

MONTY JAY

RIVER STYX HEATHENS Book ONE

WRATH
OF AN
EXILE

HATE + LOVE = WAR

wrath of an exile

River Styx Heathens

Book One

monty jay

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WRATH
OF AN
EXILE

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Wrath of an Exile
Monty Jay
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before you read

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THE RIVER STYX HEATHENS IS A SECOND-GENERATION SERIES DERIVED from The Hollow Boys Series. You DO NOT have to read The Hollow Boys to enjoy these books. None of The River Styx Heathens novels have to be read in a certain order.

THIS IS A **DARK ROMANCE**. IT DOES INCLUDE CONTENT THAT SOME MAY FIND harmful to their mental health.

THIS CONTENT INCLUDES BUT IS NOT LIMITED TO:

- Graphic sex scenes
- Graphic violence
- Murder
- Blood and gore
- Religious trauma
- Death of a parent
- Substance abuse
- Addiction
- Loss related to overdosing
- Drug and alcohol use
- Child abuse
- Sexual assault
- Rape

- Themes of post-traumatic stress disorder
- Mentions of suicide
- Suicidal ideations

If you find any of these themes triggering or harmful, please do not continue. Always put yourself and your mental health first.

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The Van Doren's

Father: Mother:
Rook Van Doren Sage Van Doren

Son:
Reign Van Doren (Oldest)

Daughter:
Seraphina Van Doren (Middle)

Daughter:
Andromeda Van Doren (Youngest)

The Hawthorne's

Father: Mother:
Silas Hawthorne Coraline Hawthorne

Daughter:
Nora Hawthorne (oldest)

Son:
Racer Hawthorne (Middle)

Daughter:
Stella Hawthorne (Twin) Son:
Scout Hawthorne (Twin)

The Caldwell's

Father of Allstair Caldwell:
Wayne Caldwell

Father: Mother:
Allstair Caldwell Briar Caldwell

Son:
Atlas Caldwell (Twin) Son:
Ezra Caldwell (Twin)

The Sinclair's

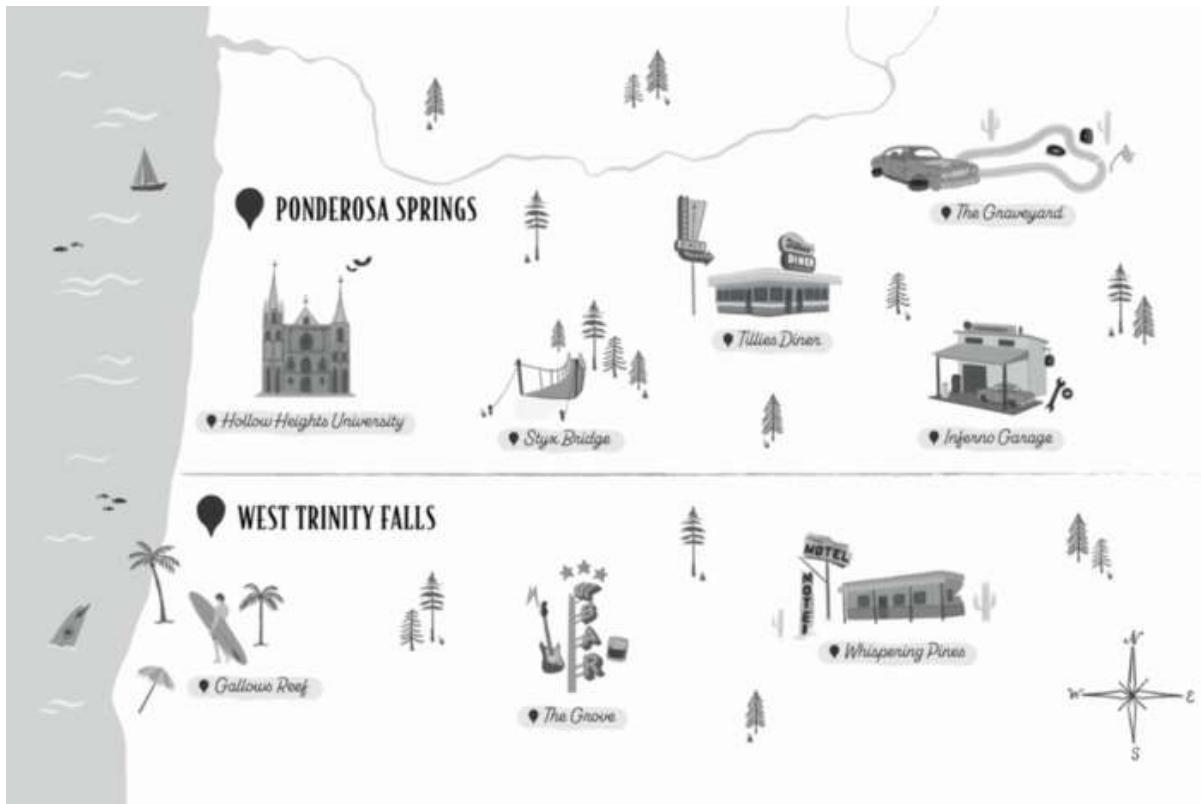
Father of Easton Sinclair:
Wayne Caldwell

Father: Mother:
East Sinclair Mary Turgid

Son:
Jude Sinclair

THE FAMILIES

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dedication

. . .

To the friends whose names are still spray-painted beside mine on that rusted water tower. The wild nights in our Nowhereville town gave me everything I needed to write the love shared between these Heathens.

To the Styx.

(Oh, and just so we're clear, that first sentence isn't an admission of guilt—
it's only metaphor...)

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prologue

...

Phi

November

FOUR YEARS Ago...

Fire feels no fear.

Only a primal hunger that knows nothing but consumption. It crackles and roars, a living entity with no hesitation or doubt. It scorches the earth with no remorse, an intangible beast that doesn't submit.

It knows only destruction, and it has never once known fear.

“Are you okay?”

I blink, eyes burning from the heat rolling from the blistering church just a few feet away. Another glass window shatters from the pressure of the flames, the burning orange threads weaving in and out of the historic structure.

“I’m—” I clear my throat, meeting eyes with the officer in front of me.
“I’m fine.”

A truck whines in the distance, rushing toward us. Firefighters eager to destroy all of my hard work with pressurized water. I mean, I guess it doesn't matter if they put the fire out now. I don't care if St. Gabriel's church crumbles to ashes or stays standing. It wasn't the building I wanted to roast, anyway.

“Do you want me to call the judge?”

“No.”

No, because he'll know what I did.

No, because he'll ask me why.

No, because I'm not ready to lie to him yet.

This cop looks young enough that all he's heard are rumors about my father. He's probably shitting his pants standing in front of me. I can guarantee the last thing he wants is to call my father.

“No,” I say again, softer this time. “I’ll tell him when I get home.”

“It was a good thing you were riding by. A few minutes later and—”

“Fuck you, pig! Fuck you!”

I flinch at the voice, against my will. My hand twitches, fingers finding the hem of my shirt and knotting it up in a fist. I fight the urge to vomit, forcing my sickness deep inside my stomach.

I wonder if there will be a time when I can exist in the same world as him and not feel this way. Like the ground is being ripped out beneath me and I’m simply free-falling into nothingness.

Oakley Wixx is thrashing against an officer’s hold. The cuffs forcing his hands behind his back rattle in the wind. A harrowing thud echoes around us as Oakley’s face meets metal.

The metallic taste of blood fills my mouth. I’ve sunk my teeth too far into my cheek, but I don’t care. As I watch Oakley get slammed into the hood of a cop car not once but twice, all I can feel is rage.

I hope it fucking hurts. I want to scream out loud for the officer to do it again, and again and again, until Oakley Wixx is nothing but a pile of bloody, crushed bone.

“I didn’t do shit!” he screams, red face pressed against the car.

“Are you sure I can’t call someone for you?”

I swallow, palms sweating as I flick my gaze back to the cop—Officer Fields, according to his name tag.

Fury fills my body like a flood, consumes my entire being, and I wonder if this cop can see it. If he can see I’m not okay, that this wasn’t how it was supposed to go.

Can he see that I planned to kill someone tonight?

That Oakley never should’ve made it out of that blaze, and the smell of his charred flesh should be stuck to my clothes? My nails dig into the soft flesh of my palm, unshed tears stinging my eyes.

“Jude! Say something!”

Vastly different from his friend, Jude Sinclair calmly allows an officer to guide him toward the police car. I’ve never known him to be docile, but he’s never been loud either.

Always a serpent curled in the grass, waiting to strike, just like his piece-of-shit dad.

My molars grind together, threatening to become dust.

I bet the two of them came to St. Gabriel’s to smoke and talk about what happened to me. Oakley probably bragged and made some sick joke that Jude laughed at.

Unintentionally fueled by nothing but a painful wrath that is cracking my ribs in half, I flick my eyes to the gun on Officer Fields’s belt, debating the consequences of shooting the two of them.

The both of them should have died tonight.

But I can’t go to jail. It’s why the fire was the perfect weapon—everyone would think it had been a terrible accident. No one would have suspected me, not the well-behaved, academically gifted Seraphina Van Doren. Never me.

Jude’s eyes stayed glued to the ground, unaffected by the raging fire behind him and the looming jail cell. As if in this moment, the only thing that matters is the damp grass growing beneath his feet.

I shake my head, answering Officer Fields’s question. “I don’t need anyone.”

Never again. I’ll never need anyone. I can’t need anyone.

The salty wind picks up, ocean-scented breeze touching my nose as the pine trees begin to rattle. It brushes Jude’s dirty-blond hair across his forehead, and this is when he looks up.

Our eyes catch across the top of the police cruiser briefly. It’s only a second, but I can see the recognition in his gaze. It’s long enough for him to see, to know I was here.

Good.

Let him see me and know that tonight...? He got lucky.

I hope this night is the domino effect that begins the bitter end of their shitty fucking lives. I want this to ruin them, in every way.

Maybe then, just maybe, they’ll understand a fraction of how annihilated I am on the inside.

Looking to the flames engulfing St. Gabriel's, I marvel in the fire's abilities. The way it licks the pointed arches and spires, painting the night sky with a deep orange, devouring the stained glass windows that once depicted all that was good and holy.

Firefighters rush to put it out, using their equipment and safety gear to protect them from the potent blaze.

Fuel. Oxygen. Heat.

A deadly holy trinity. It prays not to a god of forgiveness or justice but to one of destruction and chaos. It gives no mercy, only havoc. It is an elemental force fueled by oxygen and driven by unrelenting heat.

I wanted to be that.

A flame, a blaze, an *inferno*.

I wanted people to be afraid of touching me.

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the vixen

• • •

Phi

July 25

“DUDE, I CAN’T FUCKING GO TO JAIL AGAIN!”

Atlas Caldwell’s words fall on deaf ears. The furthest thing from my mind is being arrested.

Although it’s not the handcuffs he’s afraid of. It’s sitting in a holding cell, waiting to be bailed out by our fathers, who will equally be pissed, which, truthfully, I think is more of a *them* problem than an *us* issue.

They’ve gotta be used to it by now.

Trouble is practically our birthright.

A rebellious privilege passed down from the previous generation. Mayhem lives in our blood. It’s the core of us.

“Shut up and run!” I scream, the sound scratching my throat.

My thumb rapidly presses on the key fob, unlocking the car far more times than is needed. The flashing headlights and loud chirping from the yellow Camaro mimic the state of my panic.

With every step closer, I’m closing the gap between me and impending doom, so focused on not breaking my ankle while sprinting in platform Docs that I can pretend there aren’t five juiced-up football players hot on my tail.

“Phi, I swear to God, if you touch my fucking car!” Tex screams bloody murder from behind me, sounding more teenage girl than college sophomore.

Oh, I’m gonna do more than just touch your car, jackass.

The party I’m fleeing from like a bat out of hell is still raging on without its host, who is busy trying to chase me down. Music blares into the quiet street, echoing around the identical houses. I’m sure the people on this street are used to Tex Matthews’s weekend ragers and have compensated by investing in noise-canceling headphones.

The summer night air is a balm against my clammy skin, thudding toward the stationary American muscle vehicle that is completely unaware of the chaos coming its way.

“Son of a bitch!” I hiss as I jerk the door open, knocking my shin as I fumble my way into the driver’s seat. I’ll deal with the bruise in the morning.

“Phi, next time, how about you fuck the captain of the chess club,” Andy wheezes as she slams the passenger door. “Or, I don’t know, literally anyone that isn’t the best running back in the state of Oregon.”

“I didn’t exactly predict stealing his car while he was going down on me,” I argue, my hands shaking as I shove the key into the ignition.

Even though I despise the make of this car, the whine of the engine makes my stomach tingle, that powerful hum vibrating through my bones.

The door is practically ripped off the vehicle just before Atlas launches all six foot two of himself into the back seat, causing the vehicle to shake with the force.

“Go, go, go, go...” he babbles, feet still dangling out the door as I slam the gearshift into drive.

My cherry-colored hair whips out the window when I roll it down, a grin spreading across my lips, watching my ex...ex-boyfriend? No, that’s giving him far too much credit. He was basically a three-night stand that quickly turned into a mistake.

No sex in the world is worth putting up with that massive ego and inability to take a fucking hint. If I wanted to screw the lacrosse captain, then that’s what I’d do.

He knew the score. It’s not like Ponderosa Springs is unaware of my reputation. I don’t do relationships. I didn’t earn the nickname “vixen” for

being sweet.

You see, I've got this thing. This appetite for boys' hearts. It's impossible to survive my brand of chaos.

I like bad decisions. Fast cars. And sex.

Anything that makes me numb.

Tex barrels down the hill, goon friends hot on his heels.

"Phi!" he shouts, dark hair blending into the night sky. "Don't you dare—"

Guys are so dumb. Because you know what that shit makes me want to do?

Dare.

"Suck my fucking dick, asshole," I shout joyfully, peeling away from the curb, my hand stuck out the window and middle finger flying high. All the while, Atlas is flopping around in the back seat, trying to shut the back door before he falls out.

The squeal of tires blocks out any more of Tex's empty threats as I open the throttle, all the air sucked into the engine as I press the pedal into the floorboard. That dick can threaten me all he'd like. We both know he can't touch me.

Sure, my dad is going to chew my ass out, but there are several perks to having the town judge as a father. No one would dare report Ponderosa Springs's Queen of Disaster to the police.

No, because they are all afraid of Rook Van Doren.

Which just proves how fucking stupid they all are. All it would take is just one to grow the balls to turn me in, and they'd find out that the Judge wouldn't let me off the hook. I'd get the book thrown at me.

My dad is a lot of things, but a crooked man isn't one of them.

Despite the build of this car, there is no better feeling than this. And I don't mean grand theft, although that feels pretty damn good too. It's the shot of adrenaline that comes from an engine, that thrill coursing through my veins, knowing I'm in control of all that power and pressure beneath the hood.

No one would ever understand how much I love this because they weren't raised like me. The words "go fast" were fostered in me the way rain nourishes roots.

“Andy, do I still smell like pot?” Atlas drawls, poking his head through the space between the driver and passenger seat, reeking of weed.

My sister lazily flops her head to the side, burying her nose in his shaggy, ink-colored hair. “You got two options, dude. You crash at our place and steal some of Reign’s clothes, or you crawl into Ezra’s window and hope the ’rents don’t catch you.”

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I told them no more dumb shit.” He runs two frustrated hands through his hair. “When my father buries me beneath the floorboards tonight, please, God, clear my browser history. My mom will go blind if she finds that shit.”

An unattractive noise leaves my mouth, a combination of a snort and a laugh. I’ve known Atlas my whole life. Literally. His family has lived next door to mine since I was a baby. I’m almost positive there isn’t a single birthday photo of mine he’s not in.

Still, I will never understand how, out of all us children, he’s the one everyone calls Saint. I’ll argue till my dying breath that the title needs to be given to the darling Nora Hawthorne, but no one fucking listens to me.

“Your furry kink is in trusted hands.” Andy smiles. “Scout’s honor.”

“Fuck that,” he argues, shaking his head. From the corner of my eye, I see him poking her with his pointer finger. “On the Styx.”

That salty coastal air whips across my face, the smell of the ocean filling my senses as I glimpse over at them. Their pointer fingers loop around one another, locking into a promise more sacred than the papal coronation. An oath that started way before us, that we’d learned from our dads and uncles.

It was a silly thing we did as children, preventing each other from snitching about who ate cookies before dinner or who really kicked the soccer ball through Aunt Lyra’s kitchen window. But the older we get, the more important our promises to each other become. Like each one we make only adds another lock on the chain that has bonded us since we were babies.

I hook a left, adding more distance between us and my ex-fuckup’s house. The music buzzing, one of my favorite bands playing from the speakers, painfully reminds me that my phone is still Bluetoothed to this piece of shit.

“While the sight of Tex Matthews’s face was completely worth my unathletic display of how not to run,” Andy says above Carlos Santana’s guitar solo, “where do you plan on hiding this car? Dad’s not blind.”

“Was thinking the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, drive it right off the Peak.” I grin around the sentence, thinking of how incredible it’s going to be seeing Tex sob as his car disappears into the inky darkness of the sea. “Got any ideas, Andy?”

“Dad is going to fucking kill you.”

“Like you care.” I flick my eyes over to the passenger seat, smirking. “You’re just scared I’ll tell him you were with me. Fear not, perfect one. I wouldn’t dare tarnish your reputation.”

My sister lifts her middle finger at me, shaking her head with a grin. “Shut up and drive.”

She thinks I’m just teasing, but I’m not.

Andromeda Van Doren is the epitome of beauty, and I’ve never known her to be bad at anything. Music, art, sports, academics, the list could go on and on for hours.

She doesn’t blend in, even though I know she wishes she could. Fade into the darkness and lurk the way Ezra does. But she shines too brightly in her silence to ever be ignored, from her delicate cupid’s bow to the sprinkling of freckles across her nose.

It’s the beauty ancient priestesses beheld, the kind that whispers rather than shouts. It’s unparalleled, ethereal. She has a way of pulling you into her quiet presence, an uncanny ability to empathize with others, this depth in her soul that I’ve always been jealous of.

Her existence is effortless, and mine is a fucking battle.

“I feel for the dude you actually fall for, Phi. You gonna take his balls straight off or tease him first?”

My fingers tighten around the wheel, foot pressing harder on the gas.

“Next time you see me talking to a man, run me over with a car. Please and thank you. I’m celibate starting today.”

“Aye aye, Captain.” Atlas salutes me in the rearview mirror before he turns toward Andy. “I give it three days.”

“I’ll put fifty on twenty-four hours.”

“Please, continue talking shit. I’d love to kick you both out on the curb.”

The edges of the town blur as soaring pine trees flank either side of the road. When I was little, I used to think the branches were crippled hands, waiting for their moment to snatch up our car only to swallow us whole. But when you grow up here, the scary parts become another quirk to admire.

Ponderosa Springs is a desolate place, and I grew up in its unforgiving heart.

Despite everything being a Van Doren in this place has cost me, I refuse to let the vultures win. They can take it all, but this is my home. They'll never touch the love I have for it.

The roaring of waves touches my ears, letting me know we are close to our house. Hooking a left, taking us deeper into the Ponderosa woods, I start to slow down.

Headlights illuminate the dark iron gate, the barrier that guards our family from all the treachery that lives within the Springs. Andromeda leans through the window, her waist resting on the seal as she plugs in the gate code.

It's about a half-mile driveway once the wrought iron pulls apart. Once I get to the split, I head right. I'd always found it so cool how my home was always connected to the Caldwells', only a private road separating the two houses. It made sneaking out and stumbling into trouble much easier.

Our home rises like a twisted giant from the forest floor. The Victorian mansion looms over the dense woods, its dark gray stone walls covered in crawling ivy.

In the dark, it's menacing. A frightful home you'd expect monsters to inhabit. But the inside? Love grows like it was meant to bloom there and only there.

"Here's to hoping everyone is asleep," I mutter, pulling toward Dad's garage.

I'm sure when he first had it contracted, he imagined it being his man cave of sorts. Not even he could've prepared for how much time each of his kids spend in here.

With one hand, I type in the passcode on my phone before punching the garage entry code in on my app, lifting the doors so that I can park on top of the black epoxy-coated floors.

I slide out of the car, leaving the keys inside, looking around at how out of place the Camaro looks in a garage filled with so many imports. A grin spreads across my lips, thinking of how pissed Tex is right now. How absolutely enraged he's going to be when he finds out his prize possession went for a dive tomorrow evening.

"I'm taking my chances and hurling myself through Ezra's window. Wish me luck. Good work tonight, Phi. My offer stands—if you need me to break his nose—"

"I can handle it," I interrupt him, pulling him into a side hug. "Thanks though."

I knew if I gave him permission to beat the shit out of Tex, it would end up with more than a broken nose. Beneath his sunshine exterior is a piece of him that craves chaos and the violence that naturally blossoms from it. He needs it, but not enough to cause waves like his starkly opposite twin.

Atlas is only the saint because Ezra is so much worse.

"Always got your back, Phi-fi-fo-fum."

My eyes roll when he leans down to peck my forehead before ruffling my hair. I cross my fingers he doesn't fall and break a leg trying to scale the side of his house.

"Where are you going?" I ask my sister, who is trying to discreetly weasel her way toward the sidewalk instead of our home.

That's the thing about Andy—she's quiet, so it's hard to notice when she disappears and even harder to figure out where she goes.

"Styx Cove. Be home in the morning," she mutters.

Always chasing her shadow.

"Be careful. I'll cover for you."

"You're the best."

I wave her off, rolling my eyes as she starts to walk away, "Yeah, yeah. I know."

After she's gone, I make sure the garage door closes before leaving through the side. The roaring ocean tucked against the edge of my backyard fills the silence to the door.

Before, I might have been more sneaky coming back home. Actually, I wouldn't have even snuck out. I would have been home on a Saturday, binging *Doctor Who* until two in the morning.

I used to fear my parents' disappointment, so much so that I never even dreamed of acting out. I respected and loved them so fucking much that the idea of letting them down? It crushed me.

But that was before, and we live in the now.

Now, I'm used to it.

But no matter how accustomed I get to the disappointment in their eyes, it still fucking stings every fucking time.

The front door opens with a creak, moonlight streaming into our spacious living room. There is no noise, only silence to greet me. Or at least there is for a moment, until I glide by the kitchen, only to catch the sound of a lighter striking in the night.

I spot the flame from the corner of my eye, the dim glow illuminating a puff of smoke and a tattoo across the wielder's knuckles. My mother's name is inked in a black gothic font, as if the world needed a reminder of my father's love for her.

"Phi."

Great. Here we fucking go.

I steel my spine, which has gotten easier over the years, but God, I fucking hate this. The smell of cigar smoke hits my nose, and the overhead kitchen light flicks on and shines a light on my father's brown hair peppered with gray.

"Can we do this in the morning?" I toe my boots off, tossing them toward the shoe closet, hearing them hit the floor with a thud. "I'm tired."

"Do I want to know what happened tonight?" he asks, strong shoulder leaning against the fridge, watching me with careful eyes.

Up until the age of fourteen, I was glass to Rook Van Doren. He was always able to see through me. Even at a young age, there was no one on the earth who knew me better than Dad. I wish I could say I don't remember when that changed.

But it is a violent memory that refused to leave me, no matter how many times I tried to rip it from my brain.

A fake yawn stretches my mouth as I shrug. "Went to a party, smoked a blunt. You might get a call in the morning about me stealing a car. But that's about it."

"You're going to return Tex's car in the morning, so that call won't be happening." He lifts his phone and wiggles the security camera pictures on

the screen, pushing off the fridge and taking long strides in my direction. “What did I say about driving while you’re high? You had your sister and Atlas in the car, Phi. You’re smarter than this, kid.”

You’re better than this. You’re smarter than this. This isn’t you.

He has so much faith in me. The belief in my goodness, in the core of me, is staggering. Nothing short of killing someone right in front of his eyes would change the way he sees me. I’m always going to be his sweet Phi, his little genius.

I wish he’d take a hint. I wish he’d accept the truth that is right in front of his eyes.

His little girl died four years ago.

I’m what remains.

“Yeah, I’d rather slice my tongue with a rusty razor than take his fucking car back. That’s not happening,” I bite, tossing my jacket onto the couch. “And I smoked like six hours ago, dude. I was fine to drive.”

“Seraphina, where did we go wrong? Where did I go wrong?” Sadness ripples through his hazel eyes, and I can see how tired he is. Exhausted from work, from having the same fight with me day in and day out. “I just need you to talk to me, kid. Whatever it is, we can figure it out.”

The pure heartbreak on his face shatters me.

Give up! Just fucking give up already!

I want to beg him to just let me go. I’m a lost cause, and the sooner he cuts the thread, the easier it will be for all of us.

“You mean, when did I stop being perfect like Andy? Do you bitch at Reign for this shit too? I’m pretty sure he was at the same fucking party, getting his dick su—”

“This isn’t about tonight, and you know it.” The snap in his tone makes my stomach roll. It’s raw, and I can hear how upset he is in every word. “This is about your behavior the past few years. Your mom keeps telling me you’ll tell us when you’re ready. That if I keep pushing, you’ll just keep shutting down. But getting your acceptance from MIT was your dream, and when it was revoked you barely batted an eye. I know you. I know you like I know myself, sweet Phi. This isn’t you.”

I swallow the urge to cry.

God, I want to hate him. It would be easier to hate him. But I can’t because he’s an amazing dad, and he loves me. He has loved me every

single day of my life, and it's that love that keeps me forever trapped.

"Knew." My voice is venom, hoping it's potent enough to get him to back off. "You knew me. I didn't turn out the way you wanted. That's a *you* problem. Not mine. Should have thought of that when you signed the adoption papers, dude."

Dad flinches—the strongest man I've ever known flinches as if I'd slapped him.

"Seraphina, you've been my daughter since you were eleven days old."

"You want a medal?"

His jaw clenches, anger covering up his hurt. Something I know all too well. I may not be biologically tied to this man, but we are so similar it's fucking insane.

"Go." He points to the stairs, brows furrowed. "Go to your room. You're grounded."

"I'm eighteen. You can't fucking ground me," I argue.

"If you live under my roof, you live by rules. You *will* go upstairs. You *will* return that fucking car."

I roll my eyes, scoffing as I walk past him toward the stairs. "Whatever you say, Judge."

"Bedroom, Seraphina. Now. Or I swear to the Styx, come Monday morning, you'll have community service." He's not screaming, but it feels like he is with the weight of his words. "*Again.*"

My door vibrates as I slam it shut, encasing me inside my room, where it is only me and silence. No one can see me in here. I'm all alone.

I fall onto the wall, back sliding down as I let the tears flow from my eyes freely. My hands find my hair as I quietly sob.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper to the dark. "I'm so fucking sorry."

I accepted years ago were made years ago that I would have to live with what happened to me alone. But protecting my family has only gotten harder on my heart, and I'm starting to believe the organ in my chest was never soft to begin with.

It was always stone.

My dad will hate himself forever, blame himself for the way our relationship fell apart, but that is easier to swallow than the truth. I'll never be able to explain why I no longer cared about my acceptance to the university of my dreams or why I stopped being honest with him.

I can never tell him because the truth would obliterate my father, and I will not be the reason the patriarch of my family is ruined.

He needs to be whole so that he can guide Reign and look after Andromeda. There is still hope for them. So instead of ripping the door off the hinges and barreling down the steps to apologize, to find safety in my dad's arms like I have desperately wanted for years now, I do the opposite.

I turn the lock on my door.

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the exile

• • •

Jude

July 29

I HATE RIDING THROUGH THE SPRINGS.

The shackles of my last name are heavy here, and this shithole has a thing for charging people with crimes they didn't commit.

Or, in my case, crimes I wasn't even alive to witness.

In Ponderosa Springs, their favorite thing to do is force me to reap what I didn't sow.

“Thought we tossed the last of your family out four years ago. Now that Daddy’s finally dead, you thought you’d leave West Trinity Falls and come back here?” Sheriff Jacobs wiggles the slip of thin paper in front of my face before smacking it against my chest with a thud. “Not on my watch.”

Trust me, dude. I don’t wanna be here either.

My jaw twitches, averting my gaze down for a second. I pluck the ticket from his sausage fingers, planting my feet on either side of my motorcycle and slipping it into my back pocket.

“You answer me when I speak to you, boy,” he sneers, making his white mustache jump, beady eyes narrowed.

“You ask a question, Sheriff?” My voice drips sarcasm as I pick up the matte-black helmet in my lap.

“No better than your sick fucking father, smart mouth and all,” he snaps. “Get the fuck out of Ponderosa Springs, and do us all a favor—don’t drag that Sinclair name back.”

My last name is acid on his tongue, spitting out of his mouth like it burns his flesh to say it. It’s not the first time I’ve heard this spew from a townie. Won’t be the last. People like this guy are a dime a dozen here.

It took me a while to get it.

Why the short list of friends I’d made on the playground could never come over to my house or why people stared and crossed the street to avoid me and my father. Why their whispers about my family turned to a steady roar in my ears.

It became abundantly obvious when I was fourteen and we had to move to the next town over after I’d been arrested for a fire I didn’t start.

The message was loud and clear.

Sinclairs were not welcome in Ponderosa Springs.

And a part of me understood it, why they all hated us.

A quick Google search in middle school told me everything I needed to know. My pseudo-grandfather, who wasn’t even blood related to me, got arrested for orchestrating one of the largest sex trafficking rings on the West Coast years before my birth, only to escape jail and disappear.

The Halo made national and global news. Everyone knew about Ponderosa Springs and all its dirty secrets.

But no one cared that I was innocent. Not when the news had done such a fantastic job vilifying everyone with the last name Sinclair over the years. In their eyes? I was just as guilty as the rest of them.

I was never given a chance to prove anyone wrong. They would never see me as anything but my family’s last name. Jude didn’t exist, only Sinclair.

“Jacobs, it’s always a pleasure.” I force a tight smile, refusing to give this dick the satisfaction of a reaction.

I tug my helmet on to hide my clenched jaw before turning the key, the bike beneath me humming to life, vibrating my thighs, like the machine is begging for me to open the throttle.

“The law can’t protect you now. Next time I catch you, I’ll lock your ass up and throw away the goddamn key.”

I slam the pitch-black visor over my eyes, unable to bite my tongue.

“Good luck.”

My hand tightens around the throttle, not bothering to wait for him to take a step back before releasing the clutch and tearing from the side of the road onto the street.

And because I can, I turn my body slightly to fly him the bird.

I’ve always been a man of few words and many actions.

The sun dips below the towering pines flanking both sides of the road, casting an orange tint across the sky. At face value, in this moment, Ponderosa Springs looks almost peaceful.

It’s the people that make it a rotten piece of shit.

Wind rushes up the back of my hoodie, lifting the hem over my stomach as the road switches back sharply. I downshift and brake hard, then bank low as I make the turn. The tires whine in protest but hold their grip, making me grin.

The drive to Birch & Harrison Law Office is less than five minutes, a weathered brick building on Main Street sandwiched between a very pink boutique and a quaint-looking bookstore.

My bike dies in my ears, parked against the curb, and I take a moment to enjoy the anonymity before I remove my helmet. When my feet hit the sidewalk, a woman walking down the street with her young daughter pauses for a split second before jerking her child closer and scurrying away.

I scoff, tossing my hood onto my head, stepping past them to climb the concrete steps.

Fucking sheep. Running, scurrying with their ears filled with lies right into the mouths of wolves ready to eat them alive.

Twenty-something years ago, after the Halo crumbled, Hollow Heights University lost most of its private funding. In order to keep the historic university, one thing this shit town is known for, standing, they transitioned to a public university.

This opened the doors to a wave of new residents, those looking for a fresh start, a change of scenery, or who simply just didn’t give a fuck about the morbid history that built the Springs.

Newcomers or townies, they had two things in common.

Gossip and hating me.

I’d like to think that one day, I’ll disappear from this state. Change my name, forget the Sinclair name even existed, and finally be able to live my

life on my terms. But that's a dream, and since my first breath of life, I've lived in a harsh reality.

Dreams don't exist in my world.

A blast of freezing air hits my face when I pull the door open, the smell of old books wafting up my nose, giving me an odd sense of comfort despite all the reasons I'm here in the first place.

The walls of the law office are a dull beige, front desk stacked with papers and files, faded blue carpet beneath my feet as I walk down the hall adorned with dust-covered framed legal documents and certificates.

A fluorescent light blows the second I find the door I'm looking for. The worn plaque on the wall reads *Taylor Birch Jr., JD.*

Here's to hoping this takes less than twenty minutes so I can slump into Oakley's shitty couch, smoke a joint, and pass out before all the junkies roll in.

I'm greeted by a gangly-looking dude wearing a wrinkled gray suit and crooked oval glasses when I open the door. This dude seriously needs to stop shopping in the geriatric department.

"Mr. Sinclair." He clears his throat. "I'm so glad you could make—"

"What the *fuck* are they doing here?" I seethe, staring at the two people sitting down across the weathered mahogany table.

A not-so-quiet rage brews inside of me, simmering beneath my skin. Molten metal has replaced the blood in my veins.

Rook Van Doren flicks his gaze in my direction, light brown hair with the short sides dusted with silver, his tattooed hands tightened to fists. You'd think all the ink would keep him from the judge's seat, but when you own one-fourth of Ponderosa Springs, there is little he can't have.

His jaw twitches, molars grinding together, anger flaring in his eyes. It makes the corner of my mouth twitch toward a smirk. I hope my existence eats him fucking alive, and when he's six feet deep, I'll make sure to water his flowers while I piss on his grave.

"Mrs. Van Doren was mentioned in your father's will." Taylor Birch Jr. speaks, nerves shaking his vocal cords, squeezed by all the tension that just filled the room.

I find the gaze of Rook's wife, her gracefully aging face encircled with soft red hair that is tied in a high ponytail, not an ounce of gray in sight. But

her age lies at the edge of her eyes, on the corners of her mouth, like she had the audacity to smile after all she'd done.

To his grave, my father loved one thing, only one.

And it was Sage Van Doren, his former fiancée.

I should have expected Sage to be in the will, even though I hated it.

Hadn't she taken enough? What else could he possibly fucking give her?

Sage's eyes widen as we make eye contact, face turning porcelain. She is looking at a skeleton, and I can see how desperate she is to shove me back into the closet. I wonder, how long had it been since she'd stood face-to-face with a Sinclair?

"Please take a seat, Jude." The executor in charge of reading my father's will takes a seat at the head of the table, hands shaking as he straightens the papers in front of him.

Wanting to be anywhere other than here, I grind my teeth as I jerk the chair across from the Van Dorens out with more force than necessary. My body drops into the seat, arms crossing in front of my chest as I think about stabbing my eyeballs with the pen in front of me.

"Thank you all for, um, coming today. As you know, we're here to carry out the final wishes of Easton James Sinclair." He clears his throat, readjusting in the leather seat for the fourth time. "I, Easton Sinclair, being of sound mind and disposing memory, do hereby declare this to be my last will and testament."

He continues reading, muttering about the distribution of assets, what remains obviously being left to me. My grandmother, Lena, died years ago from cancer, and my blood-bound grandfather? Had a heart attack, which I think is karma for refusing to acknowledge our relation. And my mother died when I was two.

I'm not here for the semantics. I legally have to be here to get my money. Money that will take me far, far away from this shit. Enough for me to finally start over, on my own.

Just Jude. No last name. A clean slate.

The two people across the table sit there with their successful, happy lives. Physical representations of everything my father hated, a constant reminder of his spiral into a shell of a man.

Losing Sage, I think, is what shattered what was left of Dad's heart. What robbed his soul was something entirely different. That credit could be given to four men with a vendetta, infamously known as the Hollow Boys.

They are the sons of Ponderosa Springs.

Alistair Caldwell.

Silas Hawthorne.

Thatcher Pierson.

And none Easton Sinclair hated more than Rook Van Doren.

Birthed from the lineage of founding families, the people here worship them out of fear. In the Springs, there is no one with more power. False kings sitting on thrones built from the bones of their enemies, crowns forged from teeth and generational wealth.

The news never reported their involvement with the Halo, but I know. I know how many bodies are rotting in the dirt of this sleepy seaside town. How they ruined and wrecked anyone who stepped in their path of vengeance.

Now, they walk around as if their hands aren't drenched in blood.

They got off scot-free. Untouched. Unburdened by the crushing weight of their actions.

It was me that was left to deal with that. The scrutiny. The judgment. The abuse.

When the drugs reached their peak in Dad's mind and the cursing of their names began, I became the outlet for his untapped rage. My body was a punching bag for their mistakes, my mind constantly in battle mode because of a war I hadn't even been a part of.

It was because of them my family was left to rot.

It was because of Rook's daughter that I became an exile.

The executor mumbles on, tuning me back in at the mention of my full name. "With regards to the guardianship of my son, Elias Jude Sinclair, I hereby grant full legal custody to Sage Van Doren (formerly Donahue)."

My head almost snaps right the fuck off my shoulders with how fast I turn to look at the red-faced man at the head of the thick wooden table.

What?

"What?" Sage gasps softly, sounding as shocked as I feel.

He did what?

I sink my teeth into the flesh of my inner cheek so hard I feel blood leak onto my tongue.

“There is a note added for further explanation here. Would you like me to read that aloud as well?”

My eyes turn to the woman across from me, watching her nod, unable to find words. Hating that she has any say in how this goes down. Mr. Birch coughs before reading words handwritten by my dad.

“Sage, the damage I inflicted on your life and those around you are regrets I will die with. I was cruel when you gave me only kindness. You owe me nothing in this life. Only because I know you’ll show this to him, let Rook know I’m more than aware this makes me a prick to burden you with this responsibility. Despite that, you’re the only good person I know. My son deserves someone like you looking out for him. He’s not like me; he’s much better. Currently fighting with building blocks, so his temper might not be the best, but he’s curious and bright, the best parts of Mary and me. You knew me, Sage. Before I let Stephen turn me into a monster. Don’t do this for the man who broke you. Do this for the boy you once knew. I’ll die a coward having not said this to your face. I’ll be sorry forever. Signed Easton Sinclair.”

Pain like I’ve never known throbs across my chest.

Through all the drugs, all the booze and endless women, I’d been there. I had been the child taking care of the parent when everyone had abandoned us, cast into West Trinity Falls like trash on the side of the goddamn road.

I was the only one who stayed.

Yet...*she* gets the note.

Sage Donahue gets the apology I waited my entire life for. I’d held my breath and suffocated on the hope that one day, Dad would change. My nails dig into my palm as I tighten my fist, biting down on the inside of my cheek.

He never changed, and he never would.

Easton Sinclair was a selfish prick. I was stupid to think he’d die any differently.

The burning in my nose is enough to make my eyes water, but my pride won’t let those tears fall. No, these assholes don’t deserve to see me break. They deserve fucking nothing from me.

“Now—”

“I turned eighteen in April. This shit is pointless,” I spit, trying to expel the bitter emotions in my mouth. “What did he leave to me?”

I want my money, and I want out of here. Right now.

I don’t need this shit. I just need my money, and I can leave this room, this fucked-up town and all its shitty citizens, in the rearview mirror.

“Well, yes, technically, that is, uh, well...” Flustered by the strain in the room, Taylor stutters. “You are the sole beneficiary of, uh, assets, investments, property—”

“You mind?” Rook interjects, reaching across the table and ripping the papers away from the guy before grunting, “Thanks.”

The ticks from the clock on the wall echo in my ears as the silence drags on while the reputable Judge Van Doren reads, Rook’s eyes running across each paper with a keen eye.

“Someone just let me know where I can get my fucking money,” I mutter, palms digging into the table as I push my chair back, the screech of metal against the floor echoing throughout the room. “I’d rather eat shit and die than sit here any longer.”

Hands shoved deep into the pockets of my hoodie, on my journey to the door, Rook’s stern voice hits my ears.

“There is a clause.”

“Merry Christmas.” I toss my hand behind me. “Don’t fucking care.”

“A legal clause, smart-ass.” He speaks a little louder. “You have to be twenty-one in order to receive any of the assets or money. It’s held in a trust until then. A trust that my wife is now in control of.”

I stop, debating on how many knuckles I’ll break if I shove my fist through this fucking door.

A clause.

Of course there is. When has anything in my life been simple? I can feel my plans slipping through my fingers like sand in an hourglass. I have two months before I can even apply for the fellowship in California, and it won’t be till March that I find out if I am accepted.

I’d planned to use this money to make it until then, and now I don’t know how I’ll make it to next week.

My jaw is clenched so tight it hurts, hand reaching for the doorknob. “See you in three years.”

“We could help.” Sage’s voice is soft, calm, like she’s speaking to a wild animal. “You could stay with us while you attend college, if that’s your plan? We could help you, Jude.”

My body twists slowly as I take my time to face her. Her gaze burns into my own, hands folded neatly in front of her, brows furrowed like she’s hurting.

She’s in pain? She’s fucking hurting?

The venom in my eyes matches the malice in my grin.

“Help?” I laugh, shoulders shaking with unshed rage. I wipe my palm down my mouth aggressively. “You must have bumped your fucking head. Did you forget your psychotic-ass husband left my dad with half a face? You abandoned him, then had us cast out of Ponderosa Springs. I am gum at the bottom of your red-bottom shoe, lady.”

“You got a job, kid? One that pays the bills?” Rook’s voice scratches my ears. “Better yet, got a place to live to pay bills at? By the time you turn twenty-one, you’ll be living in a box or in jail.”

“Spare me, Judge,” I scoff. “Giving a fuck looks like shit on you.”

“Maybe, well, wait! This is an option. Um, let me see...” Mr. Birch interrupts, holding a finger up as he riffles through the papers Rook didn’t take. “You have a next of kin, an uncle—Alistair Caldwell. Maybe this could be resolved by contacting him.”

“Half,” I spit out, narrowing my eyes. “Half uncle.”

“Who lives next door to me.” Rook’s smug reply makes my hand twitch.

“Birds of a demented piece-of-shit feather flock together. Let me say it slow. Write it down if you need to,” I say, barely containing the urge to dislocate this guy’s jaw. “I’m not taking a handout from you or Alistair. Wayne Caldwell made it more than clear the only thing that family is giving me is DNA. Go back to forgetting I existed. That’s what you’re good at.”

I’m not sure how I’ll make it, but I know I will.

Dad didn’t leave them responsible for me; he left me responsible for myself. I’ll figure it out, even if I have to live in a box. I always figure it out.

“We are done here.” Rook stands, pushing the papers away from him. “Have fun rotting on the street.”

Finally, we are on the same page.

Rook offers a hand to his wife, but she doesn't take it. Sage just keeps looking at me, but I don't think she's seeing me. No, she sees Easton and the boy she left behind to die, to suffer.

"Your father was stubborn too," she says, biting down on the inside of her cheek, unaffected by the strain brewing between her husband and me, looking lost in the past. "He never knew when to swallow his pride and just ask for help."

"Don't talk about him." My voice is gravel in my throat, feet carrying me to the edge of the table as I slam my palm onto the wood, but she doesn't even flinch, "Don't sit there and talk about him like you fucking cared. You're a heartless bi—"

"Watch your fucking mouth when you're speaking to my wife." Rook's voice cuts through the air like a serrated blade, scorched and swift. Shoulders tensed, he wears a look I can only describe as pure evil in his features.

I clench my jaw as his threat hangs in the air. I've heard stories of what he's capable of, the fear people feel when his name is mentioned.

"Or what, *pyro*?" I dare him, calling his bluff with a nod of my chin. "That's what they used to call you before Judge, right? You gonna burn my face too, give me and daddy-matching scars?"

Our gazes clash, refusing to move, neither of us backing down from the challenge. The embers of my pain and his past catch fire around us, seconds from igniting the room we stand in.

"He was stubborn, and he was prideful," Sage says calmly, standing up like the picture of still water. She slides a hand onto her husband's back affectionately. "But he wasn't stupid. Everything Easton did, he did for a reason. I'm sure you know that better than anyone, Jude. If you change your mind, at any time, let us know."

I'm a reincarnation of a man Rook Van Doren would've killed if given the chance.

Now they want me to accept a handout? They want me to play nice with their daughter, the girl who had me thrown out of the only home I've ever known?

Sage is right—she may have known my father, but she doesn't, and will never, know me.

No one from Ponderosa Springs or West Trinity Falls does.

“I wouldn’t hold your breath.”

OceanofPDF.com

black hole

. . .

Phi

August 12

THE BEAUTY OF PHYSICS STOLE MY HEART AT A VERY YOUNG AGE.

After stumbling upon one episode of *Doctor Who*, I was enamored by the mysteries of our universe. Not just the stars or the creation of planets but the celebration of the profound beauty of the cosmos and our place in it.

It was looking at equations and knowing it was more than a mathematical construct. That these can be pathways to understanding the fundamental nature of electromagnetic waves, weaving the fabric of reality itself. Our reality that we live and breathe every second of the day.

The beauty, I found, was not in understanding our world but the sense of wonder and curiosity it fed. That gift of acceptance that no matter how terrible moments may seem, it is all minuscule compared to the never-ending galaxies.

I used to dream of doing something life-changing in that field. It was all I thought about. I lived and breathed science. Now, the only physics I use is finishing a Rubik's Cube faster than some random frat guy can chug beer.

“Holy shit.”

Someone mutters within the group of drunken college students crowded in a circle around me, all watching as my fingers rapidly spin the pieces of colorful plastic in my hands. I smirk when I glance up, seeing my

opponent's throat working as he tries to guzzle down twenty-four ounces of foamy booze.

The colors rotate together as I look back down, shifting beneath my touch. I'm seconds away from finishing this, and he still has half a can to go. Now, that probably has little to do with my talent and everything to do with him being terrible at this.

Either way, I don't care.

I spent hours and hours of my elementary school years learning how to work these, feeding my quiet joy of mastering something complex.

It's nice to be the center of attention for something I genuinely love again, even if it's a silly little puzzle to some. The clicking of the last few pieces rings in my ears, a warmth spreading across my chest as I offer the completed Rubik's Cube to the drunken crowd.

"Maybe you need more practice opening your throat all the way." I smirk, chucking the cube at the frat bro who'd failed to beat me. "I hear that helps."

Darren—I'm not totally sure that's his name, but oh well—fumbles it drunkenly before clutching it to his chest.

"That's your specialty, right? You offering lessons?" He arches an eyebrow, wiping the beer from his mouth to reveal a smirk.

"Ah, sexism. How refreshingly original, Darren," I retort, interrupting his group of friends who are cackling like hyenas at his jab.

"Derrick," he corrects, irritation lacing his voice, as if it's expected of me to know his name. "It's just the truth though. We all know how easy it is to get the vixen to spread her legs."

My eyes roll so far into my skull I feel like I have to hit my forehead to knock them back in place. The infamous double standard is such an exhausting conversation. Guys everywhere who walk around believing they hold ownership over other people's bodies, as if it's their fucking right to have a say in what we do with our anatomy.

Men's entitlement to vaginas is an epidemic, and I personally think castrating all chauvinistic pigs might be the only cure.

"Someone call the church! A girl enjoys sex, God fucking forbid, she must be burned at the stake!" I say dramatically, backing away from this conversation. "Blah, blah, blah. Skip the misogyny next time. It's beyond boring."

Turning on my heels, giving Darren my back, I hear him shout from behind me, “Fuck you, Phi!”

“Gotta be packing more than you’re carrying to ride this ride,” I call back. I fly him the bird, knowing he’s going to be tucking his metaphorical tail and scampering away to nurse his bruised ego while his douchebag friends help lick his wounds.

Dodging the roaring fire and the people huddled around it, I make my way to one of the moss-covered logs strewn across the forest floor. Sneaking away from the heart of the party, I dig into my pocket for a pack of Lucky Strike matches and pluck the pre-rolled blunt from inside my bra before sitting down on what used to be a towering tree but now acts as benches for inebriated kids.

Leaning back against the tree behind me, I strike a match and hold it to the end of the blunt, inhaling deeply as the tip glows. I find the edges of my hood, tossing it up over my head as the earthy taste fills my lungs, the familiar calm washing over me.

Rotating the pack of matches in my fingers, I give a secret smile, thinking about the first time I jacked these from Dad’s stash and he caught me red-handed. He hadn’t been mad, only laughed and told me to ask next time.

Weed fills my head, starting the slow process of numbing me out as I observe the people around me. The woods surrounding the party are a blur of movement and color. Bodies sway together, dancing, silhouetted against the orange flames of the bonfire. A few are hitting a keg, others are sitting around the fire, some are gathered in small groups near the tree line, all laughing as they drink and worry about nothing but this exact moment.

Raw human connection.

The only taste of that I’d gotten in the last four years was watching it happen between other people.

I share my body with guys to take the edge off. It’s physical, only. I spend time with my family and friends, but it’s surface level, always.

Sneaking out tonight wasn’t about getting high or needing to do something chaotic. It was for this.

To sit like a quiet voyeur to watch others share in what I no longer had. An attempt to fill the black hole inside of my chest caused by my self-destruction.

Being stuck inside the four walls I'd been grounded to had me too far in my own head and that place? It's a darkened cavern with nightmarish memories set on holding me captive.

It was too fucking quiet in my room. I needed the noise of life to dull the screaming.

When my world goes silent, the monster in my head awakens with a howl of remembrance. Their claws extract, just to rip and tear at what little of my soul remains. They scream into the void with a painful reminder.

You are all alone. You've done this to yourself.

Right now, as I watch the world spin while I remain wholly still, I can admit that I miss the feeling of belonging.

Belonging to someone, something, *anything*.

I used to belong. I was connected, tethered to my family like the deep roots that ground an old oak.

Caldwell. Hawthorne. Pierson. Van Doren.

They were my home before I evicted myself.

Those last names raised me. A conjoined effort of four legacies choosing to look after one another's children. They are the foundation I'd built my life on.

My summers as a kid were spent at one of Thatcher and Lyra Pierson's many vacation homes. Even though they had no children themselves, they have loved us unabashedly since our birth. Thatch taught Andromeda how to play piano, and I watched over the years as she grew to be his secret favorite because of it. Silas Hawthorne has been my biggest chess rival since I started playing, and Briar Caldwell once held my hand while I got fifteen stitches across my knee after I'd tried skateboarding and Mom couldn't be there.

My father's childhood friends and their wives do not have an ounce of blood linking them, but they are our uncles and aunts, just as their children are more siblings than simply friends. The group of eight had turned into a band of seventeen over the years, proof that the unbreakable bonds they'd built had withstood the test of time and had trickled down into their gene pool.

I'd never once felt alone before. I could've spent forever stumbling into one of their welcoming arms.

Instead, I'd shut the door on them all.

“Cops! Fucking cops!”

I hear shouting in the distance as my eyes pop open. Blue and red lights flash through the trees, and a chorus of panicked voices bounces around me. People are scrambling in all directions, abandoning their drinks and fleeing into the woods.

If the sound of impending doom wasn’t thumping in my ears, I’d roll my eyes and groan at the karmic timing. If I’m going to be stuck in Ponderosa Springs for at least another year, I’d like to avoid doing something that will make it harder than it’s already going to be.

Like being picked up from a jail cell by my father while I’m supposed to be grounded.

I know I can’t run for my bike unless I wanna run straight toward police officers to get to it. I have to wait it out before leaving, but where the fuck am I going to hide?

Shit, shitty, fucking shit.

Piercing beams from flashlights slice through the dense forest, police creeping closer, ordering people to freeze. Adrenaline surges through my body, drowning out all other sounds except for the frantic thumping of my heart.

Quickly, I stand, stubbing out the blunt and pocketing it before vaulting over the log I was just sitting on. With little thought of where I’m headed, I take off into the pitch-black woods opposite the cops, silently praying to the forest goddess that I don’t get lost.

I weave between trees, branches whipping my face and arms as I run blindly into the darkness. The platforms of my Converse slam into the damp earth as I try to use the streaks of moonlight to guide me forward without tripping.

There is an overwhelming amount of beauty in the Ponderosa Springs Forest when the sun is up. It flutters with the sounds of life, gentle songs from sparrows carried in the sea-tinged breeze, the rustle of pine needles, and has this sort of kaleidoscope effect from the sun when it pierces through the canopy of trees above.

But at night, it is a labyrinth of illusion. A feeding ground for fear.

Every shadow slithers across your skin, owls hooting into the darkness, giving warnings. Even the soil below feels like it might grow teeth to

swallow you whole. No matter how well you think you know the forest, it's never well enough.

My chest heaves as the trees grow thicker and closer together. I scramble up a small incline, clawing at the barren soil beneath me. When I reach the top, the tip of my Converse catches on an exposed root, and I sprawl forward with a scream. Throwing my hands out to break my fall, I feel the exact moment a rock slices through my palm, making me hiss.

A sharp pain pulses in my hand as I glance up through the canopy of trees to find the moon, a full moon, illuminating the ink-colored sky. I imagine if celestial beings talked, the moon would be laughing hysterically at me.

Blood leaks down my wrist, twining down my forearm as I push myself up to my knees, examining the gash on my skin. The crimson liquid catches the light as I groan in both annoyance and pain. Reaching under my hoodie, I rip at the material of one of my favorite graphic tees. With more struggle than I care to admit, I finally get a piece torn off, winding it around my hand, hoping that's enough to keep it clean until I get home.

“Fan out!” an authoritative voice booms between the trees. “See if we missed any!”

Scrambling to my feet, I look ahead, ready to take off running again, but halt. I stare at the structure in front of me, one that rattles and shrieks, old metal outraged at the violent gusts of wind.

The Ponderosa Springs water tower is imposing, standing tall amidst the forest.

“You’ve gotta be fucking joking,” I mutter dumbly.

How are my only two options right now to either face my fear of heights or run deeper into the woods?

The sounds of officers encroaching grow louder, and terror swells in my gut as I sprint toward the fence surrounding the base of the tower. A bitter, metallic taste hits my tongue as fear begins to swell in my mouth, and I watch my hands shake when I grab the metal links.

Cold steel bites into my palms, and with wobbly limbs, hand over hand, I scale the barrier. Rough metal snags at my jeans, ripping a hole in the material just above my knee. Biting down on my bottom lip to keep from screaming, I do my best to ignore the pain in my hand as I apply pressure on it to throw my leg over the top.

Clumsily, I find myself firmly planted on the other side of the fence. My head spins as I balk at the daunting spiral metal staircase. Even in the dark, I can spot the rust, the weathered steps coiled around the tower like a snake.

Trying to keep my breathing under control, despite the panic coursing through me, I close the gap between me and the stairs. Each step up groans beneath my feet, protesting against the intrusion.

Higher and higher, the ground receding below me at a dizzying rate, I force myself not to look down, thinking, in this moment, I might have preferred Dad picking me up from jail over this.

Just another one of my stupid fucking decisions, and this time, I'm suffering the consequences for it.

When the top of the tower comes into view, I step onto the small platform ringed by a waist-high railing. The wind lashes violently up here, throwing me off-balance, knocking me into the railing.

Unable to stop myself, I peer down, seeing just how far up I am. Bile wells up in the back of my throat as I look over the forest. I can see flashlights dancing between the trees far below. The sound of shouts drifts up, barely audible over the roar of the wind.

My mouth feels dry, the weight of my tongue heavy as I step back before spinning to slam my chest into the turquoise-colored tank. Spreading my arms wide, I attempt to hug it, even though this thing is so wide it would probably take at least a hundred people to encircle it.

Desperately, I press my body as close as physically possible to the metal in order to put distance between me and the edge.

My forehead drops onto the cool surface, shutting my eyes as sweat begins to pool at the back of my neck. Hot tears swell up, and I can feel them threatening to fall.

I'm not in control, and I can't fucking breathe.

Hands—hands are all over me.

My body, my mind, prisoner to these hands. They are everywhere, groping, grasping, suffocating me. They are unrelenting as I beg to be let go, but they don't listen. Their brutal touch left bruises on my skin, so deep I can still feel them aching years later. I can still see them every time I look in the mirror.

It didn't matter how much I begged to be left alone, they didn't listen. They never listen. They seize what they want with no mercy. With a

malicious grip, they take, take, take...

A noise that sounds an awful lot like a whimper tumbles from my lips, tears streaming down my cheeks.

A swarm of bees rages in my chest, their tiny wings thrashing with frenzied anger in my rib cage. Brutal stingers prick at my heart, injecting potent amounts of terror straight into my bloodstream.

I can't do this. I don't want to be here. Not on this tower, not trapped inside my head like this.

Those hands, the ones that bring shadow in the brightest days and snuff out any light that remains in the dark, have stolen everything from me.

They killed me. Took my soul and made me an empty well with no bottom. Destruction and despair are the only things that exist in me.

Seraphina Van Doren died. The girl I was, the girl I loved being, died a remorseless death.

I'm simply bones and vicious memories now.

“You planning on jumping?”

Believing all sanity has finally left me, considering the wind has started talking, I crack my teary eyes open.

Except it's not the cyclone of air that spoke—it's a person, with a voice like crackling embers, the echoes of heat touching my skin. In my peripheral vision, there is a tall shape cloaked in shadow, and only a sliver of his silhouette is visible to me.

“Does it look like I plan on jumping?” I choke out, voice raw with sarcasm. “Did my clinging to this stupid fucking tank for dear life give it away?”

Leaping to my death was obviously not why I came up here, and I think he knows that. But I can't say this is the first time I've thought about ending it.

Sometimes, I think death might be easier than living with the constant mental torment.

“No, I can't even see you,” he says. “Your tears were disturbing my solitude.”

The smell of rust fills my nose as I choke out a laugh. I've always appreciated honesty.

“Yeah, well,” I breathe out, “you can go back to your side now. Leave me to die with some of my dignity intact.”

“Unless you plan on jumping, you’re not dying tonight. This water tower’s been here for years. Hasn’t fallen yet.”

“Why do you care either way?” I ask, shutting my eyes again, keeping my body plastered to the front of this tank. “You gonna be my knight in shining armor and try to stop me?”

I can hear the smirk in his voice when he says, “Never been the kinda guy who keeps a girl from what she wants.”

This conversation feels like a life vest, and I’m hoping it’ll be enough to distract my mind long enough to get me out of the situation I’ve put myself in. Hoping it’ll keep the hands that torture my subconscious at bay.

“And they say chivalry is dead.” A scoff shakes my chest. “I’m not jumping, but I’m not sure it matters. Life is meaningless anyway.”

The familiar sound of a lighter striking hits my ears before the smell of cigarettes drifts toward me.

“Is that right?” The teasing in his tone makes me roll my eyes.

“Yeah,” I mutter, my brain too tired to be anything but brutally honest. “We’re on a rock that’s floating in an infinite oblivion. Endlessness has no end. It keeps growing regardless of whether I jump, this falls, or I live till a hundred and three. There’s no difference. None of it matters to the universe.”

When we were growing up, Andromeda, Reign, and I used to go to the Styx Bridge late at night. They’d sit as I’d ramble about the laws of thermodynamics or explained, for what was probably the millionth time, why my favorite episode of *Doctor Who* was about the creation of the universe from a single point and explored the nature of the Big Bang.

The both of them let me talk for hours. They listened and just allowed me to be, to exist without judgment. The last time we did that was the my fourteenth birthday. It was also the last time I can recall being wholly myself, sincere and uncaring of how little anyone understood what I found to be so fascinating.

This moment? Reminds me of that feeling.

I’m not sure if I like it or hate the way it makes me realize how much I’ve missed it.

“Are you always on the verge of an existential crisis, or is this all for me?” Humor laces his voice, making the corners of my lips tip up at the edges, a smile fighting its way to the surface.

“Oh yeah, just for you. The random stranger I can’t see, who only spoke to me because I fucked up his peace and quiet with my crying. Totally for you. It’s serendipitous, kismet even.”

His laughter is smoke, drifting to my ears before it’s carried away by the wind. It makes my stomach flip; this warmth spreads in my belly, soothing the earlier knot of panic, making it unfurl. If I wasn’t dead set on trying to hug this water tower to death, I’d smack myself in the forehead for the nervous yapping.

I’m not sure why it matters. It’s not like I care what this dude thinks of me. I mean, short of hanging out at the top of water towers and smoking cigarettes, I don’t know him. At least, not yet—I’m sure he’s some local who thinks he knows everything about me solely based on my last name.

But I can pretend he’s the perfect stranger, just for now.

“What the hell are you even doing up here?” I ask, curious what drives a person to need this level of solitude.

“Don’t really like people. This is one of the only places lacking them.” I can hear him take a long draw of his cigarette before he continues, voice gruff from the smoke. “Typically.”

“You sound like such a cliché loner.”

“And you sound like someone with terrible luck running from the police.”

My eyes roll, but I can’t help but smirk at his quip. There is only one thing I love more than a set of killer back muscles with tattoos, and it’s a guy with witty conversation. And this one has banter down in fucking spades.

“You’re lonely too. All that endlessness bullshit? It’s a cover-up. If it wasn’t, you’d know we give meaning to the universe, not the other way around,” he says, the accusation shocking me.

Not because it’s not true but because he’s the first person to notice, and he can’t even see me.

“You don’t know that. Not beyond a shadow of a doubt.” My eyes open slowly, head turning to rest my cheek on the water tower as I glance at the outline of his silhouette around the corner. “We might be microscopic wiggling rubber bands.”

“With feelings. Science can’t touch emotion, Einstein.”

“Veneziano,” I correct quickly. “String theory is Gabriele Veneziano, not Einstein. Also, chemicals cause emotions. Chemistry is a science, so technically—”

I freeze, my words cut short by the sudden touch of his fingers on mine. It’s featherlight, a ghost of a graze as he traces over my knuckles before outlining each digit. Almost like he’s trying to count each and every bone in my hand.

“What are you thinking right now?” His words are tinged with a gravelly bite, making my spine rattle as a violent cold chill races up my body.

I don’t blush. Boys do not make me blush. They are *boys*, for fuck’s sake.

They are placeholders to briefly fill a void. Except I can feel heat rise to my cheeks like the first blossoming rose after a deadly winter.

“How freakishly warm your hands are,” I breathe out truthfully because they are, in fact, ridiculously fucking warm.

The heat of his touch reaches my wrists as he moves beneath my flattened palm to trace my pulse. The contact makes my skin feel like it’s dancing. A thousand invisible molecules spinning in pirouettes against my flesh.

“Now?” he urges, drawing along the lines etched into my palm.

Swallowing the knot in my throat, my earlier fear waning away like an ebbing tide, I say, “How this is the first time in a while that I don’t feel alone.”

This is the most connected I’ve felt to another person in four years. This fraction of a touch from a stranger. The secret part of me that believes in fated souls says it’s romantic, but the piece of me that shuns any form of true intimacy says it’s simply fucking pathetic.

“Mmmhhh.” The hum comes from the back of his throat. “Feel like science to you, Geeks?”

“Doesn’t even feel real.”

My biggest fear is not having control, and I’m standing probably a hundred feet off the ground, if not more, yet I can’t bring myself to really care. Not as the panic drifts far off into the corner of my mind and a newfound curiosity emerges.

Who is this guy?

His fingers curl around my wrist, and before he jerks my arm, my hood is whipped from my head as I'm gracefully plucked from my koala-like hold on the tank, pulled until my chest makes solid contact with his own. A dull thud echoes between our bodies at the collision, one of his hands falling down my side to palm my hip while the other holds my wrist to his chest.

Silently, I pray to the universe that when I look up, he doesn't know me. That he knows nothing of the *vixen*, had heard only a little about my father's reputation or the one I'd forged for myself to keep me safe from the vultures that swirl this place. I pray that we can continue being perfect strangers who had a happenstance meeting.

That I'm still going to be just a girl scared of heights, and he's just a boy smoking a cigarette.

Our gazes clash.

The glow from the moonlight throws beams of silver light across the angles of his face. It snags on his carved jawline and high cheekbones.

I internally curse myself for ever even thinking about the word *hope*.

I knew the likelihood of us not knowing each other was slim to none, but this?

This is violently worse than me craving anonymity.

“Feel real now, *Van Doren*? ”

My last name is soaked in venom as he spits it out of his mouth, the taste probably bitter on his tongue.

A vicious smirk lives on his lips as Jude stares down the bridge of his nose. Messy strands of dirty-blond hair get caught in the salty breeze, pushing it away from his face like gentle fingers. Lean, not bulky. All rough edges and sharp angles.

“This might be my worst fucking nightmare, actually.”

Literally.

A deep chuckle rattles his broad chest, and I feel its hostility vibrate in my lower stomach. The echo makes my thighs quiver the same way it might on my bike when I twist the throttle.

Being up here was a mistake before; now, it's trouble. The kind I have a serious fucking problem saying no to.

“Who knew Ponderosa Springs's Queen of Disaster isn't just afraid of heights, but she's all alone in her castle. All that money not keep you

company at night?"

He takes another long drag from his cigarette, full mouth wrapped around the orangish-brown filter. His head tilts idly, watching me with hungry eyes, a predator who just trapped his prey, as the smoke curls lazily from his lips.

My jaw tightens, but it doesn't prevent my stomach from lurching.

Weakness, two little secrets, had landed in enemy hands, and I know at the right opportunity, he'd turn it into a weapon. A gun he'd have no problem unloading into my skull.

"Don't fucking touch me," I bite, yanking my arm from his hold, except it's not fast enough to be unscathed.

I can still feel the heat of his body lingering, embers from a dying fire scorching my flesh. The harsh wind sends my hair into a tornado of red across my face as I walk backward until my lower back hits the weathered railing.

Jumping from this fucking thing wouldn't come close to how much distance I want from him.

"Quite the switch up. You don't wanna feel how *freakishly warm* my hands are again?"

That entire conversation from earlier will be enough ammo against me for years, and he'll use every single bullet. It makes me sick, knowing I let my fear make me naive. It forced my guard down.

Now, Satan's fucking spawn got a glimpse past my walls.

He didn't deserve to see me like that. He didn't deserve to see me at all.

I roll my eyes, feigning indifference, before flicking my hands in a shooing motion. "Scamper back to the pound, fucking mutt. This is Springs territory, Sinclair."

"You know what they say about stray dogs, *Seraphina*." He takes his time with my name, sounding out all four syllables, each one coated in simmering wrath. "They bite."

I track the way his teeth nip at his bottom lip, revealing his naturally sharp canines. A mental image of them sinking into my skin invades my brain, all of the bruises and self-loathing they'd leave behind.

"Besides, the fun just started. Why would I leave now?" He arches a pierced eyebrow, a glimmer of light catching the silver barbell.

Jude Sinclair and I were born with hatred for each other in our DNA. Our existence is a continuation of a decades-old rivalry. An invisible string the color of blood coiled our souls in familiar resentment.

The Capulets and Montagues may have been Shakespeare's famous foes, but in Ponderosa Springs? It was the Van Dorens and Sinclairs.

"Oh, you know." I wave my arm in the air haphazardly, lips quirking. "There are a lot of people still pissed about what you did to their historic church. If the right person catches you here, it won't end well for you."

Despising one another may be ingrained in our DNA, but we built this animosity all on our own, no bitter family history required. *My* hatred for Jude had only little to do with his last name and everything to do with what he knows and the company he keeps.

And his distaste for me? Probably had something to do with the fact we both know who set the fire at St. Gabriel's, and it wasn't him.

Jude hadn't been there that Halloween night four years ago, but his best friend was. Oakley Wixx had stolen nearly everything from me, ripped it from my body with unforgiving hands, and Jude? Well, I'm sure he helped him keep it locked away.

The muscle in his chiseled jaw twitches, shoulders tightening as he pushes off the water tank behind him and towers in front of me. Beams of moonlight slash through the shadows on his face.

"Careful," he warns just as the water tower groans, shaking beneath my feet.

My heart sinks a little as I reach my hands behind me to grip the railing for stability.

I need off this tower, right now.

Before I don't just spill my guts to Jude and I let him up *in* them.

A scoff shakes my chest. "You're a glorified puppet. You're not gonna do shit without orders from Oakley. Tell me, how far is his hand shoved up your ass these days?"

With ease, he flicks the cigarette butt over the edge of the railing. "About as deep as the stick up yours, sweetheart."

"Sweetheart? Fucking gag me."

"Conniving bitch felt too obvious."

"Boring. But hey, I wasn't expecting much from an unoriginal prick," I say with a shrug. "This was super fun. Let's never do it again."

Releasing my grip on the railing, I take a wobbly step to the side toward the exit. My legs feel like Jell-O beneath me, but I refuse to show this asshole any more weakness tonight. I'd rather eat razor blades.

Except his long legs are much quicker than my shaky ones, and I don't even get close to safety. No, as his hands come to rest on the horizontal bar behind me, I am thrown very violently toward danger.

I'm caged in by his body. The heat rolls off him in waves, wrapping me in a burning fog. My head barely reaches his shoulders, dwarfed by him by probably a foot. The harsh breeze carries an addictive smell to my nose, like old books with leather-bound pages dipped in smoke and Black Ice air freshener.

Danger. Danger. Danger.

That internal speedometer living inside of me screams. I swallow roughly, staring up at his eyes. I think they're blue or maybe green, but in this moment, all I see is two black holes, their gravity so strong that nothing can escape them.

"What's it like, Phi? Making yourself so fucking untouchable only for it to turn you into a miserable, lonely bitch?" he asks with a sardonic smirk, pieces of his hair falling onto his forehead.

"Move," I grit through clenched teeth.

My hands look pathetic against his chest as I try to shove him back, feeling his toned body beneath his baggy hoodie. I need to create space, to give my brain oxygen that doesn't smell like him so it can think clearly.

But he doesn't move an inch. I think he moves closer, barely an inch between us now. I sink my teeth into the inside of my cheek, biting down so hard the taste of copper hits my tongue.

92, 93, 94, 95...

The red line on my gauge is topping out, shaking violently. My heart is hammering in my chest, and it's not fear. It's locked-up desire that is being lured out of its cage.

That appetite for hearts swells in me because his is a flavor I've never tasted before. One that is ripe, hot, and every bit of forbidden.

96, 97, 98, 99...

I'm going too fast. Too fucking fast. The yellow lines on the road are a blur, and I can't decide what I hate more.

Jude or the fact every hatred-covered molecule in my body wants to fuck him.

I've never liked him. Not ever in my life.

But.

As we got older, it got difficult to deny how hot he is. It didn't happen subtly or in pieces. I'd seen him around after the fire and never thought twice.

It happened instantly, in a moment of chaos at the Graveyard a while ago. It was a force I couldn't stop, no matter how badly I wanted to. But he'd just gotten into a fight after a race, his hair a mess and blood leaking from his mouth.

There was an edge, a hunger in his eyes that made my stomach flip. This toxic mixture of *GQ* pretty with a natural edge that *Rolling Stone* would kill for and every bit of my type.

"Or what? You'll go tattle to the Judge?" he murmurs, voice rough against my skin. "Go on, run and tell Daddy. It's all you're good for, Van Doren."

100.

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the betrayer

. . .

Jude

August 12

FROM PONDEROSA SPRINGS TO WEST TRINITY FALLS, SERAPHINA VAN Doren is folklore.

Hair red as crimson, tongue sharp as knives, and a heart made of ice.
Ponderosa Springs's infamous Queen of Disaster.

I smirk as little miss five foot nothing with a seven-foot attitude somehow manages to look down her nose at me, jaw flexing at my words, probably 'cause she knows they're true.

The myths of her reputation move through these pines like the roaring wind. It's buried in the soil this town is built on, cautionary tales of an academic savant turned vicious man-eater who had a taste for anarchy.

It's all bullshit.

No matter how much fanfare she gets, it would never change that, to me, she is just the spoiled brat who royally screwed my life.

The water tower sways beneath my feet, warm palms curled around the chilly metal railing keeping her caged in. Phi drags her tongue across her bottom lip, and I watch it curl into a mocking pout. Her thick, dark eyelashes flutter with malicious intent.

This is not the weepy girl who'd been afraid of heights and spouted bullshit science behind the veil of anonymity.

No, this is *the vixen*.

And she'll come out to play. Claws and all.

"Aww, jealous I have a daddy to run to, Sinclair? I'd say sorry for your loss, but everyone knows Easton's better six feet under."

Pop. Pop. Pop.

Bullets masked as words hit the bullseye. One after the other, I feel the searing lead in my chest.

My hands tighten on the curved railing behind her. Fresh wounds barely healed rip open. I wanna be shocked by her chirpy mouth, but I'm not.

She's an entitled princess who knows nothing of loss. Who spits venom as her only weapon and has always talked about my father as if she knew him personally, using whatever bullshit her parents said against him.

Phi wouldn't have a goddamn clue what the pain of slicing your palms on the shards of a loved one feels like. She'd fucking shatter beneath the agony of not being able to piece them back together.

Red blurs my vision, a crimson filter sliding over my eyes. The chambers of my heart pump a deadly heat through me, veins churning with molten lava.

I'm sick of this family thinking I'm beneath them. Sick of them using my father's name. It's easy to judge when you're looking down from ivory towers, easy to shit on someone you never understood.

"Keep my father's name out of your goddamn mouth."

My tone is lethal, dripping disdain.

That superiority complex she was born with aged nicely behind the shield of her last name, protected by her father's power that allows her and the rest of the Van Dorens to do whatever they want with no consequences.

But tonight? She has none of that.

Phi is all alone, and her pretty face and sweet white lies won't get her out of this one. Not this time.

"Little orphaned Jude, did I hit a nerve?" A smug little grin unfolds on her chirpy red lips, two rows of an orthodontist's dream catching the light.

I'm starting to think she's forgotten who the fuck she's up here with. That I could give a shit less if she lives or dies.

