I ask him.

He shrugs. "Yeah, I can probably rig a virus in. They'll open the most recent video, and it will let me get into their computer."

"You're a fucking genius, man." I slap his back and stand. I've still got to go home before I can make it to school. "Let me know what I owe you."

"Undying gratitude," Matt replies. "I'll cash in a favor someday."

At this rate, we traded exclusively in favors. What he'll need in a day, a week, a year is anyone's guess.

"Call me when you get answers."

And in the meantime, I'm going to set some fucking ground rules. No one messes with Margo.

Only me.

MARGO

“We’re here!” Riley yells, sprinting across the parking garage. She knocks into me, her arms squeezing around my back for a quick second. And then she jumps back, bouncing up and down. “This is a lot more imminent for you, Margo, but I’m so excited! If we like it, we can both go here, and I’ll only be a year behind, but I think I could probably graduate in three years if I take extra classes, then we can graduate *together* and—”

“Whoa,” I mumble. “I have to get in first.”

Sometimes I forget that Riley is a year younger. Besides the fact that we share no classes together, she doesn’t act like a junior. She’s... mature, or whatever. I’d been pushing off the fact that she still has a full year left at Emery-Rose.

“It’s going to be so lonely next year.” She sighs.

We link arms and head toward the elevators. Her parents, whom I’ve only met briefly, follow behind us with Len and Robert.

Another new development: Lenora asked me to call her *Len*. Less formal, and apparently everyone else calls her that, too.

“Did you tell Caleb you were coming?” Riley asks.

I nod. “He was glad.”

“Because he wants you to go to college.”

I shrug. I didn’t tell her about the mermaid, which Caleb informed me had a camera in it. But he’d disposed of it, and I didn’t need to worry. *Ha*. Of course I’m worried. Someone got it into my room. It’s already too easy for him to scale the house and get in, so how hard would it be for someone else?

The suspect list is long.

And the scarier question: Why didn't I notice it?

But today... today, we're going to take a tour. Riley and I are going to sit in on a class while the adults go to a seminar on financial aid. And after that, we get to meet some professors, talk to current students, and then we need to pull off the ultimate trick: convince our parents to let us take off by ourselves for an hour.

Better than sneaking away.

We find the admissions office, where a bunch of other high school students are gathered.

Lenora—*Len*—steps forward and squeezes my shoulder. “Excited?”

“Terrified,” I whisper.

After a tour that leaves me awestruck—the campus is huge—and an international law class, Riley and I find our families to get lunch.

The Jenkinses are chatting with a man with an NYU lanyard around his neck.

Len grins at us. “Margo, this is one of my old college professors, Eric Marks.”

“Old,” Professor Marks says, shaking his head and trying not to smile. “You always knew how to make a guy feel good, Len. Pleasure to meet you, Margo.”

I shake his hand, suddenly shy. “Hi.”

“We've heard good things,” he continues. “Grades are good. You're going to get involved in an extracurricular activity?”

“Crew, probably,” I say.

“And the school newspaper,” Riley inserts. “To cover the lacrosse season.”

I bite my lip, but the professor just smiles.

“Riley Appleton,” she introduces herself. “Currently a junior, but eager to join you, sir.”

They shake hands.

Professor Marks' smile widens. “I appreciate the enthusiasm, young lady.”

Riley's parents join us. We finally break away from the professor, who wishes Riley and me good luck with our applications, and find a spot to sit and eat.

“There's another seminar about housing,” Riley's dad says. “We were

hoping to attend that. The school has some housing, but we'd like to be prepared."

Riley turns to me. "Imagine, we could *live* together!"

Oh my god.

I offer her a weak smile. "Sounds great."

She doesn't notice any hesitancy, and the conversation sweeps away.

"You guys should go," I say to Robert. "Riley and I will keep busy for an hour."

Len and Robert exchange a glance, then Robert grins. "Yeah, I'd like to learn more about housing. The location is important if you decide to come here."

"I rented an apartment for grad school," Len says. "But you're a lot younger, and we'd worry if you were completely on your own."

We kill time until their session, then Riley and I stand.

"We'll meet you here when you're done!" she calls. She grabs my hand and leads me away, out of sight. "I pulled up his office on my phone. It's only ten minutes from here."

My stomach erupts with butterflies. "What if he isn't there?"

"He will be. Lawyers are workaholics. And if he isn't, maybe we can get his home address or something."

That's stalking. I shake my head, but we head off down the street. This part of the city is different from Times Square. A smidge less busy. No glaring screens over our heads. Just regular storefronts and tall office buildings once we get out of the residential section.

Finally, we stop in front of a large building. It's noisier here. Cabs and cars rush by on the street. Businessmen and women flood the streets. There's a smell of burning coming from the grates beneath our feet.

"Tenth floor," Riley says.

We go in. Unlike the office building Caleb and I went to, this one doesn't have much in the way of a lobby. Just a few rows of metal benches facing glass walls. No receptionist desk. We go to the elevators, then up.

Tobias Hutchins. I don't know if he's going to be the same man Caleb and I ran into, or if he'll recognize me. Maybe I can lie about who I am, get him to open up before I ask him about a seven-year-old case.

"Good afternoon," the receptionist greets us once we push through the frosted-glass doors to the law office. "Are you here for an appointment?"

"We need to speak to Mr. Hutchins," Riley says smoothly. "He said we

didn't need an appointment."

The receptionist's lips thin. "I'm afraid he's booked all day. If you call his secretary, she'll be able to set you up—"

"Margo?"

I spin toward the voice.

The lawyer.

Tobias.

He's the right one.

"Mr. Hutchins—"

"It's okay, Sandy." He looks... defeated. Maybe he was hoping I wasn't me. Wouldn't be the first time someone wished that. "Follow me, girls. It's best if we talk in private."

The receptionist makes a vague noise in the back of her throat.

Riley and I follow him down the hall. There are private offices and conference rooms, and then the hall opens into a large bullpen. Some are empty, but the greater majority are occupied. On a weekend.

That's dedication.

He stops in front of an open door and waves us in. He has a view, surprisingly. I guess I figured he would be one of the ones in the center, fighting with his colleagues for elbow room. His name is on the glass door in gold lettering, the word *partner* just under it.

"The couch?" he directs, closing the door behind us. He busies himself with drawing a shade down over the door, giving us another layer of privacy—or secrecy.

There's a framed newspaper article on the wall from five years ago about Tobias's promotion to partner. It's surrounded by other accolades and family pictures. A bookshelf on one wall holds law books and plants. In the corner by the floor-to-ceiling window—one of them, anyway—there's a cozier setup of two couches and two armchairs, a coffee table between them.

We take a seat on one of the couches, and Tobias joins us. He relaxes on the armchair next to me, crossing his legs. He seems the picture of ease, and it irks me.

"You know who I am," I say.

"You resemble your dad a bit." He nods. "And I figured you would track me down after I ran into you and Mr. Asher."

"How do you know Caleb?"

Now he fidgets. "Through the trial, of course. He was present, even if you

weren't."

I sit up straighter. "I was kept away. But... He was at my dad's trial? Why?"

Tobias pauses. "Why wouldn't he? It involved his family—"

"Because my dad was dealing drugs while living there?"

He stares at me, a contemplative expression on his face. "What did they tell you?"

"He went away on drug charges," I say. "And my social worker wouldn't let me go to the trial. I didn't get to see him again after he was arrested."

"I'm afraid that was your father's doing," Tobias says. He frowns. "He was adamant that you not see him like that."

I exchange a look with Riley. It doesn't sound like my dad. He would've wanted to see me. To say goodbye, if he knew he was going to prison.

"Can you walk us through the case?" Riley asks.

"I'm sorry, it was a long time ago," he says. He *sounds* apologetic, but he doesn't seem it. "I have another meeting in a few minutes that I have to prepare for. Now, if there's anything else..."

"It was a long time ago," I echo. "But you knew Caleb—you called him Mr. Asher then *and* just now. That's more than just respect. You were afraid of him. How could you have been afraid of a ten-year-old boy?"

He shakes his head. "Listen, Margo. These things happened in the past. It's best to just leave them buried."

"I refuse to accept that."

He stands. "Unfortunately, I don't think I can give any suitable answers. Attorney-client privilege is a tricky thing to navigate."

"One last question." It's weird to be open about the desperation clawing at me. I need answers—I'll do anything to get answers. And Tobias Hutchins is my last hope.

He waves for me to continue.

"You were a public defender. And soon after that case, you left that office to come here." I point to the framed newspaper clipping on the wall. "And you were made a partner in just two years? That's a little fast, isn't it?"

His face slowly turns red. "It's time for you to leave."

Riley takes my hand and squeezes. "We're going. Thanks for speaking with us."

He doesn't answer. His eyes follow us to the door, which Riley yanks open. We get the hell out of dodge, not speaking until we're on the street.

Free and clear.

“That didn’t answer anything,” I say. “He didn’t give up any information about how he knew Caleb, or why he was afraid, or what happened with Dad’s case.”

“Except maybe...” Riley bites her lip. “I think it *does* prove something. It proves that he’s involved. And not in a good way.”

Everything feels hopeless.

“Margo...”

I meet her eyes.

“I think you need to talk to your dad.”

MARGO

Past

“*R*eady to go, kid?”

I raised my arms in the air, and Dad obliged me. He scooped me up, up up, placing me on his shoulders. Mom said I was getting too big and I was going to break Dad’s back one of these days. He told me to ignore her.

I was still his little girl. Always would be.

We approached the door, and I ducked, curling myself around his head. He tickled my foot, and I giggled into his hair. He carried me out of the school, past all the other kids waiting for the bus.

I loved days Dad picked me up. It meant Mom was out, either with friends or on a supply run for Caleb’s house. He put me down beside his car, ruffling my hair. I fought the impulse to hug him before he helped me into the backseat and buckled me in.

“Pizza?” he asked.

“Duh,” I answered.

“Are you okay with Caleb joining us for dinner? His parents are having a party.”

“Is that where Mommy is?”

He met my gaze in the mirror. “Yeah, she’s catering it. It’s gonna be a late night.”

I sighed, tipping my head back. We grabbed the pizza and headed home, and I ran into my room to change out of the uniform. The front door opened and shut. Dad’s and Caleb’s voices drifted down the hall toward me.

It wasn’t often that I was tempted to eavesdrop—barring that one time last week with Mrs. Asher and the mystery man—but any conversation between Dad and Caleb was worth its weight in gold.

Caleb idolized my dad. I didn’t know why, and deep down, it irked me. He was *my* dad. Caleb had his own. But he was always asking him questions, hanging around when Mom wasn’t here. He didn’t like to be in our apartment if my mom was home, although I never asked why.

“Where’s Margo?” Caleb asked.

“Getting changed,” Dad said. “How was school?”

“Fine. I caught Amelie and Ian kissing in the hallway. They both paid me five bucks to keep my mouth shut.”

Dad chuckled. “You’re going to be quite the businessman.”

“Or at least good at getting people to pay me for not spilling secrets,” Caleb muttered. “Amelie says she’s Margo’s friend.”

“Does she?”

“Well, she’s not a very good one.”

I stormed out into the living room with only one sock on. “She’s a fine friend! You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Language, Margo,” Dad commented.

“He gets to insult my friend, and you’re telling *me* to watch my language?” I was so mad it hurt.

“*I’m your friend,*” Caleb answered, balling his fists. “And she’s not. Just watch, she’s gonna turn into a mean girl, and I’ll say *I told you so.*”

Tears sprung into my eyes. “Stop it.”

Dad stepped between us, pulling me into his side. “Enough, Caleb.” He knelt in front of me. “Margo, kids can be mean at this age. Caleb, Amelie, the bullies... Take everything with a grain of salt.”

Grain of salt. He explained that one to me last week. Be cautious about everything, he said.

“How about you go put your other sock on and we’ll eat this pizza.” He pats my head, and I rush away.

Dad always knew how to make things better—even Caleb’s harsh words or Mom’s weird moods. He was my favorite. He carried me on his shoulders and made up bedtime stories, checked in my closet for the boogeyman. Never raised his voice. Not at me, anyway.

But he did yell at Mom...

Grain of salt. Maybe she deserved it.

Maybe she deserved everything that happened.



Present

I can't go into my room.

It's a new fear that bloomed out of Caleb finding the mermaid figure. The *camera* in it. I haven't told anyone that I'm afraid to step into it, let alone sleep there. Caleb's been acting dandy, but the discovery was quickly followed by the trip to New York City, and I let the excitement distract me.

But now...

I hesitate on the threshold. Robert and Lenora—or Len, as she keeps insisting—went out to dinner, and I begged to stay home. I've been working up the courage to talk to Dad. I figured I could write him a letter or something. That's about as minimal contact as I can get.

I'm *angry* at him, but I didn't realize it until now.

Or rather, I had shoved it away until now. He went to prison on a drug charge. He put *drugs* ahead of his own child.

Who does that?

The great man I knew as a kid is nothing more than a drug dealer.

And now Unknown has made it virtually impossible to go into my room without being held captive by terror.

I hold my breath, creeping into the room. It's untouched. My window is locked. The closet door is shut. My bookshelf seems untouched.

I'm not convinced.

I flick the light on, inhaling sharply. "If you can hear me, I'm going to find you."

And then I get to work.

By the time I finish tearing my room apart, I've found nothing. Absolutely. Nothing. I guess I should be grateful that the only thing spying on me was a mermaid figure. But how long will it take for Unknown to get back in here and plant something else?

I sink to the floor, leaning against my bed.

My phone rings. A blocked number.

"Hello?"

There's a click, then, "You found my gift."

It's an automated voice, like their phone is reading a typed message.

"I wouldn't really call it a gift, since you were using it to spy on me."

Silence, except for breathing. They're still there.

“You’ve never called before,” I say. But at least they’re acknowledging that the mermaid was theirs. “What prompted the change?”

“Texting is so... impersonal,” the computer voice says. “Wouldn’t you agree, Margo Wolfe?”

“I can’t say I particularly agree with any part of this.”

“You’ve always had bad luck picking friends. How do you know this time is any different?”

There’s a click, and the line goes dead.

I bring my phone away from my ear, and it vibrates a second later with a text.

Caleb: *Are you home?*

My stomach flips. It’s just coincidental timing—that’s all. I don’t answer him and crawl into bed, instead. It’s still early, but I don’t care. There is a pile of things in the center of my room that I will reorganize tomorrow. And I *can’t* deal with Caleb’s judgement right now.

I should’ve known that pretending to sleep wouldn’t keep Caleb away. Minutes or hours later, he pulls back the covers and slides in next to me.

“Are you avoiding me?” he whispers.

“I’m avoiding life,” I mumble, tucking my face into the crook of his neck.

He always smells so good. It’s unfair. He could be sweaty from a run and he’d still smell like sandalwood and pine.

“And apparently the mess in the middle of your room.”

“I was searching for other...”

He hugs me tighter. “Did you find anything?”

“Not that I could tell. But I’m questioning everything. I was just thinking about the time you said Amelie was a bad friend,” I add.

He stiffens.

“Do you remember that? One night eating pizza with my dad—”

“I try not to think about memories with your dad, love,” he says. “But Amelie *was* a bad friend, even when we were kids. You refused to believe me.”

“I like to think the best of people.” I exhale.

“A major source of your downfall,” he says.

I tip my head back, squinting at him. “Really.”

He grins. “Yeah. You thought I wasn’t a monster... Hell, you even convinced me to marry you.” His finger traces the bracelet on my wrist.

Half the time, I forget I’m wearing it.

“Stuck with me now, Wolfe.”

I try to hide my frown. My fears. I flip onto my back and stare at the ceiling, my chest tight.

Life is fragile. Hadn't I learned that from my parents?

But that day is blocked. What I did to make Caleb hate me is still gone, scrubbed free of my mind. There's a wall I keep mentally running into, even in my dreams.

And I'm afraid I might misremember something.

“Do you trust your memories?” It's easier to ask when we're not looking at each other.

“Sometimes I don't,” he admits. “But most of the time? Yeah.”

I shake my head. “I don't. The little pieces I do remember—like the pizza night, or eavesdropping on your mom—”

“You eavesdropped on my mother?”

I glance at him. “You found me in your room hiding behind your door.”

