

BAD INTENTIONS

When trouble follows you home...

A DARK HOCKEY BULLY ROMANCE

MILA KANE

Bad Intentions

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HELLIONS OF HADE HARBOR

OceanofPDF.com

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Welcome to Hade Harbor



Like other books in the Mila Kane universe, this is a dark romance, and has elements which some readers might find triggering. All TWs are listed on my [website](#).

Bad Intentions is a bully romance.

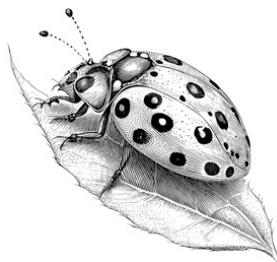
TWs include:

Bullying
Somo
CNC

Please skip this one if any of these don't tickle your fancy - otherwise,
enjoy
Mila xxx

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Lily



Parasitoids: Insects that eventually kill the host they feed on.

I TRACKED my finger down the well-worn page in my notepad. My writing was neat rows of black on white, flowing down the paper, punctuated by pink highlighter.

Light rain hit the window of the coffee shop I was sitting in. I liked to study in the library, coffee shops, and parks. For some reason, all the noise helped me concentrate. Maybe it was the silence at home that distracted me more than anything. My parents were strict about study time and held themselves to the same standard. *No one disturbs our A+ student.* I could just hear my dad's voice.

But he was right; I was in my senior year, and I needed to concentrate more than anything. My cell phone rang just as I turned the page in my textbook and jotted down yet more facts about parasites.

“Tell me you’re home already and getting dressed?” Eve’s hopeful voice brought a smile to my face.

“I’m home and getting dressed.”

She sighed. “Liar! I can hear that you’re not. Lily, we need to go to this party.”

I closed my textbook and laid my notebook on top of it, doodling under my notes. “Yeah, but we really don’t. If you think about it, absolutely no one will care if we go or not.”

“That’s not true. *I’ll* care. Lily, we’re running out of time to do stuff. Let’s not have regrets about missing the all-American rite of passage that going to a high school rager is. For me, please!” She shifted her tone with the last to the cute voice I could never say no to.

Eve had been my best friend since before we could walk. Our mothers were best friends, so there’d never really been an option not to be best buds.

“Fine. I’ll go for an hour, and I’m not getting changed. Final offer.”

Eve laughed. “You can’t open with your final offer. Counter, we go for an hour, and you wear something I bring you.”

“Whatever. Let’s get this over with. I’ll pick you up in twenty minutes.” Today, I’d borrowed my mom’s car, and it felt great to have a minuscule amount of freedom.

Eve squealed. “I can’t wait!”

“Me neither.” *For it to be over.*

I packed up my things and headed out of the coffee shop. The smells of burnt coffee grounds and pastries faded to the wet smell of a brewing storm. I ran to my car.

Soon, if I got my way, Maine weather would be a distant memory. I had plans to go to California for school. I had the grades; I had the extracurriculars; now all I needed was the acceptance letters and my parents’ approval. I had a horrible feeling that the last would be the hardest to secure. They wouldn’t refuse, they’d just be hurt. That was so much worse.

I was only a few feet away when I ran into a wall. Not a literal wall; actually, that might have been preferable. I ran into a wall of a person, bounced backward, and fell on my ass in a freezing puddle. My glasses flew off and landed somewhere on the wet asphalt.

My backpack landed in the puddle beside me, and I reached for it immediately. One of the corners was drenched. My heart lurched. *My notes!* I groped for the strap and dragged it toward me, my vision blurry without my glasses.

I tugged it onto my lap, an angry retort forming for the person who'd run right into me and sent me careening away like a pinball. But when I looked up, the words died on my lips. The man stood over me, rising to an awesome height. Dark jeans with holes at the knees, and black boots. Thin, drenched hoodie. The hood was up, shielding his face from my inspection, not that I could see well, anyway. Everything was hazy. I'd been wearing glasses and occasionally contacts for years, but I'd never been in this situation: knocked down in a puddle, blind as a bat without them, while the person responsible simply loomed over me and didn't lift a finger to help.

He stared at me. I could feel his eyes on me, even under the darkness of his hood.

“Excuse me—” I started angrily. I wasn’t the bravest at standing up for myself, but the horror of my color-coded notebook getting wet was enough to send fearless adrenaline coursing through me.

“You’re excused,” a deep voice interrupted me. The man stared down a moment longer and then turned on his heel and walked away.

Fury like lava bubbled up in my chest. I staggered to my feet, crying out when I slipped and scraped my palm in the process.

“Hey! My glasses!” *Damn it.* Blood ran down my hand as I pointed at the departing stranger’s back. “You damn—” My mind blanked, searching for a word. “Parasitoid!”

The stranger stopped; his shoulders hunched. I watched him, slightly alarmed that my mild insult had provoked a reaction. I groped around madly for my glasses. They couldn’t be that far, and I needed my eyes back. My hand closed over the frames, just as the stranger turned slowly and headed back toward me. I shoved them back on and straightened up to my full five foot seven, fighting the urge to back up a step.

Now that I was standing, I could see how big this guy really was. I was no stranger to big guys—Hade Harbor was an ice hockey town after all—but this guy took the prize. His huge shoulders bunched together with tension. He was over six five, I was sure of it.

He leaned down toward me, as if I were a speck on a petri dish. His face was still shadowed, but I could nearly make out his mouth. He had full lips and nice teeth; a clean-shaved jaw that could cut glass. His pretty mouth pulled in a sneer, making its beauty bearable.

“What did you call me?”

Now that he was closer, and I could actually see, I realized he was younger than I’d expected. His shadowy eyes glittered in the gloom.

“A jerk,” I attempted.

He shook his head. “That’s not it.”

I folded my arms over my chest and angled my chin up in the best pretense of confidence I could muster. “I called you a parasitoid, so what?”

“And what would a parasitoid be?” He took a step closer to me.

All imaginings of bravery fled my head. I mirrored his movement in the opposite direction.

“Look it up.”

“I’d rather you told me.” This guy was infuriating.

I could see an adult, like my dad, getting pissed and demanding answers from some cheeky student, but a guy my age? Absolutely not.

“I don’t have to tell you anything. How about you apologize for knocking me on my ass and I’ll tell you?” My eyes blazed a challenge up at his shadowy face.

He stared at me. I couldn’t see his expression well enough to read it. He tilted his head, a movement that seemed expressive as hell. He didn’t know what to make of me. Well, that was fine. I didn’t know what to make of him, either.

“No, I don’t think so,” he said slowly and moved closer to me.

I stepped back again, this time grabbing my keys from my pocket.

His satisfied grin made it clear he was aware of rattling me. “I think you’re going to tell me. Right. Fucking. Now.”

“Cade! We’ve got to go!” A shout reached us, piercing the building tension.

Cade?

The menacing stranger twisted to look over his shoulder, and I took the chance to unlock my mother’s car and jump inside.

I slammed the door and locked it as my shadow in the hoodie looked back at me. He studied me, unmoving. I turned the key in the ignition, jumping when the windshield wipers scraped furiously against the glass. The rain had gotten heavier, and I shivered. My jeans were wet, and my head felt just as drenched, thanks to standing outside for the intense showdown. My wet bag slouched on the passenger seat next to me. In a testament to how intimidating the guy outside had been, I’d completely forgotten to worry about my notebook.

I pulled out of the lot.

The stranger in the hoodie stood as still as stone, watching me go.

I drove across Hade Harbor toward Eve’s place. My dad didn’t like me driving to Eve’s house. It was on the so-called bad side of town. I wondered what Coach Williams would think about meeting the most intimidating guy right in the good part. He had a whole list of things he was overprotective about, starting with my friends and ending with scaring away any potential boyfriends who might have been out there.

Sure, I didn’t flatter myself that guys would be lining up to ask me out, even if it wasn’t for my dad, but being the only child of the school ice hockey coach had to be off-putting.

Yep, that's right. I was Lillian Williams, and Coach Williams was practically a celebrity in our little Maine town. Ice hockey was big here, and my father had big dreams. As a teen player at Hade Harbor High, he'd been heading toward the NHL, already a state champion, but that had all changed when I'd come along. My mom had had a difficult pregnancy, and my dad had missed out on the offers he'd been given from colleges while looking after her. The timing hadn't been right, they'd told me. Now, at HHH, since my father had taken over the team a few years ago, they'd been steadily improving. This year, he had his heart set on becoming champions again, but how they were going to get there was still a mystery.

I pulled up outside Eve's small house, sitting on a slightly run-down street. I hadn't had a chance to turn off the engine before her door opened and she scooted out. She practically ran to the passenger side of my car and jumped in.

"Let's get out of here!" She sounded breathless as she tugged her seat belt on and grinned at me.

"What's the hurry?"

"No hurry, Asher's getting ready to go to the party, too, and I don't want him to see me. He's such a buzzkill."

"And you don't think he'll see us at the party? Let's stop to get dinner. I'm starving."

"Sure. And no, I don't think Asher will see us, because if he does, I'll have to come home." Eve slid down in the seat and frowned out at the rainy street. "He's so controlling."

"I suppose he worries." It was a poor attempt to comfort her.

Asher—her hot, ice hockey-playing older brother—was terrifying. I tried my best not to be in the room with him when he blew through. Eve was right to worry. He didn't like his sister going to parties. He was overprotective as hell. Luckily for him, Eve had never been invited to many. Fear of Asher ran deep at Hade Harbor High.

We stopped at a local fast-food place. Eve dramatically clamped a hand over her mouth when I got out of the car.

“Holy shit, what happened to you?”

“I fell over on the way to the car.”

“Classic Lily. You look like you tried to swim in a puddle. Thank God I brought you a change of clothes. Just call me Eve, fairy godmother to the hopeless.”

“Sure. A fairy godmother who forces me to go to crappy high school parties where we’ll have to hide from your brother the entire time.”

“You love me really,” Eve said breezily.

We headed inside and ordered. Eve waited for the food while I went to the bathroom to change. Inside, I deliberated for a moment, checking the time before calling home. At this hour, it should be my mom who was nearest to the phone.

“Williams’ house,” a deep voice spoke.

Damn. My dad was the hardest to get around.