Metal separates from metal, my forearms burning before a deafening crack rings through the night. Her sharp gaze widens, fear bleeding into her

eyes. I toss the piece of old railing off the tower. It clangs against the spiral staircase, making her flinch, before it hits the ground below.

There is nothing to break her fall now. Only open air behind her and a promise of a brutal death.

“It’s real dangerous for you to talk shit when there is no one around to hear you scream, *Seraphina*.”

Her name tastes like acid, corroding my throat the way it flows from my mouth. She scoffs, rolling her eyes, but I see her booted feet inch closer to me, trying to put distance between her and the edge.

“Spare me, please. You’re a whiny bitch with daddy issues. I’m not afraid of you, Jude.” Phi’s hands plant on my chest, doing her best to shove me back. “Get out of my way—”

My hand seizes her throat, anger cresting in my stomach as she gasps. The delicate column of her throat is so tiny in my hand, so fucking fragile it would take nothing for me to shatter her windpipe.

I shove her back just as she scrambles for purchase, hands snatching the railing on either side of her body. It’s funny that she believes it will be enough to keep me from tossing her ass off.

“You were saying?” I grunt.

Phi’s panic is palpable, the metallic smell of it burning my nose, and it’s fucking feeding my scored heart. My soul craves vengeance, and maybe I’d find it in watching her father pick out her casket.

“A little harder, Sinclair. I like it rough,” she spits.

Her pulse thuds against my palm. Fear runs rampant in her chest, yet every word is laced with defiance. At the edge of her death, she gives as good as she takes it, and if she were anyone else, I’d respect her for it.

But she’s not.

This is someone who’d crossed the tracks to break into Trinity High just to decorate the walls with spray-painted hearts with wings for her senior prank. The hardest rider to beat at the Graveyard ’cause she’s so goddamn reckless you either lose or die going against her.

It’s Seraphina Van Doren, who with a single lie had me kicked out of the only home I ever knew. Exiled from the town I’d been born in. Forced to leave the house I grew up in after God fucking knows how many townspeople set it on fire in retaliation for a crime I didn’t commit.

That house was the only place good memories lived, and they'd torched it. All because the Judge's daughter could bat her eyes and tell a good story.

I cock my head, watching her body shake with fear as I bring my thumb up to trace her pouty bottom lip.

"Think of how many tears Rook Van Doren is gonna shed when he finds his little princess down there," I muse, nodding my head toward the ground. "A broken doll, all twisted up. You'll leave a pretty corpse."

Despite the myth of the organ in her chest, she feels anything but cold to me. Actually, I think she might be burning alive. Her bones rattle in my grip, her veins coursing with a wrath so potent I can feel the heat from it on my palms.

My cock jerks in my jeans as I smear her red lipstick, crimson sticking to my thumb as I brush it across the corner of her lips.

I wanna fuck this mouth, just to send her crawling back to her perfect life with bruised knees and watery eyes, choked on my cock and the regret of letting the guy her family despises screw her.

"If killing me is worth your own shitty life, bring it on. You know my father will find you, and you won't have a corpse to leave," she mutters. That notorious silver tongue flicks at my thumb, and it looks very, very fucking pink.

"You run that mouth because you know your father will protect you," I growl through gritted teeth, leaning my head forward. "The Judge cannot save you from me."

Wind howls in my ears, the violent breeze sweeping her cherry locks across my face, leaving the smell of vanilla in my nose.

So goddamn sweet it makes me nauseous.

Of course she smells like sugar, just another trick to lure in all her victims. She'd been born a goddamn succubus demon, created to feed on guys for sport.

"Get it over with already." Phi jerks her chin up, lips quivering with fear. "It's just foreplay at this point if you don't have the balls to finish the job."

My sanity is a snapped thread, hand shaking with unruly rage as my fingers dig deeper into the sides of her throat. The water tower rattles beneath my feet as I force her further back, leaving only the tips of her combat boots on the platform.

She's inches away from meeting a brutal, cold death, and I want her to know exactly who's giving the introduction. With my one hand free, I grab a handful of her hair and pull it back ruthlessly, forcing her to look up at me.

Tears well up in her eyes, two pretty drops falling. I savor the sight, finding an intoxicating amount of sadistic pleasure in seeing her turn from the pretentious vixen into nothing but a helpless girl.

"That's it, baby. Cry for me."

With a depraved grin, my head drops. I have to bend my knees a little to gather her tears on my tongue and swallow them like water in a drought. A tiny moan escapes her as my bottom lip coasts up her flushed cheek, the sound making blood rush to my dick.

Phi's misery tastes like it could sustain me for an eternity.

"I hate you."

"Right back at ya, *sweetheart*."

I pull back just enough to see her eyes.

It's far past midnight. The only light for miles is the shy glow of the moon, and it's just enough to see the rage on her features. Bold strokes of black eyeliner highlight her slitted eyes.

The look of a lioness in human skin, ready to maul me and use my bones to clean her teeth. Tendrils of hostility curl around her irises. It's like she was always meant to look this way.

This vicious, beautiful disaster.

Phi releases the railing on either side of her, and for a second, I think she's about to give in to the wind and tumble to the ground. But those small hands fist the front of my hoodie to pull herself further from the edge and toward me.

Our noses bump as I tilt my head, resting my forehead against hers. A live wire cords through my veins as I feel the heat of every exhale from her mouth on my own, filling our lungs with each other's resentment, and I hope mine tastes as bitter as hers does sweet.

This is a dangerous game we are playing—one with no victor or crown to claim. It'll end in ruin and a kingdom left in ashes.

When she darts her tongue out my hands instinctively grip either side of her head.

Exiles have no kingdom, and I have no need for a crown.

“Fuck it.”

My mouth slams against hers as I yank her violently from the edge. Thoughts of consequences go up in flames the moment I feel her lips move against mine.

It's not gentle or sweet. There is no kindness or love.

It's a natural disaster. Violent and unforgiving.

This is not a kiss.

I'm fucking ruining her.

My hands drop to her ass, hauling her up the length of my body. Phi's soft thighs wrap around my waist automatically, her arms curling behind my neck as she practically crawls up my torso.

I suck her lower lip into my mouth, hearing a broken moan erupt from the back of her throat. This is the only sound I want to hear from her the rest of the goddamn night. Might've kissed her earlier if I knew it would shut her up.

There is a whirl of clothes flung to the platform, her shirt and hoodie gone in a matter of seconds before Phi hungrily reconnects our mouths. I grip her hair with both hands, fingers tightening in the strands as she toys with the silver barbell piercing in my tongue.

Tired of playing nice, she sinks her teeth into my bottom lip hard enough that I feel skin break before the taste of pennies hits the back of my throat.

Vicious fucking thing.

“Shit.” I pull back with a hiss, her teeth clinging to my lip for a few seconds before she finally lets go.

When my eyes flick open, I see her already staring. Gaze veiled and heady, she's lust drunk, drinking down the sight of blood dripping down my chin.

“Told you I liked it rough. If you can't handle a little bite, Sinclair,” she snaps, reaching behind herself and unclasping her bra, “you'll never survive me.”

Not even the promise of sex can get that mouth to stop running.

“When I'm finished, you're gonna wish I killed you.” I grab her face in one hand easily, pursing her lips open before spitting a mixture of spit and blood onto her tongue. “Now, swallow.”

I pour my wrath down her throat in tidal waves when our mouths meet again. I can taste how horrible this idea is the moment her tongue swipes against mine. Blood and contempt mingle together. But I can't bring myself to care 'cause it tastes like payback.

Phi moves down, licking up all the blood she'd just spilt. She nips playfully at the skin, eating up every ounce of pain I'm leaking. I groan in frustration the moment I feel the smirk on her lips against my chin.

The metal grate beneath us creaks in protest as I turn us around before dropping her from my hold. Phi lets out a little squeal, frantically trying to regain her balance when her feet hit the platform.

I devour the sight of her streaked in moonlight. Her purple bra hangs halfway down her arms, perky nipples hardened from the cold air. My jaw flexes, thinking about ripping my teeth through her creamy, pale tits, hanging there like supple fruit.

My thumb teasingly rubs her left nipple, flicking the piece of gold jewelry piercing it.

I cock my head, a smirk tugging at my lips. "Angel wings. Cute."

Phi rolls her eyes, shrugging her bra off her arms. Her cherry-colored hair cascades down her back, framing her sharp features and slitted eyes. She lifts both arms up and flies me matching birds, something I should've expected. Phi looks every bit of sexy as she does dangerous.

The tip of my tongue brushes against my bottom lip in anticipation, a low, ominous laugh rumbling through my chest. I reach behind my head with one arm, tugging my hoodie over my head, leaving my chest bare.

"Lightning? You would be that basic," she mocks, motioning to the tattoo on my left side that spans from the top of my ribs to my hip bone.

But I see the way her eyes catch on the ripples of my abs. If it didn't mean admitting she likes what she sees, she'd probably crawl over and lick them.

I lean forward, taking one of her middle fingers into my mouth. Keeping my eyes locked on hers, I swirl my tongue, planting my hands firmly on her hips before spinning her around.

Her chest hits the water tank with a forceful thud, a rush of breath expelling from her lips. My dick curses me for wearing pants when I pin her waist with mine. Searing heat radiates from her, burning through clothes, forcing me to thrust against her ass to ease the ache in my balls.

My hands trace her curves, cupping her tits. Phi shivers as my mouth finds the shell of her ear, teeth biting it playfully.

“You think you like it rough ’cause a few guys tugged your hair, Van Doren?” I whisper. “You’ll carry my bruises for a goddamn lifetime.”

“Is that a threat?” she asks, pressing her ass against my dick.

I drag the bridge of my nose up and down the side of her throat, hand skimming to the band of her pants. That smell of vanilla soaks her skin, warm and soft in my nose, making me groan.

There is nothing but her heavy breathing as my fingers undo her zipper, the sweetest-sounding whimper coming from Phi when I slip inside her panties. I let two fingers graze her clit, reveling in the way she tosses her head back against my shoulder before moaning to an empty, black sky.

“It’s a promise.”

I pinch her clit between my fingers, making her shudder with pleasure tinged with pain. She’s soaked, dripping onto my palm. My cock throbs, leaking precum, desperate to sink myself inside.

“Stop teasing. Just fuck me already,” she pleads as I dip the tip of my finger into her entrance.

Her ass rubs against me, moving up and down, her body wanting me. I revel in her need. It injects straight adrenaline into my veins, knowing it’s my cock that she’s desperate for, the one person she’s supposed to hate more than anyone else. The person her father told her never to trust.

Yet here she is, grinding against me like a cat in heat.

“Beg me. Beg for mercy like a good fucking whore.” I smirk. “I’ll make you come so hard you see God before I send you to meet him.”

With ease, I pull my hand from her hot center before jerking her jeans down her thighs, letting them pool around her ankles. I have no desire to tease her or bother with foreplay. I could give a fuck less if she comes.

This isn’t about pleasure. Hers or mine.

It’s about fucking her and leaving her in a pile of self-loathing. I want Phi broken. No matter how much I hate her, she’s going to hate herself more after tonight. The regret is gonna eat her alive, and I’m going to love every second of it.

“Go to hell,” she spits, turning to glare over her shoulder at me.

“Wrong answer.”

I undo my jeans, the smell of her pussy lingering on my fingers as I jerk my boxers down enough to pull out my cock. My eyes trail over the slope of her back, drinking in each dip and curve highlighted by moonlight, including the tattoo of a heart with wings on her lower back.

She would have a tramp stamp.

Her sticky arousal coats my shaft as I stroke myself, thinking of all the ways I wanna mark that porcelain skin. I want it red, purple, and blue, needing it to match the wreckage inside her.

Phi glares over her shoulder at me, dropping her gaze to my hand pumping my dick from root to tip.

A scoff shakes her chest. “That proves my theory.”

I lift my chin. “What’s that, Geeks?”

“The more toxic the guy, the bigger the dick.”

A wolfish grin tugs at my lips as I bend my knees a bit. “And you’ll take every inch of it.”

As I guide the tip of my cock to her entrance, her tight walls resist me at first, but I press forward. Inch by torturous inch, she’s every bit of slick, wet heat around my length. The sensation causes my vision to blur for a second as I struggle for control.

“Goddamn it. You’re so fucking tight.” A guttural moan rips through me as I pull back and slam forward again, harder this time.

My hips finally smack against her ass, cock buried fully inside of her body. *Jesus Christ*, I think as I bite down on the inside of my cheek. Every time she breathes, that hot pussy contracts, slippery inner walls massaging every inch of my dick.

A broken gasp spills from her lips as I fill her completely, her palms smacking against water tank to steady herself. Phi’s hips try to pull away, an attempt to adjust to my size.

“Ah ah ah.” I click my tongue with a shake of my head, palming her hips roughly. “You don’t get to run away. Stick that ass out and take this dick like a good fucking slut.”

Jerking her waist back toward me, I shove my cock into her with reckless abandon. Her fingers claw at the metal tank, sharp red nails scraping along the surface as she quivers from the force of my thrusts.

The rage in my bones drives me to fuck her in a primal way, twisting my gut until I sink my teeth into the side of her neck, sucking on the skin

until my marks start to litter her throat. I'm relentlessly using her so I can bury every ounce of hatred I have inside her tight body.

I set a brutal pace, and like she was made for it, she takes it. Her walls loosen around me, making it easier to slide in and out. With a predatory gaze, I look down. Every time I bottom out, turning the skin red as my hips drill into her softness, her ass shakes. When I pull almost all the way out, I watch her cunt stretch and grip my shaft, leaving it glistening with her wetness.

She cries out as I roll my hips, her arm curling around my neck to keep my head buried in her neck. The smell of sex and sweat makes me grit my teeth, fingers digging into the plush skin of her hips.

God, I wish she wasn't this hot. Wasn't this fucking good.

Bruises form under my grip as I easily lift her body off the platform. I'm turning her into nothing but a warm Fleshlight to fill with cum as I work her pussy back and forth on my cock. Her boots dangle just above the ground as I use her to get myself off.

"Yes, right there, right there." Phi's voice is an alluring chant, softer than I've ever heard it before.

For a split second, it reminds me of the person I was talking to earlier tonight. The person who was afraid of heights, who didn't know my last name and just existed with me.

Gripping a fistful of her hair, I pull her head back. "Where is that attitude now, huh? Hard to talk shit with my cock wrecking that uptight cunt, isn't it?"

"Shut up and make me come."

"Do it yourself, fucking brat," I grunt, pulling back until I'm only halfway inside her before slamming back home, eliciting a high-pitched whimper from her lips. "Work for it. Rub that needy clit and come on my dick."

"Asshole," she snarls through gritted teeth, frustrated as she reaches between her thighs.

I wrap an arm around her stomach, pressing her body tightly against mine before driving into her with shallow thrusts. Pleasure zips through my spine, my balls throbbing as I listen to our bodies slap together.

The rusting tank shakes as I relentlessly pound into her, and her wetness drenches me. Breathy moans fill my ears as Phi's velvety walls quiver

around me, trying to lock me in, wanting to milk my cock, those telltale signs of an orgasm drawing closer.

“Come. Scream for me. Let the whole fucking town hear how much you love being fucked by a Sinclair.”

“Oh God, oh—”

Scream she does, the force of it practically overtaking the roaring wind. Phi’s body goes taut as she tumbles over the edge, her cunt turning into a vise grip as it drenches me, spilling onto my jeans.

Fuck, I should pull out. I need to pull out.

But it’s so wet, so hot. The tightest pussy I’ve ever fucked. So fucking tight. I—

A ripped moan rattles through my clenched teeth as I plunge into her without mercy. My balls draw up tight as I slam home one last time. White-hot, blinding heat flares behind my eyes as I come, cock thrumming as I fuck my cum deeper with short, jerky thrusts.

My chest heaves, post-climax haze almost making me drop my forehead to her shoulder until I remember who I just came inside of.

Like her skin burns me, I let her go. Her chest slumps against the metal tank, feet touching the ground with a thud. I try to ignore my cum dripping down her thighs when I step back, avoiding the urge tugging in my stomach to scoop it up on my fingers and shove it back inside.

I tug my boxers and jeans up, leaving them undone as the orgasm fog starts to clear. My heart still thudding against my chest, I release a breath, immediately searching for my sweatshirt.

I need a cigarette, like, yesterday.

Phi has already pulled her jeans up, and her T-shirt is halfway down her body by the time I light my nicotine stick. I watch through the puffs of smoke as she scoops her hoodie from the platform.

“In a rush?”

Phi sneers at me, mockingly pulling her hair to the side, revealing all the bruises I left on her neck and shoulders. “Yeah, I need to go get a fucking rabies shot.”

A wicked image of her walking through her house baring all those marks and having to hide who they are from makes me grin.

Casually pinching the cigarette between my fingers, I pull it from my lips. “I’m clean, princess. Should I be forking out cash for plan B?”

The lust that was consuming her eyes has disappeared. Almost as if I imagined it.

“As if you could even afford the extra fifty bucks. I’m on birth control, and stop calling me that.” Those heated tendrils of resentment flare in her gaze as she rolls her tongue along her top teeth.

A sly grin tugs at my lips, smoke rolling past my lips. “You know, princess, not all rumors about you are true. That pussy isn’t nearly as cold as your heart.”

“Fuck you.”

So tiny yet so violent.

“Already did. The sweet-ass memory of you becoming a traitor for dick is one I’ll cherish for a long time.”

Phi’s jaw works, molars probably grinding to dust before she spits, “Must run in the family. Heard your dad died still thinking about my mom.”

The red haze from earlier rushes back into my vision, threatening to engulf me in uncontrollable rage. I feel it bubbling inside of me, ready to consume me whole, and I don’t think I have the strength to be the bigger person twice in one night.

“Get the fuck off the water tower, Van Doren.”

“With pleasure, Sinclair.”

Anger crackles in me like a fire that refuses to go out. It’s always there, this town, these people always stoking the dying embers. One of these days, I really am gonna set fire to this shithole.

It’ll be a wildfire that consumes everyone in its path, and they will only have themselves to blame.

Phi disappears into the hole in the platform, wanting to get as far away from me as possible. But no matter how fast she runs away, it won’t change anything.

I hadn’t planned tonight, but it was a beautiful, vengeful happenstance.

I’ve chipped her ivory tower. She’s no longer a loyal disciple of the church of Van Doren. The moment her lips moved against mine, she’d become Judas.

The betrayer.

Every time her family mentions my name, this night will flash in her mind, and she’ll remember just how good it felt to betray the ones she loves.

My smell is on her skin. My teeth marks are on her neck. My cum is leaking between her thighs.

Tonight, the Queen of Ponderosa Spring was *my* exile.

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the reality of a galaxy

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Phi

August 19

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, ANDY!”

My younger sister’s rosy cheeks light up with a shy smile. Light streams in from the windows behind her, bathing her in sunshine as she stares at the seventeen flickering candles.

I hide a small smile, standing in the arched doorway as she places her palms on the polished mahogany table. Andromeda shuts her eyes, takes a second to make a wish, and blows them out in one go.

My family’s dining room shakes with applause and cheer. The crystal chandelier hanging from the high ceiling rattles from all the excitement as a line of people make their way to her side.

Uncle Silas drops a quiet kiss to the top of her head, his six-year-old son, Scout, in his arms, who is trying to reach for the cake. Aunt Briar hugs her so hard I think I hear a rib crack, unwilling to let go until her husband pulls her away. Everyone takes their turn, showering her with love and well-wishes.

“She hates all of this attention.”

The gentle, sweet voice of one of my aunts tickles my ears. A warmth spreads through my stomach as I glance to my side, seeing her walk in from

the living room and join me in the doorway, her petite frame dressed in a black button-up dress with puffed shoulders.

“I give it twenty seconds before she disappears from her own party.”

Lyra Pierson has always been my very own Morticia Addams. I used to think she was a vampire; I searched their estate for days when I was seven, looking for coffins. Door after door, room after room, but I never found what I was looking for.

Until one day, I just asked her husband where it was.

“TP! TP!”

Shouting the nickname Dad told me to use, I burst into Uncle Thatcher’s office. He says it’s his favorite, and I think it’s funny ’cause it stands for toilet paper. I skid to a stop in front of the humongous wooden desk.

“Yes, mini version of Rook?” He looks up at me from the papers in his hands, pushing his glasses up on the bridge of his nose, looking annoyed as per usual.

“Where is the coffin Aunt Lyra sleeps in?” I blurt out, rocking back and forth on my heels, tired of searching their never-ending house.

He lets out a small laugh, something I don’t hear from him a lot. “You think we are vampires?”

“Not you. You’re not cool enough. You sell houses. But her, yes. You live in a haunted house, and she always wears black!”

He raises his eyebrow at me. “I see.”

“So? Where is it?” I’m practically bouncing on my heels, waiting for him to tell me.

“Sorry to burst your bubble, but she isn’t a vampire.” Uncle Thatch sets his papers down, leaning forward and peering at me from his chair with a small grin. “And if she was, I’d be one too. Whatever your Aunt Lyra is, I am.”

Their love is a sickening breed. Just like my parents’.

That once-in-a-lifetime, fuck-the-world, we’re-destined-to-be-together love.

No amount of science will make me believe that doesn’t exist because I’ve seen it my entire life.

Deserving it is a different story.

“Sun and moon, the two of you. Even as babies, you adored the spotlight, and Andy hated it.” Lyra’s head shakes as she grins. Those wild,

black curls streaked with gray sway with every movement.

Stifling a laugh, I lift my can of pop to my lips. It's no secret that I was, and still am, a brazen attention whore.

I'm not sure when I noticed it. Maybe it was when I won first place for my magnetic levitation science project in elementary school. Or it might've been when my fifth-grade teacher, who's hated Dad since they attended college together, cold-called me in class, and I'd answered his question with flying colors.

No matter when it started, it became a drug to me, the praise and admiration. Now, I put myself on display for all things rebellious. I took all my passions and hid them down deep, hoping to keep them there while simultaneously preventing anyone from looking deeper.

"When do you suppose the two of them will realize they are more than friends?"

I bring my attention back to Andy at her words, seeing Ezra Caldwell looming in the corner just behind her. There are fifteen people in this house, most of them in the dining room, yet his dark eyes are stuck on her.

They never move. Not once.

I feel like I need to physically reach up and hold my eyeballs to keep them from rolling.

"Preferably before he breaks her heart," I grumble.

"Always so pessimistic, my firefly." Lyra lifts a slender hand adorned with delicate rings and tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

I give a toothless smile, shrugging. "Realist. They're young. The divorce rate for high school sweethearts is, like, fifty-four percent. Heartbreak is inevitable."

"You're young too, ya know?" Nudging me with her hip, she playfully arches an eyebrow. "Enjoy it. This phase of your life is a gift. Be young, fall in love, and fall out of it. Your heart is a resilient thing. It can survive much more than you think."

"Pass. Sounds like unnecessary suffering."

"You'll change your mind. You just haven't met the right person yet."

Yeah, can't find the right person 'cause I fuck guys I hate.

The thought makes me want to shove my hand into a blender. Since hell froze over, these little annoying film reels of the water tower have popped

into my brain. Rage boils in me, simmering in my bones, threatening to overflow.

I'm basically cockblocking my own happily ever after by chasing self-destruction to cover up what happened to me. There are a lot of things I regret, but screwing Jude Sinclair is by far the worst.

There had been countless reasons for me not to do it.

My dad warned me to stay away from the Sinclairs since I was a kid. Jude's best friends with Oakley Wixx, whom I despise. I'd gotten him arrested. Oh, and his dad dated my mom back in the day. I mean, the list could go on for eons, and I could've picked any of them to avoid doing what I did.

But I didn't. None of them came to mind the moment his mouth devoured mine. My brain shut off, took a goddamn vacation from rational thinking, and let my irresponsible vagina take the lead. I won't lie, I'm not exactly known for picking the best dudes to hook up with, but Jude takes the cake.

No, he takes the whole bakery.

Absentmindedly, I bring my hand to the side of my neck, brushing my thumb over the hickeys covered in makeup. A heat rises in my stomach, that irritating ache filling me. It's a nuisance I've been dealing with for a week. Yet it's nothing in comparison to the guilt of not just letting it happen but enjoying it.

Every bite, every thrust, every raspy groan.

When the sweat dried, all I hated was myself, that he made me come harder than anyone ever had. A cold chill runs through me, and I jerk my hand from my throat. Fuck, I'm so stupid.

How could I be this stupid?

I clear my throat. "I'm gonna go grab a cupcake."

Code for "I need a breather. Immediately."

I take one step back before Lyra pulls me into a hug. Her gentle hand holds the back of my head before she whispers in my ear, "I love you, my firefly. Come see us soon. Thatcher misses your debates on the universe."

The tears that sting the corners of my eyes are immediate. I miss those too. Miss them so much, but Uncle Thatch is a hawk with X-ray vision. He picks up on everything, and I can't risk that.

I squeeze her extra tight, a thank-you in my bones. “I love you too, Aunt Lyra.”

I pull back from her embrace and give her a small smile. As much as I want to visit, I can’t. It’ll only make things more difficult. No matter how much my behavior hurts them, my secrets would hurt them more.

I quickly make my escape into the kitchen, deftly avoiding family members on my way. My eyes land on the black countertop, where a tray of cupcakes sits temptingly. I scoop one up and lean against the counter, taking a deep breath. The scent of vanilla fills my nostrils as I swipe my finger across the smooth icing and bring it to my mouth.

When I close my eyes, I realize the mistake immediately. All I see is Jude’s face hovering above mine, that stupid eyebrow piercing and tongue ring, his lips curved in a wicked grin. Every night I lie down, trying to sleep, but’s it’s just him. His tattooed hands, his mouth, the way he—

“Hey.”

I jump at the sound of Andy’s voice, dropping the cupcake on the floor.

“Shit,” I curse before scooping it up and walking it to the trash can.

Turning around, I see that she has climbed atop the kitchen island, sitting cross-legged with her colorful knitted sweater hanging off one shoulder.

“Thank you for my gift,” she says with a grin, fiddling with the laces of her black Converse.

I bite my tongue when I notice on the toe tip in black Sharpie are the words “star child” in Ezra’s scribbly handwriting.

Andy and Ez love each other.

I stopped questioning it a while ago. I didn’t have much of a choice after I heard him drunkenly serenade her in the back of my car with The Fray’s “Look After You.”

From the moment Andromeda was born, Ezra has quietly followed behind. It’s literally why we started call him *The Shadow*. Every misstep she makes, he is right there to catch her as she tumbles, putting her back on her feet so she can take off again.

I’m grateful for how protective he is. But I live in constant fear that the sweet heart he shields is the same one he might break.

Love just isn’t enough sometimes.

“What gift?” I arch an eyebrow, resting my elbows on the island.

Andromeda rolls her eyes, smirking. “If you wanted it to be a secret, you shouldn’t be so obvious. You’re the only LEGO nerd I know.”

So much for leaving it at her door this morning in the hopes it didn’t become a big deal.

“I’m glad you like it.”

“I *love* it. It’s perfect. First thing I opened this morning, and I already had Ezra mount it on the wall for me. How long did it take you?”

“A few days.” I shrug.

It was a week. Over three thousand pieces, and as each individual LEGO came together, I thought about Andromeda. How this was perfect for her. The bands of blues, pinks, and oranges swirl together in a mesmerizing spiral, our Milky Way to display on her wall.

It’s beautiful and represents all she loves about the sky but shows nothing about the cruelty of our galaxy.

Andy gracefully hops off the counter, making a beeline for the tray of cupcakes. “My horoscope app said one of my *do*’s for today was to appreciate the stars. Thanks for proving it right.”

I like understanding why our universe works; she enjoys telling me why the stars’ position has me in a bad fucking mood. I like hard facts. She enjoys whimsical belief. Science is my favorite subject, and hers is philosophy.

We are so similar yet very different. Always have been.

I’d like to blame these differences on her naivety, the fact she hasn’t been hurt by the world, so she chooses to still have faith in it. But I can’t. Despite anything that might happen to Andy, good or bad, this is how she has always been. Full belief in the unknown, in the threads of fate and waves of destiny.

My eye roll is involuntary. “Whatever you say.”

“Your Jupiter in Capricorn always makes you so skeptical,” she mumbles with a mouthful of food, sucking icing off her thumb before continuing. “Loosen up, Phi. It’s just the stars.”

“You might’ve passed algebra if you remembered equations like you do horoscopes.”

The freckles dance across the bridge of her nose as she laughs, flying me the bird. “Low blow.”

I walk over, leaning on the counter beside her. “I just don’t see the point in letting the stars decide who I am. I like things I can prove. Physics, logic, stuff that makes sense. It’s not that I don’t like it. I’ve just always preferred fact to belief.”

“Today, the sun is the same exact place in the sky that it was when I was born—that’s a fact. The Mayans used the sky as a calendar—fact. Babylonians believed that the position of planets and stars at birth influence someone’s destiny—fact—”

“Fact,” I interrupt with a smirk, nudging her with my hip. “You’re a smart-ass.”

“Yeah, but you love me.”

She has no idea just how much.

The sun has risen and set six thousand and five times since her birth. Even on my worst days.

Sometimes, I think she’s the only reason for each of them.

“Debatable,” I mutter, a smirk pulling at my lips.

“Jerk.”

Andy looks up at me, blue eyes sparkling, turquoise gems untouched by man, pure. The apples of her cheeks are dusted with a bright pink blush matching the shade of her dyed hair, and tiny golden stickers decorate her cheeks. From the depths of her bones, she is joy.

The Milky Way eats galaxies that get too close.

Sometimes, it stretches them like taffy, pulling out the streams of stars and gas. A few of them can withstand it, merely passing by, forever changing but intact. But other times, our galaxy’s hunger is insatiable.

It’s a cosmic feast for those who get too close. It will tear apart with no remorse or mercy, devouring stars from its prey until it blends with its own.

The truth is I’m the Milky Way, and she’s the astronomer who will never know all my secrets. Far enough to love me, not close enough to be ruined by me.

Andromeda is the beauty and wonder of our universe. I’m the destructive, cold reality.

I wrap my arm around her shoulder, pulling her into my side. That overwhelming desire to protect her at all costs fills my gut.

The pain of silence will forever be worth it because it keeps her safe. It keeps them all happy, unburdened.

I'll go to the grave with this hurt because they are worth it. They are worth everything.

“Happy birthday, Andromeda.”

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the proverbs of the broken

. . .

Jude

August 21

“HOW MUCH?”

It’s the first thing I hear when I roll my window down. I casually turn my head, deadpanning at the dude wearing a Springs High letterman’s jacket. Tex Matthews is a grade A douchebag who loves flaunting just how rich his investment banking father is, and I have the lucky job of dealing with him every time he needs pot.

When I lean across the passenger seat to my duffle bag, I hear my back pop and crack like bubble wrap.

Crashing on Oakley’s spare bed is not for the weak. Or for anyone looking to get some rest. Last night, one of the springs broke through the mattress and tried to kill me. I know they say beggars can’t be choosers, but is not wanting my spleen punctured in my sleep too much to ask for?

I pull one of the plastic baggies from the side pocket, pinching it between two fingers and shaking it in the air.

“You think if you keep asking, the price will change?” I arch an eyebrow, eyes flat and lacking amusement. “Five G’s. Eighty bucks.”

Weed’s been legal in Oregon for years, but not if you’re under twenty-one and can’t afford to be busted with a fake ID. This glitch in the system is where Oakley earns his living and I earn cash to survive.

Going from broke to *really* fucking broke in a matter of forty-eight hours makes a guy do desperate shit. Like sell pot to idiots so I can live in a trap house.

“Come on, bro. Kya is selling it for way cheaper in the Springs.”

“Then go get it from her.” I lift my gaze to his face, eyes flat and lacking amusement. “And I’m not your bro.”

He runs a meaty hand down his face, clearly annoyed. I’m sure it’s not often he gets told no. Why would he? Everything he’s ever wanted has been served hot and ready to eat on a silver platter.

Tex lays his hand on the roof of my car, leaning down and drowning me with the shitty smell of his cologne. The muscle in my jaw twitches, nostrils flaring as I take a deep breath, trying to calm the anger bubbling in my gut.

“I could make your life hell, Sin. I have power, even here in shithole West Trinity Falls. So, take fifty and don’t piss me off, yeah?”

I fucking hate that nickname.

My hand grips the handle before I shove. Tex loses his balance, not expecting to be hit by a car door. A huff of air expels from his throat as his ass hits the ground. I slam my door shut, resting my arm on the window seal.

“What the fuck!” he shouts, brows furrowed and face turning an alarming shade of red.

Guy should really ease up on all those roids before his head pops off.

A few people at the gas pumps look over at us before turning away. West Trinity Falls might be filled with degenerates and criminals, but people here mind their fucking business.

“Unless you wanna spend the night picking up your teeth, don’t touch my fucking car again.”

Tex scoffs, finding his feet with ease. Resembling a toddler who just got put in time-out, he huffs and puffs as he pulls his wallet out, fingering through the bills with a pout on his ugly mug.

After he begrudgingly gives me the cash, I shove the cellophane-covered weed into his hand. One of these days, I’m gonna get real lucky. He’s gonna give me the perfect reason to bash his skull in, and I can’t wait for that day to come.

“Dumbass Waster,” he grumbles, shoving his hands in his pockets.

I lift my middle finger with a grin. “Same time next week, Heathen?”

Those who grew up in gilded mansions in Ponderosa Springs were affectionately known as Heathens by those of us on the opposite side of the tracks. Wasn't sure when it started, didn't really care that much; all I knew was since I moved to West Trinity Falls, we were always Wasters.

He doesn't respond, just turns his back and heads toward his lifted Jeep Wrangler. His goon squad hangs out of the windows, hooting and celebrating their captain scoring pot.

I scoff, rolling my window back up. Yeah, it makes sense why Phi dated him.

Not only are they both self-centered, pampered snobs, but Tex is shallow enough that her games were easy to play. The perfect victim for her to spin up in her web and ruin before he had the chance to say *Black Widow*.

A smirk tugs at my lips. No wonder she soaked my cock so quickly. Tex couldn't find the clit with a map and compass—dude hardly has two brain cells to rub together. Maybe that's why she's so fucking irritable. It must be frustrating screwing dudes who can't get her off. Poor, pathetic, lonely Seraphina, all pent up.

I should've tossed her over the edge and called it a night. It was the perfect opportunity to give Rook Van Doren a small taste of the suffering I'd experienced my entire life.

I could've let her fall back and disappeared. No one would've found her body until a forest ranger came to patrol the area, and it would've looked like a suicide.

Flawless revenge.

Phi better have gone home that night and kneeled at the edge of her bed. Prayed to whatever god she believes in that the only thing that kept me from being a goddamn psychopath was knowing I would've proved her right.

I'd have proved them all right.

I'd be no better than the man who raised me to believe cruelty was a strength, a weapon to be wielded freely and often. I didn't do it because I gave a shit about what happened to Phi. I just didn't want to validate everyone who told me I was just like my father before I even knew it was a bad thing.

That night, I could see myself killing her. How easy it would've been for that switch in me to flip.

In that moment, I was fucking terrified they might all be right.

“Here Comes The Rain Again” by Hypnogaja drifts from my car speakers, and I lean forward, turning up the volume.

The gas station’s neon lights flicker as I reach into my bag again. This time not for drugs but for a beaten-up spiral-bound notebook. Pulling the pen from behind my ear, I rest the open notebook on my knee.

I quickly cross out the words I’d written earlier, the inky black pen scratching the paper as I write another line. I repeat this process at least five times until I find a sequence of words that don’t suck ass, deciding to read it from the top.

I am not angry at God.

I don’t respect him.

His toughest battle was bestowed upon a child.

Gifted a father with weaponized hands.

I was demanded to honor.

Blessed with a patriarch who stoked violence in my throat.

Heaven’s gates rattled as he shouted, “Don’t choke.”

I am not angry at God.

I don’t understand him.

Fire and brimstone blister my blasphemous feet.

Are his words not a salve for disbelief?

I am threatened with hellfire for a fury that is not mine.

Is it not a gift from the divine?

I am not angry at God.

I am wrathful with him.

The eternal kingdom worships the sacrilegious deity who made me.

Who gave me. Who tested me. Who saved me.

All-knowing turned sacred ignorance when innocent lips try his line.

Call has been forwarded. You have reached. God is unavailable at this time.

I do not believe in God.

My voicemails were hymns that lulled him to sleep.

While I held my breath and prayed the Lord my soul to keep.

I changed my number in the night, with hopes of peace by daybreak.

Amen on my tongue, I woke with no soul for him to take.

God left me to die at the hands of his gift.

Now calls me to ask, “Why don’t you believe I exist?”

“Yeah, that’s shit,” I mutter, tossing the notebook onto the passenger seat, tired of staring at my dumb-ass word vomit.

I sag into the leather seat, hands instinctively following my brain's demand for nicotine. I grab a cigarette from the pack in the cup holder, holding it between my teeth as I light it.

Menthol smoke cools my lungs, empties my head, as I let the tobacco take over. Artificial light gleams as I spin the ring on my pointer finger with my thumb, the moonlight glinting against the words engraved in the metal.

Riddle of Strider.

I was never a fantasy guy, but Dad always really loved *Lord of the Rings*. Which seems so fucking stupid in the grand scheme of things, ya know? His stepfather was a vile bastard who groomed him to be the same, yet he was still a secret Tolkien fan despite it all?

I think that's what happens when only one version of a story is told. When the narrator is untrustworthy or the narrative is controlled so strictly, no other point of view gets an ounce of consideration.

We forget that even the worst of humanity still partakes in the mundane. For example: A serial killer needs food to live, so they go grocery shopping. A ruthless hit man will abide by traffic laws by stopping at red lights, and in my case, an abusive father reads to his kid every night before bed.

My father was a good dad when he wasn't high. He was a man who let me take his love of books and make them my own. Until I was eleven, he'd read until I fell asleep, which was quickly if it was a longer story.

Even when I got older, when he crashed from the high, we'd talk about what book I was reading. And when I started writing my own words, we'd sit in the kitchen late at night, and we'd share things we had written the past few days.

I can accept that he wasn't a good man, that he did terrible things, because even when he was sober? He was honest about who he was. Never tried to be something different.

The Van Dorens and the rest of their fucked-up crew controlled the narrative in Ponderosa Springs, dominated it so that no other point of view got an ounce of consideration. Not mine and especially not my father's.

Which makes them the worst kind of monster.

The kind who pretends not to be.

There is a knock at my window, and I know without looking it's someone else in search of drugs. I quickly sign a singular *E* at the bottom of the page before closing the notebook and telling myself the same thing I've said since the first time my dad hit me.

This is not forever. This is for one more year.

My future is California. Where no one knows my name. Where there is no past, only a new beginning.

This is my "*for the time being.*"

I won't rot here.



I EXPEL A HEAVY BREATH AS I STEP OUT OF MY CAR, MAKING SURE TO LOCK it twice. This is a sketchy part of West Trinity Falls, and I don't need some crackhead jacking my car for dope money.

Oakley's driveway is filled with cars, and I know exactly what I'm going to find inside there. It'll be packed with bodies, all too high to see straight, and it's the last thing I want to deal with right now.

The trailer park is a maze of old homes, some missing windows and with rusted siding. I'm not sure how half of them are livable. Smelling the pot from outside, I climb the cracked wooden steps to the front porch.

Libby, the local stray cat, winds between my feet, her orange stripes illuminated by the twitching porch light. I bend down, running my palm across her head before the sound of the next-door neighbors starting their nightly arguing sends her scampering away to hide.

Knowing it's already unlocked, I turn the metal knob and press the door open, hit immediately with the smell of booze and weed.

The cramped living room is hazy with smoke, packed with bodies. A couple of faces look up at me through bloodshot eyes as I step inside, but most are too wasted to notice my arrival.

Music plays from the speakers, shaking the yellowing walls as I glance toward the kitchen. I forgo the idea of grabbing something to eat when I see some guy snort a line off the chipped island.

Kicking a few beer cans as I pass the entry to the kitchen, I step past a group of ten playing some card game on the brown carpet littered with cigarette burns. I spot a couple practically fucking on the wall near the TV, just before the door to Oakley's bedroom opens and the last person I expected to see walks out.

Well, well. What do we have here?

Ezra Caldwell tosses his hood over his black hair, eyes darting around the room to make sure no one notices him. Can't blame him—if my father owned most of Ponderosa Springs and I was leaving a known drug dealer's house across the tracks, I'd hide my face too.

I wonder if my doting half uncle knows what one of his coveted twins is up to when he isn't paying attention?

I watch Ezra turn on his heel, heading toward the back door and disappearing as if he'd never been here at all.

I'm starting to think it's not all sunshine and rainbows in Heathen territory. Ezra's a druggie, and Phi's a lonely fucking bitch. Makes me think there are a lot more secrets in those glass houses than they lead people to believe.

"Hey, Sin."

I flick my gaze to the left, back toward the living room, finding a blonde chick I think I graduated with peering up at me from her spot on the frayed plaid love seat.

She gives me a soft smile, pointing at her chest. "Jessie. We had a few classes together."

Jessie's pretty, beautiful in a threadbare American sweetheart kinda way. The tits spilling out of her low-cut top tell me she might even be a good lay, but she's not my type, and I don't need to fuck bad enough that I could pretend she is.

Until I find the one who feels like silence, all of this is just noise.

"I'm—"

"Jessie girl, come hold the cooker."

My blood runs cold as I'm interrupted by an older woman on the couch. She crooks a finger at the girl in front of me before tossing a plastic baggie

of white powder onto the glass coffee table.

I'd maybe sweep it under the rug as cocaine if she didn't reach into her purse to pull out a bent silver spoon and a fresh needle.

Pain echoes in the cracks of my chest, thinking of the last time I saw a needle like that. Thinking of the first time I saw this exact setup.

I was eight when I first caught Dad shooting up. It was mid-January, and the ground was covered in a blanket of snow. The smell of white vinegar that's sat too long in the sun drew me to his bedroom.

When I'd asked what he was doing, with a blue band tethered around his forearm and a filled needle pointed toward his vein, he'd exploded. Pissed I'd interrupted him, he tossed me outside and locked the door.

I stood in the freezing winter for hours, no shoes or coat. Just me and the snow until my grandmother showed up. I stayed two days in the hospital while they treated me for hypothermia.

Dad didn't even notice I was missing. Didn't even remember locking me outside.

I stopped interrupting him after that.

"You okay?" Jessie asks.

It pulls me back to the present. My present, not my past that I couldn't control, but my current life. I made the choice to be here, to surround myself with this, not my dad this time.

I flick my gaze to Jessie, who's still watching me. My eyes move down her body; I'm sure she thinks I'm checking her out. I follow the lines of her, and in the ditch of her arm, I find what I'm looking for.

Small reddish-purple bruises decorate the spaces around her veins. My jaw tenses. The effects of heroin haven't stolen her beauty yet. I'm sure she is still telling herself that she won't develop a problem.

It's only for fun, she probably thinks.

"You get that from Oakes?" I ask, numbly motioning to the baggie of heroin.

"Yeah, do you want to shoot—"

"You've got a month tops before the first tooth falls out. Maybe a week before the vein in your arm collapses and you start looking between your toes," I spit, eyes meeting her wide ones. "You won't die pretty, but you'll die young."

I leave her sitting there, mouth slightly parted at my words, shuddering through more people down the narrow hallway before tearing the hinges off my door. I'd like to think what I said is enough to shock her into sobriety, but I don't have that much faith in humanity.

When heroin wraps her cold, slithering arms around you, she whispers. Fills your ear with sweet words and promises of no pain. She makes you believe all you need is her before she takes away everything you once knew, and she's all that is left. You follow her, believe her, until she carries you to a cemetery and drops you face down in a grave you dug all by yourself.

You die weak, sick, and alone.

With heroin nowhere to be found.

With shaky hands, I jerk the duffle bags from underneath the aged bed, tossing them onto the crumpled sheets and stuffing my entire life into them.

Two bags.

Everything that defines me will fit into these.

"J! My man, where you been?" Oakley's hazy voice floats in from the open door, his booted steps heavy against the floor. "Didn't even see you come in."

I snatch a pair of black jeans from the ground, shoving them into the bag. I roll my lips together, wanting to keep my mouth shut but knowing I won't be able to.

"Going somewhere in a hurry?"

Glancing to my side, I give him a once-over.

Brown hair sticking up in different directions, as if he'd just rolled out of bed. His eyes are glassy, the whites turned a harsh red. Based on the circles underneath his eyes, I'd say he hasn't slept in at least twenty-four hours. Too busy drunk, getting high, or selling.

This isn't the Oakley I met years ago.

I was in eighth grade, and he was a sophomore when his dad got locked up. We'd already been friends for a while before that, but I noticed a shift in him after his father's incarceration.

Sometimes, children with shitty parents become great people, and others? They do what Oakes is currently doing, becoming everything that nearly ruined him as a kid.

"I'm out," I mutter, my shoulder hitting his before I grab T-shirts from the dresser.

“You’re out? What the fuck are you talking about?” he asks as I stuff more clothes into the bags.

The confusion on his face, forcing a deep V to form between his brows, makes me scoff, and I shake my head with bitterness crawling up my throat.

Digging into my front pocket, I grab the wad of cash and shove it against his chest with a thud.

“I told you. I fucking told you. No goddamn heroin.” My harsh voice scratches my raw throat to shreds.

Anger and disappointment burn in me as our eyes clash.

He knows why I don’t fuck with that shit, and he did it anyway. I shouldn’t be surprised or pissed off—we aren’t really friends, haven’t been in a long time.

I hung around, even though I hated the drugs, ’cause he didn’t give a damn about my last name. Selfishly, I think I’ve made excuses for Oakley’s shitty behavior ’cause it was nice to just be me around someone. Not Jude Sinclair.

Just Jude.

But now, I’m starting to see that this version of myself? It isn’t me either.

Oakley’s jaw twitches as he takes his time counting the money I gave him. “Didn’t know I had to check with you about how I run my goddamn business.”

“You’re a shitty townie drug dealer who’ll wind up dead or in prison before you’re twenty-five. Wouldn’t call that a business.”

“Your daddy issues are showing, J.”

My fists clench, knuckles cracking from the force.

“Go fuck yourself,” I snap through gritted teeth.

“I give you a place to sleep, some easy routes so you can make some cash ’cause no one else would hire you, and that’s how it is?” He steps closer, the smell of alcohol strong on his breath. “I’m all you’ve fucking got.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, Oakes.” I try to keep my hands busy by zipping the bags so I don’t wrap them around his throat. “You wanna throw your life away? Fine, but I’m not going down with you.”

“That’s what this is about, huh? You’re afraid dealing is gonna have you shoving a needle in your arm like Daddy dearest?” His cruel laughter echoes through the room. “He died—cry about it and get the fuck over it.”

The concrete dam I’d built inside my mind, designed to keep the world out and myself locked in, explodes. Shards of cement rip through my insides, and a crimson river of unbridled fury pours out of me.

My fist connects with his jaw, a satisfying crack rippling to my ears. Oakley stumbles backward and falls to the ground with a thud, blood oozing from his mouth.

Every fucking day, I keep my mouth shut. Holding this rage in. Locked behind clenched teeth and tense muscles. ’Cause the moment I react, I’ll just be feeding into what everyone believes. That I’m just another bad apple that’s fallen from the Sinclair family tree.

My chest heaves as I grab the front of his stained white shirt. “Say something about my dad again, Oakley. Give me a fucking reason to leave you choking on your own blood.”

“Fuck you, Jude!” he spits, blood spilling from his lips, “Fuck you, your moral high road, and that chip on your shoulder. Always walking around like you’re too good for this place. Cast out but still had Daddy’s money in your pocket.”

Knowing if I stay here any longer I’ll end up killing him, I sling his lanky body to the floor. Tossing both duffle bags over my shoulders, I catch a glimpse of my split knuckles in the dim light.

“You sell coke and pot to teenagers. You think ’cause you draw the line at heroin, it makes you better than me? You’re still a drug dealer. You’re not better than me. We’re the fucking same!” he shouts from the floor, trying to use the bed to help himself to his feet.

Setting heroin as the boundary I wouldn’t cross for myself didn’t make me better than Oakley. In this moment, I’m man enough to admit he’s right.

I look down at the guy I once called a friend when I was young stumbling to his feet, weak and pumped full of pills. Just one last look is enough to know I may not be better than him, but I’m not the same either.

Leaving him there, I walk through the doorframe, his words hitting my back as he shouts.

“Don’t come running back when you have nowhere to go! You have nothing!”

I have a choice.

I didn't when I was a kid. I had no way to escape the drugs, booze, and abuse. But I'm not a kid anymore. I made the decision to live in a trap house, to run petty drugs, telling myself the alternative was far worse.

I'd been lying to myself.

There is no fate worse than becoming my father.

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the first sin

...

Phi

August 22

MY FAVORITE SATURDAYS SMELL LIKE GASOLINE AND SMOKE.

In Ponderosa Springs, there is one place that guarantees both.

“Nasty fucking win, Drom.”

A stream of smoke expels from my lips, floating in the wind toward the inky-black sky. Holding the blunt between two fingers, I lazily drop my head to the side to see Atlas bumping his fist against Andromeda’s.

The Yamaha purrs beneath her, sleek and predatory, gleaming under the dim floodlights someone had rigged up years ago. It took us both at least three days to get that fucking pink-and-white vinyl wrap right, but the candy-pink accents against the gritty terrain of the infield do look sick.

Plus, it’s very Andromeda, so it was definitely worth the headache.

She kills the engine, planting both scuffed Converse on the dirt, kicking the stand down with a flick of her heel. Blood leaks from the road rash on her knee, the fabric of her faded blue jeans shredded from a nasty blacktop kiss.

Ezra’s probably already beaten Axel Vance into an early grave, but when he sees her leg, he might bring him back just to kill him again.

“Thanks.” She grins, cotton-candy-pink hair brushing her shoulders as she sits her helmet on the gas tank, resting her elbows on it. “Can’t tell if

Axel is an idiot or just a shit driver. Who takes a fucking curve like that?"

I blow a smoke ring in her direction, tossing my feet up onto my handlebars while my back rests against the cowl cover. "A dude with an ego that tells him he'd rather die than lose to a chick."

Axel's bike after the race would now be considered a crushed can of soup, and it's probably halfway to a junkyard by now, courtesy of the sleaziest tow company in town.

Yet, no one in the rusting bleachers shed a tear for him. The moment they'd heard metal warping metal, saw the carnage of skin grinding against asphalt, they'd only roared louder.

There is no mercy here.

No medical staff waiting in the wings to check out his bloody forehead and fucked-up shoulder. No pit stops that might've been able to change his bald tire in order to avoid the wreck altogether.

The Graveyard takes no prisoners. It takes what it wants and leaves the rest to rot.

Ponderosa Springs left the once famous racetrack to perish in the eighties. Nestled between the endless stretch of forest and rugged Oregon coast, it's a place time itself had forgotten.

Until anarchy brought it back to life.

Now, its splintered blacktop loves opening its jaws to swallow racers whole

A ghost.

A vicious, famished spirit that has an insatiable appetite for chaos.

Mayhem to some, nirvana for me.

"You racing tonight?" Andy asks, arching a brow at my kicked-up feet and relaxed position.

I hold the blunt between my teeth, reaching into my bra and fishing out the crinkled playing card, waving it at her. "Ace of Spades."

Races here are a random draw, a game of luck that keeps things interesting. You wanna race, you pick a card. Queen of Hearts races the Queen of Diamonds, Queen of Clubs races the Queen of Spades, so forth and so on.

It also ups the stakes for betting.

"That's if she's sober enough to start her bike, let alone drive it in fucking circles."

Atlas gives me a knowing look before he plucks the blunt from my mouth, taking a long puff before stomping it out.

“Such a buzzkill,” I mutter, crossing my arms like a toddler.

I’m not even smoking to get high; it’s just to take the edge off and mellow me out. That way, when I pull up to the line, I’m not shaking with adrenaline. It helps block out all the noise, so it’s just me and miles of cracked asphalt.

Weed takes away the distractions, and here, one mistake can mean the difference between a win and a crash that claims your life.

“Where is Ez? I thought he was coming tonight?” Andy mumbles so quietly it almost gets drowned out by the rumble of engines, almost like she didn’t quite mean to say it out loud.

“I imagine smashing Axel’s face into a brutally hard surface for almost wrecking you.” I shrug. “But that’s just a guess.”

Her brows furrow, worry etched across her features. “And you just let him go?”

I quickly toss my hands up in defense. “Hey, not my boyfriend. Not my problem.”

“He’s not my boyfriend. Don’t be a dick,” she bites, but I don’t miss the warmth touching her cheeks. She quickly shifts her gaze to Atlas. “What’s your excuse for letting your brother go after a fucking giant solo?”

“He threw me into a coffee table when we were, like, eight, dude. I had staples in my fucking head.” Atlas leans against the side of my bike, eyebrows lifted to his hairline. “Hard pass on getting in his way when he turns into pissed-off Peter.”

I try and cover my giggle with a cough but fail, and it sends Atlas into a fit of laughter that I join him in. We have this stupid inside joke where we rename people based around different things.

Pissed-off Peter.

Kranky Karen for the lady who works at the grocery store who never fails to make some snarky comment.

Throw-up Theo, which is who Atlas turns into after one too many Jägerbombs and spends the rest of his night cuddling the porcelain throne.

We came up with it when we were high one night, and the alliteration assassins have been going strong ever since.

So that leaves Andy, who is not humored nor involved in our joke, glaring at us like we are toddlers in need of a time-out.

"I think you two share a brain cell," she mutters, throwing her leg over her bike. "I'm going to go get him before the idiot gets himself killed."

"Shocker. Where he goes, you follow," I say, my tongue much looser when I'm stoned.

Andy's brow crinkles, a bit of that infamous family anger sizzling in her voice. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

I really did try to swallow the words, but they crawled up my throat without warning. I know Ezra's heart is pure, that he's good and kind, that he loves Andy. I've seen it.

But he's walking on a dangerous tightrope of loving drugs more.

"Being attached the way you two are rarely ends well. What are you gonna do when he eventually goes on tour? Give up your dreams and chase him around the globe? Be his groupie? I'm just trying to look out for you."

Andromeda isn't blind.

Maybe she's already said something to him or doesn't have the heart to. Either way, she won't let go of him, even if it means getting sucked into whatever downward spiral he's heading for. And when that happens—because it will—she'll be the one left shattered in his wake.

I swear, there won't be enough love in this world to save Ezra Caldwell from the hell I'll unleash if he takes her down with him.

"Go fuck yourself, Phi." Her tone is brutal, her eyes narrowed into slits. "Just 'cause you're heartless doesn't mean we all have to be. Keep your cynical bullshit to yourself."

She might be softer than me, but I'm not the only one who inherited our mother's venomous tongue.

And because she's also stubborn as hell, she storms off before I can speak another word, leaving me staring at the back of her tank top, stars printed all over like the child of the universe she is.

I exhale sharply, tilting my head toward her retreating figure. "Go with her."

I'm not about to let her get in the middle of Ezra and *I eat roids for breakfast* Axel Vance. Pissed or not, she's still my little sister.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm on it," Atlas mutters, standing up straight and running a hand through his curls. "Cut him some slack, Phi. It's Ez—he'd never hurt

her.”

I scoff, sitting up straight on my bike. “Intentionally? Never. If he keeps it up, he’ll fucking ruin her without even meaning to. If you don’t talk to him about the drugs, I will.”

Atlas stares at me, the usual teasing glint in his eyes gone, replaced with a seriousness I hate. It tells me he knows I’m right, and he’s just been too scared to admit it out loud.

“I got you, Phi,” he finally says, voice low as he reaches out to ruffle my hair.

I watch them disappear into the distance before taking another slow hit from the blunt, feeling the burn in my lungs as the smoke crackles and hisses. With them gone, the world falls quiet, save for the echo of rumbling engines.

With an exhale, I watch the thick cloud of smoke swirl into the night. If I could, I’d stay here forever, wrapped in the smell of burnt rubber and the fading remnants of chaos, where nothing and no one can reach me.

Heat after heat. Sometimes, it’s cars that tear across the asphalt; other times, it’s bikes. Round and round they go, and I watch like I’m stuck on a merry-go-round, never wanting to get off.

In these quiet moments, the noise fades just enough that I let myself feel it.

The weight of everything.

I give myself permission to feel sorry for myself, even when I know I shouldn’t. I know others have it worse, but it doesn’t change the ache that sits in my chest.

At night, when I’m all alone here, I let myself think about how impossibly hard it is to be a Van Doren.

Everyone is so fucking much, and I have always felt too little.

A judge for a father, an award-winning Theatre owner for a mother, and two siblings who exceed every expectation set before them.

They are picture-perfect.

I’m the one who no longer fits. The adoptee. The problem child. The academic prodigy with so much potential who turned into every parent’s worst nightmare.

Reign and Andromeda flirt with the edge of teenage anarchy, sure, but they know when to pull back. They know their limits.

Me? I prefer to spiral. To fall until I hit rock bottom, only to dig deeper.

The familiar growl of an engine echoes in the air, cutting through the fog in my mind and pulling my attention toward the faded orange starting line. My spine straightens, and I blame it entirely on the machine, not the person mounting it.

Jude's metallic-gray Kawasaki pulls through the opening in the chain-link fence, the engine revving as he rides across the cracked asphalt.

God, I love that bike. Sucks it's owned by the spawn of Satan.

Carbon-fiber body that screams speed. Supercharged engine pushing over three hundred horsepower. Every detail is precision and raw performance. How the fuck Easton Sinclair could ever afford something like that and his murdered-out Skyline, I'll never know.

Even though a matte-black helmet shields his face, I know it's him.

Ratty Pantera graphic tee, arms a collage of patchwork tattoos, and that reaction from the crowd. The visceral, instinctual reaction from everyone in the rusted bleachers surrounding us.

People stir, excitement buzzing like electricity has touched the air. The shift is palpable. They know they'll be seeing blood tonight.

Jude "Sin" Sinclair is the Graveyard's favorite main event.

He's brutal on the blacktop, relentless. As long as his opponent leaves bloody, he doesn't care too much about winning.

Sin is the perfect name for him.

The very first. The fall.

Jude's existence is absolutely what resulted in the loss of innocence and the introduction of all things miserable into the world.

My hands twitch as he rolls onto the dirt infield, closer and closer, until he's parked just a few feet away from me.

This is the one place we've run into each other the most. Every time we're at the Graveyard at the same time, we avoid each other like the plague. It's almost natural for us to stay at opposite ends of the track at all times.

Tonight should be the same.

Except it won't be, and I know that the moment Jude pulls off his helmet, shaking out his messy hair and turning to catch my eyes.

It's fine. This is fine. Just feign indifference. Pretend he didn't fuck your brains out. It's going to be just fine.

Jude's smirk is slow, deliberate, as he drawls, "If it isn't my favorite Heathen."

The high from my blunt has fizzled out, sobriety crashing into me like a goddamn truck. The blood in my veins turns to ice, skin prickling with the awareness.

Every thud of his boots against the dirt grates my nerves.

I hate when people kill my high. It's a waste of good weed.

"Aww, Sin. Did you crawl out of whatever pit you call home just to grace me with your charming presence?" I tilt my head, crossing my arms as I mockingly bat my eyelashes, voice sweet as venom. "That's cute, but I'm not into low-life drug dealers with daddy issues. Maybe try therapy next time instead of harassing me."

"You sure about that, Van Doren?"

White teeth flash, his smirk folding into a grin. The light catches the silver barbell pierced through his eyebrow as he lifts it, eyes holding a secret in them that makes the pit of my stomach coil.

The kind of secret that mirrors a nasty, venomous snake.

"Why don't you go play a nice, quiet game of hide and choke, Sinclair?"

Jude's laughter rolls through the air like smoke, taunting as his fingers delve into his front pocket. My eyes involuntarily roll when he waves the playing card in the air like a trophy.

Ace of Clubs.

Out of all the times we've both been here to race, now is when the Graveyard gods decide to pit us against each other? You've gotta be fucking shitting me.

Whatever fun game the universe is playing with me in this moment, I'd like for it to stop now. I'm waving a white flag, calling mercy, it wins, please put me out of my misery.

"Sorry, sweetheart. No can do. You owe me a race."

I feel torn.

A large part of me wants Jude Sinclair as far away from me as humanly possible. Like, if given the opportunity, I would place him on another planet if I could.

But that teeny, tiny, devilish piece of me, the one that gets me into trouble, is excited. I'd love to watch him swallow the asphalt tonight. Hand

me another win and leave him limping with road rash so severe it scars him for life.

He'd live with a permanent reminder of what happens when you get too close to me.

I pout, crossing my arms in front of my chest. "How disappointing. I was hoping for an actual challenge tonight."

"There is only one of us here that's undefeated, *Geeks*."

I bristle at the nickname. It's not a secret to anyone in the Springs or the Falls that I'm smart. Being called a geek doesn't bother me. Being called that by him?

I'd rather die.

"That's 'cause you've never raced me," I chide, tilting my head a bit. "Your luck's run out, *Loner*."

The wind picks up, ruffling his dirty-blond hair as he takes a few more steps until the gap between us is closed. My teeth grab at the skin on the inside of my cheek when his thigh bumps my left knee.

Jude stares down his nose at me, watching as I shift on the seat, pulling my knee closer to my bike.

"Willing to bet on it?"

"Aww, did Daddy leave you broken and broke? I'm sure there are a few Mrs. Robinsons that'll throw you a bone. The cougars in the Springs *love* a good charity case."

Easton's his only soft spot in an otherwise stone-cold persona. If I have to pull the dead dad card to get him the fuck away from me, I will. The only time I'd gotten close to him, I'd royally screwed up.

It's a mistake I'll never make again.

"Watch it, Phi," he warns, leaning in just enough so only I can hear him. "Unless you want your daddy to find out that you like fucking the enemy."

My mouth goes dry, the sharp taste of pennies crawling up from my gut.

I didn't need the reminder of the power Jude has over me. How with one slip of his tongue, he could wreak havoc over my entire fucking life, and he wouldn't blink twice to do it.

The consequences that will follow if our dumb fucking mistake ever sees the light of day scare me. Losing my family, them finding out I betrayed them? It's my greatest fear.

And he's gonna use that fear to play with me, like the sadistic puppeteer he is.

My jaw tightens, and I tilt my chin up. "That never happened."

His eyes glint with amusement, a sly grin tugging at the corner of his lips. One hand rests on my gas tank as he leans in, too close, the warmth of his breath brushing against my skin.

"Is denial what helps you sleep at night?" he murmurs, voice dripping with the kind of certainty that makes my stomach twist.

"Like a goddamn baby," I hiss through clenched teeth, trying to keep my voice low. "It was a lapse in judgment. You were a fucking mistake. Let it die, Sin."

There are prying ears everywhere, too many people at the Graveyard that would kill to overhear this conversation.

The floodlights catch on a silver barbell as he traces his top teeth with his tongue, head cocking to the side as he lazily hums, "How long do you think it'll take before you give in and let me fuck those pretty little lies out of your mouth, *sweetheart*?"

I hold his gaze, school my features, not so much as blinking.

"A lobotomy sounds more enjoyable than touching your cock again."

"Again?" He arches a brow, a wolfish grin spreading across his lips. "Thought you said it never—"

The sharp red nail on my pointer finger cuts him off as I press it into his chest.

"It."

Poke.

"Never."

Poke.

"Fucking."

Poke.

"Happened."

Pok—

Jude catches my wrist mid-poke, grip firm but not painful, his thumb brushing over the inside of my wrist. I try to wrench myself from his grasp, but it just tightens, thumb rubbing slow, lazy circles against my pulse like he owns it.

His presence is fucking suffocating, his touch igniting embers of memories I want to keep buried in the back of my closet with the rest of the decaying skeletons.

Rage shakes my bones as he leans in closer.

Strands of blond hair ghost over my cheek as his bottom lip brushes the shell of my ear. “You were a fucking traitor that night, and you loved every second of it.”

The words hit their mark as every one of my nerve endings sparks, the gasoline in my veins igniting.

I chose pleasure over loyalty.

That guilt has been living in my stomach. This ravenous swarm of insects and their tiny, insistent bites have burrowed into my flesh, relentlessly eating away at the devotion I carry for my family, eroding my insides and leaving me hollow. I’m nothing but a shell consumed by unseen torment.

I am afraid of him telling people that we fucked. It absolutely terrifies me.

But fear has never and will never own me.

Anger does.

Fear is fleeting, temporary, but this rage in me? It’s carved into the marrow of my bones. A living entity. A snarling, feral creature rooted deep in my soul, and it’s never been more hungry than in this moment.

“You wanna bet tonight?” I snap, yanking my hand away from his grip and lifting my chin. “Let’s bet.”

Jude’s teeth grab at his bottom lip, revealing a cruel smirk. “I’m listening.”

“On the off chance God’s got your back tonight and you win, I’ll double whatever the bets are tonight. Even when you lose, you still don’t gotta pay out.”

His eyes flicker with dark amusement, looming over me, his shadow falling across my lap like a curse. “And if God forgot about me a long time ago?”

My jaw clenches, and I push back the nausea crawling up my throat, my pulse a wild thing in my neck.

“Then this—” I flick a finger between us. “—what happened on that water tower? It dies. It’s fucking done. You don’t so much as *breathe* in my

direction again.”

“Too fucking easy.” A bitter laugh falls from his lips as he shakes his head, walking back from me toward his bike. “Let’s play, Geeks.”

I want nothing more than to launch myself off this bike and slam my fist into his smirky fucking mouth. Grab the nearest sharp object and jab it into his cornea.

But I don’t.

I don’t move, just sit there, forcing my body to stay still while every muscle screams to tense, to explode.

I win tonight? I get to take back my power. I’m in control of this again. Jude Sinclair goes back to being what he’s always been—a silly, nasty bug beneath my boot, made to ignore and squash.

The wreckage of what he and Oakley had done still lives in me. It sits in my ribs, cording around the organ in my chest, and I feel it breathing there with every single beat.

I’m pissed that fire didn’t do its job.

I’d wanted them to feel like their insides were being ripped apart, piece by piece. To feel every second of the flames licking their flesh while their lungs gasped for air that would never come.

If I had it to do again, I would’ve locked the church doors. Sat in the grass and listened to their screams echo in my ears. Waited with wide eyes until their bones and the ashes of St. Gabriel’s became one.

I snatch my helmet from the ground, tugging it over my head as I watch his long leg swing over the seat of his bike.

“Hey, Loner!” I call over the roar of his bike growling to life. “Make sure to give the blacktop a kiss for me.”



WHEN MY DAD FIRST TAUGHT ME HOW TO RIDE A MOTORCYCLE, I PANICKED and ran it into the side of his car. It left a nasty dent, and the first thing he told me, after making sure I was okay, was this:

The throttle’s not in your hand. It’s in your blood.

I didn’t understand what that meant until I got comfortable going over ninety miles per hour on two wheels.

The bike knows if you're afraid.

If you ride with the fear of crashing in your mind, you'll crash. You have to give up control.

This is the only time where I give it all up. Every guard slams down, every thought leaves, and riding is the only time I let myself be completely and utterly vulnerable.

The Graveyard is alive, pulsing under the flicker of the overhead lights. It's screaming, the tarnished stands rattling in my ears. Once bright-colored flags and banners are tattered, whipping violently in the wind as they cling to old poles.

The crowd seems to howl a little louder as a girl in tiny blue jean shorts appears, her swaying hips causing uproar as she does a little spin for the spectators before stopping just a few feet in front of me.

A quiet hush falls over the track as her delicate hand raises, building the anticipation in the air. It thrums against my skin, lifting the tiny hairs on my arms as I pull back on the throttle, letting the thick growl of my bike ring out.

“One lap. Half a mile. Keep it clean.” She reaches behind her, unhooking a hot pink bra before pulling it from beneath her tank top with a grin. “Or don’t.”

Jude’s presence lingers beside me, a shadow in my peripheral vision. I don’t make it a habit to give my opponents any attention, but I physically can’t help myself. He’s like a fucking gnat, impossible to ignore.

I take a quick glimpse to my left at the inside lane, finding him already watching me, dark helmet shielding his eyes, head tilting slightly in a silent challenge.

His thighs hug the bike tightly, faded jeans stretching over strong legs. The fabric of his black shirt pulls tight across his torso with every steady breath, veins rippling as he pulls back on the throttle, making my thighs twitch.

My eyes catch on the gold chain around his neck, the small pendant resting just at the hollow of his throat, glinting under the dim lights. My jaw clenches as I face forward again.

I hate that I notice him. I hate even more that my stomach is filled with those vicious, terrible butterflies that seem to flutter when he’s around.

If I could transplant anyone else's personality into Jude's body? He'd be perfect. But unfortunately, modern medicine hasn't grown enough to help with that, so I'm left to deal with an asshole who is so hot it physically hurts me.

A blur of hot pink material catches the wind, heat filling my stomach, ripping Jude from my mind and leaving me empty.

This is my favorite part.

Just before I pull off the line, when it's just me and the engine thrumming beneath me, its rhythm syncing with the pounding in my chest until I can't tell where my heartbeat ends and the roar of the bike begins.

We're like one living thing. Every twist of the throttle, every vibration through the frame, feels like the blood pulsing through my veins.

The world narrows here, and I become intangible. Nothing can touch me here. Not the vultures of Ponderosa Springs or the Van Dorens' expectations. Not even the memories that haunt me at night can reach me.

This is the feeling of cheating death.

"Racers ready?" our flag girl purrs, shaking her hips to tease the crowd.

Her bra drops, and the echo of the word "Go!" thrums in my ears.

A surge of familiar adrenaline fires through my veins as my tires let out an ear-piercing squeal. The wind whips at the edges of my hair, sending the strands flying behind me like ribbons caught in the breeze as I fly into the first turn.

I feel my abdomen tighten as I lean sharply to the side, black jeans brushing against the molten asphalt. A low hiss escapes when my knee scrapes against the rough surface, tearing through the thin fabric.

Except I barely feel it, because the pain isn't real, not here.

Jude pulls out of the curve milliseconds before me, a blur of gray pulling a few inches ahead. I knew Jude was good; it was never a secret, and I'd seen him race before.

I'd even seen him beat Reign.

But he needs to be better than good to beat me.

Even though hundreds of people have stepped onto this unholy ground, including my siblings and friends, the Graveyard is *mine*.

An heirloom of sorts passed down by my father without even knowing it.

Every crack and pothole is burned into my body like instinct. I know the precise second to hit the brakes, when to slam the throttle. How far I can push my bike to the absolute limit before it loses its hold on the broken, unforgiving asphalt.

It's a game of inches, and I know exactly how to ride the razor-thin line between winning and crashing.

Jude purposefully swerves closer, close enough I can feel the heat radiating off his engine. His knee barely misses mine as we tear down the straight, the final turn looming ahead.

I know the only way I'm winning is if I get the inside lane.

My muscles coil, fingers tightening on the throttle, pulling ahead just enough that when I cut hard to the inside, Jude doesn't have a shot in hell of blocking me.

The only issue with that is the moment I hit the turn, I know I'm too deep. My tires skid against the blacktop, the whole bike shuddering violently beneath me. Metallic coins swell in my mouth as the back wheel fishtails, a split second of pure chaos where I swear to fuck I'm about to eat shit.

My knee touches the ground again, but this time, it's not just a scrape—it's a brutal grinding against the asphalt, shredding the fabric of my jeans, ripping through my skin.

I grit my teeth, forcing my body to lean harder, my leg on fire as I wrench the bike back into control. Goddammit, I do not want to get stitches tonight, but I can already feel the blood soaking through my jeans.

Pulling out of the turn, like I expected, Jude is still on my ass, pulling closer to my back tire. With him breathing down my neck, I don't have time to think as his front tire nudges my back wheel, a deliberate tap trying to throw me off-balance.

It's not enough to do damage, but it's enough to make my bike wobble.

"Motherfucker," I hiss, my teeth clenching so hard I'm surprised they don't crack.

I've seen him do this shit before, which means I have the advantage.

Let's play, Jude.

I throw my weight to the side, yanking the handlebars just enough to jerk my bike out of his path, creating the slightest gap between us. His bike veers to compensate, like I knew it would, a fly to fucking shit.

My wrist hammers on the throttle, and I shoot forward just as he tries to recover. Instead of pulling ahead, I swerve hard into his line, my shoulder brushing against his handlebars with just enough force to send him off-kilter.

It's subtle, but it's enough.

I hear the sound before I see it—his tires screeching against the blacktop as he tries to regain control. His bike fishtails, the back wheel sliding out from under him.

For a second, it looks like he's going to save it, but then his shoulder hits the ground, and he's skidding across the asphalt in a blur of black and gray, sparks flying as metal scrapes against the road.

I don't look back.

I catch a glimpse of him in my mirror, just a roll, some road burn, nothing fatal.

He'll be pissed, but he'll live.

Once again, he's cheated death at my hands.

The moment my tire crosses that faded orange line, I tighten the muscles in my stomach and yank back on the throttle, leaning into it until the front tire lifts off the ground and I become nothing but a cloud of smoke.

It's euphoria, and I am bathing in it. The crowd erupts as I ride out the wheelie for a few more seconds, knowing that each and every eye is on me, leaving Jude to pick himself up off the ground in the shadows.

When I finally let the front tire drop back onto the asphalt, the bike lands with a hard thud before I roll to a stop, letting the rush of victory settle into my bones.

I kick down the stand, sliding off my bike, the adrenaline still buzzing in my veins as I tug my helmet off. I barely have time to catch my breath before I hear the heavy sound of boots on asphalt, and I know, without even looking, who's coming.

