

## PROLOGUE

I clutch the bracelet tight in my fist, the metal biting into my palm as I trudge through the mud, my boots sinking with every step. Rain drizzles over me, soaking my hair, cold against my skin, but I barely feel it. Of course, it would rain—Moonwood's skies are always gray, always heavy, always mourning something. Just like me.

I should be crying. Screaming. Something. But all I feel is the familiar numbness creeping in, wrapping around me like armor. Bad things happen. They always do. So I keep walking, the weight of the bracelet pressing into my palm, the only real thing I can hold onto. Soon, it'll be buried with the rest of her things. Just like any other memory, sinking into the earth.

"Took you long enough." Tristen muttered, barely glancing up. He leaned against the tree, hood pulled low over his face, hands stuffed deep in the pockets of his worn leather jacket. His posture was relaxed, almost indifferent, like he had nowhere better to be—but the way his eyes lingered, half-lidded and unreadable, made it impossible to tell what he was really thinking.

It's no surprise—no one ever really knows what goes on in Tristen's head. But I thought, just this once, he'd show something. Anything. It's his *girlfriend's* funeral, after all. Instead, he's here like he was dragged, like this is just another inconvenience. Did she even matter to him at all?

I ignored him, making a mental note not to bother with conversation—nothing good ever comes from talking to Tristen. Instead, my eyes drifted to Sam, and damn, he looked like *shit*. He always did, but this time made every other time look like nothing. He was sitting on the ground, arms wrapped around his knees, staring at the stick stabbed into the dirt—the one with *DICKsen* carved into it. The grave of his first puppy.

We came here two years ago, on Sam's fifteenth birthday, to bury his puppy. It was supposed to be a good memory. A surprise. We had broken into the animal shelter just to get him a pet—because if anyone needed company in that house, it was Sam. And what better company than a dog? We also made sure he calls him Dicksen cause why not?

But we never expected *him*.

Lyle—his so-called dad—took one look at the puppy and didn't even hesitate. The damn thing wouldn't stop barking, too loud, too *alive* for a house like that. So Lyle made sure it never made another sound. Did it right in front of Sam.

It might seem strange, holding Emily's funeral in the same place we buried a dog, but this is the only spot where we've ever truly felt the weight of death—where we understood the need to say goodbye.

"Now that we're all here, let's start by digging the hole," Trixie said, moving toward Dicksen's grave to begin. But before she could get her hands in the dirt, Tristan pushed off the tree and brushed past her, lightly nudging her shoulder. He stepped in front of her, stopping her from digging. "I'll do it," he said flatly.

Tristan may be an asshole, but there's one thing he wouldn't do—let his twin sister dig in the dirt with her bare hands. Without a word, he stepped in, his hands getting caked with mud as he started digging. The hole grew deeper, his movements sharp and deliberate, as if the task itself was the only thing keeping him grounded.

"Where's Joshua?" Trixie asked, her voice low.

"Probably poking a needle in his arm somewhere." Tristan replied, wiping the mud off his hands with a careless flick of his wrist

Was he talking about my little brother? Yeah, he was. Was I going to argue with him? No. He was probably right. My brother was out there, somewhere, slowly destroying himself, and he wouldn't give a damn about Emily's funeral. He never did like her. It's not like he cared about anyone, really.

"Can we just get this over with?" Sam muttered, his voice barely a whisper. His body trembled slightly, and it was hard to tell if it was from the cold or the desperate need crawling under his skin, urging him to consume again.

"Fucking hell, I'll start." Trixie muttered, pulling a bottle of pink nail polish from her pocket. "Emily gave me this the night she snuck out to have that sleepover with us. I mean, fuck, I've never been one for girly shit like nail polish, but Emily? She was all about it. She was that one girly bitch who tried her hardest to make me like all that stuff. Guess it's unlucky she died before she could get me to actually use this pink crap." She chuckled darkly, her voice a mix of sadness and something colder.

She tossed the bottle into the freshly dug hole, then took a step back, her eyes scanning us, waiting for someone to take the next step.

Sam finally unfurled himself, rising to his feet, his dirty blonde hair drenched from the rain. A keychain dangled from his fingers. He held it out, the words "*Sexy Nerd*" engraved on it. Without a word, he dropped it into the hole. "She loved calling me that." he muttered, his voice barely audible, before turning and retreating back to the spot where he'd been sitting.

I took a step forward, my hand trembling as I unclutched the bracelet, leaving a raw, bloody mark on my palm. "I stole this from her room the first time she invited me over." I whispered, my voice shaky. "At first, I thought she was just a self-centered bitch, trying to befriend me to look good, like she was doing some charity work. I never thought she'd become my best friend."