He turns his head and stares me down. “Is this a new memory?”

My cheeks get hot. I wonder if he can tell, even in the dark. “It's coming back.”

“The football team is going to the state championships in December,” he says suddenly. “They're playing against Lion's Head.”

Theo and Liam are on the team. And the last time we went to a game, Caleb caused major drama with Amelie.

“So?”

He chuckles. “So, we're going. It's at Lion's Head this year, since they're last year's champs.”

“You can't just order me to go to a football game.”

“It'll be fun,” he says, rolling toward me. His fingers walk down my stomach, dipping into my panties. He swipes across my clit, and my back arches off the bed. It's a lazy assault, and he watches me squirm under him.

This kind of attention—the slow, meticulous kind, where he sees *everything*—makes me hot.

Maybe it's because no one else has looked at me like he does. Like I'm the source of every ounce of pain... and his redemption.

I can be that for you, I silently vow.

He presses his lips to my cheek, just below my eye. His tongue flicks out and tastes my skin. “Why are you crying?”

I don't know.

“Because I’m broken,” I answer. It’s true. My axis is tilted, spinning me off course.

My mind has been filled with friendship and love and thoughts of a future. And *Caleb*, promising forever.

“You’re not,” he whispers. Every word is another brush against my cheek. “Even if you think you are. Even if I’ve tried to break you. You’re stronger than you think, little wolf.”

He withdraws his hand from my shorts and pulls me close.

I don’t feel strong.

I feel...

Empty.

CALEB

Matt refuses to let me drive. He's practically vibrating with excitement, and yet...

"Just spill it, would you?"

He swerves onto a side street and hits the gas pedal, the engine whining. He grins, flexing his grip on the steering wheel. At this point, I'm just along for a ride.

"I got a location," he finally says.

About time. It's been two weeks. We're a few days into December, and I was losing my patience.

I lean forward. "How?"

"Got into the computer. It only connects to one network periodically, otherwise it's completely shut off." He grimaces. "Whoever it is, they're smart. This must be a device designated for this. I didn't find any personal documents stored on it. No clues. Sorry, man."

"Did you see any of the videos?"

He shifts. "Yeah. They kept two."

"Of what?" I want to punch Matt at the thought of him watching Margo in her room, even though he's helping me.

He eyes me. "There's no audio. But there's one of you sneaking into her room through the window—hey, man, I stopped it after that. I don't need to see your naked ass fucking your girlfriend."

I glare at him.

"And the other is her and Riley. I'm not sure what's so special about it. They sit on her bed and make a phone call."

“But you can’t hear what they say?”

“Nah, it’s just video. I guess you could figure out what they’re saying if you were a lip reader. Otherwise? Just two girls making a call.”

“Send them to me.” Maybe there’s something he’s missing.

“We’re almost there. I’ll check my laptop and see if it’s active. If it is, chances are good that we’ll be able to find Margo’s mystery stalker.”

My blood rushes hot and cold. It’s true—she has a stalker. Someone obsessed with her... and me.

Matt turns onto a familiar street, then into a parking lot. “The WiFi service comes from that restaurant,” he says, pointing to the diner on the corner.

My stomach drops.

I was just here a week ago.

Matt puts the car in park and reaches into the backseat for his laptop. But I can’t wait. My mom’s car is in the farthest corner of the lot. I don’t even spare him a glance as I climb out and stride across the road, up the concrete steps. Into the diner.

I’m on autopilot.

My gaze sweeps around, trying to find someone with a laptop, a cell phone, a tablet... nothing. The place is filled with old people sipping coffee and young families enjoying brunch. No one notices my abrupt entrance except the hostess, who has frozen by the podium.

“Caleb, what are you doing here?” she asks.

I turn toward my mother, frowning. “You know something.”

She shakes her head. “What?”

The door bangs open behind me, and a hand lands on my shoulder.

“They’re not here.” Matt sees who I’m locked in a staring contest with and coughs. “Holy shit. Mrs. Asher?”

“Matthew,” my mother comments. “Did you boys come for brunch?”

“No,” Matt says.

Mother’s eyebrow goes up. “Then what are you doing here?”

“Did you deliver my message to Uncle David?” I ask.

“About Columbia?” She tilts her head, confusion washing over her features. It’s an act—every emotion she reveals is an act. She’s much more calculating than that. “Of course I did.”

“Great. Just checking.” I shove Matt out the door ahead of me.

“Caleb, wait—”

I ignore her.

Once we're outside, I let out a growl.

"What the hell was that?" Matt demands. He grabs my arm, stopping me. "Dude. Why is your mom working at a shitty diner two towns away from Rose Hill?"

I shrug, yanking free. "Beats me."

He shakes his head, following me back to his car. "This is so fucked up."

"You're telling me?"

"Well, whoever normally connects there, I guess maybe your mom would know?" He unlocks the car, and we slide back in. "Damn. I didn't think this was going to be a wasted trip. I guess we could camp out here, see if anyone you recognize shows up."

I grunt. "Fine."

We sit and wait. Every person who comes into the diner isn't right. Matt and I get antsy, and eventually we decide to head home.

I try not to take the day personally, but it comes down to one thing.

We failed. And somehow I'll have to go pretend everything is dandy with Margo, knowing Unknown is just going to make another attempt to spy on her.

That gets me thinking. Plotting.

She might just be safer with me.

"You have a gleam in your eye," Matt comments. "Care to share?"

I don't. I shake my head at him. "Just take me back."

We drive in silence back toward Eli's house. A black car is parked in the driveway, and dread laces through me. Just the person I didn't want to see.

"You okay?"

"My uncle." I climb out and pat the roof. "Don't forget to send me those files."

"See ya next week," Matt says, lifting his hand.

Right. The championship game at Lion's Head. I only just invited Margo, and it already slipped out of my mind. I guess Uncle David has that effect on me. Now I just have to hope he doesn't drag me back to his house to teach me some lesson—how to properly inform your family of college choices, perhaps.

I spent Thanksgiving with Eli's family, ignoring all calls from my so-called family. I could practically feel his excitement. His dear nephew was breaking the rules again. Another excuse to use his fists.

My mind is torn in two different directions. I walk into the house and search the first floor for any sign of my uncle, then go down the stairs. He's leaning against my dresser, holding the picture I had taken from my house the same night I took Margo's bracelet.

It's the two of us as children, our arms hooked around each other's necks. We were young and happy.

But judging from my uncle's expression, he doesn't care that it was a happy memory. He cares that it's *Margo Wolfe*. The destroyer of our families.

She'll never win in his eyes.

I used to think the same way. If Margo came back, I'd make her life a living hell. And for a while, I fed on that energy. I got my wish. She came back to Emery-Rose for senior year. But then she got under my skin, and she's stayed there ever since.

Uncle drops the frame to the floor, taking a deliberate step forward. The glass crunches under his heel.

"I tried to warn you, son. But you just. Don't. Listen."

I throw back my shoulders, regarding him silently.

He smirks at me. "Don't worry. You'll learn."

MARGO

Len walks into the dining room, a big grin in place. “Painting again?” The portrait of Caleb is half finished. He’s still missing his eyes and lips. The two most defining features, and... *difficult*. I’ve been hemming and hawing over how exactly to do it.

“I need to get this done.” I shrug.

It’s due in a few weeks, Robert graciously reminded me. At the beginning of the project, Caleb was simple in my mind: vicious. The devil incarnate. A bully barely holding on to his demons.

But now he’s more than that. He has moments of softness and kindness. He’s not just the devil—he’s the angel who was always destined to fall. He’s a liar and a jerk and sweet and the most heartbreakingly beautiful boy I’ve ever laid eyes on.

How do I paint a liar’s lips?

How do I paint the devil’s eyes?

“I hate to interrupt, then. But you have a visitor,” Len says. She bites her lip, tipping her head toward the front of the house.

“Who?”

“Go see for yourself.” She takes my brush from my fingers and sets it down. “This will still be here later. Go on.”

I exhale and stand, sweeping invisible lint off my thighs. I’d barely started, my brush still dry and clean. I walk through the kitchen, toward the front door. My foster sister sits on the couch, typing on her phone.

Claire’s head jerks up, and we rush toward each other.

“I’m so sorry,” she blurts out, throwing her arms around my shoulders.

I hug her back tightly, leaning into her. The vanilla scent surrounding her is familiar. It brings back memories—most of them good.

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Because I totally dropped the ball after the ball,” she says. “No pun intended. Or maybe pun intended.” She releases me and stares into my eyes. “I know I dropped a big bomb, and then you didn’t reach back out, and I was just afraid you’d hate me for telling you about—”

Her attention goes over my shoulder, then to me. “Can you come with me? Maybe go for a ride?”

“You have a car?” Something dark flutters in my chest.

“Yeah, my foster parents taught me how to drive. Isn’t that cool? I just was able to get my permit last week! They still let me take the car out by myself, though.”

I suck in a breath, tempted to tell her no. Her foster parents taught her how to drive. They’ll probably teach Hanna, too, when she is old enough. And here I am, relying on Robert, Caleb, and Riley to get me places.

It stings like lemon dripped into a fresh cut.

Luck of the draw. It’s always that way with foster care. Kids either get lucky or... *not.*

And I definitely got lucky. I need to shake off this attitude just because Claire has her driving permit. Yet, I can’t get in the car with her.

“Let’s sit on the sun porch,” I offer.

Lenora lets out a slight exhale behind me. I guess I’m not the only one who wasn’t comfortable with me getting in Claire’s car.

“Fine,” Claire huffs.

I roll my eyes, and we go to the sun porch. I sink into one of the cushioned wicker chairs, and Claire mimics my movement. Clouds hang low.

I clear my throat. “So, they taught you to drive.”

“Yeah.” Her face softens, and she grabs my hand. “I’m sorry, Margo. I feel awful that I just gave you that clipping and told you I recognized Caleb, then left.”

I let out a short laugh. Claire might’ve been the catalyst of my realization, but Caleb dug his own grave. “You were just trying to help.”

“Still.”

“So you decided to swing by?”

She brightens. “Yeah. Well, I wanted to show off my driving skills. I couldn’t get away before now.”

Claire, the wild child. Always a rule breaker. I don't bother pointing out that she shouldn't be driving alone with a permit, and she *especially* shouldn't be driving someone else around without a license. A little thing like the law wouldn't stop her.

"How's Hanna?"

She grins, releasing me and leaning back. "She's good. She's really enjoying that school."

"You said she's at Lion's Head's middle school?" I perk up. "Caleb and I are going to the championship game. Are you going?"

"We were thinking about it. A guy asked..." Her face gets red. "I just don't think I'm ready to date. He's nice and all."

"Well, if you go, you can meet me there." It's the weirdest feeling, seeing Claire in front of me and wanting to know everything that happened between August and now. There's no way to get that time back. Not like how we used to be.

"Maybe," she says.

"Remember when we first met?"

Her gaze shutters for a second, then she lifts a shoulder. "How could I not? Hanna and I weren't expecting anything other than a shitty foster home that'd been coerced into taking both of us. We got the surprise of our lives."

"Me, too."

"So, uh, you and Caleb are still together?"

I squint at her. "Yep."

"Even though he's an awful person?"

I shake my head. "Seriously, Claire?" I get up. I need something—a glass of water to drink or chuck at her head, I'm not sure.

She follows me through the dining room, pausing in front of my easel.

"Wait," she says. "What's this?"

"A painting." I continue on, making a beeline for the fridge. I pour two glasses of water and carry them back, and she's still staring at it. "Claire."

She jerks. "Yeah?"

I force a laugh. "I know it's bad, but there's no need to gawk."

"No, it's pretty good, actually. Sorry. I didn't sleep well last night." She bounces on her heels. "Why are you painting Caleb?"

"We had to partner up for an art class," I mumble. "He has to paint me, too."

She hums, then drains her glass. "Interesting. I thought you might've

painted him a little more gloom and doom. Based on what happened, anyway.”

“A lot has changed.”

Her attention tears away from the painting, to my face. “Really.”

She must feel the same way I do—that we’ve slipped away from each other. We used to be inseparable. Now look at us.

“I should get going,” she says abruptly. “Return the car before my foster parents notice I’m gone.”

Ah, see? She stole the car. *Same old, same old.*

“It was good to see you.” I hug her, holding her to my chest. It takes her a second to hug me back, and then her hands press against my skin. “Next time, bring Hanna.”

Claire giggles and pats my cheek. “Sometimes I think you like her more than me.”

I rear back. “What? No.”

Her expression turns serious. “You’re always asking about her.”

I do—because Claire is solid in front of me, and I have no way of knowing how her twelve-year-old sister is. One of us has to bring her up, or else I’d never know.

“I’m sorry you think that means I care more about her than you.” My voice is stiff, and I’m suddenly glad that Claire is on her way out. I take the glass from her hand, set it down next to my painting, and lead her out. At the front door, I pause. “I hope you know it isn’t true.”

Her face falls. “I know. I just get moments of jealousy sometimes.”

I stifle a sigh.

She throws her arms around me one more time. Her lips touch my cheek briefly, and then she pulls away. I stand in the door and watch her trot to the sleek black car parked at the curb. My first thought is that it’s fancy. Fancier than I imagined.

She revs the engine and takes off, tires squealing.

Sighing, I shut the door and go back to my painting. My groove is thrown off, so I don’t even try. I cover the paints on my palette with plastic wrap and leave it where it is. I grab my phone and flop on the couch, closing my eyes. There’s a pain in my chest from her judgement, like a steady second heartbeat.

I just need to put it out of my mind.

2

Past

Two scrawny girls entered the house. They carried black garbage bags with them, and they held on to each other with grubby fingers. I tried not to analyze their stringy, greasy hair, or the way the older one's eyes darted around.

She found me hidden on the stairs, but she didn't say anything. Her attention just snapped back to my foster mom and the case worker standing next to them.

I was rather abruptly yanked out of my last home and placed with Cindy and Jeff. I'd been here a few weeks, was settling in well according to Angela. I sometimes had nightmares of people in gray suits forcibly removing me from the home. One or two nights, I woke up sweating.

And now... more kids.

Cindy mentioned it the other day at dinner. Two girls were on their way from upstate New York. A ten and fourteen-year-old. She pointed her fork in my direction, making me promise to be good. Kind. To show them the ropes.

We had chores and a curfew, which wasn't just for out of the home. If we weren't in our bedrooms by nine, we were locked out and left to sleep on the hallway floor until morning. I said *we*, but really: it was just me for a few weeks. They were certified respite housing, too, but no one came through while I was adjusting.

I saw a therapist once a week, talking about the issues I had. I'd been carrying around a *runaway* label for about a year, and it hung heavy every time Angela spoke it into existence. She didn't get it, though. I had to get out of there.

"Margo!" Cindy called.

I jumped up and ran down the stairs, pausing at the bottom. I put my hands behind my back and picked at my fingernails where she couldn't see.

"Ah, good. This is Claire and Hanna. How about you show them to their room? The one connected to yours." She smiled at me. To the case worker, she said, "As we showed the woman who did the home inspection, we have a jack-and-jill bathroom that the girls will use."

She left out that they just removed the locks on the outside of the doors.

"I can show you, if you'd like."

"Not necessary," the case worker said. "You know the drill. Girls? Call

me if you need anything.”

“Sure,” the older one said.

I didn’t know if she was Claire or Hanna. She grabbed her sister’s hand.

With wooden legs, I led them up the stairs. Once we were out of earshot, I whispered, “I’m Margo.”

“Claire,” the older one answered. “And this is Hanna.”

“Margo is an old lady name,” Hanna blurted out.

It broke the tension I didn’t realize was forming.

Claire and I grinned down at Hanna.

“Yeah,” I said simply. It wasn’t worth arguing. “This is your room.”

Bunk beds in the corner, pink curtains covering the window. It was definitely meant to be a room for girls. Claire and Hanna wandered in, dropping their bags by the beds. They exchanged unspoken words.

Hanna went to the window while Claire turned toward me.

“You get your own room?”

I shrugged. “We share a bathroom. My room’s on the other side.”

She appraised me, then stomped through the bathroom and into my room. I followed her. She stopped dead, threw back her shoulders, and turned to me. “Switch with me.”