Not even ten seconds and he's already breaking our deal.

Fucking Sinclairs.

When I turn, he's there, stalking toward me, helmet forgotten, shaggy hair sticking to his forehead, his face flushed with a mixture of sweat and anger. Road burn mars his shoulder, dirt and asphalt streaked across the hard lines of his skin. But it's his eyes that catch my attention.

Stormy, dangerous, the kind of look that says deal or no deal, he's not finished with me.

"Nice," he sneers, voice rough as gravel. "You gonna count that cheap shit as a win?"

I cross my arms, not moving an inch as he comes closer, our bodies inches apart now.

My chin lifts, defiant, and I flash him a grin that's all teeth. "I was just playing the game you started, Sin. Not my fault you can't handle losing."

Jude steps closer, and for a moment, I wonder if he's about to swing or say something that'll push me to take the first hit. His lips twitch like he's biting back something vicious, his breath hot as he leans in just enough for me to feel the tension between us spike.

"No matter how much you hate yourself for it, you can't unfuck me, Van Doren."

The words hit like a slap to the face, sharp and precise. His breath mingles with mine, hot and laced with challenge, as if daring me to deny it. My jaw tightens, but I refuse to let him see how deep he cuts.

Not here, not now.

I meet his eyes, refusing to flinch. "Maybe not. But I can sure as hell make you wish you never did."

For a second, neither of us moves, the space between us vibrating with the weight of everything unspoken. The crowd is still roaring, the night still alive with the buzz of victory, but here, in this pocket of silence between us, it's like time has stopped.

I track the twitch in his jaw, the hard cut of the muscle there, sharp enough to slice steel. His skin glows under the dim light, slick with sweat, and that feeling I got on the water tower? It rushes back in.

It floods my stomach, and I struggle to swallow it. Dirty, traitorous lust tries to crawl out of my skin, and I have no idea how to stop it.

Jude is catnip for me.

Every reckless and dangerous inch of him is the brand of trouble I love.

It's the kind that makes me numb. Gives me the kind of adrenaline that blacks out all of the pain, all the memories.

It allows me to just *exist*.

Without another word, Jude steps back, saving me from doing something stupid as he wipes a hand over his face. His eyes linger on mine,

an unreadable expression in them before he gives me one final remark.

“Already there, princess. Already there.”

I won the battle tonight.

But there is a deep sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that tells me this war?

It's just getting started.

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the dreamer

. . .

Jude

August 27

BEING TOLD NO ONE IS HIRING IN WEST TRINITY FALLS IS FAR MORE pleasant than applying for jobs in the Springs.

At least in the Falls, I'm treated like a human.

“Yeah, not gonna happen. Get lost, punk.”

The owner of Viva Coffee, a failed indie rock wannabe with breath that could strip paint, shoves a stack of papers into my chest. His greasy hair falls in front of his face as he jerks his head toward the exit. I watch as he turns to one of the nervous high school employees behind the counter.

“Trey, go get me a quinoa salad at Garden Front down the street. No onion. Are you competent enough for that today?”

I watch him pull out a crumpled wad of cash and toss it toward the kid. Trey's eyes dart around, his face flushed as he scrambles to comply.

Eight.

That's how many doors I've knocked on today in Ponderosa Springs. Eight rejections.

It's no surprise, but the sting is ever-present. Public humiliation and degradation are the toll I pay to avoid living under a bridge.

I'd even stooped so low as to apply here. A coffee shop desperately trying to be a place for the artistic and the outcast but instead feels like a

local joint for locals who fit the mold.

All day, I've kept my head down, trying to somehow shrink myself into something invisible, ignoring how people huddle together when I pass, their snarky rumors and theories swimming around my brain.

"Did you know his grandfather ran a sex ring?"

Step-grandfather.

"Oh my gosh, my mom told me his father killed, like, thirty people."

Nope. Only himself.

"I heard from my friend Stephanie that he's a drug dealer."

Retired drug dealer.

All day, different versions of these words have followed me. They're a shadow I've had attached to my toe my entire life. The moment I cross town lines, their whispers are roars in my ears. They're an echo in the hollow pit that was once my heart.

It'll never end, even if I claw myself out of here. The rumors will only grow over time, and I'll be more myth than I ever was human. A spooky story parents will tell their children beneath a blanket of a dark sky and the glow of a campfire.

Clones of clones. All the same. Sheep with no minds of their own.

"You want my advice?" Jack, the owner, returns his eyes to me.

I bite the inside of my cheek, forcing myself to keep my mouth shut because I know all the patrons on the old leather couches and wooden tables are watching, their ears straining to hear every word spoken. I wouldn't be surprised if someone was recording.

So now, I have to stand here and listen to this dude give me life advice, with no reaction.

"I'd leave town if I were you." He grabs my shoulder, giving it a squeeze that feels anything but reassuring. "No reason to stay in a place that doesn't want you now that your dad's dead. Eighteen, no family ties. The world is your oyster, big guy."

Big guy. Kid. Son. Sin.

None of them ever use my name.

The sharp hiss of the espresso machine rings in my ears as rage crackles in me. A fire that refuses to be put out. Believe me, I've fucking tried, but it's always there.

This town, these people, they just keep stoking the dying embers. Turning me into an open flame and expecting me not to torch them with it.

“Hello? Anyone home in there, mute?” Failed Jim Morrison snaps his fingers in my face.

I think I black out because one second, I’m biting my tongue, and the next, I’ve slammed Jack’s face onto the counter. His cheek slams into the surface with a thump, paired nicely with the gasps that ricochet around the coffee shop.

Now, I think he’s bitching when I flip the section of the counter used for staff to pass through, moaning and whining about how I’ll pay for this while I drag him by the collar of his shirt toward the shiny espresso machine.

That I’ll never see the light of day again after the police show up when I tell the barista in the middle of brewing a fresh shot of espresso to move. But I can’t really hear him over the heavy thud of my heartbeat in my ears.

I can’t bring myself to care as the blood in my veins warms and I feed that broken child in me a plate of long-overdue compensation. Whoever said revenge tastes better cold never swallowed it hot.

My hand shoves Jack’s running fucking mouth beneath the stream of steaming espresso. The dark brown liquid drowns out the sound of his screams as it blisters the soft tissue of his throat.

A grin folds across my face, even as I hear police officers bust through the front door of Viva Coffee.

“You want my advice?” I tighten my grip on the oily strands of Jack’s hair, hissing through clenched teeth, “Shut the fuck up.”

I release my hold on him the moment someone’s hands grab my shoulders. Even when the cold metal of the cuffs bites into my wrists, I don’t regret it. Not when I watch Jack curl into a ball on the floor, a stream of espresso swirled with crimson spilling across my shoes as he clutches his burning throat.

Monsters aren’t born. They’re built.

Not in sterile, bright laboratories with syringes of vile thoughts or bitter goals. No. They’re made in dark, crumbling homes where hope rots beneath the weight of silence. Where the walls echo with the cruel words of gossip and the scorn of those too cowardly to confront their own sins.

Monsters start as children. Wide-eyed and defenseless, too small to understand why the world is always sharper to them. They are sculpted by

hands that never knew how to hold them gently, by the shame pressed into their skin like fingerprints. The kind of shame that leaves eternal bruises.

These children, they grow. First in silence, then in anger. They learn not to cry but to sharpen their smiles into something cruel, something that cuts. They don't cry for help anymore—they grow teeth.

Teeth made for tearing through the world that fed them nothing but lies.

And when they bite back, the world gasps, clutches its pearls, quickly blaming faulty genetics or some cursed bloodline. No one wants to see their reflection in those broken children, to admit that *they* are responsible for stitching that monster together, piece by jagged piece.

They made me this way.

Easton Sinclair made me this way.

I was not born to be this person.

I was never meant to become this. This person with teeth bared and hands trembling with rage. But here I am, the creation of their careless cruelty, and I am everything they feared.

And nothing they could ever control.



JAIL MIGHT NOT BE TOO BAD.

As long as I'm kept in solitary confinement, I might actually enjoy it.

I drop my head against the wall behind me, the bare concrete caging me in as I watch the lightbulb overhead flicker, casting long, wavering shadows. There's a dull ache in my shoulder from being tossed around, the road rash there irritated and swollen if I had to guess.

I wanted to be pissed at Phi for wrecking me the other night, but the competitor in me, the one who enjoys the chaos the Graveyard brings, respected her for it. If the roles had been reversed, I would've done the same thing.

Just fucking blows that it was her.

Hey, if I'm in prison, I never have to deal with Phi Van Doren again.

It's the little things that make shitty situations better.

The holding cell is sparse, just two benches, a toilet in the corner, and a small window high up on the wall that lets in a sliver of daylight.

The adrenaline from earlier? Gone, replaced by a heavy, gnawing emptiness. But I can't deny the ease in my shoulders, can't bring myself to feel an ounce of regret.

It's quiet, save for the occasional clatter of footsteps and muffled voices from outside. It's just me and my thoughts, the only witness to the fury and pain that has simmered inside me for so long.

I enjoy being alone.

In silence, I can be whoever I want.

I'm both the creator and observer, the architect of my own thoughts. It's a refuge where I can breathe freely and exist without the weight of the world pressing down on me.

It's the only time I find peace.

The screech of metal grinding against metal rips me out of it. My eyes snap to the cell door, and I think, *You've got to be fucking kidding me.*

I'm starting to wonder if life's ever going to stop screwing me over. It's getting to be a bit much at this point.

"Espresso machine? Clever. I'll give you that."

Sage Van Doren stands there, a bright splash of color in this gray, forgotten space. Her light blue pantsuit is too neat, too clean for a place like this. Her red hair cascades in perfect waves over her shoulders, not a strand out of place, like she's completely unbothered by the chaos she's walked into.

"Come to schedule my court date with your husband?" I arch a brow, rubbing my raw wrists, soothing the ache from the cuffs I'd worn earlier.

"No need. Jack Jensen chose to turn the other cheek, thought pressing charges was unnecessary." Sage reaches into the bag over her shoulder, pulling out a few papers. "Your bail paperwork."

I flex my fingers, clenching my jaw as I think about Sage doling out money from her Prada bag to sweep my tantrum under the rug.

Did I want to go to prison for aggravated assault? No.

Would I *rather* go to prison than accept help from the Van Dorens? Fuck yes.

"Don't tell me you're still holding your breath," I mutter, crossing my arms in front of my chest.

"Turning blue."

It's said with a smirk, but pity lives in her coldly observant eyes. It lingers in the downturn of her lips, betraying her amusement with a hint of sadness, as if I'm some tragic figure in a play she never wanted tickets to.

Sage feels sorry for me.

Poor, pathetic, lonely Jude. All alone, trapped in a cell. Her chance to play savior to the broken boy, unaware that I'd grown up my entire life knowing she was the villain.

She doesn't get to be the hero in my story.

"I'm not some goddamn stray animal that you can adopt and turn into a loving house pet." My voice shakes with irritation, frustration creeping under my skin like fire ants. "Donate to another fucking charity for your tax write-offs. I'm not interested."

My hands ball into fists at my sides as I lean back against the cold cement wall. Why she keeps reaching out, I'll never understand. I snapped my teeth at their outstretched fingers enough at the will reading. By now, it's just stupid for her to continue.

I'd much prefer her to treat me like her husband does, like I don't exist. One confrontation was enough for him to know there would be no bridging the gap between his history with my father and our fucked-up present.

Her heels click against the concrete floor—expensive, designer, I'm sure—as she releases a deep sigh, finally breaking the silence.

"There are worse things than accepting my help."

I watch her take a seat on the bench to my left, folding her hands together in front of her. Those perfect red nails gleam under the harsh overhead lights. The look in her eyes makes me squirm, like she's trying to see past the walls I've built, like if she stares long enough, I'll crack.

"You give yourself too much credit."

She doesn't flinch. Instead, her gaze softens just a little, and it makes me sick to my fucking stomach.

"My family, especially my husband, are far from perfect, I'm not claiming we are. We know mistakes were made, Jude. But we are offering you something no one has. We can give you—"

"Trauma?" I cut her off with a bitter laugh. "Already got that, lady."

Her lips press into a thin line, but she doesn't rise to the bait. "A chance. A fighting chance. To be better. To prove them wrong. To be whatever you want in this life, Jude. That's it."

My skin prickles at her words, and I feel the familiar anger building in my chest. My voice is quick, harsh, like a whip cracking against bare skin. “Because you never gave my father one?”

I expect her to recoil, to stand up and leave, tail tucked between her legs. This isn’t a conversation she wants to have with me. It’ll leave her bruised and remembering a past she ran so far from she probably forgot it existed.

But she doesn’t budge.

Instead, she stays rooted to the spot, blue eyes narrowing into slits as one perfectly manicured eyebrow arches in defiance. “You think being an asshole is gonna scare me off? Sweetheart, I invented petty.”

I’d heard rumors, whispers about how brutal Sage Van Doren could be back in the day. I guess Phi had to get her silver tongue from somewhere.

“You’re not this stupid. Your mother graduated valedictorian, one of the smartest people I knew, and Easton was an asshole, but he wasn’t dumb. So I know for a fact you’re not stupid.” She pauses, letting the words settle in the air. “Which means you’re deliberately pissing away your potential for what? Your ego?”

“What is your deal, lady? Why won’t you drop this shit?”

“Your father and I were friends. Before everything, Easton was my friend.” Her voice softens, just a fraction. “I’d like to do this for the friend I once knew, for you. You deserve more than what Ponderosa Springs is offering you.”

Her *friend*. Her fucking friend?

Sage’s name is a chant that accompanied many of my beatings. A brutal song for a vicious dance I begged to stop swaying to.

Sage. Sage. Sage. Sage.

That’s what I heard over and over as the booze and drugs took my father to a place far from this earth and submerged him in a past consumed with the woman in front of me. The woman he’d loved and lost.

“*You took her from me!*”

He’d once screamed, face the color of freshly bloomed roses, before he shoved me down our stairs. It broke my collarbone in two different places, and the screws holding it together still fucking ache when I hear her name.

Even when he was sober, mind clear and rooted in the present, he’d spout endless monologue about his former fiancée, written pages and pages

of her disguised as fictional characters in spiral-bound notebooks.

“Guilt?” I scoff, leaning forward as my balled fists shake. “Whatever guilt you’ve got, you’re free of it. I release you, Sage. Let it go and leave me the fuck alone.”

They were able to escape their past.

I am still shackled to it.

And the shittiest thing? I wasn’t even alive to witness it.

“What if I told you I could guarantee your acceptance into Stanford next fall?”

I freeze.

The words hang in the air, and for a second, I forget to breathe.

“How—”

“There is little I don’t know and can’t find out, Jude.” She tilts her head, watching me closely. “You want Stanford? Rook is an alumni. You’re at Hollow Heights for one year. Let us help you for *one* year.”

It’s rare for dreams to exist in my world.

This is the only one I’ve ever clung to, fragile and elusive, like trying to catch smoke with bare hands.

The chance to rip myself free, leave this godforsaken town behind, and finally live on my terms. No shadows of the past. No ghosts whispering in my ear.

Just me and the life I know I was meant to have.

Stanford University is my ticket out. A means to an end. The Stegner Fellowship for writers they offer? That’s what I really want.

Ten spots. Only ten. And if I get one, I’d have two years. Two uninterrupted years to pour myself into the only thing that’s never left my side.

Writing.

When my father’s fists left me split open, my pen was there to catch the blood, and I used it as ink. When that retaliation fire gutted my house and left me sleeping in a filthy room at Whispering Pines Motel for weeks, words kept me company.

Through every bruise, every scare, every goddamn inch of pain I swallowed, writing stayed. It never wavered. Words filled the cracks in my soul, and the pages gave me my voice back after the world had stolen it.

The only dream I've ever had, and I want it so much it feels like it's eating me alive from the inside.

It's the only thing that's loved me back.

"I'm staying on campus. I don't need your help," I lie, my jaw tightening.

My eyes clash with hers, and I know she can see it. I know I can't hide it.

That hope in me—hope of capturing a dream—and she's dangling it in front of me like a fucking carrot.

"My best friend is the dean. I already know you missed the deadline for dorm applications," she challenges.

I hadn't bothered applying to Stanford while Dad was alive. Didn't even entertain the thought. I was resigned to Hollow Heights, chained to this place because he needed me. Because leaving meant letting him rot alone in that house.

Then he died.

He died, and when the ambulance came to haul his body away, I felt something like relief crawl under my skin, sharp and bitter. I was glad that he was dead. For a fleeting moment, I breathed clean air. No more suffocating in the fog of his anger. I could no longer feel his hands around my throat.

His death cracked open the cage I'd been trapped in for years, broke the chains I thought I'd die wearing.

I was free.

But it came too late. The deadlines had passed, and I was stuck here for another year, suffocating in this hellhole. One more year before I could claw my way out. One more year before I could even think about leaving it all behind.

And I had no idea how I was going to survive that long.

I grind my teeth, still fighting, still not wanting them to win. They'd taken so much, and now they wouldn't even let me keep my pride?

"You wanna help? Do what you're good at." I jerk my chin, feel the words rub against my raw throat. "Throw me some cash and call it a day."

"You don't need money," Sage mutters, standing slowly, pulling her purse higher on her shoulder. "What you need is family."

I look up at her, brows furrowed as she walks toward me, shoulders back, spine straight, and looking like she's won. Knowing she has me trapped in a corner with no place to go.

Family?

She wants me to come play house with them? Sit down for family dinners, pass the mashed potatoes, pretend like I didn't screw her middle child out of pure spite? Like the very mention of Phi doesn't make my blood boil, doesn't make me want to put my fist through the nearest wall?

She actually expects me to join their perfect little setup, act like I belong there, when every damn second of being around them is like sitting on a lit fuse? Pretend that I'm not carrying the weight of every bad decision they've made, all of which seem to orbit around me?

She's delusional if she thinks I'm just going to slot into their family like none of it happened.

A manic laugh spills from my lips, head shaking as I clutch my stomach. "You've lost your mind. I've got no desire to be a part of that fucked-up Brady Bunch."

"Tough. It's the only family you've got."

Her sentence is punctuated by the sound of my bail paperwork hitting the metal of my bench.

I don't want to move into that house. I don't wanna play house with them.

I want to fight this, to be bitter and tell her to fuck off.

But she's holding my dream in her palm. Right in front of me.

It's right there waiting for me to take it, and I don't have the guts to say no to it. I can't. Not when it's the only thing I've ever allowed myself to want in this life.

This secret, passionate thing that's no one else's, just mine, and I could have it. All I have to do is swallow my pride and move in with people who ruined my life.

Piece of cake.

My teeth bite into the flesh of my cheek, nostrils flaring as I meet her eyes.

"This is going to end terribly. You know that, right?"

Sage's lips tilt up at the edges, giving a little shrug of her shoulder, "Please, Jude. I've survived much worse. An unruly teenager's just a

Tuesday.”

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the room that whispers

. . .

Phi

August 29

PEACE DOES NOT EXIST IN MY LIFE.

It is always filled with some form of mayhem. If not from my own actions, then it comes from my dumbass brother and the Caldwell twins.

I slam my car door, glancing up at the arrow-shaped neon sign jutting out above the motel entrance. Streams of turquoise and pink light pierce through the fog, illuminating every puddle on the asphalt as I trudge toward the front door.

There I was, minding my business, having a solo movie marathon, when my phone rang. Ezra never calls me, and fearing someone was dead, I answered, only to find out they didn't have anyone sober to drive them home.

So not only did I have to change out of my Tardis-themed pajamas and put on real clothes, I also had to drive to the Wastelands to pick them up.

I will not know the definition of *calm Saturday night* until I relocate to Mars.

When I push the front door open, a couple of missing persons flyers trickle to the ground as the bell rings, the silvery sound echoing around the mismatched chairs that haven't been replaced since the eighties.

I don't think anything here has, including the small TV mounted on the lobby wall that is rattling with static, struggling to stay on.

"Welcome to Whispering Pines. Checking in or out?"

I glance at the battered front desk, a striking blonde sitting behind it. Her elbow is bent, chin resting on her palm as she mindlessly plays on the ancient computer.

"Just here to pick up some people."

Three fucking idiots, to be exact.

She pops her blue gum, continuing to stare at the screen. "Still gotta pay a nightly fee. Fifty bucks. Cash only."

"Right," I snort, reaching down the neck of my cropped tee, grabbing the money stashed behind my bra.

Cash only, code for no paper trail for all the illegal shit they allow.

"Here to save the Heartbreak Prince from breaking his neck?"

My heart drops to my ass, head snapping up. "What?"

She's looking at me now, fully aware of who I am. Her round cheeks turn a bright shade of pink at my furrowed brows, my anger swelling to the surface, making it clear on my face.

"Your brother. He—" she stutters, motioning with her hand toward the hall. "He's been promising to flip into the pool from the balcony all night."

I feel the tension in my shoulder release as my eyes begin to roll. Of course he fucking has. No death in the future for the oldest Van Doren, just stupidity. As per usual.

"Thanks for the heads-up..." I give a tiny smile, glancing down at her name tag. "Ever. Cute name."

My palm meets the wooden counter, sliding the money across and toward her.

"Oh, thanks." She huffs out a laugh, tucking a strand of practically white hair behind her ear. "Enjoy your stay."

With a thank-you, I head down the hallway. Once you navigate this shithole drunk enough times, it's a breeze when you're sober.

The floor beneath my boots is uneven, tiles chipped and cracked. A chill runs down my spine as shadows dance along the dingy, peeling wallpaper. Every time I come here, I can't help but think of how many people's last memory is of this place, their entire lives frozen inside this eighties relic on the side of a deserted road.

After the state rerouted the highway, the lack of traffic made Whispering Pines invisible. It stopped being a motel and became a tomb.

The owner doesn't care about new customers or town guidelines. It doesn't matter how debaucherous the parties get, how stepped on the drugs are, or how brutal the murders are, as long as he gets his cut.

We party here, we wreak havoc here, but everyone knows the golden rule.

You stay the night, you wake up missing.

Pushing open the heavy metal door at the end of the hallway, I immediately feel the atmosphere shift. Unlike the dying lobby, the courtyard is screaming with life.

It's heady, dirty, adrenaline-laced trouble. The only good things about West Trinity Falls. That itch beneath my skin builds, begging me to scratch it, to find a blunt and trouble.

But I can't 'cause I'm on babysitting duty tonight, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little bummed about it.

Moving from the doorway, I fight the urge to groan. None of them are answering their phones, so finding them is going to be like collecting fucking infinity stones.

I give a few waves to Ponderosa Springs's locals lounging under worn umbrellas, asking some of them if they've seen any of my guys. Which is a stupid move because everyone is so trashed I doubt they even know where they are.

Pausing by the pool's edge, I scan the U-shaped layout. It's a blur of movement and flashing lights, pumped full of reckless abandon, and the air smells of sex fused with weed.

I need a fucking blunt. I am far too sober for this shit.

A scream comes from the pool, drawing my attention. Girls bathed in an erratic neon glow are wrestling for each other's tops in the water. Sharp whistles come from the balconies of the second floor, horny dudes leaning over the rusty railings, cheering on their antics.

When I glance across the rectangular pool, I hit the jackpot. Or a partial jackpot.

Ezra Caldwell is sitting under a fake palm tree, a blunt in his lips, leaning against the plastic tree trunk, eyes closed in his own little world. I

should have known he'd be in whatever spot had the least amount of people.

I call his name a few times, but he doesn't budge, just sits there coated in a pink neon light as he blows out a cloud of smoke. It's not until I walk over and kick his black combat boots that his dark eyes pop open.

Red-rimmed and shining, as always.

"Phi?"

"No, it's the goddamn Easter Bunny," I shout above the music, taking a step back as he stands. "What the hell happened, Ez?"

"I just finished a gig at the Grove. Reign was supposed to DD." His lips twitch as he continues. "So I hit a dab, and after that, it's a little blurry how we ended up here."

My gut twists, knowing this isn't the time or the place to say anything, but I can't fucking remember a time when Ezra wasn't high on something.

So instead of pissing him off by bitching him out while he's stoned, I work on finding the next infinity stone.

"Where is Atlas?"

He runs a hand across the top of his black faux hawk. "I'm a twin, not a fucking GPS."

"Cut the attitude, jackass. Where is he?"

"Room thirteen, last I saw."

Yeah, that's what I thought.

The Caldwell twins have been a constant presence in my life since I was a baby. I know both of them the same way I know my siblings, and while they share similar features, they couldn't be more different.

Both have their father's inky-black hair and mother's smile. They have the same nose and freckles, but that's where the similarities end. Atlas exudes warmth, lighthearted and open. Meanwhile, Ezra has always preferred the dark, followed by an air of mystery and forever keeping people at arm's length.

Two sides of the same coin.

The infamous Saint and Shadow.

The two of them may not get along all the time, but no one is more protective than Ezra and Atlas. They'll have each other's back till the grave. Not even their conflicting personalities could tear that bond apart.

"Reign! Reign! Reign!"

My spine goes ramrod straight the moment the speakers start blaring some Justin Bieber song.

“Please tell me he isn’t—”

“He definitely is,” Ezra mutters beside me, his tone laced with amusement as he looks over my shoulder.

Following his gaze, I turn and look up to see Reign dancing his way past a few girls on the second floor. The top of his brown hair catches the light as he pushes his hood down, shedding the jacket.

Effortlessly, as if he does it for a living, he scales the railing, a mischievous grin spread across his face, revealing deep dimples that have never failed to get him his way. With fucking everything.

I cringe as he jerks his shirt over his head, tossing it to the crowd of girls below. Like hungry lions after a scrap of meat, they practically maul each other for it, and I am seriously fighting the urge to barf.

They would not be obsessed with this dude if they knew he still wears Superman underwear and has the worst-smelling feet in the world. The stench got so bad in high school, I threw out his favorite soccer cleats and refused to apologize for it.

With not a single fuck to give, he stands at the edge of the concrete balcony before launching forward. Reign completes a full flip before he meets the surface of the pool, sloshing water over the edges.

Idiot.

Despite myself, a small smile tugs at my lips.

He’s the life of the party when he’s drunk or high or both. Even on the day-to-day when he’s an asshole, he’s got a presence that feels too big for any room. Impossible to ignore, he’s just one of those people you have no choice in loving.

Reign’s the favorite of our family. Our parents wouldn’t admit it out loud, but everyone knows it’s true.

It’s not because of his natural athletic ability or his brash yet charming demeanor. He’s just kinda golden. Always has been.

Ezra and I stand side by side near the edge of the pool, mutely gawking at Reign, whose tongue is alternating between two different girls with no tops on.

“Ezzzzz,” I singsong, nudging him with my shoulder slightly. “You wanna fish the dog out of the water for me?”

“Fuck no.”

“Dude, please.” I pull my keys from my pocket, shaking them in my hand, trying to tempt him. “I’ll swing by Tilly’s on the way back.”

“You suck,” Ezra grunts, snatching the keys from me. “And you’re buying.”

“I’ll meet you at the car. Give me ten to grab Attie.”

I spin on the heel of my boot, intending to flee before he changes his mind and leaves me to get my brother out on my own. I hear him negotiate with a drunken toddler behind me.

“Goddammit, Reign. I’m too fucking high for this. No, do not take your pants off—”

Not bothering to stifle my laughter as I walk away, I weave through the crowds of people. The pulsing music and laughter thrums in my ears as I walk down the row of doors on the bottom level, counting the room numbers.

9...10...11...12...

Something sticky soaks the front of my body, and I let out a small gasp as I peer down at my drenched shirt. Beer trickles down my exposed stomach, clinging to my gold belly button ring.

“You look damn good wet, Cherry.”

Panic swells on my tongue, mouth watering like I’ve been chewing on pennies. Every ounce of blood pumping through me runs ice-cold.

“Don’t fucking call me that,” I bite, running a hand down the front of my shirt, trying to fling the beer off.

Oakley chuckles, tossing his head back from the force. That laugh lives in my nightmares, sinister and hollow. I’m afraid no matter how much time passes, I’ll never forget the sound.

“It’s my right to call you that. I own it.” He wears a slimy smirk like a badge, hands shoved into the front pockets of his blue jeans as he leans in close to my face. “That sweet fucking cherry. It’s still on my tongue, ya know?”

His gross breath skates across my face, bile crawling up from my stomach. My throat works, swallowing the urge to vomit. Painting on an unfazed smile, I slowly look him up and down with disgust.

The wind catches a few stray pieces of greasy brown hair tied back in a bun. His white teeth peek from behind his lips as he grins, secrets only we

know living behind his ratty eyes.

Oakley Wixx stole a lot from me, but he'll never get the privilege of watching me break.

Ever.

"Hope you savored it. It's the only taste you'll ever get of me."

I step to the side, trying to get around him so I can get Atlas and leave, but he mirrors my movement.

With a shake of his head, he clicks his tongue, grinning down at me.

"Not so fast. Catch me up, Phi. How's the vixen been? You been keeping that pretty mouth shut?"

My stomach lurches, vomit sitting in my throat as my anger physically manifests in my gut.

I know how to play this game with him. That's what this is—a twisted, fucked-up game with no winner. This is not the first time I've run into him since that Halloween night, and it won't be my last.

I paste on a cold smile, my voice sharp as a knife. "And embarrass myself? You're stupid if you think I'd tell anyone that a deadbeat drug dealer fucked me."

"Watch your mouth, bitch."

"Or what?"

His eyes turn to slits, charging closer.

I silently beg for him to touch me. I wish he fucking would give me an excuse to kill him in public. Add him to the list of souls Whispering Pines has stolen.

A vivid image of me shoving his face into my spinning bike tire hits me hard. It's so clear, the manic laugh that would bubble from me as the hot rubber peeled his skin clean off. I wouldn't ease up either, not until his body went slack and I was sure his heart stopped beating.

He'd die slowly, and when he tried begging for mercy, I'd lean in real close and say, *Be a good boy. It'll be over soon.*

Oakley lifts his hand, and as his mouth opens, so does the door right next to where we are standing.

"Only thing I love more than a threesome is getting to bash your skull in, Waster. Touch her and I'll be two for two tonight."

My need to puke doesn't drop when Oakley's hand does. I'm teetering on the edge of upchucking all over him. Which, when I think about it,

wouldn't be the worst thing to happen.

"I was just leaving, Caldwell. No need to get your panties in a twist." He jerks his chin toward me. "Isn't that right, Phi?"

When I turn my head, my eyes clash with my best friend's. The muscle in his square jaw twitches, eyebrow arching in silent question. My teeth sink into my tongue as I give him a little nod.

The tension from his shoulders doesn't let up, but I see his fingers flex out of their balled-up fists. He crosses his arms across his bare chest, turning sideways to let me in the hotel room.

There are few people in this world who know me better than him. In my utter silence, he hears me, and I think if I went blind, I'd still be able to see him.

Atlas Caldwell is my person. Everyone in this family has one, and he's always been mine.

Not sparing Oakley another glance or bothering with a parting jab, I slip inside the room.

"Unless you want a spin on my dick or to pick your teeth up from the ground, I'd get to fucking leaving."

I'm not sure if he replies or leaves; the only sound in my ears is my boots thumping against the grimy, brown carpet. I barely register the girl and guy still tucked in the dingy bed as I practically sprint past them.

The bathroom door rattles as I slam it shut just before my knees hit the filthy linoleum floor. My body is racked with gut-wrenching heaves as I violently empty the contents of my stomach.

All of my anger pours out of my body and into the toilet. Which is a dangerous thing when I'm in public. My anger gives me something to hold on to, and without it, I'm free-falling.

Anger, I can use as a shield.

Now, it's sitting in a disgusting toilet, and I'm left vulnerable.

My bones ache as I sink back against the side of the cold tub. Sweat beads at my hairline as I try to catch my breath. The acidic taste of vomit still coats my mouth, and I fucking wish I had a toothbrush.

This doesn't happen every time I see Oakley, but the past few run-ins have left me in a similar position.

On the outside, I can fake it. I can pretend what he did doesn't haunt me, with catty jabs and plastic smiles. If I let him see how ruined I am, he

wins. I refuse to give him that power over me.

But below the surface, there is a hatred so potent it's turned my heart the shade of spilled ink. The world will never be in full color again because of him. Wonder, hope, love. They are all tainted now. They aren't hues that exist on my palette anymore.

My head falls to the side, my gaze catching on something in the dim, flickering light of the motel bathroom. Lines of messy handwriting snake across the yellowing wallpaper, half-hidden by years of grime.

*Checked into a graveyard, that swallows people whole,
Sinks its teeth into weary souls.
I'm just a name that time forgot,
A boy that's been left to rot.
Ripped from a life I used to know.
Nowhere to stay, nowhere to go.
The perfect guest for this motel.
No one will miss, no one will tell.
Checked in for the night.
I'll stay for life.
My tomb will read,
Final resting place, room 13.*

-E

The words bleed into the wallpaper, a quiet confession carved out in shaky, desperate strokes. I reach out, tracing my fingers over the uneven script, feeling as if I'm touching the ghost of whoever wrote them. In this dingy, forgotten bathroom, their pain echoes my own, a kindred spirit buried in the walls of this place.

Carefully, I start to peel the wallpaper back, my movements slow and deliberate, as if pulling too quickly might tear the fragile connection between us. The paper gives way, and I fold the scrap, slipping it into my pocket like a secret. It's a token of solidarity, a bond with a soul as lost as mine.

“Wanna talk about it?”

Atlas's voice pulls me from the haze, and I flick my eyes toward him. He's leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed, his expression a mix of concern and patience. He's searching my face, looking for something I'm not ready to give.

"No," I grunt, forcing myself up from the floor. "Zip your pants. I promised Ezra Tilly's."

"Phi—"

"I'm fine, Attie," I cut him off, but there's a soft plea in my tone as I add, "I promise."

He doesn't call me out on the lie, though we both know it's there, hanging between us like the heavy silence that fills the room. Without another word, we head out to my car, the quiet stretching between us.

As the engine hums to life and we pull away from the motel, I can't shake the feeling that the boy who wrote those words never escaped room 13. But his pain, scrawled across that dingy wallpaper, found a way out.

And it makes tonight feel worth the pain.



"CAN YOU BE ANY FUCKING LOUDER?" I HISS, TURNING AROUND AND glaring at Reign as he clumsily fumbles into the wall.

It's a little past midnight, and my hopes of not waking our parents are going down the drain. I should've taken Atlas up on his offer to help 'cause now I'm left to deal with a drunken toddler solo.

Reign falls, landing on the tiny velvet couch by the entryway. It groans beneath his weight, looking absurdly small with his large body laid across it. He laughs to himself as he tries to toe his Jordans off his feet.

Universe, give me strength, please.

Wanting to get him into bed as quickly and quietly as possible, I walk over and kneel down, the cold marble pressing against my knees through the plush Persian rug. The smell of tobacco and booze rolls off him like a tsunami, mingling with the faint scent of expensive cologne that clings stubbornly to his clothes.

"You reek," I mutter, my fingers working at the stubborn knots in his laces.

He scoffs, leaning his head back against the wall, eyes half-lidded. “Pot’s cool, but cigarette smoke is where you draw the line?”

In this light, he’s not the self-centered jackass everyone thinks he is. Reign’s normally razor-edged features are softened. He shifts slightly, his broad shoulders sinking further into the couch. The expensive fabric seems to swallow him, as though it’s trying to absorb the mess he’s made of himself tonight.

This guy isn’t the Heartbreak Prince or Ponderosa Springs’s hotheaded soccer star.

Right now, he’s just my brother.

“Nicotine smells like lung cancer. Weed smells like escapism.”

I tug the lace free, sliding off his right shoe. The soft thud of the shoe hitting the floor is muffled by the thick rug.

“You make no sense.”

“The universe is under no obligation to make sense to you. If the cosmos don’t owe answers, neither do I.”

Reign laughs again, his broad shoulders shaking with the effort. It’s a sound that echoes through the silent, cavernous space, bouncing off the high ceilings and ornate crown molding.

“You hated wearing shoes.”

“Huh?” I ask, looking up to see his familiar lopsided grin.

“When you were little, you refused to wear shoes.” He points to the ground, voice a little slurred. “Until your amazing big brother told you they gave you superpowers.”

Unable to stop myself, a smile tugs at my lips as I pull off his left shoe. The worn leather warm in my hands, I toss it behind me to join the other.

I clear my throat, speaking in a singsong voice. “Left shoe first, you’re strong as can be. Right shoe next, you’re quick as a bee.”

Apparently, I’ve forgotten all about waking our parents as we start to laugh while I guide him up the stairs. Our giggles mingle together as I get him into his bedroom.

It’s real and fills my belly with warmth.

When I was adopted, he was five months old. I was his little mimic, and without his knowledge, he was teaching me. Taking his first steps, speaking his first word, and anything else he attempted, I followed suit a few months later.

Everything I learned, I got from Reign.

“I fell in love tonight,” he announces, voice muffled as he collapses face down onto his bed, fully clothed and utterly unbothered by the world. The heather-gray comforter crumples beneath him, a soft rustle of fabric filling the quiet room.

I scoff, leaning against the doorframe with my arms crossed. “You’re always fucking in love, dude.”

It’s not an exaggeration either. He’s a love slut. Every day, three times a day, he’s in love. Which is exactly why women can’t get enough of him. They’re drawn to his relentless declarations that each new girl is *the one*.

“No,” he groans into his pillow. “She’s the one. She’s mine.”

I let out a breath, half a laugh, half a sigh, and walk over to the foot of his bed. The room is dim, lit only by the soft glow of the moon filtering through the thin curtains, casting a bluish tint over everything.

Grabbing one of the blankets that’s haphazardly thrown at the bottom of the bed, I toss it over his body.

“Whatever you say, Casanova.”

By the time I leave, he’s already snoring softly, his breathing steady and peaceful.

With a quiet sigh, I step out of his room, the door clicking softly shut behind me. The spiral staircase groans under my weight as I descend, each creak echoing in the stillness of the night. The darkness presses in, the faint light from the windows doing little to dispel it, and for a moment, it feels like the house itself is holding its breath.

When I reach the kitchen, the familiar scent of coffee and lingering spices from dinner envelops me, a small comfort in the quiet. It’s dimly lit, the only illumination coming from the soft green glow of the stove’s clock, casting long shadows across the countertops.

I reach for a glass, the cool surface smooth and reassuring against my fingers, and fill it with water from the tap. The rush of water is the only sound, steady and soothing, grounding me in the present. But as I lift the glass to my lips, something catches my attention—a faint murmur, barely audible over the quiet.

In the silence, my ears strain to pick up the hushed sound of voices. My brows knit together in confusion as I set the glass down on the counter. I

move cautiously, my socks sliding soundlessly along the cool kitchen floor as I tiptoe toward the source of the murmurs.

The heavy wooden doors to Dad's office are slightly ajar, a sliver of golden light spilling into the hallways. I pause just outside, my heart thudding in my chest as I peer through the small opening.

"I'm a judge, Sage. I *am* the court approval. We can give him access to the trust tonight."

"Then what? Let him continue down a path he doesn't deserve to be on?"

My parents stand in front of a teakwood desk, their bodies angled toward one another, the tension unmistakable. Confusion knots my brows together as I lean in closer.

What the hell are they talking about?

"We owe that family nothing. Not after what they did, or did you just forgive and forget all of that?"

"Fuck you, Rook. My twin sister was murdered. Coraline was nearly trafficked. There is a list of shit I'll live with forever. No one forgot what Stephen Sinclair did to us."

A cold chill racks my spine. Mom's usually soft blue eyes have turned into flames, searing straight through the bone. I love her with every fiber of my being, but she's also the one woman I'd never cross.

I've only seen this version of my parents a few times. They love each other in a...tangible way. You can see the embers and sparks, feel it like a warm fire after years of winter.

But sometimes, it scorches.

"Then why are you so hell-bent on letting Jude into this house?"

"Jude deserves the help we could never give Easton. He is innocent in this, and you can't see past your hatred for his father long enough to see that."

My chest seizes at the sound of his name. That familiar gnawing of guilt builds in my stomach.

Dad doesn't speak for a moment, and the silence stretches between them, heavy and suffocating.

There is no way, no fucking way, this is happening. Jude can't move in here. He can't.

“Did you forget why you took the judge’s seat or what it’s like to live in the shadow of a shitty father? This is a kid, one who is a lot like you were at his age.” Mom’s expression softens just a fraction, her hands tugging her cream cardigan across her body. “Alistair has tried for years to be part of Jude’s life. We all are trying to move on. Why can’t you?”

“Because you almost died, Sage!” Dad’s voice is measured, but there’s an undercurrent of something darker—something I’ve only seen glimpses of—and it makes me flinch. “I held you every night for years before the nightmares stopped. I spent months of our relationship terrified I’d lose you to memories I can never save you from. I had to watch you slowly wither away until you found your way back.”

Those words hang in the air, heavy and raw. I can see the pain that’s never really gone away on his face as he drags a tired palm down his mouth.

The scent of Dad’s cigars wafts out, mixing with the faint smell of Mom’s perfume—usually comforting, but now it feels suffocating, like it’s choking me.

For the past four years, I’ve destroyed myself to protect this family. Sacrificed love to make sure they were safe. If Jude moves into this house, he’ll do everything to make sure it’s in vain.

It’ll be nothing but a constant reminder of Halloween night, of what he knows happened. And a living, breathing memory of my broken loyalty for a night of self-destructing pleasure.

I knew screwing him was wrong, our families too intertwined, the history too dark and painful. But I was drunk on him, addicted to the fire in his touch, and having him under the same roof will make it almost impossible to resist.

Mom’s face softens, and without hesitation, she steps forward and wraps her arms around my father. Immediately, the tension in his body seems to fall away, head dropping to her forehead.

“I’ll follow your lead anywhere, TG. You know that. But I cannot lose you or this family to a Sinclair again.” His voice is muffled against her light red hair.

“He is not Easton. You’re going to have to trust me on that because Jude Sinclair is a part of this family now.”

Fury ignites inside me, scorching my insides until I can barely breathe.

No. Jude Sinclair doesn't deserve to be part of this family.

I want to unleash everything boiling inside—every ounce of rage, every jagged piece of pain—until my throat is raw and my voice is nothing but a shredded whisper. It would be so damn easy to tell them about Oakley, to explain that my hatred for Jude has nothing to do with his last name.

This isn't about history. This is personal.

My throat works, knowing all I'd have to say is that Jude threatened to toss me off a water tower, and he wouldn't just be homeless.

He'd be fucking dead.

But the words, sharp and ready, lodge in my throat like shards of broken glass. They cut deep, turning into acid that burns as I swallow them down.

Helping Jude means something to Mom. I can't walk in there and rip that away from her, no matter how badly I want to. No matter how fucking hard this is going to be.

I despise Jude, but I love my mom more.

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the rule

· · ·

Phi

August 31

“RISE AND SHINE! OR AT LEAST RISE. THE SHINE IS OPTIONAL.”

My eyes crack open, sunlight pouring in from my balcony doors trying to blind me. I roll onto my stomach, burying my face into the pillow, contemplating which is worse.

The nightmare I just woke up from or the one I’m currently living.

“Let me die.”

“No can do, sugar tits.”

“Dude, it’s...” I groan, turning my head and squinting at the clock, but without my contacts, it’s just a blur. I fumble around until I find my glasses and slip them on. “Six thirty in the morning. I don’t have class till nine. Why the hell are you waking me up?”

I’d planned on skipping class, wrapping myself into a blanket burrito and playing sick. That way, I didn’t have to be part of the Jude Sinclair welcome party today.

My mother baked fucking cookies.

Cookies.

“*To make him feel more welcome,*” she’d said.

I offered to crank the heat up in the house; I figured sweltering temperatures would remind Lucifer’s apprentice of his own home. That I

wish more than anything he'd fucking return to.

“Caught some waves a few hours ago, came home, and we were out of Froot Loops. Figured you had a secret stash in the pantry. Oh, and Gauntlet location just dropped.”

For the first time since I overheard the news about Jude, joy blossoms in my chest. Forcing my body to sit upright, I extend my grabby hands toward Atlas, who has made himself at home in my room, lounging in my desk chair, casual as ever, that lazy grin on his face.

He's idly petting Galileo, who's dead to the word in his lap, my half-blind cat oblivious to everything except the warmth of Atlas's body.

“Let me see!” I practically shout.

Atlas obliges, tossing his phone on my bed for me to grab.

The fact that he's been sitting here for God knows how long should probably disturb me. But it's Atlas, and most of everything he does is thoughtless.

Unknown number: Gallows Reef. 10:30pm. 9/13.

“If it's surfing, you're fucked this year.”

I look up at him with a playful glare, grabbing a pillow and hurling it at his head. He catches it easily, his reflexes sharp from years of surfing, and tosses it back to the end of my bed.

I hope to fuck it's not anything water related. We lost last year, and I'd really love not to repeat that. Wasters didn't shut up for months about it.

The Gauntlet is my favorite town secret.

Every year, West Trinity Falls and Ponderosa Springs go to war, and the rules are simple: no game is ever repeated, and if you choose the game, the enemy picks the location. It's all run by faceless figures from each town, ensuring fair judgment for winners.

It used to happen like clockwork on the first day of spring, but when things got out of hand and kids started dying, the hosts got sneakier. Now, the date's a mystery, dropped just days before.

This is exactly what I needed.

A distraction.

“Question,” Atlas says, pulling me from my thoughts, “Do you guys have to introduce Jude as your brother now? Foster brother? Fo-Bro?”

Sometimes, I think he just says the first thing that pops into his brain. No filter, no hesitation, just speaks and hopes for the best.

“If you and Ezra don’t have to claim him as your cousin, I’m sticking with roach,” I mutter.

Roach is me being nice.

Years ago, when I found out about Jude being Alistair’s half nephew, I’d been devastated.

It still irritates the living shit out of me. Knowing he was tethered to the Caldwells in a way I never would. I’ve craved some kind of biological thread to connect me to my family for as long as I can remember, and Jude takes it for granted.

It might have been the very first thing I wrote down on my list of all the reasons I hate Jude.

“Touché, pussy cat.” He grins, nodding in my direction. “Why’s he moving in *here*? Dad’s his only living relative. I mean, I’m fucking stoked I’m not sharing a house with the guy, but it makes more sense.”

“Some bullshit will.”

“So no sibling bonding time for you?”

“I’d rather play in traffic,” I deadpan.

Jude’s too big for this house. All six foot five of him. He doesn’t belong here—this house, my space, was never meant for him.

I share my body with people. That’s fine, I don’t care. It’s a flesh suit that I use to bring myself fleeting pleasure. I fuck them before they fuck me. It’s on my terms.

The pieces of me in here? They belong to my soul, and no one, especially him, gets that.

“Whining about it isn’t gonna help.” Reign’s voice cuts through the room as he strides in, his white shirt stained with grass and still damp from what I assume was soccer practice.

What the hell is up with everyone being up at the ass crack of dawn for athletic activities today?

“Oh, because you’re so thrilled about him showing up?” I retort, raising an eyebrow. “Didn’t you just threaten to kick his ass at the Graveyard two weekends ago?”

“Don’t forget the time he stole his girlfriend on the playground,” Atlas chimes in, his brown eyes twinkling with amusement. “He cried about that shit for an entire day.”

“I didn’t say I liked him. He’s a shady prick that I don’t want in my house,” Reign grunts, flipping his hat backward and leaning on my dresser. “I said, bitching isn’t gonna change anything. He’s coming. We have to deal with it.”

“Yeah, that’s too much family drama for me,” Atlas drawls.

He pets Galileo one last time before setting her on the floor, then stands, his hand naturally ruffling my hair as he passes by.

In every existence, in alternate realities, this is how I will recognize Atlas. The same goodbye gesture he’s been doing since we were toddlers, his hand mussing my hair.

“I’m right next door if you need anything, Phi-fi-fo-fum,” he says, pausing by my bed, inky, saltwater curls peeking out from beneath his beanie.

“Sketchy shit included?” I smirk. “Like a prank on the roach?”

He grins. “You name the time and place. I’m there.”

Atlas may think I’m joking, but I’m dead serious.

If he thinks living here is gonna be sunshine and rainbows, he’s fucked in the head. The only, and I do mean only, thing good about Jude moving into the bedroom next to mine is I can gather intel.

I can figure out what his weaknesses are, what he loves (if his cold, dead heart is capable of that sorta thing), what scares him. Bedrooms and the things they hold are sacred. He’s bound to have something he doesn’t want anyone to find out about in there.

Something I can use against him. To make sure he keeps his fucking mouth shut. The last thing I need right now is him spilling the beans at breakfast and my dad stabbing him with a butter knife.

I watch Atlas walk toward the door, exchanging one of those bro hugs and a few words before disappearing. Lucky bastard gets to escape the impending doom about to descend on our house.

Kicking the covers off my legs, I swing them over the edge of the bed. My wallowing in self-pity is officially ruined, so my next plan is to see if I can drown myself in the shower.

Sure, my parents have the money to put me up in an apartment, but they don’t trust me enough on my own. I mean, until four months ago, I thought I’d be in Massachusetts. All the way across the map, a fresh start. I’d planned my entire future around it.

Funny how life can turn on a dime. One letter, cold words that began with, *We regret to inform you that after careful consideration, we have decided to revoke your offer of admission to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology*, and ended with a polite, *Thank you for your understanding*.

The urge to send a letter back with a picture of my middle finger and *you're welcome* drawn across it was strong. But Andy quickly talked me back from that ledge.

I even tried for a last-minute dorm at Hollow Heights, only to be told that all the freshman spots were filled. The dean doesn't play favorites either, so asking Aunt Lyra was out of the question.

So, here I am, stuck with two choices: deal with my new roommate or die.

I head for my closet, noticing Reign lingering by the door, which means he's got something to say. And if I had to guess, it's going to piss me off.

“Something you'd like to say, or are you gonna just stand there?”

“Stay away from Jude.”

My brow furrows, turning to look at him.

He's joking, right? But as I study his face, features strikingly similar to our dad's, I see that he is dead serious.

Carefree, drunk Reign from the other night? Gone.

The overprotective, sober asshole has arrived.

“No worries there, dude,” I snort dismissively. “What crawled up your ass and—”

“I mean it, Phi. Stay away from him.”

Oh.

This isn't about protecting me from Jude. It's about protecting our family from *me*.

Bitterness builds in my throat, bile working its way from the pit of my stomach. My arms fold in front of my chest as if to defend myself from whatever comes next. Like it might lessen the blow somehow.

“What exactly are you trying to say, Reign?”

“I'm saying I know you. One rule. Dad gave us one rule. That rule is about to be our pseudo-foster sibling.”

Do not trust a Sinclair. Ever.

I don't remember how old I was when I first heard my dad say those words, but I do know it was the only time I was afraid of him.

What happened with Jude was more than just sex.

“You were a fucking traitor that night, and you loved every second of it.”

I slowly nod, lips pressing into a tight line. “And you think I’m going to fuck him because I’m a self-destructing whore with low impulse control. That sound about right?”

“I think you’re selfish. Hell-bent on hurting the people who love you. Fucking around with Jude is a great way to do that.” Reign’s voice is hot coals pressed against the soles of my feet, the heat forcing me to break his gaze.

Trauma isn’t confined to the person who endures it. Its impact ripples outward, touching everyone in its path.

I’ve done to my family the same thing Oakley did to me. No one is to blame for that but me. But the hurt Reign feels right now is better than the alternative.

“Thanks for the lecture. Golden child as always.” Bitterness drips from my tongue like venom. “How would this family survive without you and your goddamn high horse?”

Reign and I, we used to be close.

That was before, and now, we live in the after.

There is no one my brother is more loyal to than our parents, and when I hurt them? When I changed and didn’t have a solid answer to why?

My very first friend became a stranger.

Our bond snapped in half, cracked like brittle bones, leaving us standing on opposite ends of the earth with no way to bridge the gap and the shards of our relationship beneath our feet.

Reign pushes off the dresser, fury in every step until he meets me in the middle of the room.

“You’ve put Mom and Dad through hell the last four years. Vandalism, stealing, threw your entire future in the goddamn trash. All for them to forgive you every single fucking time.” His chest heaves with each word, brows furrowed with anguish and broken anger. “Make me the bad guy. I don’t care, but don’t do this to them. You do and there will be no one to bail you out next time.”

I flinch at his words, each one a knife. Old wounds I’d sewn up with bloody fingers are carved open, the feeble stitches useless.

Slash after slash, I have no choice but to endure it. Just grit my teeth and hope that after this is over, there will be something to stitch back up.

My fists tighten at my sides, tears threatening to spill, my eyes stinging with unspoken pain. I've committed the ultimate betrayal to Reign.

I'm not his sister. I'm a person who has hurt this family, and nothing short of the truth will change that.

Biting my lip hard enough to draw blood, I meet his gaze.

"You done?"

"That's all you have to say to me—"

"Are. You. Done?" I bite out each word, my teeth clenched so hard I can feel the tension vibrating through my skull.

He runs a hand over his buzzed hair, letting out a scoff that's more of a growl than a laugh. "Yeah, Phi. I'm done."

The door slams shut, but it keeps rattling long after he's gone, echoing with the force of his anger, vibrating through the walls and into my bones.

I move on autopilot, numb and detached, as I walk to the en suite bathroom, pretending none of that just happened. The cold floor bites at my bare feet, the only sound in the otherwise suffocating silence, before I reach the shower and turn on the water.

I don't even bother taking off my clothes.

Just step through the open glass door and collapse to my knees under the scalding spray, the water burning my skin, a punishment I don't fight. The smooth, pebble-like stones on the floor press into my knees, grounding me as I curl into myself, folding under the weight of everything I don't know how to carry anymore.

And then, I shatter.

My hand flies to my mouth, desperate to muffle the choked cries that claw their way out of my throat. I press the other hand to my stomach, as if I can somehow hold myself together, keep this deep, relentless ache from devouring me whole.

Being seen as the disaster, the vixen, the girl who doesn't care—it's a role I've played so well in Ponderosa Springs that it's almost second nature.

But knowing Reign sees me that way? Knowing Mom, Dad, and even Andy probably do too? It's worse than I ever imagined.

All I've ever wanted was for them to give up on me, to finally see there's nothing good left inside. My actions are erasing all of the good

memories they have of me, leaving behind only this catastrophic version of myself.

This is what I wanted. It's better this way—it'll make it easier for them to move on when I disappear from their lives. It will be better for everyone then.

They'll be happier without me in Ponderosa Springs.
But it doesn't make it hurt any less.

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the judge

...

Jude

August 31

I FEEL FUCKING *DIRTY* BEING HERE.

Everything in the Van Doren house screams wealth.

I don't mean just monetarily wealthy. It's worse.

It's rich in love. The kind you can feel in every perfectly framed family photo, in every careful brush of paint on the walls. It's suffocating, really. A gluttonous amount of togetherness, of everything I've never had.

My dad blew every penny he ever touched on booze, women, and whatever fix he could get his hands on. We had money sometimes, but love? That was never in the budget. Our house in West Trinity Falls—the one he died in—was just as broken as the man who raised me. Yellowing linoleum, wallpaper that peeled in every corner, cracks running along the ceiling like veins, like the place was barely holding itself together.

But here? Here, everything shines. It's too perfect, too clean, like even the air has been polished and buffed. Marble floors that gleam like they've never known dirt, surfaces that reflect too much light.

It makes me feel like I can't touch anything.

Not without living dirt behind. Every step of the tour Sage gave me, I kept looking down, just to make sure I wasn't dragging ash and soot across their spotless world.

The moment Sage left me alone, I sprinted for the shower.

But it doesn't matter. It never matters how many showers I take.

I'll never be able to scrub the grime of my past off my skin. The scars are too deep, bruises too permanent. I could rub my flesh raw, and the nights spent flinching from my father's fist would remain etched into me like tattoos I never asked for.

There is something filthy in my veins that nothing could ever wash clean, and as I look down, hot water streaming down my shoulders, I half expect to see thick sludge pooling into the drain.

I slam my fist against the wall in the shower, all the steam making the road rash eating up my shoulder sting like a fucking bitch.

Again, the cracking of my bone against marble rings in my ears.

Again, again, again, again.

I do this until the only color swirling down the drain is red, deep crimson leaking from the cracked skin of my knuckles. My muscles ache in protests as I drag a shaky hand down my face.

This place is a house of mirrors. It's fucking hell.

Everywhere I go, I catch my eyes in the reflection. The eyes my father gave me.

I'm painfully reminded of who I am.

That I'm a Sinclair. No matter where I go or how I change, *that* will never change.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

My brows furrow as I turn my head to the bathroom door, expecting someone to knock or burst inside, but silence follows. I strain my ears, listening above the running shower for another noise. I'm about to brush it off as one of the Van Doren children getting home until the floorboards in my bedroom let out a whiny creak.

It had only been me and Sage here earlier, but someone is definitely home now, and they're in my newly appointed bedroom.

I push open the glass door, snatching the gray towel on the hanger and encircling it around my waist, making sure to keep the shower going. Just to make sure whoever is snooping doesn't hear it cut off and bolt before I catch them.

Water drips from my hair as I walk toward the door, cracking it just enough to see into the bedroom. Steam rolls from the opening, and when it

clears I catch my Peeping Tom.

Well, well, what do we have here?

Seraphina Van Doren has her back to me and is rifling through my shit like a rat.

She plucks a thing of condoms from the drawer in my bedside table. Her dainty fingers pull it open before she peers inside, searching for fuck knows what inside the Magnum box.

When Phi doesn't find what she's looking for, she tosses it back inside the drawer. My lips twitch as she lets out a frustrated huff as she stands straight, cherry-colored waves brushing right above the hem of her jeans.

I'm about to call her out from where I stand, but then she moves one of the pillows, revealing the black spiral-bound notebook hidden beneath it, and my blood runs cold.

"Keep your sticky fucking fingers to yourself, shithead."

I rip the book from her hand after crossing the short distance from the bathroom to her.

Phi whirls around, her eyebrows to her hairline, shocked to see me and even more shocked that I'm partially naked.

There are three things I notice immediately now that she's facing me.

One, Phi is definitely checking me out.

It's not subtle. Not by a long shot. She's straight-up devouring me with her eyes.

Her gaze dips to my bare chest, lingering like she's memorizing every line, and when it slides lower to the towel slung low on my hips, her cheeks flush with that telltale blush. A dangerous, deep pink that makes it clear she's seeing more than she's supposed to, and she likes it.

Two, she's got on what some might call a shirt.

But it's more like a tit-hugging scrap of fabric, with bold red letters that read *Make Boys Cry*.

And three, she's not wearing a bra, and my cock is the first to notice. The cropped white material strains over the swell of her breasts, nipple piercings pressing against it, begging for my teeth.

Her wild, endless red hair is damp, cascading down one shoulder in a tangled mess. No makeup, nothing but raw, furious beauty—better than any eyeliner could ever hope to be.

Goddamn, she's hot. So mind-numbingly hot that I almost wish I hated myself a little more just to use it as an excuse to fuck her again.

"You can't be looking at your new foster brother like that, Geeks," I murmur, a slow, arrogant grin playing at my mouth.

That blush deepens, but I'd be stupid to think she'd admit to eye-fucking me. Not in this lifetime.

"Oh, sorry, I was trying to disassociate from this fucking nightmare."

Bullshit.

Phi says that, but I catch the way her eyes flick to my chest again, the necklace dangling at the hollow of my throat. She wants me so fucking bad she can't stand it.

It's all over her, like a rash she can't hide.

She just doesn't wanna be responsible for what happens after she takes what she wants.

I let out a low chuckle, shaking my head I lean over to shove my notebook beneath the pillow once again. "Sure you were, princess."

"You should find a better hiding spot for your diary. Wouldn't want it falling into the wrong hands," she teases, crossing her arms in front of her chest like she's got all day to annoy the shit out of me.

My eyes roll as I stand up straight. "Didn't know there'd be a human raccoon rifling through my shit, but duly noted."

"So, it *is* a diary? That's cute," she shoots back, her lips curving in that maddening way.

"Why are you still here, Phi?" I tilt my head, narrowing my gaze as I study her. "We had a deal, right? I hate to break it to you, but I'm not interested in fucking you again."

Her eyebrow arches, and I can see it, the defiance, the need to prove me wrong. She's good at that, turning every word I throw at her into some kind of challenge. Phi thrives on attention, and if she doesn't get it, she'll claw it out of you, kicking and screaming if she has to.

This back-and-forth game we play? Trying to out-hate each other? I'm done with it. I've got my reasons for not liking her, and she knows them. This isn't something I want to keep hashing out just so she can watch me lose my temper.

I *need* this year to fly by, to go as smoothly as possible, so I can get the fuck away from here.

That won't happen if her dad and brother try to kill me because we got a little too close behind a closed door. Which is what will happen if we keep at it, especially when all that's separating me from her hot mouth is a towel.

Arguing with her? It's like foreplay. We rile each other up until someone snaps and sheds the first piece of clothing.

Sex with Seraphina Van Doren is a fucking death wish.

It was good, but I'm not risking my future for an orgasm.

"Trust me, Sinclair. I'd rather stick forks into my eyes than touch you again, but don't be a liar, Jude." She flicks her gaze down, right to where my dick's pitching a tent beneath the towel slung around my waist, then wrinkles her nose. "It's not a good look, dude."

God, I want to tear that smug little grin off her face, rip that pride she's holding on to into pieces with my teeth.

I release a heavy sigh, crossing my arms over my chest, forcing my body to relax despite the lust pooling in my gut.

"My dick's not blind, and you know what they say about you, Van Doren."

"Oh yeah?" She cocks her head, daring me. "Enlighten me, Sin. What do *they* say about me?"

I step closer, closing the distance between us. Her breath hitches, just for a second, but it's enough. Enough for me to know she feels this tension. The pull. That dark, slithering thing between us that neither of us wants to acknowledge, but it's there anyway.

Lurking beneath the surface, just waiting for one of us to break. To give in.

I hook a finger into the waistband of her jean shorts, yanking her close until her palms land on my chest. My teeth grab at my lower lip the moment her waist rubs against the towel, stirring my cock beneath the fabric.

Phi's a pretty liar.

Smooth and won't think twice about lying to get what she wants. But the truth, her truth, it lives in her eyes. And right now, hers are drowning in desire, dancing in pools of lewd want.

I could kiss her right now, and she'd let me. She'd let me do whatever I wanted as long as I promised to take that ache between her pretty little

thighs away. I could fuck her raw on this bed, with her parents just down the hall, and the only thing she'd have to say is *more*.

My finger slides below her chin, lifting it up as my voice drops to a whisper. "Hottest piece of ass from here to the Falls."

This is the first time I've been this close to her in the daylight, and I tilt my head, curiosity getting the better of me as I study her.

Green.

Her eyes are green—soft, translucent, like sea glass worn smooth by the ocean.

It's a pity a girl with eyes this beautiful has such a savage fucking heart.

"But that's boring. Easy. And I'm not interested in easy." I flip her chin as I take a step back, forcing myself to put distance between us.

The blood from my knuckles stains her chin, a crimson mark left behind. She'll have to walk around this house with my blood marring her skin until someone either asks her about it or she looks in a mirror. Either way, she'll remember this little conversation and just how easy I could get her to cave if I wanted.

Her lips press into a thin line, the flush spreading from her cheeks to her neck, and I know, whether she likes it or not, I've hit a nerve.

Good.

She holds my gaze for a second longer, her jaw clenched tight. I'm sure she had a plan creeping in here, trying to find dirt on me, and now she's gonna leave horny and irritated she failed.

Technically, I'm doing her a favor.

Pissed off and wet is her best look.

Phi's mouth opens, but whatever comeback she's got ready dies on her red lips.

A knock at the door freezes both of us in place, like we've been caught.

Rook Van Doren's voice cuts through the silence, sharp as ever. "Jude, mind talking to me in my office?"

I don't bother hiding the smirk that tugs at my mouth. If I had my phone on me, I'd snap a picture of Phi's face right now. Her eyes are wide as hell, like a deer caught in headlights, and there's nothing but raw, unfiltered fear swimming in them.

She likes to act tough, like she's untouchable, this *vixen* who devours boys like her morning snack. But it's all smoke and mirrors.

Underneath all the bravado, she's still the good little girl who plays by her daddy's rules.

"If I say no?" I call out.

"I wouldn't," comes his calm reply, laced with a quiet authority that brooks no argument.

There's a brief pause before his heavy footsteps retreat, leaving us in silence.

I walk past Phi, taking my sweet time, feeling the weight of her eyes burning into my back. "I've got a hearing to attend, Geeks," I say, grabbing a shirt from the closet. "If I were you, I'd sneak out. Wouldn't want anyone else walking in on us."

The tension between us thickens as I pull the shirt over my head, her frustration practically radiating from across the room.

"There was nothing to walk in on," she hisses through clenched teeth. "Don't say anything stupid to him."

Laughter rumbles in my chest, the sound unapologetic, as I drop the towel. I know damn well her eyes are glued to my ass, and I take my time pulling on a pair of jeans, deliberately skipping the underwear. I zip them up slowly, turning to face her once they're snug, the smirk on my lips widening.

"Worried about me, Geeks?" I arch a brow, my tone teasing.

Her lips part, but no sound comes out, just a flicker of something in those green eyes—panic, frustration. More than anything, it's fear.

Hopefully, that fear will keep her the fuck out of my room next time.

I close the distance between us, the space between us shrinking until I can practically feel the heat rolling off her. Her breath catches, but she doesn't move. Doesn't push me away.

I lean in, just enough for my lips to brush her ear, my voice low, deliberate.

"Don't worry, princess. I'll be a good boy and keep your secret." I pause, letting my words linger. "For now."



THE WALK TO ROOK'S OFFICE IS A SLOW ONE, GIVING ME PLENTY OF TIME to appreciate the Persian rugs and fine china. I even stop at the grandfather clock ticking softly in the hallway for a few moments, just to prolong the inevitable.

This house is everything you'd expect in a multimillion-dollar estate on the coast. Yet, despite all the wealth, it feels lived-in.

The walls are lined with pictures of family trips, stacks of board games sat on the living room coffee table. I'd even spotted a fucking growth chart on the kitchen entryway.

I remember times when I'd come home from school starved, just to open the fridge and find only two-week-old takeout. If I was lucky, which was rare, there would be almost sour milk to wash it down with.

Before I can even push the heavy wooden door open fully, the Judge's voice hits my ears.

"Have a seat."

My eyes sweep the room as I walk inside. Dark, polished wood dominates the space, every surface oozing with wealth and power. Intricately carved bookcases line the walls, filled with leather-bound books that look like they've never been touched, let alone read.

Rook sits behind his desk, watching me through the dim lighting.

"I'll stand," I grunt, leaning against the doorframe. "Can we get this rolling? I'm trying to go to bed. School tomorrow. Early bird gets the worm and all that shit."

I watch as he carefully drops the papers in his hands, leaning forward to flick open the box on his desk. "Sage mentioned you were looking for work. Inferno Garage is hiring. Your first day is next week."

My jaw clenches so hard I can feel the strain in my neck. I bite down on my tongue hard enough to taste copper.

"I didn't need your—"

"Help?" he cuts me off, his tone cool and measured. "From where I'm standing, I beg to differ."

"Then beg," I bite.

If he wants to play this game, we can play it.

A smirk pulls at his mouth, dim lights catching the streaks of silver threading through his brown hair. One tattooed hand calmly plucks a cigar from his collection, one that probably cost more than my liver.

“Defying authority. Smart-ass mouth. Short temper. You might be a Caldwell after all.”

Fury ignites in my bones, raging and crackling through every inch of me, turning my blood into molten iron. My fists clench, nails digging into my palms.

Every single time my father hit me, it was him he saw. The number of times Dad called me Rook just before he broke a bottle over my back is painful.

The Hollow Boys are a physical manifestation of my abuse. Their past plagued Dad into an addiction, and those demons are the reason I found him on the floor of his bedroom with a needle in his arm.

Where were the Caldwells when I begged someone, anyone, to save me as a kid? When I was innocent, and all I wanted was a family that loved me back?

Nowhere.

They left me alone, rotting and in charge of handling the consequences of their actions. I’m collateral damage they locked in the back of their closets, in their big-ass houses, with their happy fucking families.

And I’m supposed to what? Be thankful for that?

Fuck him. And fuck them twice.

“Never,” I grit out, teeth aching. “Got that? The only thing that family gave me was blood. My presence hard to swallow when you don’t think of me as his nephew? Tough shit, Judge. I’m a Sinclair. Choke on it.”

Rook says nothing. Just watches me.

But his irritation is palpable, thick enough to cut through, and it fills the space between us.

Ponderosa Springs’s judge doesn’t exist in these walls.

This is just Rook Van Doren and his demons crawling up from hell for their pound of flesh.

Flicking the wheel on his Zippo, engraved with his initials, he lights his cigar. The harsh edges of his aging face are illuminated by a deep orange glow before it’s hidden briefly by a cloud of smoke.

“You’re here because of my wife, because she is patient and kind,” he says finally, voice steady as ever. “I don’t share those qualities.”

“Is this supposed to scare me?” I counter, my voice edged with mockery.

He cocks his head, the scent of tobacco and authority clinging to him like a second skin, making me sick to my fucking stomach.

“Stay away from my daughter.”

“Just one or both?” I arch a brow.

I’m pushing him, taunting him. Seeing just how far I’d need to push before he snapped, broken in half and showing his true colors. Not this honorable family man he pretends to be.

The man that melted the side of my dad’s face off. The one everyone in this town is so afraid of.

Rook’s jaw tightens, and the look he gives me is one of pure disdain. He’s fed up with my bullshit, that much is clear.

“If you hurt Seraphina—if you so much as breathe too close to her, I’ll—”

“You’ll?” I interrupt, stepping into his space, daring him to make a move. “You’ll what? You gonna kill me, Judge?”

A slow grin spreads across Rook’s face, like the idea of my death brings him nothing but pure joy. He takes another slow drag from his cigar, smoke curling in front of his face.

“I’ll show you why Ponderosa Springs called me the Devil long before they ever called me Judge.”

the prank

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Phi

September 4

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED HOW MANY ROLLS OF SARAN WRAP IT TAKES TO completely mummify a Nissan Skyline?

Three.

Ten if you're feeling petty.

Fifteen if you're me and Atlas.

It took a little over an hour and five hundred bucks to bribe campus security to turn a blind eye in student parking, but I just know the look on his face was worth every cent.

Or at least Atlas said it was.

I hadn't been able to see the reward of my pranking efforts because I had a chem class I was already late for and couldn't wait around to see Jude's reaction to his car being wrapped tighter than a Christmas present, complete with a big red bow on the hood.

Thankfully, I'd snapped a picture of my handiwork, and I'm seriously debating on making it my screen saver.

Did it make me a bitch? Maybe. Especially knowing he's still working on his bike after the wreck at the Graveyard. But it could've been worse.

I could've slashed his tires or cut his brake line. Or, you know, stabbed him with a kitchen knife this morning when he swiped the last blueberry

muffin.

But I didn't. Like the angel I am, I behaved myself.

Choosing vandalism over homicide is personal growth.

"That was clean!" Nora jumps to her feet, yelling at some poor guy in stripes.

For what? I have no clue.

I'm just here for moral support and backup in case she decides to fight the referees again. Which I'm hoping doesn't happen—last year, it did, and I left with a split lip.

After my phenomenal practical joke and a full day of classes, I didn't want to go home. I wanted to continue avoiding the roach for as long as humanly possible, so badly I'd resorted to filling my time with sports.

Soccer's the only sport I know anything about—probably because I spent summers being Reign's personal target, pretending I was a goalie.

The field sprawls just beyond the Irvine District, with towering stone buildings looming in the distance. My eyes flick to the green, and it's impossible to miss Reign.

He moves like he's part of it—fluid, fast, with the kind of grace that comes from knowing every inch of this game like the back of his hand. His cleats rip into the grass as he tears past the opposition, buzzed brown hair slick with sweat.

I may not know a lot about the game, but I know my brother dominates at it.

"Dude, what the fuck! You're blind, zebra!" Nora shouts again, her white shirt riding up to flash her toned stomach before she settles back into her seat, brow furrowed.

"Is it bad that every time he runs that fast, I secretly hope he trips?" I shout above the crowd, bleachers groaning under the weight of too many bodies crammed shoulder to shoulder.

"You two still fighting?" Nora grins, that knowing look in her brown eyes like she already knows the answer.

What Atlas is to me, Reign is to her.

We all love each other; we'd all die for each other. But those two—they just get each other.

"He's a dick."

I'm not mad at Reign.

I'm mad at myself that I deserved his anger.

Guys like Jude are my kryptonite, and I'm not known for making great decisions when it comes to boys. Reign was just trying to look out for me, for our family. The delivery could use some fucking work, but I get it.

It's only been six days since Jude moved in, and he's like a termite.

Crawling around my house with those secret, filthy smirks. Burrowing through the walls of my composure every time I see him on campus. I turn, and he's there—dark blue eyes following my every move, like a predator stalking its prey.

The other day, I went to the kitchen to grab my stash of Oreos, and there he was, in all his shirtless glory, drinking milk from the jug like a caveman.

It's bad enough he was in my kitchen at all, but it's worse that I think Jude is a living work of art.

Specifically, that one artist who sculpted Lucifer so beautifully that it was too tempting for the church, so they commissioned his brother to try again—and he made him even hotter? That kind of art.

Sinful. Forbidden. Perfected.

The fridge light was taut over his abs, highlighting the ridges of his toned torso. Every muscle carved with precision. Every tattoo painted and placed to move with each breath.

When milk dripped down from his chin, following the hollow groove between his pecs, this tug pulled in my gut, urging me to lick it up. And I'm fucking lactose intolerant.