Tristan's scoff cut through the moment, and I had to force myself to look away, reminding myself yet again to ignore him.

I tossed the bracelet into the hole, where it finally belonged, and took a step back. The sharp click of a lighter broke the silence, followed by the faint hiss of Trixie lighting a cigarette.

Now it was finally Tristan's turn. I watched him curiously, wondering what he'd bring, considering he wasn't exactly the sentimental type. Sure enough, I wasn't disappointed—he pulled out a pair of white panties, like it was the most normal thing in the world. Without so much as a second thought, he tossed them into the hole, then casually strolled back to his tree as if nothing out of the ordinary just happened.

None of us expected him to say anything meaningful, but we sure as hell didn't expect him to bring Emily's *panties* either.

"Are you fucking serious?" Trixie snapped, throwing her cigarette into the bushes, her calm demeanor instantly replaced by pure anger.

"You said to bring something that belonged to her. There." he said, his tone flat and indifferent.

"You're a fucking piece of shit, you know that?" Sam said tiredly, his gaze heavy as he stared at Tristan.

Tristan's smirk spread wider, his eyes lighting up with a dangerous gleam. "What did you say to me?" he taunted, clearly savoring the tension. He was waiting for Sam to snap, itching for a fight—Tristan always was. He craved it, needed it, like a drug. And today? Today, he was practically *begging* for it.

"You know what? I'm just fucking done," Sam spat, his voice sharp with frustration. "I'm so fucking done with all of you and your bullshit. If we're gonna stand here and pretend we didn't fucking ruin her life, then at least have the decency to do it right—*not* bringing that shit into this."

He stood up, his entire posture radiating exhaustion and anger.

"Oh, please, don't act like we're not gonna catch you later digging this hole like a bitch, just so you can sniff that shit like the fucking weirdo you are." Tristan taunted, his voice dripping with malice as he stepped closer to Sam.

That's when Sam finally snapped, throwing his first punch ever, connecting solidly with Tristan's jaw. In that instant, Tristan's wish came true, and the fight he craved was finally on.

We just stood there, frozen, as Tristan tackled Sam to the ground, his fists raining down with brutal force. Each punch landed with a sickening thud, the sound of bone meeting flesh echoing in the air. Sam didn't even try to fight back—he simply took the hits, each one more vicious than the last, his body going limp under the assault.

We knew better than to intervene. There was no breaking Tristan once he was in that state, no pulling him out of the fight. He was like a wild animal, driven by something darker, and we were all just helpless spectators.

Sam, on the other hand, seemed almost... resigned. His face was bloodied, his lip split, but he didn't move, didn't struggle. He just lay there, taking the punches like he was used to them, like this was all he deserved. His body was still and accepting, the years of brutal, nightly punishment from his father bleeding into this moment. It was like he'd learned to crave the pain, to need it.

It felt like seconds, or maybe minutes, but in reality, it was an eternity before Tristan finally pulled himself off Sam. His knuckles were torn open, blood seeping from the wounds he'd earned in his last fight, and he was breathing heavily, chest rising and falling with each sharp, angry breath.

He shot us all a look—cold, biting, full of contempt—before his voice cut through the silence.

"After all, he's right. You fucking killed her. All of you," he spat, his words laced with venom. "So don't fucking pretend."

Without another word, he turned and walked away, leaving the rest of us standing there, swallowed by the weight of what he'd said.

Trixie rushed over to Sam, trying to help him up, but he shoved her away.

"Get the fuck off me," he snarled.

"Shut the fuck up and let me help you, you fucking idiot," she snapped back, forcing him to his feet despite his resistance.

I turned towards the hole, my feet heavy as I made my way over to it. As I started covering it up, I paused for a moment, staring down at my hands. They were caked in dirt and mud, the grime grinding into my skin, filling the creases between my nails. The dark, wet earth clung to my fingers, making them feel like something foreign, like they didn't belong to me. I couldn't shake the irony of it all—here I was, burying a life, my hands stained in the same muck that had taken it.

## CHAPTER ONE

I leaned my head against the cold window, the chill creeping into my skin as I traced random shapes on the glass with my finger. Outside, the town's welcome sign came into view: *"Welcome to Moonwood."* The road stretched out in front of me, winding through a dense forest that seemed to close in on either side. The trees stood like silent sentinels, their branches twisting and reaching toward the sky. Above, the clouds hung low and heavy, casting a dull, gray light over everything, as if even the heavens were reluctant to offer warmth. The song "High and Dry" by Radiohead blared from the radio distracting me from the sound of my dad talking.