I regarded her. *Did I seem like a pushover?* Too many kids had tried to force me out of things that were mine. I rubbed my wrist, where my bracelet used to sit. I lost that a few homes back and still felt the ache of its absence.

“No,” I said, inching past her. It was *my* room, the first one I’d ever had of my own. And I was not about to let some skinny kid walk into my home—and all over me.

I tried not to flinch at my line of thoughts. Did I really just call this place home? Even in my own head, it was alien.

“No?” Claire echoed. Her lips pushed down. “B-but why—”

“Because I was here first,” I snapped. “You don’t get everything your way.”

Her chin wobbled, and she stared at me. Her eyes filled with tears.

All at once, it stopped. She shook her head and inhaled a deep breath, then stuck out her hand. “Fine. Truce.”

I shook her hand, if only to maintain a bit of peace. No use starting a war on their first day.

Hanna shoved into my room. Her attention latched on to our hands. “Claire didn’t cheat you out of this room, did she?”

I snorted, and Claire groaned.

“Has she done it before?” I asked Hanna.

The younger girl laughed. “She’s good at getting her way.”

“Not here,” I said. “I’m not a pushover—and neither are our new foster parents.”

Claire just smiled. “Yeah? Well, you passed. But *they* haven’t met me yet.”

Famous last words.



Present

I wake up to Robert watching me.

“You okay?” he asks. “You were muttering in your sleep.”

I sit up, taking the water bottle he extends in my direction. “Yeah, I think I was dreaming about the first time I met Claire. She tried to trick me out of my room.”

He sits on the coffee table, facing me. “This was at your last foster home?”

I nod and take a sip. “She was always on the wild side. Some kids get to be like that. You know.”

“Our last foster was like that,” he says. “She liked to push our buttons.”

“With the curfew,” I mumble.

“And other things.” He smiles at me. “Don’t let that dissuade you from going through a wild phase. Although I think dating Caleb might give Len enough of a heart attack to last until we’re old and gray.”

I crack a smile. “Yeah, he’s...”

Robert shrugs. “I get it. I had him in a few different classes and never had a problem with him. It’s just the perception of him that Len has an issue with. That, and he purposefully tried to turn us against you—which isn’t going to happen.”

“Lapse in judgement.”

“Angela called,” he says. “She’s going to swing by this evening and chat with us. I invited her to stay for dinner.”

My expression falls. “Why do we need to talk to her?”

He squints at me. “It’s nothing bad, Margo. We just want to see what the next steps are to make you a member of this family. Len asked about it a few days ago, but we wanted to have the chance to talk to you.”

“It still seems...” *Out of reach.*

“Impossible?”

“Something like that.”

He looks down at his hands, then back up at me. “Len might have a harder time saying this, but I don’t. We love you, Margo.”

We love you. It echoes inside of my, banging around my chest. It hurts, but it isn’t bad pain. It’s a sore muscle stretching for the first time. A heartbeat I thought had died long ago.

But there's always another shoe to drop.

CALEB

*M*y uncle's hot palm lands on the back of my neck as we walk into the house. He's shorter than me by a fraction, and thinner, too. I could easily throw him off me if I wanted. But that would just cause a more violent retaliation on his part.

So I let it happen.

My back has mostly healed, but the mental scars are deep.

"You've been visiting your mother?" Uncle David asks.

He gives me a light shove into the study, and I stumble forward. It reminds me that I did the same thing to Margo on one of her first days at Emery-Rose. I experience a shred of guilt, and then my uncle is back in my face.

He wants to pick a fight—or just get his anger out on his human punching bag.

He grabs the front of my shirt and twists the fabric, my collar biting into my neck.

"Answer me," he grunts.

"I didn't realize there was a rule against seeing my own damn mother."

One of these days, I'm going to punch his face in. Once he isn't dangling my inheritance over my head, we're done.

I grind my teeth.

Only four months to go.

He's been in a bad mood for the past three... ever since Margo's reappearance at school. I'm not fool enough to think they're unrelated. He's been the driving force behind my fury all these years. Stoking it. Murmuring

about revenge on the Wolfe family.

“Ah, Caleb,” Aunt Iris says. She pauses at the state we’re in. Bites her lip. “David, is everything okay?”

“Peachy,” he grumbles.

“I’ve done what you asked.” I glare at him.

One day. One day, he’ll get what’s coming to him.

“Oh? And what’s that, exactly?” He has worse demons than me.

Then again, he was never supposed to bear the brunt of my father’s company. Never supposed to support his nephew, to guard his inheritance. It broke something inside him.

All because, as Mother likes to say, “It’s happening the way your father wants.”

Bullshit.

Uncle David and I both know it, but neither of us have voiced it. We’re not angry at each other—we’re angry at *him*. My father.

“College,” I grit out. “Lacrosse. Grades.”

“How about the part where you don’t fucking fall in love with a Wolfe?” He shoves me backward.

I stare at him. I don’t love her.

Do I?

“Don’t be daft,” he snaps. “You’re going to break off all relations with her. You’re not going to see her. Touch her. Communicate with her.”

I laugh. I can’t help it.

“Or what?”

Uncle David has a few telltale signs of extreme anger. But the best indication I’ve ever seen is the redness of his ears. If it were possible, the next step would be steam coming out. Right now, his whole face is mottled red.

I know why he hates the Wolfes, but it’s more satisfying to make him say it out loud.

“Or you will not get a dime from me,” he finally shouts. “You will get nothing. No help. No support.”

I cross my arms over my chest, if only to stop myself from beating him bloody. “You made a promise,” I say in a low voice. “Don’t forget about your end of the deal, Uncle.”

He charges at me.

But honestly? I’m so fucking done.

I sidestep him and back away. He's like an angry bull, the way he eyes me.

"I'm leaving," I announce. "No more summoning me. No more threats. Or I will march into the Asher offices and explain to the Board exactly what you've been doing."

His red face turns white.

I've never threatened him before, but it feels good. Satisfying.

Aunt Iris gasps from the doorway, her hand raised to cover her mouth. "Caleb, honey—"

"Don't, Aunt," I say. "You've stood by and let him hurt me for too long. This is the last straw."

Why didn't I do this ages ago?

On some level, I knew I deserved it. I was suffering for my father's actions—and Margo's. I was her friend, I should've stopped her, I could've done something. How many times had I heard my family say that to me? To pin the blame on *me*, since Margo was sucked away to foster care?

Her mom was gone. Her dad was in prison.

The only one left in the equation was *me*.

I shake out my limbs, satisfied. I've read through the paperwork multiple times. The company put *no* stipulations on my inheritance except age. Uncle David, as my legal ward, got a stipend every month to cover my expenses. I assumed he passed along at least a slight portion of them onto Eli's family. They were the ones who fed me and gave me a place to stay, after all.

We lived in peace until this year.

"You walk out that door, you don't get to come back!" Uncle David roars behind me.

It's a pity that family has a way of disappointing you—even when you know to expect it.

"If I never see your face again, I'll die happy." I salute him and walk out the door. Something crashes behind me. I keep going, liberated by my choices, until I'm hit in the back of my head.

I crumple.

Blackout.

MARGO

Caleb has disappeared—*again*. I swear to God, I’m going to kill his uncle.

I get to their front porch, then freeze, unwilling to go any farther. I’m pretty sure the family hates me for reasons I can’t remember. And a little thing like memory loss wouldn’t hold up against years of anger.

Riley climbs out of the car behind me. “I don’t think anyone is here.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Why?”

She shrugs. “No lights on, and it’s dark out?”

“Right.” I ring the doorbell and hold my breath.

No one answers. We look at each other.

“So... you ever going to tell me what happened with your social worker?”

I grimace. “Yeah, she wants me to see a therapist. I start going next week. I’m going in.”

“Margo—”

I twist the doorknob, expecting sirens. Nothing. We creep into the foyer as quietly as we can. Riley follows close behind me, almost touching my back. When no one comes running, we both straighten.

“A therapist? You can’t just say that and then walk into someone else’s house,” she whispers.

“Caleb is in here,” I answer, matching her low tone. “I can feel it.”

“I’ll stand lookout, I guess. You search for him.” She shivers. “I’m picturing him tied up somewhere. Is that creepy?”

I elbow her. “Don’t even think that.”

Eli saunters in through the open door, and both of us jump.

“I told you to wait in the truck,” Riley whisper-yells.

“Since when do I listen to you?” He rolls his eyes. “I moved it around the corner just in case we need to make a run for it.”

Our eyes go wide, and he laughs.

“Kidding.”

Sure he is.

Eli and I venture farther into the house while Riley hangs back. We split up, me taking the first floor and Eli heading up the stairs. The house is giant, I’ll just say that. There are rooms upon rooms, each more extravagant than the last. But more than that, they’re *old*. Antique furniture and dark wood on the walls. Rugs that have probably never been stepped on, chairs and couches that’ve never had kids bounce on them.

It’s cold. Worse than Caleb’s house.

I get to a closed door and pause in front of it. Up until now, everything has been open. I hesitate for a fraction of a second.

A low moan comes from the other side.

I shove the door open, shocked at the darkness of the room. After a moment of feeling along the wall, my fingers hit the light switch.

Blinding lights flicker on in the ceiling.

My gaze flies around the room—a game room with a pinball machine, a pool table, and other various games—and lands on Caleb.

He’s on the floor, his back against the wall. Like he was sitting and then fell over. His eyes are closed.

There’s blood on the wall. Just a smear, but enough that my heart hammers.

I rush to him, falling to my knees. “Caleb, wake up.”

His eyes open. He blinks up at me, squinting, then pushes himself up. “What are you doing here?”

“Coming to rescue you.”

He shakes his head, then abruptly stops. He watches me while his hand goes to the back of his head, probing. “What day is it?”

My eyebrow goes up of its own accord. “Huh?”

“The day—or night, judging from the dark room behind you.”

“Glad you’re with it enough to notice it’s dark out,” I grumble. “It’s Saturday night. Like eight-ish. I texted you twice, but you didn’t respond, and I got worried. Why?”

“Just wanted to see how long it took you to notice.”

“You’re really going to dissect the time it took me to find you?”

He shrugs and climbs to his feet. I rise, too, holding out my hands. He doesn’t need me, although he does take one of my hands, tugging me closer.

He rubs his thumb between my brows.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to erase your concern.”

I scoff. “I found you on the floor in a dark room. I’m not supposed to be concerned?”

He shrugs. “Nope. I’m fine.” He leads me out of the room, into a hallway that cuts straight to the kitchen. He grabs a bag of frozen veggies and puts it to the back of his head, winking at me. “Let’s leave.”

“Eli is still wandering around,” I say.

He pauses. “Is he now?”

“Nope!” Eli says, rushing toward us. He propels Riley in front of us. “Your aunt and uncle just got home.”

Caleb straightens. “Everyone out!”

We slip out the back door, around the side of the house. The garage door opening is loud, and we wait until it’s silent for us to open the gate. We slink along the tall shrubs dividing the property from their neighbors, and I take a moment to cast a silent thank you that Eli moved his truck.

Once we’re in, all of us let out relieved sighs. I lean into Caleb’s side, wrapping my arms around him.

“Didn’t take you very long at all,” he muses. “Eli?”

He glances back at us. “Well, we all know what happened last time...”

I shudder.

“I told him to shove it,” he informs us. “And then he hit me with something... I don’t know. I was on my way out.”

We’re on the road, but I still push up onto my knees and move the bag out of the way. He leans forward slightly, letting me inspect his scalp. There’s an inch-long gash of dried blood just above where his neck meets his skull.

“He could’ve killed you,” I whisper.

Eli growls. “This is ridiculous. I’m telling my parents—not all of it, don’t throw a fucking hissy fit back there.”

Caleb doesn’t react.

“They won’t let David come back. We’ll change the locks—”

“I just have to last four more months,” Caleb says woodenly. “That’s all.”

“That’s all,” Eli sneers.

I imagine this isn’t the first time they’ve had such a conversation.

We end up back at Eli’s house, and the four of us pile out. I hang back a minute, sending a text to Robert and Lenora. Angela made a point about communication, and I want to do well. I want them to actually like me enough to let me stay.

Hence the texting.

A minute later my phone buzzes.

Robert: *Len and I are fine with you sleeping over. Have fun with Riley!*

Okay, so maybe my communication isn’t the best...

“Come on, Wolfe!” Eli yells. “We’re ordering pizza!”

I tuck my phone away and go in, taking a deep breath. Riley and Eli are in the kitchen. I peek into the living room and dining room, then make my way down to the basement.

Caleb is standing in the middle of the room. His attention is focused on his bed.

“You okay?” I ask.

He turns toward me. His eyes are dark. He lowers the frozen bag from his head and beckons me closer. “You came for me.”

I shift, taking a small step in his direction.

“Margo.”

“Don’t make it a big deal.”

He meets me halfway, his hand sliding around my neck and into my hair.

I melt. Can’t help it. I hold on to his waist and tip my head back. He leans down, and my heart pounds, tremors spreading through me. His lips are millimeters away, and he pauses.

“It is a big deal. Can you just admit that?”

I press my lips together.

He smiles, twisting to the side. He kisses the corner of my mouth.

I’m already winded.

“You care so damn much.”

I shake my head. “Stop.”

“Is it a bad thing?”

Is it? Caring about people gets them taken away.

Caleb's whole body is flush against mine. I can feel just how much he cares. His lips travel down the side of my jaw, to my throat. I jump at the scrape of his teeth on my skin, the feeling sending tingles through me like runaway firecrackers.

"God," I moan. "Fine. It is a big deal. I hate your uncle for hitting you. I wish you didn't get hurt. I—"

I almost just confessed my heart away because he's kissing me.

Grow up, Margo.

I grab his face and drag it to mine. I capture his lower lip in my teeth, nipping and releasing. He growls deep in the back of his throat, but he lets me have control. I walk him backward until his knees hit the side of the bed.

He lowers himself, and I straddle him, opening his lips and sliding my tongue into his mouth. His hips raise ever so slightly, his erection rubbing against my core.

"I need to feel you," I whisper. "Is this going to hurt?"

"Fuck, no," he says.

He reaches over to his nightstand and finds a condom while I yank off my leggings. I climb back on him and unbuckle his pants, then tug them down far enough for his erection to spring free. Impulsively, I scoot back and lean down. We did this once—right after the masquerade ball—but this is going to be different.

"Ah, fuck," he says.

Slowly, I lean forward and lick up his length. His groan is an encouragement, and I swirl my tongue over the head of his cock. I take him in my mouth, my tongue sliding around, and his thighs automatically tense. I open my jaw wider, letting him in deeper. He hits the back of my throat, but I don't gag. My nostrils flare.

Deeper.

He hisses out a breath. I come back up, sucking and stroking him with my hand. His fingers wind in my hair, taking back an ounce of power.

"Fuck, Margo," he grunts.

I keep going until he can't control the movement of his hips.

He abruptly yanks me up onto his chest. "If you keep doing that, I'll come, and where would that leave you?" He rolls a condom on, his eyes on mine.

I barely have time to catch my breath, then he drives up into me.

We both groan.

I put my hands on his chest, leaning back. He makes me feel complete. And yeah, that's some bullshit we could go over in therapy, but right now? I let my head fall back and I *feel* it. I rise, thrilled at the sight of him between my legs, then slowly lower back onto him. I'm shakier than a newborn deer, every micromovement sending waves of electricity through me.

Once I'm steady, I move faster. Our thighs slap together.

His grip tightens on my hips, slamming me down onto him.

"Look at me." His hand slips to my clit.

I gasp, holding on to him. It's too much. There's too much emotion assaulting me. He's hitting a spot deep inside me, working me up higher. I freeze, and an orgasm crashes over me. It's hardly over when he flips me onto my back and thrusts into me.

His pace is brutal, but it doesn't last. He shudders above me, letting his head fall to my shoulder as he comes. His whole body jerks, then stills.

"Did that make your head worse?" I ask.

He snorts. "Maybe. But it was worth it."

"Come on, lovebirds," Eli yells from the top of the stairs. "Pizza is here!"

"Perfect timing," Caleb murmurs. He kisses the tip of my nose and hops up.

I follow him into the bathroom, and we clean up in silence.

We walk into the kitchen, and Riley and Eli grin at us.