“Hi, Dad, it’s me. I’m going to be a bit late. I’m with Eve, and we’re going to the movies,” I improvised.

If Eve thought Asher was protective, she had no idea what Coach Williams was capable of.

“Is that right? What movie?”

“Um, we haven’t decided. Something scary.”

My dad was quiet for a long moment. “Well, as long as you’re really going to a movie and not Beckett’s party.”

“Is Beckett having a party? I wouldn’t be invited to that anyway. I’m not a puck bunny.”

“Damn right you’re not. My daughter will never be a puck bunny, will she?”

I gripped the phone tight. The entire conversation—from my father’s trusting tone to all the lies I was telling—was making me squirm. At least I could be

honest about the puck bunny thing. Hockey guys weren't my type. They were way too confident, arrogant, and fit, for a start. And Beckett Anderson was one of the worst offenders of the entire team. Not only was he gorgeous and a skilled player, but he was rich, too.

"No, Dad. Don't worry. I'll be home after the movie, okay?"

"Okay, Lily. I trust you."

Guilt flooded me at his parting shot. I hated lying, but I'd hate being forbidden from going even more.

I hung up and pulled Eve's dress from the bag. A quick change later, and I stared, aghast, at my reflection. She'd given me a little black dress to wear, emphasis on the "little."

It had off-the-shoulder straps and a hem that sat higher on my long body than it would on my best friend's. I seriously considered putting my dirty jeans back on instead. I never wore revealing clothes. It didn't seem right that the off-limits Coach's daughter, a complete bookworm and science nerd, should care what she wore. I'd learned the hard way that even if I made an effort, no one noticed. I washed my hands and balanced my contacts case on the edge of the sink, quickly swapping my glasses and tucking them away in my bag.

I headed back to our table, the thought of food too good to resist. I decided I could always keep my jacket on at the party. Everyone thought I was weird, anyway. One more quirk wouldn't matter.

Eve froze when she saw me, dramatically pausing with her burger halfway to her mouth. "Jesus, you look so hot."

"My dad would kill me if he saw this outfit," I muttered, sliding into the booth and grabbing my bag to lay it over my knees. I'd checked inside it already, and my notebook had somehow escaped getting too wet.

"He's not going to be there, and you deserve a night of acting like a normal seventeen-year-old."

"Whatever you say. We agreed on one hour, don't forget."

Eve grinned. “Let’s just play it by ear.”

“Sure, let’s. After an hour I might just run into Asher, in that case.”

Eve’s brother would make sure she went home if I couldn’t get her to leave when she said she would.

She narrowed her eyes at me. “You wouldn’t.”

“I wouldn’t test that theory.” I smiled as I started on my fries.

The hot, salty goodness soothed my ragged nerves. I decided not to tell Eve about the weird incident in the parking lot. I didn’t feel like I came off very well in it. It left me unsettled, like a jagged tooth I couldn’t stop running my tongue over. Eve didn’t notice that anything was up as she filled me in on the latest gossip about the popular kids in our grade. I might not talk to half of them, but I knew who they were. I laughed until my sides ached. I wished we could just stay here, eating fast food and talking shit. I didn’t want to go to a party where I’d feel awkward and weird. I didn’t want to creep around, avoiding Eve’s brother. I didn’t want to wear this dress.

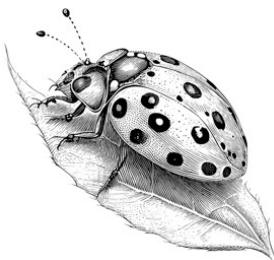
Stop being a buzzkill. It’s only an hour.

Right. I could do anything for an hour. *Right?*

Maybe if I kept repeating it, it would come true.

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Lily



THE PARTY WAS at Beckett Anderson's house, a place high on a bluff overlooking the entire town. The area was as exclusive as you could get in Hade Harbor, and considering how wealthy the little Maine town was, that was saying something. Beckett's father was a billionaire, and he let his son throw as many parties as he wanted while he traveled abroad on business. It seemed like Beckett's father traveled more than he was in Hade Harbor, considering how many ragers had taken place this year at the big mansion at the edge of the ocean.

Tonight, the road leading to Beckett's house was already packed with cars. Partygoers drifted up the road toward the building at the top, which shone like a beacon through the drizzly night. I parked where I could find a spot, at least a five-minute walk from the house.

"Damn, my hair is going to get wet," Eve worried. She had waist-length, black tumbling curls that, wet or not, always looked perfect.

"I have an umbrella. You take it," I offered, pulling it out from the backseat.

"Let's share."

We got out of the car, and I immediately felt ridiculous in my skin-tight outfit. I never dressed like this. I barely glanced in the mirror when I was getting in the shower. The dress showed way more of me than I was even familiar with. I was not a sexy person. It was something I'd slowly come to terms with. Other girls, my best friend included, had filled out in all the right places and become more and more magnetic to look at, while I felt

like I'd gone the other way. I was awkward, with knobby elbows and continually scraped knees. I was all freckled limbs and red hair that had never darkened to auburn, and a smile that showed too many teeth. I'd made my peace with that as much as any seventeen-year-old girl, about to turn eighteen, could.

Still, I'd come this far, and I'd promised Eve. I gritted my teeth against the cool night air and the rain hitting my legs and wrapped my thin jacket around me. It was only a little wet from my fall earlier, and it was better than nothing. Nothing was going to save my hair, already working itself into red, limp strands snaking over my shoulders.

Eve looped her arm through mine and positioned the umbrella over our heads, making sure that we were both getting at most one shoulder wet. Together, we started up the road to the house. As we drew closer, music thumped in the still night air.

"Ah, I can't believe we're really here!" Eve grinned.

Nerves were growing thicker in my belly as we approached. "Remind me again who invited us?"

"Winter DeLaurie."

"Winter? The cheerleader? Why would she invite us?"

Eve shrugged. "She's nicer than she seems."

"She seems like the anti-Christ, so that's comforting to know."

We walked through huge metal gates. They'd been left open so the crowd could drift through with ease. There was an enormous courtyard in front of the mansion. I craned my neck to look up at the house that Beckett Anderson called home. It seemed impossible that a student at my school lived in such luxury. Not only that, but he was also an Ice God. The Ice Gods were three of the best players for the Hade Harbor Hellions, the hockey team my father coached. Not only did they rule the team, but they ruled the school, too. They were beautiful and terrible. Callous, arrogant, and, at times, even cruel. No one wanted to get on their bad side. I seemed to have a pass, probably thanks to being the coach's daughter. Eve also had a pass, since her brother was an Ice God.

“Okay, are you ready to do this?” Eve asked once we climbed the shiny white stone steps to the massive front doors.

“If I said no, could we go home?”

“Hilarious.” Eve pushed her shoulders back and smiled. “How do I look?”

“Perfect,” I murmured.

She really did. Eve and Asher had won the genetic lottery. They were dark and stunning, with caramel skin and black hair. Eve was easily the most beautiful girl in school, though she never acted like it. She’d have been popular for her appearance alone, if not for her overprotective brother warning everyone away from her and the stain that her address brought. While Asher was exempt from judgement, being an Ice God, Eve wasn’t so lucky. Hade Harbor students were snobby as hell, and my father’s attitude toward my friendship with Eve was a perfect example.

She’s a nice girl, but her family... I don’t want you hanging around that part of town with those kinds of people.

It infuriated me every time. I didn’t care what anyone said. Eve was my best friend, and I’d never let anyone keep me away from her. The pretentiousness of the student body and their wealthy parents drove me insane. It was so out of touch and ridiculous, yet I couldn’t see it changing anytime soon. My family wasn’t exactly wealthy, but my father’s position as coach put us in a special bracket.

Eve shook the umbrella and propped it beside the door to dry. She took my stiff hand in hers and gave me an excited smile. “Ready?”

“Not even remotely,” I muttered.

She laughed and tugged me into the house.

Inside was packed already. It was warm, with that steamy atmosphere that came from hundreds of damp, hormone-ridden bodies pressed too closely together.

“Let’s get a drink first. I want to have a couple before Asher gets here,” Eve yelled in my ear.

The music was loud as hell. Some rap song I didn't know was blasting loud enough to vibrate the floor. Eve grabbed my hand and pushed through the crowd. No one moved as we shoved our way through. Voices were raised, excited or drunk, I couldn't tell. Maybe it was a little of both. I'd already decided that I wouldn't be drinking, seeing as I needed to drive us home in an hour.

It's only an hour, Lillian. Calm down.

We made it through the entrance hall, an area nearly as big as the entire ground floor of my house. A huge staircase branched off in two directions, and students hung out on the upper floors, leaning on the railings and looking down at the mass assembled below. There had to be two hundred students here. It was crazy.

"I think it's this way!" Eve shouted in my ear and took a left, heading through a corridor with black-and-white floor tiles and dark red walls.

Framed photographs dotted the wall, and I stared at them as we passed. Beckett and his father. I didn't know the richest boy in school at all, but I couldn't deny he was nice to look at.

We walked down the quieter hall, and then, right back into the din. The kitchen. It was huge, with high ceilings and marble counters. A wall of windows stared out at the dark night and the faraway lights of Hade Harbor. So, this was the side of the house that peered out over the bluff. I'd bet the view from here in the daylight was stunning, not that I'd have any reason to be at the Anderson house during the day.

"How do you know your way around so well?" I wondered as we pushed through the groups of people gathered in front of the counter, where the drinks seemed to be.

"My mom. She's worked here for years. Sometimes, I have to come with her," Eve said, her voice dimming.

Right. Eve and Asher's mom was a cleaner, and she had a bunch of clients in town. I wondered how weird it was for Asher that his mom cleaned his best friend's house.

We got to the counter, and I blinked at the array of bottles there. No expense had been spared, it seemed, for Beckett's guests. There was all the liquor you could drink, punch, sodas and then, to top it off, at the very end of the counter, a bartender dressed in black, mixing cocktails with a theatrical flair.

"A bartender for a high school party? That's crazy."

Eve laughed. "They're called mixologists these days, and relax. If Beckett freaking Anderson wants to waste his money, who cares?"