"Are you listening to me, Emily?" he asked, his voice edged with impatience, as I realized I hadn't answered whatever question he'd just asked.

"Yes, Dad, what did you say?" I forced a smile, masking the complete lack of interest I felt.

"I asked if you were excited about exploring the town. I know you haven't left your room much this past year, and I was wondering if that might change now that we've moved," he said, his smile wide, though it felt more like a hopeful plea than a genuine question.

Ever since my mom died last year, my dad seemed obsessed with making sure I wasn't affected by it. He gave me whatever I wanted and said whatever sounded good, like it would somehow fix everything. But the last thing I wanted was to leave our old town behind—my friends, my school, my entire life. Now I'm stuck here, trying to figure out if I should resent him for throwing away mom's memory and pretending everything's fine or if I should just admire him for his ridiculous attempt at a fresh start.

"If there's anything worth seeing in this town, then sure, why not?" I said, my voice thick with sarcasm.

"Come on, princess. I'm sure this place is exactly what we need—a beautiful landscape and a peaceful vibe," he said, his tone oozing false cheer.

I don't know if he's color blind, but this town is practically drowning in green and gray. It feels like we're about to move into a cabin in the middle of nowhere, and yet, he's describing it like it's some kind of paradise—like we're in the damn Swiss Alps or something.

"Sure, Dad," I muttered, reaching for the radio to crank up the volume. He sighed, his shoulders slumping in defeat, finally accepting that the rest of the ride would be in silence.

It felt like forever before we finally pulled up to what I was now supposed to call home. The house was nice enough, tucked away on the edge of a dense forest. It wasn't far from the town square, but just enough to make it feel a little too isolated. The area wasn't exactly the most desirable—it was close to the bad side of town, but there really hadn't been much of a choice. The town was small, and this was honestly the best spot we could find. A trailer park was just down the road, not far at all. I couldn't help but feel the weight of how little we really fit in here, but this was it now.

"This looks nice, doesn't it, Emily?" My dad laughed, his voice full of that forced cheer, and I managed a weak smile.

"Before we go in and get settled, I noticed a diner not far from here. How about we grab some burgers and fries?" he suggested, clearly eager for something to break the silence.

I wasn't exactly thrilled about the house—it didn't feel important enough to dive into right away. Besides, I was starving. "Yeah, sure." I said, eager to escape the awkwardness for a bit. Food sounded way better than dealing with the house right now.

We walked to the diner, and with every step, I could feel my patience wearing thinner. If I had to hear one more compliment about the house, I swear my ears would start bleeding. So, when we finally reached the door, I practically rushed to open it, the loud *ding* of the bell cutting him off mid-sentence.

Inside, the warm, greasy scent of fried food hit me, and I couldn't help but feel a little relief. We made our way to a booth near the back, my dad trailing behind me as I slid into the seat, already scanning the menu. It was one of those places that had that worn-in, familiar feel, with the kind of comfort food you didn't have to think too hard about. For a moment, I didn't care about anything else but the food in front of me.

A few minutes passed before the waitress came to take our orders. I looked up from the table, ready to give mine, and found myself staring at a girl who was probably my age. She looked effortlessly cool. She had a nose piercing that added a sharp edge to her look, and a tattoo peeked out from under her sleeve, a bold design I couldn't quite make out. Her brown hair was cut short, messy but somehow perfect for her, like she didn't care about looking flawless—but it worked. Her nails were painted jet black, and her entire vibe screamed alternative, grunge, and effortlessly badass. I could almost feel it—she definitely played music, or at least had a rebellious soul that screamed "rock 'n' roll."

I must've stared a little too long because she gave me a strange look, and I suddenly realized I hadn't even given her my order yet. "I'll have the double cheeseburger, small fries, and a Coke," I said quickly, trying to recover. I flashed her a smile, but she just scribbled it down and gave me another one of those weird glances before turning to leave. Okay, that was... awkward.

"I just don't get how some parents let their kids get that many piercings," my dad muttered, shaking his head in disbelief. "It's ridiculous, really."

I shrugged, not really caring for his opinion. "I thought the piercings and the tattoo were cool."

He looked back at me with an exaggerated frown. "She has a tattoo? Isn't she, like, seventeen? That's just... wrong." His voice was dripping with judgment, like he couldn't quite fathom anyone so young making choices like that.

"So what? It's her body, she should have the freedom to make her own choices," I argued, feeling my frustration grow.

He scoffed, shaking his head. "Her parents get to make those decisions for her until she's eighteen. And even then, it's not like she can do whatever she wants. There are limits."