"Couldn't wait until after we ate, huh?" Eli laughs. He throws an ice pack at Caleb.

My face heats up. We were pretty quiet, but—

"You reek of sex," Eli continues. "Seriously, guys. It's kind of turning me on."

Riley jabs him with her elbow.

I go to the boxes of pizza, ignoring their chatter. I'm still tangled in a web of worry. He probably has a concussion. *I just fucked a concussed person.*

I don't have an appetite. I stare down at the pizza, inhaling the scent of cheese and garlic, and my stomach turns over.

It isn't just finding Caleb bloody and alone in his uncle's house. It's that plus the fact that he kissed my nose and my heart skipped a beat. It's that Angela visited and she asked how I was doing, and for the first time in a really freaking long time, I was able to say, *Great!*

We talked about long-term fostering, going to court to petition for the Jenkins's right to adopt me, the steps we'd have to take. She mentioned

restarting therapy, and Robert and Lenora agreed.

I exhale and close the lid on the pizza.

Caleb comes up behind me, one hand sliding around my waist, and his hand splays over my stomach, pulling me back against him.

“Not hungry?” he asks. “After that?”

I shrug, glancing away.

Why can’t I just lean into happiness? It’s right there, begging me to take it.

“What’s wrong?” His breath hits my neck, followed by his lips.

I tilt my head to the side. His other arm comes around me, dropping the ice pack on the counter, then locking around my chest. I’m thoroughly encompassed.

“You can tell me.”

“Everything,” I whisper. “Everything’s wrong. Do you ever just feel sad for no reason?”

He twists me around, cupping my jaw and tilting my head up.

I keep my gaze on his chin.

“Margo.”

I press my lips together.

“You have every reason to fall apart,” he says. “My fault—I wanted you to break. But I changed my mind.” He frowns. “*You* changed my mind. Because you’re still...”

I’m hanging on the edge of a knife.

“You’re still good. A bit devious.” He winks. “But at your heart?”

“Stop.” I push away from him.

He doesn’t let me go. His fingers dig into my neck, and he tugs me even closer. “*You* stop. Don’t run away.”

I wasn’t is on the tip of my tongue, but I can’t voice it.

He releases me and grabs the box of pizza. “My head is killing me,” he announces to Riley and Eli.

They pause their conversation. Riley’s eyebrows jump up.

“Come on, Margo.” And then he just leaves. His feet pounding down the steps to the basement.

“You okay?” Riley asks.

If only people would stop asking me that. I force a smile. “Dandy.”

“Don’t let him push you around,” she says.

I scoff.

“She’s been on a roll standing up to him,” she adds, glancing at Eli.

He glowers at her.

“On that note, I’m going home.” She grabs her purse and slings it over her shoulder.

Eli jumps up. “What? Already?”

Riley smirks. “Does that bother you? I still have a curfew, even on a Saturday.”

“Fine,” he snaps. “I’ll drive.”

I watch the two of them walk out, and suddenly I’m entirely alone. It doesn’t feel good.

I hurry to the basement and stop on the third-to-last stair. Caleb suddenly appears at the bottom. At this angle, I’m just a little taller than him.

“Eli and Riley leave?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“And you?”

I shake my head. “What about me?”

“Do you want to leave?” His eyes are impossibly dark.

“You should get some rest.” I take a step back.

He follows me up. “They say the opposite for a concussion,” he argues. “If I have one, which is doubtful.”

I bite my lip. “What do you remember?”

He huffs. “I’ll tell you if you’re naked.”

I hesitate.

He smirks. “Clothes, off. All of them this time.”

In our haste, we hadn’t removed our shirts. But now... I grab the hem of my shirt and lift it off, letting it fall from my fingertips behind me. My bra is next. He drags my leggings over my hips, and I hold his shoulders to step out of them. Then panties.

He hops off the step and stares at me.

“Your turn,” I mumble, trying not to let my self-consciousness overwhelm me. I haven’t had this feeling before—shaky. The last time we had *good* sex, in the hotel room after the ball, I trusted him.

I don’t know if I trust him now.

He captured my heart so slowly, I barely realized he was taking it. But my heart is just a fraction of the picture. And now, letting him peruse my body, I realize there’s still broken shards between us.

He wants it that way. He thinks *he’s* broken. The thought comes on

suddenly, out of nowhere. But he's so wrong. *I will file you smooth*, I vow. One sharp edge at a time.

"Strip," I demand. "Fair is fair."

His eyebrow jumps up. "Have we ever played fair?"

I raise my chin. "Starting now."

He just watches me for a moment, then nods. He unbuttons his pants and lets them drop around his ankles. Then boxers. He hesitates on his shirt, but I have no such reservations. Not when it comes to him.

I walk to him and take over, pulling his shirt over his head. I drop it on the floor and run my finger down his chest. He has hard abs and faint white scars. I circle around him, tracing an invisible path with my index finger, and he stands perfectly still.

I touch a pink, raised scar. This was a welt not too long ago. A welt that was his uncle's doing. He shudders.

I bite my lip and keep going. There are old scars, barely visible in the low light. Circular ones that catch the light. "He burned you?"

"I don't know what's worse—growing up like you did, or like me."

I lean forward and kiss one of the scars. He shivers beneath my lips, and my chest aches like he just punched out my heart. He had family, but at a steep cost.

"I wish I remembered what happened."

He turns around and lifts my chin with his finger. "Do you?"

"You could tell me," I whisper.

He shakes his head and pushes my hair off my shoulder. "You'd never believe me."

My mind goes back to ten years old. One minute we're happy ten-year-olds chasing each other through his house, and the next, I'm at the park with Dad. He's being taken away.

There's a gaping hole, and it's driving me mad.

I open my mouth to ask another question.

"Leave it for tonight," he says. "I wasn't lying about my head hurting."

Well, then. I climb into his bed, folding myself into a little ball with my back against the wall. I pat the space beside me. "You said you'd tell me what you remember."

He joins me, picking me up and putting me on his lap. I wrap my arm around his shoulders. The room is a bit chilly, and goosebumps break out along my arms and legs. He draws a pattern on my thigh.

“What do I remember?” he muses. “Yelling at my uncle. Telling him enough was enough.”

“Yelling at him about what?”

“My right to live.”

It’s a bit cryptic, honestly, but I don’t question him further. We just sit in the quiet for a few minutes. My eyes track the pattern he’s drawing on my thigh. A circle, a cross, a loop. *A word.*

B. R. A. V. E.

“Who are you calling brave?”

He pauses. “I heard a woman screaming. It’s weird, right? Aunt Iris is used to her husband’s... outbursts.”

“Does he hit her?”

He flinches. “I doubt it. Uncle David has other ways of keeping her and my mother under control.”

The last time I asked about his dad, I got shut down. I keep my questions to myself this time. There will be other days to ask where his dad went. Did I drive him away? I know something had to have happened with my mother. I didn’t just make the Ashers hate me—I made her *leave* me.

What kind of child does that?

“You’re in your head again.”

I meet his eyes. “Misery loves company.”

That gets a smile out of him. He kisses me softly, but it doesn’t last. We weren’t meant to be soft. So I let him push me onto my back and take away the aching in my bones.

MARGO

Riley picks me up from Caleb's house the next morning. She wiggles her eyebrows at me, laughing. "How was your night?"
I glare at her. "I should be asking you the same thing."

Her smile widens. "Yeah, you definitely should. Damn, Eli is good in bed."

"Stop."

"Nope, you asked." She backs out of his driveway with a shit-eating grin. "He does this thing where he kind of rotates—"

"Riley!" I yell, finally laughing. "I really, *really* don't want to hear about your sex life. Not the details, anyway."

She shrugs. "Okay, okay."

"I'm glad you're happy, though."

She goes quiet.

I tilt my head. "You are *happy*, though, aren't you?"

"We're not talking about me, we're talking about you."

"Hmm." I don't trust her glossed-over non-answer, but I let it go. I tip my head back and close my eyes. We had mind-numbing sex. Multiple times. One of us woke up in the middle of the night and the other just knew. We needed each other.

Hands reaching toward each other in the darkness.

Our faces so close we shared breath.

"Earth to Margo," Riley says. "Where'd you go?"

"I want to remember what happened to me," I whisper, my gaze on the houses flashing past us.

Riley knows the bare bones of the situation. More than that, I guess. But since she didn't come in until after I'd been gone a while, no one was talking about it. I don't think anyone in our class actually knows the real story except Caleb. And a piece of my mind I can't access.

I want to know why he hated me, and how he was able to stop.

She glances over. We're almost at my house, and she instinctively slows.

"What do you want to do?"

I inhale. "My old house brought back memories last time."

She makes a quick turn. "Roger that."

I left Caleb eating breakfast with Eli. There's no way—hopefully—he'll pack up his stuff and go to his house. Why would he?

Besides, I don't think he'd mind us breaking and entering...

All too soon, she pulls in the driveway and shuts off the car. "Now what?"

"Now we hope the place doesn't have an alarm."

Her jaw drops. "You want to go in."

"You didn't have a problem with it when it was Caleb's uncle's house..."

I get out of the car. Either she'll come or she won't.

But Riley is faithful, and a second later her car door creaks open, too.

"This way." I lead her down the driveway, to the door in the gate. I've done this too many times recently for it to be shocking, but I still get flickers of a younger me running past us. It's chilling.

Riley's head swings around, trying to take everything in. It's a bit overgrown, but winter is upon us. No one cares about landscaping in November.

I point to the guest house. "I grew up there."

"Literally in Caleb's backyard," she says.

I nod.

"Okay, so where do you want to go? In there?"

"Yeah..." I scan the yard and pause on the pillar by the sliding glass doors. My feet automatically carry me in that direction, an old dream rearing its ugly head.

I crouch and stare through the window.

"What are you doing?" Riley whispers.

"I had a dream that I hid here while my mom and his dad argued in the kitchen." I shake my head, hunkering lower. I duck my head and close my eyes. "I couldn't hear what they were saying."

The image comes back, but it's still without sound. My mom throws the glass against the wall. Caleb's dad stormed away.

I grimace and open my eyes. Riley's watching me strangely, but she doesn't comment.

"I wonder..." I go to the sliding glass door. They used to keep a key on the top of the frame, which didn't help Caleb or me on the off chance we got locked out—we had to make a big production of dragging a chair over, teetering on it precariously—but now... now I'm taller.

I run my fingers along the top of the frame, pausing when they trip over something cold. Metal. My chest erupts with butterflies. The key fits in the lock, audibly turning the deadbolt, and then... we're in.

I spare a single glance at the kitchen counter and go to the stairs.

"Caleb lived here?" Riley whispers. "What happened?"

I shrug. "I don't know."

He moved away. In with Eli. He doesn't talk about his parents, just his uncle. Something happened here.

At the top of the stairs, I have a choice. Go left to Caleb's room and bathroom, or go right, down the hall to the master and guest bedrooms. I go left.

His room is virtually untouched, the same as mine. It's neater, no clothes lying on the floor or in the hamper. I guess he had more time to pack than I did. Still, it's a ten-year-old's room. Blue walls. A train set in the corner. Toys stacked on top of his dresser.

We used to play with this stuff.

Riley follows me in. "It feels eerie to be here," she admits. "Do you remember anything?"

"Just stuff I already knew."

I drag my finger through the dust on top of his dresser. Every other room in the house has been swept clean, covered in white sheets.

Why is Caleb's room different?

I grab the door, intending to close it, and am gripped with a sudden sense of déjà vu. Grabbing the door to hide.

More than once.



Past

“Run,” Caleb muttered, hauling me by my shoulders and shoving me toward the stairs.

His dad was on a rampage. His yelling echoed through the kitchen and dining room, to the living room where Caleb and I had been trying to learn chess. It came out of nowhere—peace one second, then an earth-shattering roar.

I listened to him. I bolted for the stairs, flying up and to the left. I made it to the safety of his room and grabbed the door, ready to slam it closed behind us... but Caleb hadn't followed me.

I shuddered and crept out. His dad was still hollering about something, the sound of breaking glass and wood haunting my ears.

If Caleb got caught...

He appeared on the staircase, frowning at me.

“Caleb!” his dad screamed. “What the fuck is this mess?”

“The chessboard,” he whispered. His shoulders slumped. “I’ll be right back. Margo. *Stay here.*” He pushed me back into the room.

I latched on to the door, and I couldn't pry my fingers off of it. Not until Caleb was back. Fear wormed its way up my throat, choking me. My dad never got angry like that. Never screamed. Mom did, but Dad said it was the chef in her. She learned how to use her voice in a kitchen, surrounded by men.

I didn't know what that meant, but I always nodded.

At any minute, Caleb was going to appear in front of his dad and take the blame for the chessboard and pieces spread across the floor in the living room. But before it had even begun, everything screeched to a halt. Something had distracted Caleb's dad.

“I'm coming to get my daughter,” Dad said, right on time. “Jesus, Ben. I could hear you from my house.”

“*Your* house,” Caleb's dad sneered. “It isn't your house. It's mine. And who do you think you are, coming in here like you're welcome?”

“I came for my daughter,” Dad answered. Even. Maybe annoyed, but definitely not showing it.

The fear loosened its grip on my airways.

“She's not here,” Caleb's dad snapped.

“Margo!” Dad called. “It’s okay, honey. Come on out.”

I ran out of Caleb’s room, down the stairs, and launched myself into Dad’s arms. Caleb was on the floor at his dad’s feet, scrambling to pick up the chess pieces. I tried to help, but Dad held me fast to his side.

“Caleb was going to teach me how to play,” I whispered into his shirt.

Dad looked from me to Caleb, then Caleb’s dad. “Well.”

“What did she say?” Caleb’s dad snapped.

“Caleb and Margo wanted to learn how to play chess,” Dad said. He released me and bent down. He picked up the box, sliding the board inside. One by one, he took the pieces out of Caleb’s hand and put them away, his hands steady. “I think we can do it in our living room. Margo’s mom was a chess champion back in her day. Maybe she can give us some pointers.”

He straightened and put the box under his arm.

Caleb’s dad stared at mine. “Well.”

“Amberly will be over soon, I’m sure,” Dad said. “I’ll send Caleb back with her.”

“Well,” Caleb’s dad said again. The wind had been taken out of his sails.

Dad took my hand. I took Caleb’s.

My first hero marched us out of the house, and we didn’t look back. It didn’t make it okay—it didn’t erase the pops and flashes of terror the sight of Caleb’s dad incited. But knowing Dad was just a minute away sure did help.



Present

“Riley,” I choke out, sinking to my knees.

A tsunami wave of sadness hits me square in the chest. I didn’t realize how much I missed my dad until I recalled that fear of Caleb’s dad.

I dig my fingernails into the wood.

“Tell me,” she says.

I lay out what I remembered. It wasn’t necessarily a new memory, or a previously blocked one, but it was one I had shuffled to the very back of my mind. Caleb’s dad had a temper. It matches what I dreamed about—my mom and him in an argument.

“What does it mean?”

A laugh bursts out of me. “I have no idea. But... let’s check my old house. I have a feeling about it.”

She nods and holds out her hands, pulling me to my feet. We slip out of the house the same way we came in, and I lock the sliding door behind us. I replace the key, then we make the short trip to the guest house.

I kept that key, and I use it now to unlock the door.

“Caleb invited me to the championship game,” I say.

Riley glances at me. “Yeah?”

“Did Eli ask you?”

“No. He’ll probably just show up at my house and demand I go with him.”

I snort. “Sounds familiar. You never mentioned why he hated you.”

“I told you, it was a misunderstanding in our past.” She shrugs and gestures to the door. It’s unlocked, but I haven’t opened it yet. “Let’s do this thing.”

“It’s weird in here,” I warn her. “Like stepping back in time.”

“Okay.”

I shove the door open, ready to be assailed by memories.

But I’m not. It’s empty.

I walk into the living room and spin in a slow circle.

Nothing.

“I’m guessing this isn’t what you expected,” Riley says.

“This place hasn’t been touched in seven years! And *now* everything is cleared out?”

There are still marks in the carpet where our furniture sat. The ring left behind by the cup that used to sit next to the sink. I open drawers in the kitchen, but they're empty.

It's all *empty*.