But then he opened his mouth. Which ruined everything.

“Enjoying the view?”

He's a fucking infestation, and I don't know the number of a good enough exterminator to get him the fuck out.

My brain has been on board with avoiding him since day one, but my vagina has not jumped on the bandwagon just yet.

I can't trust myself around Jude.

“True.” Nora snorts, her button nose wrinkling before she nudges me, snapping me out of my thoughts, “But he loves you, Phi. You're our little sister.”

I love Nora Hawthorne.

She's soft in the way willow trees are, swaying gently with the breeze of life's challenges. Bending but never breaking. The most kind yet ruthlessly

dedicated person I've ever met.

The only person who will eat all the purple Skittles for me 'cause I hate them, someone who iced my knuckles after I punched a guy in a bar for trying to smack her ass.

She's peace in a bottle. Our favorite tiny dancer.

Even though she stopped being tiny years ago. Girl grew to six foot overnight.

"I know," I mutter, grabbing a fistful of popcorn and shoving it into my mouth. "How's it been, being home?"

Nora lets out a breath, shoulders relaxing, "Minus the cracked knee and fleeting dreams, it's great. I like being home, missed Mom and Dad. I blinked and missed so much. I've been on a ballet hamster wheel my whole life. It's nice being able to slow down and enjoy things."

No one deserved to lose their dream less than Nora. She's three years older than me, but I grew up watching her ballet recitals. It wasn't just that she was a great dancer; it was her dedication to being a great dancer that set her apart.

All her life, it's been ballet.

Now, at twenty-two, she's restarting her life without it.

"I'm sorry about New York, Nor," I offer, cringing as the words leave my mouth, knowing my apology does nothing to soothe her pain. Broken dreams are an ache that never goes away.

"Wasn't meant to be. Sucks, but I can't do anything about it." She shrugs, looking back out to the field, her brown curls tied back in a long pony that brushes the middle of her back. "This is a fresh start, not the end. Plus, Reign is set on making me enjoy college."

My heart aches for her, knowing all too well what it feels like to picture your future as one thing only for it to turn out differently.

You dedicate years of hard work. Hours of time.

Just to lose it in a matter of seconds.

Dreams are fragile.

You can hold on to them, you can cherish them, protect them. But sometimes, they slip through your fingers and shatter. All you can do is pick up the pieces and try to find joy in the fragments that remain.

I look up at her, giving my best smile. "Wanna share some of your optimism, please and thank you?"

Nora grins, all white teeth and sunshine. “It’s a—”

The crowd quickly interrupts her.

The stadium around me shakes with excitement as we both turn to the field just in time to see the checkered ball hit the back of the white net.

Reign rushes toward the bleachers, hitting his knees and sliding across the grass, leaving a trail of dirt and sweat in his wake. His shirt comes off in one smooth motion, revealing the tattoos that snake down his sides.

His skin is slick with sweat, his chest heaving from the sprint, and he’s grinning. Wild and bold, the embodiment of everything he was ever meant to be.

Untouchable.

There are times—rare—but there are times when I’m glad to be his sister. Most of those moments are when I get to watch him and Andy shine.

I shake my head, feeling my own lips twitch into a reluctant smile. “He’s literally the human equivalent of a male peacock.”

Nora leans over, her arm draping around my shoulders like a familiar weight, bringing with her the faint, salty scent of the ocean. She presses a kiss to my forehead, soft and reassuring, the way she always does, the way the *Hawthornes* always do—like they know the exact moment when the world gets a little too heavy.

Her dad does the same thing whenever he sees me, as if with each press of lips to skin, Silas is stitching me back together.

“Gotta let him fly,” she murmurs, her breath warm against my temple. “It’s a bad day, not a bad life. We’ll work it out, the both of us. We always do.”

It’s a bad day, not a bad life.

Maybe if I hold tightly enough to that belief, I’ll believe it too. That maybe one day, I’ll be just as good as Nora at pretending it’s true. Even when we both know it’s nowhere close to the truth.

“Dude, peacocks don’t even like flying.”



I WONDER IF I COULD PAY SOMEONE TO REMOVE MY BRAIN, BLEACH IT, AND then put it back in.

A deep sigh expels from my lips, fingers pressing my glasses up onto my head as I rub my eyes, sinking back into my chair. I let my eyes roam the vaulted ceiling of Caldwell Library before glancing at the clock.

10:47 p.m.

At least I think that's what it says. My eyes started crossing after the last two paragraphs on rotational motion.

It's so fucking loud in my head. Recently more than average.

I can't seem to find silence anywhere.

Not at home, not at parties, not at the Graveyard.

It's like the second Jude walked through that door, my peace packed its bags and peaced the fuck out. He's everywhere—every damn corner I turn—and every glimpse of his face drags up memories I've fought tooth and nail to bury.

No matter how deep I shove them, they claw their way back to the surface. With each inch of uncovered dirt, the nightmares creep in, drowning me in shame that clings to my skin like a second layer, impossible to shed, no matter how hard I try.

After the soccer game, which nearly broke my eardrums when the Hellhounds won their third game of the season, I just needed some quiet.

I didn't want to feel the weight of Jude's presence at the house. Wasn't in the mood to be the vixen for Ponderosa Springs at some random house party. So I went to the only thing that makes sense when nothing in my life does.

Schoolwork.

Rotational motion occurs when an object spins around an axis. Similar to linear motion, rotational motion can be described in terms of angular displacement, angular velocity, and angular acceleration. For this next section, you will refer to textbook—

I drop my head onto the open book in front of me, the thud echoing throughout the library. Have we not evolved as a species enough to put everything regarding a singular topic in one book?

My chair scratches against the floor as I stand, the sound pulling a couple of students from their quiet, their eyes briefly flicking in my direction. I ignore them, the soft yellow glow from their tiny lamps barely casting enough light to reach my path.

Caldwell Library breathes at night, the shelves rising like dark monoliths on either side of me. The further I walk, the more the light thins out, the weak glow from the overheads swallowed by the shadows that seem to close in tighter with every step. It's quiet, too quiet, the kind of silence that creeps under your skin, heavy with the weight of history and secrets hidden in the dusty corners.

When I was younger, Andy and I used to play hide-and-seek in here during summer visits to Aunt Lyra. Our giggles would echo off the walls as we darted between the shelves, unaware of how suffocating this place could be in the dark.

My fingers glide over the spines of the books, their leather cracked and worn, each one seemingly daring me to pull it from the shelf.

There's a distinct creak, faint but unmistakable, somewhere ahead. It's probably just the building settling, but the hairs on the back of my neck prick to life as I instinctively flinch toward my phone, resisting the urge to flick on the flashlight.

Old places make creepy noises. Chill the fuck out.

I push the unease down and turn toward the section I need. Squinting at the spines ahead, I pull my glasses back onto my nose to make out the faded lettering. My hand slides to the book I need, and I pull it free with a muted groan.

When I spin around, I quickly realize I'm no longer alone between the stacks.

A wall of shadow looms in front of me, so close I barely register what's happening before a large hand covers my mouth, cutting off any sound I might have made.

My back slams into the bookshelf with a thud, my spine protesting as books rattle in their places, heart racing in my chest as panic claws up my throat.

But it lasts only a second before a familiar scent hits me.

Books. Smoke. Black Ice.

My eyes widen, not in fear but recognition.

Jude.

"What the fuck did I say about keeping your hands to yourself, Van Doren."

Uh-oh. Looks like he isn't happy about my little prank.

Jude's words are venomous, his breath hot against my ear, and the mix of fury and heat inside me is so intense it feels like I might combust.

I'm usually more prepared for our encounters, but he's caught me off guard. It's hard to think of anything, let alone the history between us, when he's this fucking close.

His hand drops from my mouth, but the relief is short-lived as his dark blue eyes lock onto mine. They track my every move like a predator sizing up its prey. A hunter that knows its prey wants to be caught.

No. No. No.

No catching. Not hunting.

I scoff, rolling my eyes. "You're one to talk."

"Next time you're feeling needy for my attention, Geeks, just ask. Might save us both some time and Saran Wrap."

"What?" I force a pout, letting my lips curl in fake innocence. "You didn't like my gift?"

His jaw flexes, irritation rippling across his face.

Jude's pissed, and I love it.

Maybe if I keep pushing, he'll break and move to Iceland.

I want him the furthest point from me he could be. Separate planets. Different goddamn dimensions. I'm so petty that I would dedicate my entire life to space travel just to transport him to Pluto.

Jude's eyes darken as he drops his head closer, his lips brushing the curve of my jaw, but I don't react. I don't move as his hand remains braced beside my head, trapping me between the bookshelf and his body without touching me—yet his presence alone is enough to suffocate.

"I know what you're trying to do, Phi." His voice is a threat, a jolt of heat searing through me. "Knock it the fuck off."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're so desperate for my attention I can practically *smell* it."

Anger flares in my chest, a scorching heat that makes my hands shake. With everything I have, I shove him away, hard, until I'm stepping out from under the shadow he casts.

"Don't flatter yourself, Sinclair," I bite.

Jude lets out a bitter laugh, giving a shake of his head. "You're a fucking joke."

“Yeah?” I arch a brow. “I’m gonna be real hilarious if you put your hands on me again.”

The threat is anything but hollow, and I think he knows that. He just doesn’t give a shit. I track his hand, watching how it drags slowly across his jaw, revealing that twisted, infuriating smirk.

He’s always so smug, so goddamn cocky, and I hate the twisted, shameful part of me that finds it intoxicating. I need to see a doctor immediately. I want an MRI stat to figure out which wires in my brain have crossed flirting and fighting.

“It’s pathetic, really,” he murmurs condescendingly, sending a ripple of fury straight through me. “You trying this hard to get me riled up with your stupid fucking games just cause you can’t admit you want me to screw you again.”

“You think I want your attention?” I snap, voice rising, fueled by the anger that lives in me. “I want indifference, Sinclair. I want fucking neglect. I want you out of my life. You’re the one who crashed into my world, not the other way around. And now you’re pissed that I’m not rolling out the red carpet for you? Cry about it, bitch.”

Jude’s jaw tightens, his nostrils flaring as his hands curl into fists at his sides. “Hate to break it to you, you spoiled goddamn brat, but you’re not the sun. The world, especially mine, doesn’t revolve around you.”

“Then what’s your angle, huh?” I cross my arms defensively. “Why the hell are you here? You and Oakley got some sick fucking bet going on?”

The mention of Oakley does something to him. It’s subtle, barely there, but I catch it—a flicker in his eyes, a shift in his expression. His jaw tenses for the briefest moment before it’s gone.

But I saw it.

It makes no sense that he’s here instead of staying with his piece-of-shit best friend in West Trinity Falls. Oakley and Jude are thick as thieves. I’d avoided the both of them the best I could in high school, but when I did see them? They were together.

Before Jude moved to the Falls, Oakley would show up to our middle school just to eat lunch. They were always together, a toxic duo clinging to each other like worn-out pieces of Velcro.

Go where you’re wanted, right? So why the fuck is Jude here?

It's only a matter of time before he brings Oakley by the house. I can feel it, the anticipation simmering beneath my skin. Tiny firecrackers in my veins that threaten to explode the moment he walks through my front door.

That moment might be the day I go to jail. And I wish I was kidding. I made a promise to myself.

That what happened between Oakley and me would die with me. Not to protect him or some weird sense of guilt. It was for my family because they'd never survive the damage my truth would bring.

And I've been doing it. I've carried this weight with a smile and will continue for the rest of my life because my family is worth it.

Jude's words are harsh, pulling me from my thoughts. "Your hard-on for Oakley has fuck all to do with me. My angle is to get this year over with. I wanted it to be easy. But no, you're too fucking stubborn to make that happen."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

His eyes lock onto mine.

My heartbeat ticks in time with the clock on the wall. He doesn't say anything at all. Just stares, letting the tension stretch between us like a wire about to snap. The silence stretching between us feels like it lasts forever before he strides by me, making sure to hit my shoulder as he passes.

"You hard of hearing, Sinclair? I asked you a question!" I call to his back, brows furrowed.

He doesn't stop. Doesn't turn around. But I hear him, his voice slicing through the silence in the library like a knife.

"Congratulations, Phi. You've got my attention."

His words hang in the air as his footsteps fade into the distance. I know Jude Sinclair is a storm, and if I keep pushing him, he's going to destroy everything in his path.

Including me.

He's stolen some of my secrets, carved them out of me without my permission. And now, I want his. I want to see what's lurking below the surface. I want to know what makes him tick, what makes him come undone.

And I don't care what I have to do to get them.

the lonely

...

Jude

September 7

I GREW UP IN A HOUSE OF SILENCE.

It stretched from end to end, allowing me to hear every step, every creak. Depending on the weight and pace, I could gauge my father's mood without even seeing him. Know what drug he'd taken or if he'd had white or brown liquor.

This house isn't like that. Not even close.

Not only are the ceilings painfully white and sheets too soft, like a fucking expensive hotel that I'd give a negative three-star rating on Yelp for trying too hard, but it's loud.

Chaotic.

Laughter echoes in every room here. It shouts with love from every corner.

There is a constant brigade of heavy footsteps, kids flowing in and out of the front door. For dinner, before class, in the middle of the day just because. I'd run smack into Nora Hawthorne for the first time in my life at two in the morning when I was going to piss.

I'd never given much thought to the rumors of how intense she was until that night. Nora's intimidating as fuck. I actually believed her when

she said she'd cut my dick off if I screwed with anyone in the Van Doren household.

My thoughts are interrupted when my bedroom door bangs against the wall as it flies open. Some girl stumbling in, heels way too high for the amount of alcohol she's had.

"Sin?" she slurs, confusion clouding her face for a second before her brows shoot up. "Oh, right! You're the Van Dorens' new foster kid now, aren't you? How does that work, like after your dad died—"

The walls practically shake from the music blasting from downstairs, leaking in through the open door.

I flip the page of my sociology book in my lap, teeth grinding. "Get out."

"Sorry. Sore subject. My friends constantly tell me I have no filter," she rambles. "Anyway, party is getting boring, and you look like you could use some—"

I shift my eyes lazily back to her face. "No."

Her brows knit together, a hint of embarrassment creeping into her expression. "Are you serious?"

"Dead."

No matter how much the Springs's good girls love fucking us Wasters, it'll never change how they look at us. Like we're trash, dirt under their designer heels.

My gaze drops to the gold Cartier necklace resting just above her boobs before drifting back up to meet her eyes. They're a pretty shade of blue, but pretty has never done it for me.

Pretty is boring, refined, chemically processed.

I need someone raw, someone I can sink my teeth into. The kind of connection that feels toxic when it floods your veins but is actually the best high you'll ever chase. One you can't quit even if you wanted to.

Love is the only drug I've ever wanted in my bloodstream. Craved and crippled my heart for it. It's the core of human existence. Forever wanting what we will never have.

"My friends were right. You're such an ass—" She stops mid-sentence, her face lighting up as she lets out an ear-piercing squeal. "Oh my God, this is my song!"

And just like that, she's gone, sprinting out of my room as quickly as she came. It's impressive, really, considering how high those heels are.

I shove my book off my lap, running a frustrated hand down my face. Never thought I'd say this, but I wish Rook and Sage would get back already.

They've been gone a few days, some fucking business trip, and their children are set on driving me out of my mind.

Except for Andromeda. She might be the only Van Doren I can stand.

She doesn't talk much.

We pass each other quietly in the mornings, just long enough to grab coffee. The only words she's spoken to me were to ask if she could have some of the hazelnut creamer I use. And because she doesn't glare holes through my skull like her brother, I said yes.

If Reign could catch me on fire with his gaze, I'd be a torched crisp by now.

Anytime that asshole has a chance, he reminds me of just how unhappy he is about having me in his house.

My response is always the same.

Ditto.

I drag myself out of the bed, not bothering with a shirt, the jeans I wore today stiff against my thighs. I'm gonna be up all night finishing this paper, which means I'm going to have to make the trek downstairs into the zoo to grab my Red Bull in the fridge.

The music is louder out here.

It pounds through the walls, vibrating in my chest like a second heartbeat. Voices drift up from downstairs—laughter, drunken conversations, the occasional shout.

I move down the stairs, taking them two at a time, ignoring the groups of people scattered along the steps like they're camping out. The smell of alcohol and weed hits me as soon as I round the corner into the main room. Bodies press against each other, swaying, grinding, making it more of a club than a living room.

Keeping my head down, I make my way through the throngs of trust-fund babies and Wasters in disguise, trying to ignore the way a few people huddle together when I pass, their voices going from high-pitched excitement to hushed whispers.

I push through the crowd, eyes set on the kitchen. Just get what I need. Get back to my room. Easy.

Easy? Yes.

Without distraction? No.

Swaying and clutching a bottle of half-drunk tequila on top of a marble island is my least favorite Van Doren.

A loud wolf whistle pierces my ears as I lean against the entryway, hidden behind a crowd of people pooling in the kitchen to watch Phi's audition for the Coyote Ugly Saloon.

Sandwiched between two girls, clad in dark red leather pants that sit dangerously low on her hips, she sways to the music. A pit of hot-blooded males smack their palms against the marble, cheering them on.

My least favorite, yes, but God, she's the most fun to fuck with.

Phi's been doing her best to avoid me after our run-in at the library, keeping her distance at home, ducking out when she spots me on campus. I'm pretty sure she's even started locking her door at night, desperately trying to keep a wall between us, because she's afraid.

Scared of what I'm gonna do in retaliation for her little prank.

I know she's afraid I'm gonna snitch about the water tower, but she's got nothing to worry about there.

We both have something to lose if anyone finds out.

Her family. My future.

“Take it off!” someone shouts just before the other girls hop down, fading into the background as Phi keeps sensually lifting her shirt higher and higher, unbothered as the material stops just beneath her bra, thriving in the spotlight.

It's not like anyone was watching the other girls anyway.

No, when Seraphina enters a room, she snatches the attention of everyone close enough to catch a glimpse. It's her fucking world; we are just witnessing it move in circles.

Little attention whore.

I roll the barbell of my tongue ring across my teeth when she drops to her knees, slinging her hair recklessly. My eyes eat up the view, devouring the skin of her exposed stomach, tight fabric covering her plump ass that everyone wants their mouth on.

Including the creep leaning down to catch a glimpse beneath her skirt. He's shouting drunk words at her, and I just know he's the kind of guy who wouldn't take no for an answer.

I hate her, but I'm not gonna let her or anyone else get sexually assaulted.

I stalk through the swarm of bodies, shouldering myself to the edge of the island that's acting as a makeshift stage.

"Get lost," I grunt to the dude in front of me.

He turns, bleary-eyed and annoyed until he realizes I'm bigger than him.

Much bigger.

"Yeah, man, all yours," he mutters, ducking his head and disappearing into the crowd of people.

I move so I'm facing Phi again, and just when she winds her body down in the shape of an S, squatting down with her eyes closed, I curl my fingers around her ankle.

My jaw tightens when her eyes pop open.

Sea-glass green, hazy and unfocused from the booze. Shards of glass washed onshore, softened by the tide but still sharp if you look close enough.

"No killjoys allowed."

Her pink mouth curves into a grin, an authentic smile.

Briefly, just briefly, it knocks the fucking breath out of me. My lungs struggle to expand, brain forgetting how to operate simple bodily functions.

Phi smiles at everyone.

It's not rare for that grin to make an appearance. Kinda like the sun rising each morning, even when it doesn't feel like it. Phi's natural default is to be a beam of light, anywhere, anytime.

But this is the first time Seraphina Van Doren has ever smiled at *me*.

I recover quickly, tightening my grip on her ankle, nails digging into the skin. "Didn't know they hired strippers for college parties."

Her eyes narrow.

Ah, there it is.

Smiles I'm not equipped for, but her rage? I'm all over that shit.

No amount of tequila will blur her distaste for me. Phi leans in close, a curtain of freshly dyed red hair falling in front of her face, giving me

permission to smell the vanilla imprinted on her skin.

“Hands off the entertainment, Sinclair. You can’t afford to pay this piper.” Her voice is poisoned honey, sticky and sweet with that raw bite, eyes tinged with mischief.

Some 2000s pop song screams from the speakers, causing mass eruption from the people around us, squeals of joy as they scramble to find someone to grind their booze-filled bodies on.

Phi’s eyes leave me, looking around the party, I’m assuming to try and find someone to save her from her social suicide.

Seraphina Van Doren doesn’t acknowledge my existence around other people. She’d probably rather hack off her own toe with a soldering iron than be seen talking to a Sinclair in public.

But I could give a fuck less if the entire town watched the way their queen is about to fall to her knees for the bastard outcast.

I’ve already reached into my front pocket with one hand, pulling a crisp Benjamin from the wad of cash shoved in there. When she attempts to stand, I jerk her ankle until she loses her balance, smirking as she falls straight to her ass on the marble.

Her mouth is open to speak, but I just tug her to the edge of the island. One of her legs dangles at my side while I tuck the other one around my back, forcing our bodies together, fusing my lower half to hers.

I lift the bill between my middle and forefinger, dropping my gaze to her mouth.

The temptation is too much when her pink tongue wets her bee-stung lips. With a slow, deliberate motion, I drag the money across her red mouth, leaving behind a smear of her favorite vibrant crimson lipstick on the crisp green paper.

I descend further, leaving a scorching path down her chin and delicately tracing the curves of her neck with the bill. Our eyes remain locked, speaking words we’d never say out loud. I feel her breath catch in her throat. A soft whimper I’m positive she didn’t want me to hear hits my ears. The thrumming pulse in her neck matches the rapid beating of my own.

Every inhale I take is sticky, hot, and tastes of vanilla, filling my chest with a burning tension I’m more than ready to choke on. My fingertips glide over the soft swell of her breasts before slipping the cash into the neckline of her shirt, nestling it between the valley of her tits. The palm of

my right hand caresses the smooth skin of her thigh, finally coming to rest on her delicate waist.

“That gonna buy me a private dance, Geeks?” I murmur above the music. The sultry mix only adds to the tension brewing between us.

I hate her, hate her family, despise everything they represent. How they exist in their happy worlds while I was cast away to suffer for actions I wasn’t even born to witness.

The Hollow Boys made it out unscathed, and I was left to bear the scars.

But I’d like to do more filthy things to Phi’s body. Fuck her until her last name didn’t matter, and when I was done, she’d beg me to do it all over again. My cock swells at the thought, pressing between us as my grip tightens on her side.

Through the haze of desire, she must realize I hold the power in this moment because the initial shock on her face quickly gives way to the vixen. Her sharp black nails dig into my forearms, her legs tightening around me, pulling me closer in silent invitation for more.

As her lips hover just inches from mine, a wicked grin twists her lips.

“A hundred bucks wouldn’t buy my left toe.” She playfully flicks her tongue across my bottom lip before leaning back. Her pointed red heel comes between us, pressing against my chest and shoving me back. “Nice try, Loner.”

“Interesting.” I tilt my head, smirking. “I got to fuck that pussy for free.”

Phi’s eyes narrow to vicious slits, a familiar fire blazing in those green eyes. I brace for whatever is about to spew from those lips. Her mouth opens, probably to say something vile that would piss me off, but then it happens.

Her face pales, the alcohol finally setting in.

I’m pretty much an expert on the actions of inebriated people, and I know she’s a second away from throwing up all over the marble countertop.

“I’m gonna throw up,” she confirms, slurring a little, weak.

I roll my eyes, gritting my teeth, but deep down, I know I’m not leaving her like this.

This is still Phi, and the last thing I want is to help her out.

But I’m not an asshole.

I’m just not gonna be happy about this.

“Of course you are,” I mutter.

Without a second thought, I scoop her up, one arm under her knees, the other braced behind her back. Her head lolls against my chest, breath shallow, and for a second, she’s quiet, and that might be the most unsettling part.

Seraphina Van Doren, who never shuts up, has gone quiet.

The loud music, the throngs of people, it all feels like background noise as I carry her through the chaos, heading for the stairs. A few people drunkenly stare as I pass, but I couldn’t care less.

I’ve got one goal: get her out of here before she pukes on someone’s \$500 sneakers.

When we reach the top of the stairs, I nudge her door open with my foot and step inside. It’s dark, but not enough that I can’t see her bed. Gently, softer than she deserves, I lower her down.

Phi sinks into the mattress, and she groans softly, fighting the spins.

Karma for my fucking car.

At first, I click the lamp on her bedside table on to look for a water bottle she may have in here, but then I get distracted by the bookcase just to my left. My brows furrow as I scan the spines before I pluck one from the rows.

Sticky notes mark certain pages, her messy handwriting adorning each one.

I think there are two different people existing in Phi’s body.

I slide *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry* back into her bookcase, careful not to disturb the stacks of paper on top of it. Shaking my head, I pick up a tiny LEGO car, twirling it in my hands.

There’s the vixen the world sees, all tight leather pants and barely there tops, a walking challenge with a razor-sharp tongue.

But then there’s this—this space that belongs to the girl I met at the water tower. The one who has science fair medals displayed above her desk and posters on the wall that say various things from *wibbly wobbly timey wimey* to *Science and everyday life cannot and should not be separated*.

So the queen of the Springs is a nerd. That night hadn’t been a fluke of panic about the heights.

It was something real.

I step back from the shelves, pocketing the LEGO car, about to leave her to suffer in peace, when her voice breaks through the silence.

“You’re not allowed in here,” Phi mutters, a little laugh falling from her lips as she rolls onto her back. “Foster brother is so pushing it, by the way. You’re basically a roach. An infestation.”

I roll my eyes at her drunk words, even hammered she hates me.

Good to know.

“Yeah, I’m leaving,” I say, heading toward the door. “Don’t need your guard dog barking when he finds me in here.”

The last thing I want or need is to fight an intoxicated Reign Van Doren.

I’m about to leave when her voice drags me back, soft and slurred, like she’s saying something she didn’t plan to. “They aren’t even my real family. Did you know that?”

It’s not a secret. Everyone knows she’s adopted. It’s not like this family ever tried to hide it. But I didn’t expect her to bring it up now, while she’s half-sprawled across her bed, too drunk to hold up her usual walls.

“Yeah,” I breathe out slowly. “I know you’re adopted.”

“That’s why I don’t belong.” She lets out a little huff of air. “I don’t belong, and no one else can see that I’m all alone.”

I stop at the door, hand on the frame. Her voice has that drunk, half-lucid honesty. The kind that stings because you know it’s coming from somewhere real.

Alone? What the fuck would she know about being alone?

I turn, leaning on the doorframe with my arms crossed. “You’re surrounded by at least two people at any given moment. You’re the antonym of alone.”

Phi lets out a little hiccup, cherry-red hair a mess in her face as she curls around a pillow, her eyes shut as she rambles, “You’ve got no clue what it’s like to be in a room full of people and know that none of them know you. None of them see you. That’s loneliness.”

“Being alone is just part of the deal, princess,” I grunt, tone clipped. “You get used to it.”

I grit my teeth, forcing my expression to stay hard, forcing myself not to give a shit about the girl unraveling in front of me. She’s nothing but a cyclone of complications I don’t need.

She’s alone. Great. So are a lot of people. So am I.

It doesn't make her any less of a spoiled, entitled Van Doren, floating through life like she owns the world while I've clawed through mine just to stay afloat.

But this crack in her armor, it makes me curious. Curious enough to stand here a little longer, watching her like some puzzle I can't solve.

It doesn't make me like her.

"I know," she mutters, her words soft, slipping through the haze of alcohol as she lets out a small, tired yawn. Her lips curve into a faint, lopsided smile, almost playful. "It's entropy."

Oh, this is bound to be good.

My brows furrow as I ask, "What the hell is that?"

Her eyes flutter open, half-lidded, the lashes brushing against her cheeks as she stares up at the ceiling, lost in some drunken train of thought.

"The natural state of things. Everything falls into disorder over time. That's what the universe does—it moves toward chaos. You get used to the fact that nothing stays in place. Being alone is just part of the breakdown. Part of the disorder we all fall into eventually."

Phi's face is bathed in the dim light spilling from her lamp, looking softer than I've ever seen her. There is no guard up.

Just a drunk girl rambling on about the universe and what it means.

I watch her, really *watch* her as she talks. Her shoulders are tense, her body curled in like she's trying to make herself smaller, less noticeable.

It's a stark contrast to the girl who commands every room she walks into, all fire and sharp edges. Now, though, she looks like she's trying to disappear.

This isn't the girl who thrives on chaos. This is someone drowning in it.

"It's the same for us," she continues, her words slurring a little now, heavy with exhaustion. "You start out thinking you're supposed to belong somewhere, supposed to fit. But eventually, you realize that some of us, we're just meant to be out there on our own. Drifting. Collapsing into chaos, like everything else in the universe. Alone doesn't hurt after a while. It's just what's left."

I pause at the doorway, watching her for longer than I ever wanted to, watching her breathing steady.

Her pain, it isn't loud.

It's not the kind that screams for attention. It's the quiet kind, the kind that gnaws at you in the middle of the night when the world goes silent and there's no one left to distract you from it. It's a slow, suffocating ache, a weight that carves itself into bone.

It's the kind I know and know well.

It leaves scars you can't see.

A flicker of understanding passes through me, a sliver of middle ground bridging between us. But it's not enough to cross the gap our history has created.

There is a weird, heavy atmosphere that's settled between us. It's not filled with tension or contempt. It feels gentle, a warm blanket on a winter night.

Phi's completely still, her red hair spread out like a fiery halo against the pillow as sleep calls her name, pulling her further and further from consciousness.

"I hate science," I mutter, thinking she's finally out.

But a little laugh falls from her mouth, her voice following me out of her room.

"Blasphemy."

the fire child

...

Phi

September 9

YOU MAY BE ASKING YOURSELF, WHAT DRIVES SOMEONE TO SMOKE POT IN their college parking lot?

The answer would be simple.

Jude Sinclair thought it would be funny to fuck with my paper.

Imagine my surprise this morning when Dr. Delaney pulled me aside to chat. Instead of my well-thought-out, concise analysis of Kepler's work transforming the scientific landscape that took three hours to finish, it was a page of only two lines.

Don't get drunk and leave your laptop unattended.

White flag time, Geeks?

Now, I can't be certain, but I think literal steam blew from my ears as I lied to my professor about it being an uploading mishap. Had she not been fond of my Aunt Lyra and hadn't let me reupload the correct file, I was going to strangle Jude.

A gracious History of Science and Technology teacher had spared his fucking life today. That being said, I hope he's prepared for me to verbally rip his head off when I get home.

He makes me fucking volatile.

So, for the safety of everyone on campus, I needed a bong rip.

I lean back in the driver's seat, the glass of my bong cool against my palm as I bring it to my lips for one last hit. My eyes widen as the next song comes through my speakers, fumbling to turn up the sound of "*Feel Good Inc.*" by Gorillaz.

Some people have 2000s divorced dad rock, but courtesy of Rook Van Doren, I have domesticated stoner dad hip-hop. Which just so happens to be the name of this playlist.

When I was, like, ten, Dad and I would drive to Tilly's every single Thursday. Always just before sunset, and I would sit in the front seat of his car while he showed me music no kid my age had any business hearing.

My dad was my best friend, until one day, he wasn't.

The bowl burns red, and smoke fills the chamber thickly. I pull hard, the air hissing through the water before I let it flood my lungs, holding it for a beat longer than I should.

My head already feels light, that familiar haze I love so much creeping in, softening the edges of my royally shit-tastic mood.

I know I could confront Jude.

I could tear into him with every ounce of rage that's burning beneath my skin, cut him down with all the words I've been choking on for years.

But what's the point?

What good would it do to scream at him, to let that anger out now?

It wouldn't make me feel better. It wouldn't change what's already been done. It won't rewind the years of pain or the twisted knot of guilt and shame that sits in my chest like it's been welded there.

And more than that—I can't bring myself to.

Not because I don't want to but because I know it won't be enough.

Nothing I say could match what I'm feeling, the depth of it, the way it coils around my bones like it's part of me. And maybe I'm afraid that if I start, I won't be able to stop.

I won't be able to hold back the flood of everything I've locked away. All the nights I spent staring at the ceiling, replaying every second in my mind, wondering if I could've done something different.

If I could've saved myself when no one else did. If I could've screamed louder. Fought harder. Never fucking believed Oakley when he told me I was special.

I could tell him all of that, unleash the storm he deserves, but it wouldn't fix me.

Nothing was ever going to fix me.

With a lazy exhale, I turn my car off, sitting the bong on the floorboard of my passenger seat and gently laying a discarded hoodie over it, tucking it out of sight. When I shove the door open, smoke billows out like a rolling fog.

I step out of the car, stretching my arms above my head as I ignore the heads that turn my way. From the corner of my eye, I see a group of students at their cars, pretending not to stare, before one of them, someone I vaguely recognize from chem class, lifts a hand in an awkward wave.

"Hi, Phi!" she calls out, her voice too bright, too eager. "We were just headed to Tilly's. Wanna come?"

I nod in her direction, giving a tight-lipped smile. "Headed to my next class. Next time though."

That is a lie, but oh well.

They don't actually give a shit about befriending me. It's all about status, being seen with me and using whatever information I divulge as weaponized gossip. I learned very quickly growing up here the only people to be trusted were those with the last names Van Doren, Hawthorne, Caldwell, or Pierson.

That's it.

People are nice to me in person. They wave, give a smile, pour me shots at a random party, but behind closed doors? They're all vipers, just waiting to strike.

I'm sure the little group will go for lunch and spend the majority of the time talking shit about me. They probably have a slew of colorful words to describe me—whore, cunt, spoiled brat, bitch, the list goes on and on.

Yet I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that not a single person would dare say any of that shit to my face. And I can't blame them—I stabbed a guy with a screwdriver at the Graveyard for grabbing my ass.

I'd be scared of me too.

It's a short walk from the parking lot to the Bursley District. My boots thump against the damp green lawn of the Commons as I cut across it.

Hollow Heights University.

"We invited success."

The words are etched into stone, a permanent fixture beneath the arched gates that lead into a place steeped in history and heavy with expectation. Hollow Heights doesn't just wear its prestige—it bleeds it.

The gothic spires pierce the sky like needles, and the ivy clings to the ancient walls as if it, too, knows this place will outlast time itself.

Despite the hit to its reputation years ago, nothing could strip away the glory that seeps through every creaking floorboard, every shadowed corner. The university breathes with the weight of its past, each corridor whispering the secrets of those who've walked these halls long before I ever did.

If you listen close enough, you can almost hear them—the soft murmur of ambition, betrayal, and promises made in the dark.

After Aunt Lyra became dean, Hollow Heights grew sharper, more refined, expanding beyond its legacy of catering to trust fund babies like me. She rebuilt the cracks left behind by scandals, restored the name to something more than just gilded halls and old money.

I should have loved it here.

I *did* love it, once.

Then things changed. *I* changed.

It's quiet when my feet hit the plush red carpet lining the aisles between the seats of the theatre. My mom is leaning against the stage, glasses on her face as she stares down at the paper in her hands.

Her light red hair is loose around her shoulders, lips pursed as she strikes a line through whatever is written in front of her.

Sage Van Doren is not only a business owner, but she also happens to be the chair of the Theatre Department at Hollow Heights. This is her kingdom of order and art, and she rules it flawlessly.

When she pops by to check on things, we meet here for lunch on my free block. A way to continue a tradition we started when I was in high school.

My freshman year, I may or may not have been involved in a touch of vandalism in the form of graffiti that got me suspended for a day. In my defense, Victor Kincaid absolutely fucking deserved to have his locker spray-painted.

He and his caveman friends tried to jump Reign over some girl. Gave him a black eye before Reign cracked his jaw. I think that's also when Ezra broke his knuckle.

Either way, after I told her, she took me to lunch.

So a few times a month, we have lunch together.

“Please tell me that paper bag has a burger with extra pickles and no onion in it,” I plead as I drop into one of the front-row seats, the velvet absorbing my weight.

“Why? You have the munchies?” Mom looks up from her papers, arching a perfectly manicured brow at me.

I open my mouth to defend myself, but she quickly cuts me off with a playful smirk.

“Don’t deny it. You smell like a Grateful Dead concert.”

Yeah, I definitely should’ve gotten more dryer sheets before smoking.

Pro tip: If you have a scheduled lunch date with your mother and you don’t want to smell like a skunk, rub your clothes with dryer sheets. Works like a charm.

“Would it help my case if I said I don’t have any more classes today?”

“No,” she says bluntly, handing me the bag of food. “Your punishment is waiting until after Reign’s soccer practice to catch a ride home. Now, hand over the keys.”

“Mom,” I groan, thinking about being subjected to organized sports.

“Don’t *Mom* me.” She grins, laughing a little. “You can smoke at the house, where I know you’re safe. You know this.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it,” I mutter, reaching into my bag and tossing her my keys, watching her catch them with ease.

I’m far too stoned to argue with her, so I settle for reaching into the bag, grabbing my food while she starts eating, and asking her if she’d watched the last episode of our favorite reality television show.

Which eventually leads us to me asking about how the department is going, and that is when she starts her ramble. You see, my mom develops a case of word vomit every time something she is passionate about is brought up.

And I, unfortunately, have not mastered my dad’s ability to absorb all of the information that comes out of her mouth when she talks this fast. That may have more to do with the fact I’ve never really understood or enjoyed *the arts*.

The way people crave a metaphor. How they pull meaning from the mundane, extracting emotions and spinning them into stanzas, brushstrokes,

or characters on a stage. I don't see the world in shades of feeling.

I see it in data. Rules. Logic. The stuff that can be broken down into numbers and processes, where you know exactly where you stand. Equations that hold true no matter how chaotic life gets.

The arts, on the other hand, feel like chaos itself. No boundaries, no control—just raw, unpredictable emotion spilling onto a canvas or into words. It's messy. And maybe that's why I don't get it. Maybe that's why I cling so hard to the things I can measure. The things I can control.

Because the opposite scares me.

Despite all of that, I fucking love watching Mom in her element.

"Am I boring you, or did I lose you at *Hamlet* for the Fall Showcase?"

Her voice cuts through the haze, and I blink and refocus on the smile on her face. The faded velvet curtains behind her clash with the deep red of her blouse, but somehow, it works.

Sage Van Doren is a force of nature. Not because of her wealth or success, though she has plenty of both. It's something more. There is an intensity that crackles in the air around her. It gives her the ability to command every room she walks into without ever raising her voice, the type of woman who doesn't give you a choice in respecting her.

People talk in hushed tones about how *Sage is not to be crossed*, and I believe it. I've seen it.

But there's another side to her too, one that the town doesn't get to see. The side that let me crawl into her bed night after night when nightmares took hold until I was too old to admit I still wanted to. The side that refills the strawberry-scented diffuser in my room because she knows it smells like her, and that somehow keeps the darkness at bay.

That duality—sharp, no-nonsense, fierce, yet endlessly soft with her family—is what makes her terrifying and comforting, all at once.

My mother is who I want to be when I grow up.

I shrug, offering a sheepish smile. "You are anything but boring, Mom. Shakespeare, however, could use some more excitement."

She laughs, her eyes crinkling at the corners as she tosses a crumpled napkin my way. I catch it, barely.

"How's the weather, my fire child?" she asks gently, just before taking a bite of her burger.

Mom has asked me that question for as long as I can remember. Her way of checking in on me without prying too much. Sometimes, the answer is sunshine; other times, it's a thunderstorm. But every time she asks, I know she's really wanting to know, *Are you okay?*

It makes me love her a little more every time, if that's even possible. Even though I have to lie about the weather on several occasions, just knowing she is there to ask is enough.

I lean back in the seat, absently tracing the intricate carvings on the armrest. "Cloudy, but the sun's in the forecast."

Apparently, the fake-ass grin I give her doesn't get past her 'cause she gives me that look, the one that says *you're full of shit*.

"Is it because of Jude? I know the transition has been a little difficult, but if you're uncomfortable, we can make other arrangements for him."

Yes, please and thank you.

That's what I want to say.

Yes, he makes me more than uncomfortable. He makes me homicidal.

Jude is not only the reason I almost failed a paper but also the reason I have to watch sweaty men run up and down a field before I go home.

But then I remember the look on her face the night she fought Dad to take Jude in. The guilt, the fight in her.

A stupid retaliation prank isn't enough to take that away from her. Not yet, anyway.

"No, Mom. It's just stress from school. Jude is..." I trail off, inhaling the scent of the polished wood stage, searching for the right words. I settle on, "Fine. He's fine."

I can't remember much from the other night, just flashes of him showing up at the party and killing my vibe. And then waking up with a hangover so bad it felt like my head was splitting in two.

Our interaction hadn't been terrible, but it's the principle that he was in my room. On my laptop. Going through my things. Meddling around like an unwanted, nosy neighbor.

However, her bringing him up does open the door for something that could even even the playing field between Jude and me.

I don't say this lightly, but my mother knows everything, and if she doesn't, it's not long till she finds out.

If anyone has dirt on Jude, it's her.

A secret for a secret.

I take a breath, trying to sound casual as I pop another fry in my mouth.
“Speaking of him, can I ask you something?”

She arches a brow, setting her burger down as she dusts her hands. “Of course you can. Anything.”

Maybe it’s the weed, maybe it’s curiosity, maybe it’s both.

But the question I ask isn’t the one I expected to come out of my mouth.
“Why did Easton pick you to be the person to take care of Jude?”

Her expression shifts, a flicker of something unreadable passing over her face. I see the way she bristles at his name, like no matter how many years pass, the Sinclairs will forever be a sensitive subject.

I don’t know all the details of what my mother went through all those years ago, but I know she fought like fucking hell to make it to this point.

I almost think for a second, for the first time, my mom isn’t going to give me an honest answer.

But true to her character, she does.

“I don’t know, honestly,” she admits, tucking a piece of soft red hair behind her ear before continuing. “There is a long, bitter history between us. But Easton didn’t have anyone. He didn’t have the family we’ve built. He was alone most of his life, and I think he wanted Jude to have a chance of growing up differently than we were forced to.”

I bite down on the inside of my cheek, words slipping out like water.
“You think Jude’s like his father? I’d ask Dad, but I think we know where he stands.”

Mom smirks, a soft eye roll at the mention of Dad. “No, I don’t. We aren’t our parents. Your father knows that better than most. I think Jude’s been through more than he lets on. He is lost and just trying to find where he belongs.”

Her words linger.

Lost and just trying to find where he belongs.

It echoes in my head because a part of me knows what that feels like. That gnawing, quiet sense of not fitting in, even when everyone around you insists you do.

I know because I’m living it.

For the first fourteen years of my life, I belonged.

It was easy to slip into the rhythm of family dinners, beach trips, late-night movie marathons. The way Reign teased me relentlessly but always had my back. The way Andy and I fit together like puzzle pieces, practically reading each other's thoughts.

I used to be able to breathe in that space, where love was as natural as the waves crashing outside our window.

But then it happened. Oakley happened.

Suddenly, the weight of being adopted felt like a boulder on my chest. A crack in the foundation I'd never noticed before. Sure, my parents had told me when I was young, and at the time, it didn't really bother me.

It was just a fact—something I accepted without question. But as I got older, that fact did turn into a question. And that question turned into a feeling.

A feeling that maybe there was a reason this terrible, nasty, awful thing happened to me and not anyone else.

I started seeing the differences in everything. Reign with his fierce temper that mirrored Dad's. Andy's nose and freckles, identical to Mom's.

And then there was me.

Different eyes, different hair, different genes.

I'm not a Van Doren by blood, and no matter how many times I cover my naturally blonde hair with red dye, I'll never shake the weight of that.

"Do you regret it?" I start, hating that I said it out loud and reminding myself to never smoke before lunch with Mom ever again.

Mom watches me with the patient, unflinching gaze she always gives before prompting gently, "Regret what?"

I take a breath, the words sticking in my throat. "Adopting me. I know I'm not who you expected I'd be. I wouldn't blame you if you—"

"Do you know why I named you Seraphina?" She cuts me off, face not shifting. There is no hurt, no shock, just her steady voice as she pushes off the stage and walks toward the seat next to me.

"No?"

"It means fire."

Mom takes a seat, tilting her head as she looks at me and running the tip of her finger down the bridge of my nose softly.

"We were scared. We just had Reign, and I was already terrified of trying to be a good mother to one child. Then suddenly, we had two." A

smile breaks across her red lips, eyes distant with the memory. “But when your father laid eyes on you? When I watched him refuse to leave your side? All the fear left, and I knew you were ours. I named you Seraphina because your father’s name means smoke.”

Where there’s smoke, there’s fire.

I hate crying. Loathe it with every fiber of my being. It makes me feel weak, exposed, like my heart is on display for the world to pick apart.

I’ve spent years building walls, brick by brick, to keep all that vulnerability locked away.

But now, as she speaks, those walls slide down a little, and I can feel the burn of tears in my eyes. And the worst part? I can’t even be angry at her for making me feel this way ’cause all I feel is love.

“You are *exactly* who we expected you to be,” she mutters, tucking a piece of hair behind my ear. “Our daughter. Nothing will ever change that.”

“Not even if I hate Shakespeare?” I counter, arching a brow as I quickly wipe the tears from my cheeks.

She tilts her head back with a laugh, shaking it as she says, “Not even then.”

Before we part, she pulls me into a hug, squeezing me a little tighter than normal.

Her parting words remind me why blood has never and will ever determine who my family is.

“I know that weight on your shoulders is heavy. I can see it. When you’re ready, I’m right here, baby. I’m strong enough to help you carry it, always.”

the truth

. . .

Jude

September 13

I'M SERIOUSLY STARTING TO QUESTION WHY I PUT MY MORALS ABOVE tossing Seraphina Van Doren to her death when I had the chance.

I stand and take in her handiwork all over again. As if Saran Wrap hadn't been enough the first time, she's taken to red chalk paint. From the hood to the back glass, there are words, stupid hearts with wings—I even spotted a dick on the passenger-side door.

Phi took her time to cover every inch of open space on the car I've spent years building up.

Dealing with Hollow Heights and the Van Doren house is fine, but this? Had me debating walking right back onto campus and dragging her little ass out by her throat.

I drop the sponge into a bucket of suds, the water stained the same color as Phi's hair.

“Damn. What happened?”

My jaw clenches as I glance over my shoulder at Ezra Caldwell.

He sets another bucket of clean water beside me, smirking as he shakes his head. Grease smudges the tips of his fingers, crawling up his arms before disappearing beneath the sleeve of his worn graphic tee.

Ezra is the perfect mixture of *fuck you* arrogance and *I don't give a shit* detachment, daring the world to challenge him while simultaneously not giving a damn about its response.

"I existed," I mutter, eyeing the fresh water, jerking my chin at him. "Thanks."

I'd thought my little paper swapping would be enough for her to back off. Naively, by the way she'd been dodging me, I'd thought we'd called a silent stalemate.

Unfortunately, the vixen had only been lying low, waiting to strike.

Not only had she once again fucked with my car, she'd taken it upon herself to decorate every single cigarette in my pack with various phrases.

Fuck you :)

Bite me.

Cancer kills.

The upside, if there was one, was I finally fixed my bike, so if I couldn't get this shit cleaned in the next hour, I was leaving it here to be tomorrow's problem.

"Don't mention it. Figured you needed it to clean 'Bow down, bitch boy' off your windshield." He bites the inside of his cheek, trying not to laugh. "Phi's many things, but subtle has never been one of them."

A snort escapes me as I drag the wet rag across the hood of my car, wiping away her *lovely* fucking artwork. "Yeah, no shit."

Inferno Garage is a gritty, grunge haven. Walls covered in graffiti, old posters peeling off, and neon signs humming above workbenches cluttered with tools.

Despite the person who got me the job, I like working here.

There's something almost comforting in the chaos, in the way everything here is just a little bit broken. It feels honest, familiar, in a way that nothing else does in Ponderosa Springs.

A blue neon sign reading *Six Seconds or Less* flickers above us, casting a cold glow across the garage. The sponge squeaks against the glass as Ezra's tattooed arm extends across the windshield.

"What the hell are you doing?" I ask, watching his steady movements under the neon haze.

"Uh, helping you?" He arches a dark brow, that distant, glazed-over sheen on his face. "Phi's like my sister, but fucking with a Skyline? That

shit hurts my soul, dude.”

“I don’t need your help, *dude*,” I grunt.

“Is being an asshole genetic, or did you get that sparkling personality all by yourself?”

“Ask your dad.”

I’m expecting anger, maybe even a fight.

I brace myself for it, ready for the sharp retort, the flash of temper that usually follows when I push someone too far. But instead, Ezra shocks me. He doesn’t lash out or throw back some biting remark.

Instead, he laughs—low and almost to himself, a sound that catches me off guard. He gives a little shake of his head, amused, as he pulls his bottom lip between his teeth.

“We all have our shit, Sinclair,” he says on a sigh. “You’ve just let yours turn you into a bitter asshole who can’t tell a friend from an enemy.”

“Sorry, not in the market for friends.” I grab the clean sponge, the wet plop echoing in my ears as I toss it on the hood of my car to scrub off an upside-down smiley face.

“Yeah, well, I’m too high to be your enemy. Get the fuck over it.” He leans across the roof of the car, scrubbing off another upside-down smiley face.

We work together, but that’s circumstance. We’re half cousins, but that’s blood.

Prior to starting this job, I’d never even spoken to Ezra. Not once. Not a quip or a hello. Hell, since starting here a week ago, the most words we’d exchanged was *Oil change in bay 4*.

My point is, we aren’t friends, and we sure as fuck aren’t family. So it begs the question, what the fuck does he want from me?

“Thought you’d be at the Gauntlet by now,” I probe, cautious of the Heathen everyone calls Shadow.

“Fuck no.” He chuckles to himself as he lifts my windshield wiper. “That’s all them. I’d rather not witness the carnage they’ll unleash.”

The whites of his eyes are tinged with red, veins threading through the corners, caught in a web of a dreamlike haze.

He’s not wired enough to be on coke, but he’s far more talkative here at the garage than he is on campus. If I had to guess, Ezra’s rolling with a dash of weed in the passenger seat.

It's the second time this week I've noticed it. I can't tell if his family is just turning a blind eye or giving him the benefit of the doubt, but he's definitely leaning toward a problem over it just being teenage fun.

"Them?"

The soft thud of the wiper hitting the window echoes as he jerks his head toward the exits. "The fantastic four. Nora, Atlas, Reign, and Phi. Competition fiends. My brother didn't speak to Reign for three months over a game of Monopoly. They hate losing. Me and Andy always hang back to help with the bloody aftermath."

I pause mid-wipe, my curiosity piqued without my consent. "Phi competitive like that too?"

"Used to be. She's wicked smart, did a shit ton of scholastic competitions and won most of them. Got early acceptance into some MIT her junior year."

Interesting.

"Might've been better for my car if she went."

Ezra smirks, dropping the windshield wiper back into place with a soft thud. "Maybe. But then you wouldn't have the pleasure of her artistic expression."

I roll my eyes, the sarcasm not lost on me. "Pleasure's one way to put it."

He leans against the car, arms crossed, his gaze distant for a moment before he looks back at me. "Wasn't always like this. She used to be different."

"Different how?"

"I don't know. Just different, ya know? Kept her head down, did what she was told. Quiet, focused, almost invisible. But life pushes you, and you either push back or get trampled. And she..."

Ezra pauses, a flicker of something unreadable passing through his glassy eyes before he continues. "She pushed hard as fuck. And she's been pushing back ever since. Against everything, everyone. Especially herself."

Her drunken words and sober thoughts the night of the party had sparked something in me. A feeling I hadn't experienced in a long time.

Curiosity.

I've watched her these past few days without her knowledge.

I know she has an everything bagel with whipped cream cheese for breakfast every morning. That she sneaks out and goes for night rides every single Thursday night. She also has a blind cat that fucking loves me. I found Galileo curled in my bed this morning.

It doesn't take much to figure out who she is either.

Her public social media is a gold mine. An entire grid filled with pictures of family and friends—so much smiling, so much pretending. But what stands out the most is *her*.

Always in the frame but never really *in* the moment. It's like she's just...there, a ghost haunting her own life, posing for photos she doesn't belong in.

She's a Van Doren, but she's not *really* part of them, not the way I expected. There's this distance she puts between them, this invisible line she refuses to cross.

At every family gathering, she hovers at the edge, close enough to be counted but far enough away to keep from really being seen. Always watching, never joining.

It's strange, considering how much she loves being the center of attention.

“Did she—”

The vibration in my pocket shuts me up mid-sentence. I pull the phone out, wiping my hand on my jeans before pressing it to my ear without checking the screen.

“Yeah?” I mutter, already irritated.

“Jude, my man,” Oakley’s voice slurs through the speaker. “How’s it feel living it up in the Van Doren mansion?”

I grit my teeth. He’s fucked out of his mind right now. I can hear it in the way his words trip over each other, too loose, too careless, like he’s forgotten how to talk. Hell, maybe he has.

There’s laughter in the background, followed by the sharp crack of glass breaking. I shake my head, knowing Oakley is too far gone in his world to ever be saved.

This isn’t my friend. He hasn’t been my friend in a long time.

“I told you I was done. Lose my number, Oakes.”

“Aww, come on, don’t be like that, buddy,” he whines, and I can almost see him stumbling around in some dimly lit room, surrounded by people

who don't even know his name. "You're really gonna throw away our friendship over some drugs? I was the only one there to toss you ice after your daddy kicked your ass. I had your back, man."

His words hit like dull punches, but it's the past he's dragging up that makes my jaw clench.

The blood, the bruises, Oakley standing there with a bag of ice and a grin that never quite reached his eyes. We were close, but after his dad was shipped off, things shifted.

Oakes became...a piece of shit, for lack of a better word. Stopped caring, lost compassion, turned into someone I didn't recognize.

He refuses to crawl out of the gutter his family threw him in, and I wasn't going to rot there with him.

"Bye." My thumb hovers over the screen, ready to end the call, when his voice spikes, desperate.

"Wait—wait, Jude! Just hold on, man. I gotta ask you something!"

I hesitate.

Maybe it's the stupid part of me still holding on, giving him the benefit of the doubt. The part that hopes, maybe this time, he'll ask for help. That he'll mean it.

Because if he did, if he actually wanted to get clean, to crawl out of that mess he's drowning in—I'd help. I'd drag him through the dirt if I had to, just like I tried to do with Dad.

I fucking hate myself for this.

"Make it quick," I grunt, jaw clenched.

He doesn't respond right away. He lets the silence drag out, stretching it until it's unbearable. And then I hear it—the smirk in his voice, slimy and smug, crawling through the line like a parasite, burrowing beneath my skin.

"Is Phi still as sweet as I remember?"

My shoulders tense, blood running cold. "What the hell did you just say?"

"That piece of shit Judge tossed my dad in the slammer for life. I got even, stole that bitch's cherry. Best Halloween of my life. Phi's a sweet little treat." Oakley laughs, deep, and the sound makes me sick to my fucking stomach. "I can't believe she's kept her mouth shut this long."

My heart becomes this uncaged animal. Feral as it slams against my chest, beating and banging along the walls, the screaming of my pulse in

my ears.

Rage.

I can feel my hand tremble as I clench the phone tighter, knuckles bone-white.

“You’re lying.” The words barely make it past my throat, strangled with fury.

He doesn’t answer right away, and that’s worse. The silence drags, and I can hear his smirk, feel it crawling through the line like a goddamn parasite.

“If I’m lying, why’d she try to set me on fire?” His tone is mocking, dripping with satisfaction, like he’s enjoying every second of this. Like this is his twisted version of fun. “How long did you think St. Gabriel’s was because of you? Four years? Pathetic, sad little Sin. You even apologized to me for it.”

I had thought it was because of me that he’d served three months in juvie.

I did apologize.

Over and over again, I let that guilt weigh on me like a fucking anchor, dragging me down into the dirt where Oakley wanted me. I let him use it. I let him sink his claws into my head, wrap my guilt around his fingers like a leash, pulling me wherever he wanted.

I let him con me into selling his shitty drugs.

I let him control me, play me like a pawn in whatever sick game he was running, all while he was hiding this.

I was friends with a fucking *rapist*.

The realization crashes over me like a tidal wave, cold and suffocating, and I feel it. This violent, uncontrollable fury rising inside of me, boiling over until I can barely see straight.

The phone is ripped from my ear, and before I even register what I’m doing, it’s flying across the room, smashing into the wall with a loud crack.

“Whoa, dude, you good?” Ezra’s shocked voice tries to pierce the sound of my blood pumping in my ears, but I can barely hear it. Can’t think straight with the rage pulsing through my veins.

My hands are shaking, my chest feels like it’s going to explode, and all I can think about is *her*.

Seraphina.

Her name beats against the inside of my skull, relentless, sharp, as everything Oakley said loops through my mind in this grotesque, never-ending reel.

The fire four years ago, the way she looked at me like I was something to be crushed beneath her heel. The hate in her eyes. It wasn't just anger. It wasn't some family feud or petty revenge.

She thinks I know.

All these years, she's been carrying that weight, burning alive in her own hell because she thinks I'm part of it. She thinks I stood by and let Oakley destroy her.

I hate it. I *fucking hate* that she thinks I'm the same as him. That I'd ever let something like that happen. That I'd be capable of standing there, watching her or anyone else get hurt like that, and do nothing.

And why wouldn't she think that? I stayed. I hung around.

I was his best friend. I was fucking there, and I let it all happen.

I let Oakley drag me down into his mess, let him use me like a pawn, and I didn't see it.

Didn't see *her*.

How long had it been since *anyone* had seen Seraphina Van Doren?

"Jude, what are you doing, man?" Ezra's words fall away as I grab my jacket, my movements rough, like I can't move fast enough.

Soon, I'm going to make Oakley Wixx regret breathing.

Right now?

I'm going to make it crystal fucking clear that I'm not the villain in her story.

the gauntlet

“As tradition goes, West Trinity selected the location, and Ponderosa Springs has chosen the game. The game this year is Finders Keepers. Keys to your respective town halls are hidden within the bounds of Gallows Reef. X marks the spot. Find your key and return it to your marked area. Stealing isn’t just allowed; it’s expected. The key can be passed between teammates, but once you have it, it stays in the play area. Work as a team, work solo. Step out of bounds, and you’re out—no second chances. Ponderosa Springs will start at the beach. West Trinity in the woods. A siren will let you know when the game has begun. You will have till the witching hour. First town to find and return their key to the marked area wins. Winner takes all, and as always, try not to die.”

OceanofPDF.com

finders keepers

...

Phi

September 13

FIND THE KEY. GET IT BACK. STEAL THEIRS IF YOU CAN.

Rules are simple, but out here, nothing ever is.

The darkness at Gallows Reef isn't just the absence of light—it's alive.

A thing that presses against my skin, cold and unyielding. My fingers dig through the wet sand, waves kissing my knuckles, while the ocean crashes against the rocks, a constant, relentless roar.

*Where the echoes of passion quietly sleep,
Hidden where the shore's whispers seep.*

That was our hint, so that means it has to be here. There is no other place it could be. Well, I mean, there are definitely other hiding spots. Gallows Reef and the surrounding woods are like a hundred acres.

But there is only one Lovers Cove. Which I know because this is where Atlas lost his virginity.

Gross. Did not need that mental image in my—

“Found it!” I shout, interrupting my own thoughts. “Holy shit, I found it.”

Glinting faintly in the pale moonlight filtering down through the mist is the key to town hall. I press the historic skeleton key to my chest like it's my firstborn child.

“Phi, I could kiss you on the mouth right now!”

“Please don’t,” I shout back to Atlas, who was helping me dig, which he was not happy about.

But we flipped Charon’s obol for it, and he lost. So the other two got the fun job.

I stand from the wet sand, leggings soaked and sticking to me. Nora comes around the corner, a baseball bat slung over her shoulder and sweat dripping from her brow.

“I forgot how fun this was,” she breathes, wiping the blood on her mouth off with the back of her hand, a grin on her lips.

“Coming back home isn’t all bad, huh?” I grin, walking closer to her and using my thumb to clean the crimson from her chin.

“It could definitely be worse.”

“We gotta go run for the woods. Time’s almost up,” Atlas announces, coming up from behind me and waving his phone in my face. “Let’s make like a banana and split.”

“You’re an idiot.” My voice is a low laugh as I smack the back of his head.

Walking out of the cave, I tuck the key into my bra. The mist rolling in from the water, thick and swirling, casts a blanket across the darkened beach, making it hard to see more than a few feet ahead, let alone to the edge of the woods.

Great, I already can’t see shit ’cause I dropped my last pair of contacts in the fucking sink this morning. This is going to be just *lovely*.

“Holy shit, your eye,” I gasp as we hit the sand of the beach, laying eyes on my brother for the first time in an hour.

Reign’s shirt is ripped to shit, scratches littering his torso, pink bruises forming on his ribs. But the worst is the split right down the middle of his eyebrow. It’s swollen and raw, leaking blood down his cheek.

“Who the fuck brings nunchucks?” he complains, chest heaving.

I roll my eyes. “Probably the same kind of person who brings brass knuckles.”

I note the way the moon catches on the silver metal curled around his fingers as we walk through the fog.

“Anyone else getting the vibe that we’re about to be sucked into a black hole?” Nora says softly, boots thudding against the sand.

“Actually, black holes don’t suck things in like a vacuum cleaner. It’s more about the gravitational pull being so strong that not even—”

“I love you, but not the time for that nerdy word vomit thing you do when you get nervous,” Atlas interrupts me, his eyes behind us. “Wasters incoming.”

A bolt of panic and adrenaline surges through my chest as I follow his intense gaze to the group a few yards away. Their heavy footfalls thump against the ground as they sprint toward us.

“Run.”

I’m not sure who said it, but it doesn’t matter. We take off toward the edge of the woods looming just ahead, a darker line against the gray mist.

No more laughter, no more jokes.

The Gauntlet didn’t get sneaky because of accidents. It got sneaky because people started dying, and everyone knew it wasn’t just bad luck.

It’s something darker, something raw and relentless, where the line between a game and the grave blurs. Where life and death dance too close for comfort, and the stakes are more than just bragging rights.

A brutal proving ground where old grudges, festering beneath the surface for generations, find a bloody outlet.

The ache in my chest starts quickly. My boots kick up sand with each step, shifting beneath my feet, making me fight for every inch.

Running isn’t my thing. Someone could rob me with the threat of running, no weapon needed.

When the soles of my boots hit solid dirt, my feet breathe a sigh of relief, just before my cheek hisses at me as a tree branch slashes across my face. I can feel the split skin leaking blood, but I don’t have time to check the damage.

The double helix is our marked area, two spruce trees that grew side by side, trunks intertwining like strands of DNA. I know where it is normally, but right now, it’s hard to make out my hand in front of my face.

Wet air weighs down my lungs, chest burning as the usual sharp edges of reality are blurred and softened by thick, swirling fog.

I can’t tell if I trip or a branch grabbed my ankle, but either way, I go tumbling onto the damp earth, knees breaking my fall with a thud. Looking around me, I see nothing.

No Nora, or Reign, or Atlas.

Just me.

I look up at the endless night sky, the hopeless stars trying to pierce the canopy of trees. But their effort is futile. Ponderosa pine trees crowd the sky, looming. Spindly branches horned with needles reach outward, skeletal fingers ready to snatch me up.

I place my hands on my knees, dropping my head. Pretty positive my heart is about to eject itself from my chest.

A high-pitched whistle shatters my eardrums, the air from a bullet brushing my cheek. Moonlight cuts through the pines, illuminating the tree bark in front of me, where a circle of red paint now drips.

Okay, nunchucks, fine. But a goddamn paintball gun? Seriously?

“Please—stop, no!”

The gut-wrenching scream cuts through the night, ricocheting off the trees, slicing above the crashing waves. I whip around, heart in my throat, just in time to see a stranger stumble through the pines, his clothes smeared with red paint, collapsing onto the damp forest floor.

The instinct to help kicks in, and I lurch forward, feet barely finding their grip in the dirt. But then, another figure emerges from the shadows.

“Oh my God,” I whisper, hand flying to my mouth as I watch the guy slam the butt of the gun into the stranger’s face with a sickening thud.

Blood spurts from his nose as he curls into a fetal position on the ground.

The familiar taste of panic swells in my throat, fear kicking my legs into gear.

I’m running, but it feels like I’m sinking. Every step is heavier, like the ground is swallowing me whole, dragging me down into the earth. The fog is thick, suffocating. My lungs burn, screaming for air that I can’t seem to find.

I can’t get enough. There isn’t enough air.

Branches tear at my skin, sharp and relentless, like claws trying to pull me back. The trees are closing in, their gnarled arms reaching out. The darkness is alive, pulsing, a living thing that feeds on my fear.

Another paintball whizzes past my arm, urging me to continue weaving through the trees. I have no idea where everyone is, and at this point, I don’t know where I’m at either.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I'm barely clear of a tree when pain explodes across my chest—once, twice, three times in quick succession, each shot landing with brutal precision.

“Shit!” I shout, grinding my teeth together, “You got me the first time, asshole!”

My palm goes to my arm, red paint seeping through my fingers as I try to soothe the ache, but it's no use. A tree branch snaps behind me, and I whip around, heart hammering in my chest.

“Well, well, if it isn't Ponderosa Springs's Queen of Disaster in the flesh. If I'd know who you were, I would've only shot once.”

The moonlight casts an eerie glow on his face, highlighting the sinister smirk etched on his features. He's unremarkable in every way: average height, plain face, but there is something unsettling about his ratty eyes.

“And they say chivalry is dead,” I mutter, taking a step back when he walks forward.

His predatory gaze travels up and down my body, assessing me like a piece of meat. “I fucking *hate* redheads, but God, you're too tempting to pass up.”

Panic claws at my throat, threatening to choke me.

Another step forward, another step back.

Until he's only a few feet in front of me and the bark of a tree bites into my spine.

“Make sure you fight me hard, baby. It's gonna make breaking into that tight cunt so much sweeter.”

Memories crash into me like waves, relentless and cold, pulling me under. I see flashes of a face, of eyes filled with malice, of hands that hurt, that break, that take everything until there's nothing left.

I'm no longer here. I'm there, trapped in a nightmare that I never escaped.

I'm not in control. I'm not in control. I'm not—

A harrowing thud cracks through the darkness. I blink, vision clearing just in time to see the Waster's head collide with the tree right next to the one I'm leaning on. Shock ripples through me as he's lifted by the back of his hair before his face smashes into the bark again.

The cracking of bone and wails of pain tangle in the night, echoing in my ears.

The moonlight slashes across Jude's face, carving out the undeniable rage twisting his features into something artistically monstrous. The golden medallion necklace around his neck sways with his movements. I can't bring myself to look away as his fingers tighten around the stranger's hair, repeatedly slamming his head into the tree.

Crack. Crack. Crack.

I'm not sure how long it lasts, but the moans of agony halt, replaced with a disgusting choking sound before the man's body falls. A distorted heap of bones and flesh on the forest floor. He coughs, teeth spraying from his torn lips.

One rattling breath. Two. Then his chest goes wholly still.

Jude stands over him, shoulders heaving, light gray T-shirt straining as the muscles in his back ripple with every breath. Rage pulses from him in relentless waves, so intense I can see it in the corded veins on his forearms, surging and taut with raw fury.

There is nothing but the look on his face as he finally turns to me.

Cheekbones carved with precision, splattered with blood. A constellation of savagery. A strong jawline that could have been sculpted from stone. Full lips that hint at softness yet are set in a cruel, unyielding line.

His beauty isn't gentle; it's fierce, commanding, the kind that leaves a trail of destruction in its wake, burning with the same ferocity as a dying star. Jude is raw, beautiful brutality.

A supernova.

"What...is he..." My voice barely rises above a whisper, words strangled by the intensity of his gaze.

He takes a step forward, the distance between us slowly evaporating.

Blood trickles down the hollow of his throat, drawing my eyes as it drips to the ground. His Adam's apple bobs when he speaks.

"I'm the only one allowed to hate you."

My chest tightens, every breath coming sharper, harder to hold on to, as if my heart is about to break free from the cage it's trapped in. Panic coils in my stomach, wrapping tighter around my ribs.

Our eyes catch, like lace fabric on unfinished wooden furniture.

The silvery light from the moon shows the stormy blend of navy and turbulent gray in his irises. A sky on the brink of fury, thunderclouds

gathering.

Tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

The body is a remarkable thing, sensing danger before the mind can fully grasp it. Lightning is near, despite the clear, star-strewn sky above. The air crackles with static electricity, a silent warning that I've stepped into a charged zone.

I'm going to regret what comes next.

I am about to break the only commandment engraved in the Book of Van Doren. The ultimate sin.

"Thou shalt not covet a Sinclair."

My father will never forgive me for this.

"Touch me."

His eyes burn into mine, head tilting as he peers down at me. "Say it again. Tell me you want me, Geeks."

This is my out.

This is where I walk away.

But I don't.

I can't.

My fingers grab the hem of my shirt, ripping it over my head. My chest heaves as it falls to the damp ground, and I look up at him.

"Touch me," I repeat, tongue wetting my bottom lip as I take ahold of his belt, tugging him into my body. "Show me how much you fucking hate me."

Jude claims my mouth like a punishment, as if he's trying to pour every ounce of hostility in his bones down my throat. Like he wants me to choke on it. His lips are hot, angry, punishing me, hand cradling the back of my neck, forcing my mouth to open up further for his tongue to explore.

A helpless moan escapes my throat as his other hand finds its mark, palm cupping my pussy through the fabric of my leggings. The heel of his palm grinds against the ache between my thighs, heat building in me. My body betrays me with each pulse of desire that ripples through me, so intense I can hardly breathe.

And when I do, it's only his scent filling my lungs.

Books. Black Ice. Smoke.

No oxygen. Just him.

Jude's body is a wall of solid heat, shoving me against the rough bark of the tree as I arch into his hand, desperate. The friction is too good, feels too real, igniting sparks that spread across my skin, sharp, electric, on the verge of combusting under his touch.

With hungry hands, I move my palm down his chest to the hard bulge straining against his jeans. My core clenches around nothing, remembering the way this dick stretched me open, demanding entrance and delivering nothing but pleasure.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I let my teeth grab my bottom lip, feeling him throb against my palm. Heat radiates from his cock as I wrap my hand around it, squeezing just enough to pull a deep, guttural growl from him.

He tears his mouth from mine, his lips trailing down to the rapid pulse at my throat, teeth grazing the sensitive skin. Jude's fingers are already ripping my leggings down, rough and impatient.

Breath hot against my neck, he growls, "What are your friends going to say when they find you panting for my cock like a needy little whore, huh?"

"Same thing yours would say if they saw how desperate you are to be inside my pussy," I bite, hands working their way under his shirt, nails scratching every rigid line of his abs, feeling the molten heat of his skin, the tension rippling beneath it.

A quick grasp escapes me as his hand comes down hard on my ass, the sting making my legs quiver.

"I'm gonna fuck that snarky-ass mouth one day. Ruin those pretty lips until they're nothing but a hole for me to spill in. We'll see how much shit you talk when you're choking on my dick."

With my leggings halfway down my thigh, I shove them the rest of the way off, stepping out of the pool of clothing until I'm left in just my bra and shoes, exposed to the night air.

My back bows against the rough bark as his fingers find the slick heat between my thighs. Two fingers tease along my cunt, slow and deliberate, spreading my wetness in lazy, taunting strokes.

"Goddamn," he grunts against my ear, letting me feel the smirk on his lips as his fingers lazily sink into my entrance. "Wet. Tight. Hot. Aching for me. Such a good fucking pussy."

I preen beneath his praise, parting my legs wider to give him more access. My walls tighten around his fingers, clenching as he works them in and out, the rhythm relentless.

Each stroke sends lightning through my veins, burning up every last shred of guilt I had left. The air between us is thick with the sound of my pussy opening up for him. Slick, obscene, lewd desire.

This pleasure, the kind Jude fosters in me, drowns everything out. There is no hatred, no self-loathing. Just his fingers, fucking me harder, driving me toward a release so intense I can barely hold myself together.

“Taste how sweet your cunt is for me,” he murmurs against my skin, leaving me hollow before filling another one of my holes. “Fucking the enemy tastes good, doesn’t it, my little traitor?”

His long fingers shove past my bruised lips, forcing me to moan around them. My tongue swirls, tasting my own need. The salty tang of myself fills my mouth, and I just want more.

I want more, need more, every nerve in my body screaming for him to take me further, to push me over the edge until there’s nothing left but raw, mind-numbing bliss.

“Loner.” My husky voice scratches my throat. “If you don’t fuck me in the next twenty seconds, I’m gonna find someone who will.”

A dark chuckle rumbles in his chest, the feel of those sharp canine teeth dragging across my collarbone before he takes a step back.

“By all means, Geeks. Go ahead.” He smirks, eyes half-lidded as he yanks his shirt over his head. “When he busts before you come, your foster brother will be right down the hall to finish you off.”

There is nothing more dangerous than a man who’s good in bed and fucking knows it.

“Still afraid of heights?” he asks, stepping closer once again, a gleam in his eyes.

My brows knit together. “Wha—”

It’s all the reaction I have time for before he palms my ass and lifts me off the ground. The breath is knocked from my lungs at the rush as I instinctively try to tether my legs around his waist.

But he doesn’t stop.

No, he forces me higher, shoving me up his body until I’m perched with my legs dangling over his shoulders and his head between my thighs.

“Fuck,” I gasp, head tilting back against the tree as my fingers thread through his hair, clinging to him as he drags his tongue along the slit of my pussy.

“Who’s about to play with your pretty pink pussy, Geeks?” His voice is thick with lust, sultry gaze locking onto mine when I glance down, taunting.