She was right, of course. I hated the judgmental voice that was always chirping in my head. The voice sounded like my parents. I could hear their words in my head without them even needing to speak them. I didn't need my mother to see the opulent spread in the kitchen to hear her derision.

"Come on, have one drink and relax," Eve was saying, grabbing a bottle of beer.

"No, none for me. I'm driving, remember?" I checked my watch. "In approximately fifty minutes from now."

"Stop! You're stressing me out," Eve complained. "We're here now. Let's have a little fun."

I sighed when she pouted at me. Goddamn it. I could never tell her no.

"Whatever. As soon as it gets too boring to stand or your brother makes a fuss, we're out of here." I grabbed a can of Coke and popped it opened.

Eve grinned victoriously and pulled me close for a hug. "Thank you, you're amazing. Now, shall we go and explore more, or mingle or something?"

"Who would we mingle with?"

"I don't know." Eve chewed her lip for a moment. "Let's just walk around a bit and see who's here."

That sounded terrible, but I nodded. It was bright in the kitchen, and I wanted to disappear into a crowd. A couple of hockey players had already looked in my direction. I could only hope they wouldn't tell my dad that they'd seen me here. He'd be *disappointed*. That was always the worst

outcome. I could take anger, raging, grounding, all of it. Anything but his disappointment.

We left the kitchen and headed deeper into the house.

“Let’s go out to the pool house. There’s a pool table and arcade games out there,” Eve said.

“Wow, you really do know your way around here.” It was kind of strange that she’d never mentioned it before, but I didn’t have time to think about it before we were stepping back out into the rain.

We ran toward the pool house, past the huge aqua pool on the way. Rain rippled the surface, and I could only imagine how freezing it was.

We got to the pool house just as the door opened. I fought a groan when I saw who was leaving.

Winter and her best friend Selena. Selena was queen bitch around Hade Harbor High and also head cheerleader for the football team. A tall, willowy bleached blonde, Selena was supremely confident in her power. Selena looked us both over before her catty smile clicked into place.

“Wow, Eve, I didn’t know you were coming,” she said with a fake friendly voice.

“Yeah, Winter mentioned it, so I just thought I’d come,” Eve said.

I knew how talking to Selena hurt her. She’d tried out for the cheerleading team a few years in a row and always been miles above everyone else, but she never got a spot. She’d finally asked Selena why she was never picked.

“Sweetie, it costs a lot to take care of our football players and travel to their games. I didn’t want you to feel stressed about it. It’s best this way.”

I could hear the words in my head, Eve had repeated them so often. It had really upset her, but eventually, she’d bounced back. She was too cool to be a cheerleader, anyway. With her black nail polish and dark red lipstick, Eve had an edgy, Goth style that didn’t mesh with Selena and Winter’s preppy polo shirts and denim cutoffs.

Selena tapped a pink talon to her lips. “And you thought you’d bring Bug with you? Brave choice.”

Bug. Irritation filled me, but I fought to keep it from my face. Selena was looking for a weakness, and I wasn’t going to give her one. I hated the nickname, though. I *hated* it. Give one presentation about why germs and bugs were cool and how you wanted to study epidemiology, and wind up with the most unglamorous nickname in the world. Lesson learned, a little too late, it seemed. Last time I checked, being terminally uncool wasn’t a crime, and yet I was still doing time for it.

“Whatever. I need a drink,” Winter interrupted from behind her friend, her beautiful blue eyes showing her boredom.

Winter was well named. She had an icy, aloof energy that never slipped. She really was made of ice. With her artic blue eyes, and white blonde hair, she was a snow queen made real. Her natural beauty was what Selena tried to imitate, but fell short. She was nearly as rich as Beckett, or so I’d heard, and seemed terminally bored with life. Selena rolled her eyes but let us past.

“Have fun at the party, Eve. You too, Bug.”

I took a long breath through my nose, channeling my inner Zen monk. Responding to Selena was a waste of time. Soon enough, I’d be across the country, making a fresh start at college in California, giving presentations about bugs to people who were actually interested. I couldn’t wait.

“Sorry,” Eve muttered to me as we entered the pool house.

“It’s not your fault Selena’s a bitch,” I reminded her. “Let’s just have fun and see what games they have here. Beating your ass at air hockey will cheer me up,” I teased.

She laughed, forgetting her bad mood. “Right, you couldn’t beat me even if Coach Williams was the ref.”

The main room was huge. It was insane to call it a pool house. It was really an annex of some kind. A small kitchen stood at one end, and several other rooms branched off the hall beyond the main room.

The music was quiet in here and the conversation low. The lights weren't blaring, and there were plenty of soft, empty seats. I headed for one, just as the soft clink of balls at the pool table caught my attention. I glanced toward the table, wondering who else was hiding out in here, and froze.

Marcus Bailey, another one of the Ice Gods, was playing, along with someone else.

Someone new.

His silhouette was immediately familiar. He had dark hair, cut short, and his black hoodie was long gone, and beneath, a simple black T-shirt and jeans. His shoulders were just as broad as they'd promised to be when he'd towered over me in the parking lot. His ocean-blue eyes caught mine and held. He paused in the act of leaning down to take a shot. I froze in place while he abandoned his shot and slowly straightened up, his eyes boring into me. His mouth and angular, strong jaw were instantly recognizable, but nothing could have prepared me for the effect of his entire face. He was beautiful and terrifying at the same time.

He leaned on his pool cue, and those blue eyes narrowed. He knew I'd recognized him. He'd clearly recognized me, too. His gaze moved from mine, down to my throat, and then lower. He perused my body with a look so thorough, it was like a touch.

"Hot damn, who is that?" Eve whispered beside me.

I shook my head. "I have no idea."

"I wonder if he's the new ace. I heard that we're getting a transfer student who's going to win nationals for us," Eve was saying, totally oblivious to the fact that I was caught in a staring contest with the guy across the room.

Her words took a moment to register. Wait, this guy was transferring to my school? *No. Please, no.*

School was awkward enough without adding another guy into the mix. Ugh, and a hockey player, too. He probably worshipped my father and couldn't understand how cool Coach Williams had ended up with such a nerdy daughter.

A loud whistle cut through the tension. “Little Eve... the ultimate forbidden fruit. Does Asher know you’re here?” Marcus asked, smiling broadly at us. He leaned his fit body against the pool table and grinned. Marcus was the most approachable of the Ice Gods, which hardly made him less intimidating. He always seemed to be in on a secret joke, an ever-present smirk on his handsome face.

Eve flushed and folded her arms over her chest, tossing her black curls back. “He’s not my keeper. I’m a senior. He can’t tell me what to do.”

Marcus laughed. “Let’s see about that.”

“Leave her be. If she wants to party, let her party,” another deep voice cut in.

Beckett, the host, lounged in the corner, his feet up, phone in hand. He was the biggest of the Ice Gods, and his powerful body filled the chair. He had dark hair and gray eyes, which were usually filled with jaded distain. He was the kind of good-looking that made it hard to look right at him. He was just too much. He didn’t look at us, but I had the feeling that somehow, he was watching. It was an odd sensation. Regardless, despite the banter that ensued since we’d landed smack dab in the middle of the Ice Gods’ little hangout, the new guy held my attention completely.

“I-I forgot something in the kitchen,” I muttered to Eve and turned around.

Deep laughter rumbled behind us. Marcus. “Oh look, we scared Bug away.”

I left the pool house and headed around the pool. My face flamed and I wanted to take my jacket off but was self-conscious of my short dress. I went in the house and pushed through the crowd, heading for the kitchen. It seemed best to hide somewhere busy. As paranoid as it was, I had a horrible feeling that my parking lot stranger was going to follow me. He hadn’t seemed like he was messing around when he’d followed me to my car.

I burrowed into a busy group by the refrigerator and peeked around. So far, there was no sign of him.

“Wow, Lillian, I’ve never seen you at one of Beck’s parties before,” a voice said just beside me.

I blinked up at another player, my mind blanking on his name for a long moment.

“Hi, Josh, yeah, it’s my first time. Don’t tell Coach, okay?”

Josh Samuels was okay. He was kind of a suck-up to my dad and had gone through a phase where he’d tried to butter me up to impress him. It hadn’t worked.

“I won’t, don’t worry. Isn’t it his birthday in a few weeks? The team is going to get him a gift or something. I’m organizing it.” Josh gave me his golden retriever smile. *My dad’s birthday, right.* It was a little after mine and I already had his gift picked out.

“Nice. He’ll like that.”

“Who’ll like what?”

The deep voice behind me registered at the same time a hard chest pressed against my back.

Josh turned and looked up, and up again. “Cayden, man. How are you enjoying your first Hade Harbor party?”

I froze, my front squished against the counter. *Cayden.* That was his name? He was standing so close, I couldn’t turn without rubbing my entire body against his. It was busy in the kitchen, and Josh didn’t seem to notice that the new guy had pinned me to the counter with his hips.

“Beckett wanted you. He’s out in the pool house.” Cayden’s voice was rough, rasping over my nerves and sending my tension higher.

Josh immediately brightened, setting down his beer. “Really? Cool. Be right back.”

“Wait—” I started, but Josh was already gone.

“What’s wrong, *Bug*. You don’t want to be left alone with me?” His hands landed on my hips, and his fingers pressed in, sinking into my flesh. He was so tall, my head fit into the space underneath his chin.

“I-I don’t know what to say.” Stating the obvious was about all my overheated brain could handle.

“But you had so much to say before... what was it you called me again?” His voice dipped low, grim amusement coloring his tone.

“I don’t remember.”

He chuckled. “I think you do.”

One of his hands slid around my belly, and my insides trembled. What was he up to? Nobody touched me like this, especially not a hockey player. The new guy was breaking all my father’s rules.

“Lily! There you are,” Eve’s voice washed over me.

Thank God.

“What are you doing?”

Eve appeared beside me, just as Cayden released me and stepped back. I twisted around immediately, trying to put some distance between us. My gaze landed on his collarbones. His T-shirt was thin, it even had the odd hole in places. I couldn’t tell if it was strategic and designer or just worn. Either way, he looked hot.

“Eyes up here, *Bug*.” Cayden’s voice was just as hot as the rest of him.

“Don’t call me Bug,” I muttered instinctively, raising my eyes to take him in.