I run to my bedroom, shoving the door open.

Every piece of my childhood has been removed except the dresser—maybe it was too heavy? I go to it, yanking open drawers. Caleb did this. He had to. Who else would want to get rid of this stuff?

I find something in the bottom drawer. A note.

Cheers to the good times and the bad. May the hits just keep on coming. – a friend

"I'm going to be sick." I drop the note and rush to the bathroom, falling to my knees in front of the toilet. I realize with vague detachment that the bathroom has been scrubbed clean, too. I heave, but nothing comes up. After a solid minute of my stomach rolling, I fall back and lean against the wall.

"You okay?"

I glance up. "Did you see the note?"

She holds it up. "A friend. Who is that?"

I shrug. "You're my only friend. Was it you?"

"Not funny."

"Humor is a good escape." I pick myself up. "Did you check the other room?"

"No, figured I'd wait."

I sigh and cross the hallway. My parents' bedroom door is still closed, and I'm not sure I even want to look. The last time I saw it, it was a wreck. But Caleb didn't give me a chance to really... *explore*. That, and I was on the verge of a panic attack last time.

Now, I'm much steadier.

"Ready?" I ask Riley.

She takes my hand. "Yep."

I push open the door, immediately sucking in a breath.

It's untouched.

Like a tornado went through their things, there's clothes everywhere. Broken glass from picture frames and a shattered lamp. The dresser is broken, leaning to one side.

A hole in the wall.

"What happened here?"

I pick my way through the room and squat next to the fallen frames. I carefully brush away the glass, sliding the photo out. I was maybe four years old in it, running on the beach. Mom is behind me, blurred out, but I can tell her arms are outstretched.

—Hands reaching for me, shaking my shoulders—

No.

My hands tremble on the photo. White spots flash in front of my eyes.

“Margo—”

The darkness creeps from the corners of my vision. I manage to scoot away from the glass, grabbing the edge of the bed. “I’m gonna pass out.”

It swoops in, and down I go.

MARGO

Past

Dad rushed into the room, his gaze flying around until it landed on me in the corner of the room. “Oh, Margo,” he said. He was sad.

I was sad.

Tears streaked down my face. My fingers hurt. My chest hurt. My head ached.

“You’re okay.” He scooped me up and sat on my bed, cradling me to his chest. “Let me see.”

I sucked in a shaky breath, on the verge of tears again. My fingernails were torn, bloody. Every single one.

“We’re going to clean you up and go to the park, okay?”

I nodded, closing my eyes. He left me on the bed and returned a moment later with a warm, damp cloth. He gently cleaned off each finger, then straightened my shirt.

“Come on, Margo. Time to be strong.”

He took my hand, and we walked out the house. Straight down the driveway and into his car, which was the only one there. He buckled me into the seat, and then we were off.

“Where’s Mom?” I asked.

He shook his head. “She lost her marbles,” he muttered.

I wasn’t supposed to hear. Or understand.

Mom went crazy?

We got to the park. Once we were free of the car, he took a deep breath. “Things are going to change now, Margo.”

I shook my head. “Why?”

“Because you told me a secret, and I didn’t keep it.”

I had to keep the secret. Caleb begged me not to tell, but I did. I told my dad, because he was trustworthy.

“Is Caleb going to be mad?”

He glanced down at me, but then we were at our bench, and he looked away. Finally, he said, “He might be.”

I sniffled. I ran my finger across the bracelet. I had told Dad we were married, but all he did was chuckle and kiss the top of my head. What was I

supposed to do when Caleb was mad at me?

Dad glanced over his shoulder, then back to me. "Listen to me, Margo."

I met his gaze.

"Don't believe what they say about you and me. Okay? You're a Wolfe. You're strong. Your—" He broke off and squeezed my hand. "Your grandmother would be proud of you."

I shook my head. I'd never met my grandma, although Dad talked about her a lot. She lived far away.

He showed me a small bag of breadcrumbs. "How about you go feed the ducks?"

I grabbed the bag and hopped up. The ducks swarmed to the edge of the pond, crowding me without getting too close. They weren't that brave.

There was a commotion, and I spun around. A police officer was taking Dad away!

I dropped the breadcrumbs and rushed back. "Daddy!" I screamed.

A woman caught me by the shoulders. "Shh, Margo," she said. "It's okay. Can we sit? We need to talk."

Things are about to change.

Instant. One minute we're gasoline, the next we're aflame.

And I haven't stopped burning.

CALEB

Liam and Theo pick me up. Well, *Theo* picks me up. Liam's car is still out of commission—or he caved and gave it to his brother, he refused to tell us which one—and I'm not allowed to drive. Doctor's orders.

Yep. The Blacks called their concierge doctor to check out my head.

The doctor ruled it a concussion and warned me about dangerous symptoms. For the next month, I'm not allowed to drive. I'm tempted to rebel, but Mrs. Black begged me to follow the rules. *For once*. She even said that.

Please, Caleb, just follow the rules for once.

So here I am, letting my best friends chauffeur me around.

They're both wearing their football jerseys, and Liam passes me a to-go cup of coffee after I climb in.

"Ready for the game?" I ask. It's going to be very *Friday Night Lights*-esque, I'm predicting. Does Emery-Rose have the skills necessary to take down Lion's Head on their home turf, for the state championship game? Maybe.

But they also have the ability to fall apart under Lion's Head's defensive pressure.

"Ready as we'll ever be," Liam answers. "You and Margo coming?"

"Along with half the school." I chuckle. "She didn't sound too keen, but then again, the last time we went to a game I made a spectacle of Amelie."

"You're not planning on making a fool of yourself again, right?" Theo asks.

“Depends.” I take a sip of coffee.

“On?”

“If you make a fool of yourself.” I smirk. “You know she’s going to be there.”

The tips of his ears get red. It’s slight, but it’s one of his tells. That, and sometimes his jaw tics. Little movements he’s incapable of masking.

Liam sighs. “Fucking hell, Alistair. Do not get thrown out of the game because of some stupid girl—”

“Don’t.” Theo glowers at him.

Once we get to school, the three of us make our way inside. Margo is already there with Riley, telling some story using too many hand motions. She’s eager. Happy.

And then she sees me, and her face falls the slightest bit.

Why?

I grind my teeth. We’ve come this far, I won’t have her backing out. Running away because she’s afraid of feelings. If only she *knew* how deep into her skin I’m willing to engrave myself.

I leave my friends and go to her. We have a connection. An awareness. I always know where she is, and I’d bet money that she can sense me in a room, too.

The frown still sits on her pretty mouth. I snag her chin in my fingers and tip her head up. She inhales through her nose when I slam my lips to hers, pushing her against the lockers with the force of it.

You’re mine, I tell her with my body. *Just in case you forgot.*

She resists for half a second, then melts. Her hands slide up my arms, around my neck. Her fingers stop just shy of my hair, which is hiding the stitched-up gash from my uncle.

Her mouth parts, allowing my tongue to slide in. I kiss her until she gives, the tiniest whimper in her throat. *First to give in loses.*

She doesn’t realize *I* was the first to give in to her.

I pull away, but her grip tightens on my neck. Her teeth catch my lower lip, and she tugs.

My dick twitches in my pants. Any more of that, and I’d be hard in the middle of the fucking hallway. Her eyes go to my lip, and she smirks.

She fucking smirks.

Kill me now.

“If you don’t stop looking at me like that, I won’t be held accountable for

my actions.” I swipe my tongue along my lower lip. A metallic taste blooms across my mouth. She bit me hard enough to draw blood, and *God*, it’s hot.

Her smirk fades. An expression on my face, maybe. I’m two seconds away from dragging her into the greenhouse and fucking her against the wall.

“Calm down.” She puts her palm on my chest, pushing me away.

“That’s not how this works.” I’m sorely tempted to follow through on my threat, if only to show her who still has control.

Total bullshit, though. I gave up an ounce of control the moment I let her escape me, and then she steamrolled her way into my heart.

Heart. First I’m told I love her, now I’m referencing my heart?

Her eyes narrow. “We do need to talk, actually.”

I start to answer, but the bell cuts me off. I grab her hand and tuck her close to me. Her fingers curl around my biceps.

“I’m going to see my father,” she blurts out.

I twitch. It was only a matter of time before she decided to go see him. I’ve been dreading it since I realized her memory was blocked.

“Caleb?”

At eight years old, she wanted to gauge my level of interest—in her, that is. So she showed up with a white dress and let me fill in the blanks.

I’ve been missing that version of Margo, and she’s finally made a reappearance.

“I can’t stop you,” I finally say. “When?”

She squeezes my arm. “Tomorrow. After we get back from the game. Robert offered to take me, and I need him to help me remember what happened.”

I shake my head. “Why? Why can’t you just let it go?”

She yanks me to a stop, glaring. “Let it go? You did not seriously just say that. I had let it go—for seven freaking years! And then you came back into my life and you hated me for something I couldn’t *remember!*” She’s yelling now, her face red.

She’s hot when she’s angry. And she has a point.

“Fine,” I grit out. “But what he knows? You’re not ready for it.”

She stares at me, disappointed. “We’ll see about that.”

MARGO

To say I'm mad at Caleb would be a lie. I'm not mad. Upset, irritated, frustrated, exasperated—all yes. But it melts away when he walks into Robert's classroom.

He grins at me—a huge smile that touches his eyes—and kisses my cheek, then slides onto the stool next to mine. “You're applying to NYU, right?”

I blink. “Um, I hadn't thought about it.”

He levels me with a look. “You haven't thought about it.”

We toured the school weeks ago, and it's slipped my mind. To be fair, I've had a lot going on. Lenora and Robert haven't brought it up, either.

He shakes his head. “The deadline is coming up. You don't want to be stuck not having applied anywhere.”

“I always thought I'd just get a job after high school,” I mumble, shifting away to get my supplies out of my bag. “What's the big deal?”

“The big deal is that...”

I glance back and wince at his scowl.

He meets my gaze. “What about your future? Don't you want to dream bigger?”

“That ended the moment I was put into foster care,” I say quietly. I had *dreamed bigger*—of course I did. But I stopped. I forced those dreams to go away, and now I can't remember them at all.

Robert pauses in front of us. “You're not painting,” he points out.

I blush. “Sorry.”

“Margo isn't sure she wants to go to NYU,” Caleb tells him. “I was trying

to convince her to apply.”

Robert’s eyes widen. “Margo,” he chides. “You should at least apply. Give yourself some options.” He’s quiet for a moment. “I’m sorry, we should’ve discussed this more after the open house. Most deadlines are January first, which gives us a few weeks to tour more schools, if you wanted.”

I fake a smile. There’s no way I can afford that. Even if I get scholarships, or the Jenkinses offer to help out, I’m basically screwed. I’ll be in debt forever. And nowadays, a degree isn’t even a guarantee of a job.

“We’ll talk tomorrow.” Robert glances at his watch. “You’re going straight to Lion’s Head?”

I nod. “My overnight bag is in Riley’s car.”

He winks. “Good. And keep it on the down low on social media, huh? If Angela found out about your sleepovers, we’d all be in trouble.”

Caleb glances between us. “She doesn’t know?”

“Well, it isn’t exactly allowed,” I murmur. “Even if it’s at my best friend’s house. If it’s not a pre-approved home, then...”

Caleb grins. Robert and Len think I sleep at Riley’s—but I haven’t so much as spent an evening there. So I guess, inadvertently, I just called Caleb my best friend.

About time I acknowledged that. He’s returned to the pedestal in my mind.

“Have fun.” Robert pats my shoulder. “No funny business.”

“Just an afterparty,” I whisper. I told him about it already, how it was going to be at Ian’s house, and then Riley and I were going straight home.

Lies.

“Barely any drinking,” Caleb adds.

Robert snorts. “Nice try. Just have Margo home safe and sound by noon tomorrow.”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

“Back to work,” Robert says, shaking his head.

He wanders away, and I turn my attention back to the piece I started yesterday. A field of flowers. It’s more impressionistic than anything. You can really see the yellow sunflowers if you squint and tilt your head to the left. I add in darker strokes, bringing the foreground to life.

“How’s your portrait coming along?” Caleb asks. “Seeing as how it’s due soon.”

I shrug and clean off my brush. “Almost done. You?”

“Finished.” He smirks. “I can’t wait for you to see it.”

My cheeks heat up. I don’t know how Caleb sees me, and up until now I was eager to find out. I think I can hold off a bit longer, though.

Because you’re afraid, a voice in my head whispers.

I’ll keep being afraid until I find out what happened to us.

The rest of the class flies by, and soon enough the bell is ringing. In the hallway, Caleb takes my hand. Our fingers lace together.

The energy in the halls is palpable, kids rushing by. The football players are grinning, bouncing on their heels. They move in a pack toward the locker rooms.

And yet, no one knocks into us. They skirt around Caleb and me like we’re protected by a forcefield.

The advantage of being Caleb Asher, I imagine.

Riley and Eli meet us at my locker.

“Are we all riding together?” Riley asks.

Eli’s arm is slung around her shoulder. He’s excited, too—outwardly. Caleb’s energy is more contained, held like a jar full of bees in his chest. I feel the same way. My limbs won’t cooperate. We’re on the edge of a cliff.

It isn’t just the game, either, or the night ahead of us. It’s *tomorrow*. Seeing Dad for the first time in seven years.

“Focus,” Eli says to me, snapping his fingers in front of my face.

I jerk back and scowl.

“Yes,” Caleb answers Riley. “We’ll drop my car off at Ian’s house and ride together. Then we’ll be able to leave from the party whenever we want.”

I nod at his rationale.

“Great,” Eli hoots.

I slam my locker, books unloaded, and we join the throng of students exiting school. The pep squad—girls who weren’t able to get on the cheerleading team, apparently—has decorated the front of the building with signs and balloons.

We’re going to state!

Go get ’em, ERE!

Our mascot is a gold-and-black eagle, but it’s only used for sports. Liam mentioned that the school prides itself on the silver crest logo that appears on all documents and emails, hiding away from the fact that it even has a mundane mascot.

“An eagle isn’t *mundane*,” Eli had yelled. “It’s fucking *majestic*.”

Right.

Off to the side of the lot, cheerleaders are decorating two busses. I nudge Riley and lift my chin in that direction, and she makes a noise in the back of her throat.

“Party bus and athlete bus,” she says. “Football players and cheerleaders all ride together, and the party bus is for anyone who doesn’t want to drive to the game.”

“Ah.”

She grins. “It’s a big deal, the state championships. You know?”

“Not particularly.”

Caleb squeezes my hand, and I wave goodbye to Riley. We’ll see them in a few minutes, anyway. I slide into Theo’s car and wait for Caleb to shut his door. Apparently Caleb’s no-drive order only extends to when Eli’s mom is watching. But since Theo and Liam are getting ready for the game...

I lean over and touch his cheek, guiding his mouth toward mine.

The kiss is sweet and slow, and I pull back slightly. He’s already watching me.

“What was that for?” he asks.

“I can’t kiss you when I want?”

In truth, I have a weird feeling in my chest. I’m anticipating the distraction of tonight.

He smirks. “You can, but you don’t usually kiss like *that*...”

I bite my lip and ignore the heat that floods through me. I press my thighs together, trying to be subtle about it.

His eyes darken. He misses nothing.

“Maybe we should take a detour,” I suggest.

In response, he starts the car and pulls out, tires squealing. He takes me to the lookout we once went to and parks in the corner. There aren’t any other cars.

He pushes his seat back and pats his legs. “Get over here.”

Once I’m settled on his lap, my knees on either side of his hips, I kiss him again. I want the distraction. For him to take me to another place.

His hands skate up my sides, over my uniform shirt. He undoes the buttons one at a time, revealing my white camisole and nude bra. He takes his time looking me up and down. His dick hardens against my thigh, and I can’t hide my wicked smile.

I like turning him on. Affecting him as much as he affects me.

I'm also glad I wore the skirt today, even if it's freezing out.

He unclips my bra and pushes down the cami, exposing my breasts. He guides me forward and puts his mouth on my nipple, his tongue flicking out. I let my head fall back, sucking in a deep breath.

He continues his assault, his hand going to my other nipple and rolling it between his fingers.

"Fuck," I exhale. "You could make me come like that."