“You.” My fingers tighten in the dirty-gold strands of his hair, pulling him closer, needing him to curb the desire churning in my stomach.

Playfully, he bites at my dangling belly button ring, tugging it away from my body lightly before letting it go.

“Say my name,” he demands, spitting directly on my clit before coaxing it with the tip of his tongue. “Tell me who’s about to devour your cunt until you drip down my chin.”

“You talk too fucking much.”

A sharp smack echoes through the woods as he slaps me on the ass, the sting making me twitch.

“I will fucking leave you here. Aching for me. Say it and I’ll give your needy cunt what she wants. I’ll suck, fuck, and fill her up. Leave her swollen and dripping with my cum. Let me make her feel good. Say my fucking name, *Seraphina*.”

I try to jerk my hips toward his mouth, but he tightens his grip, holding me still, right at the brink. A teasing flick here, a lazy stroke there. His tongue ring grazes over my clit in cruel, torturous strokes.

My pulse pounds in my ears, the throbbing between my thighs two fucking intense. Too fucking much. I need it so bad it fucking hurts.

“Jude,” I finally say, voice coming out as a whimper. “Jude is about to eat my pussy.”

“Atta girl.”

His lips curve into a wicked smile, dark satisfaction in his eyes that tugs low in my stomach.

Without hesitation, Jude’s mouth descends on me, his hot mouth sealing over my clit. The relief of pressure is enough to almost make me come. My thighs tighten around his head as his tongue moves with a precision that makes my legs tremble.

Holding me steady, firm hands gripping my hips as he devours me like a man starved, he drags me closer to the edge of sanity.

Every flick of his tongue sends lightning bolts through my body, each stroke deliberate, relentless. The cold metal of his tongue ring flicking against me has tension coiling in my stomach, tighter and tighter, like a wire stretched too tight.

“Faster,” I pant. “Yes, fuck, right there.”

I tilt my head back, eyes closed, letting out a strangled moan as he alternates between slow, teasing licks and firm before giving my clit attention. He pushes me further, making it harder to hold back from the pleasure on my heels that’s threatening to rip me apart.

He growls low against my core, the vibrations making me arch. The rough bark of the tree scrapes my back, pain mixing with pleasure in a perfect, brutal harmony.

“That’s it, little traitor. Show me how hard you come for the guy you hate. Soak my fucking face. Let that pussy cry for me.” His words are muffled by my body, but I feel them reverberate through me, sinking deep into my bones.

Pressure builds, consuming every thought until there’s nothing left. No worry. No hatred. No Jude. No Phi.

Just the heat of his mouth against my wet core, the burn in my veins, and the primal, insistent need to let go.

My fingers tighten in his hair, my breath ragged. “I’m coming. Shit, I’m coming, Jude—”

My orgasm crashes into me, a violent release, ripping through me with a force so intense I can’t hold back the scream that tears from my throat. Legs tightening around his shoulders, my hands gripping his hair, desperate to anchor myself as wave after wave of pleasure racks through me.

White-hot sparks flicker behind my eyelids, body shaking with the force of it. I can feel every beat of my heart, each one sending shock waves through every inch of me. My pulse thunders in my veins, relentless as I free-fall into a pool of ecstasy.

And I just keep falling because Jude doesn’t stop.

My breath catches in short, ragged bursts as he keeps working his tongue in slow, lazy strokes that drag out the pleasure, stretching it like taffy until my body is on fire.

His fingers dig into my hips, hard enough to bruise, hard enough to remind me of where I am, who I am, and that this isn’t a dream. It’s all too

real, too visceral. I crave the bite of pain, the way it roots me in the moment, grounding me as pleasure rips me apart.

“Oh fuck. Jesus fucking—”

The words tumble out of my mouth in a broken chant. My legs shake uncontrollably as his relentless mouth keeps working, dragging me deeper into an abyss.

Where there is no light. No oxygen. No life.

Just pleasure.

I’m barely recovering from the first orgasm when I feel it building again, an unstoppable force tightening inside me, pussy clenching hard around nothing. My vision blurs with the intensity of it, the world narrowing down to the way his mouth owns me, to the ache between my legs.

It’s a haze of pleasure, white-hot and all-encompassing. A fog I’m not sure I’ll ever leave.

Time blurs—seconds, minutes, hours—all folding into one endless moment where nothing exists beyond the heat of his mouth and the soft burn spreading through my body.

My legs tremble as he pulls away, leaving me breathless and exposed to the cool bite of the night air. I don’t know how I’m still standing when he finally sets me down, my body jolting as the breeze brushes against my overly sensitive skin.

Jude’s breathing is labored, eyes hooded as he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. He looks at me like he’s starving, like he could stay between my thighs forever and still want more. It’s that look—raw, unfiltered—like I’m something sacred and ruinous all at once, and it sends a shiver down my spine.

And then the world crashes back in.

A siren pierces the air, sharp and shrill, slicing through the thick fog of lust with a violent clarity. West Trinity Falls has returned their key. The sound is like ice water dousing a fire, pulling me out of the heat and into the cold.

The Gauntlet. The key. The metallic shape presses against my chest, still hidden beneath the band of my bra, but the urgency that gripped me earlier has vanished. The key doesn’t matter now. Not with this weight settling inside me, thick and suffocating. The nauseating awareness of what just

happened, of what *we've* done, anchors me to the moment like a stone pulling me under.

I glance over Jude's shoulder, past his broad frame, and my gaze snags on the body lying on the forest floor. Lifeless. Motionless. *Dead*.

It feels unreal, like something out of a dream—a nightmare that doesn't quite belong to me. But it is. It's real. It's so damn real.

Jude Sinclair just killed someone.

For *me*.

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the cleanup

...

Jude

September 14

LOGIC SAYS THE DEAD GUY ON THE GROUND SHOULD BE MY NUMBER ONE priority right now.

But logic isn't my friend tonight. I wouldn't even call us acquaintances.

The only thing I'm thinking is: *What's her natural hair color?*

I glance at her through the haze of cigarette smoke. Red dye streaks down her face from the roots of her hair, a jagged line of color that drips like blood. She's soaked head to toe, looking like a drowned cat, her boots squelching against the muddy forest floor with every frantic step she takes.

The forest is thick, an ancient wall of pines that tower overhead, their branches curling in like claws, creating a canopy that swallows the sky. Every inhale is heavy, damp, and it reeks of wet moss. The storm has settled into a steady rhythm now, raindrops falling like a slow, relentless drumbeat.

The kind that doesn't wash things away but embeds them deeper into the earth.

I hadn't planned any of this.

Finding her was coincidence, killing him was necessity, and touching her—instinctual.

Phi paces in front of me, breathless, as if her body is still trying to process the adrenaline crashing through her veins. Back and forth. Back and

forth.

“You’re gonna walk a hole in the fucking ground,” I grunt, pinching my cigarette between two fingers, smoke curling lazily through the rain. “Take a breath, princess. Daddy’s coming to rescue you.”

Her panic kicked in the second the adrenaline wore off. I’d told her to leave him, told her that corpse would blend in just fine with the other casualties tonight. The Gauntlet claims lives every year—he wouldn’t be the first. We’d be fine.

But Phi, for all her sharp edges and venom-tipped words, still holds tight to that good girl somewhere inside her. So she called the one person she knew would get her out of this.

The conversation with her father had been brief. A few anxiously rambled opening lines that ended with, *“Dad, what are you doing?”*

“*Calling your uncles.*”

I’d heard his clipped response crackle through the speaker three cigarettes ago. Not only would tonight be the first time I’ve committed murder, but it might also be the same night I die.

“This is so not the time for your bitching,” Phi hisses, halting her pacing to throw a glare at me. “There’s a dead guy two feet away, my dad’s gonna go nuclear, and the rain is ruining my fucking hair. So do us both a favor and don’t piss me off right now.”

The storm crackles in response, lightning streaking across the sky, illuminating the jagged outlines of trees like ghostly fingers reaching toward us.

She stands there, looking at me through slitted eyes, arms crossed tight over her chest, soaked to the bone as the rain flattens her hair against her head, the strands clinging to her face in jagged lines.

I have so many fucking things I want to say. So many that are clawing at the back of my throat, desperate to spill out. But I can’t say them. Not right now, maybe not ever.

If I open that door, if she finds out that I never knew, the guilt will shred her to pieces.

I should be angry about the fire. I should want to throw it in her face. Make her admit she was wrong about me. That she got me arrested and exiled for no fucking reason, but I can’t.

Because I can only imagine how much fucking pain she's in. Phi's been carrying this alone, and I know that for a fact because Oakley would be dead right now if her family knew.

I'm an asshole, but I won't do that to her. No one deserves that. Not after what she's been through.

So, I swallow the questions. Bury them down deep with the rest of the shit I'll never say. Because some truths aren't worth the damage they'll cause.

I flick the cigarette to the ground, the ember hissing as it hits the wet soil. Grabbing the back of my shirt, I tug it over my head, feeling the cold air hit my bare chest.

"Might save the hair," I mutter, holding it out to her. "Can't do shit about your dad's hissy fit though."

Phi looks at the damp fabric in my hand like it's some kind of foreign object, hesitation flicking in her gaze before she snatches it from my hand. She steps back, putting a little more distance between us, her movements sharp, defensive.

With an exasperated sigh, she flips her head forward and wraps the shirt around her hair, twisting it into a makeshift towel. The rain drums steadily on her shoulders, but at least it's a barrier between her hair and the irritable weather.

When she stands up straight again, her mouth is already open. "Why did you—"

"I don't recall the Gauntlet being quite so dramatic when we played."

The coldness of the voice rattles my bones, ice shoved beneath my skin and forced to sit on my spine. I turn my head to the right, catching sight of four figures stepping out from the shadows.

I can feel the forest still, the rain halting, as if nature itself has begun holding its breath.

"Thatch," Silas releases on a heavy sigh. "You've always been fucking dramatic."

Silas Hawthorne doesn't even glance at me as he strides over to Phi. Not like I can blame him—my father shot him once.

There is a deadly calm about him as his dark eyes sweep over her, taking in every inch of her face, her body, searching for any injuries.

He's massive, both in size and intimidation factor. The kind of guy who makes people take a step back without realizing it.

But something softens in him when he wraps his arms around Phi, pulling her into his chest before dropping a kiss on top of her makeshift-towel-covered head.

I can't think of one person, alive or dead, who would care enough about me to even wonder if I was missing, let alone come running to help the moment I called.

"Who's responsible for this man's *lovely* facial reconstruction?"

My gaze snaps to Thatcher, who's squatting next to the body, leather-gloved hand gripping the guy's hair, holding his head up to inspect the mess I made of his face.

Moonlight cuts across his pale skin, illuminating the edges of his tailored coat as it brushes the forest floor. The eerie Nosferatu vibes he's got going for him don't do shit to diminish the myth that is Thatcher Pierson.

He's an echo of brutality, with a last name that's synonymous with murder and bloodshed. It only adds to the glacial detachment in his eyes.

And even though he's not the one headed straight at me with clenched fists, I'm man enough to admit Thatcher creeps me the fuck out.

"What did you do, and make it fucking quick, *Jude*." Rook spits my name out of his mouth, tone dripping venom.

There is enough hellfire burning in his eyes right now to know I'm not dealing with the Judge tonight.

This is the retired anarchist. The Pyro.

I tilt my head, letting my eyes lock onto his, taunting him. "Who said it was me?"

It might not be smart for me to poke the hornet's nest, but honestly? I don't give a shit about a few beestings, and that's all they are to me. Four annoying-ass thorns in my side.

Rook, Alistair, Silas, and Thatcher.

They're the kind of men that Ponderosa Springs learned to respect out of fear of repercussions.

They own it. Every damning inch of that vile town is theirs.

For decades, their presence has been a black cloud. Rumors, truths, and lies have built their ominous reputations brick by bloody brick. It's turned them into unholy folklore no local will dare whisper.

I know what each of them is capable of doing to me.
I just don't care enough to be afraid.
I've got nothing to lose because they've got nothing left to take from me.

"Now isn't the time to be smart with me, kid. Trust me."

"Should I reschedule?" I arch a brow, voice dripping with sarcasm.

Thatcher chuckles, the sound devoid of humor. "Karma is truly the sweetest gift. How's your medicine taste, Van Doren?"

Rook takes a step closer, thoroughly riled up and in my face. Well, as close as he can get to it—I've got at least three inches on the guy.

Barely contained rage brews beneath his surface, the muscles in his neck tense, cords standing out against the ink covering his throat, like I'm one wrong word away from getting my skull caved in.

Rook's men ready to shred the world apart for his daughter, and I'm standing in that path.

"Dad."

Phi's voice cuts through the rising tension. It's the first word she's spoken since they arrived.

I flick my gaze to her, finding her staring right at me, her teeth attempting to chew through the soft tissue of her cheek.

It'd be easy for her to lie right now.

Cry wolf and throw me under the bus. Tell them I'd been the one who got her into this mess, that it was my fault. I'm sure she could spin a beautiful web, and these men would fall right into it.

"What he did was for me. That guy. He..." She pauses, steadying herself before continuing. "Jude was just looking out."

My tongue runs across the inside of my cheek. I thought killing that guy would've taken the edge off. Wiped away the bitter aftertaste of the truth Oakley left on my tongue.

But it hasn't.

The *guilt* is still there. A ghost, never fully seen, but I feel it. I'm unable to escape it, and it whispers in my ear every time I look at her.

"Did he touch you?"

Rook's question is directed to Phi, but when I look back at him, I see he hasn't moved his gaze from my face.

It takes every ounce of willpower in me to keep my mouth shut. I bite back the urge to tell him just how much I'd touched her. How I can still taste her on my tongue and how much she *loved* being a traitor.

"Didn't get a chance before Jude showed up," Phi mutters.

"Good."

I assume that's the closest thing to a thank-you I'll ever get from Rook Van Doren.

I watch him pull her into a hug, his large frame blocking her from my view as they have what I assume is a conversation meant to be private. Not that I care. I've done my part for the night.

Dismissed like some kid caught in a schoolyard fight, I roll my eyes, striding away from the noise. My back hits a nearby tree, cigarette naturally finding the space between my fingers before I light it.

There isn't enough menthol-flavored nicotine in the world to get me through this night.

Taking a long pull, I let the smoke settle deep in my chest, burning its way through me.

I killed someone. I killed someone, and I don't regret it.

I didn't even know his name, yet the blood that once pumped in his veins, touched the muscles of his heart, is still on my hands, staining my knuckles, refusing to wash away despite the rain.

There is no guilt. No horror. No panic.

I feel calm.

It's like that part of me—the one my father gave me, the one I've fought so hard against—finally found its place.

It's settled deep into that thick, obsidian sludge that's always been inside me, waiting. Waiting for me to stop pretending I'm anything more than this. Just beneath the surface, it pulses, alive and at home in the darkness I was given as a child.

I didn't do this to get a thank-you from Phi. From Rook. From any of them.

I did it because I had a hand in turning her into everything I hate.

And that snapped something inside me.

This primal, ugly thing, the thing I'm most afraid of, broke through the metal bars meant to contain it. It crawled out with a ravenous appetite for cruelty, and the scariest part isn't the abnormal calm I feel right now.

It's that I don't know if I can ever get it back inside its cage.

"Got an extra?"

Alistair's voice pulls me back to the present. He steps through the fog of smoke like a ghost until he's standing right in front of me. He jerks his head toward the cigarette pack in my hand, shadows playing along the harsh lines of his face.

If this guy tries to scold me 'cause we have a blood relation, I'm gonna deck him in the face.

I toss him the pack, watching him catch it effortlessly. He lights one up with practiced ease, taking a drag before glancing at me through the haze.

"These things will kill you, ya know?" he mutters, talking through a cloud of smoke.

"Yeah," I breathe on an exhale. "That's why I gave you one."

Alistair Caldwell is known for his anger, so I'm expecting some sort of vicious overreaction from him, but instead, I get the opposite.

The corners of his mouth twitch, a low chuckle rumbling from his throat. I would've taken wrath over this, that glint in his eye that looks an awful lot like approval.

There was a time where I would've died for his approval. Walked across fiery coals for even a smidge of recognition.

He lets out a heavy sigh, dragging a tired hand across his beard. "Are you alright?"

A snort leaves me as our gazes clash. "Take your concern and shove it up your ass, Caldwell."

They say blood is thicker than water. If that's true, then why do I feel more connected to the raindrops hitting my skin than to the man standing right in front of me?

"Not lost enough yet?" Alistair grunts, jerking his chin toward my bare chest, his eyes flicking to the medallion hanging around my neck.

Cotton fills my throat, mouth dry as I try to swallow.

It's been years since we stood this close, since we shared anything resembling a conversation.

The last time, I was seven, and I ran straight into his legs in the hallway of my house. He'd just left my dad's office, back when the abuse hadn't started, and I probably looked like any other kid, wide-eyed and innocent.

He'd squatted down, meeting my gaze without a word. We just kinda stared at each other, two strangers who weren't supposed to cross paths.

And then, in that moment, he'd taken off his necklace—a golden medallion with the words *Admit One, Styx Ferryman* etched into the surface—and pressed it into my small hands.

I remember staring at it, confused, before asking, "Is it money?"

And he'd replied, "Sorta. It buys your way back home. If you ever get lost."

Now, standing here with him again, that same medallion cold against my skin, a wave of bitterness crawls up my throat. The word *home* twists like a knife in my gut. My jaw tightens, the muscles in my neck straining as I force out the words, my voice low, razor-sharp.

"Never had a home to get lost from."

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the poet

· · ·

Phi

September 14

I HAVE A GRAVEYARD INSIDE ME, A PLACE WHERE SECRETS GO TO DIE.
Tonight, I buried a few more.

Each lie I fed Nora, Atlas, and Reign left a new tombstone in its wake.
I couldn't tell them the truth of what happened tonight.

Just past my wrought-iron balcony, the remnants of night cling stubbornly to the horizon. The backyard unfurls toward the Pacific, the sky shifting from deep indigo to a muted blue, shimmering under the first traces of dawn.

I keep telling myself lying was for the best.

They didn't need to be involved in this mess, but really, I wouldn't even fucking know how to explain the *mess*. Where would I start? The murder? The sex? The fear on my father's face when he saw me?

Another grave in my cemetery of secrets is better than any of those truths.

Daybreak is coming, slowly peeling away the night, but the stars refuse to surrender. They linger, like ghosts, refusing to fade. They're holding their breath, waiting to greet the sun.

This is the world offering me a clean slate.
But like the stars, I'm not ready to let go. Not yet.

Not before I dislodge this question from my brain.

Why would Jude Sinclair kill someone for me?

It's all I thought about when Dad was checking me, scolding me for my recklessness, more worried about my safety than the fact I'd called him to get rid of a corpse. I've never been a stranger to my father and uncles' reputation. I know that wasn't the first dead body they've gotten rid of.

The curiosity about his motivation plagued my mind with such ferocity I couldn't even be shocked by how calm Mom was. The tranquil demeanor she carried when she came into the bathroom an hour ago, the lack of questions or accusations, should've worried me.

But it hadn't.

We sat in silence as she kneeled on the floor next to the tub, my thoughts consumed with Jude as her hands carefully washed my hair like all the times she'd done when I was little.

I'd hoped it would've been enough to put me to sleep, but I'm still wide-awake, eyes burning as the sea breeze cools my skin.

I lean back into the cushions on the L-shaped couch, pulling the knit blanket tighter around my legs. Above me, string lights and glow-in-the-dark planets dangle from the ceiling, casting soft, faint light.

The blunt between my fingers burns steady as I discard my lighter into a hollowed-out book on the square table—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's work now reduced to my stash box.

“That's stupid.”

My body jerks upright as I whip my head around and stare at the wooden partition decorated with dark green ivy and tiny yellow lights. I flick my gaze down at the weed in my hand, wondering if this shit is laced because I think the plants just insulted me.

Then I remember.

Conjoined balconies.

A frustrated sigh that borders on a whine brushes my lips. I'm trying so hard to be pissed, but this new weed makes it physically impossible to be anything other than high.

So my brain and I come together for a little meeting, then settle for mildly annoyed.

I open my mouth, but Jude's words are the first to break the silence.

“Vengeance lost...”

It's a barely audible mumble, but I'm able to make it out.

I quickly realize that he's not talking to me. He's talking to himself.

My earlier curiosity battles through the weed-induced haze in my mind, drawing me to the edge of the couch. I crawl closer to the wall that separates us, peeking through the small crack beneath the ivy.

Jude's lost in his own world, headphones on, completely unaware of me. His sweatpants rest low on his hips, revealing the sharp lines of his abdomen, the faint sheen of a recent shower still clinging to him. Damp strands of hair curl at the nape of his neck, the blood from earlier washed clean from his skin.

"Fate's cruel hand...no...fucking dumb," he mutters, raking his long fingers through his hair in frustration.

All the rage from earlier is gone, as if it never existed in the first place.

He looks relaxed. Threadbare. Jaded. Held together by ink and tension, like every piece of him is barely stitched in place.

The cigarette between his lips looks almost edible, framed by the curve of his mouth as smoke dances around him. My eyes trace the tattoos inked across his skin—a coiled snake on his bicep, a dagger carved into his chest, a cherub perched on his shoulder. So many pieces, scattered across him, each one just as random as the other.

A current of electricity courses through my veins as my eyes land on the crescent-shaped imprints on his shoulders. Marks left by my nails when I'd clung to him, lost in the waves of pleasure that had torn through me.

Fucking him branded me a traitor, I know that, but in that moment? It didn't feel like betrayal.

It was like grabbing life with my bare hands.

Jude went from the harbinger of death to a live wire in seconds.

The moment he touched me, there was a crackling, volatile heat that coursed through the air between us. A pulse that was both terrifying and intoxicating, like we'd cheated the universe, and it was telling us it knew.

In those woods, it wasn't betrayal—it was instinct.

It was the feeling of being alive, of skin on skin with all the fragility and violence that life carries. We touched something sacred, something we shouldn't have.

I could chalk it all up to spiked adrenaline, trauma shock even, but it would just be another lie.

I'd wanted him.

And God, did I hate myself for it. For all of it.

"Heat...no, not right...warmth? Maybe." His voice pulls me from my thoughts, and I bite down on my lip to keep from laughing.

What the fuck is he doing?

The sound of glass shattering on the ground makes me flinch.

"Damn it, Galileo," I hiss under my breath, pushing up from the couch to inspect the damage. A cup lies in shards on the balcony floor, and of course, the culprit is nowhere in sight.

I kneel, peering under the couch where my blind tuxedo cat hides. Clicking my tongue softly, I reach out, my fingers brushing her fur. She nudges into my hand, purring quietly before I scoop her into my arms, checking her paws for any cuts.

Thankfully, there will be no emergency vet visit today.

"All good over there, Geeks?" Jude's smug remark slips through the wall, and I can practically hear the smirk stretching across his face.

Fucking fantastic. I'm busted.

"You see what you've done to me?" I whisper into Galileo's fur, shaking my head as I carry her to my room. I wince at my own words. "Well, not *see*, but you know what I mean."

I tell myself I should just stay in my room, crawl into bed, and let the covers swallow me whole. It's what any sane person would do after a night like this. But instead, I find myself quietly shutting the balcony doors, sinking back onto the couch, making sure I'm facing the partition.

I swallow thickly as silence falls, picking up the burning blunt from the table just to have something to do with my hands. It's dense, settling like the haze of smoke lingering in the air. The only sound is the waves kissing the nearby cliffside as the reality of what happened hangs between us.

I watched Jude end a man's life for *stepping* too close to me.

The guy hadn't even touched me. Just one step and a threat. That's all it took. Jude's fury was instant, lethal. No hesitation. No second thoughts. He acted like it was instinct, like destruction was something woven into the marrow of him.

The crack of bone, the wet thud of a body hitting the ground. A violent symphony that still plays in my ears, and Jude was the conductor.

He didn't even blink. Not once. Just pure, cold, calculated annihilation.

“You’re gonna suffocate yourself with all those thoughts over there.”

“I’m sure you’d love that,” I say through a cloud of smoke.

“Maybe.”

I give a pointed look to the partition coated in ivy, flipping him the bird, not caring if he can’t see it. It’s the thought that counts.

“What were you muttering about over there?” I ask, shifting so I can rest my back against the armrest. “Makes you a bit of an overachiever, doing homework after cleaning up a crime scene.”

Jude lets out a throaty laugh, a scoff more than anything. “You’re high.”

“No shit, Sherlock. Doesn’t mean I didn’t hear you. I’m stoned, not deaf.” I let the blunt dangle between my fingers, the smoke curling lazily into the air. “What was it?”

“Nothing that would interest a science geek with a LEGO obsession.” His tone is casual, but there’s a shift in the air, the sound of him moving around, restless. “Trust me.”

“Try me.”

The words slip out before I can stop them. Maybe it’s the weed dulling my guard, or maybe it’s just the need for answers. Curiosity burns in my chest, an itch I can’t scratch, and I know I can’t let this go.

I hate being left in the dark. It drives me fucking crazy. And this? This feels like one of those times when the lack of answers is going to eat at me until I lose it.

The one thing I’ve learned since living with the guy on the other side of this wall? His picture is right next to the word *loner* in the Merriam-Webster dictionary.

Jude practically breathes isolation. He clings to the night, to the quiet, like they’re the only things keeping him tethered to the ground. No need for words to tell people to stay away—his whole presence does the job for him.

The guy moves through the world with this impenetrable indifference, like nothing and no one could ever touch him. I always catch him in the shadows, tucked away in corners where the light barely reaches, as if the sound of someone’s breath might send him over the edge.

If you removed our last names and gave us a clean slate, we’d still be standing on opposite ends of the personality spectrum.

I thrive under the lights, where the energy of people feeds me, where the buzz of everyday life feels like oxygen. I need the attention, the noise, the

chaos.

He lives in the silence, in the spaces where the air feels heavy, like it could choke the life out of anything that gets too close.

The sound of paper crackling pulls me from my thoughts. I hear it before I see the edge of the note, slipping through the ivy-covered wall.

I stare at it for a moment, not sure whether to be intrigued or annoyed.

“What is this, high school?” I mutter, but I’m already reaching for it. My fingers brush against the torn edge as I pull the paper through.

It’s crumpled, the paper worn at the edges, like it’s been folded and unfolded too many times. The handwriting is messy, scrawled in hurried, uneven strokes, like his thoughts were racing ahead of his hand.

*I was the thief in the shadows,
Reaching for a light I never owned,
A fire meant to warm the world—
But in my hands, it seared through bone.*

*Prometheus knew the weight of chains,
But mine were forged by blood and name,
Bound not to rocks but to a place
Where love was given in the shape of pain.*

*I was given this marble heart.
Heavy, cold, unbreakable.
At least that's what they told me,
Like it was something to be proud of. Like it was a weapon.
Not a weight I'd have to carry.*

*The echo of a sinner crossed.
A spitting image of vengeance lost.
Fate's cruel hand carved me in stone.
Cursed to sit on a rotten throne.
But it was only warmth I sought—
A spark of kindness, never taught.
Marble and blood, I choke with spite.
I'm a tragedy the gods forgot to write.*

I READ THE WORDS ONCE, TWICE, MY BREATH CATCHING IN MY THROAT.

Jude Sinclair is a fucking poet.

Poetry is chaos. It's the universe before the Big Bang, a mess of atoms colliding in ways that can't be predicted.

Physics? Physics makes sense. You can *see* the forces at play, understand them, work through the problems like puzzles waiting to be solved. But poetry? It's emotion. It's abstract. It's a game played in the dark.

And yet...

"This is...good," I admit, hating how foreign the words feel leaving my lips. "Like, *really* good."

I don't know what it is—the rawness of it, the way his words claw their way into my chest and settle like a weight I didn't ask for.

My mind spirals with the revelation, the haze of the weed twisting reality, blurring the lines between the person I know and the one who wrote these words.

The Jude I'm familiar with is rage personified—jagged edges, a coward who kept his friend's secret at the cost of my suffering. The same man I watched take a life with his bare hands, cold and unflinching.

But this? This person on the page, I don't recognize.

This one is shattered, raw, stripped down to the bone. Chain-smoking like he's trying to fill all the empty spaces inside him while inking his pain into broken lines of poetry.

Jude's a walking contradiction. He's bleeding ink from the same hands that spilt it.

"You don't think it's weird that your hands are capable of killing *and* writing poetry?" I ask, furrowing my brows. "These things aren't exactly synonymous. Poets are melancholic, not homicidal."

The flick of his lighter echoes across the space, a pause as he inhales.

"To destroy is to make room for creation," Jude murmurs, a subtle edge in the words. "Destruction strips everything to the bone. That's where art comes from."

Note to self: When Jude gets writer's block, people die.

"So you're saying you went American Psycho on someone for some artistic inspiration?"

"Yeah," Jude snorts. "Something like that, Geeks."

I should leave it alone. I should let the joke die here.
But curiosity is a dangerous thing, and I have a crippling case of it.
I have questions. So many questions.
*What happened to you? Why poetry? Why did you kill someone for me?
Who the fuck are you?*

They burn under my skin, clawing at my mind until the words bubble up in my throat. I blame the deadly combination of trauma, exhaustion, and pot for why I can't hold them back any longer.

"Did you do it for me?"

I bite down on the inside of my cheek. The sharp taste of iron floods my mouth as I tug at the sensitive skin, not sure I even want the answer anymore.

I stare at the wooden partition separating us, no longer close enough to see him through the crack. But I hear it—his head thumping softly against the wall.

"Didn't do it for fun," Jude exhales, his voice rough, gravel being dragged across my skin.

His answer hangs there, suspended in the thick air, as if they're waiting for me to react. My heart thuds in my chest, a slow, heavy rhythm that feels too loud, too present.

Well, I've already opened Pandora's box. The damage is done, the lid's off, and there's no going back. So I push, unable to stop myself.

"Why?"

"You deserved to be protected."

Jude's response is sharp, cold. Final, as if that one sentence could undo everything.

As if it could erase the blood, the mess, the years of pain that have hollowed me out, carved me into someone I barely recognize anymore.

My heart slams against my chest, cracking my rib cage open, like the bones can no longer contain the agony coursing through me. I can feel the scars I've spent years stitching together splitting wide, jagged edges tearing through fragile skin, bleeding out all the rage I've buried deep.

Anger, slow and scorching, creeps up my spine like a match struck too close to the wick.

Jude's four years too late for this bullshit.

“I deserved to be protected?” My fists clench, throat raw from disbelief, fury curling around my words. “Are you fucking serious?”

Memories flood me, dragging me under the surface where everything I fear lives. Was tonight his penance? Some fucked-up way of paying for the silence that protected Oakley? For standing by while I fell apart under the weight of being violated, while I crumbled, piece by piece?

My jaw locks, and I grind my teeth until the tension shoots sharp pain through my skull.

One good deed doesn’t erase the nightmares that haunt me. It doesn’t remove the invisible hands from my skin that don’t belong to me.

Jude Sinclair could’ve killed a thousand men in my name tonight. It still wouldn’t warrant my forgiveness.

“Just because you don’t want to hear it doesn’t make it any less true.” Jude’s voice grates against my skin, the edge biting.

“I never asked for your protection,” I spit back, my voice trembling under the weight of all I’ve held inside.

I can feel fire burning in my chest now, hot and all-consuming, and I can’t stop it.

This.

This is why no one gets in. This is why I keep the walls locked tight, why I shut out anyone who gets too close.

I become this savage *thing*.

A creature driven by vengeance, a person who would set fire to holy ground with the full intention of watching someone die in the flames.

When it gets too much, when the anger takes over, my DNA is rewritten, twisted, coated with venom that corrodes every molecule.

The rage isn’t separate from me—it *is* me.

And it is the *only* thing that’s ever protected me.

“No, but you needed it.” His tone shifts, an edge creeping in. “You needed it tonight, and you needed it four years ago. I’m so—”

“You don’t get to be sorry!” I scream, the words breaking as they escape, my palms crashing into the partition between us, shoving hard. “You don’t get to fix me.”

Desperation claws at me, begging to break something—anything to release this chaos tearing me apart.

He doesn’t get to be the hero.

I slam my hands against the wall again, harder. The force reverberates through my bones, a dull ache feeding the fire already raging inside me. Yet it doesn't budge, the bolts beneath securing it to the balcony floor.

Still, I don't stop. I can't.

My fists hit the partition over and over, body shaking with every strike, palms going numb, arms trembling from the effort.

I barely register Jude's insistent voice.

"Stop, Phi! Stop! Goddamn it..."

I want him to feel this. To understand the depth of the cracks in my soul. Let him see the consequences of his silence.

Let him see what it's really like being Ponderosa Springs's Queen of Disaster.

Tears burn behind my eyes as the partition rattles under my blows, but it won't give—just like my pain.

I just want it to break. The wall. The pain inside me.

God, I need it to shatter.

To crumble. For once, just give.

The roar in my ears drowns out everything—the pounding of my heart, the blaze running through my veins. The edges of reality blur, fraying at the seams.

All that remains is the need to destroy.

To make everything around me reflect the ruin I feel inside.

I don't hear Jude move.

I don't hear the scrape of his shoes against the balcony railing as he climbs over.

I don't even hear when his feet hit the ground beside me.

Not until his hands seize my wrists, jerking my body, forcing me to meet his storm cloud eyes, do I realize that he is here.

Jude's chest heaves, his entire body wound tight, muscles coiled in his arms. Of course he'd have the audacity to look concerned, as if he has any right to care now.

"*Seraphina*," Jude breathes, the softest my name has ever sounded, as his eyebrows furrow.

It's so fragile, so tender, it makes me sick.

It's too late for him to try to be the person I needed years ago.

“Don’t touch me.” The words slice through the air, dripping with venom as I wrench my hands from his grip.

“Look at you,” he urges, his voice tight, eyes flicking down before locking back onto mine. “You’re fucking bleeding.”

Confusion flashes through me for a split second before I look down. That’s when I see it—the jagged glass, the blood pooling around my foot, warm and sticky, spilling from the wound.

For a moment, the world grinds to a halt.

The fire that had been burning so fiercely inside me dies, snuffed out by the sting radiating from my foot. An ache creeps through me, slow at first, then sharper, a reminder that I can’t outrun the pain.

It follows me, clings to me like a shadow.

I stare at the blood for a beat too long, almost detached from the mess. It should make me feel something—fear, maybe, or even panic—but all I feel is numbness creeping in.

The fire that had raged inside me is gone, replaced by that familiar hollowness. A weight of exhaustion wraps around my chest like a vise, crushing me, stealing the air from my lungs.

I just want it to stop—the pain, the anger, the endless cycle of tearing myself apart and putting the pieces back together.

I’m tired. So tired of fighting. Tired of bleeding, inside and out.

“I’m waving my white flag, Jude.” My voice is steady, though it feels like I’m crumbling beneath the weight of the words. “Go do what you do best—leave me the fuck alone.”

the tragedy

. . .

Jude

October 12

THE SHARP TOLL OF THE HOLLOW HEIGHTS CLOCK TOWER VIBRATES through the room.

“Papers are due by next Friday, and please let’s not forget our cited sources this time.” Professor Howard clasps his hands together, effectively dismissing the class.

I slide out from behind the desk, tossing my hood up, quietly making my way out of my last class and into the echoing halls. I’m already not looking forward to this walk through campus to the parking lot.

My Vans step across vibrant hues of blues, greens, and reds as light pierces through the stained glass windows, spilling the jewel tones across the polished stone floor.

The cold air bites at my skin when I push through the hall doors and onto a cobblestone walkway. I move through the arcade that connects the buildings of the Kennedy District, listening to the raging ocean just to my right, violent slate waves crashing into the rocky cliffside.

My eyes drift to the square at the heart of the campus, where the towering clock tower stands, looming over everything with its sharp spires cutting into the gray sky.

Below, students rush across the Commons, desperate to avoid the inevitable soaking as the rain pelts down, probably regretting their decision to attend college in the dreary Pacific Northwest.

Hollow Heights is exactly what I'd expected.

Cold, gray, and reeking pretentious bullshit.

The campus stretches out in all its gothic grandeur. Gargoyles, spiral staircases, marble statues everywhere you turn. Which are fucking creepy if you stay late, by the way.

I almost punched a rendition of Socrates after leaving the library the other night.

Spit splatters at my feet, barely missing my shoes, just before I head inside Everhart Hall. My head snaps up, brows furrowing, and I meet the glare of an old woman—skin crinkled like dried parchment, deep-set wrinkles folding into a permanent scowl. Her grip on the cane is white-knuckled, and for a second, I think she might take a swing at me.

“Grandma!” A girl rushes forward, panic in her voice as she yanks the old lady back a step, her eyes wide with embarrassment. “I’m so sorry. She’s just—she’s just...”

“Senile?” I offer, the edge of my words sharp, biting back my irritation.

The old woman huffs, her eyes narrowing as she leans heavier on her cane.

“Got enough sense to know you’re rotten. To the core, boy. Sinclairs don’t belong here.” She spits again, as if my name is a curse.

My jaw clenches, the muscles in my neck straining as her words slice through me.

Hollow Heights is built atop ground that carries a twisted history and vile secrets that never escape the wrought-iron gates. Horrible, wicked things that those with my last name orchestrated.

I wish I could say I was surprised or that this is the only time something like this has happened to me, but I can’t.

The girl stumbles over her apology, her words a messy rush. “Oh my God, I’m sorry—again. It’s my birthday, and she wanted to bring me lunch. And she, well, she gets like this, and I—yeah, I’m really sorry.”

I catch her eyes for a moment, expecting pity, but it’s not sympathy that meets me. It’s fear. She’s scared of me.

Fucking great.

“Don’t worry about it,” I grunt, brushing it off.

I step past them, feeling the burn of her stare still digging into my back. The old woman mutters something under her breath, and just as I’m about to clear her range, she swipes her cane out, aiming for my legs.

I sidestep, barely dodging the attempt to trip me. My pulse spikes, the urge to snap back sharp and sudden, but I don’t. Going nuclear on an old lady would not help my *sparkling* reputation.

So I keep walking, letting the anger quietly brew in my chest.

This was never what I wanted.

I never wanted to go to this school, to be everyone’s favorite pariah. My last name is a curse, a stain on Hollow Heights University, and no one lets me forget it.

It’s everywhere. The whispers that follow me down every corridor, the walls seeming to close in. The very grounds beneath my feet burn with every step—holy ground, and I am the damned.

I know what my father was a part of, what his stepfather did. I know what the Sinclairs left behind—disgust, ruin, the vile imprint of the Halo. It makes me sick too.

My name, my face, everything about me is a living reminder of that horror, a walking ghost of Ponderosa Springs’s worst memories.

I get it. I know why they hate me. I understand why the Springs will never owe me anything. But that’s why I wanted to leave, why I wanted out as much as they wanted me to leave.

I didn’t want to carry this weight anymore, this constant reminder of the damage done by the name I was born into.

More than that, I didn’t want to be the cause of *Phi*’s pain anymore.

I wasn’t involved. I didn’t know anything about that night with Oakley, but every time Phi looks at me, all she sees is her trauma.

It’s like I’m made of it.

A walking reminder of the night that shattered her into pieces.

When she looks at me, she knows I’m the only other person, besides her abuser, who knows what’s been taken from her.

She didn’t consent to me knowing these things about her. She didn’t ask for me to carry these truths in my head, like some dark secret stitched into my skin. And yet I do.

And that guilt...it’s sunk into me like rot.

The air is thick inside Everhart Hall with the smell of old books and damp stone. I cut through a hallway, passing rows of classrooms, when something catches my eye.

I stop mid-step, glancing over at the open door to my right. There, through the gap, I see miles and miles of cherry-tinted hair. A pair of torn-to-hell red pantyhose and an oversized hoodie that's doubling as a dress, it seems.

Geeks.

All alone, standing in an empty lab, completely absorbed in the whiteboard in front of her.

In nearly a month, she's barely uttered two words to me. I could count every time we crossed paths, each moment she slipped past me like I was invisible, not a glance, not a single snarky word, like I'm nothing more than air.

Phi didn't just wave the white flag the night of the Gauntlet. She broke.

She shattered into pieces right in front of me, and I could do nothing but watch. I had to let the shards slice me open, bleeding all the apologies she didn't want to hear.

It wasn't the slow, inevitable decay I'd grown used to in my father's eyes. The kind that eats at you little by little until there's nothing left but hollowed-out bones.

No, when Phi broke, she was a star imploding.

Something brilliant collapsing in on itself, pulling everything around it into the void. It was the kind of devastation you couldn't look away from.

One second, she was whole, and the next, she was cracked wide open. And it lived in her eyes. The fight in those eyes, which once held so much hostility, was snuffed out, and what remained was shattered green stained glass.

And it almost fucking killed me.

That night on the balcony, for the first time, I saw her.

And now? Now, I can't fucking stop seeing her.

I push the door open the rest of the way, the creak echoing through the empty lab, and shut it behind me. The fluorescent lights buzz overhead, the room chilled with that sterile, lifeless air.

Phi stands at the whiteboard, scribbling furiously while muttering to herself under her breath. Her hair spills down her back in messy waves, like

she might've just rolled out of bed.

She doesn't hear me. Not surprising, considering the headphones still clamped over her ears. Her foot taps lightly, in sync with the beat I can't hear, as I move further into the room.

This is all she does recently—buries herself in homework. To the point where it's past studious and has reached unhealthy obsession.

I woke up at four in the morning two nights ago for a drink and found an academic disaster in the living room.

Papers scattered, at least three open textbooks, and Phi sitting crisscross on the floor in the middle of the mess with a highlighter wedged between her teeth. Which may not be a big deal to some, but we have the same chemistry class, and we've barely made a dent in our textbooks. Phi was more than halfway through hers, working on shit that was weeks in advance.

She hadn't touched the cracked asphalt of the Graveyard in nearly a month. Not once.

No races, no parties, nothing but this.

Even now, I can see it. The desperation in her writing across the board, a frantic need to get it right, to find the answer, like solving this problem can fix whatever's broken inside her.

I walk closer, close enough that I could reach out and rip the marker from her hand. Close enough that I can see the smudges of ink on her fingers and the slight tremble in her hand as she writes. But I don't move. Not yet.

I just watch her.

Because Seraphina Van Doren was made to be watched.

I didn't want to, but I couldn't fucking help myself. From a distance, those stone walls she built around herself look impenetrable, but up close? They're littered with cracks, and I noticed them.

Small things, at first.

The music—her wild, chaotic music that used to bleed through the walls every night—went silent. At Sunday dinner last week, she wore a smile that everyone believed. She laughed at all the right moments, threw back her sharp comebacks whenever someone teased her.

But I saw it. The smile never touched her eyes, her laughter just a shade too hollow. I saw the way her hands trembled, fingers twisting the hem of

her shirt under the table, like she needed something to anchor herself.

Seraphina Van Doren has spent years mastering the art of hiding in plain sight—locking herself in her own personal hell, building walls too thick for anyone to climb.

And to her credit, no one has noticed.

But that's because no one has ever really looked.

I stand there for another beat, watching her—waiting for her to notice me, waiting for something to pull her out of whatever world she's trapped herself in. But she doesn't look up. Doesn't acknowledge me. She just keeps going, marker scratching against the whiteboard like if she writes fast enough, she can outrun whatever's eating her alive.

Without thinking, I reach out, plucking the marker from her hands. Just as Phi whirls around, I step over, leaning my shoulder on the whiteboard.

“You’re not gonna solve shit if you keep scribbling like that. How the fuck do you even read this chicken scratch?”

She turns to face me, round glasses perched on her nose, and my teeth grind the moment I see the dark circles beneath her eyes, the heavy purple bruises staining her skin like a permanent reminder of her sleepless nights.

I was expecting to find fire in her gaze, some trace of the girl who loved having the last word, but all I see is emptiness.

Her eyes, those once fierce, defiant eyes that roared and lived with hostility for me, are lifeless. Two broken stained-glass windows, just together enough to still the color.

“With my eyes,” she mutters, the words falling flat, hollow.

The sarcasm is there, but it’s an echo of what it used to be. No bite. No edge. Just words that float in the space between us.

I smirk, the expression not reaching my eyes. “Smart-ass.”

She barely reacts. No flash of irritation, no roll of her eyes. She just stands there, looking through me like I’m not even real, like nothing in this room is. I hold the marker up, taunting, waiting for her to grab for it.

But she doesn’t.

Instead, she looks at me with the kind of blank expression that makes my chest tighten, then wordlessly turns her back, walking to one of the lab tables. She pulls open a drawer, the sound of metal scraping against metal harsh in the quiet room, and retrieves another marker without so much as a glance in my direction.

Phi was always the center of every room she stepped into, commanding attention without even trying, like the sun dragging the planets in its wake. And now, she's stopped stepping into rooms altogether.

It's like she's allergic to the light. Like it hurts her to even touch it.

And that's a fucking tragedy because no matter where we stand, the shadows were never meant to hold someone like her.

The spotlight wasn't just made for her—it *bends* to her. She doesn't chase it. She *owns* it. Gravity pulling everything and everyone into her orbit, whether she wanted it or not.

The world notices when she's absent.

And unfortunately, so do I.

I can't *not* notice—not when I know I helped turn her into everything I hate.

Every single word dipped in poison, every sharp jab about my father, was rooted in a hate that had nothing to do with my last name. Nothing to do with our families and everything to do with the company I kept.

Before the fire at St. Gabriel's, we didn't even exist to each other. Same elementary school, same middle school. But not once did our paths cross in any meaningful way. She was the girl in the background of my life, a blur in the crowd, and I was just another kid who didn't matter to her.

Call it cruel fate or twisted divine intervention, but my first real memory of Seraphina Van Doren was the way the burnt-orange glow of the fire lit up her face just before I got shoved into the back of a police car.

Phi uncaps the new marker, the faint squeak of it cutting through the silence as she goes back to her frantic scribbling. As if I don't exist. As if she doesn't exist.

I straighten up, closing the distance between us until my arm brushes against her shoulder. She stiffens, just for a split second, her hand pausing mid-stroke on the board.

But then she keeps going, like nothing happened. Like I'm not standing right there, invading her space.

I lean back against the desk behind us, crossing my arms as I tilt my head to the side, trying to make sense of the chaotic mess of numbers and symbols she's scribbling.

The whiteboard is covered in equations that don't mean a damn thing to me, but I squint at them anyway, pretending like I'm interested, like I'm not

just trying to get under her skin.

"I flunked ninth-grade biology, you know," I say casually, my eyes scanning the mess she's created, "So you're gonna have to break this down for me. What the hell are you solving for?"

She doesn't even flinch. Her hand just keeps moving, the marker squeaking against the board like she's in a race with herself.

"Acceleration due to gravity is..." I trail off, leaning in closer just enough to feel the heat radiating off her, squinting at the scribbles. "What the fuck is coefficient of friction?"

Nothing. Not even a twitch.

The absences not only from her life but from *herself* leave an ache in the pit of my stomach. It's like staring at someone who's already made peace with disappearing.

And I hate it.

I hate how numb she looks, how every step she takes feels like it's weighed down by a thousand invisible burdens. She's barely there. A shadow of the girl I knew, the one who'd meet me blow for blow, glare for glare.

I hate how badly I want her to fight me, to *feel* something.

But most of all, I hate that I *notice*. I hate that I see it every day, and I can't stop seeing it.

How the fuck am I the only one who sees this?

"What's this? Kinetic energy?" I pause, watching the tension in her shoulders build, the way her back stiffens with every word I say. "Are these NASA plans or hieroglyphics?"

I have no fucking clue what the hell is coming out of my mouth. All I know is that I can see the coil in her body winding, and it's the most I've seen out of her in a month.

So if I have to keep spitting science jargon until she cracks, that's what I'll do.

Shoving off the desk, I step right into her space, so close I can smell the faint, familiar scent of her vanilla perfume mixing with the ink on her fingers. My chest is inches away from the back of her head, and I can see the way her hand falters, just long enough for me to notice.

"I can see why you got into MIT. Early admission, right?" I mutter, not even bothering to hide the smirk on my face. "Why didn't you—"

She slams the marker down, the sound reverberating off the sterile walls of the lab. Her whole body stiffens, her fingers clenching into fists at her sides as she spins around to face me, her green eyes flashing with something raw and furious.

Bingo.

“What do you want, Sinclair?” she snaps, her voice sharp, cutting through the air like a blade.

I don’t move, don’t flinch. Finally.

A slow grin pulls at my lips. “There she is.”

“I gave you what you wanted, Loner. We’re fucking even. You’ve got my white flag. What do you want from me?”

I hold her gaze, and it’s like the air between us ignites, crackling with an electricity that has nothing to do with the room and everything to do with *her*.

For a second, I wonder if she’s going to storm out, throw something, or swing at me. Any of those would be better than the emptiness she’s been serving me for weeks.

But she doesn’t move.

She just stands there, chest rising and falling like she’s been running, fists clenched tight at her sides, knuckles white with tension. And her eyes —those green, shattered eyes—spark with something wild and alive. Raw. Burning.

She’s chaos and ruin, broken glass turned into art.

There’s a violence to her beauty, a savage grace that makes you want to reach out, even though you know you’ll bleed for it.

No one, not a single living soul, has ever pissed me off by being beautiful before. But if anyone could do it, it would be Phi.

“Hate me. I want you to fucking hate me.” My voice drops, raw and jagged as it cuts through the thick air between us. My jaw clenches so hard I can feel the tension creeping up my neck.

I need *something*—anything but this dead-eyed nothingness she’s been giving me for weeks.

Phi takes a step forward, her boots scuffing the floor, the tips of her black combat boots now brushing against my Vans. Her eyes narrow into dangerous slits.

“I hate you,” she hisses, the venom in her words crackling like static between us.

I hold her gaze, refusing to blink, a wicked smirk pulling at my lips. The smell of her scent fills my nose, reminding me of how fucking good she smelled when I was between her thighs. She’s so close now I can feel the heat radiating off her skin, feel the pulse of her rage beneath her surface.

My cock jerks behind my zipper, and I mentally tell myself this isn’t about that. He’s gonna have to take a back seat today.

“Say it again,” I command, jerking my chin at her, the taste of her defiance already on my tongue. I drag my bottom lip between my teeth. “This time, like you *mean* it.”

“Haven’t you taken enough from me? You want me to thank you for killing someone to protect me? Is that what you want, Jude? You want me to tell you you’re a good boy?” She spits the words, sharp and biting, and I swear they lash across my skin like a whip.

That’s it. Come on, Geeks. Give it to me. Let me rip you apart.

“Thank you, Jude. Thank you so much for growing a pair of goddamn balls and not being like your coward fucking fath—”

I don’t let her finish.

In one violent, desperate movement, I grab her, my fingers tangling in the thick waves of her hair as I slam her back against the whiteboard. The loud thud echoes through the empty room, reverberating off the walls as my chest heaves with every ragged breath. Her body arches beneath me, her hands instinctively finding my chest.

My breath comes out in short, shallow bursts, brushing across her face as my jaw tightens.

“Give it to me, Phi.” I seethe, the words barely escaping through clenched teeth. “Give me all your pain, all your hurt, every ounce of that rage in your vicious fucking heart. I can take it.”

My fingers tighten at the back of her scalp, pulling her head back slightly so I can look into her eyes. Her chest is rising and falling in sync with mine, our breaths mingling in the space between us, and I can see all the heat dancing around her dilated pupils.

It would take one word, just one, and I’d back away. Give her space and mind my business, but she won’t. She won’t because she wants me just as badly as I want her.

I've been someone's punching bag my entire life. I can handle her.

We aren't friends. We don't even like each other.

I don't have to like Phi to want to help fix what I broke.

This I can do. I can be her outlet, take whatever she needs to throw at me. It's the least I can do after everything with Oakley. It's the least she fucking *deserves*.

Her eyes flicker with a combination of confusion and desperation, her small hands tightening in my shirt.

"Why are you doing this to me?" she croaks, brows furrowed, like the words hurt when she speaks them. "What are you doing to me?"

"Seeing you," I breathe, the words slipping out like they've been trapped in my lungs for years and this is the first time I've been able to let them go.

Phi's hands tighten in my shirt, pulling me into her body, pulling herself closer. Her lips part, her breath shallow and uneven, and I swear I can feel the crackle of her heartbeat beneath my fingers as one of my hands traces the column of her throat.

"Yeah?" she mutters, her voice low, almost broken. "What do you see?"

I lean in, my forehead nearly touching hers as I rub circles on the pulse in her throat. My breath comes out in a heavy, uneven burst as I search her eyes, those shattered, sea-glass-green eyes.

"There is so much agony in your eyes I don't know how I'm the only one who sees it." I tighten my fingers at the back of her scalp, leaning down so I can feel her breath on my face. "You're a goddamn tragedy, Van Doren. But fuck, you're beautiful."

The space between us evaporates, her chest flush against mine, our breaths tangling in the air like smoke. Her lips part, and for a split second, I'm lost.

Lost in the shattered pieces of her, in the jagged edges she tries to hide, in the chaos that lives just beneath her skin. And I want to drown in it. I want to feel every bit of that pain that comes with touching her.

Her eyes are wild, desperate, as if she's trying to figure out whether to pull me closer or push me away. But I can feel it—the way her body leans into mine, the way her breath hitches as my fingers trace the column of her throat.

And then the door swings open.

“Hey, Phi—” Reign’s voice fills the room, casual and unaware, but it’s like a gunshot going off in the silence.

We snap apart, fast and instinctive, like we’ve been caught doing something far worse than whatever the hell this is. I step back, my hand still half-raised, and she slips out from under my arm, ducking past me like she’s been burned.

My jaw clenches as I drag my hand across it, turning to face him, with his eyes narrowed and fists already clenched. Angry doesn’t even begin to cover it. Rage rolls off him in waves, thick and heavy, the air around him practically vibrating with the threat of violence.

Great.

I shove my hands into my pockets, fighting the urge to roll my eyes as his gaze bounces between us. It’s like he’s already decided I’m guilty of something.

Typical.

Reign Van Doren. Notorious man-whore and walking powder keg.

That cocky smirk he usually wears is nowhere to be seen now, which fills me with a small pocket of joy. I love irritating this guy. It’s too fucking easy sometimes.

“What the fuck is going on here?”

I watch Phi from the corner of my eye. She looks unfazed, calm even, as she waves a lazy hand toward the whiteboard.

“Tutoring, idiot,” she mutters, her tone as flat as ever. “Jude’s practically failing physics.”

I arch a brow at her, my expression silently questioning her bullshit. *Really? That’s what we’re going with?*

She doesn’t meet my gaze, but there’s a flicker of something in her eyes —amusement, maybe, or annoyance. Either way, she’s doing a great job at playing this off like nothing happened.

“Yeah,” I grunt, unable to keep from being a sarcastic asshole. “She’s been a *real* lifesaver.”

Reign’s eyes narrow even further, his gaze darting between us, landing on me like I’m the cause of every problem in the room. His fists tighten at his sides, knuckles going white. Just a breath in the wrong direction and he’ll lose his shit.

Dude has the shortest fuse I've ever seen, and that's saying something, coming from me.

The last thing I want is to have to explain to his mother why her precious soccer star has a broken nose.

I shift, sliding out from behind the lab desk, my hands still in my pockets, “Cool your jets, hotshot. I was just leaving.”

I don’t feel like sticking around for the “don’t touch my sister, or I’ll kill you” conversation. Again.

I glance back at Phi, catching her eyes just for a moment. This isn’t over. Whatever happened here isn’t over, and she knows it.

I want every last piece of the twisted puzzle she hides behind that pretty smile. The darkness she buries so deep no one else dares to touch it. I want the secrets she guards with venom-laced words and the shame she masks with smiles that never quite reach her eyes.

Her violence. Her rage. The seething self-loathing that’s barely held together by threads of pride.

I want to own them.

Fight her for it, to rip it from her with my teeth if I have to, until it’s all mine.

As I reach the door, I feel it—Reign’s hand clamping down on my shoulder, a grip too tight to be casual. It’s like a vise, his fingers digging into my shirt, and for a second, the room goes still.

I glance down at his hand, then slowly lift my gaze to meet his, arching one brow in silent warning.

He *really* doesn’t want this problem today.

“Move your hand, Van Doren. Before I make you fucking eat it.”

Reign’s fingers tighten for just a second, his grip firm, and I feel the heat of his anger radiating off him. His jaw clenches, working like he’s grinding his teeth into dust. He’s thinking about it—about swinging on me.

“Do it. Make my fucking day,” I bite, the words dripping with a threat I don’t bother to hide.

I’d love nothing more than to kick his cocky spoiled ass.

But he doesn’t.

He hesitates, jaw still tight, before finally, slowly, releasing his grip.

The room feels like it exhales, but the tension doesn’t go away. It lingers, heavy and dark, as his hand drops back to his side. His eyes, still

locked on mine, are full of venom, the kind that sticks with you, the kind that festers.

And instead of physically punching me, he gives me parting words that feel like one.

“History has a way of repeating itself. Remember, Sinclair, you don’t get the girl. You break her.”

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the storm

. . .

Phi

October 25

“PHI! PHI! PHI!”

The chant pounds in my ears, a rhythmic pulse of voices as the burn of cheap tequila slides down my throat.

It’s supposed to numb me.

Supposed to drown out the ache that’s been clawing at my insides for days. But instead, it just sits there, lead in my gut, stirring a sickness that has nothing to do with the liquor.

I lower the bottle from my lips, shaking the empty glass above my head. The room erupts—whistles, cheers, and drunken applause, all crashing around me like the tide against sharp rocks.

I blink through the haze, swaying slightly as I glance around from my makeshift throne atop someone’s battered dining room table.

Bodies are crammed together, a sea of sweat and heat, pressed too close in the dim, smoky light. Laughter rises in chaotic bursts, drinks slosh over the rims of red cups, and hands reach out to slap backs and pull people into messy embraces.

The air is thick with cheap cologne, spilled booze, and cigarette smoke, hanging like a suffocating blanket over the room.

Faces blur and swirl—grins too wide, eyes too bright under the flicker of neon lights that splash across the peeling wallpaper. Dozens of them, all looking up at me like I’m something worth cheering for. Like I’m the life of this stupid, out-of-control house party.

And yet...they don’t see it. None of them do.

They can’t see the rot creeping through me, tendrils of poison winding their way into the marrow of my bones. It festers right beneath the surface, hidden beneath layers of skin and pretty smiles.

It’s not the kind of pain that bleeds. No, this is a slow, insidious decay. It devours in silence, consuming my organs, my breath, my thoughts, until there’s nothing left but a hollow shell where a person used to be.

Where I used to be.

Twenty people, maybe more, encircle this table, but not a single person in this suffocating room has any idea.

Not one.

Jude did.

No.

If I was a little more drunk, I’d smack my own head just to beat that into my brain.

Jude’s full of shit. He’s a liar, a manipulative bastard playing some twisted game with me, and I’m a pawn he loves watching squirm. That’s all this is. He gets off on pushing my buttons, on making my skin crawl every time he’s too close.

I’ve been *trying* to avoid him, trying to dodge the way his presence makes my nerves snap and spark like a live wire. But no matter how hard I try, he just keeps *showing up*.

Two nights ago, I was curled up on the couch, drowning in old reruns of comfort shows, building a new LEGO set, trying to drown out the memories consuming my brain. The room was dim, shadows stretching across the floor, the soft glow of the TV the only light.

I thought I had a moment of peace where I could bury myself in the things that make me feel like *Phi*. Not Ponderosa Springs’s Queen of Disaster, not the vixen, just *Phi*.

But then he appeared.

Jude came down the stairs, sauntering like he owned the damn place, and plopped his infuriating self on the love seat across from me. Not a

word, not a glance—he just sat there, staring at the TV like he was enjoying himself.

And he stayed.

He didn't leave. Didn't fidget or get bored or make some snarky comment. He just stayed there, like the silence between us wasn't choking the air, like I wasn't trying to not snap and throw something at his fucking head.

It pisses me off.

But worse than that—it terrifies me.

Because some part of me, the part that should know better, my brain? It wants to believe him.

In the lab, under those cold fluorescent lights, I wanted to believe him so badly.

When he looked at me, *really* looked at me, it was like he saw everything. Every crack and splinter in my facade, every jagged piece of me that's come undone, every sharp shard no one else would dare to touch. He saw it all and didn't run. Didn't look at me differently.

He stayed.

And for a split second, for the first time in a long time, I felt like I wasn't alone, drowning in my pain.

Someone had started treading water with me.

I've waited my entire life to be seen. To be more than the wreckage people whisper about behind closed doors. Even before that night four years ago. Before everything went to hell, I was desperate.

Desperate for someone to see me as more than just the Judge's charity case. The adopted one, the one who doesn't fit.

That's why I trusted Oakley. That's why he was so easily able to take from me because I was so fucking desperate to be noticed. To be seen.

It's all I've ever wanted.

Just not from him.

Anyone but the one guy I'm not supposed to stay away from.

Anyone but a Sinclair.

“Told you it would be fun.” Atlas grins, throwing his arm around my shoulders with that easy charm of his as I jump down from the table. “See what happens when you listen to me?”

I hadn't wanted to come out tonight. I hadn't wanted to do anything other than engulf myself in school. Lock myself away, hunker down until the rawness drifted over. Until pretending wasn't so fucking hard.

Pretending to be okay has never been this hard before.

And I'm fucking terrified being around people when the walls I've spent years building are so goddamn fragile.

Plus, I couldn't keep telling Atlas no. Every time I bailed, every time I said I'd rather stay home, he got more and more suspicious. The constant worry in his eyes was gutting me.

He had Ezra's shit to deal with. I didn't want to add to that.

Plus, I'd be fine.

I always am.

"Thanks for getting me out of the house," I mutter, forcing a hollow smile that doesn't reach my eyes. "You're the best."

For a moment, I thought going out might be a good thing. Falling into the noise, the people, the drinks, all the usual distractions? It would be a good thing.

Wrong.

None of it is working. The drinks are just gasoline fueling the fire inside me, making the ache burn hotter. The laughter around me feels like a distant echo, something I can't touch, can't feel.

It all just feels so hollow.

"I know I asked earlier, but now that you're tipsy and your inhibitions are lowered, I'm gonna ask again," he says above the noise of the party. "You doing okay?"

I let out a small, humorless laugh, shaking my head. "I'm here, aren't I? That's something."

"Yeah, but I'm not asking if you're here. I'm asking if you're okay, Phi."

An ache echoes in my chest.

"I'm fine, Attie." I wrap my arm around his trim waist, squeezing him a little tighter. "Promise."

I look up just in time to catch his jaw flex, his eyes peering down at me as he asks, "You swear on the Styx?"

My heart falters, skipping a beat.

I've never sworn on the Styx. Not once. I've never had the need to because I'm the keeper of all my secrets.

It sounds stupid—maybe even silly to some—but to me, to us, this is sacred. It's not just some empty promise, not something to toss around casually.

Breaking a promise on the Styx is blasphemous in the church of our childhood.

It's what our fathers and uncles did, back when promises were unbreakable. Back when loyalty meant something. It was their way of saying that no matter what, even in death, they'd find their way back to each other.

We took that seriously because we knew what it meant to our parents. How hard they fought to make it here.

It will break my heart to do this. Atlas knows that, knows I can't lie.

“I’m—”

“Atlas! Come play pong! I need a new partner. Ezra fucking blows!”

Both of our heads snap toward the doorway where Reign is standing, waving Atlas down with that usual cocky grin plastered across his face. He's leaning against the kitchen doorframe, red cup in hand, oblivious to the tension hanging in the air between Atlas and me.

I've never been more thankful for my idiot brother in my life.

“Go before they start throwing punches over who's the worst,” I say, rolling my eyes to mask the relief spreading through me. “I'm gonna hit the bathroom.”

Atlas gives me a long look, his eyes searching mine like he wants to push further, but he lets out a sigh, nodding reluctantly.

“You're not getting out of this conversation that easy,” he calls after me as I slip away from his side, already making my way through the crowd.

I lift a hand in a half-hearted wave, not bothering to turn around. “Yeah, yeah, I know.”

I weave through the crush of bodies, the heavy bass of the music thrumming under my skin, the scent of spilled alcohol and sweat filling the air.

I want to let the people who love me in, I want to let them be there for me, to hold some of the burden.

But I can't. I can't handle the thought of them looking at me like I'm broken.

Once they know, once they find out the truth, every time they see me, all they'll see is this shattered, fractured version of me.

They won't remember the way I used to laugh or the parts of me that were still whole. No. Every glance will be filled with guilt, every smile they force will be tinged with sadness, and I'll become this constant reminder of what they'd failed to protect.

They'll blame themselves in a thousand different ways. They'll tiptoe around me like I'm made of fragile glass, afraid that one wrong move will shatter me completely. And I can't live with that.

I sidestep a couple, their bodies tangled together, hands shoved into each other's pants like they can't wait a second longer. My lips curl into a low snort, amused despite myself, the sheer chaos of the party weaving around me.

My fingers wrap around the bathroom door handle, and I push it open, not thinking, my mind already elsewhere. But the second it swings wide, I realize I've made a mistake.

I've forgotten the cardinal rule of house parties: *always knock*.

"Cherry." Oakley grins around the word, rubbing his nose to wipe away the white powder on his upper lip. "How's my girl? Want a bump?"

Cherry.

That's the first word Oakley Wixx ever spoke to me.

I feel stupid remembering that I used to actually like it.

I was naive back then, too willing to believe that people were good, that someone could be trusted with the fragile parts of me. But he quickly showed how merciless reality is.

He reached into me, deeper than anyone should have been allowed, and stole everything good I had to offer. Ripped it away so violently I couldn't even feel it at first. It was like a numbness settling over my bones.

But when the shock waned, the blood dried, and the ache faded?

Emptiness was all I had left.

"Pass."

The word slips out, flat and empty. I don't have the strength to muster a smirk or pretend like I'm unfazed. Not by him. Not by what he did to me.

There are too many people here.

People I can't afford to see me break, and I know if I stand here and he keeps pushing, I will break. I'm too raw. An open wound that anyone will be able to see if he presses too hard. I'm too vulnerable to fake indifference right now, and it makes me sick.

I don't offer anything else. No explanation, no glance. I just turn away, giving him my back as I pull my phone from my pocket, the urgency to get out of here clawing at me.

I need Andy to come get me—now.

But before I can even dial, I feel it. His hand wraps around my wrist, tight, his fingers curling like a vise, squeezing hard enough to make my pulse stutter.

"Now, now. Where you going?" His voice slithers into my ear, dripping with arrogance. "I'm talking to you."

White-hot rage flares in my chest, my breath catching as my skin prickles with the need to scream. I whirl around, yanking my wrist out of his grip with more force than I thought I had.

"Don't fucking touch me."

My voice is low but sharp enough to cut through the thick air between us. I meet his eyes, my body trembling with the kind of fury that makes me want to tear the walls down around us.

"Don't ever touch me again."

I can feel the house closing in on me—the noise, the heat, the crowd pressing in too close. Every instinct in me screams to rip this place apart, to bury him beneath the rubble of it all and leave him to rot.

This Halloween will make four years. Four years since Oakley ripped through the delicate fabric of my soul, leaving it in tatters.

Each anniversary gets harder.

Not because it reminds me of that night but because it marks how much time has passed since I lost myself.

Mourning the old me feels like trying to catch smoke in my hands. It slips through my fingers, impossible to hold, impossible to let go of.

There's no grave to visit, no tombstone marking her death, just this aching void where she used to be.

It makes grieving nearly impossible.

Oakley steps forward, slow and deliberate, his presence looming over me like a dark shadow. Instinctively, I step back, my heel catching on the

floor as I stumble, my pulse kicking into overdrive.

“You too good for me now, sweet thing?” His brow arches, a sick grin spreading across his face, flashing those yellowed teeth. He tilts his head, eyes narrowing as if he’s assessing me. “I remember when your cheeks used to light up red for me.”

Bile churns in my stomach, rising fast. The room tilts, and for a second, I think I might actually be sick, right here in front of him, in front of everyone. How did I ever think there was something appealing in him?

I stare blankly at his face, at that twisted smile, and wonder how teenage hormones and his well-crafted lies ever blinded me to the truth.

How did I let someone like *him* make me feel special?

“That was before you *raped* me.” The words choke their way out of my throat, raw and jagged. My teeth grind as I force myself to say it. “You tricked me. You used me.”

Saying it aloud feels like tearing open an old wound, the pain flooding back in full force. My chest tightens, a vise squeezing my lungs, making it harder to breathe with every second that passes.

If I never say it, it doesn’t feel real. It didn’t happen. Not really.

But it did. It did, and it destroyed me. It’s *still* destroying me.

Oakley’s face doesn’t shift, no flicker of remorse, no guilt. His smile only grows more sinister before he takes another step forward, closer than he should ever be.

“Did I?” His voice drips with mockery, every syllable sinking in like a twisted blade. “You came to that Halloween party to see me. You followed me into my bedroom. You *kissed* me first.”

Anger explodes inside me, barreling through my veins, spiraling faster and faster until it feels like I’m burning alive from the inside out. My body trembles with the sheer force of it, this fury that I can barely contain, this fire that threatens to consume everything in its path.

I said no. I *begged* him to stop. I said no.

No is enough. No is a full fucking sentence. No *should’ve* been enough.

But I wasn’t dealing with a man that night—I was dealing with a monster. A creature that fed on power and pain, whose only goal was to wreck me. He had planned it from the start, every sick word, every touch meant to tear me apart. It wasn’t about lust or desire. It was never about me.

It was about *the Judge*.

“Run back to Daddy, little girl. Make sure you tell him how I broke you in. Make sure you tell him what happens when he fucks with my family.”

I was just a tool, a means to an end. He wanted to destroy me to get back at my father for sending his piece-of-shit dad to prison. Oakley didn't care about me, didn't care about what he took from me that night. All he cared about was revenge.

And he was never going to get it.

My father would never know the truth of what happened that night. Oakley would never get the satisfaction of watching him crumble.

I refused to let him turn me into a weapon to destroy the one person who's always been there. Who has always blindly protected and loved me.

I would *die* before I let this motherfucker win.

“This is over,” I bite, taking another step back from him.

“Yeah? If you're done with me, I could always just go after that sweet little sister of yours. What's her name? Andromed—”

My fist connects with his nose before he can finish, the crack of bone on bone sharp in the air, like a whip slicing through the thick night. The pain erupts in my knuckles, hot and immediate, but the satisfaction—the satisfaction of watching him stumble back, blood gushing from his nose, dripping down his sneering mouth—is worth it.

Every second of it.

Something feral tears loose inside me, that intangible, savage thing, as I lunge for him again.

My fingers claw into the fabric of his shirt, nails digging into his chest as I shove him harder, pushing him back with every ounce of strength I own.

He's taller than me, stronger even, but the booze and drugs dull his reflexes, and he stumbles, almost falling.

I'm on him before he can find his balance again, my fist swinging up, crashing into his jaw with a brutal crack. The bones in my arm vibrate with the force of it, the impact reverberating through me, but I can barely feel it.

Rage clouds my vision, red-hot and pulsing, and all I know, all I *feel*, is that I won't stop until Oakley feels every ounce of pain he's caused me.

“You so much as fucking breathe near my family,” I growl, my voice a low, vicious snarl, “I will kill you. Do you hear me? I will gut you, Oakley.”

The shock on his face starts to fade as the anger sets in. He wipes the blood from his shattered nose, his eyes narrowing as he glares at me. His hand balls into a fist at his side, blood dripping from his mouth.

“You’ve done it now, you fucking cunt.”

Before he can move, before he can swing on me, I go to launch myself at him again, the fire burning in my veins, white-hot and blinding.

Red blurs my vision. I refuse to let him survive this fire.

This time, he’ll pay for laying his filthy hands on me with his life.

But before I can, a strong arm curls around my waist, pulling me back, trapping me against a solid chest. I thrash, my breath ragged, heart pounding. “Let me go! Let me fucking go, right now—”

“Geeks.” The low rasp of Jude’s voice slips into my ear, soft but firm.

My foot connects with Oakley’s chest just before I’m spun around, my back pressed flat against the opposite wall. Jude steps in front of me, his body a barrier between me and his *friend*.

“You’re protecting him?” I hiss, shoving my palms into his back. “You sick motherfuck—”

Oakley’s laughter cracks against my skin, cutting off my words.

“Oh, Jude. How’d I know you’d jump at the chance to play hero the moment you found out?” His voice drips with derision. “So fucking desperate to shed the skin of a wolf, you’ve turned into a pathetic fucking lamb.”

My eyes widen slightly, shock rippling through me as I stare at the back of Jude’s head. His muscles tighten beneath the thin fabric of his shirt, fists clenching at his sides.

What the fuck did he just say?

“Oakes,” Jude warns, his tone cold, a hard edge, “pick up whatever dignity you’ve got left and get the fuck out of here.”

“Touchy, touchy.” Oakley raises his hands, mocking innocence. “If I’d known you were into her, I would’ve told you sooner. Done you a solid, man. Have you felt how tight her—”

A loud crash splits in the air before he can finish talking.

I flinch at the noise, breath catching as the pictures lining the hallway fall to the floor, glass shattering against the tile. Jude’s arms are a blur of movement as he slams Oakley into the wall with a force that rattles the house.

The drywall crumbles under the impact, a jagged hole appearing behind Oakley's shoulders as his body slams back into it. Jude's forearms are tense, corded with veins, the fury rolling off him in waves, palpable, electric. His fingers curl around Oakley's shirt, twisting the fabric tight enough to choke.

"Finish that sentence. I dare you."

It's a lethal, quiet threat.