“So, you’re Cayden West? Big-shot ace, the one who’s going to take us to Nationals?” Eve smiled up at him without seeming to realize anything weird had been going on.

“So they say,” Cayden said shortly. “I saw Asher around. He just passed through.” He cast a look over his shoulder.

Damn. This guy caught on quick. He’d already managed to get rid of Josh and Eve with little effort.

Eve tensed. “Shit. I’ll be right back.” She looked predictably freaked out that her brother might appear.

She turned on her heel and disappeared before I could stop her. I was hot on her heels. Eve disappeared down the hall and into a bathroom. I made it to the hall before a hard hand closed around my wrist. Cayden tugged me to a stop.

“We weren’t done talking,” he snapped at me. His tone was far from friendly.

“What do you want?” The hallway was quiet, and no one else was waiting in line for the bathroom. We were alone. Heat crawled across my face as Cayden backed me into the wall and caged me against it.

“I want to finish our conversation from earlier, before you so rudely ran off.”

“Fine, whatever. I called you a parasitoid – it’s not that deep. A kind of insect that eventually kills the host it feeds off. It was a biology joke. It was lame. Let it go. Why are you so angry about nothing?” My voice rang in the air between us.

Cayden stared down at me, a deep frown creasing his forehead. He wasn’t smiling. His face looked hewn from granite.

“When someone crosses me, I don’t get angry-I get even. I’m not the kind of guy who lets things go, you’d do well to remember that. Don’t get on my bad side. I’ll be your worst nightmare, Bug.”

“Don’t call me Bug,” I ground out. My cheeks must be beet red, and I felt squirmy all over. I hated this. I hated the way he was staring at me, giving me no space to avoid his inspection.

“Why not? It suits you... little, scurrying bug, so easy to crush.”

He still wasn’t smiling, and his cruel words hit something soft and vulnerable inside me. *Ouch*. My lips parted, but nothing came out. I had no words to match his cruelty. His hand cupped my jaw, and the touch jolted me from my shocked reverie. I tried to shove him, but he only stepped closer. So close I could barely breathe. His hand on my chin tightened so much that he was probably leaving fingerprints on my skin.

“Now, let’s get something straight, since it looks like we’re going to be classmates. Stay out of my way, unless you want to be crushed. I won’t hesitate. Don’t test me. You’ll regret it.” He moved his hand in an up-and-down motion, taking my head with him, a horrible parody of nodding. “Say you understand.”

“Fuck you, asshole,” I managed, anger colliding with anxiety in my chest.

“Be careful what you’re asking for, Bug.” Cold mocking was back in his eyes.

I pushed harder at his chest. I couldn’t move him a damn inch. Fucking hockey players.

“Don’t forget what I said, and don’t ignore it either...” He dropped his grip.

I stared at him as he stepped back. He was so huge, his shoulders dwarfed me. I wasn’t even remotely short, and I still felt tiny in front of him.

He smirked coldly. “If you do—it’ll only be more fun for me.”

“You’re insane,” I muttered, cupping my chin. The skin throbbed.

He nodded. “You have no idea, and believe me, you don’t want to find out.”

With that, he turned on his heel and sauntered away, leaving me reeling.

Had that really just happened?

The lock on the bathroom door slid open, and Eve peered out. “Have you seen Asher?”

I shook my head. I dismissed telling my best friend that the new guy had just threatened me. She’d feel compelled to rush in and defend me, and I didn’t want her putting herself in the line of fire either.

She let out a sigh of relief. “I guess we should go. Our hour is up.”

“You don’t mind?”

She shook her head and grinned, linking her arm through mine.

I'd never been so grateful to leave a place in my life. Now, if only I didn't have to see Cayden West at school on Monday, everything would be great.

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Cayden



HADE HARBOR WAS A FUCKING JOKE. With its shiny new school building, idyllic setting, and kids with cars that cost more than my foster father's entire trailer, it felt like a dream. Did people really live like this?

On Monday, I joined the rush heading into the school. Even the air smelled expensive. Wholesome, privileged students wandered around, eyeing me curiously. I wasn't a guy who melted into the background well. I stuck the hell out, and there was nothing I could do about it. I'd stopped trying. In my life up until now, I'd learned well that some people had no choice but to be seen and talked about. At least in Hade Harbor, I was being talked about for hockey and nothing else. Not like back home. There was nothing like back home.

I shoved away the black hole that threatened to swallow me at the thought of home, and a flash of rose gold caught my eye by the entrance.

Her.

Lily. Bug.

She walked with her head down, holding an open textbook. She literally had her nose in a book. She was just as much of a fever dream as the rest of this picture-perfect place. Was there really anyone so angelic-looking? It seemed impossible.

The sun fell over her bowed head, lighting her hair from a muted strawberry blonde to a blaze of red gold. Friday night, and the feeling of her slender

wrist in my hand returned to me full force. She had green eyes, lush as the pines that crowded the back of the school. I'd been close enough on Friday to see that they were streaked with gold. She was tall for a girl but small to me; regardless, her pale skin was a map of fawn-colored freckles. Her exposed skin in the black dress had revealed a constellation across her collarbones.

The thought that she was freckled under her clothes had made me hard.

A new kink unlocked?

Maybe, or perhaps it had been the way she'd gone toe to toe with me, despite being scared. The girl with the racing pulse and the fiery gaze. Her mouth was distractingly full, her lips naturally pouty. An effect that countless girls tried to achieve and failed. I could tell that this girl, *Lily*, was all real, though. She was studious and serious, annoying as fuck and feisty. Her jeans clung to her long legs and a huge sweater kept slipping off her shoulder, revealing a thin strap. I followed behind her, growing closer. She climbed the stairs slowly, her eyes never leaving her book.

I had nothing to say to her; I'd said it all on Friday. She should stay out of my way. It might have sounded harsh, but it was good advice. I was here for one reason, and it was too important to be distracted from. Besides, good little girls like Lillian could destroy a guy like me. I knew my level, and Lillian Williams was far above it.

"Cayden! You made it okay on the bus over here? I would have picked you up." Coach Williams waited for me inside the entrance hall.

Lily stopped, twisting around to find me just behind her. She jerked back and dropped her book, her green-eyed gaze fastening on me with surprise, and maybe a little accusation, like she suspected I'd been about to trip her or something equally childish. Lily had no idea that if I decided to take her down, there'd be nothing childish about what I'd do to her.

"Lily, have you met Cayden?" Coach Williams asked, approaching us both.

I crouched to swipe her dropped book from the floor. Lily mirrored my movement and cracked her chin off my jaw. She fell back, sitting on the floor and holding her head.

“Lil, you’ve got to pay attention to things around you,” Coach Williams said, a note of exasperation in his tone.

Lil?

“I was. I didn’t expect him to try to take my book.”

Lily cast me a narrow look that nearly tugged a laugh from me. She thought I’d steal her book? She thought I was interested in those kinds of petty games? Little Lily was in for a surprise if she did, in fact, bring my attention down on her by being fucking annoying.

“Here.” I grabbed the book and handed it to her.

She took it like it was a snake that might bite her before standing.

“Manners, Lillian,” Coach reminded her.

What the fuck was their relationship?

She flushed, a pretty petal pink that I’d bet she hated. Folding her arms over her chest and making that damn sweater shoulder slip down her creamy arm, she spoke through gritted teeth.

“Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome.” My amused tone only sent her color higher.

“So, Cayden, this is my daughter, Lillian. Lily, Cayden is our new forward, or at least, I hope he is. He’s going to change everything this year for the Hellions.” Coach slapped my shoulder, giving me a grin.

The man was a broken record, seriously, but I couldn’t afford to piss him off. He was giving me a chance to leave Midnight Falls and my past behind. I needed him.

I looked back at Lily. *The coach’s daughter?* That shouldn’t make her more intriguing, but it did. She wasn’t just some nobody I could crush under my heel to make sure she was a good girl and didn’t get in my way. She had her own power. The ear of the coach, the most important man in my life right now.

I stuck out my hand, pretending that we’d never met.

“Nice to meet you, Lily. Call me Cade.” My hand wavered in the air between us.

Lily stared down at it, clearly unwilling to touch me. Her father cleared his throat, and she stuck her hand out quickly, taking mine. Her skin was soft, and her hand was absurdly small and fragile feeling. I shook her hand, my thumb rubbing a circle around the back, and squeezed. Not enough for Coach to see, but enough to remind little Bug about our talk on Friday. Her eyes jumped to me as she tried to pull her hand from mine. Unluckily for her, her dad had turned away, speaking to another teacher who was passing by. I took the opportunity to yank Lily closer to me for a second.

“What are you—” she started.

“Play nice, or I won’t either,” I reminded her just as Coach turned back to us. I dropped Lily’s hand and pasted on a bland smile. It was regrettable that we’d gotten off on the wrong foot, but what mattered now was that Lily didn’t make a fuss about me to the coach.

“Okay, Lil, you get to class, Cade and I are heading over to the rink.”

Lily took a few steps back, her eyes flashing between me and her father, before spinning on her heel and hurrying off. I watched her go. Her bare shoulder looked polished under the hall’s fluorescent lights.

Pull your damn sweater up and stop letting people stare at your untouched skin.

I turned away from the coach’s daughter and found the man himself watching me.

“Lily’s a good girl. She’s special. If all of this is going to work, you need to understand how it is with her and the team.” Coach Williams’ voice was low.

So, he’d made sure that his daughter was off-limits around here? That made sense. I had no experience with parents who gave a damn about you. It was an odd feeling. I could downgrade my expectations of Lily’s experience with guys from minimal to none.

Why am I thinking about her experience with guys at all?

“Got it, Coach. I’m here to play and get into HHU. That’s it.” Hade Harbor University had the best direct route into the NHL of any place around, and I needed to go there. I also needed a full ride.

“Hell yeah.” Coach grinned and gripped my shoulder, his strong hand digging in surprisingly hard. “Let’s go and see how you like the ice in Hade Harbor.”