He chuckles, barely pulling back. "Yeah?"

He renews his assault. His teeth graze my breast, and fire spreads through me. I grind on him, unable to stop myself.

"Condom?"

He tips his head back and grins. "Eager, are you?"

I grab his face and slam my lips to his, showing him just how eager I am. My hands go to his pants, unzipping them, then navigating his hard length out. I'm a heartbeat away from saying fuck the condom when he breaks the kiss.

"Glove compartment," he grunts.

I let him find it, need thrumming through me like a livewire.

"Caleb," I whimper, stroking him. He jumps in my hand.

Condom on. Panties pushed to the side.

I'm soaking wet. His finger pushes into me, curling. My eyelids flutter.

His hands go to my hips, lifting me slightly, and he slides in. We both groan. He just... fits. Perfection.

"Fuck, baby," he growls, claiming my lips again in a quick kiss.

His teeth drag against my lower lip. There's no more talking after that. We stare into each other's eyes. He guides the pace, slamming me down on him. Our faces are close enough that we could kiss if either of us moved a fraction of an inch closer.

He leans me back and suddenly hits a whole new spot. My mouth parts. I hang on to his shoulders, letting him press me back on the steering wheel. He darts forward, leaving a trail of kisses down my throat, my collarbone. He bites my breast, then soothes it with his tongue a second later.

Kiss.

Bite.

Lick.

My fingers slip into his hair, tugging. I'm coming undone, thread by

thread. Falling apart in his hands. He sucks on my nipple, and that's it.

His gaze flies up to mine. I shatter. My whole body pulses. He grabs my chin, forcing me to look at him as the orgasm sweeps through me. I don't realize we've stilled until I slowly come back.

"Hold on," he warns me.

He grips my waist and thrusts his hips up. I tighten my hold on his shoulders, and he pounds into me without restraint. Chasing a high.

A minute later, he freezes, his eyes on me. He groans.

We stare at each other.

I'm caught entirely in his web.

...and then reality returns. The game. The party. And *tomorrow*.

He catches my face in his hands. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Disappear again."

I shrug. "I'm not."

"You *won't*," he corrects.

Bossy as ever.

"Say it."

I roll my eyes. "I won't disappear again."

He squints at me. "No matter what happens tomorrow. No matter what happens with my family, or our past." He shakes his wrist, drawing my attention to the bracelet. "You promised."

I smile, running my finger over his bracelet. The fact that he wears it openly, unashamed, makes my heart sing. "I did promise."

He kisses me once more. "Good. Let's go have some fun." He looks down at his lap, where we're still connected.

"Unless you want to skip the game and do more of this?" I ask hopefully.

He laughs. "If I don't make an appearance, people will talk."

I grunt. "Not the worst thing in the world."

I climb off him and throw myself back into the passenger seat. He hands me my bra, then takes care of the condom. Once we're both more put-together, he winks and drives back out onto the road.

Lion's Head, here we come.

Why does it feel like we're about to walk into the enemy's lair?

MARGO

*K*ing Caleb has returned to his throne.
At least, that's what it feels like.

Lion's Head is like a castle. More ancient than Emery-Rose, with four towers on each corner. The whole place is made of brick with ivy crawling up its sides, black-framed windows. Even the driveway that snakes past the school and a few fields feels old. The football field in the back, though, is new. Crisp, white-painted lines. Bleachers on either side and a small building manned by two adults selling food and drinks. It's a giant campus abutting a state reservation, and it's much more peaceful than I would've guessed.

Caleb keeps me tucked next to him as countless people approach him from the top of the bleachers. He slaps guys' hands, waves off girls. Smiles and jokes. He's charming, which shocks the hell out of me. I don't know why I expected grunts and stares, which is what most people usually get out of him.

He squeezes my arm, and I'm reminded of the last time we did this. The first and *only* time we did this. It didn't really end well...

I let my head rest against his shoulder. We came prepared in winter gear. Ian wasn't exactly thrilled to let Riley and me into his house to change, but Eli barged past him, Riley right behind.

Riley and I giggled to each other, shrugging out of the white uniform t-shirts and the dark skirts, putting on skin-tight black leggings and gold shirts she found at the mall. Mine shimmers like silk, and hers had a rough, purposefully ripped vibe. The outfits weren't for the game—it's too cold for

that—but for the afterparty. We painted on makeup and fixed our hair, and finally we were ready.

An impatient Ian stood by the door, periodically checking his watch.

Caleb and Eli thundered down the stairs, decked out in black and gold, and we were off.

I sink further into my black coat, grateful for the hat Len gave me a few weeks ago. It's an Emery-Rose winter one, black with gold tinsel-like threads woven through, and an eagle stitched on the side.

Riley and Eli are just below us, and Caleb's lacrosse friends run interference for him a few rows down. They're sprawled out, being generally loud and rowdy.

"How does it feel?" I ask Caleb.

He glances at me. The game hasn't started yet, but he and Eli seem particularly keen on the Lion's Head sidelines. They keep staring like a monster is going to pop out.

"What?"

"Being so popular," I elaborate. "It must be weird, right?"

He shrugs. "I've always been popular. Even when we were kids. You just never noticed."

True.

"My parents prepped me for this type of lifestyle." He throws his shoulders back. "You think my dad was able to go anywhere without being recognized? His face was on billboards around town."

I raise my eyebrow. "I don't remember that."

"Well, Uncle took them down after a while. They lost their effectiveness."

Weird. But he has an odd expression, so I don't question it.

The cheerleaders run out across the field, shaking their pompoms.

Two familiar faces climb the steps, and I shoot to my feet.

"Claire! Hanna!" I race toward them.

Hanna's face lights up, and she crashes into me. I throw my arms around her, squeezing tight.

"I swear you grew five inches," I tell her. "How are you?"

She grins at me. "Good! Claire said she saw you, but I couldn't go." Her lower lip pops out. "I miss you, Margo."

"I miss you, too." I rub her arm.

Her hair is pulled back in two neat French braids, and the sisters are

decked out in Lion's Head colors. I touch the purple hair bands and smile.

"You guys went all out."

Hanna beams. "Claire helped me with my hair, and she got me this shirt from school, see?" She unzips her purple jacket and shows me the purple-and-black shirt. *Lion's Head Forever* is scrawled across her chest.

"Very nice."

Claire steps up and hugs me. "You guys really got prime seating, huh?"

I glance back at Caleb, but he's talking to someone else. The boy dressed in purple and black is vaguely familiar.

I shrug. "I guess."

"We're on the other side." Claire hooks her thumb behind her, to the other side of the field. It's very clearly divided: Lion's Head fans on one side and Emery-Rose on the other.

"Well, thanks for coming to say hi. I don't think I would've spotted you otherwise."

Claire shrugs.

"Hey, Margo."

I turn toward the Lion's Head boy who was just talking to Caleb. He towers above me. "Matt Bonner," he reminds me. "We met at a game a few months ago."

I nod. "Right..."

Claire clears her throat, raising her eyebrows.

"Oh, right. Um, Matt, have you met Claire? She's a junior at Lion's Head."

Matt grins at her, extending his hand. "Pleasure."

She blushes.

Ooh.

Matt takes a second to release her hand, and my attention bounces between the two of them for a hot second. Then Claire pulls away, scowling, and grabs Hanna.

"Nice to meet you." Her voice is gruff. "Margo, I'll see you later."

"Maybe at the afterparty?" Matt asks. "Fletcher's hosting."

"Lion's Head students are going?" I ask.

Matt watches Claire for a second, then turns back to me. "Yeah, well. Depends on who wins and who's a poor sport. But I'm Caleb's friend, so I plan on going."

"I have to take Hanna home after," Claire says, stepping down. "So..."

I get it. Responsibility is bound to rear its ugly head for her at some point. Hanna pouts, but her older sister ignores it. They both give me a wave and head back to the Lion's Head side.

Matt pauses beside me. "She's a junior, huh?"

"A transfer," I mumble. "You're friends with Caleb, right?"

"You betcha."

"How's that work during lacrosse season?"

He coughs. Maybe he's surprised by my question, because he takes a long moment to answer. "We know to leave our friendship on the sidelines during a game."

I glance back at Caleb and am not surprised to find his gaze on me. "But... what if the game doesn't stop at the end of the night?"

The teams run onto the field, and the crowds have grown thicker. Matt's purple and black colors stick out like a sore thumb in a mass of gold. I try to find Liam and Theo, but they're indistinguishable from their teammates with their helmets on.

Matt chuckles. "Is that what you're worried about? You think whatever game he's playing hasn't ended yet?"

I purse my lips.

No, that isn't what I'm afraid of. I'm afraid his game is only just beginning.

An announcer's speaker clicks on, and they begin a welcome speech.

"Shit, that's my cue. See ya around, Margo."

I go back to Caleb, falling to the bench next to him. He frowns, handing me a soda and popcorn.

"Where did this come from?" I ask.

"You and Bonner have a nice conversation?"

I roll my eyes. "I just wondered if he saw Claire in school. And then I asked how you two managed to be friends with the whole rivalry thing."

"Eh, Matt used to go to Emery-Rose. We were all friends before he transferred, and it just stuck."

"That's sweet." I pop a kernel into my mouth. Salt and butter explode on my tongue. "Is Theo gonna go crazy again?"

Caleb snorts. "See the girl with the camera? By the Lion's Head coach."

I squint, but then I see her. Her blonde hair is pulled back in a braid, slung over her shoulder. Dark-framed glasses. She's drowning in a black jacket. There's a camera slung around her neck, and she periodically raises it to her

eye.

“What’s his problem with her?”

Caleb shrugs. “I don’t know.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t ask. But he might freak out on her.”

Eli turns around. “Might? Hundred bucks says he’ll do something stupid.”

Caleb’s eyes narrow. “Define stupid.”

“Touch her in some way. Push her or break her camera.”

I shake my head. “No, he wouldn’t risk getting carded before the game’s even started, would he?”

Eli smirks at me. “Well, what do you think is going to happen, Wolfe?”

“Maybe he’ll just yell at her.” I don’t really want *anything* to happen to her—because I know how it is. I know what it’s like to have someone gunning for you. Especially someone as dark as Theo. As dark as Caleb.

“Is that a bet?”

I shrug. “I sure as hell don’t have a hundred bucks to give you.”

Caleb snickers. “I’ll pay if you’re wrong.”

Eli and Caleb shake hands, and I roll my eyes.

“He might not even react at all,” I murmur.

“Nope. See?” Eli points.

Sure enough, the starters for each team are taking the field, but Theo heads straight for the girl.

“Ah, hell,” Caleb mutters. “Game hasn’t even started yet.”

He stops just shy of her. She stands still. He waves his hands in front of her face, but he doesn’t touch her. He might be on the edge of it, because I picture steam pouring out of his ears, but Liam grabs him and yanks him back.

And that was that.

Caleb hoots. “Pay up, Black.”

Eli grumbles and holds out a crisp hundred-dollar bill. More money than I’ve ever held at once, I’d reckon.

I eye it like it’s kryptonite, and both boys laugh at me. Caleb takes it and tucks it into my front pocket, patting my thigh.

“Good call,” he whispers, kissing my temple.

“Well, we did fake date. You really get to know a person that way.” I realize the instant the words leave my mouth that I shouldn’t have said it.

Caleb's expression drops. "Is that right?"

"Um, no..."

He takes the cup from my hand, setting it on the bleachers, then yanks me to my feet. "Let's go for a walk."

Riley watches me with wide eyes, but she doesn't say anything.

We're past the point of Caleb torturing me.

Right?

We get to the grass and keep going. The roar of the crowd quickly fades the farther away we get.

"Caleb, stop." I yank my arm, but his grip doesn't loosen. If anything, he holds me tighter. "Oh, come on, I was joking."

The cold mask I had grown to recognize has settled over his features. Scary Caleb.

I was wondering if he would ever make a reappearance.

We round the back of the concession stand, and he backs me against the wall. He cages me in, leaning down. His lips brush the shell of my ear.

I stay perfectly still.

"Hearing you talk about dating Theo makes me want to go out onto the field and pummel his ass."

"Fake dating," I breathe. "Which we only did to get a rise out of you."

"A rise out of me, huh?" He draws back, smirking, then presses his hips against mine. His erection digs into my belly.

My lips part.

Shit. He's really turned on.

"I guess it worked." He tugs on a lock of my hair. "Now what?"

Distant cheering, but I don't know if it's for our team or theirs.

As much as Scary Caleb is kind of hot—in an intimidating way—I prefer the other version of him.

"Now..." I push up onto my toes, getting in his face. "We go back to the game." I slip out from under his arm and walk away, ignoring the tingling down my spine.

If I were to look back, I'd see him staring. Jealousy suits him.

"Every action has a reaction, little wolf," he calls.

I shiver.

He follows me back into the public area, up the bleachers. Back to our seats. He grabs my hips before I can sit, though, and pulls me onto his lap.

After a failed attempt to get up, I loop my arm around his shoulders. We

watch the game, the players moving up and down the field. Their grunts and the creaking of equipment, the way they crash into each other. Eli and Riley are absorbed in the game. Everyone is.

Caleb's hand starts on my thigh. I think nothing of it until it slides up just a hair, under the edge of my coat. I ignore it. I ignore *him* and whatever game he's trying to play right now. In public.

"The thing I love most about your outfit, little wolf?"

"What's that?" I'm hyper-aware of his thumb's circular movements.

"You can still feel everything through leggings," he comments. His hand climbs higher, and his thumb brushes my center.

I gasp, pressing my legs together, but it's too late. He's already there.

"You can't keep me out." He darts forward and kisses my neck. "I wonder who will notice your face when you come on my hand?"

He rubs my clit through my leggings and panties. I bite back a groan, already strung out on a wire from feeling his erection and standing up to him. It was an unexpected high. And now, it's too much.

I turn my face into his neck. "You're wicked."

"It's your game," he says into my hair. "Will you scream my name?"

I grit my teeth and shift, trying to get some relief. He's driving me wild. Every inch of me is focused on the drag of his finger on the most sensitive part of me. I dig my fingernails into his shoulder.

"Stop," I moan, but I don't move to push him away.

I've gone insane.

He reaches higher, to my waistband. I angle toward him, trying to shield myself. My coat is doing a pretty good job, but even then...

His hand slips into my panties, and the feel of his fingers on my skin almost undoes me. Two fingers thrust into me, and I yelp, burying my face back in his neck. I expect him to laugh, but he's silent, moving faster.

Something good happens on the field, because students below us surge to their feet. We alone remain sitting as the crowd goes crazy.

"Scream," he says, teeth on my earlobe.

The orgasm rips out of me, and I do scream into his shoulder, the noise getting carried away by the cheering. He pulls his hand out of my pants, straightens my jacket for me, and waits.

The crowd settles.

My heart seems to be bursting out of my chest, and then it goes quiet, too. And shame trickles in. Burning embarrassment follows it.

Holy shit, I just had an orgasm on the bleachers at a fucking football game. Surrounded by students. The last time he fingered me in public, someone captured it on video and sent it out to *everyone*.

And our best friends are right in front of us.

As if on cue, Riley asks, “Is she okay?”

“Fine,” Caleb says, shifting me closer to him. “Just overwhelmed.”

“Margo?”

“Yep,” I say into his chest. “Peachy.”

“Peachy,” she echoes. “Um, okay.”

Caleb’s chuckle rumbles in his chest. He doesn’t force me to come out of hiding until my face has stopped flaming. I try to come to grips with my anger, letting my hair fall in front of my face.

When I pick up my head, Caleb turns his attention away from the game and toward me. “A state championship we’ll never forget.”

I stare at him, shocked. A laugh bubbles out of me, and I clamp my hand over my mouth. It doesn’t stop the giggles. I thought *I* was the insane one—turns out, we both are.

CALEB

*W*e won. We're on the field with the football team and their fans, jumping and cheering.

Well, not *all* of us are cheering.

Eli and I spot Theo a moment before Liam does.

The girls are with us, Margo's hand firmly holding mine, but I drop it to lunge toward my friend. I grab his arm and take a split second to marvel at the rage he must be feeling, because he throws me off without a thought.

He goes toward the Lion's Head girl.