And for the first time, I catch it—fear flickering in Oakley's eyes. His cocky grin falters, his smirk vanishing as the bravado drains from his face, leaving only the sharp reality of Jude's rage staring him down.

In one swift motion, Jude hauls him off the wall and tosses him to the floor like he weighs nothing. Oakley crashes onto the hardwood with a dull thud, groaning as he scrambles to regain his footing.

"Go," Jude grunts, "before I let her finish what she started."

I stand there, frozen, watching all of this as my pulse thunders in my ears. The rush of rage that kept me anchored vanishes, leaving me unsteady, like the floor beneath me has crumbled.

Panic isn't a wave.

It's a suffocating black hole, sucking in all the light, devouring everything until there's nothing left but darkness. My mind spirals, unraveling at the seams, and no matter how hard I try to hold on, the threads slip through my fingers.

Oakley slinks off, his sneer smeared with blood as he disappears into the crowd. But I can't focus on him, not anymore. There's something far more suffocating than my hatred for him—something that tightens around my chest like a vise.

Jude.

He wasn't complicit.

He never knew.

I've been hating him for nothing, pushing him away for nothing, punishing him for a crime he never committed.

The rage I clung to, the lie that justified the distance between us, crumbles to ash, scattering in the wake of this brutal reality. The weight of it presses down on me, so heavy it's like the air itself has turned to shards of glass, too sharp to inhale.

I can't fucking breathe.

"Phi, look at me."

Jude's voice cuts through the madness, but it's not enough. I'm still spiraling, unraveling. My hands shake, fingers trembling as I try to grasp onto something solid, something to anchor me.

Then his hands are on me, warm and steady, cupping my face. Those eyes, those storm cloud eyes, flicker with concern as they search mine, turbulent blue swirled with the dark, heavy weight of thunderclouds.

They remind me of the sky just after a downpour, the kind of storm that leaves the world soaked and trembling but quiet, almost calm. Moments right after the rain stops falling, when everything feels on the edge of breaking but hasn't yet.

"You never knew," I choke out, the words barely a whisper as they shatter between us. "You never knew, Jude..."

The weight of it hits me like a tidal wave, my chest caving under the realization of what I've done.

I turned Jude Sinclair into an exile, for nothing.

Arrested, for nothing.

His family home was burned to the ground over a lie.

My lie.

"Geeks, listen to me—"

"I can't do this," I gasp, shaking my head. Panic bubbles inside of me, guilt rising like floodwater. "I can't. Not here. I need to leave."

I try to pull away, to escape his hold, but Jude doesn't let go.

His hands slip to the back of my hair, fingers tangling in the long strands, holding me there. Pressing my back further into the wall, he's unwavering in the face of my panic.

I physically can't breathe under the weight of his gaze.

I need hate to be living in them, pure and utter loathing, because it deserves to have a home there for me. He deserves to despise me for what I've done, what I did to him, but there isn't anything but the dark, wild kind of blue that swallows the light whole.

"I need to go," I whisper, but it comes out more like a plea, like I'm begging him to let me disappear into the night.

I feel raw, exposed, every nerve ending frayed, ready to snap.

I don't want to do this in front of all these people. In front of my friends. In front of him.

“No.” His voice is low, rough like gravel grinding against pavement. It sends a shiver down my spine. “You’re not leaving alone.”

Jude’s thumb skims the corner of my lips, the touch featherlight. The softness of it almost makes me laugh, a quiet, bitter thing lodged in my throat.

How can hands like these—gentle enough to craft poetry, to leave tender imprints on my skin—also be the same ones that can throw a grown man into a wall as if he were nothing? How can they be the same hands that killed someone?

These hands had transformed into something brutal for *me*.

All because I leave ruin in my wake. Disaster written in the cracks of my skin while his hands follow, cleaning up the wreckage I never wanted to create but can’t seem to stop.

All I ever do is bring brutality. Break things. Shatter people.

I shake my head, panic clawing its way back up my throat. “Jude, please, I can’t—”

He steps closer, cutting me off, and I can feel the heat rolling off him in waves, his chest brushing mine, close enough that the world narrows to just this—his presence, his voice, the scent of rain just before lightning strikes.

“You leave with me,” he says, his voice a command, a promise. “Or you go grab Atlas. But you’re not walking out of here by yourself. Not tonight, Phi.”

“I don’t need you,” I force out, my teeth grinding against the lie, clinging to the words I’ve repeated to myself for years. “I don’t need anyone. I’m fine on my own.”

His fingers curl under my chin, lifting it until I’m forced to meet his gaze. There’s no softness there, no room for argument, only something raw and relentless.

“You leave with me, or you don’t leave at all.”

“I don’t want your help,” I whisper, but the words tremble, fragile, and we both know it.

Jude’s eyes darken, something primal flickering in their depths as he steps even closer. His forehead brushes mine, and the heat between us sparks, electric.

“Yes, you do,” he murmurs, his voice a low rasp that ghosts over my lips. “You’ve been begging for it. It’s right there in those tragedy-soaked

eyes.”

I need to pull away, I tell myself.

I need to break free from the gravity of him, but I can’t.

I’m tethered by the weight of his gaze, drawn in by the intensity burning behind those storm cloud eyes. For a heartbeat, everything else—the party, the noise, the people—fades into nothing but a distant hum, like we’ve been swallowed into a universe where only he and I exist.

“You can hate that it’s me all you want, but that vicious fucking heart of yours? It’s aching to be soft.” Jude pauses, his thumb tracing a slow, deliberate line along my jaw, and I feel my pulse quicken. “Let it, Phi. Let it be gentle, just this once. You deserve that. Worry about it being me later.”

Jude knows.

He knows I can’t run to anyone else. He’s the only one who knows what’s clawing at my insides, the only one standing with me in the ruins of everything I’ve tried to hold together.

I can’t do this alone anymore, and we both know it.

None of the names I was raised to rely on, to lean into when the weight of the world got too heavy, are here. Not one of them can see me like this, stripped bare, standing on the edge of unraveling.

Not a Van Doren, not a Caldwell, Hawthorne, or Pierson.

The only name I have left is the one I was warned away from. The one I was never supposed to trust.

Jude Sinclair is all I have right now.

The worst part?

I don’t feel like a traitor for needing him.

the tower

. . .

Jude

October 26

“NOT HOME. ANYWHERE ELSE. JUST NOT HOME.”

That's what Phi whispered in my ear, her voice barely rising above the roar of my engine as we tore through the streets of Ponderosa Springs. I wasn't sure she meant it—not completely.

Not until I watched her climb the ladder to the top of the water tower, her body tense, each step deliberate, like she was climbing away from the pain here on the ground.

Her fear of anyone seeing her crack—seeing her *break*—was far worse than any fear of heights.

The only reason I even showed up tonight was because Ezra left his keys at the garage, and unfortunately, the fucking twat is growing on me. Like a fungus, but growing nonetheless.

Phi wasn't supposed to be there. She hadn't gone anywhere besides school and home in weeks. I told myself not to get more involved after cornering her in class the other day, but then I saw Oakley.

And I knew it was already too late.

I was too deep in this, whether I liked it or not.

Now, we sit side by side.

Phi's silence is louder than anything else. The cool, rusted metal of the water tank digs into my back, the grate beneath us biting into our legs, but I don't move. Neither of us does.

We've been like this for at least half an hour—no words, just the cold night air, the wind tugging at us, and the vast sky above.

It's just us, and I realized on the ride here that if Seraphina Van Doren doesn't have me, she has no one.

Which is so fucked, considering she's surrounded by people—family who would tear themselves apart just to help her. But she won't let them. She keeps them out, locked behind walls no one's allowed to breach.

I know what that does to someone. I know what keeping all this shit inside does. It gnaws at you, chews through everything that makes you human, until there's nothing left. I watched my father disappear into the needle, into his own fucking oblivion, and I couldn't do shit to stop it.

I couldn't save him.

But maybe—*maybe*—I can save her.

Because all this pain she's been carrying, trapped inside her body with nowhere to go?

It's going to fucking kill her if she doesn't let it out.

"I'd just dyed my hair."

Phi's voice finally breaks the silence, so soft I almost miss it.

The words are fragile, barely cutting through the wind, like they're not meant for anyone to hear.

She doesn't look at me—won't look at me. Her eyes stay fixed on the horizon, on the endless stretch of trees that disappear into the darkness. Phi's talking to the night itself, and I'm just part of the background.

"When I met Oakley, I'd just dyed my hair for the first time."

"Geeks, you don't have to—" I start, trying to give her an out. I don't want her to feel like she has to spill this. I didn't make her leave with me to talk. I just didn't want her to be alone.

"No." The word breaks from her lips, head shaking as she cuts me off. "I want to. I *need* to."

I've never known Phi to be anything but a force of nature—wild, untamed, always pushing against the world. I've seen her shattered, crumbling under the weight of her own pain.

I've seen her in the throes of anger, every word sharp enough to cut, every movement filled with rage. But I've never seen her like this.

Never seen her soft, vulnerable, the edges of her hardened armor slipping away.

"I was fourteen," she says, the words like stones dropping into the silence. "Desperate to feel some kind of connection to Sage. Andy has her natural auburn hair under all the pink, and I wanted that. Some physical proof that I belonged, that I was hers. Her daughter."

Phi wipes at her face, her sleeve dragging across her cheeks, but it's no use. Once the tears start, they don't stop. They just keep spilling, silently, as if all the pain she's been hiding is pouring out of her in waves.

It's like watching a storm quiet for the first time, the wild winds calming, revealing something fragile beneath all that chaos. There's a tenderness in her now, a quiet ache that lingers in the way she moves.

It's startling, like catching a glimpse of something sacred.

Rare.

"So I tried it," she sighs, the sound exhausted, like it's taking everything in her just to keep talking. "I thought it would make me feel like I fit in. Like maybe I could have that piece of her too. But I had no idea what I was doing. Left it in too long, and this...this is the color I was left with."

The wind tugs at her hair, lifting the strands and pulling them across her face like ghostly fingers. Her hair, knotted and tangled from the ride, catches the light of the moon.

All I can think about is how something as simple as her hair became the start of her nightmare.

"Mom told me it was beautiful. Over and over again. That it suited me. All I could think was how it would be just one more thing for them to use against me. The shy, nerdy, adopted girl with the bad hair. One more thing to make me stand out in all the wrong ways."

Phi laughs, but it's hollow, brittle, like it's coming from somewhere deep inside her, a place that's already broken.

"I ran into him that morning. Just before school. He picked up a lock of my hair and said, 'Cherry. My favorite flavor.'"

Once she starts, she doesn't stop.

Her words are like shards of glass, sharp and unforgiving, slicing through the heavy quiet of the night. Each one lands like a fresh wound,

cutting deeper with every breath she takes. She tells me how Oakley slipped into her life—slow, deliberate—like poison finding its way into her bloodstream. He didn’t arrive with the force of a storm, didn’t tear through her world all at once. No, he was patient, subtle, creeping in at the edges, until one day he was everywhere.

He came after school with easy smiles and practiced compliments, offering just enough attention to make her feel seen. To make her believe she mattered to him, like she wasn’t just the shy, awkward girl who faded into the background. He made her feel like someone worth noticing.

And she was fourteen. Too young, too naive, and too desperate to be seen.

She didn’t see it happening—how he was slowly, methodically setting the stage, pulling her deeper into his web. How her hunger for validation was something he could twist, could *use*. He took the ache she carried in her chest—the need to be someone, to belong—and turned it into something he could exploit.

And the worst part?

I didn’t see it either.

I had no fucking clue. No idea what was happening right in front of me. I didn’t see the signs, didn’t know how deep she was sinking until it was too late. Five months, she says. Five months of him weaving his way into her world, stringing her along like she was nothing more than a pawn in whatever sick, twisted game he was playing.

And I hate myself for it. I hate that I didn’t see him approaching her or notice him texting her. Maybe if I had, I could’ve stopped it. Maybe I could’ve done something—anything—before Halloween night four years ago.

But by then, he had her exactly where he wanted her. Vulnerable. Falling for him. Her heart wide open, full of hope, and ready to be crushed. And that’s exactly what he did. He took all of that—the fragile, innocent trust she gave him—and destroyed it.

He shattered her in ways no one could fix. Made sure that anyone who came after him would have to fight tooth and nail just to get a glimpse of the heart she’s laying bare in front of me now.

She whispers the words, her voice barely more than a breath carried on the wind, but I hear them. I hear every single one, and with each syllable,

she tears me apart.

"I lied to my parents for the first time that night. I snuck out. I went to that party in West Trinity Falls. I got drunk. I went into his room. I kissed him first."

Her voice trembles, and I can hear the shame in it, the self-hatred tangled up in every word.

Phi's a girl who deserved so much more than what she got. A girl who trusted the wrong person and paid the price. And it guts me. It fucking destroys me, knowing I didn't see it—knowing I wasn't there to stop it.

I clench my fists, the cold metal of the water tower biting into my palms, but the pain doesn't register. All I feel is the rage—this burning need to tear this whole fucking tower apart.

I want to destroy him. I want to find Oakley and tear him apart, limb by limb, for what he's done. For what he's still doing. For the way he's made her feel like this—small, broken, like she's to blame.

But I can't. I can't because if anyone deserves to kill Oakley Wixx, it's Phi, and I won't take that from her.

"I did those things, Jude. I made those choices."

Before I even realize what I'm doing, my hand is on her, firm but gentle. My fingers grip her jaw, pulling her toward me because I need her to see me.

"Look at me."

Her breath stutters, shaky and uneven, and when she finally lifts her gaze to mine, her eyes are glassy, filled with guilt and pain that twists deep inside me.

It's the kind of hurt that clings to you, digs its claws in, refusing to let go. And I can feel her breath on my lips—warm, unsteady—reminding me just how close she is.

All I want to do is take it all away. Every bit of it.

I don't want her to look at herself like this—like she's broken, like she's fragile, like she's something less than the force she is.

Because that's not who she is. That's not who she's ever been.

Not to me.

"What happened was *not* your fault." My voice is rough, scraping like gravel against the night air. "It was never your fault. Oakley is a sick piece of shit, and nothing—*nothing*—you did made you deserve that."

Phi's eyes drift, distant, like she's somewhere else, somewhere she can't escape from. I recognize the look—it's like she's trapped in her own memories, suffocating under the weight of everything she's kept buried. And when her voice finally cracks through the silence, it's barely above a whisper.

"Then why do I feel like it was? Why does it feel like every choice I made led me here? To this?"

I don't answer right away. I *can't*. The pain in her voice, the way she looks at me like she's drowning in her own guilt—it guts me, rips me open from the inside out.

I'm reminded, all too vividly, of the nights I spent watching my dad, lying in piles of his own vomit, begging anyone, *begging me*, to make it stop. To take his pain away. And just like then, all I can do now is sit here, feeling fucking helpless.

Because that's what it feels like when someone is falling apart in front of you. You want to fix it, to *save* them, but sometimes, all you can do is be there.

So that's what I do.

My hand moves from her jaw, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. The touch is light, steady—something solid for her to hold on to. She needs that right now. Something that won't waver, won't break under the weight of everything she's carrying.

"You were a *kid*. You were a kid, Seraphina," I finally say, my voice low, trying to contain the fury that's simmering beneath the surface. The anger I feel, not at her, but at him. "He took advantage of you, Geeks. He *used* you. And that's on him—not you."

I can see the battle raging behind her eyes—the way she's fighting the truth, trying to push it away, burying it under the mountain of guilt she's carried for years. I know that somewhere deep inside her, she knows it wasn't her fault. She knows it. But knowing the truth in your head doesn't stop the damage it does to your heart.

She's been carrying this for so long, letting it poison everything she touches, letting it warp the way she sees herself. And it's killing me to watch her struggle, to see her drowning in a sea of shame she doesn't deserve to feel.

“The fire at St. Gabriel’s.” Phi looks away, her voice barely more than a rasp, raw and broken. “I didn’t know you’d be there. I knew Oakley liked to break in and hang out there, but I didn’t...you weren’t supposed to be there.”

“Seraphina, I—”

“Oakley told me you knew about us, that he’d talk to you about me. I thought you were in on it all along. I almost killed you that night. I’d wanted to. I wrecked your life, Jude.” She chokes out a little sob, trying to catch her breath before rambling on. “That’s on me. I did that. And I know sorry will never be enough to fix it.”

I don’t blink. Don’t look away.

I just keep staring at her, letting her feel the full weight of my gaze.

That fire had royally fucked my life.

Phi’s lie gave Ponderosa Springs the proof they needed to believe I was no better than my father. It set off a chain reaction, erasing Jude and leaving only the Sinclair name in its wake, branding me with a legacy of destruction before I ever had the chance to be anything else.

I should be angry, but I’m not.

How could I be when I’ve seen what this has done to her? How could I hate her when I know—when I *feel*—that her actions were born out of her own brokenness, her own suffering?

Because I know what it’s like to feel trapped inside your own pain. I know what it’s like to make choices that you regret because you’re trying to survive the only way you know how.

I’ve been there. In that darkness, lashing out, making mistakes, just trying to feel *something* other than the ache that’s eating away at you from the inside out. I’ve been the person who let pain turn me into someone I didn’t recognize.

“Then don’t be sorry.”

The words hit her like a shock, and I can see it in her eyes—the way they widen just slightly, like she didn’t expect that. Like she’s been bracing herself, waiting for me to lash out.

Waiting for the anger, the blame, the words she’s convinced herself she deserves. She’s been holding her breath, waiting for me to confirm everything she believes about herself—that it’s her fault, that I’m angry, that I hate her for what happened.

“Don’t be sorry, Geeks. I don’t hold your hurt against you. Pain—” I pause, my voice softening just slightly, gentling like I’m trying to calm a wild animal. “Pain can turn us into people we were never meant to be.”

She shakes her head, her lips trembling as the words spill out. “You should hate me.”

“Maybe,” I grunt, “but I don’t.”

Our pain feels a lot like distant twin flames.

Our scars might be different, etched by different hands, but they burn the same. We’re forged in the same fire, tempered by the same agony that no one else could ever truly understand.

I can’t hate her when she’s the only one who carries that same weight—the same unbearable burden of living in a world that never gave us a chance to be anything but broken.

The weight of her words settles between us, heavy and raw, but it’s the kind of heaviness that feels shared now. Like all the shame and guilt she’s carried for years has been halved, passed over to me in a sore exchange I didn’t ask for but am willing to hold.

Because maybe that’s what she needs right now—someone to share the weight. Even for just a second.

The cold bites into my skin, the metal of the water tower seeping through my clothes, but I don’t move. The wind whips around us, tugging at our hair, cutting through the silence like a living thing.

We just sit there, side by side, as the sky slowly begins to lighten, the inky black fading into the softest shade of gray. It’s still dark, but there’s a hint of something on the horizon—a promise of dawn, of light breaking through the darkness. The kind of light that doesn’t quite reach us yet but is close enough to feel.

Phi lets out a long, quiet sigh, her back pressing deeper into the cold steel of the tank before she finally lets herself relax against me. Her head drops to my shoulder, the weight of her body sinking into mine.

“I don’t want to leave yet. I just want a few more seconds of this. Of everything being broken and not having to pretend it’s not.”

Her words hit me in a place I didn’t know I could still feel, and for a moment, I don’t say anything. I just look down at her, her red hair falling in loose, tangled waves across my chest.

She's wearing one of those oversized flannel shirts she always steals from Reign, the sleeves too long, the hem frayed from years of use. It hangs loosely on her, making her seem even smaller than she is.

There's something about the way she's curled into me that feels fragile. Like if I move, even an inch, the world will shatter around us again.

I let out a slow breath, resting my chin lightly against the top of her head, the smell of vanilla filling the space between us.

"We can stay here as long as you want, Geeks."

And we do. We stay.

The horizon begins to lighten, ever so slowly, the night bleeding into dawn with hues of pale lavender and soft pink. The wind rustles through the trees, carrying the salty scent of the ocean, and the stars, one by one, begin to fade from the sky. But we don't move. We don't speak. We just exist here, in this quiet moment that feels suspended between time and space, like if we sit still enough, we can pretend the world isn't waiting for us down below.

Sometimes we sit in complete silence, not needing to fill it with anything. Words are unnecessary up here, where it feels like nothing can touch us. At one point, Phi grabbed my pack of cigarettes and threatened to toss them over the edge of the tower, her fingers brushing dangerously close to the edge, before deciding instead to take one for herself.

She didn't smoke it—she drew a dick on it, like the little shit she is.

And then, like clockwork, she breaks the silence with one of her random questions. That's how she's been, filling the gaps in conversation with some strange, obscure piece of knowledge that takes me a minute or two to fully understand.

"You ever think about parallel universes?"

I scoff, shaking my head with a small laugh. "No, Miss Eternal Damnation, but I'm sure you have, and you're about to tell me all about it."

Phi doesn't lift her head, doesn't even shift in my arms, but I feel her smile against my shoulder, soft and fleeting, like she's still with me, even if her mind's somewhere far away.

"It's this idea that every choice we make creates another universe," she murmurs, her voice low and steady, like she's thought about this a thousand times before. "When I'm stoned, I like to think there's a version of me out there where none of this happened. Where I'm different. Better, maybe."

I glance down at her, her hair spilling over my chest, catching the faintest hint of the dawn's light. Her face is half-hidden in the shadows, but I can see the weariness etched into the lines of her expression, the weight of everything she's been carrying for so long.

It breaks something in me—something I didn't even know could still be broken.

"I gave up hoping on a better existence a long time ago, Geeks."

My voice sounds rougher than I intended, a little too raw, but it's the truth. I've never believed in second chances, not for people like me, at least. The fates spin your thread, and then it's tangled beyond repair. There's no undoing it.

I look back out at the horizon, watching as the light creeps over the tops of the trees, casting long, skeletal shadows across the ground. The cold nips at my skin, but I barely feel it. Not with her pressed up against me like this, like we're the only two people left in this godforsaken town.

"What if there's another version of us out there? You think we hate each other in all of them?"

I can't help but laugh, "With the way Rook Van Doren holds a grudge, I'd say our family hatred spans across every universe."

"True," Phi snorts, her breath warm against my neck. "We could be total strangers in one of them. I could be your boss, or you could be my annoying-ass neighbor. So many different possibilities, and yet this is the one we're stuck in."

The words hang in the air, heavier than they should be. Maybe because they're true. Out of all the versions of us that could exist, this is the one we're trapped in. The one where we're both broken, both scarred, both too far gone to ever really fix.

"That's life," I mutter, "The thread's spun, it's tangled, it's cut. There's no rewinding it. No fixing it."

"So let's make our own."

I arch a brow, not quite sure where she's going with this. "I think you've been watching too much *Doctor Who*—"

"I'm serious, asshole." Phi shifts beside me, her head lifting slightly, just enough for her to glance up at me through a curtain of wild, tangled red hair.

For a moment, the world seems to pause, caught between the fading night and the creeping dawn, as her eyes meet mine.

Green sea glass.

The same exact color as the ones I used to find on the beach with my grandmother when she was still alive. Lost and discarded by the sea, once sharp but softened by years of tumbling in the waves until they were nothing but smooth, weathered fragments.

Broken, but somehow more beautiful for it.

Seraphina would fucking have eyes that remind me of the only home I've ever known.

"Right here, right now, we're no one. There's no history. No last names. You're just Jude. I'm just Phi. We can create something that's ours."

Phi says it so easily, like it's the simplest thing in the world—to just forget everything, to strip away all the pain, all the scars, and just be...us.

But it's not that simple.

It can't be, not for us.

"Just Geeks and the Loner, huh?" I grunt, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from grinning at her tired eyes.

"Yeah." Phi gives a little nod. "Our universe, Loner."

"Our universe, Geeks."

The words feel like razor blades coming out of my throat.

Fucking Phi is one thing. I could handle that.

Letting her trauma vomit on me to help her carry the weight of it? Easy.

I could compartmentalize, keep my distance, pretend this is nothing but crossed suffering and sexual tension.

But this? Conversations about the universe until dawn? Getting involved with her emotionally? Letting myself feel anything more than resentment and sexual attraction?

It's inviting destruction into my life.

We don't get a neat little happily ever after. Hell, we'll barely get a shot at friendship.

We are a tragedy.

Like Heathcliff and Catherine, forever locked in a brutal dance of passion and destruction, tearing each other apart because they don't know how to love without bleeding.

We're the kind of story people warn you about, the kind they study in classrooms with furrowed brows and ask, *How did it get this bad?*

We're not made for soft endings. We're made for catastrophe, for the kind of connection that leaves scars, the kind that haunts you long after the final page is turned.

I know that.

And yet, I stay.

Because my stupid, dumbass fucking heart still has a tiny piece of hope. A flicker of light that maybe this is our universe.

Maybe, in this tiny, fleeting moment at the top of a water tower, we get to rewrite everything. We get to create something that's ours, something that doesn't belong to anyone else.

And that's all I've ever wanted. Something to belong to me. To just Jude.

I stay because, for the first time, I can see her—the real her. The fragile, broken parts she's hidden for so long, laid bare in the pale light of dawn. But I know this moment, this rare glimpse of her heart, is fleeting. It's like watching a solar eclipse—brief, breathtaking, and so damn fragile that if I blink, it'll be gone.

Tomorrow, the walls will go back up. She'll retreat into her shadows, into the safety of the armor she's spent years building, and I'll be left standing here, wondering if I'll ever see her like this again.

And like a solar eclipse, it'll leave me with nothing but the memory of something beautiful and untouched.

Phi sighs, her head falling back against my shoulder as the first rays of sunlight begin to stretch over the horizon.

“In this universe, none of this makes us friends, Jude.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Whatever this is, whatever we are, it's not friendship. It's something messier, darker, and something that'll probably tear us both apart before it's over.

But for now, I'll take this moment—the quiet, the pain, and our fleeting universe giving me the chance to see the brief eclipse of her vicious heart.

the heathens

. . .

November 3rd

Heathen HQ Group Chat

ROYAL ASS

Ports open on Saturday. 1/8 mile drag. Four-car lineup. I'm tryna shark some new drivers—any takers?

NOR

It's been forever since I got to watch dumbasses smash into shipping containers. Count me in.

ME

Gotta change my spark plugs, but I'm in.

Ezzy

Got a gig till midnight, but don't worry, I'll bless you with my presence after. Might even bring an autograph for ya.

ROYAL ASS

Make sure it's on something soft so I can wipe my ass with it.

ANDY

Dude. Gross.

ANDY

With Ez tonight at The Grove. I'll tag along after, but hard pass on lining up tonight. Fucking hate the port. Shit's like trying to drag race on a slip 'n slide.

ROYAL ASS

Captain of team no balls, Drom.

Ezzy

Jude's in. You can tag team with him.

NOR

Did I fucking miss when we voted on befriending a Sinclair?

ROYAL ASS

Ezzy and him are besties now. They have matching friendship bracelets.

EZZY

Don't forget I just shared my Spotify playlist with him last week. Jealous, Reignbow?

ATTIE

I just woke up from a coma. Who are we tag teaming?

ATTIE

Is Ez involved?

ATTIE

If not, can I join?

OceanofPDF.com

the judge

...

Phi

November 7

“*MIT’s LOSS,*” HE MUSES, A LAZY GRIN TUGGING AT HIS LIPS. “*WHO wouldn’t want a girl who recited the first fifty digits of pi while drunk just to shut me up?*”

The sun has fully risen now, its light unapologetically stretching over the town below, bright and relentless, erasing every shadow we’d once hidden in. Up here, though, I still feel cocooned, sheltered from the harshness of the day.

I laugh, pulling my knees to my chest, trying to chase away the chill that’s settled into my bones. “Flattery only works when it’s genuine, Sinclair.”

The metallic tang of rust mingles with the faint scent of Jude’s hoodie I’m wearing—leather-bound books drenched in the inky scent of Black Ice that lingers like smoke. He’s leaning against the railing, his silhouette standing out against the pale blue sky.

It’s comforting, wrapping around me, pulling me closer and closer to sleep.

I don’t want to leave just yet. Just a few more minutes.

Jude leans against the railing, relaxed silhouetted against the pale sky, a hint of a smile on his lips. “I wrote you a fucking poem on the spot at 8:00

a.m., Geeks. I don't know how much more genuine I can get."

"Is it finished yet?"

His fingers pause over the screen, uncertainty flickering in his eyes. The soft glow of his phone competes with the morning light, making him look caught between two worlds.

After a moment, he hands it over, a silent invitation that feels heavy, not because of the words themselves but because of what they might mean.

"Read it to me." My voice is tinged with sleep as I rest my cheek against my knees, the exhaustion in my bones making everything feel softer, slower.

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Asshole."

"Do you want me to read it or not?"

"Yes, sorry." A sleepy smile tugs at my lips. "The stage is yours, Poet Laureate."

The sunlight filters through his hair, making it look almost golden, a sharp contrast to the ink winding up his arms.

"Like a plant seeking space in a pot too little. Roots bound for comfort, suffocate your change. You pleaded for the first fracture. Girl trapped in a pot, your eyes begged for agony. Do you yearn for my soil, drenched in heartache?"

His voice is slow and careful as he begins reading, the words rolling off his tongue. Even though the poem hadn't been planned, the way he reads sounds practiced, as if he's spent lifetimes reading words out loud.

I barely focus on the lines, too distracted by the way he looks in the early light. The sun highlights the scar beneath his lip. A mark, I'd learned tonight, he'd gotten while riding his bike for the first time.

"Girl turned tree, you see how beautiful your shattering is to me? Branches stretch toward a sky you'll never reach, roots dig deep, searching for something that's never there."

I watch him—his lips moving, jaw tensing slightly with each line, fingers gripping the phone a little too tight. The lilac bruises on his knuckles should make him look harder, rougher, but instead, they add to his gentleness.

Jude's a worn novel, edges frayed but still worth reading.

“Do you feel it?” he asks, tone softening. “The breaking inside you, splintering under the weight of everything you wanted to be?”

The words slip into my bloodstream like a slow, quiet drug, warm and heavy. I bite my lip, trying to ground myself in the moment, to hold on to this rare softness. I just want to stay here a little longer. Where the possibilities of the world seem endless again and not so goddamn daunting.

“Look at you,” he breathes, eyes leaving the phone to find mine, his brows twitching, “sprouting from the cracks. Ruin in full bloom.”

I meet his gaze, not knowing what to say or if I even need to say anything at all.

There’s something tender between us, fragile and unspoken, like the morning itself—a beginning, an ending, and something more that can never exist outside our universe.

“Shit,” I hiss as the ratchet in my grip slips and crashes against the concrete floor.

The sharp clatter snaps me back, cutting through the fog of memory like a cold splash of water. I blink hard, refocusing as the familiar scent of motor oil and metal settles around me like an old friend.

I bend down to pick up the tool, pausing just long enough to consider smacking my own head with it before I let out a frustrated sigh.

This is why we don’t let our memories hijack our brain while wrestling with tools, Phi.

The garage is quiet, with the late-afternoon sunlight streaming in through the wide windows, casting long shadows across the floor. Posters of old racing legends and Reign’s childhood trophies clutter the walls and shelves, while old car parts lie scattered across the concrete, waiting for someone to breathe life back into them.

This garage isn’t just a workshop. It’s home.

A place where Dad taught me how to change my first tire and where Reign once dared me to lick an exhaust pipe to prove my love of cars. I did it, of course, but only because I was six and stupidly determined to impress my big brother.

I slip the ratchet back into place, fingers wrapping around it with practiced ease. The movement is steady, mechanical—I know this car better than I know most people. It’s the same Nissan that’s been my project since

high school. I begged Mom for months to buy it from the junkyard for me, desperate to build it from scratch.

And I had.

Piece by piece until the Silvia was everything I'd imagined for my dream car. Vixen printed plainly on the tags, the origin of my deviant nickname.

But even here, with the comforting weight of tools in my hands and the smell of fresh oil in the air, I can't escape the ghost that is Jude Sinclair. He lingers in the back of my mind, a constant presence that refuses to be ignored. Since that night at the water tower, he's been everywhere and nowhere all at once—hovering on the edges, never close enough to touch but always close enough to feel.

He's been giving me space, keeping his distance. I know it's intentional. He's letting me come to him, putting the ball in my court, protecting my pride from facing the music of what was shared that night there.

It's a kindness I don't deserve.

I tighten the last spark plug, my fingers moving automatically while my mind drifts back to the tangled mess we've made of our lives. Jude and I are in dangerous waters now, and I have no fucking idea how to navigate them. We've crossed lines—lines I should've kept clear, lines that don't give a damn about our last names or the history that runs through our veins.

Jude was willing to let me hate him. He was prepared to be the villain in my story so I wouldn't have to face the worst parts of myself. He let me blame him for everything, just to keep me from confronting my own guilt over the fire.

I don't deserve his forgiveness for that fire or for the chain of events it set off in his life. But he gave it to me anyway, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

And I don't know what to do with that.

The ratchet slips again, my hand fumbling as I try to adjust the angle. I curse under my breath, shaking out the sting in my palm, and focus back on the engine.

All my life, Ponderosa Springs has taught me who the Sinclair family is. They're spineless, vile humans with no mercy and no regret for the havoc they reek.

But since Jude moved in, he's shown me that he isn't any one of those things.

None.

Yeah, he brutally killed someone with his bare hands, but he did that to protect me. To keep someone from hurting me.

And on that water tower? He was so fucking soft with me.

When I least expected it, when I didn't even realize how desperately I needed it, he gave me a place where I could be real, stripped of every pretense and mask I've built over the years.

Up there on that tower, with dawn creeping over the horizon, I let everything unravel. I laid bare every jagged, ugly part of me. And Jude didn't flinch. He didn't try to make it pretty or fix it.

He just *stayed*, his silence more comforting than any words could have been.

Despite every rumor, every warning, I can't hate him anymore.

No matter how much my last name says I should.

No matter how hard I've made myself to the outside world, a quiet, tender heart still beats within me. And it refuses to hate him. Not when he is the only one in four years that made her feel safe enough to beat freely around.

A gentle tug on my earbud pulls me from the spiral of traitorous thoughts, and the moment I catch the scent of tobacco and smoke, heat floods my cheeks.

Caught—without doing a damn thing. But that's only because the person now standing next to me has an unnerving talent for reading my mind.

“Thought I'd find you here.”

Dad's voice is warm, a little tired, and a whole lot familiar. It carries the weight of too much responsibility, like a long day of judgment weighing on his shoulders.

I glance up from under the hood, spotting him in his work clothes—tie loosened, shirtsleeves rolled up to expose his tattooed arms, creases of a long day softened by the dim garage light.

He looks out of place among the grease, a judge in a sanctuary of steel and oil. Yet there's something about him that fits here, like this space knows him—remembers the man he was before life settled on his shoulders.

“Long day, Judge?” I tease, a smirk tugging at my lips.

He snorts, shaking his head as he leans against the workbench. The day’s burden clings to him, but the faintest lift at the corners of his mouth hints at a smile.

“You could say that. Never gets any easier.”

I wipe my hands on the grease-stained rag, the question bubbling up before I can stop it.

“Why did you become a judge if it stresses you the fuck out so much? Why not a mechanic or something you actually enjoy?”

It’s a Van Doren legacy to be part of the judicial system, a path I knew was laid out for him. But I’ve always wondered why—why he chose it, why he kept at it when it seemed to weigh him down.

Dad pauses, steady hazel eyes searching mine, a depth of understanding that comes from years spent in the courtroom.

“I know how far people will go when they’re desperate for justice. What it costs to get it yourself. No one should have to go through what our family did to find peace.”

His words hang heavy, the unspoken truths weaving through the air between us.

My uncles, my father—they carry a shadow, a reputation that people respect not because of their titles but because of the darkness woven into their pasts.

The kind of fear they evoke isn’t the kind that comes from money or accolades—it’s something deeper, something earned. A legacy built on secrets and the blood they’ve spilled to protect what’s theirs.

I know it. I’ve heard enough whispered conversations to piece it together. Atlas and I perfected the art of eavesdropping during family holidays, absorbing the confessions that slipped out after too many glasses of wine.

That guy in the woods they helped me get rid of? He wasn’t their first dead body.

“Besides, I look fucking incredible in a tie.” Dad shifts, smirking a bit, breaking the tension like he always does with humor.

I roll my eyes, unable to suppress a smile. “Gag me. You sound like Uncle Thatch.”

He chuckles, warmth radiating as his gaze drifts around the garage—Ten coveted JDM cars gleam under the overhead lights, polished gems in a crown of grease.

This is home—his kingdom. A place built with sweat and dedication, wrench by wrench, bolt by bolt.

When his eyes land back on me, he leans closer to peer under the hood of my Silvia.

He raises a brow. “Graveyard?”

The echo of my mint gum popping snaps in the air as I shake my head. “The Port.”

He sighs, dragging a tattooed hand over his face, thumb and forefinger pressing into his eyes. “Phi, for the love of all things holy, don’t make me fish you out of the Pacific tonight.”

“Dude, wrong kid,” I scoff, waving the ratchet like a weapon. “Give that speech to Reign. I actually know what the fuck I’m doing behind the wheel.”

Dad groans, heavy with exasperation but laced with pride. “Just don’t dump the clutch, or you’ll lose traction right out of the gate. Feel the grip, let—”

“Let the tires bite the asphalt before I give it full throttle. Don’t redline it, shift just before the sweet spot where the torque’s still pulling hard?” I finish, smirk spreading wider.

“You know”—he shakes his head, lips twitching in a fight against a smile—“I used to love how much you were like me when you were a kid. Then you learned to walk, and I realized I’d created my very own heart attack.”

“Oh, fuck you,” I laugh, shoving him playfully, the kind of nudge that says I love you in our language.

When I got my learner’s permit, I didn’t get the same cautious driving lessons most kids get. There were no slow laps around empty parking lots, no white-knuckled merges onto the highway with a nervous parent praying to survive the ride.

No, Rook Van Doren had other plans for me.

He threw me behind the wheel of a Nissan Fairlady Z and took me to the Port. There were no second chances, no hand-holding. Not until shifting gears was burned into my muscle memory did he even think about taking

me to the Graveyard. He made me earn every damn stripe, every ounce of respect for the road, like it was sacred—something untouchable.

And now, he wonders why I'm an adrenaline junkie.

Like, really, dude?

You practically built me from scratch, forged me in speed and gasoline, and now you're surprised I came out with a lead foot? It's like creating a shark and then wondering why it likes to swim.

"Are things with..." He clears his throat, awkwardness thick in the air.
"Jude going alright?"

We'd talked after the Gauntlet—when I laid everything out, told him the truth. I made it crystal clear Jude was only protecting me, but I could still see the worry, the doubt flickering in his eyes, a shadow he couldn't shake.

And it's still there now, gnawing at him, and it fucking irks me.

"Fine." I shrug, the lie sliding off my tongue. "He's just another roommate."

"He's not being inappropriate or trying to—"

"No, Dad," I cut him off, twisting the tool in my hands harder than necessary. Metal bites into my palm as irritation flares hot in my chest. "It's nothing like that."

It pisses me off, the way no one—myself included—ever gives Jude the benefit of the doubt.

I hate everything the name Sinclair stands for. I hate what Easton Sinclair did to my family. I hate what Stephen Sinclair did to Ponderosa Springs, what he did to the women who should've been safe in this town. Their legacy is rotten, a festering wound that's never healed.

I get why my dad's so protective. I do. But Jude isn't them.

I want him to be. Shit, I *need* him to be. It would be much easier if he were just another Sinclair—another monster carved from the same corrupt tree. But he's not.

At the very least, Jude deserves to be given a chance. The chance to be the apple that's fallen far, far from the poisoned tree.

"I hear you." Dad's voice softens, ruffling my hair before pulling me into a hug. His arms wrap around me, solid and strong, like they always have. "I just worry, kid. Wanna make sure you're alright."

It's such an easy, familiar gesture that anchors me, making the chaotic world still for a moment. I feel the warmth of him, the solidness, and

suddenly, I'm pulled back.

Back to a time when life was simple, before it became this tangled web of secrets and expectations.

I'm a kid again, sneaking downstairs after bedtime, knowing he'd let me stay up just a little longer. We'd sit on the living room floor, surrounded by scattered LEGO pieces, building castles and cars, whispering and laughing like we had all the time in the world.

Back then, Dad was more than just my father—he was my best friend. The guy who could fix anything, build anything, and make everything okay with just a joke and ice cream.

Somewhere along the way, life got complicated. We drifted apart, like two ships caught in different currents. The distance between us grew, subtle at first, until it felt like we were orbiting different planets.

But standing here in his arms, I can still feel it—that bond, that unshakable connection that no amount of time or the lack of shared DNA could ever sever.

“I know, Dad,” I murmur against his chest, hugging him a little tighter. “I know.”

“I miss you,” he whispers against the top of my hair, voice rough. “Where have you been, Sweet Phi?”

His words punch a hole in my chest because I know he isn't asking about where I've been physically. He's asking where *I* went.

The girl who used to light up every room, the kid who raced him to the garage after dinner, who didn't need a reason to laugh or share a secret with him.

The girl who trusted him with everything.

What he doesn't realize is that the daughter he's asking about is gone.

And I don't know how to tell him that the version of me he still holds on to, the one he believes in so fiercely, died a long time ago.

How do you tell the man who loves you more than anything that the person he's clinging to is just a memory?

How do you look into the eyes of the one person who's always seen the best in you and admit that you're not that person anymore—and maybe you never will be?

“Right here,” I choke out, barely managing the lie.

He exhales softly, his chest rising and falling beneath my cheek. When he pulls back just enough to meet my eyes, I see the search in his gaze—looking for answers I can't provide.

"I know we've been out of sync for a while," he says quietly, his tone steady yet laced with pain. "I don't know what I did...or what changed. But no matter how far you think you've wandered, no matter how lost you feel, I've always got you. You're never too far gone. Home's always right here."

His finger taps lightly over his heart, and that simple movement feels like it splits me open.

Despite everything—the damage I've caused, the depths I've fallen—he still sees me as his daughter. He still believes I'm worth saving.

For a moment, I teeter on the edge, ready to break, to let it all spill out—the pain, the secrets, the guilt.

I want to crumble, to let him fix it like he used to when I was small, when the world was less complicated. I want him to chase away the monsters in my closet one last time, like he always did just before bed.

But I can't.

This burden is mine. It always has been.

"Wanna help me finish up?" I ask, deflecting.

"So much like your mother," he mutters, poking my forehead playfully. "Stubborn."

I roll my eyes, a smile tugging at my lips as he takes the ratchet from my hands, helping me finish working on my car.

I never let anyone get close for a reason.

I want people to be afraid of hurting me.

I wear my anger like a crown, reigning over a kingdom of distance and intimidation. It's not just a shield; it's a throne, forged from every scar, every betrayal. I built it high, ensuring that fear was the first thing anyone felt when they laid eyes on me, the first wall they hit when they dared to come too close.

I honed my edges to a razor's precision, turning words into weapons. I learned how to wield bitchy like an art form—one that left its marks quickly, cleanly, before anyone could strike back. I mastered the role of the mean girl, the one who was always two steps ahead in the game of cruelty.

Fear meant power.

It meant I would never again be at someone else's mercy, never again be the girl left bleeding while someone else walked away unscathed.

I became everything I'd wanted to be: untouchable, unbreakable, a vicious bitch too dangerous to challenge.

But what I never accounted for was the loneliness that came with it—the suffocating quiet of a throne room with no one left standing inside it.

I'm *lonely*.

I've been lonely for a while—*I know that*. But the ache of it, the way it claws at me now? That's new.

Jude is the reason for that.

Not the loneliness—that's always been mine. It's the familiar weight I've learned to carry, a constant companion I chose for myself. I wore my solitude like armor, something I could control, a second skin that kept the world at bay. But the *ache* of it? The sharpness that's carved into the empty spaces I thought I'd forgotten?

That's him.

Jude gave me a universe where I could be *me*.

But that's what makes it unbearable now—the knowing.

Knowing that just down the hall, there's a space where I could let my guard down. Where I could breathe again without feeling like I have to carry the weight of everything alone. A space where the softer version of Phi, the one I've hidden for so long, could exist without fear.

But that place is with Jude, and to cross that threshold would mean stepping into enemy territory.

It's forbidden, a house with walls I was raised to never enter.

the port

• • •

Phi

November 8

RICH KIDS WILL DO JUST ABOUT ANYTHING FOR A CHEAP THRILL.

Including, but not limited to, trespassing on a closed container yard, because apparently, it makes for the perfect drag track.

Spoiler alert: I'm one of those rich brats.

The Port's locked up for business tonight, but wide open for the reckless few who get off on dancing with disaster. Though I should say it's open *for now*. Too many people have shown up, and we've got maybe two hours before blue lights flash and kill the mood.

It's been a good night. I'm up on cash, my record's spotless, and the rush from the races is still thrumming through my veins.

The only problem? I can't stop staring at *him*.

Like a magnet, my eyes are drawn to the finish line just in time to catch Jude and his murdered-out Skyline gliding through a flawless drift. The car doesn't just move—it prowls, sleek and dangerous, born from the night itself. Black on black, sharp lines cutting through the darkness, it devours the asphalt with a savage grace that demands attention.

That car...it's sex on wheels. A deadly beauty. My wet fucking dream.

Every inch of it is designed to make you weak. The midnight-black curves, the aggressive angles, the growl of the engine reverberating through

the air like a low moan.

It's not just a machine—it's a promise whispered in the dead of night.

Thick clouds of smoke curl from his tires, shrouding him for a split second, leaving the crowd on edge, caught between awe and fear. His back tires flirt with disaster, skimming dangerously close to the bystanders just feet from the finish line.

The smoke clears just enough to catch a glimpse of his smirk through the rolled-down window. Leaning back in the driver's seat, one hand draped lazily over the wheel, the other resting on the window frame.

And then, the bastard winks.

Right at the crowd.

Cocky fucker.

It's unfair, really. A car that lethal and its driver? Just as sinful.

I want to touch it.

Scratch that. I want to touch him.

"You're staring at a Sinclair. Should I call 911 or a priest?" Atlas's voice cuts through the hum of engines, his hip bumping mine.

"I'm not staring. He drove into my line of sight." I mutter, knowing I'm full of shit.

Besides there isn't a priest on earth qualified to exercise that demon from my life.

He arches a brow. "Uh-huh."

My gaze briefly flickers back to Jude, before cutting away, because unfortunately for me, I *have* been staring.

Lately, I can't seem to quit.

I can't cross that line into our universe, so I've been hovering outside of it. Watching, trying to hold onto the last pieces of my sanity.

It's becoming a problem. I'd rather wrestle a grizzly bear in a tutu than admit this, but I've started compiling a list. A physical list.

Let me repeat that.

I've taken the time to write out things about a fucking *guy*.

Clearly, I've lost my mind.

The proof of my insanity?

Jude drinks hazelnut coffee creamer. Mornings in the kitchen, I can smell it on him before I even see him.

He only smokes menthols, and I'm starting to think he likes the snarky notes I've been leaving on his cigarette packs. Always choosing chicken over steak, and he falls asleep to horror movies that would keep me up for a week if I didn't put headphones in before bed.

Then there's the ring.

The one he wears on his pointer finger, always twisting it absentmindedly, the cool metal sliding beneath his thumb in a rhythmic pattern. He does it when he's lost in thought, like it brings him comfort.

Kind of like the way he bites the chain of his gold medallion necklace between his teeth when he's leaning over the hood of a car at Inferno Garage.

Not my finest moment, but I might've caught that when I *just so happened to show up yesterday* to see Ezra.

Did I actually need to see Ezra? Absolutely not.

But he didn't question me when I lied, saying I needed help upgrading my coilovers. Even though we both know I could do that in my sleep—with both hands tied behind my back.

At the garage, Jude looked harder. Colder. Like nothing outside of his own mind touches him. Furrowed brows, lips pressed into a thin line, dark eyes completely unreadable. That's the Jude everyone sees.

But when he's alone, buried in that tattered notebook on his balcony or flipping through the pages of a book in the Commons, the rough edges he gives the world peel away.

What remains is the version of himself that exists in *our universe*.

All this intel? Collected against my will.

My curiosity's got me in a chokehold, and I swear to God, I've been trying to tap out for a while now.

"You've got it so bad," Atlas laughs, pulling me back to the chaos of the container yard.

I roll my eyes. "Bad? I don't even have it mild."

The smirk on his face says he knows I'm full of shit as I turn my head to look at him. Atlas's dark jeans cling to his lean legs, his hoodie stretched over his broad shoulders as he leans against my car.

Atlas has always carried himself with effortless confidence, the kind that makes me want to punch him if I didn't love him so damn much. Everything about him is unfairly cool.

“Phi, I love you, but—”

“Aww, Attie, I love you too,” I cut him off with a grin, batting my lashes dramatically. “Let’s just leave it there, okay?”

His eyes narrow, as he leans toward me just a little. “Can’t cute your way out of this, Phi. You’re staring at Jude like you’re two seconds from carving his initials into a tree.”

“Please,” I snort. “I have standards.”

“Yeah, and Jude’s the guy who proves they’re flexible.”

“You’re so hilarious.”

“I try,” he shrugs, poking me in the ribs, his tone shifting just enough to let me know he’s serious. “Look, I’m not gonna try to change your terrible fucking taste in men. Never have. But Jude? I don’t trust him, Phi. So be careful.”

Even if I could tell him the truth, what the fuck would I say?

Atlas, I don’t actually like him. I think we might still mildly despise each other. He just, you know, killed someone for touching me, became the one person on this godforsaken planet who’s seen all my messy bits, and, oh yeah—we had sex once, and he ate me out right next to a corpse. No big deal. Totally normal Tuesday stuff.

Yeah, that’s gonna go over *real* well.

“Nothing’s going on,” I say, waving my hand dismissively. “He’s hot. He drives a nice car. But there are twenty other guys here doing the same thing.”

Atlas gives me the look.

The “I’m onto your shit” look he’s perfected since we were kids.

“Okay,” Atlas sighs, throwing his hands up in mock surrender. “Fine. Just remember, when this blows up in your face, and it will, I’m always here to scrape you off the pavement.”

I smile despite the situation. “Love you always, Atlas.”

“Love you more, Phi,” Atlas grins, pressing a quick kiss to the top of my head. “But I’m not missing the chance to roast Reign for that tragic second-place finish.”

“Send my condolences to his ego,” I say, waving him off as he starts to walk away from the car.

Atlas spins around, walking backward with a wicked grin. “I’m thinking black balloons for the funeral. Maybe a ‘Gone Too Soon’ banner.”

“Oh, closed casket for sure. His pride’s way too bruised for an open one.”

“I’m writing the eulogy: ‘Here lies Reign’s self-esteem, taken too soon by terrible driving.’”

“Dibs on the playlist. Nothing but the world’s smallest violins on repeat.”

We go back and forth, his laughter ringing out above the rumble of engines and voices, until he fades into the crowd, his body disappearing as he goes to find Reign.

I’d almost feel bad for all the shit we give Reign, if his ego wasn’t the size of Texas and built to survive a nuclear apocalypse. Dude’s unshakeable and deep down he knows it’s our love language.

The air around me buzzes, heavy with exhaust fumes, fog swirling like a restless tide around the rows of shipping containers. The towering metal boxes rise into the sky, their bulk casting long shadows across the slick asphalt.

Above, the floodlights hanging from massive cranes bathe everything in a yellow, industrial glow, making the night feel thick, almost impenetrable.

I scan the chaos, when my gaze finds Jude.

Parked sideways in a shadowy corner between shipping containers. The glow of the overhead lights barely touches him there, shrouding him in a darkness that feels like it belongs to him.

Even in the madness of The Port, Jude’s managed to carve out a pocket of space just for him.

Naturally, I’m staring again.

At this point, I might as well get him tattooed on my retinas.

He leans against the passenger side of his car like he’s been carved straight from marble, all lean muscle and sharp edges. His white shirt clings to him, stretched across his chest and shoulders as if it’s barely managing to contain the strength underneath. The fabric molds to the sculpted ridges of his torso, each line drawn with precision, making it impossible to look anywhere else.

I bite down on the inside of my cheek when I move lower. Dark jeans worn-in just right, hugging the powerful lines of his thighs in a way that feels almost indecent.

My eyes trace the ink that snakes out from under his sleeves, a patchwork of tattoos covering him from his neck down to his fingertips. The art winding up his forearms, climbing over his biceps and disappears beneath the collar of his shirt.

A soft red glow from his cigarette flares in the dim light. He's both shadow and flame, flickering in and out of view, the flare of the cigarette between his fingers casting him in a smoky halo.

When I finish eye-fucking his entire body, the universe politely reminds me that it's out for my head, because the moment my gaze reaches his face? I find him already looking at me.

Busted. Fantastic.

I've spent my whole life being nothing but a loyal, respectful nerd to the universe—just trying to understand its mysteries, appreciate its vastness—and *this* is what I get for my devotion?

Screw that. Screw the Universe.

A slow, lazy smirk curls on his lips, like he's been waiting for me to finish devouring him with my eyes

The space between us feels too small, suffocating, as if the crowd has vanished, leaving only us. Blurry figures move in the periphery, but they're nothing more than background noise.

The world collapses into a singular point: him.

The distance between us shrinks with every passing second, locked in a silent battle I'm not sure I'm equipped to win.

His grin grows wider, head tilted just so, eyes never leaving mine. There's something predatory in his gaze, as if he knows exactly what I'm thinking. Hell, maybe he does.

Jude Sinclair has this infuriating way of making me feel like he's always ten steps ahead, like he's already mapped out every move I'm going to make before I've even thought of it.

And that smirk? It's a weapon, wielded with surgical precision, designed to unravel me.

My pulse races, caught between the slow burn of desire and the frigid reminder of what's at stake if I close the gap between us.

I need to leave. Right now.

I'll just turn around, get in my car, and drive away.

That's exactly what I'm about to do—until a pair of skyscraper legs and a perfect rack strolls right into my line of sight, making a beeline for Jude.

She's beautiful. Infuriatingly beautiful.

The kind of girl who can walk in stilettos across gravel without so much as a wobble. Her hair shimmers like liquid gold under the dim lights as she flashes him a smile so bright, it should come with a warning label. And her sun-kissed skin practically glows.

How the hell does someone even get a tan like that here?

You know what, this isn't my problem. Not my business. I exhale sharply, trying to convince myself that I don't care and that I'm definitely leaving.

But my feet stay rooted to the ground, and my nails bite into my palms, carving tiny crescent moons that whisper, *Liar, liar, pants on fire*.

I bet she's soft. Sweet. The kind of girl who giggles at his jokes, never snaps back, never builds walls to keep him out. She's the princess, all golden smiles and easy warmth, while I'm standing her like a fire-breathing dragon.

Too sharp. Too dangerous. With edges that cut and flames that scorch. Only fools with a death wish get close to me.

Jude's gaze finally slips from mine, shifting toward her with all the effort of a lazy cat stretching in the sun. My jaw clenches so hard, I'm surprised I don't crack a molar. I didn't suffer through two years of braces just to have my teeth ruined by Victoria's Secret's finest.

I watch her move closer, hips swaying like she owns the ground beneath her feet. When her hand finally lifts—perfectly manicured and all—I feel a wave of heat slam into my chest.

Can I still be considered a girl's girl if I have the urge to run her over with my car?

I'm not jealous.

I'm just...mildly homicidal.

Because she can do the one thing I can't. The one thing I'll never be able to.

She can touch him.

In front of everyone, without hesitation. Her fingers glide over his jawline, lingering there as if she's tracing a familiar map. And no one here

even blinks. No one cares, because she gets to have him. Out in the open. With nothing to hide.

It's not just the touch; it's everything it represents. She can laugh at his jokes without feeling like she's betraying herself. She can flash him a smile that doesn't taste bitter, hold his gaze without all the tangled history lurking beneath it. She gets to have him without having to create some hidden parallel universe.

It's easy for her. Simple. While every inch I get closer to him is another step toward ruining everything.

But right now, as her laugh rings out—light and musical, like she doesn't know what it's like to choke on her own broken pieces—it's not enough to stop me.

Before I can talk myself out of it, my feet start moving. It's instinct, driven by a jealousy so raw it feels like it's ripping through my chest. The crowd blurs around me, faceless bodies shifting aside as I cut a path straight to them.

Jude's blue eyes flick to mine the second I get close enough, his attention abandoning her entirely. That smug, lazy smirk curls at the corners of his lips, like he knew I'd break.

Like he's been waiting for me.

"What's up, Geeks?" His voice a low, slow drawl soaked in amusement, like he's eating this shit up.

I stop right in front of him, fists clenched and pulse roaring in my ears. "Fuck you, Loner."

Fuck you for knowing this shit would make me crack.

"Oh, hey, Phi." The girl's voice stumbles, her earlier confidence unraveling. "Uh, killer win earlier?"

I take my sweet time turning my gaze toward her, relishing the way the color drains from her face.

I'm Ponderosa Springs's Queen of Disaster, and everyone in this town knows better than to test me.

Little miss sunshine does too.

I arch a brow, letting my eyes drift down to her hand, still resting on Jude's chest. She flinches, yanking her hand away like she's been burned.

"Good girl," I say, jerking my chin. "Run along."

“Right, sorry,” She mutters, taking a shaky step back. “I’ll just...yeah, I’m gone.”

Without another glance at Jude, she spins on her heel and disappears into the crowd, leaving behind only a faint trace of expensive perfume.

If I weren’t so pissed I could barely see straight, I’d probably ask her where she bought it, because it smells incredible.

Jude’s still propped against his car, amusement flickering in his eyes as they trace my body. Unhurried, as if he’s memorizing every inch. It’s slow. A slow, sensual drag that feels like a burn.

“That skirt’s doing you all kinds of favors, Van Doren.” He murmurs, laced with heat as teeth catch his bottom lip, “But jealousy? That’s deadly on you, sweetheart. Absolutely *fucking* lethal.”

I’m suddenly aware of how reckless I’ve been—charging over here on pure impulse, driven by a jealousy that’s twisted my gut like a vice. Now, I have to quickly figure out how to salvage what’s left of my pride.

Karma, for giving Reign so much shit, no doubt.

“Jealous? Not in this lifetime.” The lie slips easily, my arms crossing over my chest.

Jude straightens from his lean against the car, the movement fluid, calculated, like he’s been waiting for this all night. His eyes darken, and the air between us thickens, ready to snap.

“Yeah?” His chin tilts, challenging.

“Yeah, dipshit.”

“Then why the fuck are you cockblocking me?” His words are sharp, cutting through the tension.

My jaw tightens as I stare at him, knowing he’s waiting for an excuse I can’t give.

“You wanna screw Bubbles from the Powerpuff Girls?” I spit, jerking a thumb toward where she disappeared. “Be my guest. Go get your dick wet. I’m not stopping you.”

He steps closer, heat rolling off him like a furnace. His voice drops, colder, more dangerous. “Aren’t you, though? Throwing a fit because someone else wanted to play with the toy you don’t even want. Standing right in my way, like a brat.”

That slow, cruel smile tugs at his lips, sending my pulse into overdrive. I grit my teeth, fighting the urge to let him see just how much he’s affecting

me.

But it's pointless. The heat is overwhelming, dragging me under like a riptide.

I force myself to step aside, throwing my arm toward the clear path. "Go get your girl."

The words taste bitter, but I force them out.

"Just remember, you asked for this, Geeks." He shrugs, a cold, detached look washing over his face.

I brace myself.

Prepare for the sting of him brushing past me, for the brutal reminder that this thing between us doesn't go both ways. That I was a good fuck, nothing more. That whatever kindness he's shown me comes from guilt and that's it.

But then, his hand wraps around my wrist, a sudden, sharp grip that sends a jolt through my system. He yanks me toward him, spinning me around and pressing me against the side of his car.

The metal is cool against my skin, the impact knocking the breath from my lungs. My body arches into his on instinct, chest heaving as I try to catch my breath.

Jude is everywhere.

His body pins me against the car, all hard edges and rough heat. The warmth radiating off him sinks into my skin, wrapping around me like a suffocating blanket. His breaths brush my neck, maddeningly close, each one hotter than the last.

I feel his hand wrap around the back of my neck, fingers firm but not harsh, holding me in place. His breath fans against my throat, before he inhales deeply. Dragging his nose up the column of my neck, savoring me like I'm his first taste of air after drowning.

"GOT HER." HIS VOICE IS A LOW GROWL, ROUGH AND PRIMAL, THE SOUND vibrating against my skin, sending a shudder rippling through me.

My pulse spikes, heart hammering so fast it's dizzying. My mind is a chaotic mess, barely keeping pace with my body's reaction—every nerve firing. He lifts his hands, caging me in, palms flat against the car beside my head.

Jude's gaze drops, tracing my lips, lingering like he's considering whether to kiss me or devour me whole. When his eyes lift back to mine, they're darker, stormier, burning with an intensity that makes it impossible to breathe.

The air between us is thick, charged with a tension that's raw and electric, like it could snap if either of us makes the wrong move. My body presses harder into his, drawn by a force I can't control, even as my mind screams warnings I refuse to listen to.

God, I hate how much I want this.

How much I want *him*.

"No," I manage to whisper, my voice breaking. "Not here. Too many people. Anyone could see. We can't..."

His jaw tightens, muscle ticking once, twice, a third time, each twitch sharp and precise, like he's barely holding himself back.

The silence between us isn't just tense—it's volatile, crackling with barely-contained hunger, his restraint coiled tight, ready to snap.

"Get in the fucking car." The command rumbles from his chest, vibrating through the air with an intensity that seizes every nerve in my body.

I blink, momentarily thrown off. "What? I drove here, I—"

Before I can finish, his hand shifts to my throat, fingers curling around it, firm enough to make my pulse hammer beneath his grip. It's not rough—it's possessive.

The pressure is intoxicating, sending a shockwave straight through me, making it hard to think, let alone resist. He leans in, his breath scorching my ear, his voice a rasp that hits me like a live wire.

"Want to find out what happens if you don't get your stubborn ass in my passenger seat, Phi?"

The words roll over me, slow and deliberate, each syllable soaked in challenge. A soft moan slips past my lips, involuntary, betraying just how much his touch unravels me.

"I'll bend you over this hood and make you scream for me right here. Try me, princess. I could give a fuck less who sees me defile your sweet cunt."

My body reacts before my mind can catch up, thighs clenching to dull the relentless ache building between them. His grip tightens just enough to

remind me of the power he holds, the thrill that comes with it.

“Now,” he orders, voice cold and final.

The smart thing would be to shove him away, tell him to fuck off, remind myself of every reason why this is a terrible idea. Why I shouldn’t—why I *can’t*.

But I don’t.

Thinking isn’t an option right now.

Breathing isn’t, either.

All I can do is feel.

The heat that rolls off him, the way his touch burns into my skin, the undeniable pull drawing us closer.

My hand moves on its own, reaching behind me. My fingers find the cool metal of the car door, hesitating for the briefest second, caught between sense and madness.

But sense never stood a chance. Not with him.

I pull the door open, the creak of the hinges echoing through the thick air, as heavy as a whispered promise. The line we’ve been dancing on shatters beneath us, a thousand shards of everything we swore we’d never do.

And maybe this is how it was always supposed to be—inevitable.

A tragic ending we can’t rewrite. Two reckless souls drawn together, not in spite of the danger, but because of it. The poison we know is killing us, yet tastes too sweet to stop drinking.

Romeo kissed his Juliet knowing he’d lose everything.

I kiss my fate with the same reckless abandon, knowing exactly where this road leads.

And when I climb into this car? Our fate is sealed.

The final act of a tragedy we were always meant to play out.

the sun

• • •

JUDE

November 9th

“WE’RE FUCKED IF ANYONE CATCHES US.”

The words tumble from Phi's lips, her voice breathy and desperate as I haul her from the passenger seat into my lap. My hands clamp onto her hips, fingers digging in so hard I can feel the bruises already blooming beneath my grip—bruises she'll try to cover up tomorrow, as if hiding them could somehow erase who put them there.

I'm rough. Unforgiving.

Weeks of pent-up frustration finally breaking loose, surging in a vicious wave of hunger I can't hold back any longer. Every unsaid word, every silent confession, spills into the way I drag her closer, my grip unrelenting, my touch almost brutal. There's no gentleness between us.

There never was.

“No, princess. *I'm* fucked if anyone catches us.” My lips curl into a smirk as I drag my thumb across her smeared lipstick, tracing the swollen curve of her bottom lip. “It's me your dad and brother will be beating the shit out of.”

Her leather skirt rides up as she straddles me, pale thighs contrasting against the dark interior of the car. The only thing separating us is a thin

scrap of silk. I shove the seat back, the metal screeching in protest, a sound that matches the chaos in my veins.

She makes everything so goddamn hard.

And I don't just mean my dick.

It's the way she builds walls faster than I can tear them down, how she pulls me in, only to vanish the next moment. One second, she's letting me see her, feel her, and the next, she's gone—like none of it meant anything.

"Then maybe we shouldn't do this. I don't want that. I—"

But before she can finish, my hands slide beneath her skirt, fingers gripping her ass as I yank her flush against me. The heat of her core pressing into my jeans.

I bury my face in the crook of her neck, my kisses messy and urgent, the taste of vanilla mingling with sweat as my teeth graze her skin. I want to consume her, claim every inch of her until she forgets anything else ever existed.

"Watching you come for me will be worth the ER trip," I breathe against her throat, "You can even play my naughty nurse."

Thirteen days of silence, thirteen days of pretending the water tower didn't matter—pretending *I* didn't matter.

Then had the nerve to get jealous tonight.

I saw it in her eyes, that raw, unfiltered rage when she thought that girl was too close. Phi was ready to rip her hair out, and she hates herself for it. I can see it in the tension of her jaw, feel it in the way her fingers dig into my shoulders, trying to brand me.

Phi's lost control, she's given away how much she wants me without meaning to and it's tearing her little ass up inside.

The thought stirs a need so primal in me, it's almost painful.

I want to mark her so deep that even denial can't erase it—leave something permanent, something she can't scrub away in the shower, can't forget in the dark.

Tonight, she's gonna admit it.

She wants me.

And I'm done letting her pretend otherwise.

"In your dreams," she breathes on a low, needy moan that rips from her lips, head tilting back, exposing her pale neck to me like an offering.

I grab her tube top and yank it down, baring her tits to the cool air. Her pierced nipples harden instantly, the sight alone making my dick throb painfully against the zipper of my jeans.

My mouth is on her before she can draw another breath. My wet tongue chases the goosebumps blooming across her skin, dragging a sharp gasp from her lips. Her back arches when I suck a nipple into my mouth, the clash of heat and metal making her tremble. Her fingers tangle in my hair, fisting it tight, pulling me closer like she'd let me devour her whole if I wanted.

Each sound that slips from her lips is a jolt of heat straight to my cock—breathy gasps that rip through me. Her aching pussy, grinding down on my lap like a cat in heat.

I can feel her wetness through the rough denim, a reminder of how fucking close we are and how far. It's torture, a tease that makes my dick ache.

It's furious, throbbing at the flimsy barriers between us, desperate to bury itself where it belongs—in that tight, wet cunt that's just a few scraps of fabric away.

My teeth graze the curve of her breast, then sink into the sensitive flesh, just hard enough to leave a mark. I feel her tense beneath me, arching into the pain even as she whimpers.

"That's it," I groan against her skin, "Chase the pain only I bring you, little traitor."

"This is a bad idea."

"Terrible."

Her body trembles in my lap, still trying to fight back sense through the haze. "Someone could see."

"Tinted windows, Geeks." I mutter as my tongue traces the frantic pulse beneath. I nip at her again, this time harder, making her squirm. "No one's gonna see what a filthy, traitorous slut you are for me."

She tries to respond, but I swallow her protests with a bruising kiss, mouths colliding in a clash of tongues and teeth. It's chaos, sweet like honey but burning like poison—addictively bitter.

My favorite fucking flavor—Seraphina Van Doren.

I palm her ass, squeezing possessively as I guide her over the hard ridge of my cock, dragging her down again and again until she's panting into my

mouth, each gasp hotter than the last.

She tries to pull back, desperate for air, but I don't let her go. I bite down on her bottom lip, keeping her there, forcing her to choke on my breath, to swallow every ounce of the hunger between us. I want her dizzy, dazed, until she finally understands that in our twisted little universe?

She belongs to me.

Only me.

I deepen the kiss, swallowing every gasp, tasting the raw surrender on her lips. Her small hands tangle in my hair, pulling me closer, her hips grinding harder, chasing more. I shift beneath her, making sure my cock rubs right where she needs it.

Phi rips her mouth from mine, leaving me gasping, chest heaving like I've been starved of air. Her forehead presses against mine, brows furrowed, cherry-red hair sticking to sweat-damp skin, brushing my face.

"We should stop. We need to stop."

Her voice is a shaky plea, her nails still biting into my shoulders, crescent moons that will linger as proof tomorrow. She clings to me, her need contradicting her words.

"You say stop, and it's over," I murmur, "You've got the control here, Phi. Always."

It's not a line—it's a promise. As much as I want to lose myself in her, I won't take more than she's ready to give.

For a fleeting second, a flicker of softness breaks through her hard edges, a vulnerability that's there and then gone, swallowed by that fiery stubbornness that makes me want to both kiss her and throttle her.

And then she does what I expect from a brat like her. She bites down on my bottom lip, sharp enough to sting, tugging with a mix of defiance and heat that shoots straight to my balls.

"Just one more minute."

"One more minute," I echo.

My hands slide down, fingers slipping over the thin silk of her panties, pushing the damp fabric aside to feel the slick heat waiting for me.

Phi shudders under my touch, her breath catching sharply. Her hair spills over her shoulders, vibrant against her pale skin, a wicked halo framing her flushed face. A sinful bloom of pink creeps up her neck and cheeks, making her look almost innocent.

Almost.

“Just one more second to feel how wet this needy little cunt gets for me,” I taunt, my thumb pressing into her clit. The pressure is light enough to tease, heavy enough to make her squirm. “Isn’t that right, vicious girl?”

Her breath hitches, lips parting as if to speak, but no words come out. Her pupils are blown wide, green irises swallowed whole by lust.

I circle her clit slowly, tracing maddening patterns that have her hips jerking against my hand. The cool metal of my ring contrasts against her feverish skin, each stroke sending sparks up her spine. I can feel her clenching, trying to drag me closer, to make me give her what she refuses to ask for.

“Admit you were jealous,” I growl, a wolfish grin tugging at my lips.

“Fuck you,” she spits, grinding her hips harder in a desperate, futile attempt to pull me deeper.

My laugh is dark, a low rumble against her neck as I part her folds, dipping my fingers just inside. Teasing, giving her a taste without the relief she craves.

I pull back slightly, my smirk taunting. “That’s the plan, baby. But first, you’re gonna tell me the truth.”

Her breath hitches, her eyes narrowing with stubborn defiance, but I feel the way she trembles, the way her body betrays her. She’s right on the edge, every ragged breath telling me how badly she needs it.

How badly she needs *me*.

“I wasn’t jealous,” she lies, voice barely more than a whisper.

I shake my head slowly, a *tsk, tsk* leaving my lips.

Such a stubborn little thing.

I slam my fingers deep, forcing a ragged cry from her throat, her head snapping back.

“Liar,” I rasp, curling my fingers just right, feeling her walls flutter around me. “Come on, sweetheart. Say it, and I’ll give you more. You know I will. You know I can make this needy pussy feel so goddamn good.”

“You really get off on being a bastard, don’t you?”

I keep my fingers buried deep, but I go still—pinning her down on my lap, letting her tight, dripping heat clench around me. I hold her there, trapped, helpless. Her thighs shake, her core pulsing around the intrusion, but I don’t let her move an inch.

“No, I get off on *breaking* you.” I snarl, my tone razor-sharp, almost vicious. “Until all that’s left is what’s real. The girl who is so fucking achy for me. The dirty fucking whore that is desperate for her foster brother’s cock.”

Not the queen with a crown. Not the girl who hides behind her anger. The one who’s still there, beneath all the broken pieces. The real her. That’s who I want.

My fingers twitch inside her, a teasing reminder of the pleasure just beyond her reach. Her lips tremble, breath hitching, her body betraying her completely as she clenches around me, desperate for more. It’s maddening—the way her pride is still trying to put up a fight even as her body screams for surrender.

“I will sit here with my fingers buried in your bratty cunt all goddamn night, Phi. Don’t make—”

“I was jealous! I was fucking jealous, Jude,” She finally chokes out, voice raw. “I wanted to rip her apart. Wanted her gone, just so you’d keep seeing me.”

Her confession spills from her, torn and desperate, and I watch it wash over her—shame, anger, hunger colliding all at once. It’s brutal, and it’s fucking beautiful.

“Stubborn fucking girl,” I growl, grabbing the back of her neck and pulling her closer. “You don’t get it, do you? I *always* see you.”

My thumb presses into her clit, rubbing ruthless circles as my fingers slam into her warmth, unrelenting.

“I’m always fucking seeing you, Phi. In every room, no matter how much I want to ignore you, you burn too fucking bright. You’re the goddamn sun, and I hate that I can’t stop looking at you.”

I shove my fingers deeper, the slick sounds echoing between us, her warmth soaking into my jeans. Her body arches, hips jerking wildly, trying to take more.

Her breathing is shattered, desperate, and I can feel the way she tightens around my fingers, clinging to every inch I give. She’s right there, teetering on the brink, her pulse erratic beneath my palm.

“You think I like this?” I murmur, voice rough against her ear. “Being caught up in you, wanting what I shouldn’t? But here I am, Phi—just like you, ruined by this.”