As always, being on the ice felt like coming home. Well, it felt like what I imagined home was supposed to feel like. In real life, there was little to expect other than pain and hunger. But on the ice? I was immortal. I skated around the rink, warming up. Coach Williams sat on the bench and watched me, his elbows braced on his knees, his face intent. It might freak other guys out to have that sort of pressure. Coach Williams needed a star forward to make it to Nationals this year. He needed me, and I needed him back. Eric Williams was a local hockey legend. He’d turned the Hellions high school team around completely when he’d come in, after his own failed shot at the NHL.

This was my senior year. I was out of chances to get the hell out of the backwater town I lived in. It was this or nothing. I didn’t care about the pressure. I was a drowning man grasping for something to hold on to before going under. For Coach Williams, it was about work. He wanted to coach at HHU, the prestigious local university. I had no idea why, exactly, he was so driven to do so, except for clout. Maybe the position came with a huge pay rise, that I could understand. Bug’s father was more ambitious than he seemed. That suited me just fine. I was more ambitious than I had any right to be, too.

“Let’s see some shots,” Coach called once I was warmed up.

Adrenaline pumped through me as I faced the goal and shot. Puck after puck sank into the net.

I was sweating by the time I turned back to Coach Williams and found a beaming smile on his face. My muscles ached, and tension ran down my

spine. I was fired up, ready to go. I'd bulldoze through any defensive line in this state; I could outskate the fastest defenseman. I could fly if I had to.

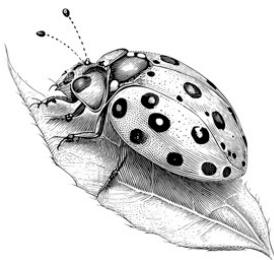
Williams' eyes met mine, and we shared a look for a moment. A man who wanted to win at any cost, and me, someone who *needed* to win at any cost.

He stood and checked his watch.

“We have a meeting with the school committee. Let’s make this happen.”

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Lily



THE SCHOOL DAY FLEW BY. I had a test in my last period, an important one, so I spent the day secretly studying my textbook whenever I could. I hadn't seen Cayden West around again, thank God. He had a screw loose, and I didn't want anything to do with him.

The test went well, and soon, I was home and grabbing food from the fridge. I checked my email again. Since I'd applied for early admission to the school of my dreams on the West Coast, I'd developed a compulsion for checking my inbox. Now, I was waiting.

Soon I'd apply for my backup schools, including HHU. Hade Harbor University was a great school, but it was too close to home. If I went there, I knew for a fact that my parents would expect me to live at home, and I couldn't take it. This time next year, I wanted to be out of this house, this town, just out. I wanted to be gone. I wanted – no, needed – some freedom in my life. I loved my parents, but their attention was stifling. I needed to make some mistakes, to strike out on my own. I was desperate to escape the pressure of being Lillian Williams, straight-A student, Coach's daughter.

Balancing a green apple on top of a jar of peanut butter and a chocolate bar, I headed through the house toward my bedroom.

"How was the test?"

My mother's unexpected voice startled me, and I nearly dropped everything. I whirled around and found her sitting in the corner of the living room, a magazine open on her lap.

“It was okay. Good.” I replied breathlessly, my heart still pounding from the fright.

She smiled at me. My mother, Sandra, was still a beautiful woman, and she took great pains to ensure everyone knew it. Sometimes it was like she knew my school schedule better than I did.

“I knew you could do it. HHU will be begging you to attend, you’ll see.”

I often suspected my mom could read my mind. Despite how occupied she was with her real estate career, she seemed to see inside my head with such precision, it was eerie. I dropped my gaze.

Can she tell I’m hiding something from her?

“Yeah, we’ll see.”

She gave me an encouraging smile. “Don’t worry about it, honey. You’re a shoo-in.”

“Yeah, but it’s really competitive, you know.” I fidgeted.

“Trust me, keep acing your tests and you have nothing to worry about. Go and eat your snack,” she said after a moment, turning back to her magazine.

Inside my bedroom, I shut the door and set my snack down.

My heart shuddered. I hated lying to my mom, but I had no idea how to tell my well-meaning parents that they were suffocating me. I had no idea how to tell them that at seventeen years old, I’d never even been kissed. I wanted to date, I wanted to stay out late, and I wanted to obsess over some guy who asked me out. I wanted to be normal and not the test acer for once. My mom would never understand. She’d had me young and married my father when they’d both just gotten out of high school. She saw in me all the potential that she’d lost when she’d become a mom at nineteen. I didn’t have it in me to break her heart.

I sliced my apple carefully, spread peanut butter on each slice, and added a square of chocolate to the top. The methodical action of preparing it perfectly calmed me. Once I had my plate all set up, with the apple slices

arranged in a pleasing circle—appeasing my OCD tendencies—I reached for my laptop.

After my test today and nonstop cramming, my brain was fried, but I had another test at the end of the week I should really start preparing for. First, I dug my diary out from under my pillow and chose a light-blue pen to write in it. I always needed to write things out to process them. My newest diary had a cute little keypad lock, though I never really worried about anyone reading it in my house and had lost the key months ago. My parents trusted me far too much to suspect that there was anything interesting or wild going on between the pages of my journal. Sadly, they were right.

Today, however, that changed. I stared at the name I'd written in blue across the white page.

Cayden West.

I rarely wrote about anything but my family, classes, and future aspirations. Cayden had really gotten under my skin. He was like a hurricane, slamming into my life without warning and shaking everything free from its tethers. Most of all, he'd noticed me, and that made me uncomfortable. I was such an expert in not being noticed that it was unsettling to have caught someone's eye. The fact that it was someone so crazy only made it worse.

Still, it was something new, an unknown variable to introduce into the system of my life. I didn't like unknowns. They were scary. The very best thing I could do to get rid of this particular unknown was to stay out his way, keep my head down, and wait until Cayden West forgot about me and my silly insults. It was sure to happen any day now. He was a soon-to-be Ice God, if the guys he'd been hanging out with at Beckett's party were anything to go by, and I – well, I was just Bug. Science nerd, Coach Williams' dorky daughter. A girl with the weight of the world on her shoulders.

I'd be off his radar as soon as girls like Selena sunk their claws into him. Given his outrageous good looks and bad-boy aura, that was sure to happen sooner rather than later.

Yep, Cayden West would forget about the weird, rude girl who'd shouted at him in a parking lot, and I'd forget what it felt like to be noticed by

someone new. Life would go back to normal soon enough.

Hours later at dinner, however, it seemed my father wasn't ready to let Cayden West be forgotten any time soon.

"This kid, you should see him skate. I mean, you will, if I have anything to say about it."

"But is he allowed to play for Hade Harbor if he doesn't live here?" My mother was on her third glass of wine.

My father, Eric, blew out a derisive snort. "Let them try and stop him. The Hellions need him, and the school board wants to win Nationals just as badly as I do."

"Why this year?" I wondered aloud.

My father turned his eyes to me. "This year, with Beckett, Marcus, and Asher, we have a real chance. They need a killer center though, and that person is Cayden. You should have seen them skating together after school today. It's like they were born to be a team."

"So, sounds like the Ice Gods have a new member," I muttered.

"They sure do. I'm getting Cayden on the team, no matter what. Otherwise —" He cut off and looked at me.

I sat up straighter under his long stare. "Otherwise what?"

My dad sat back, putting his napkin on the table and giving me a grin. "Otherwise, I might not be able to move to the coach position at HHU. They're keeping it open for me, depending on what I can do with the team this year."

My dinner felt like a rock in my belly. My father was going to coach at HHU? Because of me?

"I didn't know you wanted to coach college hockey," I said lightly.

“It’s a great opportunity, Lillian, and a huge promotion,” my mother said.

She was excited. It was evident in her tone.

“You mean a great opportunity to keep an eye on me?” My accusing question shot out before I could stop it. Never mind that I didn’t even plan on going to HHU, just the fact that my dad was planning on being there only made that invisible pressure that was already threatening to crush me push down even harder.

“Lillian, it’s a big school. I won’t even see you, unless you come and visit your old man. I just thought it would be nice to know that we’re both on campus somewhere. I’m not there to cramp your style.”

I sighed. “That’s what you always say, but being the coach’s daughter was supposed to end after high school.” My protest sounded petty, even to me.

My dad sighed. “Lil, I don’t know what you want me to say. It’s a great opportunity. It’s the next step for me. More money, bigger games, more skill, strategy—”

“The chance at fame you never got as a player because of me, right?”

Silence fell as the cruel words left my mouth. God, I was being a bitch. I was insufferable. My face crumpled immediately, and tears left my eyes as I stood and threw myself into my dad’s arms. They opened for me without hesitation.

“I’m sorry. That was awful,” I muttered against his chest.

“It’s okay, Lil. I know you didn’t mean it. It’s a big shock, I guess.” He rubbed a warm circle on my back.

I nodded, and after a moment, leaned away. My mother was looking at me with sympathy in her eyes.

“I’m just tired. It was a long day. I should go and get started on my homework.”

“Okay, sweetheart. We’re here if you want to talk,” my mom said with a kind smile.

I nodded and slunk away.

After dinner, I ran on the treadmill in the basement. I liked to work off my anxious energy before bed, but I wasn't allowed to go jogging alone at night, so the basement it was.

I returned to my room and grabbed my shower things, spending far too long under the hot spray. I washed my long hair slowly and methodically before finally getting out of the shower. The mirror was fogged, exactly like I preferred it. I brushed my teeth and let my mind linger over the conversation at the dinner table.

My father wanted to coach at HHU.

But I'm not going to HHU. I'm going far, far away, and he has no idea.

I'd acted like a complete bitch. I couldn't stop torturing myself by replaying the moment when I'd snapped at my dad, reminding him of his short-lived hockey career. It wasn't only my mom's dreams that had been shattered by my arrival, but my dad's, too.

I'd cost them everything, and I was reminded of it every single day. It was the very reason I'd burrowed into schoolwork so hard and stressed over having a perfect attendance record and GPA. It was the reason I never got in trouble, or snuck out late, or hell, even kissed a boy. I was fated to pay penance to the two people who had given up everything for me, and I was the ungrateful brat who wanted to run away and be free on the other side of the country.

Forget about California. Be a good girl, go to HHU, and make your parents proud. You won't be happy in the Golden State if they're sad, and you know it.

I took a deep breath through my nose, trying to calm my wild anxiety and drown out the obnoxiously wise voice in my head. Rinsing my mouth, I wrapped my towel tighter around my body and went back to my room.