Eli jumps in front of him, holding up his hands. "Yo, man, normally I wouldn't get between you and your business, but literally the entire school is here, and you're going to just start a—"

Theo growls, shoving Eli to the side. *Great.*

I haul Eli up, and we chase after Theo. I look ahead and see the reason he's pissed.

One of the Lion's Head football players has his hand on her hip. They're standing too close.

Liam runs past us. His helmet is gone, abandoned behind him, but even he isn't quick enough to stop Theo's charge.

Theo's fist slams into the Lion's Head football player's jaw, knocking him to the ground. He's on top of him in an instant, his elbows snapping back. He delivers blow after blow to the poor sucker's face.

"Fucking hell, Theo!" I yell.

People are noticing.

Eli and Liam haul Theo away, but it's too late. The Lion's Head football

team swarms us. It's only a second before the rest of the Emery-Rose football team, who had been celebrating, leap into the fray. I catch an elbow to my stomach. Eli swings wildly, getting people away from us.

And in the midst of all of this, Theo's still struggling to get free from Eli and Liam. I push myself in front of him and slap him.

Theo's eyes finally focus on me.

"Calm the fuck down," I growl.

Eli drops Theo's arm. "Riley and Margo."

We're in the center of a shitstorm. On the edges, I spot Coach Marzden yanking students off from each other. It's become an all-out brawl. Not just angry or hyped-up football players, but the fans—students from both schools—as well.

"With me," I order. I drive my shoulder to get through the crowd.

The four of us duck flying fists and elbows, bodies being hauled across the grass.

She's not where I left her.

"Caleb!"

I spin around, searching. Someone hits me from behind, knocking me flat on my stomach. They're gone in an instant, and Theo helps me up.

"There," he yells. He points toward the bleachers.

Students are running away, and it takes me a second to realize why: the police have arrived.

Someone knocks into Margo, and she falls in slow motion.

I sprint toward her, bumping people out of the way. Screams follow us. The fighters realize the police are here, and suddenly everyone is running past us. I tune it all out, focusing on getting to Margo.

She stands, and I arrive at her side a second later.

Eli grabs Riley, tugging her behind him. "See you at Ian's!" he calls.

I almost drag Margo after them, but there's a higher chance we'll get caught. Margo *can't* get caught—they'd take her away for sure. Haul her in for questioning at the very least.

"You okay?" I ask her.

Theo is right behind me, blocking us from getting hit.

"This is insane!"

I pick her up and put her on her feet. "Now's not the time to dwell on it. Ready to run?"

She smiles. "This feels familiar."

If I didn't know better, I'd say she was delusional... but I do know her, and I know she's referring to the time we ran through a field to hide from my parents.

I jerk. She had asked me about a field. But...

"Come on." She takes a few quick steps backward. "They're going to catch us, and the whole night will be ruined."

What else can we do?

We run.

She goes toward the parking lot, but I grab her arm and steer her toward the woods bordering the school. There's a path somewhere along here...

"This way!" Matt comes from our left, Hanna on his back.

Claire jogs beside him, worry painted over her features. "The path is over here."

We follow them along the tree line. The harsh lights from the police cars paint everything red and blue. It makes the earth weirdly pitted. Margo trips in a hole and latches on to my arm.

"Keep moving," Matt calls.

He finds the path and veers into the woods.

"Hey, stop!"

They found us.

Margo's palm is sweaty against mine, but I don't let go. I can't. She's slow behind me, but it doesn't matter. Matt and Claire have their phones out, flashlights illuminating the ground in front of us. All I can hear is Margo's sharp pants.

I drag her to a halt. "Get on my back."

"But—"

I drop to a knee. "Now."

She jumps on, wrapping her arms around my shoulders.

"Try not to choke me." I get to my feet. She's light—we should've done this ten minutes ago. I take off after Matt.

Margo lets go with one hand, reaching back. Her phone flashlight comes on, giving me enough light to see the path.

I catch up to them quickly.

Constant vigilance. Something Margo's dad used to say to me. I glance around, trying to figure out where we are. It's a cross-country running path—it has to lead back to the school eventually.

"This way," Matt yells.

We go onto a smaller path, mostly hidden by leaves. Ahead of us, Claire slips on loose stones and almost goes down.

“Where is he taking us?” Margo says in my ear.

“Somewhere the cops won’t find you,” I answer. If she’s caught, it doesn’t matter if she was involved or not—they’d take her in. She’s in the system. She’s labeled a runaway. What next, a troublemaker?

Not on my watch.

Our jog turns into a walk, which turns into a climb.

And finally, we get to our destination. We’re dumped out of the woods into a clearing. I spin in a slow circle, taking in the view. The water tower that supplies half the town is on the opposite side of the field. But beyond that is nothing but treetops, the city lights flickering in the distance.

“Beautiful,” Margo says. She wiggles until I release her thighs, sliding down my back. “We came all the way up here to escape the police?”

Matt puts Hanna back on her feet, and she rushes to Margo.

The two of them hug while Claire watches.

Interesting.

Claire’s gaze flicks to me, eyes wide. She stares longer than necessary.

I watch her. What can I say? I’m not one to back down from a challenge—spoken or not.

“How did you know this was up here, dude?” I ask Matt.

Theo and Liam didn’t come with us—I suspect they peeled off and caught a ride.

Matt grins, going toward the water tower. “Our lacrosse team parties up here.” He unearths a cooler half hidden by brush. “Drink, anyone?”

“No,” Margo murmurs.

“I’ll pass, too,” I say. To Margo, I whisper, “Plenty of time for that later.”

She snorts.

Matt flips the cooler lid closed, shaking his head. “Just as well. It’s probably not cold.”

He types on his phone, then stuffs it back in his pocket.

“So, you two know each other.” Margo points from Claire to Matt.

“You told me to keep an eye on her.” He raises his bottle, tipping it toward Claire. “So that’s what I did.”

Something about this has made Margo suspicious, but she doesn’t say anything. Her attention bounces between her foster sister and my friend.

My phone buzzes, and I grab it eagerly. Honestly, this is the last place

Margo and I should be—with her foster siblings and my friend who has probably watched a spy-cam video of Margo and I fucking. But I can't see a way out of here without being rude... or leaving Margo's foster siblings with Matt.

I'm not that big of a dick.

Liam is calling me.

"Yeah?" I answer.

"That was fucking wild," Liam hoots. "Police are gone. Coach sorted them out, although they hauled away like a dozen kids. Not sure how Theo got out—ow, okay, I guess the deputy recognized his last name—ow, fucking hell, Theo, stop—"

I snicker.

"Shut it, Asher," he says. "Where'd you go? Eli texted, said he and Riley would double back for you if you needed it."

I exhale, motioning for Margo to come closer. "We'll be at the parking lot in ten. Doesn't matter who gives us a ride as long as someone waits for us."

"Over and out," Liam answers.

I stuff my phone back in my pocket. "Cops are gone," I tell them. "We're going to head down."

Claire bites her lip.

Matt shifts.

I narrow my eyes at him, trying to silently ask, *What the fuck?*

Matt coughs and steps away. "Yeah, we'll join you."

Margo, Claire, and Hanna march away from us. Claire leads the way, and Hanna slips her hand into Margo's. My heart warms just a bit.

And then Matt is beside me, and I glare at him.

"I'm just being friendly." He raises his hands in surrender. "Not my fault she's so damn pretty."

I chuckle. "Don't even think about it."

"Whoa, whoa." Matt's eyebrows hike up. We both turn on our flashlights. "Think about what?"

I sigh. "I'm gonna do this even though I might puke after. They're Margo's sisters. You can't fuck with them."

"*Them?* Buddy, my eye is just on Claire. And if she wants what I'm giving..."

"Don't make me punch you." I glance ahead, then pull him slower. "Any update on you-know-who?"

He groans. “No. It’s been maddeningly frustrating. No activity. I think they know their figurine was found and they’re lying low.”

“Keep an eye on it,” I tell him. And then I break away, jogging to catch up with Margo.

I’ve had enough people-ing for the day.

MARGO

Caleb and I climb into Theo's car. Liam has already claimed the front seat. Matt waves us off, Claire and Hanna close behind him.

Something spins in my gut, but Caleb trusts him. He told me they were friends. And after I hugged both of them goodbye, he said Matt would take them home.

As much as I kind of hate it, I'm letting it happen. Claire is old enough to make her own decisions.

"You seem tense," Caleb whispers in my ear.

I sigh. "Yeah."

"We could always just go home..."

He smirks. I'm pretty sure my face just lit up. There's nothing more I'd like better than to just... go to bed. Caleb's presence has a way of shielding the nightmares.

"Hey, Theo, drop us at my place."

Theo grunts. "No partying with us, man? We just won fucking *state!*"

"Yeah, then you almost ruined it by fucking up a Lion's Head player."

Liam shakes his head. "What the hell is it with that chick?"

Theo turns to him, glowering. "Shut up."

I whistle. "What could one girl do to deserve all your anger?"

"Long story," he grunts. "She's a fucking bitch."

I wince.

Caleb shakes his head without taking his eyes from the window. "He's had a hard-on for that girl since sophomore year, but he hates to admit it."

Theo slams on the brakes. "You're damn lucky we're here, asshole," he

says. "Get out of my car."

"Testy," Caleb mutters. He grins, flinging open the door and helping me out.

As soon as the door is closed, Theo's tires burn rubber. We're left standing in the road, watching him go.

"Are the Blacks going to question why I'm here?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest. The jacket and hat aren't helping against the chill anymore. It smells like snow.

"They're out of town this weekend."

I bite my lip and follow him inside. "I'm going to see my dad tomorrow."

"I know."

"Well, I felt the need to remind you."

He flicks on lights in the living room, the hallway, the kitchen. Soon the whole downstairs is lit up. "You did, huh?"

I nod. "Just in case you were going to be upset about it."

He strides toward me. Around me.

"Me? Upset?" He's behind me, lingering. His fingers sift through my hair, lifting the hat off my head.

I huff. "You hate when I mention him."

"That's because I hate *him*," he whispers. "And I just... if you knew, you'd hate him, too."

I spin around. I have to crane my neck back to meet his gaze. "That's just it—if *I* knew. I want a chance to know. And I need to talk to him about the Jenkinses."

"About them adopting you."

"Well, it's a nice thought, isn't it?" I run my hands up and down my arms, suddenly cold. "The idea of a happily ever after."

He pauses. "Do you think you're not going to get one?"

Do I? No, I never thought that far ahead. It was just one foot in front of the other. One *day* in front of the other. That's how we survived in the homes that sucked, in the homes that were great with an expiration date, in the group homes cramped with too many kids.

Problem kids.

I never got that official label, but I almost did. And then there really would be no future for me to hunt down.

"I can't apply to NYU," I say. "It's outside my budget. Maybe a nice local community college—"

“Bullshit,” he says.

“What?”

He motions for me to go into the kitchen. I don’t budge.

“Caleb, you can’t just dismiss the fact that I literally have no money—”

“I think I can,” he says.

He bends down and scoops me up, an arm under my knees and the other at my back. I let out a little yip, throwing my arms around his shoulders.

“What—”

“Just let me,” he mutters. “Just once, okay?”

He carries me down the basement stairs.

He’s wrong. It isn’t just once. He’s had spontaneous moments of kindness since I returned to Emery-Rose. They were hard to recognize at first, but he really changed after finding me in the woods. Seeing me hurt by someone else’s hand...

Maybe that’s what this is. A premature apology for whatever damage my father’s going to cause.

I hold on to him and let him do what he has to do. It’ll make both of us feel better before... I guess I’m either going to walk out of the prison visitor’s entrance in one piece or not. Either way, I’m getting answers. I’ll be changed.

This is a goodbye to the Margo I was.

Am.

Will never be again.

“Shh,” he whispers. “You’re crying.”

“I’m not,” I murmur, blinking at the ceiling. “I just have something in my eye.”

“Both of them.”

“Right. A bit of mascara or an eyelash or a branch...”

He coughs a laugh. He hits the light in the bathroom with his elbow, then gently sets me on the counter. This, too, is familiar. Although I’ll confess—we haven’t done this with clothes on before.

“Are you wearing fake eyelashes?” he asks me.

I choke on my laugh. “Yeah, Caleb, I am.”

Thanks for noticing. I can’t even *think* that sentence in a straight voice.

Boys are so ridiculous. The only thing they tend to notice are boob jobs, new cars, and lingerie.

Sadly, I have none of those things.

He cocks his head. “How do you get them off?”

I pinch the outside edge between my finger and thumb and slowly peel it off. It’s a relief to get lashes off—not that I’m an expert or anything. Riley had to put them on for me in Ian’s bathroom.

He reaches out to my other eye, which flutters closed before he can touch me. Gently, he lifts it off.

“Like an unmasking,” he says under his breath. “Stay here.”

He disappears, returning a few minutes later with my overnight bag. At this rate, I don’t even know how it got inside. He pulls out a packet of makeup remover wipes.

“Can I?” he asks.

I squint at him. “Can you take off my makeup?”

He doesn’t answer but swipes at my forehead.

I lean away, catching his wrist. “You *can*, but not like that. My face doesn’t need to be scrubbed raw.”

He smiles, but it’s unsure. “Right.”

I cover his hand with my own and guide him. His strokes become soft, and I close my eyes. Let him remove the layers of foundation and concealer, the eyeliner and eyeshadow. I take it away from him to get the mascara off, then hand it back to him.

“This shit was on your face,” he says, holding it up.

“Yep.”

“You’re pretty without it.”

I shrug. “Yeah, but it makes me feel good when I do wear it.”

He hums. His hands go to my jacket, unzipping it and pushing it down my arms. My shoes are next. Then my shirt.

I raise my arms diligently.

Camisole. Bra.

I stand, and he yanks my leggings off, his face hungry.

“Kiss me,” I whisper.

He obliges. I’m not sure how he always ends up fully clothed while I’m naked, but I’m suddenly desperate to change it. Not breaking away, I unbuckle his belt, unzip his pants. Shove them down until he can kick them away. We pause to remove his sweater, then shirt.

I run my nails down his chest, eliciting a shiver that rolls up his body.

“Bed,” I say.

His chin lifts, gesturing for me to go first.

I make it halfway across the room when he grabs me, lifting me by my hips and carrying me the rest of the way. My back is pressed tightly to his chest, my feet only a few inches off the floor.

“Wasn’t I moving fast enough?” I joke.

I fall onto the bed and roll over, welcoming him when he climbs over me. We’ve had sex. We’ve fucked.

But tonight, I have a feeling it’s going to be something new entirely.

“Am I in control?” I ask.

He shakes his head slowly, eyes going to my throat when I swallow. “Are you ever?”

“More times than you know.”

A muscle in his jaw tics.

“Caleb.”

“Hmm?” He’s getting closer to my neck, inching down.

He’s not touching me, and I’m really starting to hate him for it.

Not really. Pretty sure I don’t hold an ounce of hate for him anymore.

Did I? Yes. Should I? Yes.

Do I?

I exhale when his lips finally touch my throat. His hand follows, resting there. Keeping me from moving.

“You’re going to lose your innocence,” he says in my ear. His breath is hot, moving my hair. “You’re going to walk into that prison as you are now, and you’re going to leave it as someone else.”

“Maybe.”

His hand tightens for a second, then relaxes.

“You’re going to hold more secrets than me, and then I’m going to...” His teeth graze my earlobe.

I shudder.

“I’m not going to lose you,” he says.

“How do you know?” I force him to meet my gaze. None of this running bullshit.

He’s scared of the truth. He’s scared of what my dad has to tell me.

And I swear, at my question, his eyes darken.

“Because if I *do* lose you, I’ll go down whatever fucking dark hole you bury yourself in, and I will find you. I will bring you back.”

He kisses me, silencing any other questions. His lips are rough. His tongue claims my mouth. I wrap my legs around his hips and pull him flush

against me.

I don't know what my father could possibly say to make me want to run from this, but I shove it out of my mind.

That's the point.

Tonight is about us.

A hello.

A goodbye.

A *promise*.

MARGO

“Name?”

I swallow. “Margo Wolfe.”
“Who are you visiting?”

“Keith Wolfe.” I clear my throat, beyond nervous.

The guard on the other side of the glass is bored. There are other people—families, single people, men and women in business attire—scattered around the waiting room.