“Jude!” Phi’s back arches, a ragged cry ripping from her throat as I stretch her open.

“Yes, princess? Jude what?” I tease, lazily pumping inside her, feeling her tighten around my fingers. “Jude, please keep ruining me? Jude, fill my needy cunt with your fat cock? What is it, baby? Say it.”

My cock throbs with envy, desperate to replace my hand and claim the wet heat that’s squeezing me so greedily.

When I curl my fingers inside her just right, she lets out a desperate whimper.

Ah, there it is.

The sweet spot that makes her entire body tremble, her breath turning ragged, chest heaving like she’s struggling to hold herself together. Her lips part in a silent plea, teetering right on the edge of breaking.

“Be a good girl, Phi. Show me how much you fucking hate wanting me.”

And then she shatters.

Her climax hits her like a violent storm, walls clenching around my fingers in rhythmic, desperate spasms. Her hips buck wildly, her body arching as she’s thrown into the abyss of pleasure, a guttural cry ripped from her throat. Wetness floods my hand, drenching my lap, the heat of it searing against my skin.

I hold her through it, my fingers slowing but never stopping, drawing out every last wave of her release.

She’s wrecked, exposed, raw—everything I wanted her to be.

I pull my fingers out slowly, savoring the way she shudders from the lingering sensitivity. Her entire body collapses against me, breathing coming out in ragged, uneven gasps as the aftershocks ripple through her.

Phi’s flushed skin is damp with sweat, and the rawness in her gaze hits me straight in the chest.

“There’s my girl,” I murmur, pressing my forehead to hers, “How’s our universe?”

She doesn’t answer immediately, her lips still swollen from our brutal kisses, breaths coming out in slow, shaky exhales. She stares at me for a beat, and there’s something in those pretty eyes—vulnerability, hatred, maybe both.

“Fucked up. This universe is completely fucked up.”

“ Fucked or not, it’s ours, Phi.” I murmur, brushing a thumb across her swollen bottom lip, eyes locked on hers, “ And I’m not letting you leave it until that hot pussy shatters on my cock.”

My gaze lingers, soaking in every inch of her—sweaty, flushed, marked by me. And then, just as I’m about to pull her back down for another bruising kiss, my eyes catch a detail that’s so absurdly Phi it makes the corners of my mouth twitch.

“ Fucking nerd,” I murmur, motioning down to the space between us.

Phi’s brows knit for a second, confusion shadowing her face. Then it clicks, and a blinding smile spreads across her lips as she’s reminded of what panties she’s wearing.

A black silk number with the words, *Use the force, daddy* printed right along the hem.

“ You own six editions of the same Stephen King book,” She shrugs, completely unbothered, “ Pot, meet the whole fucking cookware set.”

I arch a brow, mirroring her smirk. “ Going through my room again, Geeks?”

And just like the Van Doren she is, she sidesteps owning up to anything that involves a Sinclair.

“ I’ll take the fifth, thanks.”

I nudge her nose playfully, letting a low chuckle rumble in my chest. “ Cute, Geeks.”

Giving her ass a little smack, I reach for a condom in the dash. Already feeling her hands moving, trembling with urgency as she tugs my jeans down my thighs.

The relief is instant, but it’s not enough—only a tease of what I crave, what I need.

Phi’s fingers wrap around the base of my cock, her thumb swiping over the swollen tip to collect the bead of pre-cum gathering there. Her eyes meet mine, hungry, dark, before she slowly brings her thumb to her mouth, sucking it clean with a throaty moan.

“ If you’re that desperate for my cum, I could fill that filthy mouth.”

“ Drown me in it, Loner,” she bites back, her teeth grazing my lip in a wicked grin.

Her small hand wraps around my shaft, barely able to circle it, but she starts stroking slowly, each movement a torturous tease.

“You’re gonna fucking kill me,” I groan.

She just smirks, snagging the condom from my fingers.

“You didn’t know? No man’s ever survived me.” She tears it open with her teeth, her eyes blazing. “Dead men tell no tales, J.”

My head falls back against the headrest, veins thrumming beneath my skin, as she rolls the latex down my length.

Consider me her last victim because, goddamn, this girl...

This girl is...*fuck*.

Phi’s hair falls over her delicate shoulders as she lifts herself, aligning us, before slowly sinking down. The instant stretch steals the air from both of us, the tight, searing heat closing around me like a vice.

I watch, mesmerized, as her slick walls fight to adjust around my cock, her body struggling to take all of me. Each inch feels like a battle, every desperate clench a reminder of just how tight she is.

“Now I remember why I was so fucking sore last time,” She huffs, frustration lacing her voice. “How the hell did this even work before?”

“You were too busy bitching at me to think about how deep I was in your guts.”

It’s said on a groan, teeth clenching with the effort to not plunge my length inside her.

The first time I took her, I hurt her—driven by the need to mark her, to leave bruises beneath the surface, to make her feel me for days. I wanted to break the untouchable vixen. It was savage, cruel satisfaction.

But now, as she struggles, regret slices through me, unexpected and raw. I hate that I hurt *this* Phi.

My vicious little disaster. My Geeks.

The girl who’s so clear to me now, she feels like glass in my hands.

“Jude, it’s...too much—”

“Not for you,” I interrupt, my fingers tracing slow, soothing lines along her inner thighs. “This perfect cunt knows how to take every inch of me, doesn’t she, sweetheart?”

A soft, broken whimper falls from her lips, her sea-glass eyes fluttering closed. I spread her wider, thumb pressing against her swollen clit, coaxing her to relax, to open up for me. Her wetness drenches my lap, each idle circle pushing her closer, making her body arch into my touch.

“No one takes it like my spoiled little brat. You were made for it. You got it, just relax for me. Let me make you feel good.”

The praise seeps into her like fuel, the academic overachiever in her lapping it up. I feel her start to loosen, the tension melting away as she finally gives in, letting me take control, letting me own her completely.

“There you go. Just like that.” I coax, voice rough, “Look at you, pretty thing, letting my dick stretch you open.”

The words hit her like a shockwave, her walls squeezing around me. Her breath hitches, her hips forcing down, taking the last few inches in one slow, torturous drop.

I don’t believe in God.

But Phi’s pussy might just make me a born-again Catholic, because if this is what heaven feels like?

I’d sell my soul twice to stay here.

“Good fucking girl, Phi,” I groan, my grip on her hips turning bruising as I hold her still, cock pulsing inside her. “Good goddamn girl.”

But then reality punches through the haze.

A burst of laughter pierces the fogged windows, too close and way too real.

Not hers. Definitely not fucking mine.

“Shit, dude, you got a lighter?” someone slurs right outside.

“Yeah, man, here—hold the blunt,” comes the lazy reply, their blurred silhouettes visible through the steamed-up glass.

Cold panic slices through my lust, but the need to be inside her—right here, right now—burns hotter. Phi’s head jerks toward the window, eyes wide with panic, catching the flicker of orange embers through the glass.

We are so goddamn fucked.

That’s what logic screams, urging me to pull out, separate, hide. But logic is useless when I’m balls-deep in Phi, her slick heat clenching around me with a need so fierce it’s painful.

Even through the thin barrier of latex, it’s raw, animalistic—the tightest, hottest thing I’ve ever felt. My body’s screaming for release, brain fogged by lust, and nothing outside this car matters.

Nothing.

“Jude—”

I thrust up into her, cutting her words off with a sharp gasp.

My groan rumbles low, guttural, as I bury my face against her neck, her skin fever-hot and soaked in sweat. The scent of vanilla and smoke sends me over the edge, drowning me in her.

Just the idea of stopping, of pulling out and losing the feel of her tight, needy pussy wrapped around me, physically *hurts* me.

“Please, just a little longer.” I hum against her ear, dragging my nose along the column of her throat, “I just need to be inside you for one more minute. You’re so fucking tight, squeezing me so good. Let me have your pussy for another minute, baby.”

Phi trembles in my arms, caught in a desperate struggle between reason and surrender.

“Another minute,” she breathes, voice shaky, barely more than a whisper.

The second her hips move, my restraint shatters.

Gone—obliterated in the thrill of getting caught, in the heat of her. She rides me a little harder, wetter, her body moving like she’s designed to break me apart.

“A few more seconds,” I rasp, the lie burning in my throat. “Then I’ll pull out.”

“Yeah.” She nods eagerly, grinding up and down my shaft, “We’ll stop soon.”

But the way she moves? *Soon* can go to hell. Disrespectfully.

“Look at how fucking wet you are,” I snarl, grabbing her chin and forcing her gaze down. “Look at you, Phi. Look at what a dirty slut you are, risking everything just so you can fuck me.”

Her eyes dart down to the obscene sight between us. Her swollen cunt stretched wide around me, each brutal thrust a reckless pursuit of pleasure. Slick heat drips from her, coating my cock, a sinful baptism in the kind of lust that damns you.

“You like this, don’t you? Knowing they can hear you taking me like a fucking dream?”

She doesn’t answer with words; she doesn’t have to. Her response is in the frantic rhythm of her hips, in the way her pussy squeezes tighter drawing me deeper with every desperate thrust.

Phi is *drenching* me.

The sound of it is filthy, fucking pornographic—wet smacks of skin on skin mixed with the thick, heady scent of sex.

“You like it so much you’re dripping all over my seats, Phi.” I rasp, voice tight, “You’re my favorite little attention whore, aren’t you? Wanting them to hear, wanting them to see how those perky tits bounce while you ride me.”

“J—Jude, I have to slow down, we—” Her voice breaks, tangled in desire, a pathetic attempt at logic. “The car...it’s rocking. They’ll know. They can’t know.”

But despite her words, her body does the opposite.

Phi’s hips move faster, hungrier, as if the fear only fuels the fire burning between us. She’s not just riding me—she’s chasing the danger of getting caught, savoring it like the sweetest drug.

“Let them find out, Phi,” I taunt, smacking her ass hard, “It’s not gonna stop your greedy pussy from taking what it wants. You’d keep milking my cock even if I rolled the window down and gave them a peek.”

“This is so wrong. It’s fucking crazy.” She slams her palm against the roof of the car, using the leverage to fuck me harder.

Her brows are furrowed, lips parted, as the tension coils tighter inside her. She rides me with a desperation that borders on insanity and I know she’ll regret it in the morning—when her body’s sore and marked with reminders of everything we shouldn’t be.

“*Yo, did you hear that?*” a voice drifts through the haze from outside.

It should be our wake-up call.

But to Phi, it’s just more fuel.

She doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t pause. Instead, she grabs my hand, yanking it from her waist and shoving it between her thighs, her movements frantic.

“Play with my clit,” she demands shamelessly. “Harder. Yes, fuck, just like that.”

I love it—love how she’s unfiltered, owning every bit of her need. It drives me fucking wild, makes my blood roar like I’m the one unraveling.

Following her orders, I strum her clit with a relentless rhythm. Making her pussy cry for me, each stroke pushing her closer to the edge. Her wet heat soaking me, sticky and sweet as she chases her high.

“Jude...Fuck, I need... I need—”

Phi’s falling apart, a live wire burning bright, pressed tight against me.

And God, I'm addicted to it.

I love that it's me driving her to this point, bringing out a side of her no one else gets to see—vulnerable, desperate, completely *mine*.

"What do you need, Phi?" I taunt, my words edged with control and a twisted kind of tenderness. "Need my permission to break? Need to hear you've done a good job taking my cock?"

The Queen of Disaster, needing my words, my hands, my dick, to come undone. Who fucking knew?

"You've been so good," I growl, voice rough as I thrust deeper, our bodies continuing to make obscene noises as they clash together, "My perfect little whore, taking every inch like you were made for it. Don't fight it. Let it rip you apart. Let me rip you apart, baby."

And that's all it takes. My words hit her like a sledgehammer, breaking down every last bit of her resistance. She goes tight, spasming hard as her orgasm crashes over her, walls clenching down so viciously it feels like she's trying to fuse our bodies together.

"Yes, baby, yes..." I murmur as I feel the hot rush of her release coat my dick. "Just like that, baby. Flood my cock. Fucking soak me."

Phi's scream is muffled, her face buried in my neck, and the intensity makes my cock pulse. It's a sound that's both primal and fragile, pleasure ripping through her like it's too much for her little body to contain.

The way her face twists with pleasure, so unguarded, is enough to make my own release claw up my spine.

Both my arms curl around her waist, pulling her tighter to my chest, forcing her to take every brutal thrust. Phi's so gone, so blissed out that her body's gone limp. Boneless, nothing but a filthy, pretty doll to make my cock feel good.

Mine to ruin. Mine to break.

My vicious, broken puppet. Her lonely, angry puppeteer.

My mouth latches onto her nipple, sucking hard, the metal cold against my burning tongue as I bounce her mercilessly in my lap.

The car rocks violently beneath us, the movement shameless, but I couldn't give a single fuck. If those stoned idiots outside decide to come closer, I'll rip their heads from their goddamn shoulders.

With my teeth.

There's no room for caution, no thoughts of consequence allowed when I'm balls-deep in the best pussy on the west coast.

Hell, scratch that—the whole goddamn world.

Phi's fingers twist in my hair, a rough tug that forces my head back. Our eyes lock and hers are the most untamed shade of green I've ever seen. For a split second, I'm no longer the predator.

I'm the prey, caught in the vixen's trap.

"Wanna come for me, J?" She purrs, dragging her smirking mouth across mine in a ghost of a kiss, "Be my good fucking boy and come."

Fuck. Me.

The tension at the base of my spine coils tight, my balls pulling up painfully, every muscle tensing as I drive up into her with erratic, punishing thrusts. Her slick walls are pliant, wet, choking me, letting me take what I need.

"Goddamnit, Phi—"

The words tear from my throat, dragged from the darkest, most feral parts of me. The parts that exists only to fuck, fill, and completely wreck every inch of this tight, wet little body in my hands.

My teeth sink hard into her collarbone, forcing her pussy to slam down on my shaft one last time. I hold her down on my lap, burying myself deep, forcing her to feel every throbbing inch of my cock.

Ecstasy pulls me under, crashing over like an unforgiving tidal wave as my entire body goes rigid. Every muscle locked in place, each brutal pulse of pleasure humming through my veins, as I spill into the condom.

Anger zips through me, just now remembering that Phi's on birth control, and I missed an opportunity to watch me drip from her swollen cunt. My jaw clenches, picturing my fingers shoving it back into her cum-hungry hole.

For a moment, the only sound is our breathing—ragged, cutting through the blistering heat trapped inside my car. The windows are fogged over, smeared with the raw, illicit evidence of the line we keep obliterating.

Lust paints the glass in hazy streaks, each one a silent confession. Her betrayal is written in the steam, clinging to the glass like a sin she can't wipe away.

We're locked inside our own forbidden snow globe.

Phi shivers slightly, leaning back with careful ease, her spine grazing the steering wheel without pressing it.

She's flushed a deep, feverish pink, her skin glistening with sweat. Her eyes are hazy, still glassy with unshed tears of pleasure, lashes wet and dark against her cheeks.

It's like looking at the aftermath of a storm—chaos in its most beautiful, vulnerable form.

She's all ruin and radiance, a deviant shooting star—one that tempts you to whisper your deepest wish but grants your darkest fear instead.

Phi's body is still trembling against me, her breath uneven, her skin warm and slick beneath my fingertips. My hands remain splayed across her hips, fingers pressing into soft flesh as I ground her on my lap.

There's a vulnerability in the way she leans into me, resting her head against my chest.

This wasn't just sex.

It's something deeper—an addiction that feels like fate and tastes like tragedy.

And I still want it.

I want her.

Not just her body, but all the parts she won't let anyone else touch.

Even when I know I shouldn't.

Even when I know this is a mistake that will cost me everything.

the puppets

...

Phi

November 16

“*PHI!*”

I drop my phone like it burned me, quickly turning it over and glancing up the moment the door swings open, the hinges creaking in protest. Andy’s voice slices through the steady hum of J. Cole, filling the air with her familiar gentle energy.

My heart is racing, feeling like I’ve just been busted, and I wasn’t even doing anything bad. Well...nothing *that* bad.

I arch a brow at my sister, taking in the sight of her, pink hair twisted into cute space buns that bounce with each determined step she takes toward my closet.

Her outfit is a striking blend of black and pink, an aesthetic that embodies all she is. She has this uncanny ability to juxtapose dainty softness with a fierce edge—delicate frills of pink against the stark, rebellious undertones of black that dominate her wardrobe.

It’s like, yeah, I’d believe she started the heist, but not at a bank. Definitely a cotton candy factory, leaving a trail of sugary chaos in her wake.

“Can I please borrow that vintage leather jacket you have?” she pleads, already rifling through the hangers with practiced urgency.

“I would give you a kidney if you needed one,” I mutter, leaning back against my pillows, “but no.”

“Ugh, why?” she whines, her voice rising as she snatches one of my favorite jackets, clutching it to her chest like a cherished prize. “It’s gonna go perfect with my outfit tonight. Please?”

“Dude,” I laugh, shaking my head before playfully launching a highlighter in her direction. It arcs through the air, hitting her chest before toppling to the ground. “You know how long it took me to find that, and the last time you borrowed something, it went *missing*.”

Those big blue eyes of hers, wide and pleading, do that stupid fucking thing that makes me want to give her my firstborn child, her bottom lip sticking out as she pouts like a spoiled kitten.

I don’t even know why I bother putting up a fight.

“Please? Not even if I pick you up midnight munchies on the way back home?”

“Slim Jims, Skittles, and a Diet Coke?” I counter, raising an eyebrow, curiosity piqued.

“Always,” she laughs, a bright sound that shatters the heavy air of my room as she shrugs the jacket over her shoulders. “I’ll even go to the gas station in West Trinity that has the cherry vanilla Icees you like.”

Damn, she’s good.

“Deal.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come out tonight?” she asks, tone shifting as she walks toward the door. “It’ll be fun.”

“I’ve made a home in my cave tonight. Leave me to rot.” I wave my hand dismissively, even though part of me longs to join her in the world outside. “Go have fun, be safe, and seriously, Andy—no crowd surfing this time. If you break another bone, I’m getting you a bubble suit for Christmas.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She rolls her eyes dramatically, the gesture exaggerated, but I can see the affection behind it. “I swear, no one in this family lets me live.”

“Sue us for wanting to keep you alive,” I shoot back, a smirk tugging at my lips.

“Love you, Phi.”

“Love you more,” I call after her as she retreats down the hall. The door clicks shut behind her, leaving me alone with my thoughts, the silence settling in like a thick fog.

The music fills the quiet, wrapping around me in a comforting embrace, while the sweet scent of Aunt Coraline’s lavender cookies lingers faintly in the air, their plate lying abandoned at the foot of my bed like a forgotten treasure. The soft, warm glow of fairy lights casts a cozy ambiance, flickering gently as if sharing in my solitude.

Textbooks are sprawled open across my comforter, surrounded by a chaotic mix of highlighters, each one a vibrant color, a testament to my indecision because why choose one when I can have them all? Out on the balcony, a freshly rolled vanilla Swisher Sweet waits, its sweet aroma practically calling my name, a promise of escape lingering in the night air.

This is my usual recipe for a perfect evening: a blend of solitude and indulgence, my ritual for recharging. It’s the paradox of my existence—loving the attention and the warmth of the spotlight while craving these moments alone to replenish my energy, a way to prepare myself for performing for those around me.

In here, I can break. That way, when I’m outside these four walls, I look completely and utterly whole.

This familiar routine is something I usually look forward to every week. My “rot days,” as I call them, are a refuge where I can just be.

But today? I don’t want to rot.

My fingers twitch toward my phone, unable to resist the pull, and I scoop it off my comforter, the cool screen lighting up my face.

LONER

If birds really were government surveillance drones, don’t you think they’d be more subtle?

ME

What, pray tell, would subtle look like to you? Pigeons in trench coats? Robins with sunglasses?

LONER

I’m just saying, if you’re gonna spy on people, maybe pick something less likely to get hit by a semi.

LONER

Or fly into a windshield.

I snort a laugh at his replies, a grin spreading across my face despite myself, like sunlight breaking through a stormy sky. I'd like to say I don't know how we ended up here, tangled in this absurd conversation, but I do.

While we waited for the random stoners to clear out at the Port, an awkward silence had draped itself over us, thick and uncomfortable. We fumbled with our clothes—a futile attempt to reclaim some semblance of normalcy—while I dabbed at what was left of my makeup, trying to piece together the facade that was slowly unraveling.

That tension shattered like glass when a whole fucking bird flew straight into Jude's windshield, sending us both into a fit of laughter, the sound echoing against the stillness of the night.

Our laughter erupted simultaneously, a spontaneous, infectious sound that echoed against the stillness of the night, a brief moment of relief from the heaviness that had settled between us.

His laughter was deep and genuine, and I found myself caught up in it, the sound reverberating through me like a pulse. I watched as he threw his head back, the lines of his jaw sharp and defined under the streetlights, his eyes crinkling with amusement.

And that's how we ended the night.

Laughing.

It was a moment that lingered, a snapshot of joy etched into the fabric of my memory. As the stoners finally drifted away, we remained, still chuckling, our breaths continuing to fog up the windows. There was something electric in the air between us, a fragile connection born from the absurdity of the moment and the mind-numbing sex.

A spark that ignited the possibility of more.

When he asked for my number before I got out of his car, I couldn't say no—not when it felt like the first time I'd genuinely laughed with someone in ages.

Since that night, we've just been...texting.

Stupid stuff, obviously. Conversations spiraling from government conspiracy theories to heated debates over whether Plato's Allegory of the Cave supports the idea that individual experiences shape reality or, as I

argued, implies an absolute truth that exists independently of human perception.

Jude...he makes me feel settled. No, that's not right—peaceful doesn't quite capture it either. We fight about most philosophical ideas, which is to be expected from the idealistic, brooding poet and the realistic physics nerd.

Light.

Loner makes me feel lighter.

The word feels foreign, strange, like something I shouldn't recognize anymore—an old shirt I've outgrown but can't bear to toss aside because it's the only thing that fits, the only thing I can breathe in.

Really breathe.

The oxygen Jude provides is different. Better. Cleaner, somehow. It's like he's filtered out the suffocating parts of my past without even trying. The way his presence loosens the knots in my chest, making everything feel just a little less heavy.

The air isn't thick with shame and hurt, no longer choking me with every inhale. The weight I've carried for so long still lingers, a shadow I can't shake, but it's no longer suffocating me. Not like before.

It's there, always—looming and heavy—but it doesn't crush me with each breath.

The air Jude Sinclair gives me feels like my first real breath after four years of drowning in a war I thought would never end.

ME

I miss our universe.

Galileo lets out a soft meow at the foot of my bed as the familiar whoosh of a text sending echoes.

“You do not get to judge me. I feed you,” I hiss, dragging my sock-covered foot across her fluffy body, earning a disgruntled huff in response.

Jude's response comes through quicker than I expected.

LONER

You climbing the wall, Geeks? Or am I?

I bite down on my bottom lip, my heart racing at the thought.
I want to, so bad.

Everyone in the house has started to warm up to Jude, so it wouldn't be *that* odd for us to hang out.

I'd even caught Dad smirking at Jude a few days ago, amusement twinkling in his eyes like he'd secretly approved of him helping Andromeda with her English paper. Which in itself had sent butterflies soaring in my stomach.

There is nothing I love more than seeing my family taken care of.

If it were only about shared company and friendship, this decision would be so much easier.

But it isn't.

Jude and I can't be *just* friends.

We don't know how to be *only* that. We couldn't even be enemies without fucking each other, and now we're gonna make a run for friends?

We burn through boundaries of labels, and if that truth comes out, it'll leave everything and everyone else in ashes behind us.

Hating him used to be my armor. As long as I could despise Jude, I could surrender my body without handing over the rest of me. It kept me safe, locked behind walls he couldn't climb. But that shield? It's cracked, the pieces slipping through my fingers like sand.

And Jude's hands are right there, catching the fragments before they fall away completely, adding them to an hourglass he keeps on his shelf. Each grain represents a moment we share, the time we have ticking away until it eventually runs out. It's a delicate balance, and I can't help but wonder how long we can keep this up before everything collapses

ME

What happens if I come over there?

Jesus, Phi. You're an idiot. You know exactly what happens.

It feels like some twisted cosmic joke.

The guy I swore to hate forever is the only one who's seen every broken, ugly piece of me.

My sorta, kinda, not-really foster brother—the only person in the world my family would disown me for touching—is the one I crave with an intensity that should fucking terrify me.

Not just in some casual desire kind of way either.

It's the wake up at night drenched in sweat kind of desire. It consumes my late nights and early mornings, my thoughts tangled around the memory of his tongue ring swirling over my clit, his hands gripping my waist, bouncing me on his cock, like he owns every inch of my pleasure.

Yesterday morning, before class, he slid behind me in the kitchen—barely awake, hair a wild, tousled mess, still damp from sleep.

Jude's shirtless body brushed against mine, heat radiating from his skin, sending a shiver through me. His fingers curled around my belt loops, not rushed but deliberate, as if he had all the time in the world, before tugging me to the side and grabbing the orange juice on the top shelf.

It was so simple, so stupid, but so hot at the same time.

The roughness of his fingertips sent a jolt straight through me, lighting up my nerves in ways I wasn't prepared for. And I swear to God, I almost fucked him right there.

Had Andy not tumbled in with her hair looking like a rat's nest, I would've let him bend me over the counter.

It wasn't just the way he moved; it was the casual intimacy of it. Like he could slide into my space, and I'd just...let him. No resistance, no hesitation. Like we'd been doing it for years, like he knew how to touch me in all the ways that mattered without even trying.

My phone buzzes in my hands, drawing my attention back to the screen, heat crawling up my neck and tinting my cheeks as I read.

LONER

Whatever you want to happen and nothing you don't.

LONER

You're in control here, Geeks. Always.

I know he means it. It's always my choice with Jude.

He will never take from me what I don't willingly give.

It's the bare minimum—a respect that should be given freely without having to fight for it. I understand that, yet it ignites a flicker of warmth in my chest.

Something fragile and dangerous. Something I can't afford to feel but do.

My fingers are moving before I can stop them.

ME

That's what I'm scared of. We know what happens when we are alone together for too long, J.

LONER

Are you about to try and sext with me right now?

LONER

Fair warning, my thing is making words that touch people.

LONER

I could make you cry if I really tried.

I snort out a laugh, rolling my eyes at the screen, a mix of amusement and exasperation bubbling up inside me.

ME

Prove it.

The seconds that go by feel like hours, the typing bubble appearing and disappearing repeatedly, each pulse echoing my growing anticipation until finally, his message comes through.

LONER

She, the muse of the stage,

Sculpted from ruin, propelled by rage.

Born to sway on strings of cruelty,

A marionette of fractured beauty.

But beyond the red drape, where shadows grow,

She slips from beauty's grasp below.

Her strings secretly frayed,

No longer the graceful illusion,

But a tired, broken thing.

Him, the shadowed architect, her hidden hand.

Master of misery forged for wicked strands,

Gentle limbs were never his to bend,

For love is a violent act learned from tortured kings.

His wrath-stained fingers pulled her close,

As she danced with fear, unmasking her face.
A wilting rose in God's cruel throes,
Bound by a fate that time cannot erase.
In this dim theater, their dance remains,
No masks, no light, just endless pains.
No audience to laugh or to sneer—
His vicious puppet, her angry puppeteer.—E

I'm the girl who thrives on numbers and equations, who finds solace in the neatness of formulas. But Jude's words? They are haunting melodies that strike chords in me I didn't know existed.

It's not just poetry.

It's an invitation into the heart of a boy I have spent my life misunderstanding.

A glimpse into a world where emotions dance and intertwine, where pain and beauty coexist in a delicate balance. Each line resonates, echoing the turmoil I've tucked away, the struggles I thought I could outsmart with logic.

It makes me feel seen in a way that is both exhilarating and terrifying.

Jude has this uncanny ability to capture the chaos of my existence, transforming it into something beautiful. It's like he holds up a mirror to my soul, reflecting the parts of me I've always tried to hide.

My entire life I've been called beautiful. I've been sought after because of how I look. But after Oakley, all I could see in the mirror was the reflection of a rotting girl. Someone ugly, cracked, and irreparable.

I've told myself for a long time that words don't matter. What people whisper about me, what they say behind my back when they think I'm not listening, what they say to my face—words can't hurt me.

But his do.

Jude's words fucking *hurt*.

They're stitches pulling together wounds that have long been left to fester. I can almost feel the angry skin knitting itself back together, the sharp pangs of discomfort that accompany healing, slowly repairing the broken image of myself I've always seen in the mirror. Reminding me,

making me believe, that maybe, just maybe, broken things can still be beautiful.

I pause, my thumb hovering over the screen.

I'm trapped in a toxic cocktail of emotions I don't know how to untangle.

Jude has given me safety—real, tangible safety—but there's more to it. He's attractive in ways that get under my skin, ways I can't shut out. Mysterious enough to feed my curiosity, dangerous enough to keep me on edge.

Atlas was right.

This will blow up in my face if I'm not careful. And when it does, it won't be a minor explosion. It'll be an all-out detonation, shrapnel slicing through my family like a weapon of betrayal.

No one walks away from this unscathed.

And for what? For this magnetic pull that's already costing me more than I have to give?

It's reckless. Stupid, even. But...can't I have this one thing? This singular, secret joy? I deserve that, right? Even if it comes with a Sinclair label?

I've been down this road before—sacrifices for the people I care about.

I've given up dreams, trust, my own happiness, all to protect them.

But when I look at the *E* signing the bottom of his message, I think of the poem tucked away in my dresser drawer. The boy from room 13 made it out. Made it to *me*.

I don't want Jude to become another thing I have to surrender, another casualty in a war I never wanted to fight.

Ponderosa Springs says it's wrong. That our names shouldn't go together, that we are destined to carry on a legacy of turmoil, deception, and hatred. They insist this will be a mistake, a repeat of history etched in the scars of our families.

But how can this be a mistake when I don't have to shower after he touches me? How can this be wrong when the only time I feel *right* is when I'm with Jude?

the moon

...

Phi

YOU KNOW WHAT'S HARDER THAN SCALING A BALCONY?

Fighting the urge not to be a fucking creep and watch Jude while he's in the shower.

The moment my feet hit his bedroom floor, the sound of running water reached my ears, tempting me with its soothing rhythm. I told myself I'd wait on the balcony, that I'd be a respectful, decent, normal fucking human being.

But...

One peek would hurt, right?

Just one glance and I'll leave.

No harm, no foul.

That mantra spirals in my mind as I close the distance to the cracked bathroom door. Steam spills out like a soft, inviting veil, wrapping around me, thickening the air with the intoxicating scent of him.

Stupid, stupid curiosity.

It's going to kill me one of these days, maybe today, because the moment Jude steps into my line of sight, it knocks the fucking wind out of me.

Water cascades down his body, glistening on his skin like liquid glass. Each droplet trails down the contours of his muscles, pooling at his waist, and I realize, consequences be damned—I'm not moving from this spot.

Droplets slide down his closed eyes, his jaw tensing as the hot water pounds against his back. Each harsh line of his body is illuminated by the soft glow of the bathroom light, and he looks so utterly breathtaking that it almost hurts to look at him for too long.

Jude Sinclair isn't just attractive. He's magnetic. A force that pulls you in—not because he seeks the spotlight but because you're utterly powerless to resist.

He's like the moon.

Silent, distant, yet impossible to ignore. You don't just see him—you feel him, like the pull of the tide. There's a gravity to him, an undeniable allure that draws me in without permission, a quiet strength that makes it hard to look away.

He's completely lost in his own world, and I'm mesmerized by each of his movements as he runs a hand through his damp hair, water streaming down, accentuating the shades of faded gold in the strands.

That's what Jude is.

A precious metal left to weather alone, hidden beneath layers of history that aren't even his. He's coveted, faded gold, and I want him. To discover everything Ponderosa Springs buried in him.

My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I watch his muscles flex as he reaches for the soap, tattoos moving across his skin with every gentle movement. I track the lightning tattoo that spreads across his rib cage, dipping low into that V-shaped groove.

When he turns to face the showerhead, placing a palm against the cool marble, my breath catches. I expect a canvas of more ink, but there's only one—a stretch of bold words sprawling from shoulder blade to shoulder blade: **Noli Timere**.

My chest aches at the vicious scar they are inked on top of. A brutal stripe across his upper back, partially concealed by the artistry, yet the pale, raised skin is still visible.

The unbearable urge to touch it hums through my body, fingers twitching as I quietly push the door open a little further. My bare feet glide across the warm floors until I'm just outside the glass door.

Jude's seen all of me. Every part I've hidden from the light and my never-ending curiosity wants to see him.

Jude's helping me carry a weight I didn't realize I needed help with.

I want that for him. I want this to be a universe he can exist freely in too, and I know there are things he's hiding. He happily blends into the shadows, content to suffer alone, used to keeping everything inside.

He gets to witness the sun when it's cold and distant.

I want to explore the dark side of the moon.

I feel like a voyeur, like Jude is a living piece of art trapped in a glass box that I can only admire from a distance.

DO. NOT. TOUCH.

It's written in a big, bold, nasty font just outside his glass case.

Except I've never been very good at following the rules.

Clothes and all, I pull the shower door open, allowing billows of steam to escape before I shut it. I'm not sure if he's just choosing to ignore me or if I'm much better at being quiet than I thought, but he doesn't turn until my fingers trace the raised skin on his scar.

I feel it for a split second before Jude has me in his grasp, spinning my body until I'm pinned to the wall just beneath the stream of water. It drenches my clothes, the warm water cascading down me as he leans in close to my face.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

His tone in tandem with the harsh storm brewing in his dark blue eyes has a violent cold chill racking my body as he looks down at me.

“I just, I wanted—” I bite the inside of my cheek, not feeling as bold as I normally do. “What happened to you, Jude?”

The muscle in his jaw jumps as he cocks his head, “Which time?”

My brow furrows, hands twitching at my sides before committing to the idea of touching him. I reach out, placing my palms flat against his chest before smoothing upward.

“All of them.”

“Dad liked to get high. Liked to lose himself in the past, and I became his villain. Every ounce of his hurt, he put on me.” His jaw works, nostrils flaring. “The first time he ever called me your father’s name was just before he shattered a Ketel One bottle across my back.”

I flinch like he slapped me.

I didn’t know Easton Sinclair.

Not really.

I think I'd seen him maybe four times in my entire life—if that—randomly around town while I was out with friends or family. Each time, he was a shadow flitting at the edge of my vision, a figure blurred by distance and whispers.

A man etched in the whispers of Ponderosa Springs yet somehow a stranger to me.

I didn't know him.

But I hated him.

"You know what I thought the entire time the doctor stapled my back shut?" he grunts, water dripping from his mouth as he speaks. "Who was Rook, and what did he do to my father that made him hate me so fucking much?"

"Jude, I—"

"Then I come here," he cuts me off, anger and pain radiating off him in waves, "and I see that it was never a Van Doren problem. I was made to hate a family because Easton Sinclair was a miserable, sad man, and I didn't have it in me to hate him. So I hated you instead."

My heart aches, thudding heavily in my chest, feeling the weight of him pressing against me. I ache for the boy who lived through the wreckage of addiction, the one who wears his father's pain like a second skin.

The flicker of vulnerability in his eyes reveals ghosts of a past that hover just beneath the surface, shadows of a life he can't escape. I have no fucking idea what it's like to grow up with a father whose demons were more powerful than any love he could offer.

I just know that I want to carry it with him.

No matter how heavy his pain is, I want to carry it with him.

My hands continue up the path of his body, palms cupping his cheeks as I tilt my head back to gaze up at him.

"Loner," I breathe, "I'm so sorry. You didn't deserve that. No one deserves that."

"Don't pity me, Geeks. I don't fucking want it."

My jaw tightens. "Don't do that. Don't sweep your pain under the rug, Jude. Not here, not with me."

I drag my thumb across his bottom lip, staring up at this beautiful, beautiful, broken boy.

"You see me, right?"

He nods slowly, his dark gaze unwavering, and it feels like a promise. “Always.”

“Then let me see you,” I murmur. “Scars and all. It doesn’t matter. Your pain doesn’t make you weak. Your anger doesn’t make you your father. You’re just Loner here. Just Jude.”

Shock pulls at his eyebrows for a split second before recognition ignites a spark in his stormy eyes, the darkness giving way to a softness that brightens the space between us, clearing the clouds from the sky.

And then his mouth crashes against mine.

A jolt of warmth surges through me, flooding every inch of my body as desire takes control, drowning out the tiny voice screaming for caution. What if someone walked in? What if I was too loud?

But that whisper is nothing compared to the overwhelming hunger that rises within me.

My heart slams against my rib cage, this wild, frantic thing, as he presses into me, the solid weight of his body igniting every nerve ending in my skin. The rational part of my brain is shoved far, far away, silenced when he nips at my bottom lip with a teasing bite, sending shock waves through me.

All that matters is Jude’s touch—the way his hands cradle my face, the heat of him pressing against me, as if he’s pulling me into his very essence. I want to take all the shattered pieces of this boy the world has broken and hide them deep within my chest, where he can finally feel safe.

Jude deserves, at the very least, to feel safe. To be protected.

“You climbed the wall,” he breathes against my mouth, chest heaving as his tongue traces the seam of my lips.

“Yeah, Loner. I climbed the wall.”

Jude’s hands slide down my body, fingers trailing fire in their wake as he grips my waist, pulling me closer until our bodies meld together.

I can feel the heat radiating from him, the tension in his muscles, his cock pressed tightly against my stomach. It makes me ache, a desperate need to bridge the gap between our worlds, to become a part of his.

“You gonna be able to be quiet while my cock is drilling that tight hole, sweetheart?” he murmurs, voice dipped in smoke. “You gonna be a good girl and let me fuck you when anyone could walk in?”

I nod my head once, twice, three times before his lips collide with mine again. Hungry and insistent, he demands me to open up for him. My skin ignites beneath the spray of water, his tongue sliding against mine.

My hands weave through his damp hair, pulling him closer, wanting more. Wanting all of him.

“Jude.”

Kiss.

“My clothes.”

Kiss.

“Off.”

We can barely keep our mouths apart long enough to shed my clothes, tossing them carelessly onto the tiled floor of the shower. The moment they hit the ground, I’m forced to physically climb this man like he’s a tree.

I wish I could say I was joking.

With every inch, I stretch up onto my tippy-toes, wrapping my arms around his neck, pulling myself closer, but frustration bubbles within me when I realize I can’t reach him the way I want to.

“Aww, baby.” His chuckle vibrates against my lips, the sound teasing my skin as it sends shivers down my spine. “You want up here? Does that needy little cunt want to be stretched and filled while I bounce you on my cock like a little fuck toy?”

A soft whimper escapes my throat, my thighs instinctively pressing together in a desperate attempt to quell the relentless ache throbbing between my legs.

“Loner, don’t make me hurt you,” I bite, my palm sliding down his chest to his cock, giving it a teasing squeeze. “I could do some serious damage down here.”

The corners of his eyes crinkle as he grins, head shaking as he bends his knees and scoops me up.

I let out a heavy gasp as he presses me against the wall, my legs curling around his trim waist as he shoves his cock against my pussy.

“Vicious little thing,” he whispers, dipping his head into the crook of my neck, letting me feel the smirk on his lips as he peppers kisses along my throat. “So demanding. So fucking hot.”

A whimper rocks through me as he thrusts his hips against mine, his shaft rubbing my clit as he uses his grip on my body to stroke me up and

down his cock.

Everything about Jude makes me feel small, and not in a bad way. I've always felt like this scary, hardened thing. Too sharp, too demanding. But Jude makes me feel soft, gentle, like I've been misunderstood my entire life, and he's just been there waiting to crack me open.

"Jude," I moan when the tip of his cock nudges at my entrance, eyes flicking down at where our lower halves connect. "Please tell me it's just this angle and you're not actually gonna rip me half."

The bridge of his nose trails up my neck, mouth returning to mine for another punishing kiss, just enough to leave me breathless before he pulls back.

"My cock is gonna shred this bratty pussy in half, baby, but you're gonna love it. You're gonna beg for more. 'Cause you were made to take what I give you."

With that, he thrusts into me in one fluid motion, and the sensation is nothing short of electric. My body stretches around him, the initial discomfort quickly morphing into a deep, pulsing pleasure that sends waves of warmth radiating through my cunt.

A shocked gasp slips from my mouth, and it is quickly muffled by the weight of his palm. I dig my nails into his shoulders, head falling back against the wall behind me, trying to ground myself as he fills me completely.

I've never felt so fucking full. Every inch of space my body allows, Jude takes.

"God, you always feel so fucking good. So fucking tight." He grunts lowly, his tone filled with awe as he watches his cock stroke in and out of my wet core. "You gotta be quiet for me, baby. So, so quiet for me, yeah? We can't let anyone know how hungry this pretty cunt is for my dick, can we, sweetheart?"

I moan into his hand, arching my body into his touch as his mouth descends on my nipple. His teeth tug at the piercing, tongue playing with my sensitive tits.

Jude's not just another guy I'm attracted to.

God, if only that's all he was.

If it were just his sharp jawline or the way he looks behind the wheel of his car, this would be easy. I'd let the loyalty to my last name crush the pull

I feel toward him. It'd be a temporary thing, a fleeting spark I could smother.

But he's not just a Sinclair.

He's also Jude.

The loner.

The poet.

The guy who sees the world in shades of gray and scribbles those shades into that worn notebook like he's writing his way through some personal hell.

Jude's the one who proved that life can still exist within me.

Before he touched me, I was nothing but withering earth. Orgasms were fleeting, a spark that died before I could even feel its warmth, a hollow relief that left me emptier than before. I was a wasteland, all cracked soil and desolation, where nothing could take root.

But with him, it's...different.

I'm different.

When he touches me, it's like a storm breaking loose inside my veins. A lightning strike that splits me wide open, burns through every dark corner of my soul until there's no space left for hatred or the self-loathing that eats at me.

For the first time since Oakley, someone touched me and...and...

Something *bloomed*.

In the barren ruin of my chest, beneath ribs that have always felt like a cage, he planted something wild, untamable, something so vibrant it almost hurt.

A secret flower.

Thorny, forbidden, but undeniably alive.

The pleasure builds inside me, coiling tighter with every thrust. He sets a relentless pace, each stroke sending shock waves through my body, and I can't help but writhe against him, eager for more.

Echoes of our skin slapping against each other fill the air, mixing with the rhythm of the shower, the water cascading down our bodies, amplifying every stroke.

I can feel my nails biting into his skin, holding on to his body for dear fucking life as he uses the brutal grip on my ass to shove himself

impossibly deeper. He jerks my body down in time with his heavy thrusts while he presses his hand into my mouth to keep me quiet.

“Look at what a good girl you’re being, Phi,” he growls, pressing his mouth against his hand covering mine. “So quiet, taking me. This wet pussy is my favorite fucking thing. You’re my favorite little whore, baby.”

I preen beneath the praise.

His favorite.

I clench around him, and he responds with a grunt, the sound vibrating against my chest. It spurs him on, driving him deeper, harder. Every thrust sends me spiraling further into ecstasy.

My body bows against the wall, the rough surface grounding me as he takes me higher, pushing me to the brink. The heat builds like a wildfire, consuming me whole, leaving nothing but pure, unadulterated pleasure in its wake.

“You’re close, aren’t you, baby? You gonna come for me? Go on, sweetheart. Break for me. Show me what a good fucking girl you are and come for me.”

Each thrust drives him deeper, hitting that sweet spot within me that makes my vision blur and my thoughts scatter. I can hardly hold on to anything—my fingers grip his shoulders, nails digging into his skin, anchoring myself as he pushes me toward the edge.

The tension snaps, and I come undone. A cry erupts from my lips, muted by the palm pressed against my mouth, as the world blurs and collapses into pure ecstasy.

I shudder, waves of pleasure crashing over me, drowning me in sensation. My body quakes around him, every pulse radiating with a heat so intense it feels like I’m burning from the inside out.

“Fuck, yes, baby. Fuck yes. Just like that. Your pussy grips me so good. So goddamn tight,” Jude grunts, the sound of his voice pulling me back to him, grounding me even as I float in the afterglow of my orgasm.

His hand moves from my mouth, leaving me to keep quiet on my own as he palms my ass with both hands, squeezing possessively. He works me up and down his dick like a madman, and I can feel the weight of him, stretching me, filling me completely. The sensation is dizzying, the pleasure mixing with the remnants of my climax, driving me higher and higher.

“Jude,” I whimper, my voice barely above a breath as the heat within me begins to coil again. “I want you to—”

“I know, baby. I know.” He leans into me, capturing my mouth once more, our lips moving together as his hips snap against mine, driving us deeper into this whirlwind of pleasure. “I’m gonna give my favorite bratty cunt just what she wants. I’m gonna pump her so full of my cum you’ll feel me for weeks.”

The possessiveness in his words sends a shiver down my spine. I can feel the tension in his body, the way he’s building toward his own release, and it only makes me crave him more.

“Yes, please. Please, Jude, fill me up,” I breathe against his lips, the desperate need spilling out of me like a prayer.

He drives into me harder, the sound of our bodies slapping together echoing in the steamy air, a symphony of lust that drowns out the world beyond the shower.

“I’m so close, baby,” he grunts, his voice a low growl as he pulls back to look into my eyes, the intensity of his gaze igniting something wild within me. “I want you to come again, just like that. Squeeze me tight. Come on, Geeks. Give it to me.”

I slam my hand over my mouth to muffle my scream as another tidal wave of pleasure crashes over my body, lights exploding behind my eyes as I give my body over to him.

With one final thrust, he spills into me, his release flooding me in hot waves that send me spiraling into a blissful haze. I can feel him pulse within me, filling me completely, and it’s overwhelming, consuming me in a way I’ve never felt before.

“Fuck, yes, Phi. Good girl. That’s my favorite good girl.” He moans, burying his face in my neck, his breath hot against my skin as he wraps his arms around me, holding me close as we both ride out the waves of pleasure.

We linger there, wrapped in each other, the warm water cascading around us like a cocoon, sealing us away from the world. In this moment, nothing else matters.

It’s just us, tangled together, a beautiful mess of bodies.

In here, we can be whoever we want.

Just Jude and Phi.

I don't think it was an accident I'm the one who found his poem on the wall of Whispering Pines Motel.

Among all the people in West Trinity Falls and Ponderosa Springs, it doesn't feel like mere chance that I found those words.

It feels like fate.

That maybe, just maybe, something made sure I'd be the one to discover it long before we ever realized what was happening between us.

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the sun thief

• • •

Jude

November 17

“HOME!” I SHOUT.

The house responds in silence, its emptiness familiar.

I scan the room, eyes landing on the collection of empty vodka bottles scattered across the coffee table like abandoned promises. I grab all five, tossing them into the trash with a force that rattles the bin.

I’ve learned my lesson about leaving them out. Once was enough—a night spent in the ER getting my back stapled shut was the price I paid.

I listen, straining for a sound—any sound—but it’s just me and the hollow thump of my heartbeat. I head for the stairs, my footsteps heavy on the creaking wood.

Let’s hope it’s just booze tonight.

“Put your dick away, old man,” I say through the door, turning the handle and letting myself into his room. “Did you eat today?”

There’s no answer, just the dim, flickering light of a dying lamp that barely pierces the darkness. But it’s enough. Enough to see him slumped against the wall, head tilted unnaturally to the side. My stomach twists, a cold sweat breaking out across my skin.

Don’t panic. Don’t panic, Jude.

My feet move on autopilot, rushing across the room as my bag hits the floor. My hands tremble violently as I tear the zipper open, fingers fumbling for the Narcan. The cap slips, rolling away into the shadows, but I don't care. I shove the nozzle into his nose, slamming the plunger down with desperate force.

"Come on. Please, come on, Dad."

I pull back, waiting for the miracle that always seems just within reach. My breath is ragged, each second an eternity that stretches my heart into thin, fraying threads.

One...two...three...

Nothing.

His chest remains still, a void where life should be.

You're brave. Don't panic, Jude. Don't fucking panic.

I drop to my knees, pressing my hands to his chest, the familiar rhythm a cruel echo of too many nights like this. The floor is cold beneath me, biting into my skin, but it's nothing compared to the ice clawing its way up my spine.

"Thirty compressions. Two breaths. Repeat."

I chant it like a prayer to a god that's never once listened, never cared.

"Nineteen...twenty...twenty-one..."

My voice cracks, raw with desperation. I lean down, sealing my lips to his. The cold hits me like a slap, the taste of stale whiskey mingling with the salt of my tears.

But I don't stop.

I can bring him back. I've done it before.

"Twenty-six...twenty-seven...twenty-eight..."

I pause, pressing two fingers to his neck, searching for the pulse that should be there. It's not. My chest tightens, a searing pain that rips through me.

"Wake up, you son of a bitch," I hiss, tears finally breaking free, blurring my vision. I breathe into his mouth again, the sound of my own gasping breaths the only noise in the oppressive quiet. "Don't do this to me. Please don't leave me alone, Dad."

I press harder, palms bruising his rib cage, the cracking of bone a familiar horror.

My arms burn, but I don't care. I don't stop. I can't.

“You don’t get to do this to me,” I sob. “You don’t get to fucking do this to me.”

But his skin is too cold. His body is too still.

I keep going, like sheer willpower alone can fix this, like every pump of my hands can force Dad’s heart to remember how to beat. My arms tremble violently, the ache spreading through my chest until it feels like I’m breaking apart from the inside.

Just one more time. Just wake up one more goddamn time.

“Thirty compressions. Two breaths. Repeat.”

I’ve been saying it for so long the words lose their meaning, just a hollow, frantic sound that escapes my lips as I slam my fists against his chest.

“Please, Dad. Goddammit, wake up!”

My voice shreds, the last word a guttural scream that tears through the emptiness. I collapse forward, forehead against his unmoving chest, the icy chill sinking deep into my bones. My tears soak into his shirt, each drop a final, broken admission of defeat.

He won. He finally won.

Finality hits me like a wave.

I wish I could say it was one of the sleeper waves the Oregon coast is notorious for, an unsuspecting hit that pulls you to a watery grave. No, this was simply high tide, calling my name.

I’ve been waiting on an overdose for years.

“Couldn’t give it up, could you? You just had to keep going, chasing it until it fucking killed you.”

I press my palms into my eyes, trying to stop the tears that won’t obey. They burn, a searing reminder of everything I’ve lost, of everything I never had.

“You took so much from me, Dad,” I choke out, my voice cracking, the words barely audible. “Why couldn’t you just stay? Why couldn’t you give me this one fucking thing?”

I look down at him—gray, lifeless, with a needle still beside him. His eyes are closed, his face peaceful in a way that feels like the cruellest joke of all.

A laugh breaks from my throat, jagged and hollow, echoing in the empty room.

“You’re at peace, yeah? Fuck you! What about me, huh?” My hand smacks my chest with a hollow thud. “What about me?”

I slump against the wall, my body folding in on itself, the exhaustion finally taking over. I want to hate him. I need to hate him. But my heart betrays me, haunted by the memories of pillow forts and glow-in-the-dark stars, of a father who at times made me feel safe.

I can’t hate him. Not completely. Not like I should.

Because there are two versions of my father, and they exist within me like a brutal paradox.

The man who robbed me of the chance of being a child. The one who left memories in the form of bruises and is currently lying stale on the cold floor.

But I cry for the man who taught me how to love words. The one who laughed and binged shitty horror flicks with me past bedtime. I mourn the side of him I admire, the man who wrote words on paper that would’ve changed lives if he’d published them and fought this addiction.

Anger rattles within me because I know that part of him died with the bitter, tormented man.

The addict who destroyed everything and the man who once loved me in the only way he knew how.

I force myself to stand, legs shaking, every movement slow and heavy. I know I should call the police, but I can’t bring myself to leave yet. Instead, I sink back down beside him, letting the silence wrap around us like a suffocating blanket.

I reach for the notebook on his bed, the pages crumpled and stained with liquor tears. A deep, shaky breath makes my chest ache as I read the words along the page.

This would be it.

There would be no letter or teary video detailing his apologies disguised as “I love you.”

Only this.

An empty heroin needle and the last writings of a tortured man.

“What does it mean?”

I pull my gaze away from the iPad, where Doctor Who plays steadily in the background, its familiar echo weaving around us on the balcony.

Phi sits in my lap, dressed in nothing but a pair of panties and my oversized hoodie that looks more like a dress on her. The fabric drapes over her delicate frame, her hair spilling out like dark silk as she plucks my cigarettes from the pack, doodling notes and smiley faces with a black pen, a mischievous sparkle in her eyes.

The notes have definitely softened since the water tower incident. Sure, I still get the occasional “suck my dick,” but that’s to be expected.

“What?”

“The tattoo on your back. What does it mean?” She jabs another menthol dart back into the pack, her satisfaction palpable as she admires her handiwork.

“It means ‘do not be afraid’ in Latin,” I grunt, my palms sliding up her bare thighs, feeling the goose bumps rise against my touch as the cool night air, tinged with salt, brushes against us. “After my dad’s first overdose, the paramedic who brought him back taught me CPR. ‘Don’t panic, Jude. Don’t panic,’ she kept saying. Said it so much as a kid, felt right getting it on my body forever.”

I’m surprised at how easily the words spill out, how effortlessly I can share these pieces of myself with her.

My entire life, I’ve buried my pain, my anger, my truth—keeping it all locked inside, leaking only onto the unread pages of my poetry. Those words were the only parts of me that didn’t belong to Ponderosa Springs or the Sinclair name.

This is the first time in my life I’ve ever wanted to share myself with someone.

The first time I’ve ever trusted anyone with it.

Phi bites down on the inside of her cheek, pausing her vandalism on my nicotine to look at me. “Do you miss him? Your dad?”

What a fucking question.

Despite everything—the abuse, the pain, the suffering—Easton Sinclair was all I had, and some days, I find myself missing him.

He was a shitty excuse for a man, a poor father. He beat the fuck out of me and made part of me believe I deserved it, that somehow, this was how I was meant to be loved—through violence, through bruises, through shattered bones.

The pain was just a part of our relationship. A twisted connection I couldn't sever, no matter how much it bled me dry.

But he was all I had.

"I don't miss the bruises. I fucking hate him most days." I clear my throat, rolling my tongue across my upper teeth. "But some days, yeah. I miss his laugh. Miss binging movies with him. I miss reading what he wrote. I used to steal his notebooks, spend the day reading pages and pages because it was impossible to put down. He was good, great even."

He wrote like his life depended on it, like the words clawing to escape his mind would suffocate him if they stayed trapped inside. I felt the weight of every paragraph, the raw emotion woven into each line—a talent no one ever knew about.

Just me.

It was easy to carry the pieces of him the world never got to witness, reminders of what we could have had, of the man he might have been.

But the parts he showed the world? Those were the heaviest.

"Is that why you sign your poetry with an *E*?" she asks, tilting her head, her gaze penetrating as she studies me. "For him?"

The way she looks at me knocks the wind out of my lungs. She's so curious—about me, the world, everything.

With her, every conversation feels like a dance—fluid and dynamic, where we twist and turn through subjects, laughing and challenging each other. She pulls me into her world, where knowledge is a currency and curiosity is the spark that lights the fire.

It's intoxicating.

Her brain is the most incredible thing I've ever witnessed.

"No. My first name is Elias. Started going by Jude in school 'cause it was too close to Easton."

A smile tugs at her lips as she picks up another cigarette, muttering as she writes along the white paper, "Elias. Jude. Sinclair."

My name has always been a weapon, a curse hurled at me with venomous intent. It's been spat out in anger, associated with every misfortune and dark chapter of this town's existence. But in Phi's mouth, it transforms completely. She breathes life into it, wrapping it in warmth and curiosity, making it sound like something precious rather than a mark of shame.

For the first time, I don't recoil at the sound of my name.

I pluck the cigarette from her fingers, bringing it to my lips. "Doesn't sound so bad when you say it."

We've been out here for hours, dawn creeping closer and closer to the horizon. I'm going to be dead fucking tired tomorrow, but I don't care. Sleep is boring compared to this.

Of course, we had to pull a serious bait and switch when Andromeda came home from the Grove, her arms full of snacks for Phi. The moment her bedroom door swung open and her voice rang out in the hall, Phi sprang into action, slipping into the hallway wrapped in nothing but a towel.

She quickly concocted a story about her shower not working, claiming she'd used the bathroom down the hall instead. Andromeda, buzzing with excitement over Ezra's performance earlier that night, didn't even blink at the lie.

Phi's a sneaky little shit.

The flicking of a lighter makes me blink, Phi's hands holding an orange flame to the cigarette in my mouth, helping me light it.

"What's your middle name?" I ask, releasing a puff of smoke into the air, shifting on the couch beneath me.

"Rose," she replies, a faint smile gracing her lips. "After my Aunt Rosemary."

"Your mom's twin. That's why." I pause, not sure what I want to say or how to even say it. "That's why your family hates my dad so much, yeah?"

"What he was a part of hurt a lot of people. My mom has bad days. All of them do. My aunt Coraline especially. They have these days where they feel like ghosts, and it feels like I can't reach Mom. She's there but not really, you know? Like she's part of this world but also trapped somewhere else." Her brows knot up, pain etching across her features. "I know he's your father, but my mom, my family, they—"

My hand cups her cheek, thumb catching the tear that's escaped from her sea-glass eyes. "Hey, it's okay, Geeks. You're okay. I get it. I promise."

I know my father was a piece of shit. I know that. I've never denied it to myself or to anyone else. The things he did—the damage he caused—are etched into my memory like scars, undeniable and unforgiving. He was guilty, and I've spent years knowing that truth.

I never hated the Hollow Boys and their families because of how they felt about my dad. No, that hatred runs deeper, tangled in the raw, exposed nerves of my own insecurities.

I hated them because I was jealous.

Jealous of their lives, their ease, their bonds forged in a world where love was given freely. I watched them from the sidelines, a spectator to their laughter and lives, while I sat in the shadows, feeling like a ghost haunting the edges of my own existence.

They had the privilege of family, of connections that seemed unbreakable, while I was left to navigate the wreckage alone.

Their indifference felt like a betrayal, a knife twisting deeper with each day I spent isolated from the world. I was drowning in the echoes of their laughter, suffocating in the weight of my loneliness, as I tried to make sense of a life that felt so utterly devoid of love and support.

The resentment burned inside me, fueled by the hollow ache of abandonment. I wanted to scream at them, to shake them and demand to know how they could turn their backs while I struggled to find my footing in a life that felt so cruelly unfair.

I felt invisible, overlooked, and the bitterness consumed me, leaving nothing but a hollow shell where hope used to reside.

And yet, how could I blame them? Truly, how could I hold it against them for wanting to leave the past—me included—behind?

They were merely trying to carve out a future free from the shadows of their own trauma, desperately seeking light in the darkness that had enveloped our town. Who wouldn't want to escape the weight of the past, to unshackle themselves from the chains of pain that tethered them to memories they'd rather forget?

They were just kids, really.

Children trying to navigate a world that had handed them too many burdens, and I was a reminder of the pain they had fought so hard to distance themselves from.

That didn't stop the hurt from festering inside me, didn't quiet the voice that screamed for recognition, for understanding.

But like I told her, I get it.

Phi lays her head on my chest, curling into me as smoke curls from my lips.

“I’m sorry, Jude. For the fire, for all—”

“Stop apologizing to me,” I grunt, cutting her off. “I don’t want your apologies, Phi.”

The girl who set St. Gabriel’s on fire wasn’t the vixen. It wasn’t the Queen of Disaster.

It was Seraphina Van Doren.

A fourteen-year-old girl who wanted to belong.

Who dyed her hair for the first time, hoping to feel a connection to her mother. She was a shy, nerdy girl who craved love and validation, who once trusted the wrong person and found herself shattered, piecing together fragments of a heart that refuses to stay whole.

I don’t want apologies from that girl. I don’t need them.

“Then what do you want from me?” Phi asks softly, her voice barely above a whisper, as she turns her head to rest her chin on my chest, peering up at me with an intensity that makes it ache.

The soft pinks and warm oranges of the horizon dance across her face, casting a delicate glow that enhances her features, her skin glowing with the ethereal light of dawn.

Those sea-glass-green eyes shimmer in the early morning hours, reflecting a mix of exhaustion and unspoken emotions, but there’s something else there too. A gentleness, a coaxing warmth that draws me in, urging me to share every single secret I’ve hidden from the world.

I’m a poet.

A shitty one, but still.

I’m supposed to have words for this, and I do. So many words. But right now, not a single one feels right for her.

Pulchritude is too formal. *Selcouth* too distant. *Elysian* too peaceful for someone who thrives in mayhem. *Aether*, maybe? Because right now, she fucking looks sculpted from the gods’ own ethereal breath, but even that doesn’t seem enough.

Even *ineffable*, meaning so beautiful it defies words, falls short.

I have words, I do.

Just...none worthy of her.

“Just this, Phi. Our universe. I wanna stay here for a little bit longer.”

A smile tugs at her lips as she echoes the words I once said to her. “We can stay here for as long as you want, Loner.”

No, we can't, but I don't have the heart to tell her that.

Phi will always choose her family over this universe we've created, and I don't blame her for it. Her loyalty is one of the reasons I'm drawn to her —this undying need to shield the ones she loves is just another piece of her alluring puzzle.

She wouldn't be Phi if she chose me.

But it's okay. It's fine.

I'll just sit here, stealing pieces of her like a thief.

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the invisible string

...

Phi

December 1

“WHERE IS CHRISTMAS AT THIS YEAR?”

“My place,” Nora mumbles, tossing a grape into the air as we walk down the hall, effortlessly catching it in her mouth. “Mom’s been obsessing over decorations for days now. It’s getting concerning. She made Dad move the tree at least four times.”

I snort out a laugh, hiking my book bag up higher on my shoulder. The halls of Hollow Heights are buzzing with people. The end of the semester is approaching, and everyone’s panic about finals is at an all-time high.

“Fuck yes,” Reign groans, tossing an arm lazily around Nora’s shoulder as we wind down the curved stone staircase. “Your dad makes the fucking best pumpkin pie.”

“Ew.”

The word comes out in perfect sync from me and Atlas, a mischievous smirk on our faces as we bump our fists together. The best part about pumpkin pie is never eating it. Or the whipped cream on top—that’s always a given.

“Styx Bridge the hour before, yeah?” Nora asks. “Do we still do pre-festivity smoke sessions or...?”

I nod. “Fuck yes. It’s my favorite part of the holidays. Stoned and surrounded by food.”

Winter has arrived in Ponderosa Springs, and I am so fucking upset about it. I hate the cold with every fiber of my being. I just want to be in a place where it’s summer all year long.

The only good thing about the temperature dropping is being able to covertly wear Jude’s hoodies without anyone questioning it. I’ve got a thing for showing as much skin as possible, but now that the sky constantly looks ready to pour down snow, it’s not as noticeable.

It doesn’t hurt that we share a similar style, so the clothes I steal like some thief in the night could easily pass as mine.

The smell of him consumes me. His *Sopula* hoodie is drenched in his scent. It makes not being able to touch him in public easier. Makes the days pass by faster, so by the time night rolls around and we climb into each other’s beds, it feels like we haven’t been apart that long.

At school, we only have chemistry together, and he might be the reason I fail it because he fucking *loves* to shove his hand up my skirt during class. How am I supposed to focus on atomic structure when he’s determined to make me come on his fingers?

Being caught together—with our hands to ourselves, obviously—has gotten a little better now that he’s gotten closer to Ezra and the rest of the guys. He and Reign are still two wary dogs walking around each other, waiting for the other to bite, but I definitely caught them playing *Call of Duty* together a few nights ago.

We’re able to sneak off during the weekends, spending our days at the water tower or a few towns over, but it’s fucking exhausting. Truthfully, I hate having to hide him, to hide this.

All Rook Van Doren has ever wanted for me is to see me happy, and Jude Sinclair? He makes me so fucking happy.

But every time I think of telling my family, of screaming that Jude isn’t his father’s son, it sends me into a spiral. They’ve accepted him enough for the tension to ease, but that doesn’t mean they’d be okay with me dating him.

Which is basically what we are doing.

Dating. Secretly, but it still counts.

Which makes Jude Sinclair...? The first boyfriend I’ve ever had.

“Phi, you coming out tonight?”

“What? Oh,” I mutter, blinking as Nora’s voice pulls me out of my brain fog. “No. I gotta cram for my calculus final.”

“Where have you been lately, dude? It’s like you’ve disappeared.” Atlas bumps me with his hip as we hit the bottom level of the Valewood building, one of the many sections of the Bursley District.

“School, mostly.” I shrug, the lie slipping from my tongue easily. “I’ll come out next weekend after finals. We can celebrate, I promise.”

The four of us separate as the cold air from outside hits our faces. Reign’s got soccer, Atlas and Nora have another class, I think, and I’m thankfully finished today.

Which means I’m going to scale my balcony and wrap myself in Jude’s blankets while we study and he tries to distract me with his tongue ring.

That’s what is going through my brain as I walk across the grounds of Hollow Heights toward the parking lot. Time seems to slow during the winters here, trapping everyone and everything in a tiny gothic snow globe.

Just as I turn the corner, my feet hitting the asphalt of the student lot, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it from my pocket, expecting a message from Jude, but instead, my brows furrow in confusion.

UNKNOWN

We aren’t done until I say we are.

What the fuck?

My thumbs fly across the screen.

ME

Who the hell is this?

I stare down at the screen, waiting for a response, until I hear a familiar voice.

“Come on, Sin,” Tex Matthews grunts. “You still got the hookup. Do us a solid and front us a couple of G’s.”

Jude *hates* being called Sin.

My heart clenches as I look at Jude leaning against the side of his car, still somehow towering over Tex and his wide receiver, Ryker Bellows. Everything about Jude is so fucking *big*. His palm is literally the size of my face.

Which is why I know that he's more than capable of handling these two idiots. Jude can fight—he *killed* someone with his bare hands.

I'm not worried about him physically.

But if a fight were to break out right now, I know the blame would fall squarely on Jude's shoulders. The town adores Tex—the golden boy, the football star—and they'd never see him as the instigator.

I don't want him to face any more backlash from this town. A town that doesn't know the truth of his past, that only sees him as Jude "Sin" Sinclair, a town that would rather see him as a monster than a victim of circumstance.

They don't understand him the way I do.

They don't see the Loner. None of them see J.

"Don't sell anymore, Matthews. Get your shit somewhere else," Jude breathes, the conversation getting clearer the closer I get, still unnoticed by all parties.

Tex slaps a hand on Jude's shoulder, and my jaw feels like it might break with how hard I'm grinding my molars.

Jude hates being touched by random people. I've spent hours trailing my fingers through those faded gold locks while he talks about it.

More than that? I fucking *hate* when people touch him.

"What? Daddy killing himself with those chemicals finally eating at your conscience, Sinclair?"

Oh fuck.

Anger radiates off J in waves, his fists clenched tightly at his sides, knuckles white. It's a stance I've seen before, one that screams he's on the edge of losing his shit.

Please walk away. Please walk away.

I silently plead, willing Tex to just leave him alone. But he doesn't move, and neither does J.

Without warning, Jude slams his fist into Tex's nose, a stream of blood spraying into the air, and that's when my feet move of their own volition.

"Shit," I hiss, dropping my book bag to the ground with a thud.

My head is completely empty. I'm not thinking about the crowd of people in the parking lot or the fact my aunt is the dean of this school. None of that matters as I close the distance between me and the fight that's

breaking out just in front of me, my heart pounding in sync with the adrenaline coursing through my veins.

If a stranger asks, I'll say I was looking out for my foster brother. If Atlas, Nora, or Reign probe for answers, I'll say I was already itching to beat the shit out of Tex.

I will *lie*.

Whatever I need to do to deflect from the fact the only reason I'm barreling toward this fight is to protect Jude. Not because of some legal will that put him in my house or guilt but because I *care* about him.

I won't let him be blamed for anything else.

Not anymore.

"Phi?"

I think it's Jude's voice, but I can't be sure because in the next breath, Ryker's fist collides with my *not-really-my-boyfriend's* gut, and my vision blazes red.

This is gonna hurt like a *bitch*.



"HOW'RE THESE TINY WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION, VICIOUS THING."

Jude lifts the ice pack up from my hand, brushing his lips across my swollen knuckles. His dark eyes peer down at me, searching my face for the eightieth time for any injuries. My head is in his lap, his hand resting on my stomach as I rest a bag of frozen peas on his knuckles,

Ryker and Tex will be playing with broken noses and busted lips this Friday, but surprisingly, Jude's only injury is a little cut on his eyebrow. The moment my fist slammed into Ryker's nose, Jude went from fight mode to protection mode.

His arms had curled around my waist, pulling me from the chaos, cursing me over and over for getting involved, for getting hurt.

"I'll survive." I shrug.

After our impromptu brawl on the school grounds, we were all sent to the dean's office to face Aunt Lyra's wrath, forced to sit through an awkward interrogation that felt more like a trial than a family discussion.

The football players didn't want to miss their next game due to disciplinary actions, so we settled on a misunderstanding.

Then, we were all sent home to deal with our parents.

Now, I don't want to brag or anything, but when I'd told Dad I broke a guy's nose, he'd definitely high-fived me behind Mom's back. It was tense for a bit, for all of ten minutes, before I'd told them Jude was just defending me.

I also didn't miss Mom's little smile after, as if it was confirmation that we'd finally accepted Jude into the fold of our lives. The other day, I caught him helping Mom with the dishes, and he can deny it all he wants, but I know he's warming up to my parents. To everyone, he and to Scout's twin sister, Stella Hawthorne have become friends after bonding over their shared fascination of jellyfish at last Sunday dinner.

It's not perfect by any means, but...we are getting further from Jude being an outcast and closer to him being a part of this world my family created.

Which falsely gives me some kinda hope that maybe...maybe one day, the universe Jude and I have created doesn't have to be a secret forever.

"Wasn't expecting to be backed up, but hey, I'll take it," Jude scoffs, the corner of his mouth twitching into a smirk as he leans back against the headboard of my bed.

"Welcome to the Heathens Club," I murmur, as the familiar comfort of my room envelops us.

"When the fuck did I start paying for that membership?"

"Your acceptance was solidified the moment my dad and uncles helped us dispose of a dead body with your DNA on it. Today's little brawl was just part of the benefit package."

I can't help but grin as he buries his face into the crook of my neck, inhaling deeply as if he's memorizing my scent. He peppers kisses along my collarbone, trailing up my throat and across my cheeks, his lips intoxicating in a way that can only be Jude.

Finally, he captures my mouth, a slow, lingering kiss that feels like a secret. It's electric, every nerve in my body lighting up, and for that fleeting moment, the chaos of the outside world fades away, leaving only the two of us.

“Don’t do that again, Phi,” he murmurs against my mouth, playfully nipping at my bottom lip. “I would’ve been fine. I’ve fought off worse.”

I cradle his face in my hands, tracing the sharp contours of his jaw. “You deserved to be protected, Jude. I didn’t want anyone to blame you.”

He leans into my touch, pressing a soft kiss to my palm. “So sweet for me.”

“If you tell anyone about this, I’ll deny it.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

I sit up gently, crawling up the length of his body and settling into his lap. My fingers rake through his soft hair.

“Let’s go to Stanford together.”

His eyebrow arches. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, me and you. We survive this year, we keep this a secret. Then, before we leave, we drop the bomb and dip to California.” I grin, giving a little shrug. “Seems like the perfect plan to me.”

“You’re going to be the death of me, Seraphina Van Doren.”

With practiced confidence, his fingers slip behind my neck, gripping the skin there before tilting my face to meet his.

“But what a way to fucking go,” he whispers before his mouth finds mine.

The kiss starts off soft and curious, as if we’re both savoring this moment. The coolness of his metal ring presses against my skin at the nape of my neck as we taste one another, our breaths mingling. His strong fingers tangle in my hair, pulling gently, urging me to surrender.

We move like we already know what the other needs. As if we’ve done this a hundred times over.

It’s not hide-and-seek. More like lost and found. A long-awaited hello for lips who’d before said goodbye.

“Tell me what you want, sweetheart,” he pants into my mouth, hands palming my ass, helping me rock against him.

My throat tightens, ribs squeezing my lungs. A fire ignites within me, an overwhelming desire that pulses through my veins. All rational thought dissipates, replaced by a raw need to stay in this moment with him.

“Everything,” I mutter with a shake of my head, never looking away from his dark eyes. “I want everything.”

I roll my hips across the unmistakable outline in his jeans, feeling the rough material drag across the seam of my leggings.

“Everything,” Jude breathes just before our lips collide again.

It’s not just desire—it’s desperation, a feverish need to be as close as possible. Jude’s grip tightens on my hips, guiding me as I grind against him with more urgency.

The friction is electric, sending shivers down my spine as his hands slip beneath the hem of my hoodie, fingers splaying across the small of my back. I arch into his touch, my body instinctively seeking more of his warmth.

His body fits against mine like a puzzle piece, every hard contour melding perfectly with my softness. Heat radiates from him, sending sparks skimming along my skin, igniting a fire that spreads from my core to my limbs.

I crave him, every inch of him, like a drug I never want to quit.

Jude’s lips trail down my neck, leaving a burning path in their wake. His hands grasp my hips, fingers digging into my flesh as he grinds against me. I slide my hands under his shirt, raking over the hard planes of his abdomen before gliding up to caress his chest. Breaking our kiss, I lean in to nip at his earlobe.

“Take this off,” I whisper.

With a smirk, Jude complies, sitting up, reaching behind his neck, and tugging it over his head. I drink in the sight of his bare chest, sculpted muscle under smooth, pale skin. Reaching out, I trail my fingers over the black ink decorating his body, each tattoo a map of his past.