My mom was sitting on my bed. I jerked to a stop, my face flushing as she met my eyes. Again, I felt like she could see inside my frantic, selfish mind.

“Honey, come and sit. Let’s talk.”

I inched further into the room.

“We don’t have to. I’m over it now. I’m sorry for what I said.”

My mother just patted the bed until my resistance crumbled and I sank down beside her.

“Look, I know it’s not easy. Your father and I might be a little overprotective, but the alternatives are far worse. The last thing I want is to see you tied up over some guy, distracted, unfocused... I know it sounds like an over exaggeration right now, but believe me, Lily, this time is important. You’re shaping the rest of your life. You can’t afford any mistakes.”

Maybe making some mistakes is exactly what I need.

My mom didn’t get it. She couldn’t remember what it was like to be my age. I had nothing to drive me except for wanting to make my parents proud. I felt like I hadn’t lived for myself yet. I kept putting it off and putting it off for some later date. But my protests remained sealed behind my lips. I’d never say them. I couldn’t break her heart like that.

“I know, Mom. Don’t worry. You don’t have to worry about me, you know that.”

Good ol’ dependable Bug. I was depressingly predictable. If I died before I graduated college, at least they could put on my headstone that I “aimed to please, no matter the personal cost” – that was something to be proud of, right?

My mom patted my hand. “I know, honey. I know.”

Cayden



I WENT to eat with some of the guys from the team before heading home on the bus. Midnight Falls was nearly an hour away, and I needed every second of the journey to come back down. I was high on the hope that Hade Harbor and the Hellions gave me. It was a dangerous feeling.

Coach Williams had spoken to the principal and school board about me. He was fighting hard for me—for his own benefit as much as mine—but still, I'd never had a teacher take such an interest in me.

My school wasn't award-winning at anything, and my coach was a tired old man who drank too much and passed out at most of the games. The rest of the team was a joke, and the left winger was a serious pain in the ass. Chase Elliot was more of a liability than an asset for the team. If I didn't get the fuck out of here, there was a real chance I'd kill the fucker. As it was, the team was never going to be good enough to attract scouts. I was going nowhere fast here. But in Hade Harbor, playing for the Hellions, there was a chance, slim as it might be, to claw my way out of the hole I'd been born in.

I got off the bus in Midnight Falls and made my way out of the bus station. It was crowded with the usual faces. Their eyes skittered from mine. I recognized most of them. It was my job to know them.

I'd worked for my foster father since I'd turned fourteen and started to fill out. By the time I was sixteen, he'd moved me from peddling his poison to collecting payment from the miserable souls who owed him money. Uncle Jack was a two-bit criminal, thief, and dealer who'd made Midnight Falls

his territory. There wasn't much you could wring out of the people who lived here. The town was well below the poverty line and nearly everyone and their neighbor had a drug problem. But Uncle Jack was inventive. He always found lots of ways for the desperate to pay their debts—and it was my job to make sure they delivered.

By the time I was seventeen, my soul was already tarnished, and my heart jaded. People were desperate, weak, crawling things, and this world was simple—crush or be crushed. The most ironic thing of all was that Jack had been my savior, the one who'd taken me away from my first foster family. I was pathetically grateful when he'd taken me in. I thought that everything would change. I was wrong.

It was ironic that Lillian Williams' nickname was Bug. I tended to think of most people I interacted with as crawling insects—following the next hit blindly, unaware of the boot about to stomp them out of existence. To me, Lillian Williams seemed anything but that.

“Cade!” A shout reached me from across the dark street.

I glanced to the side, spotting a familiar figure hurrying toward me. His name was Sid, and he'd been a victim of addiction—and my uncle—for nearly a decade. It was a miracle the guy was still alive.

“What's up?”

“Nothing, nothing... just wondering if you're carrying tonight. I feel like partying.” Sid reached my side and grabbed my arm, latched on like a leech.

“Not tonight.”

“Oh, come on, man, I know you always have something on you for emergencies, it's just good business!”

I stopped so abruptly that Sid slammed into me. He swiftly backed away, a terrified expression flashing across his wasted face.

“I said I don't have anything. Don't make me repeat myself.”

My cold words froze him to the spot. His eyes met mine for only a second before darting away. Few could meet my stare these days. It was a black, yawning pit. I'd yet to find the bottom.

"Okay, sure, sorry to bother you," Sid muttered and spun so quickly, he slipped on his tattered shoes and went down.

I turned away, not wanting to watch him squirm around on the ground while trying to get up. He wouldn't want my help, anyway. He wouldn't want me touching him. He wasn't used to kindness from me, and there wasn't any point in confusing him. I might be feeling generous from my day in Hade Harbor, but I was still just me.

The bad guy.

I knew there was going to be trouble as soon as I got back to the trailer. It was a triple-wide and a place I tried my best to avoid, only returning for a quick sleep three or four nights a week. The other days, I slept in the team locker room, and used the shitty showers at school after practice and ate whatever I could get my hands on.

"So, the golden boy's decided to return?" Uncle Jack's slurred voice met me as soon as I stepped inside.

Golden boy, Jack's nickname for me. It was a whole lot better than the nickname my first foster parents had given me, but his tone made it clear he was being sarcastic as hell. It started after the local newspaper ran an article calling me a golden boy –in relation to hockey, of course. I'd never been good at anything else. Except working for Uncle Jack, I supposed. He liked the fact that he sent his golden boy out to do his dirty work.

He sat at the scarred dining table, a light swinging slightly over his head. The smell of cheap vodka hung in the air. Jack's drugs of choice were alcohol and violence. He never sampled his own supply. He'd seen too many men lose everything that way, and Uncle Jack was determined to remain at the top of the filthy heap.

He pushed the bottle toward me. “Drink?” His beady eyes were already glazed and bloodshot. He was lanky, preferring drinking over eating, but alcohol gave him a puffiness that looked uncomfortable. His T-shirt was unclean, and his fingers were stained with years of tobacco use. His mean, rat-like face was fixed in my direction.

“Not for me. I’m beat. I just need to sleep.” I turned away from him and walked toward the fridge.

Jack chuckled, but the sound lacked amusement. “Is that right? Tired yourself out in Hade Harbor, did you? Wasting all day lounging about in the bougie town, playing with yourself for your new coach?”

I froze with my hand on the fridge. He knew about Hade Harbor? I’d been so careful, and yet he already knew. I forced myself to reach into the fridge and grab a bottle of water. I took a quick swig and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, fighting for calm.

“Huh?” It was the best I could do right now.

Jack laughed again. “So, we’re feigning ignorance? Okay, great. You tell me where you were all day then? Where were you when I needed you?”

“What did you need me for?”

“That fucker, Lewis, who owns the bar on Fifth, missed his payment, and he beat up the guy I sent for it.”

“Well, that’s not my job--Lewis isn’t on my list. It’s not my fault your other guys can’t fight for shit.”

Jack studied me and then threw his glass in a sudden burst of energy. It smashed into the cupboard right beside my head, showering me with splinters. I didn’t flinch. I’d lost the ability to be surprised. It had been beaten out of me too many times.

“Don’t talk back to me, boy. You know who the boss is around here, you know who you belong to. I’ve got enough on you to put you away for years, never mind playing hockey for a living. Did you forget?” Jack pushed himself to his feet. He sauntered toward me, unintimidated by my superior height and muscle. Of course, he didn’t need to beat me to threaten me. He

wasn't lying; he had evidence of plenty of the illegal shit I did in his name. Starting from the night we'd met, he'd been keeping a record on me that would never die—not until he did.

Tonight, however, my temper felt dangerously close to the surface. He was threatening the only thing I cared about.

"Look, I've put my time in and more than paid back anything I might owe you for the last ten years."

"Your debt to me can't be measured in money, boy, and you know it. I saved your life. If I hadn't taken you in when I did, where do you think you'd be now?"

I swallowed hard, anger, guilt, and a healthy dose of fear crawling up my throat. I still couldn't think about that night without feeling the same fear I'd felt at eight –years old. I was stuck in that moment, forever a terrified child realizing he'd just set his future on fire.

"Jack—" I let out on an exhale.

He stepped closer, squaring up to me. "What do you think Coach Williams will think about your past? Or your reputation, for that matter? You weren't just a fucked up kid, were you? You're a fucked up man now, and people like you and me don't change. He won't want you around his team, or in his town... near his daughter... Bad things happen to good, innocent folks who take in bad eggs like you—"

He hadn't finished talking before my fragile patience snapped. I grabbed him, hauling his heavy, alcohol-bloated frame to my chest.

He'd been expecting it, clearly. He had something hard in his fist, and his first two blows to my side knocked the wind from my lungs. I released him, seeing the glint of the brass knuckles he'd slipped on.

"You think you can take me, boy? Let's go. Let's see, once and for all."

Jack stepped back and pulled a knife from his other pocket. He hefted it as my gaze fixed on the blade.

“I win, you stay and put thoughts of Hade Harbor and Coach Williams out of your head.”

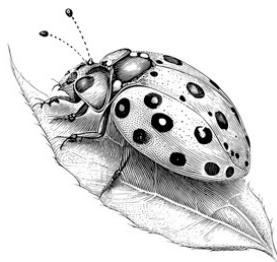
“And if I win?”

Jack only laughed. “Not going to happen.”

Then he lunged.

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Lily



THAT NIGHT, for the first time in longer than I could remember, I dreamed, and it wasn't the kind of dream you told your parents about around the breakfast table. In it, I was lying in bed, and a heavy weight was pinning me down. My body was alive with sensation. Burning-hot skin pressed against mine. Strong hands imprisoned my wrists above my head. Warm, soft lips moved up my neck.

I should have been scared, but I wasn't.

“Don’t get on my bad side, Bug,” a deep voice whispered in my ear.

One of his hands gripped my throat, holding me in place. I couldn't move, couldn't speak. I couldn't do anything but feel his hands on me, breaking all the rules without a care in the world.

“Or do – more fun for me.”