She types on the computer in front of her and grunts. “You’re not on the list.”

“The, ah, what?”

“The approved visitors list. Wait here.” She gets up and disappears into a back room.

I wait. A minute, then two. Five.

Caleb insisted on dropping me off this morning. He didn’t think anything of it when I mentioned they might be suspicious—I was supposed to sleep over Riley’s house, after all. Through the night and into the morning, he was unusually... handsy. Clingy. I don’t think he ever stopped touching me.

I climbed out of the car in front of my house, and he told me to call him later.

Said he’d be waiting.

I smiled and pretended everything was fine—it *was* fine, on the surface. Underneath my skin, anxiety was gnawing at me.

And then Robert made me suffer through breakfast. He hemmed and hawed over the weather and what shoes to wear. In the end, he was stalling.

We drove the short distance to the prison, and he parked right out front.

“I’ll be here when you’re done,” he said. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I nodded and took a deep breath, willing myself courage.

And now I’m here—I’m doing it. But apparently only if I get...
approved.

Finally, she returns. “Okay. I need your ID. You can put all your belongings in one of the lockers. No phone, food or gum, drinks. No purses or bags, nothing in your pockets...”

She’s reading from a mental list, and I do my best to keep up. I slide my student ID through the hole. She takes a cursory glance at it then files it away.

“Take locker six. Code is seven-nine-zero-four. Then have a seat until we’re ready.”

“Okay.” I’m so out of my league here. I collect a few sympathetic glances as I scan the lockers and finally find number six. I type in the code, and it beeps twice, then swings open.

Slowly, like I’m moving through molasses, I empty my pockets and shut the locker. I don’t have time to take a seat. Something buzzes, and a door opens.

A guard calls, “Visitors, this way, please.”

I follow the group of people down the hall. I’m trembling in my bones. But whether it’s from the cold or fear, I can’t tell. This is my father’s temporary home. I wonder if he sees it that way. If, after a certain point, he just gave up calling it anything other than *his*.

It’s how I was with my foster homes, after all. The foster parents were always Mr. and Mrs. This-or-That, the home was always their house, never mine. Because it wasn’t. It was temporary, just like prison.

I’m serving a sentence the same as my father, for things we both apparently did.

Our escort guard stops and presses a button. There’s another deep buzz, and the guard pulls the door open. “You can hug on initial greeting,” he says to us. “And goodbye. But no touching otherwise.”

I force myself to nod and stuff my hands in my pockets.

There are round tables scattered in the center of the room with attached stools, the kind you’d see in an elementary school cafeteria. It keeps people from getting too close, I guess. By the windows are two-person tables, and I automatically drift in that direction.

Visiting families are already claiming tables. Some are eager, others bored. It makes me wonder who's here on a regular occurrence.

He knows I'm here.

That thought alone has me weak in the knees.

I almost fall into the chair and put my arms on the table. I can't stop the bouncing in my leg.

It's been seven years. Am I going to recognize him?

A woman shoots me a look. "You okay, honey? You're not going to pass out?"

I take a deep breath. "I've never done this."

"They're the same guys we know," she says, shrugging. "At least they start off that way. You visiting a boyfriend?"

"My dad," I whisper.

She exhales. "Yeah, I've got a fucked-up dad, too. He finally stopped letting me come visit. Now I just see my brother once a month."

"That's..."

"Depressing as shit? Yeah." She forces a laugh. "But he passes on news of my dad, and I'll take it. We do what we have to."

I nod. "Right."

I jump when another buzz rings through the room.

"Inmates entering," a guard calls.

A door in the center of one wall slowly slides open on its own, and a guard walks through. He stops just shy of the door and takes a step to his left, admitting the inmates. Prisoners.

Their uniforms are khaki, their last names stitched over a breast pocket. Some scary-looking dudes come through the door first, finding their visitors and making a beeline in their direction.

The room breaks out into murmurs as greetings are made.

I stare at the door, gripping the table like it'll save me from getting sucked underwater.

What if I don't recognize him?

An unnecessary thought.

He walks through the door, and he appears exactly like I remember him, if a little more tired. Sandy-brown hair trimmed too short, a straight nose and full lips. He has the barest hint of scruff on his face.

His eyes are dark, like mine, and they find me immediately.

He pauses, the guard removing his handcuffs, and then he strides toward

me. Shuffles, really, because there are thin chains around his ankles.

“Margo,” he says with all the warmth in the world.

Nothing could’ve prepared me for it.

Tears fill my eyes, and I throw my arms around his shoulders. All my internal debating—to hug or not to hug, to smile or frown, to be happy or upset—flies out the window. *Happy. Definitely happy.*

But also... not.

“Hi, kiddo,” he whispers into my hair. His arms come around me more slowly, but once there, he locks on. “You’re so grown up.”

God, it feels so good to hug him.

We cling to each other until a guard barks at us to separate.

I shakily withdraw, swiping at my cheeks.

“Let’s sit,” he says. “God, it’s been a while.”

I nod.

“How have you been? Your case worker was allowed to tell me a little about your foster homes... and the trouble you had. Running away.” His eyebrows draw in. “I’ve never felt so fucking helpless.”

“It’s okay.”

“She made it pretty clear that you weren’t going to come see me.” Dad leans forward, into the table, and extends his hands. “You’re an adult now. I can’t even believe it.”

I take them in my own. His are calloused. He’s thinner than I remember, too, but harder.

“Angela doesn’t know I’m here.”

He winces. “Who—”

“My foster dad drove me,” I say quickly. “They... they’re going to petition to adopt.”

He glances down at our hands, then back at my face. “How do you feel about that? Are they good people?”

“They are, but—”

“Then I’m assuming you’re just here to see if I’ll give up my rights.”

He tries to pull away, but I hold fast.

“I came here...” I clear my throat and almost chicken out. It’d be easy to say *yes, that’s why I’m here*. But it isn’t. “My memory is blocked. I remember being happy, and then they were taking you away in the park.”

I don’t examine his expression.

“Did you give the drugs to Mom? Is that what I saw that made everything

blow up?”

“What?” Confusion laces his tone. “Margo, what are you talking about?”

I freeze. “A-Angela said you were arrested on drug charges. Trafficking or something. She said I wasn’t allowed to go to the trial...”

“Bullshit,” Dad whispers. “She really told you that?”

“I’m just trying to figure out the truth here, Dad.” I release his hands to wipe at my face again. “If that’s bullshit, then what *happened*?”

He glances at the clock on the wall. “Listen. Angela lied—or she masked the truth. Whatever her reasoning, I didn’t get sent to prison for drugs.”

“I tried to search it online,” I whisper. “And there was nothing. I couldn’t find anything about a trial.”

“Because the Ashers wanted it hidden,” he bites out. “Lydia and her brother-in-law in particular. They wanted the Asher name to be pristine.”

“But *why*?”

He shakes his head. “You saw something you shouldn’t have. And you told me about it when your mother told you not to.” He pauses, like he’s waiting for me to magically remember.

Sorry, Dad. This is all new information.

I wish I could just freaking *remember*. “She—you—one of you locked me in my room. There was yelling. Your room was destroyed.”

“We got into an argument,” he says. “It was heated.”

I’d hate to see what a real fight looked like, if that was just a heated argument.

I push that thought away. “Did you hurt her?”

He’s miserable reliving this—it’s written all over his face—and I almost apologize.

“I didn’t touch her,” he says. “But... I did hurt someone else.”

“Can you just be straight with me?” I demand. “Why are you in here? I talked to your lawyer, but he didn’t give me anything—”

“You talked to my—”

“Five minutes!” a guard yells.

His face is white, and he grabs my wrists. I suppress a yelp and stay perfectly still.

“You went to Tobias? Alone?”

“My friend went with me,” I mutter. “We were in the city looking at NYU.”

His face softens for an instant. “We’ll discuss your college search the

next time you come in,” he says quietly. And then he’s back to brisk. “He got me a deal. A shit one, if you ask me, but what choice did I have?”

“What deal?”

He shakes his head. “You’re going to come back, right?”

Will I?

He clearly has a story to tell, but it might take some tugging to follow a single thread through the tapestry.

“Yes,” I say. “I promise. Now tell me what deal you took. Please.”

He grimaces. “I was looking at a life sentence for murder.”

My eyes go wide.

“But the deal was voluntary manslaughter. Medium security prison. I have another five years before parole is even considered.”

I’m pretty sure I’m in shock. I can’t move. Can’t think. Dad’s in prison for killing someone. That’s... that’s so not the image I had of him. I didn’t think he would be capable of it.

“I didn’t do it,” he adds.

“Then why on earth did you accept the deal?”

He shakes his head.

“Time’s up!”

Inmates around us stand and hug or shake hands.

Me? I’m locked in a staring contest with my father, trying to sort through the different emotions fluttering around inside my chest. I might throw up.

He pulls me to my feet and wraps his arms around my back. His mouth at my ear, he whispers, “I was up against the Ashers’ top-notch lawyers, as well as a determined District Attorney. All I had was a shitty public defender who didn’t believe my story.”

I hug him back, blinking. “Why were the Ashers against you?”

He chuckles. It’s the most depressing sound I’ve ever heard, and it drills a hole straight through my chest. In one side and out the other.

“Because according to them, I killed Ben.”

Ben. Benjamin Asher.

Caleb’s dad. *Caleb’s dad is dead*. All this time, Caleb didn’t mention it. He grimaced whenever I mentioned my dad, who he had loved up until... well, up until Dad allegedly killed his father.

“Let’s move it, Wolfe.”

Dad releases me and steps back, searching my face. I nod at him, unable to do anything more. I don’t think I can speak without screaming. He and the

rest of the inmates file back through the door, and it slowly slides back into place.

He's gone.

All around me, visitors stand. Some stretch, others just go right for the door where a guard is waiting.

I can't move. My knees are locked. White spots flicker in front of my vision.

"Hey, hey," the woman from earlier says, coming over. She grasps my elbow. "You okay? First time visiting?"

I nod.

"Yeah, first time can be intense. It gets easier. Although you look like you saw a ghost."

I force myself to smile. "Yeah, it was intense. I haven't seen him in a while."

She hums. "Well, let me walk you out."

Through the door. Down the hall. Once we're buzzed through the final door and back in the waiting area, I take a deep breath. My first one in a while.

I grab my stuff from the locker and collect my ID from the guard at the counter. I can't be in here anymore. Just visiting is suffocating... or maybe it's the impact of new truth.

He said he didn't *actually* kill Caleb's dad. But nevertheless, Mr. Asher is dead. Someone must've killed him, whether it was Dad and he's trying to preserve himself, or...

Or he was framed.

But there would still have to be motive and opportunity for the District Attorney to even get Dad arrested in the first place, right? They would've had to have evidence pointing them toward my father.

I storm outside, emotions all over the place. I don't know whether to cry or go on a rampage. *He killed Caleb's dad.* The why is unclear.

He pled out, got a lighter sentence than *murder*.

Voluntary manslaughter.

It sounds so...

"Margo, are you okay?" Robert meets me halfway across the parking lot.

I fall into his arms and a sob erupts out of my chest before I can stop it.

He hugs me tightly, one hand pressing against the back of my head. "Shh, honey, it's okay." His other hand rubs small circles on my back.

I hugged Dad and it felt like home. I can't help but think that moment will forever be tainted by bars on the windows and confessions whispered in my ear.

Caleb knew I was going to come out of there as a different person. Did he know what my dad did? *Why didn't he tell me?* And it begs another question: what else hasn't he said?

I realize I'm gripping the back of Robert's shirt in my fists. Tears stream out. I can't breathe over the lump in my throat. My whole face is on fire with embarrassment, shock. I slowly loosen my hold, but I don't release Robert. I tuck my face against his chest and try to get a hold of myself.

I need to talk to Caleb.

He knows something—I know he does. This ties into the lawyer, his family, *my* family. He sure as hell knew his dad was dead—and that mine is doing time for his death—but he didn't say anything.

My mind can't grip reality. I'm furious and sad and overwhelmed.

"Breathe," Robert reminds me. "It's okay. What happened?"

I take a shaky breath. When I lean away, I'm ashamed of the tearstains on his jacket. "I just..." I can't tell the truth. "It was a lot."

He guides me to his car, tucking me into the passenger seat then circling around. I watch him pass the front of the hood, bundled against the cold. He climbs in and turns on the car, and we sit there for a moment until the air gets warm.

It must've started snowing while I was inside. It falls thick and heavy now.

"Let's go home," I suggest. "I could use a cup of hot chocolate."

"Len should be home by now," Robert says. "Maybe a movie night?"

I force myself to smile. "Sounds good."

He hands me a tissue, then pulls out onto the street. "You can talk about it if you want. Either to me or Len, Angela, your new therapist... There are a lot of options."

"I know," I mumble. My gaze goes to my fingernails. I shredded them at some point, but I didn't notice the full extent of the damage. There's blood caked around the nail of my index finger.

"I just wanted to say, without anyone else around—you know how Len gets, hovering—that I'm proud of you. You were so against seeing your father when we first met you. It's only been a few months, but this willingness to open up—"

I bite my lip, desperate not to cry again. “I want to stay with you. And thank you for taking the time to drive—”

The SUV comes out of nowhere.

It smashes into the front corner of our vehicle, sending us flying. Robert reaches over, his arm across my chest as we catapult off the road. In slow motion, we hit a ditch, and the nose of the car goes down. Momentum takes it from there.

I close my eyes, bringing my hands up to protect my face.

The car flips. Glass shatters.

My head bangs against something, and the world flickers.

Screeching fills my ears, then the sound of wind.

And then, silence.

Darkness.

Pain comes a heartbeat later, lacerating through me. I gasp, revived, and stare at Robert. We hang upside down, suspended by our seat belts. His eyes are closed.

Black spots form in front of my eyes.

It’s hard to breathe.

“Robert?” I moan. I try to reach over, but my arm isn’t working right.

I unbuckle myself, reaching up with my working arm to lower myself to the floor—the ceiling of the car. Hot liquid pours down my face, and I give in to the wave of dizziness.

Just one second, I order. Then get out.

The longer I stay still, the harder it is to drag my eyes open.

Rough hands grab at me, and I fight them for an instant.

“Stop, I’m here to help,” a voice says. “It’s okay, Margo.”

How do you know my name?

I hesitate long enough for them to drag me out of the car. Their arm is wrapped around my chest, just below my breasts, and they manage to get me out through the window.

“How did you find me?” I slur. “Robert—”

“He’s okay. The ambulance will take him. Come on, up to your feet.” My savior hoists me up, but my legs won’t hold me. After a moment, they adjust their grip and half drag me, moving backwards. “You hit your head pretty good, huh?”

The voice is familiar. Distant. Talking to me through a tunnel.

“I can’t leave my dad—”

A sharp inhale. Mine? Theirs?

“Where did you come from?” I ask. My heels drag across the pavement.

“You’re not hard to track down.”

I get a foot under me. My eyes open enough to see that we’re across the intersection by now. Robert’s car is almost unrecognizable. “Wait. I need to help him.”

We stop, and I’m lowered into a sitting position. I stare at the car. I just need to get back there. Make sure Robert gets out. Why didn’t they get him out?

“I’m sorry, Margo,” the voice says. A boy. It’s familiar, but his identity is just out of my grasp.

It occurs to me that I could look back and see who pulled me out of the car, but I just don’t care. I need to get back. It’s so cold, and my neck is so stiff. My whole body is locking up. The road tilts.

“This is what has to happen,” he continues. Loose gravel crunches as he kneels behind me. “You’ll forgive me, won’t you?”

His hand wraps around my face. He covers my nose and mouth with a damp cloth.

I stop breathing and jerk, trying to get away, but I’m no match.

He holds me tightly, his forearm pressed against my ear and his hand bracing the top of my head. I can’t get away from him.

Pain radiates down my spine.

Finally, I have to give in.

I have to breathe.

Chemicals choke me. And a second later, I fall into nothingness.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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Reader, this one is for you. Your enthusiasm for Caleb and Margo has made my days so much brighter. This story was born out of a desire to explore the dark side (of life, of romance, of characters' minds) and it evolved into so much more than that.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S. Massery is a romance author of varying sub-genres. 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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