This man is the most beautiful human I’ve ever seen in my life.

“Charon’s obol,” I mutter, picking up the gold medallion necklace on his chest. “It’s the way to pay the ferryman across the Styx so you—”

“So I can find my way home if I ever get lost,” he finishes, bumping his nose against mine.

“To me,” I correct, my fingers tangling in the hair at the nape of his neck, “You buy your way back to me, Loner.”

“To you, Geeks.”

A deep growl rumbles in Jude’s throat as my hands slide down to the waistband of his jeans. I deftly undo the button and zipper, feeling the thrill of anticipation spike through me.

“Let’s see if you can be quiet,” I mutter, working my way down his body until I’m kneeling between his strong thighs.

The smirk on my face grows as I jerk at the material clinging to his hips, watching his teeth sink into his lower lip. When we get them down far enough for his cock to be exposed, the aching length smacks against his toned stomach.

Jude’s eyes darken as his gaze flickers. “You’re such a fucking brat—”

His words are cut off by a quiet groan as my tongue flicks the head of his cock, savoring the taste of him. I arch my brow, curling my hand around the base of him, watching his hips buck into my touch.

“You were saying?” I tease, a mischievous grin spreading across my lips.

Jude lets out a soft huff of air, shaking his head at me, his gaze intense as I wrap my lips around the tip of his cock, slowly taking more of him into my mouth.

I keep my eyes locked on his, watching his jaw tighten and the veins in his neck pop, cording up like roots on a tree. One large hand finds its way to the back of my head, fingers tightening in my hair as I work my way down his length.

“Fuck, baby,” he grunts, pleasure etched across his features as I draw him deeper into my mouth.

I want to pull every ounce of pleasure from his body. I want him struggling to stay quiet, fighting to maintain control. I want him weak for me because I feel undeniably soft for him.

I stretch my jaw wide, taking him deeper, letting him stretch my mouth open with his size. I already know there’s no way to fit all of him in my throat, so I grip the base with my hand, stroking what I can’t reach.

My head begins to bob, my tongue swirling around the sensitive tip every time I come up, bouncing my mouth over him again and again. I drink down the precum that leaks from him, savoring the taste.

“What a good fucking girl, choking on my cock. Spread that red lipstick all over me. Yeah, just like that, sweetheart.” He groans huskily, hips thrusting involuntarily as he struggles to hold back from fucking my throat.

Slowly, I trail my tongue down the length of him before taking him in again, this time deeper. Jude’s fingers dig into the sheets, his body tensed with pent-up desire.

I pull back, keeping my hand stroking his impossibly hard length, feeling him pulse beneath my grip as I leave open-mouthed kisses on his hips. The red lipstick kisses decorate his pale skin, marking his body as I tighten my grip around him.

Licking my way back up his length, I take him into my mouth once more. This time, I bob my head faster, harder, my hand pumping the base as spit drips from my lips, making it easier to fuck him with my hand. I take him as deep as I can, gagging quietly, watching Jude fist the comforter, the only thing holding him back from thrusting himself deeper into my waiting mouth.

“Fuck this,” he grunts, snatching my hair to pull me off his cock, the lust in his eyes burning brighter than ever.

I release him with a pop, letting him pull me up his body. His strong arms wrap around me as his lips crash against mine. The kiss is demanding, hungry, fueled by the arousal coursing through our veins.

His hands grip my hips, fingers digging into my flesh hard enough to leave bruises. With a grunt, he flips us over, pinning me against the mattress, his hard body pressing down on me.

“All of this needs to come off. Right now.”

I laugh as I tug my hoodie over my head, and we fumble with my leggings, the fabric clinging stubbornly to my legs. Before I can fully unclip my bra, his large hands spread across my ribs, head dipping down to capture a nipple between his lips. I arch into him with a gasp, pleasure shooting through me as his tongue swirls around the sensitive nub.

My hands grasp at his back, nails digging in, urging him on. He kisses his way across my chest, giving the other breast equal attention. I whimper and squirm beneath him, his warm breath leaving goose bumps in its wake.

Heat floods between my thighs as his fingers shove my panties to the side, letting me feel his slick cock, wet with my saliva, pressing against my soaked core. He rocks his body against mine, teasing my entrance but holding back, just out of reach.

“Jude, please,” I whine, struggling to keep my voice down, knowing that at any moment, someone could burst in here.

Usually we fuck in his car or mine, somewhere that doesn’t have the possibility of ruining our secret, but I want him so fucking badly that I couldn’t care less at this point. Every single inch of my body aches for him.

“Be quiet for me, baby. Spread your legs and let me use this tight, forbidden little pussy,” he grunts into my skin, his cock pushing through my slick folds, sinking into my tight walls.

Every time, there’s an initial pain, a delicious stretch echoing through me as he works his full length into me.

“You’re always so tight. So fucking good. God, I love this cunt.”

With a groan, Jude buries his cock deep inside me, his hips driving into mine with a possessive thrust. Each movement sends shivers of pleasure coursing through my bones, and I clench around him, feeling him touch places only he has ever reached. His hands grip my thighs, pinning me in place as he angles his hips to hit that sweet spot inside me.

“That’s it,” I hiss, biting my lip to suppress my moans. “Harder.”

Jude obliges, picking up the pace until our bodies collide in a symphony of skin-on-skin contact.

The sounds of our quiet grunts and gasps mingle with the rustling of the sheets, creating an intimate melody that envelops us, drowning out the world outside.

A moan escapes my lips, a little too loud for comfort.

“Shhh, careful, baby. We can’t let anyone know how much you love taking my dick,” Jude whispers, his voice low and gravelly. “You wanna come, don’t you? You want me to make you shatter on my cock? You gotta be quiet for me, then. Just let me fuck you, baby.”

I nod frantically, biting down harder on my lip. Jude knows exactly how to push me to the edge, and I’m teetering on the brink. His fingers dig into my thighs while his other hand rests firmly on my stomach, holding me in place as he drives into me relentlessly.

My hand reaches back, grasping one of the bars on my headboard, desperate to keep it from slamming into the wall as I buck my hips up against his, urging him to fuck me harder.

“Jude, Jude, I...” I pant, the pleasure building in my core like a tidal wave ready to crash.

“Shit,” he mutters through gritted teeth, and then suddenly, his hand shoots up to cover my mouth.

The feel of his hand over my lips only heightens the sensations coursing through my body, and I can feel my orgasm creeping closer, ready to explode at any moment. Jude’s hips continue to thrust into mine, his

breathing ragged against my ear. Heat pools between my thighs, my body trembling with anticipation.

“That’s it,” he grunts, his voice strained. “You’re so fucking close, aren’t you? You want me to make you come?”

His other hand slides down between our bodies, searching for my clit. His calloused fingers flick expertly over the sensitive bud as he drives in and out of me, bringing me closer to the edge with each stroke.

I can’t take it anymore. I bite down on Jude’s hand, muffling my scream as I come undone. My walls clench around him, milking his length as my orgasm consumes me, racking through my body.

The pleasure is blinding, coursing through every nerve ending, igniting a fire that spreads from my core to the tips of my fingers and toes. My hips buck instinctively, desperate for more friction, more of him. I feel like I’m soaring, weightless, as if the world has fallen away, leaving only Jude and the overwhelming ecstasy that binds us together.

His hand remains over my mouth, stifling my cries, and I can feel the heat radiating from him as he watches me unravel beneath him, his dark eyes filled with a mix of awe and primal hunger. He groans softly, the sound vibrating through his chest and sending another pulse of pleasure through me, intensifying the aftershocks of my release.

“That’s it, squeeze my cock, sweetheart. Fuck, fuck, Phi,” he pants, his breath hot against my neck as he uses my body to find his release.

I feel his hips stutter as his orgasm washes over him, and he holds himself deep inside me, throbbing against my sensitive walls. Slowly, his grip on my thighs and my mouth loosens, allowing me to gasp for air, our chests heaving in unison.

When it’s just us, like this, either lost in pleasure or settled with one another, I feel like nothing can touch this. We exist in a world of our own making—a secret garden of intimacy and raw emotion that no one else can access.

It’s all ours, and no one can take it from us.

I think I’ve been waiting my entire life for Jude Sinclair.

Even when we hated each other, there was always this invisible force between us, a pull I couldn’t shake, no matter how hard I tried. Not a chain, not a shackle—more like a delicate thread spun between us, impossibly thin but somehow unbreakable.

We've known each other our entire lives, grown up in the same small town since we were babies. We sat in the same classrooms in middle school, and I even had a crush on his best friend once.

But it wasn't until after his father's death, when the weight on my own shoulders felt unbearable, that we collided one random night at a water tower.

This doesn't feel like a mere human experience or some fleeting emotion.

It feels cosmic. Fated.

Like Jude and I were woven into the very fabric of the universe itself. As if, long before we were born, we were already written into each other's stories. Every decision, every path, every wrong turn—it all led us here, to this moment.

It's as if the atoms making up every inch of his soul once belonged to the same distant star that birthed me. Like particles that drifted apart billions of years ago have found a way to reunite in the form of two people.

Nothing anyone could've done would have been able to keep us from each other.

Not even us.

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the shadow

. . .

Jude

December 6

I'D KNOWN EZRA WAS A MUSICIAN, BUT I WAS PICTURING A WANNABE EMO kid with daddy's money searching for depth by playing "Wonderwall" at house parties.

I was pleasantly surprised to find he's actually good.
Really fucking good.

Orpheus in Ashes' heavy drums and Ez's throaty voice vibrate my eardrums, thrumming through the oil-soaked air. It's Sunday, which means Inferno Garage is closed to patrons, and Ezra's band is using it as a rehearsal space, providing me ample background music as I work on my car.

For the first time in what feels like forever, there's a weightlessness in the air, like the dark cloud that's clung to me all my life has taken a day off. It's not that the darkness is gone; it's just quieter, no longer raging against my ribs or clawing at my skin.

I don't feel like I have to constantly brace for impact, waiting for the world to punch back the moment I let my guard down.

Phi feels like the first breath of air after years of drowning.

I'm pretty sure the gods created her with me in mind. Not as my match but as my opposite.

They thought, *Hey, let's see what happens if we give this idiot the human equivalent of a middle finger wrapped in vanilla-flavored lip gloss.*

Maybe they figured I'd need something to keep me on my toes. Or maybe they were just bored, wondering what it would look like to pit fire against ice and see who'd burn out first.

Where I'm all sharp edges and rough hands, she's sugar-laced sarcasm with a mouth that's as lethal as it is irresistible.

She talks, and I listen. It's as simple—and complicated—as that.

Every word that slips from her mouth pulls me closer, even when she's just ranting about the absurdity of government conspiracies or arguing that tomatoes are fruits and should never belong in a salad. I don't care what she's saying; I just care that *she*'s saying it.

Yesterday, I had to wake her up early so she could sneak back into her room, and you'd have thought I was trying to start World War III. She threw a pillow at me, grumbled something about "cruel and unusual punishment," and pulled the covers back over her head.

It was stupid, mundane, but I haven't stopped thinking about the way her hair was a tangled mess across her face or how she looked at me like I was the villain in her morning nightmare.

The girl truly despises waking up early, but I like being the one she complains to. Like I could spend the rest of my life being the one who fights for her and also icing her knuckles when she throws punches at men twice her size.

She's warm, and I'm ice-cold.

She hates pickles, so I eat them for her.

She's day, and I'm night. Sun, moon.

Phi is everything I'm not, but in all the ways that count, she feels familiar, like I've known her all my life. A constant beat in a song that never changes, even when the rest of the world goes off-key. There's a rhythm to our chaos, a twisted comfort in knowing that, beneath the pain, we understand each other in ways no one else could.

I hate that I can't have her in public, not the way I want to. I hate that we have to pretend, have to hide what's real. But it's only for a few more months. And the thing about having someone like Seraphina Van Doren is that you take what you can get, even if it's just these stolen moments in the dark.

Because when it comes to Phi, even the smallest bit feels like more than I deserve.

It's a sick joke, a cruel twist of fate, honestly.

I was born a romantic in a house that never knew love.

The walls around me were always rigid, always too controlled. There was no space for tenderness, no room for vulnerability. My heart was crafted by hopeless fingers, like the universe dipped my very thread in ambrosia before cruelly weaving me together.

I'm a hopeless romantic.

Of course, my fate was for me to want the one person I could never have.

"Jude!" Alistair Caldwell's voice cuts through the rumble of music and the hum of machinery, commanding attention the way only a Caldwell can.

I don't rush to respond. Instead, I finish tightening the last bolt on the engine, my hands moving with the kind of practiced precision that's become second nature.

I glance over my shoulder, seeing him standing in the doorway, shifting through papers like he's more annoyed than urgent. I wipe my hands on a rag, then push off the workbench and head toward the back office.

I lean against the doorframe, arching a brow at him. "Thought you owned a tattoo shop? You work here too?"

Alistair looks up, his dark hair slicked back and his beard framing his jawline, the sharp lines of his face softened only by the hint of humor in his eyes. "I own twenty-five tattoo shops on the West Coast. Rook and I both own Inferno Garage."

"What do you need?" I ask, tone flat.

"Got an extra smoke?"

I furrow my brow, digging into my back pocket, and toss the pack his way, the movement feeling almost automatic. It lands with a thud on the desk, his tattooed fingers plucking one out and lighting it with practiced ease.

"You know they sell them by the pack, right?"

He chuckles, putting the filter into his mouth, "My wife wants me to stop. Stealing a few from you keeps me honest."

This is how it goes whenever he shows up. We don't talk much—mostly, we just share smokes and silence. It's not awkward; it's just...there,

like a worn-out routine neither of us bothers to break.

Ah. So that's why there was an opening here.

The hardest pill to swallow since being thrust into the world of the Hollow Boys isn't their wealth or power.

It's the fact that they're good fathers.

I spent years believing that these men were the root of everything wrong in Ponderosa Springs—the source of my father's misery and, by extension, mine. I imagined them as careless tyrants, ruling their empires with iron fists and blind eyes.

I figured Alistair Caldwell was no different, a man who allowed Ezra to dance dangerously close to the edge, thinking money could shield his son from the worst of the world. I was sure it was the kind of false security rich men built for their children: a buffer of cash and influence, as if that could really protect them from something like addiction.

But I was wrong.

I've watched Alistair and Ezra enough times to know their dynamic isn't simple.

Alistair isn't blind to what his kid is doing; he knows exactly when his son is pushing limits that could break him. Alistair doesn't sugarcoat it. He's hard on Ezra, relentless in his anger, but there's something else there—something I'd never seen in my father's eyes. It's fear, pure and raw. Fear that Ezra will make mistakes that will cost him his life if he's not careful.

Every time they finish one of those arguments, I try to ask what it's about. Ezra always slams the door on the conversation, retreating behind a wall of frustration, but even in that, there's a sense of safety. It's the kind of anger that stems from being cared about, from knowing someone's willing to go to war just to keep you alive.

I know what it's like to look into a father's eyes and see nothing but indifference. Easton was always there but never present. His gaze was empty, hollowed out by addiction and regrets he couldn't outrun.

He didn't care if I got hurt, if I fell, if I stumbled into the same darkness that swallowed him whole. There were no late-night lectures, no hands to guide me, no steady presence to remind me that I wasn't completely alone.

But these men? Alistair, Rook, Silas? Even fucking Thatcher Pierson, who looks about as alive as a corpse, is a great uncle. I watched him build a dollhouse—a fucking *dollhouse*—with Silas at Thanksgiving for Stella.

They'd set the whole world on fire if it meant keeping their kids safe. And for all the things I've hated about the Hollow Boys, I can't hate them for that.

"That all?" I ask, jerking my thumb back toward the car. The unspoken question hangs between us—can I leave now?

Alistair exhales a stream of smoke, his gaze distant before locking back onto me.

"I was known for fighting when I was your age. I fought people. My family. Ponderosa Springs. I fought for a long fucking time." His voice sounds like gravel as he pins me with his dark eyes. "I should've fought harder for you, Jude."

The words are unexpected, a punch I didn't see coming, and they knock the goddamn wind out of me. I feel the familiar burn of bitterness at the back of my throat, but it's not the kind that wants to lash out—it's the kind that twists, slow and aching.

"I tried to convince your dad to let me have you. I tried until you were seven. Every time, he'd say the same thing: you were the only thing he had left." Alistair clears his throat, like the weight of the memory is too much. "I didn't want to take him from you, but I didn't want you to suffer either. I never wanted you to suffer, Jude."

The irony isn't lost on me. The Hollow Boys were the cause of my downfall, the ghosts that haunted my father's addiction, the ones who left me to rot in a home that was anything but safe.

But they're also the first to offer me a semblance of shelter. Maybe that's why I was so angry all these years—not because they took something from me but because they had something I never did.

And standing here now, listening to Alistair's words, I realize that the jealousy hasn't entirely faded. It's just changed. It's less about hating their legacy and more about wanting a place to belong—somewhere that's mine, somewhere that feels less empty.

I bite the inside of my cheek, the coppery taste of blood grounding me. "You're where the money came from, yeah?"

"Yeah."

Dad didn't work, didn't do much of anything besides drugs. I shouldn't be surprised, and yet, I am.

“I, of all people, know throwing money at shit doesn’t fix anything, but I just want you to know that if you ever need anything, Jude, anything at all, I’m here. This family has your back, for as long as you need it.”

The word *family* stings. It’s a word that’s always been more myth than reality to me. But for the first time, it doesn’t feel like an empty promise.

It’s a strange feeling, like being offered a hand you’re not sure you can trust but want desperately to grab onto. For the first time, I see the Hollow Boys not as just the men who broke my father but as men who tried, in their own fucked-up way, to keep me from breaking too.

“Thank you, Alistair,” I mutter, feeling the words stick in my throat.

He gives me a nod, shoving my pack of cigarettes towards me. When I walk to grab them, he speaks again.

“Word of advice?” He lifts the dart he’s been holding, revealing the writing along the white paper: *SRV HEARTS EJS* in neat, looping script.

My stomach drops.

“I—”

“Tell Rook before he finds out,” Alistair interrupts, voice low but firm. “There’s nothing the Judge hates more than being left in the dark. Especially when it comes to his family.”

the burning one

...

Phi

December 6

LONER

Where are you?

ME

House, why?

LONER

Meet me at Tilly's We gotta talk.

HOW MANY TIMES IS TOO MANY TIMES TO READ A TEXT MESSAGE? ASKING for a friend.

I've been standing in Tilly's parking lot for twenty minutes now, just staring at my phone. My mind is a mess, spinning through a thousand scenarios. For a brief moment, I thought maybe someone had found out about us—that the bomb had finally dropped. But the house had been calm when I left, no chaos, no whispers.

So, this had to be about *us*.

And somehow, that's even worse.

I shift from one foot to the other, biting the inside of my cheek, running through every possibility. What if he's tired of keeping this a secret? What if he's bored of me? What if he doesn't love me?

“I fucking hate him,” I mutter into the wind, leaning back against my driver’s-side door.

I hate him for asking me the other night if I’d ever been in love. I hate that I lied and said no. Even as I felt it clawing at my chest. I knew, right there in that moment, that I *was* in love with him.

And now, here I am, standing in the cold, waiting for a guy who’s probably about to break my heart.

Just fucking great.

People say being star-crossed is romantic. They say it’s poetic, tragic in all the right ways. But with the way my heart tightens at the thought of losing him, I know there’s nothing romantic about loving someone you can’t fully have.

Nothing beautiful about this pain. Not the one poets write about that is sweetened by metaphors and softened by time. It’s raw, brutal, the kind that keeps you up at night with questions that have no answers.

It’s staring at the ceiling at three a.m., wondering if it’s better to walk away and save yourself or to stay and let the ache bleed you dry because you can’t bear the thought of leaving them behind.

I’m so fucking consumed with the thoughts of Jude, with the thought of losing a future that I knew was never mine to fully have, that I don’t hear a car door shutting.

My mind is racing with how I’m gonna explain to him that I love him in the middle of him possibly breaking up with me without letting my anger or pride get in the way. It’s so loud in my brain that I don’t hear footsteps.

I’m so focused on Jude that I don’t know I’m in trouble until I feel the cold weight of a gun at my back and the sound of Oakley’s voice in my ear.

“Don’t make a scene. You’re gonna walk that pretty ass right to my car and get in without a peep. You got that, Cherry?”



WHEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL, MY FATHER ALWAYS TOLD ME THAT FIRE FEELS no fear.

He’d kneel down to my level, his gaze intense but tender, and remind me that if fear ever tried to slither inside my chest, I was to remember one

thing: I was Seraphina Van Doren.

The burning one. The fire child. A Van Doren.

If I ever wavered, if the darkness ever pressed too close, if the monsters in my closet got too real, he'd always be there to chase them away.

"Where there is smoke, there is fire, sweet Phi. I'm with you, always."

But there is no smoke. There is no fire.

In this abandoned warehouse where the air hangs heavy with damp rot and rust, all that remains is me, a massive fucking headache, and a piece of shit I should've killed a long fucking time ago.

The warehouse looms like a cavern of broken promises—empty, cold, and soaked in regret. I think we might be somewhere in West Trinity Falls? But I can't remember the drive, the blood leaking down from my temple a reminder of being knocked out cold after I'd tried wrecking his car on the drive here.

My jaw clenches, neck cracking as I tilt my head, trying to ignore the water dripping from a rusted pipe in the far corner. A sinister metronome.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

Oakley leans back against the metal chair in front of me, his eyes darker than the filthy concrete beneath us.

"This isn't how I wanted things to shake down, Cherry." His voice is slurred, the heroin I'd watched him shoot earlier seeping into his system. "It didn't have to be like this. If you would've been a good little girl and ran back to Daddy, I wouldn't have to take such crazy measures to make sure Rook Van Doren gets what he deserves."

"We can sit here all night, shit stain. I don't give a fuck. You wanna kill me? Fine," I bite. "But you better do it quick, and you better run fast, Oakley. My family won't rest until your head is on our goddamn mantle."

I pull against the ropes, feeling the coarse fibers bite deeper into my wrists. The rough, frayed edges chafe my skin raw, sending a fresh jolt of pain up my arms. My shoulders ache, stretched beyond comfort, but pain is familiar, a friend that has carved itself into my bones over the years.

The taste of blood blooms on my tongue, warm and metallic, as I drag it over my cracked bottom lip—a final reminder that, for all Oakley's threats, I'm still very much alive.

Alive.

If death is coming for me, then I'll welcome it with bared teeth.

But I won't greet it with fear. I won't die afraid.

This dude can rip my flesh open, can break every bone, but he'll never get the satisfaction of seeing me crumble. Not now, not ever. Never again does he get to see me weak.

Oakley stands, swaying slightly like he's one step away from falling apart himself. The warehouse air is thick with dampness and the faint stench of mold, but beneath it, I can still smell the reek of sweat and stale cigarettes clinging to him. The gun at his waistband clicks against his belt buckle as he takes a few staggering steps toward me.

His hand snakes out and grips my hair, yanking my head back so hard my neck strains, muscles stretching to their limit. I feel his filthy nails scrape against my scalp before his hand jerks tighter, the sharp burn making my eyes water.

I brace myself, body rigid, just as his palm cracks across my cheek with the force of a sledgehammer.

Pain explodes like fireworks behind my eyes, my vision blurring from the impact. My jaw shifts sideways, a dull, throbbing ache setting in, and the faint ringing in my ears grows louder, as if the air itself is vibrating with violence.

“You don’t get it, do you, bitch?” Oakley’s voice is a low, guttural rasp, raw from years of chain-smoking and rage. “I’m already dead. You’re just the fun before I get there.”

I gather the blood pooling in my mouth, thick and metallic, before spitting it directly into his face. The spit lands with a wet smack, crimson streaks staining his skin.

“You hit like a bitch, you fucking crackhead.”

Oakley’s dazed eyes crackle with anger. For a moment, he’s still, and then his grip tightens viciously, pulling so hard that I feel a searing pain as strands of hair rip free from my scalp. My vision blurs with tears, but I bite down hard on my tongue, so hard that I taste fresh blood, just to keep from making a sound.

“When I’m done with your broken little body, I’m going after your boyfriend.” His lips twist into a grin that’s all malice, a baring of yellowed

teeth. “I’m gonna make Jude stare at all the pictures of your bloody and ruined corpse while I take his ungrateful life.”

My jaw tightens at the mere whisper of his name, my body trembling as I sway in the chair, the metal legs scraping harshly against the cold concrete floor.

Jude. Jude. Jude.

The image of him forced to watch me like this—beaten, bleeding, helpless—sends a wave of desperation crashing over me. My body jolts violently, the chair scraping against the concrete as I thrash against the ropes. My wrists scream with pain, the ropes digging in so deep I know they’re cutting me open, but I don’t care.

I can’t leave him.

I can’t be just another ghost in his life, another name etched into the long list of people who abandoned him.

“Good luck,” I mutter, keeping my tone as casual as I can manage, even with my jaw throbbing like a bitch. “Jude’s gonna string you up with your own guts for touching me.”

Oakley’s grip loosens, his eyes darkening with a wild, untamed fury. Without a second thought, his fist swings forward, crashing into my face with brutal force. Pain erupts behind my eyes like a violent storm, the sound of breaking bone echoing through the empty warehouse, sharp and final like a gunshot in the stillness.

For a fleeting moment, everything fades to black, and Jude’s voice softly resonates in the depths of my mind.

“Three a.m. is for lovers and broken hearts.” His Adam’s apple bobs as he grins, the veins in his throat like tiny roots from trees cording upward. “Which one are you?”

I take another bite of my ice cream, slipping the spoon between my lips.

“Neither,” I mutter honestly as the spoon leaves my lips. “I’ve never been in love.”

Smoothly, so calm I barely notice it, I feel the rough skin of his palms slide across the outside of my thighs. Purposeful fingers curl around the back of my legs just beneath the hem of my frayed shorts.

“Do you want to be?” he murmurs, his voice like silk and smoke. Soft, yet heavy, like every word is a threat.

Jude urges the first flap of a butterfly's wing in my lower belly, right in time with my heart. I feel the tiny cocoons of silk existing between the spaces of my ribs begin to transition.

I've never felt like this.

"What are you doing?" I ask suspiciously. The tips of his fingers dig into me, catching beneath my fishnet leggings, tethering his hands to my body.

I let him lure me closer into the apex of his spread legs.

"Avoiding the wind." He smirks like it's obvious.

My chest tightens when a stream of air rushes against my stomach. He tosses my baggy T-shirt upward, tucking his head beneath the thin material. A gasp skates from my lips as that golden hair tickles my skin.

"Jude—"

His nose brushes against my belly button, making me gasp. He's tracing the fire swirling in my gut like he can see it, or maybe the flame is following his lead. Strong hands slide further up my thighs, sitting right beneath my ass as he hauls me closer, my waist hitting his.

I hate cigarettes.

I've always despised the stench that clings to the air. It reminds me of that one night when I accidentally took a swig from a red Solo cup at a party, convinced it was mine.

Instead, I was greeted by the fucking rank cocktail of stale water and crushed cigarette ashes. It sent me to the bathroom, retching for hours, and it wasn't just the UV Blue sloshing around in my stomach that did it.

Yet, here I am at the Graveyard where anyone could see us, and all I can think about is wanting a hit.

No, I want my mouth on his throat.

I want to taste the nicotine-soaked skin, feel the pulse beneath it—every time we fuck, I'm left with that infamous buzz smokers rave about. It lingers, intoxicating and addictive, like I've inhaled the very essence of him.

I'm hooked. So hopelessly fucking addicted that I might as well be a chain-smoker, devouring a pack a day, twice a day. Any chance we get, any hidden corner we find, our hands are discovering each other's bodies, ripping at clothes, tearing at skin.

And it still doesn't feel like enough.

My teeth take hold of my bottom lip when his hands join his head under my shirt, the graphic tee acting as a hood, a cloak from the roaring wind around us. Right here, he's hidden from the world.

No one knows he's here. No one but me.

I chance a peek down the neckline of my stretched shirt, looking past my lacy purple bra to his face. With the cigarette perched on his lips, he carefully flicks the wheel on the lighter. I feel the heat of the flame on my skin, watching the smoke waft up toward me.

My eyes are watery when he pulls away, pinching the cigarette between two fingers. Lazily inhaling, he's unfazed, as if what had just happened was a figment of my imagination. The smoke billows out of his mouth, drifting up, up, and away into the night.

"You didn't answer me, Geeks. Do you wanna be?"

Tears blur my vision as the memory settles over me, a bittersweet ache that pierces through the physical pain. Oakley is high, unsteady, and that makes the hit bearable. But my nose is definitely broken. Hot blood spills over my lips, metallic and bitter, trickling toward my mouth as my head spins.

A shiver climbs up my spine, prickling the skin beneath my shirt, and I clench my teeth, curling my fingers around my left thumb. I bite down hard on the inside of my cheek, copper flooding my mouth, trapping the scream that threatens to rip from my throat.

You can't die here.

You have to get back to Jude.

You have to get back to your family.

Don't wreck the people you love by letting this bastard kill you. Don't be a little bitch—

I fake a cough, the sound ragged and wet, as I force my thumb from the socket. The snap is sickening, a jolt of lightning that bolts through my arm.

Tears spill down my cheeks, mixing with the blood dripping from my nose, but I barely register them. I just focus on the fiery rush of pain, each beat of it like a twisted prayer.

Last year, breaking my hand felt like the end of the world. Now, it feels like salvation.

The rope loosens, its fibers scraping over torn skin as I twist. I force myself to stay calm and collected as I work my broken hand free. The pain

is excruciating, but I push through it, focusing on my breathing.

In and out. Steady.

Oakley paces erratically, muttering threats under his breath, oblivious to my newfound freedom. His movements are jerky, eyes glassy, the heroin pumping through his veins dulling his senses. I've never been more grateful for drugs than I am now, watching him unravel before me.

"Ruined my life...ruined *everything!*" he screams, voice cracking, raw with rage. His hands claw at his hair, and his face flushes with the same fury that burned the night my world shattered.

"Shut the hell up," I bite out.

Oakley freezes, head snapping toward me. His eyes blaze with disbelief, then morph into hatred. "What did you say, you fucking cunt?"

"Shut. The. Fuck. Up."

He lunges at me with a guttural roar, hands clawing for my throat. I swing my leg out sharply, catching him in the knee. The kick is brutal, a hard, precise hit that sends him stumbling.

Oakley howls in pain, the impact catching him off guard just enough for me to stumble from the chair. My hands are raw and shaking but steady enough to seize the cold metal frame he'd tied me to.

It's heavy, solid, and it hums with the promise of retribution.

I don't give him time to steady himself. I lift the metal chair, every muscle screaming in protest, but the weight feels like hope in my hands—cold, brutal, and unyielding.

It's the kind of hope that doesn't save you; it's the kind that fights back.

The first swing connects with his shoulder, a brutal collision of metal against flesh. The impact reverberates through the warehouse, the sickening crunch slicing through the suffocating silence. His scream pierces the air—raw, jagged, like the sound of something breaking that was never meant to be fixed.

But I don't stop.

I *can't* stop.

I swing again, harder this time, the chair colliding with his ribs. I feel the crack echo in my bones, a deep, guttural vibration that rattles my very core. His body convulses beneath the assault, the sound of his wheezing breaths clawing at the stale, cold air around us. The metal is slick in my

hands, wet with sweat and blood, a cruel testament to the violence pouring out of me.

I swing for the girl who trusted him, her innocence shredded by the lies he wrapped in tenderness.

The chair comes down again, and Oakley's face twists into a distorted mask of agony, the flesh of his forehead splitting beneath the force of my rage. Blood sprays upward in dark, wet streaks, dotting my face, warm and sticky. His mouth is open, gasping, but no words come—just guttural cries, barely human.

I swing for the innocence he stole, the fragile, delicate parts of me he shattered just to watch them crumble.

The next blow connects with his head, the impact brutal, primal. There's a sick, crunching sound as tender flesh splits open, exposing raw, broken skin. Crimson pours from the wound, the bright red of it shocking against the dingy concrete floor.

Blood, bone, skin.

No longer a monster.

Only a broken, beaten man.

I let my pain out of its cage, unleashing it like a starving animal. It's been trapped for too long, festering inside me, and now it's feeding on Oakley's choked sobs, his pitiful cries for mercy that bounce off the walls and fall back empty.

"God, please—"

"God isn't listening. God doesn't exist. The only god here is *me*."

The world narrows to the rattling in my chest, to the wet, labored gasps I force through bloodied lips. I drop the chair, the metal clattering to the ground, a hollow sound that rings in the stillness.

I'm covered in his blood. It coats my hands, sticky and warm, the proof of his last moments seeping into my skin like a mark that will never wash away.

My body trembles violently, limbs sluggish and weak, as I look down at Oakley's broken form. He's barely conscious, blood pooling beneath him, twitching as he clings desperately to the final, fraying thread of life.

I'm the hands of fate tonight. The scissors are mine.

I'm not leaving until that thread is severed clean in two.

Forcing my aching legs to move, each step sending a sharp jolt of pain up my body, I limp toward the canister of gasoline tucked beside Oakley's chair.

Fuel. Oxygen. Heat.

A deadly holy trinity.

Oakley Wixx will never touch me again.

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the romeo

• • •

Jude

December 5th

“WHERE THE FUCK IS SHE?”

The words come out jagged, like barbed wire tearing at my throat. I barely recognize my own voice, low and broken with a desperation that feels foreign—like it belongs to someone else.

Tex Matthews grins, his bloodshot eyes alight with a twisted kind of amusement. “I told you, dude. I watched her head out with Oakley when we got here. Guess the vixen opens her legs for anyone these days.”

The words don’t just hit; they detonate.

I see red—no, I *become* it.

Before I know what I’m doing, I’ve grabbed Tex by the collar and slammed his head into the edge of the table. The sickening thud is the only sound I hear, wet and brutal, reverberating through Tilly’s diner like a violent promise.

But it’s not enough.

The rage inside me is too wild, too vicious, and it needs more than just the feel of Tex’s skull cracking under my hands.

Tex coughs, a bloody tooth spilling from his mouth as he tries to catch his breath. “You’re out of your mind, Sinclair,”

“Where did he take her?” I snarl, yanking him closer, the stench of blood and sweat thick between us. “Where is she, Tex?”

“I told you!” he shouts, his body shaking in my grip. “I don’t know!”

I shove him back, disgust churning in my gut.

I can’t fucking breathe.

My chest is too tight, every breath coming in hurts. I try to steady myself, to clear my head, but all I can think of is Phi—her voice, her laugh, her.

And the terrifying realization that I might never see her again.

I just got her.

Fuck, I haven’t even really *gotten* her yet.

The thought of losing her now, before she’s fully mine, is a weight that crushes every bit of breath from my lungs.

I jump into my car, hands shaking as I fumble with the keys. My grip is unsteady, the tremble in my fingers showing the panic I can’t hide. I drive faster than I should, tires screeching on wet pavement as I tear through Ponderosa Springs, trying to piece together every step Oakley would have taken, every dark corner he could’ve dragged her into.

The fear inside me is primal, raw—a wild animal thrashing against the walls of its cage, desperate for freedom. I’ve never felt like this, this suffocating blend of anger, terror, and helplessness so deep it feels like my lungs are filling with lead, dragging me under. Every breath is a struggle, a fight just to stay above the surface.

I burst into Oakley’s trailer, the stench of stale beer and rot slapping me in the face. I rip open doors, kick over tables, my shouts tearing through the air, her name bouncing back at me, unanswered.

Nothing.

I rush to St. Gabriel’s, the place where both our ghosts still linger. My hands shake as I break down the door, shouting into the empty, darkened halls. The silence is suffocating, a void that swallows every sound I make. It’s a quiet that’s haunted me since childhood, a kind of empty that feels like it’s always been there, waiting.

Still nothing.

I drive.

And I keep driving.

Two missed calls.

I'd missed *two* of her calls earlier.

My fucking phone had died, and now it feels like a death sentence. I replay it over and over—my screen going black, my charger left on the kitchen counter, two calls I never answered.

She *needed* me and I wasn't there.

I slam my fist against the steering wheel, the impact jarring up my arm, splitting my knuckles open.

"Fuck!"

My scream is ragged, raw, a sound ripped straight from my chest. It's not just rage—it's regret, the kind that eats away at you from the inside.

This is not what I wanted.

This is not how I wanted this go.

But the longer I wait, the longer Phi is with Oakley, and I don't even want to fucking think about what he's doing to her. The thoughts that flash in my mind are brutal, unrelenting, and I hate myself for every one of them. My heart feels like it's being squeezed in a fist—tightening with each passing second, each unanswered call, each empty road.

I know I should be angry.

I should be raging, ready to rip Oakley's head clean from his shoulders. Anger has always been my first instinct—sharp, immediate, like a match striking against flint. It's always been there for me, this wild, uncontrollable force, a shield and a weapon all at once.

But right now, my rage is buried alive, suffocating beneath layers of a much darker, more brutal emotion.

Panic.

Fear claws at me from the inside, twisting my gut, tightening my chest until every breath feels like it's being torn out of me. It's a desperate, gut-wrenching feeling that swallows everything else whole.

I've begged God before in my life.

As a kid, I used to get down on my knees and beg God for things—love, safety, redemption—until my knees were bruised and raw. Purple and blue marks that felt like penance for a salvation that never came. I can still feel them now, aching beneath my skin, a reminder of every unanswered plea.

I swore that no man, no god, no force in this fucked-up world would ever see me on my knees again. Not in pleading, not in desperation, not in

the kind of hollow, gut-wrenching need that rips your dignity to shreds and leaves it scattered like ashes in the wind.

But for her?

I'd kneel.

I'd grovel like Prometheus, chained to the rock, enduring agony every day for a stolen fire I was never meant to touch. I'd suffer, I'd bleed, I'd pray to gods I've long since forsaken if only for the *hope* that she was okay.

And that's why I don't hesitate. Not for a single second.

I stumble out of the car the moment it jerks to a stop, legs barely holding me as I make my way up the marble steps. My chest is burning, aching with an undying fire that's searing through me, threatening to consume everything in its path.

The door opens with a thud that echoes through the house, a desperate, harrowing sound.

I storm into the living room, not even noticing the handful of people gathered there. Their faces blur together, concern etched into features I can't focus on, voices calling my name that I can't register.

Because they aren't who I'm looking for.

Rook Van Doren can kill me for loving her later.

I push past them, each step frantic, my feet barely keeping up with the frantic beat of my heart. I don't stop until I'm in front of Rook's office, my palms slamming into the heavy wooden door. It swings open, the smell of cigar smoke immediately filling my lungs.

Rook's head snaps up, his brows furrowed with confusion, his voice a gruff mutter. "Jude?"

But the moment he sees my face, something shifts. The confusion disappears, replaced by a cold, deadly focus.

"What happened?"

"Phi," I choke out, the word leaving me like a broken prayer. I can't stop the tears burning at the corners of my eyes, but I don't care. I don't give a fuck if he sees me like this. "Seraphina, Phi, she..."

My throat closes, the words strangling me, the panic finally breaking through. I reach out, trying to steady myself by grabbing for the back of a leather chair, but I miss. My legs give way beneath me, and I crash to the floor, knees slamming against the hardwood with a hollow, resounding thud.

The pain barely registers. It's drowned out by the burning in my chest, an unbearable pressure that's threatening to swallow me whole.

Don't panic, Jude. Don't panic.

Don't panic, Jude. Don't panic.

Don't panic, Jude. Don't panic.

"Jude, hey, kid, *look at me.*"

Rook's voice is closer now, low and steady. I feel his hands on my face, rough palms holding me up, forcing me to meet his gaze. His eyes are fierce, focused, but there's something else there, too, and it mirrors the fear in mine.

"What happened?" Rook demands, voice breaking through the haze of panic that's suffocating me. "Where is Phi?"

I know I should answer, but my chest is caving in, my lungs refusing to fill. My mouth opens, but the words are tangled in the back of my throat, choking me.

I don't care if it makes me weak. I don't care if he sees me like this—broken, desperate, begging.

"Phi," I finally manage, my voice nothing more than a shattered whisper. "I can't find her. Oakley...Oakley Wixx has her, and I can't find her."

My voice cracks, tears spilling over despite my best efforts to hold them back.

"I don't have anyone," I choke out, the words breaking like glass. "Rook, please."

For a moment, there's a heavy silence, as if even the air itself is holding its breath. And then, without warning, Rook's hand is at the back of my head, gripping tight.

Rook's grip tightens around me, his broad hand cradling the back of my head as I collapse against his chest. My forehead presses into the rough fabric of his shirt, and the smell of stale cigar smoke and bourbon fills my nose.

His heartbeat thuds beneath my skin—steady, grounding, a rhythm that contrasts sharply with the chaos inside me. I let it anchor me, let it be the only thing holding me upright as my chest heaves with desperate, ragged breaths.

"Breathe, Jude. Just breathe."

I grit my teeth, the taste of salt and iron heavy on my tongue, my throat closing around a sob that I refuse to let escape.

“I should’ve been there,” I whisper, the words barely audible, but heavy with guilt. “I *should’ve*—”

“It’s not your fault, Jude.” Rook interrupts harshly, “This is not your fault.”

The words hit like a punch, unexpected and almost too much to take. I try to pull away, to retreat back into the familiar comfort of my anger, but Rook doesn’t let me. His hands stay steady, holding me in place, refusing to let me crumble under the weight of my own guilt.

I can barely hear anything past the roar of blood in my ears, past the sound of my own heart hammering wildly against my ribs.

And then, a sudden, piercing sound shatters the heavy silence.

My phone is ringing.

And when I answer, I’m reminded of why Seraphina Van Doren never needed anyone to slay her dragons.

She is one.



December 6th

“SERAPHINA SUSTAINED SEVERE TRAUMA TO HER HEAD, FACE, AND BODY. SHE’S suffered multiple facial fractures, including a broken nose and cheekbone. The impact to her head caused a significant concussion, and she’s currently in a medically-induced coma to manage the brain swelling.”

I lean back against the cold, sterile wall, the unforgiving tile biting into my spine through my thin T-shirt. The smell of antiseptic clings to the air, mixing with the staleness of shitty hospital food wafting from somewhere down the hall.

My arms are draped over my knees, head bowed, eyes burning but dry.

I don’t know how long I’ve been here. Time doesn’t really move the same way when you’re numb. Everything just feels like a blur of white walls, hollow footsteps, and a constant, monotonous beeping echoing faintly from other rooms.

My chest feels empty, like someone has hollowed me out, scooped out my insides, and left nothing behind but a dull, aching void.

I should be feeling something—anger, pain, fear—but right now there's nothing.

Just numbness.

A paralyzing, suffocating numbness that's settled into my bones like ice.

“Her ribs are badly bruised, and she has a fracture along the right side—likely from the blows she endured.”

The hallway feels too bright, too clean for the molten black turmoil I'm carrying inside me. I stare blankly at the scuffed linoleum floor, counting the cracks, tracing the faded patterns with a kind of desperate focus.

I need something to keep me tethered, something to hold onto because everything else feels like it's slipping through my fingers.

“The next twenty-four to forty-eight hours are crucial, especially with the head injury. The swelling in her brain needs to subside before we can be more definitive about her recovery. She’s strong, and given the extent of her injuries, it’s remarkable she managed to stay conscious to escape the fire.”

I take a shaky breath, my throat burning with the effort. I close my eyes, the darkness behind my eyelids offering no comfort, only the same crushing, unrelenting reality. I press the heels of my palms into my eyes, trying to force the tears back, trying to force the images of Phi—broken, bleeding, helpless—out of my mind.

But they don't leave. They cling to me, relentless, haunting echoes that won't let go. Each one feels like a knife twisted into my chest, a cruel reminder that I wasn't there when she needed me most.

I should've been there.

The guilt is a living, breathing thing inside me. It gnaws at my insides, piece by piece, devouring whatever is left of my heart.

It's the kind of pain that doesn't just hurt—it hollows you out, leaves you feeling empty, a wound that will never close.

We didn't have enough time. The world didn't give us enough time.

And maybe it never would have.

I don't know what I did—what I did in this life or the last one—to deserve this kind of punishment.

All I wanted was one good thing. Just one.

I wonder if I had the right to believe I deserved something like Phi. Was it stupid to think that someone like me could have her? That I could be worthy of the sun?

Or was I always destined to be the moon?
We'd had our brief eclipse and it was over.

Because maybe the Sinclair name meant I could never truly love anything without destroying it in the process.

I hear a familiar, steady cadence of footsteps approaching. I don't look up, but I know it's Rook. I recognize the sound of his shoes against the linoleum—the determined, deliberate weight of them.

He stops beside me, the weight of his presence suddenly heavy. I know he blames me, and that's okay. I find no fault in him for that. All Rook had done was try to keep history from repeating itself and my pride forced me to ignore him.

Finally, he moves, lowering himself to the floor, letting out a little groan as his knees creak.

Rook sits next to me, leaning back against the wall in a mirror of my posture.

The silence stretches, but I don't know how to break it. I don't even know if I want to.

So we just sit there.

Two men bound by love for a girl who's fighting for her life behind a set of closed doors we can't enter.

"She's stubborn, you know," Rook finally says, voice rough but steady.
"Always has been."

I swallow hard, my throat dry and raw. "I know."

"She wouldn't let me teach her how to ride a bike without training wheels," he continues, a faint, tired smile flickering at the corner of his mouth. "Kept falling, skinning her knees, crying—god, she cried so much—but she never once asked me to help her up."

My mouth waters, bile sitting in the bottom of my throat.

I can almost see it—little Phi, stubborn and relentless, refusing to let anyone help her, even when her knees were scraped raw and bloody. I can picture her tiny, furious determination, the way she must've squared her jaw, set fire in her eyes, and tried again.

Stubborn girl.

“You and I—” Rook starts, then pauses, finding his footing, “You and I are far more similar than I wanted to admit, Jude. My wife has more grace with these kinds of things, but I know what it’s like to bare scars from a man who is supposed to protect you.”

I stare down at the floor, my jaw tightening. The familiar weight of old wounds presses against my chest, and suddenly it’s not just about Phi anymore. It’s about fathers and sons, about all the things we carry because of men who never learned how to be anything but broken.

“You don’t have to do this.”

Part of me wants him to stop, wants to keep the distance between us. It’s safer that way, isn’t it?

To stay bitter, to keep him at arm’s length, to hold onto the anger that’s been a shield for as long as I can remember.

But the other part—the part that’s breaking apart with every second Phi stays in that room—wants to let him in, to let this be the start of something that isn’t built on hate.

Something good for Phi.

Because I know, the man sitting next to me is her entire world. Her father is her hero and how can she love me if I hate him?

“I do. I owe you an apology. For punishing you for things you didn’t do. I know that you’re not Easton. That you are more than your last name. I know that better than anyone, Jude. I just, I didn’t want to—”

“You didn’t want to lose them,” I finish for him. “I know. I don’t fault you for protecting your family, Rook. Never have.”

And it’s true.

For all the resentment I’ve harbored, for all the ways I’ve hated him, I’ve always understood this one thing. I know what it’s like to love someone so fiercely that it scares you. I know what it’s like to build walls around the people you care about, even if it means keeping others out.

I did it for my dad, even though he never deserved it. Anytime his name was harshly mentioned, anger would flare in me. Because even though he was a monster to this town, to *me*? He was still *my* father.

“She’s gonna make it,” I tell him, not sure if I’m saying it for me or for him.

“Yes, she will.”

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the juliet

· · ·

Phi

December 9

“WHO CAN WE CALL FOR YOU? MA’AM, CAN YOU HEAR ME?”

Cold. I’m so fucking cold.

The voices around me are muffled, like they’re underwater, distant and warped. My body feels heavy, leaden, every muscle refusing to respond. There’s a dull, throbbing pain somewhere deep, but the numbness is creeping in.

“Jude.” It’s barely a whisper, so weak it’s almost swallowed by the chaos around me. I try to move, try to wrap my arms around myself for warmth, but my limbs feel paralyzed, dead weight.

“Jude...Jude...”

“Crash cart, she’s coding!”

The darkness wraps tighter, but there’s a sliver of light, a faint pull that won’t let me go. It’s Jude’s name, echoing somewhere deep inside me—a lifeline.

Then, suddenly, it’s like being dragged upward from the depths of a freezing ocean.

Air fills my lungs in a violent rush, the world around me snapping into sharp focus. The sounds are harsh and disjointed—urgent voices, the rapid

beeping of machines, frantic shuffling of feet. My heart thunders in my chest, racing against the echo of near death.

“Clear!”

“Phi, can you hear me?”

It’s a voice that’s steady, familiar, one I’d know anywhere.

“Mom?” It’s barely more than a broken rasp.

My throat feels raw, like I’ve swallowed shards of glass.

I blink slowly, my vision blurry, like I’m looking through murky water. Everything is distant, distorted—except her voice. It’s so clear, so achingly familiar, it feels like it’s the only real thing in this moment.

“Right here, baby.” Mom’s face comes into view, tear-streaked and pale, her blue eyes wide with a terror that’s only now beginning to soften into relief. She’s clutching my hand so tightly it hurts, but I can’t bring myself to pull away.

Tears blur my vision, and I feel the wet warmth of her kiss against my forehead, her fingers stroking my hair. “Oh, my sweet fire child, you’re okay. You’re okay.”

The words anchor me, each one sinking in, pulling me further into reality.

My mother is here.

I’m not alone.

I didn’t die.

Flashes of memory cut through the haze: Oakley’s twisted grin, the cold metal chair, the suffocating smell of gasoline. His hands on me, pain shooting through my head.

The fire.

The last thing I remember is the flames licking at the walls, smoke thick in the air, and a feeling of desperation so sharp it still lingers in my chest. Did I escape? Or was I pulled out, half-dead and barely breathing?

Oakley is dead. Oakley died.

I killed him. I—

“Dad?” I croak, trying to turn my head, but the effort is too much.

Everything fucking hurts.

God, this is so not the fucking vibe.

I feel like my body has been shoved into a blender and spun into pulp. Even my teeth ache.

“Right here, sweet Phi.” Dad’s words are thick, as if he’s been holding back tears for hours.

He steps closer, his broad frame blocking out the harsh light above me. His eyes are red, the lines of his face deeper than I remember, but his presence is solid, unwavering.

“You scared the hell out of us,” he breathes, brushing a thumb over the cheek that isn’t throbbing.

I try to give a smile, but it ends up just coming out crooked as I lean back against the pillow behind me. “Thought I’d keep you on your toes.”

I’m so tired that breathing feels like it’s taking up too much effort.

“I’m gonna go let everyone know she’s awake,” Mom says, giving my hand another tight squeeze, her strawberry scent swimming around me as she leans in to kiss my forehead again. “I love you, my sweet girl.”

I lean into her touch. “I love you more.”

As she walks toward the door, I watch her through half-lidded eyes, the weight of exhaustion pulling at me. Dad stays by my side, his presence both a comfort and a reminder of everything that’s happened. His fingers brush over my hair, gentle but trembling, like he’s afraid I might break beneath his touch.

The fog in my brain starts to clear more, panic settling in my chest as I look up at my dad, eyes wide.

“Dad, Jude didn’t have anything to do with this,” I rush out, the words coming out as a ramble. “He wasn’t involved. He and Oakley aren’t—”

“I know, I know.” His voice is calm, steady, even as his fingers gently smooth the crease in my brow. “Hey, it’s okay.”

“Where is he? Is he alright?”

The words tumble out, frantic and uneven, and the sudden escalation of my heart rate sets off the monitor beside me. The beeping becomes rapid, sharp, matching the rising panic that’s clawing at my chest.

“Jude’s fine. He’s right outside—hasn’t left since they brought you in two days ago.” He lets out a small grunt, a hint of dry humor breaking through the worry. “Though he’s starting to smell, and it’s freaking out the nurses.”

The corner of my mouth twitches, a feeble attempt at a laugh that quickly turns into a cough.

“I never—” Dad chokes, then clears his throat from all the emotion trapped there. “I never wanted my past, my job, to affect this family. I should’ve done a better job of protecting you.”

This is what I’ve spent years trying to avoid—seeing my father wear my burdens like his own personal crown of thorns. I’ve watched him fight battles he never asked for, ones I caused with my reckless need to burn down everything that gets too close.

“Dad, please,” I whisper. “It’s not your fault.”

The tears that spill over his cheeks are silent, his eyes a storm of regret and anguish. He wipes at them quickly, as if ashamed to let me see his pain, but I reach out weakly, my hand finding his.

As my fingers close around Dad’s, I feel the roughness of his skin—a texture caused by years of hard choices and heavy burdens. His guilt presses down on the room, suffocating in its weight, and it’s unbearable.

“I’m sorry, Phi. I’m so sorry. This is on me. What Oakley did to you in that warehouse was not your fault. It was mine. It was never about you. I just...I’m—”

“Dad, it’s okay,” I interrupt, squeezing his hand. “It’s okay.”

The realization hits me like a punch to the gut. He doesn’t know. Not about Halloween night. Not about the suffocating shame that’s lodged itself in my chest ever since, festering like an open wound. I let out a shaky breath, my shoulders sagging under the weight of secrets I’ve been too terrified to share.

For a fleeting moment, it feels like a small mercy. If he knew the whole truth, I don’t think I could take the look in his eyes—the one that would go from guilt to shattered helplessness.

It’s bad enough knowing that he blames himself for this. But the assault? That’s something I can’t bring myself to give him. It’s too raw, too ugly, too intertwined with every part of me I’ve tried to bury.

It’s a scar I’ve kept hidden, even from myself, by cloaking it in anger and recklessness.

“I love you so much, sweet Phi.”

“I love you, Dad.”



WHEN I WAKE UP AGAIN, THE ROOM IS DARK.

Bathed in the faint flow of monitors and the muted hum of machinery, I blink slowly, my eyes adjusting to the dimness, and my body feels achingly heavy against the thin hospital mattress.

But then I see him.

Jude is sitting in the chair by the door, elbows propped on his knees, fingers tangled in his still-damp hair. He must've taken a shower—probably the first one in days. His hair falls across his forehead, darker when damp, making him look both exhausted and achingly beautiful.

My heart clenches at the sight of him, this boy who should have been my enemy yet somehow became the one person I can't bear to lose.

“Loner.”

Jude's head snaps up, his eyes locking onto mine. He looks like he's seen a ghost—his jaw clenches, and raw emotion flickers in his gaze. Relief. Desperation.

“Geeks,” he breathes.

Subconsciously, his palm falls to his chest, rubbing the spot right where his heart is as he stares at me. I'd expected pity, for him to look at me like I was a broken doll that couldn't be fixed.

Yet Jude is looking at me like he always does.

I'm not broken. I'm not The Queen of Disaster. I'm not his enemy.

I'm just Phi. Just Geeks.

“Will you...” I mutter, dragging my tongue across my cracked bottom lip. “Will you hold me, please?”

The words are soft, barely more than a breath, but they carry the weight of everything I've tried to keep buried for so long.

I need him closer.

The distance between us feels like an open wound, and I'm so tired of bleeding.

Tears start falling, unrelenting, and I let them. There's a strange relief in it, like a dam finally breaking. I'm not crying just for the current pain but for the years of silence that have held me captive, for the lies I told myself to survive.

The walls I've built, the armor I've worn—they all fall away in this moment. I don't need to be brave right now. Not with Jude.

I don't want to be strong, or untouchable, or angry.

I just want to be held and told that, somehow, my shattered pieces are still worth loving.

Jude's brows furrow, pain and tenderness breaking across his eyes. It makes my chest ache, watching as he moves toward me.

He doesn't ask if I'm sure. He doesn't hesitate. He just moves.

Once he's close enough, I give him another nod, letting him know I'm okay, and it's all he needs. Jude shifts, gently lying down beside me, careful to avoid the IVs and the wires that connect me to the beeping machines. The corners of my mouth twitch up as I look at his feet hanging off the edge, his big body struggling to fit on this bed.

I feel the warmth of him radiate through the thin hospital gown as his arm slips under my shoulders, pulling me closer until my head rests against his chest. I can hear the steady, uneven thump of his heart, and it's the most comforting sound in the world—proof that he's here, alive, real.

His other hand finds mine, his fingers threading through mine with a careful, trembling touch.

The dam inside me isn't just breaking—it's flooding, washing away the walls I've built brick by brick. I've spent so long trying to be untouchable, the fire-breathing dragon who's never the damsel in distress. But here, in the warmth of his arms, I feel so small, so fragile.

It's a part of me I thought I'd killed off years ago, but right now, she's clawing her way to the surface, desperate for comfort, desperate for *Jude*.

"I've got you, baby. I'm right here. I've got you."

His hand cradles the back of my head, his fingers gently threading through my hair in that soothing way he does when I can't sleep and my mind is racing with too many thoughts.

I bury my face in his chest, the familiar scent of smoke and books enveloping me. It's a scent that means safety. For once, I don't resist. I don't push him away.

I just let myself be held.

I'm not sure how long we stay there. How long I let him hold me, but I know I end up falling asleep at some point because when I wake up, the sun is streaming through the blinds of the hospital room.

The room is filled with an array of flower arrangements, their vibrant colors a stark contrast to the sterile walls. On one side, a large banner hangs, cheerfully proclaiming, *We love you, Phi Phi!*

Little painted handprints decorate it, each one accompanied by a name signed along the bottom: *Racer Hawthorne, Stella Hawthorne, Scout Hawthorne.*

My chest tightens as I read the names, a flood of warmth cutting through the lingering pain. I can already picture Racer's wild, mischievous grin, Stella's shy but sweet smile, and Scout's little hands reaching out for a hug.

The thought of being able to wrap my arms around them once more, to feel their sticky kisses and hear them call me *Phi Phi* in that eager, excited way, makes me feel like I can finally breathe again.

I'm so grateful that I'll get to see them again. That I'll get to see everyone again.

I think about all the conversations that haven't been finished, the jokes that haven't been told yet, the moments of quiet comfort that make life feel bearable. I think about bonfires and late-night drives, the races at the Graveyard, and even the messy arguments that somehow make us stronger.

It's all here, waiting for me, just outside this room. And for the first time in a long time, the future doesn't feel like a series of battles waiting to be fought.

It feels like a gift—one I almost lost but somehow managed to hold on to.

“How’s our universe, baby?”

Jude’s voice interrupts my thoughts, his body still lying next to mine, arms wrapped securely around me.

“Better with you in it,” I hum, rubbing my nose against the fabric of his shirt, inhaling deeply until the only air left in me is Jude.

“I thought I lost you.”

“I’m offended you’d think I’d die that easily.”

Jude’s chest rumbles with a soft, low laugh, the sound vibrating against my cheek. The world outside blurs, leaving only this fragile universe we’ve carved out for ourselves.

Right now, it’s just Jude and Phi.

“I killed Oakley,” I whisper, a silent confession to the set of ears I trust most in this world. “I killed him.”

“I know,” he murmurs, no judgment, only quiet acceptance. “I know, baby.”

A part of me wishes I felt regret, but I don't.

There's no guilt lingering in the corners of my mind, no shame gnawing at my insides. The void Oakley left inside me isn't filled by his death—it's as empty and raw as ever, a reminder that some wounds run too deep to ever truly close.

But I don't regret it.

I tilt my head up slightly, my cheek still pressed against his chest.
“Jude?”

“Yeah?”

“I wanna stay here. Just a little longer. Okay?”

“We can stay here as long as you want, Geeks. Forever.”

Forever.

If we're meant to end in tragedy, ours will be my favorite.

It won't be the kind written in history books, filled with grand speeches and epic betrayals. It'll be quieter, etched in stolen moments and whispered confessions. It'll be the kind of heartbreak that tastes like his lips and smells like smoke and rain.

We were made for chaos, for love that is wild.

And if it all comes crashing down, I'll still take every broken piece of it, knowing I chose him and he chose me, despite the world that begged us not to.

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the star-crossed lovers

. . .

Jude

December 25

“JUDE.”

Poke.

“Jude.”

Poke.

“Ju—”

“Yes, Geeks?” I interrupt, catching her wrist midair, stopping her from poking my cheek again. My voice is rough, thick with sleep.

I crack one eye open, squinting against the early morning sunlight streaming through the curtains. It cuts across the room in warm, hazy streaks, casting soft, golden light over the bed and the girl straddling my lap.

Phi is wide-awake, a mischievous grin curling on her lips. One of my old T-shirts hangs off her shoulder, swallowing her petite frame in its oversized fabric.

Her red hair tumbles messily over her shoulders, catching the sunlight and making her look wild, like a painting in shades of fire and rebellion.

In her hands, she’s holding a box wrapped in shiny blue paper, a big bow perched on top like a crown.

“Merry Christmas, Loner,” she says, the words tinged with unrestrained excitement.

The bruises on her face are still there, but the swelling has gone down considerably, leaving only faded traces of purple and blue along her cheekbone and jaw. The cast on her hand is still a reminder of what a badass she is. I mean, the girl broke her own finger, for fuck’s sake.

But despite the lingering marks of violence, she’s a vision—messy, raw, but achingly beautiful.

“Is this another prank?” I tease, running my palms up her bare thighs. “Glitter bomb? Rabid ferret? Some other plot to destroy my morning?”

She bursts into laughter, her head tilting back, the sound deep and unrestrained. It’s a kind of joy that’s entirely hers—bold, unapologetic, and loud enough to fill the entire room. Her whole body shakes with it, the vibration resonating through my chest.

There she is.

There is the sun.

Now my morning can start.

“It’s stupid.” She shrugs, her expression growing slightly more serious as she bites down on her bottom lip. “But I saw it, and I thought you’d like it.”

Phi *loves* Christmas.

It’s what we spent all night talking about.

The smell of peppermint, the decorations, the gifts, the family. All of it. It’s her favorite holiday, and even though she said she didn’t get me something, I knew she was lying.

The truth lives in her eyes, always.

I shift upward, bringing her with me as I rest against the headboard. She settles in my lap, her weight grounding me. I start tearing at the wrapping paper, savoring each rip, trying to draw out the moment.

When I finally peel it away, a medium-sized glass display box is revealed. Inside, perfectly encased, is a typewriter built entirely of LEGO.

“It took me a fucking week. Do you know how hard it is to build this in secret when you are always poking around, making sure I’m still breathing?”

“Oh, how dare I make sure my girlfriend is okay,” I say with a mockingly serious tone, squeezing her thighs playfully. I lean forward to

press a kiss to her nose, unable to contain my smile. “I love it. Thank you, Geeks.”

“That’s not all,” she says quickly.

“Yeah?” I arch a brow, letting my hands wander higher, gripping her hips tighter so she can feel the hardness beneath the sheet. “I get more?”

“Head out of the gutter, Sinclair,” she chides, swatting at my chest. She retrieves a folded-up piece of paper from beside the bed, handing it over with a nervous huff. “If you tell anyone I wrote this, I will actually kill you.”

“Your secret’s safe with me, baby. No one gets to know how sweet you are for me.”

All of her secrets are with me.

They’re not the kind whispered in dark corners or passed around like rumors. No, her secrets are heavier, darker—hidden behind sharp words, defiant smirks, and a reputation built on chaos.

But I know them. I know the broken edges like they are my own.

I’ve felt the sharpness of her pain, the way it cuts through even when she’s trying to hide it. I know the nights when she wakes up gasping, the memories choking her. I know the way she clenches her fists until her knuckles turn white, fighting off tears because she’s terrified of being seen as weak.

I know the moments she lets herself be vulnerable, rare, fleeting glimpses when her armor slips, when her eyes lose their edge and she’s just *Phi*—scared, hopeful, and so damn real it hurts.

I know her secrets. I’ve felt their weight, and they are ones I will happily carry in this life and the next.

Phi unfolds the letter, her fingers trembling slightly as she stares down at the words.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this. Okay, okay, here we go.” She hums, giving her head a little shake before she releases a breath. “Jude, J, my loner poet, the star-crossed love of my life...”

My grip on her thighs tightens, my heart thundering as I wait for her to continue.

“I am not a poet. I do not know the difference between a limerick and a sonnet. I don’t have the right words to make pain beautiful, to wrap

heartbreak in flowery phrases that make it easier to swallow. I am not a poet, but I do know this.”

Phi looks up at me, and I see how much these past two weeks have taken out of her. The hard work she’s put in to heal, to get better not only for herself but for those around her.

It’s not been easy. None of it has. The weird navigation of now living several yards away instead of a few feet.

Rook and I are...alright. Tolerable. We’ve reached a truce, of sorts. But that doesn’t mean he’s about to let me sleep beside his daughter, not when he knows exactly how I feel about her.

The silver lining? The Caldwell house is just across the way. A few steps, a quick dash. Close enough that I can still be there when she needs me.

“There’s this thing called quantum entanglement.” She pauses, a playful grin tugging at her lips before she continues. “It’s this idea that when two particles interact, they become linked—entangled. No matter how far apart they are, they stay connected. If you change one, the other changes too, instantly. It’s like the universe has tied an invisible string between them, pulling one when the other moves, binding them in a way that defies logic and space. Even if they’re galaxies apart, they still move together, like they’re dancing to the same silent song.”

I watch her as she speaks.

There’s something ferociously beautiful about Seraphina Van Doren.

It isn’t the delicate kind of beauty that hangs in museums or graces the pages of art books, the kind that leaves you in breathless awe.

No, it’s a raw, untamed beauty that makes you understand why a single face could launch a thousand ships into battle.

It doesn’t inspire admiration; it ignites war in the hearts of men. Not to be adored—Phi’s heart demands to be fought for, claimed even at the risk of ruin.

I’d risk ruin every time for this.

For her.

“I never really got it until I met you. You, with your storm cloud eyes and faded gold hair, the boy who wore loneliness like a second skin. You were a different kind of gravity, pulling everything in me toward you—every thought, every heartbeat. And suddenly, I was entangled.”

Her eyes glisten, tears pooling in the corners, and I can't help but reach up, my thumb gently brushing away the drops that threaten to fall.

"I think our love is like that. It's not poetic; it's cosmic. We are messy, raw, like a collision that should've destroyed us both. But maybe that's the point. Maybe love isn't meant to be easy. Maybe it's meant to be this—two people desperately trying to find each other across the chaos, across the darkness, across everything that should've kept us apart. So, I am not a poet, Jude. But I am yours. For however long our particles keep dancing."

I pull her closer, wrapping her up in my arms, burying my face in the crook of her neck. Her skin is warm, soft, and smells of vanilla and smoke, a scent that's become the only home I know.

"I love you, Geeks."

They feel foreign yet deeply right, like they've been there all along, just waiting to be spoken.

It's the first time I've ever said those words out loud to anyone. Not to a friend, not to family—hell, not even to myself when I've tried to convince myself that I'm worth loving.

No one has given me a chance to love them until Phi.

Her fingers weave into the back of my hair, and I feel her lips brush against my temple. "I love you, Loner."

I tilt her chin up, my mouth trailing hot, open-mouthed kisses along the column of her throat, feeling the way she shivers under my touch. Her body rocks against mine, the silk of her panties rubbing over the sheet, teasing every nerve I have left.

"You—"

Bang. Bang. Bang.

"Jude, twenty minutes before we head out," Alistair's voice booms through the door. "You too, Phi. I'm not fighting your father on Christmas."

Phi snorts softly, burying her face into my shoulder, and I groan, dropping my forehead against hers.

Alistair Caldwell once told me that the medallion around my neck could buy my way back home.

And when the reaper comes to claim my soul, there will be no hesitation, no second thoughts.

I'll pay my way straight back to her.

To the fire in her eyes and the love that feels like fate.

Because home isn't a place; it's right here, in her arms, where even fate can't keep me away.



PHI

CHRISTMAS IS MY FAVORITE HOLIDAY.

The smell of peppermint, all the traditions and decorating, but mostly, I love giving presents.

It's sorta been my thing since I found a few bugs to give to Aunt Lyra when I was just a kid. Now, she's got a PhD in entomology and has published several successful books on the topic, so I'm sure she didn't need some bug I dug up in our backyard, but she'd treated it like it was her most prized possession. It's still pinned in a frame in her house.

It was her that gave me the love of gift giving.

Now, I spend hours and hours scouring the internet, curating the perfect present for every member of my family. It takes nearly the entire year to buy for everyone, but the moment December 25 rolls around and I get to see the looks on their faces? It's more than worth it.

We've spent hours huddled in my parents' living room, watching everyone open gifts one by one. Reign is helping my mom pass out gifts, Nora's cuddling Scout on the couch, I'm pretty sure Atlas is passed out on the floor, and then there is Ez and Andy. Her bubble-gum-pink hair is a direct contrast to his inky black, with her feet thrown over his lap while he uses a Sharpie to draw on her shoes.

Everyone is so harmoniously in sync, happy.

It's not perfect, but we are happy, and it's more than enough.

I take it all in—the shredded wrapping paper, the sound of the littles squealing as they dive into another pile of gifts, the soft hum of Christmas music in the background.

I slip out quietly, the need for a moment's air pulling me toward the back door.

The cold December air bites at my cheeks as I step onto the back porch, the faint scent of pine and smoke drifting in the crisp night.

And there he is—Jude.

He's leaning against the porch railing, a cigarette dangling from his fingers, smoke curling lazily into the air. His face is partially illuminated by the soft glow of the porch light, the shadows making him look both impossibly familiar and achingly distant.

"If you hurt my niece, I will give your spine to my wife as an anniversary gift," Thatcher says, voice low and steady, the kind of threat that doesn't need repeating.

I'd like to say my uncle is just being protective, but knowing Thatcher, there's a very real chance he's serious. He's got that kind of vibe—calm, calculated, and absolutely willing to follow through on every word he just said.

Jude, to his credit, doesn't flinch. He stands tall, wearing that lazy, lopsided smirk that usually drives me insane in the best way. "Respectfully, your niece swings on grown men and has impulse control issues. I think she's gonna be just fine."

Thatcher's brows arch in amusement, a hint of a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "She's a Van Doren. I'm not sure why you expected less."

He gives Jude one last assessing look before turning to walk away, his footsteps heavy against the porch as I watch from the shadows until he disappears back into the chaos of the living room.

I bite back a grin, the warmth of it spreading across my chest as I step closer. Jude's eyes find mine instantly, a spark of amusement flickering in their depths.

"Didn't know I had to survive a medieval trial to be with you, Geeks."

I roll my eyes, my smile betraying me as I saunter toward him, closing the gap between us. "Welcome to the family, Loner. It's an extreme sport."

I take the final step toward him, closing the distance between us, and lean back against the railing beside him. The cold metal seeps through my sweater, but the heat radiating from Jude's body makes up for it. His hands find my waist as he steps in front of me, his touch warm against the soft fabric of my sweater.

"Listen, not to be that girl, but it is our first Christmas together, and I still don't have my gift."

“Oh, is that so?” Jude teases, leaning in just enough that our noses almost touch. “You’re feeling neglected?”

I try to keep my expression serious, though a smile tugs at the corner of my lips. “Yes, completely. You’re a hopeless romantic. Where is my grand gesture?”

Jude rolls his eyes, the kind of exaggerated motion that’s meant to make me laugh, and it works. He reaches into his coat pocket, producing a small, carefully wrapped box tied with a ribbon.

“Oh my gosh!” I gasp, feigning dramatic shock. “I wasn’t expecting this!”

“You’re a fucking drama queen,” he laughs. “Now, open it.”

I untie the ribbon slowly, savoring the moment. The crisp paper peels away to reveal a small velvet box. My breath hitches as I lift the lid, finding a golden medallion nestled inside. The sun etched into its surface is intricate and beautiful, the rays fanning out in perfect detail, catching the faint light from the porch.

My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I pull out the piece of paper folded beneath it, unfolding and reading the familiar scrawl of Jude’s handwriting appearing before me.

No wall built from blood and name could keep me from you.

How could it?

My soul has danced with the cosmic dust your heart once knew.

No night darkened by crimson history could hide you from me.

How could it?

I knew you before my hands felt touch and eyes could see.

No wall could hold me.

How could it?

Their shield was fabricated by man-made hatred.

We are first thread.

Untouchable string Clotho herself created.

-E

“MERRY CHRISTMAS, GEEKS,” JUDE WHISPERS, PRESSING A GENTLE KISS TO my forehead, his breath warm against my skin.

Jude Sinclair did not fix me.

He did not magically restore what Oakley broke in me. Not even killing him could fix it.

But Jude is the person who makes it feel lighter. Who helps me carry it, who walks beside me as I navigate healing.

Jude Sinclair is the only person that I want to be there for me. The only one who gets my secrets, the only one who gets all of me.

I tilt my head up, searching his eyes as if trying to memorize every shadow, every flicker. My voice is barely audible, almost swallowed by the winter stillness. “Is this our happy ending, J?”

He arches a brow, a familiar smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. “What if I said I don’t believe in happy endings?”

“Then we’ll create one anyway.”

We’d create universes to be with each other.

Ours isn’t a love that waits for permission; it’s the kind that defies boundaries, the kind that would set fire to the stars if it meant we could hold on to this moment just a little longer.

We’d burn through galaxies if it meant a single breath together.

And as I look up at Jude, the snow beginning to fall in soft, slow flurries around us, I realize that maybe this is the truest kind of happy ending.

Not perfect, not easy, but *ours*.

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about the author

Monty Jay is a dark romance author with titles published in multiple countries. Their books are for hopeless romantics with wicked hearts looking for their next morally grey hero. They call the Appalachian mountains home, along with their two furry friends, Poe and Maeve. When they aren't writing you can find them reading anything Stephen King, in a tattoo chair or binging a new true crime documentary.

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