It could only be one person. Only one person had ever spoken to me like that. *Cayden West.*

I woke suddenly, my body hot and wet and wanting. I stared at the moonlit wall opposite my bed, waiting for my heart to calm. My whole body felt heated, like I'd been standing too close to a furnace or had a low-grade fever. I pushed my hair back from my sticky forehead and took a deep, shuddering breath. I slipped out of bed and grabbed my journal and pen from my desk. Describing the dream made it more real. Cayden West. The new boy who'd knocked me on my ass, hauled me around a party, and

threatened me all in a forty-eight-hour period. And I – Lily Williams, touch-starved good girl – had just had a sex dream about him.

Once I emptied my sleep-dazed thoughts onto a blank page, I reached for my water and gulped it down. Maybe that would return some sanity to my feverish mind. What was wrong with me?

*He doesn't play by the rules, he wouldn't care about your father's threats.
He would take what he wanted and never even give you a choice.*

I shivered, the thoughts curling through the edges of my mind like wisps of smoke, too unformed to grab on to. Regardless, just the memory of the dream had my body responding. It was official. I was playing a dangerous game, building up an endless supply of raging teenage hormones without any kind of outlet. One day, it might just boil over and I'd become the girl who went insane from unsatisfied lust.

Returning to bed, I slid under the covers. The sweat that had slicked my body while I dreamed, was cold now, and I shivered. My body felt twitchy and awake from the dream. I ran my hand down myself, over my breasts. My nipples were hard, straining against my T-shirt. Shame and embarrassment coated me as I let my hand drift lower, under the elastic of my shorts. I was all hot and wet down there, and even my thighs were sticky. I slid my hand under my panties to check. *Yup. It's bad.* My own meager explorations had been the only action I'd ever had downstairs, and those experiences had been sorely lacking. It felt good when I touched myself, and I knew enough about human biology to understand the components, but I'd never managed to make myself come. I'd read up about it and approached it in the most scientific way I could, and yet I was still orgasm-free.

There had to be a variable I wasn't factoring in. Given that dream tonight and my body's reaction to it, it seemed clear what that variable was. I was missing another person. Namely, one who would pin me down and take what he wanted from me. Just that thought sent a fresh, slick wave of want through me. I slid my virgin fingers around my clit, rubbing in a circle. It felt good, better than usual. I let the dream fill my mind again, imagining the heavy feeling of Cayden's body against mine, picturing the way his hand held my neck. I had no choice. I wasn't breaking my parents' rules

and I wasn't letting them down. It wasn't my fault. I moved my fingers faster on my wet pussy, and for once, I felt myself rising. Maybe the elusive O could finally be mine.

Outside, a car door slammed, jolting me up in my bed, my impending orgasm slipping from reach.

Who the hell is out at this time of night?

We didn't live close enough to anyone else for it to be a neighbor. I slipped out of bed and peeked around the curtain. It was raining heavily. I couldn't make out too much. My bedroom was on the ground floor, beside the spare room. My parents' room was upstairs.

My father had been out? I checked my glow-in-the-dark clock. Three a.m.

Curiosity pulled me from the safety of my room. I drifted down the hall, wrapping my huge fluffy robe around me and perching my glasses on my nose.

The lights blazed in the kitchen. My father stood in the middle, his raincoat wet and his hair shining. My mother stood in front of him in a robe and slippers. They argued quietly. The front door stood open, and a cold wind blew through the room and down the hall, winding around my legs. A shadow lurked just outside the door, leaning against the wall, just out of the rain. A person, shrouded in darkness. I somehow knew his eyes were on me, despite not being able to make out a damn thing but his vague outline. Just like that day in the parking lot, when that dark hood had hidden glittering sea-blue eyes from me, I knew exactly who was standing in the rain outside my house at three a.m.

I couldn't make out everything they were saying, but my mother gestured wildly toward the shadow outside, and my father made those hand gestures he always used to try and quiet her. After a few minutes like that, my mom turned on her heel, angrily storming through the house.

"Mom, what's going on?" I called.

"Ask your father!"

Her snapped reply made me even more curious about what was going on. Something out of the ordinary was happening.

I approached the kitchen. My dad shrugged off his coat and wiped his feet on the mat, then turned to hold the door open for our unexpected guest.

“Come on in, Cayden, make yourself at home,” my dad said. Coach Eric was always polite and warm. Everyone loved him. The town good guy.

Cayden didn’t have a jacket on. His thin, holey hoodie was soaked through on the shoulders, and his sneakers squeaked with water. He carried a black trash bag in one hand. His hood was up, his face shadowed. That dark oval turned toward me as I stood in the doorway, feeling like a kid in my oversized robe.

“Lily, Cayden is going to be staying with us for a while,” Dad said and threw me a distracted smile, his gaze straying along the hall in the direction my mother had gone. “Honey, can you get Cayden a towel? It’s really coming down out there. Then take him to the spare room, and show him how to use the shower and all that. I have to talk to your mother before she goes back to sleep. Cade, see you at breakfast, seven o’clock sharp.”

Instructions given, Eric clapped Cayden on his soaking-wet shoulder and left the room. Being the high school coach, my father was used to being obeyed.

Cayden West was staying with us?

I was rigid with tension as I watched my father walk down the hall, leaving me alone with the boy who’d done nothing but threaten me since we’d first met.

“The towel, Bug.” Cayden’s deep voice jerked me from my horror.

“Fine, but it’s just because I don’t want you dripping on the floor,” I sniffed. I didn’t know why I bothered trying to come off as unaffected by him. His eyes told me he didn’t buy my cool girl act. His presence bothered me. I couldn’t hide it. The dream beat at my temples, and my face filled with an unpleasant itchy heat.

Not expecting an answer, I turned and headed for the linen cupboard. It was at the end of the laundry room, past the kitchen. Opening the door, I reached up and grabbed a couple of towels from the warm, lavender-scented space.

I spun around and immediately froze.

Cayden stood right behind me. He'd followed me, and damn closely, at that.

"You didn't have to come, I'd have brought them to you," I said, fighting the urge to fidget. God, this was so awkward. "Here," I blurted and pushed the towels into his chest, escaping around the side of his body.

He had that gift of sucking the air out of the room with his presence. Reaching a far safer distance, I turned and leaned around the counter, watching our new guest. He looked at the towels for a long moment.

"You probably have to take off your hoodie to get dry. If you want, I can put it in the dryer right now," I told him.

He was still for a long moment, and then he tossed the towels on the counter and reached for the bottom of his hoodie. When he yanked it up, his T-shirt came with it.

I didn't consider myself a creep, not usually, but right now, nothing could stop me from staring at Cayden's body. Okay, sometimes it was fun to go and watch hockey practice on the pretense of waiting for my dad, but usually, I wasn't going just to stare at beautiful bodies.

Cayden's T-shirt slid up his torso, revealing golden skin and the taut, tightly packed muscles on his abdomen. His long arms bulged with well-defined strength as he dropped them back down to his sides.

But my lust quickly morphed into concern when I noticed mottled purple marks on his torso. Fresh bruises. I gasped, my hand unconsciously moving toward them.

"Don't." His voice was like a whip. He grabbed my hand where it grazed his chest, yanking it into the air between us, gripping it tightly. "Don't touch me."

I swallowed hard, the serious look in his eyes freezing me to the spot. I couldn't remember what I was supposed to be doing. Cayden had my hand up near his face, my fingers clutched in his. His blue eyes stared down at me, warning me away and drawing me in all at once.

No. I'm not going to be the girl who's drawn to the broken boy. Nope. I've read that story, and it's not going to happen.

"You're the one touching me," I muttered when he continued to hold my hand in a punishing grip.

The hard line of his mouth softened a fraction, and his chest suddenly expanded like he'd been holding his breath. I realized that I had, too, at the same moment, and gulped down some much-needed oxygen.

Cayden squeezed my fingers and made to let go, just as his nostrils flared. My hand was only inches from his face, and in a move that would forever haunt me, he brought my hand to his nose and inhaled.

Heat flooded my cheeks. *Holy crap.* I rarely bothered touching myself much, seeing as it never went anywhere. This was just my luck. The one night I'd ventured down there, and the very guy I'd dreamed about appeared and sniffed my goddamn fingers.

He couldn't really smell anything, though, right? *You're being paranoid. Relax.*

"W-what are you doing?" I stammered out. I was pretty sure my face couldn't get any hotter at this point. A curse of being a natural redhead.

Cayden made a noise deep in his throat that was kind of like a growl. Goosebumps rose on my arms.

"The question, Bug, is what have *you* been doing?" he mocked quietly.

I snatched my hand from his and stepped back. "I haven't been doing anything. I was sleeping. It's three in the morning, in case you hadn't realized."

I was doing a great job of coming across like a prim schoolmarm. Cayden watched me with glittering eyes. His T-shirt had fallen back into place,

hiding his obvious beating. I didn't care. If he wanted to hide his injuries and be a martyr creeping around at night, I couldn't have cared less – so long as it didn't involve my family.

"Whatever you say. The dryer?" he prompted, somehow embarrassing me even further; he'd flustered me so much, I'd forgotten why we were standing there in the first place.

"Right, the dryer," I muttered and reached out to snatch the hoodie from his hands. I stuffed his threadbare jacket into the dryer and turned it on. I needed to get the hell away from this guy before I embarrassed myself even more.

"I'll show you to the spare room," I said, trying to find something to do with my hands. I grabbed the remaining towel on the counter and started through the room. The house was quiet, but I knew my mom and dad had to be arguing somewhere inside. Clearly, my mom wasn't happy about a student staying the night. Good. I knew I couldn't take more than a night under the same roof as Cayden West without losing my mind.

"Here you go," I said, entering the spare room and hitting the light switch. Warm light flooded the room. "It's not much."

"Yes, it is," Cayden said, so quietly that I wasn't sure I'd heard him right. He'd grabbed the trash bag as we'd passed the hall and now set it on the desk. Was it his clothes? Why would he have his clothes in a trash bag?

I felt his eyes on my face and realized that he had to know what I was thinking.

"Okay, so there's a shower down the hall, get dried off and um, change, if you want."

"Don't worry about it, Bug. I'm sure I can make myself at home just fine."

Cayden's words sent annoyance sparking back over me.

I rolled my eyes at him, and he narrowed his in return.

"Whatever. I'm going to bed."