I stared at him, trying to keep my voice steady. “You really think someone should have to wait until they’re eighteen to decide what they want to do with their own body? That’s a little controlling, don’t you think?”

He shot me a look, eyes narrowing. “It’s about respect, Emily. And responsibility. When you’re younger, you don’t always know what’s best for you. Some things, like tattoos and piercings, are decisions that stick with you.”

“Maybe, but why should someone else get to decide what’s best for me? I can make my own choices, just like she can.”

He frowned, clearly irritated. “It’s not about control, it’s about guidance. You’ll understand when you’re older.”

I rolled my eyes inwardly, trying to keep the frustration from showing. It was like talking to a brick wall. He was being so ridiculous, so caught up in his own outdated views. It’s not about control or guidance, it’s about him trying to hold onto this idea that he knows what’s best for everyone, even when it doesn’t make sense. The world doesn’t work the way he thinks it does anymore, and it’s honestly exhausting hearing him talk like this.

It was like his whole world was boxed in by rules and restrictions, and he couldn’t see beyond them. He didn’t get that I didn’t want to be controlled. I wanted to be trusted to make my own decisions, even if I made mistakes along the way. Isn’t that what growing up is? The freedom to mess up and learn from it?

We sat in silence, both of us too stubborn to find common ground, the tension thick between us. The food took a bit longer than expected, but when the waitress finally brought it over, I couldn’t help but take the opportunity. As she placed the plates down and started to turn, I caught her eye and flashed a smile. “Cool tattoo,” I said, deliberately letting my voice ring out a little louder than usual, making sure my dad could hear every word. “I really like it.”

It was a small jab, but I could see it. The slight shift in my dad’s expression, the twitch of irritation he couldn’t hide. It felt good to have something to say that wasn’t about his old-school, narrow view of everything. The girl nodded, giving me a brief, appreciative smile, but I was already watching my dad’s face, waiting for his reaction. It was petty, sure, but at that moment, I didn’t care. It was a way to make him squirm, to show him that not everyone has to follow the same rules he believed in.

The food wasn’t anything to write home about, but it was decent enough to finish without hesitation. I cleared my plate, and for the first time in a long while, I didn’t feel the weight of my dad’s judgment hanging over me. He didn’t say a word after our argument, and honestly, it felt like a small victory. I could finally breathe.

Instead of focusing on the silence between us, my attention drifted back to the girl. She moved around the diner with this effortless grace, almost like she didn’t belong in the dull monotony of the small town. There was something intriguing about her—something that pulled me in. Her face had this relaxed, almost distant quality, like she wasn’t fully present, but still very much aware of her surroundings.

The way she observed people, the way her eyes flicked over the room as if she was constantly analyzing, it was captivating. She seemed to read people without needing to say anything, sizing them up in an instant. I couldn't help but wonder what it was about her that made her so... different. Her look was raw, unapologetic—like she had a story to tell, but kept it locked away, tucked behind that quiet intensity.

I kept watching her, trying to imagine the life she led. There had to be something more beneath that tough exterior. Was she happy? Was she as sharp and self-aware as she seemed? I couldn't help but wonder, even though I knew I'd probably never know. Still, there was something magnetic about her, a curiosity I couldn't shake.

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I kicked the last box away from the door with a tired sigh, watching it slide across the floor and settle against the wall. The room wasn't too big, nor too small—just enough space for me and all the clutter in my mind. I flopped onto the bed, staring at the ceiling with a blank expression.

How was I ever supposed to get used to this town? It felt like I was trapped in a place where everything was foreign, and I didn't belong. I wasn't even sure I wanted to belong. I could already feel myself slipping into the margins of this small town, unnoticed and out of place. Nothing about this felt like home. The air here was thick with the kind of quiet that made me feel suffocated. Even the walls in this house, despite their fresh coat of paint, felt cold and distant, like they were holding secrets I wasn't ready to uncover.

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to push away the feeling of being lost, but it clung to me. Maybe it was the way everything here was so... stagnant. The town, the people—it all felt like it was stuck in time. I didn't want to be stuck here too, but I didn't know how to escape it either. I hadn't even made an effort to meet anyone or explore the place, not that I cared. The thought of running into more people like my dad—so eager to start fresh—only made me want to retreat further into myself.

I wondered if it was possible to ever feel at home here, or if I was just destined to exist on the outskirts of this town, a shadow of the person I used to be. The idea of blending in felt like a joke—something I would never pull off.

For now, all I could do was survive the silence, take it one day at a time, and keep my distance.