“Yes, go. I’m sorry I interrupted your – sleeping – earlier.” He gave me a mocking smile and rested a long, thick arm above my head, leaning on the doorframe and making me feel tiny. “If you want some help getting a more satisfying *sleep*, let me know.”

His words sent my blood rushing back to my face, and a hot, squirming feeling coiled in my belly.

“I don’t need your help, and I’d never let you touch me,” I started, flustered all over again. No one ever hit on me. It just didn’t happen.

Cayden chuckled, the bastard. “Bug, I don’t do charity. I simply meant I’d point you in the direction of a book or something from the library you can consult. Don’t get worked up.”

I scowled at him. “You’re such an asshole, you know that?”

“I’m well aware, and our earlier conversation remains true – don’t piss me off or you’ll regret it.”

I matched his violently nonchalant tone. “I don’t think I will, seeing as you clearly need to be on my father’s good side. In fact, you better not piss *me* off, or you’ll be the one regretting it.”

He glared down at me, tension thickening the air around us. A muscle worked in the strong column of his jaw. It was criminal how good the guy looked when he was threatening me. Totally unfair, really.

Then he grinned, and ice skated down my spine, chasing away the heat that had been there.

“Lillian... you don’t want to go toe to toe with me. You’re too smart for that. You don’t want to threaten me, Freckles, or go to battle against me. You really don’t. You won’t like the consequences.”

Freckles?

Somehow, in a reserve of strength I didn’t know I had, I summoned a smirk. “Oh really? With that kind of hype, I just know you’ll never live up to it. You don’t scare me, Cayden. Get that through your thick skull.”

He stared at me a moment longer, his blue eyes assessing. His head tilted slightly to the side. “We’ll see, I guess.”

He lifted his arm, no longer barring me from leaving. I backed away, never moving my eyes from his. He followed me out into the hall, leaning against his doorframe. He watched me open my door, and a smirk played around his lips.

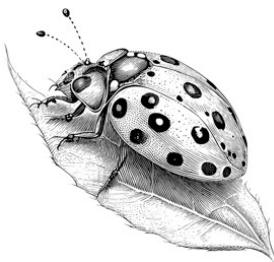
“Is that your room? I guess we’re neighbors.”

His smirk only widened as my pulse quickened. It was cold and predatory, more of a threat than any words could be.

“Remember that and be a good girl.”

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Lily



BY THE TIME I ventured out of my room the next morning, my dad and his new ace hockey player were gone. Thank God for that. The rest of the night I'd tossed and turned, listening for the slightest sound in the hallway. Whether I was scared that Cayden would make good on his threats, or disappointed that he didn't, I couldn't look too closely at.

When I fell asleep, I fell right back into the same kind of filthy dreams I'd had before Cayden showed up last night. These ones were even worse. I'd scribbled them out in my journal the next morning to purge my mind of the depraved images I'd dreamed up. Maybe I'd finally reached the level of unresolved teenage hormones where I'd simply started to lose my mind. It had always been going to happen. Maybe Cayden West sleeping next door would be the tipping point.

Hopefully, by the time I got home today, the entire thing would just be a nightmare I could forget about.

I had to meet my dad after practice on Tuesdays. The team did their drills and coaching in the mornings, so Tuesdays, I went home with my dad. I didn't have my own car, unfortunately. My parents thought it wasn't necessary since my dad and I went to the same place every day. I'm sure they factored that into their dream of me attending HHU next year and living at home.

Hey, look at the bright side, that routine can continue if you go to HHU and carpool from home every morning.

I thumped my way down the rink stairs, despondent at the thought of the acceptance email for early admission to my dream school in California—an email that hadn't materialized. Considering how unpopular I was here, I had no idea why I was expecting that anyone else would want me, never mind my dream school. The admission officer had probably looked at my application and laughed.

Finding the rink empty, I turned and headed for my dad's office. I walked down the hall outside the locker rooms, hearing the ruckus from the team changing, even outside. Those guys couldn't do anything quietly. I hurried to my dad's office, knocking briefly before pushing the door open.

It was dark, but the joining room—which was more of a hallway that led through to a private bathroom and shower—was lit up like a Christmas tree. There was no end to the perks that Hade Harbor High could bestow upon its superstar coach...except for a decent salary, it seemed.

I'd wait for my dad in here. It was safer than the hallway outside where the players would soon pass through. Now that Cayden West was in the mix, I was even less inclined to run into them.

The door to the private bathroom was open, and a sudden movement caught my eye. *Wait, is someone in there?* I was about to throw my hand up and yell at my dad for not remembering to close the door when the shadow drifted past the opening again, forming into a person. It wasn't my dad.

Cayden stood in front of the small bathroom mirror, steam curling off his gleaming skin. His torso was bare, and only a white towel swathed his hips. He was staring at his reflection, and his look of concentration gave me a chance to take in the sinfully hot picture he made. Last night hadn't allowed much time to stare. I might hate the guy already, but I couldn't deny he was beautiful to watch.

What I hadn't expected was the extent of the damage. Turned out, I'd only seen a glimpse of it last night. The truth was so much worse.

Bruises clustered along one side of his ribcage, with crisscrossed welts overlaying the purple and blue. He had tattoos working down his arms, a couple of them, but I wasn't close enough to make them out. Most noticeable of all were the thick scars high up on his shoulders and arms, the

type that looked like bad stitches made it worse. A mess of white scar tissue sat low on one side, woven into the fabric of his skin. Was it letters? I could make out a few shapes that looked like letters: *w-o-r*. The other letter was out of sight. I tilted my head for a better view.

Had I drifted closer? *Crap*. I only realized I was approaching the room when the water bottle, stuck in the side pocket of my backpack, clicked against the door.

Cayden froze. He hadn't been moving much before, but at the sound, an eerie stillness filled his tall frame. His eyes shot to mine in the mirror.

"I-I'm looking for my dad," I said lamely.

He was tense, his hands curled into fists on the countertop.

"I—are you okay?" I heard myself say. "Your back..."

I hadn't known it was possible for someone to get so still. A darkness entered his eyes that made me drop his gaze. Blue wrath and the promise of future pain was held in that look.

He didn't like me snooping on him.

He didn't like being seen.

"Anyway, I'll just wait for him outside," I babbled as I backed away.

Cayden had straightened up, and as I made it to the door, he half turned, his eyes tracking my every movement.

I really did feel like a bug under the microscope then.

With a stumble and heat flooding my cheeks, I spun around and ran from the office. I didn't stop until I got back to the truck.

I hid in my room until dinner. The drive home had been tense, though my dad hadn't seemed to notice. I'd shuffled down and tried to become invisible in the backseat, but regardless, I'd felt Cayden's attention on me.

He was here again, next door, and this time, he'd be scarier than ever. I could feel it. There had been nothing teasing or light in his eyes when he'd caught me looking at his back and seeing that awful scar. Now, I was really on his shit list.

I paced my room, biting my nails, until my mom yelled for me to come to dinner. I left the room cautiously. No sounds greeted me. Maybe Cayden was already in the kitchen. I ran past the spare room and arrived in the kitchen, breathless.

Cayden straightened up from the dishwasher, having just put a bowl in. My mom stood at the sink and dried her hands, smiling at me.

“Great, you’re here. Let’s eat.”

“Good day at school?” my dad asked his go-to question to kick off dinner conversation.

Tonight, I could barely tear my eyes away from Cayden. Everyone acted like it was totally normal that he was here. A stranger, in our house, sitting at the dinner table. He watched me with a dark gaze.

“It was fine. Normal,” I muttered, dropping Cayden’s hot look and staring at my plate.

“Well, normal is good. Lily is a straight-A student,” my mom bragged to Cayden.

“Is that right? Well done, senior year is hard.”

I risked a glance at Cayden. He had his mask firmly in place. Cool politeness. My parents were falling for it.

“Well, you can get on track, too.” My dad smiled at Cayden. “Hade Harbor is a great school. Of course, your focus should be on hockey, but you’ll still have a much better senior year academically than back in Midnight Falls.”

Cayden was from Midnight Falls? That town, about an hour over, was notoriously sketchy.

“Thanks, Coach. Believe me, I mean to make the most of it.” Cayden was laying it on thick, but I wasn’t falling for it.

“I’m sure Lily can help you out here and there with some tutoring, if you want. She really is a very smart girl,” my mom chipped in.

“Mom!” I stared at her, horrified.

Cayden chuckled. “I might just take her up on that, seeing as I’ll be here, anyway.”

Silence fell at his words. *He’ll be here anyway?*

I turned to my dad. He had a suppressed sort of excitement about him. I knew that look. It was one I’d grown wary of trusting long ago. It was the expression that told us he was working all weekend or missing a family outing to go and scout some kid at a faraway game.

I looked at my mom, searching for a clue. Her eyes were bright. She seemed worried but excited.

“Cayden, have a second helping. You need energy for training.” She pushed the bowl of mashed potatoes toward him.

“Dad, what’s going on?” My voice sounded too loud inside my own head.

He picked up my mom’s hand, and they shared a look. Dread gathered in my belly. This couldn’t be good. Cayden was too confident, and my mom was too nervous.

“Lily, we wanted to tell you now, before it’s official... that we’ve made a very important decision for our family.”

Mom smoothed her hair back. “Honey, I don’t know if you realize, but your father has a very good chance of winning nationals this year. As you know, if he does, he’s got that job at HHU lined up,” she said.

I recognized the tactic immediately.

Dad took over. “But to win, I need help. I need this guy right here,” he said and nodded to Cayden.

I avoided his eyes at all costs. Keeping my mouth shut and not protesting what was coming was all I could do right now.

“Cade can’t play for his old school. It’s a waste, and they aren’t going anywhere. And besides, between us, his living situation wasn’t ideal,” my dad continued.

I spied Cayden’s fist curling into a ball beside his plate.

“So, what does it all mean?” I burst out, the suspense doing terrible things for my heart rate.

“It means Cayden’s going to stay here with us, we’re going to foster him... just until the end of the school year.”

I raised my eyes to my parents’ hopeful ones, my shock quickly turning to horror.

“You mean, he’s going to be living here for a year?” I asked, trying to keep the hysteria out of my voice.

“Yep, just long enough to win nationals, get a scholarship, and make local history, for both of us,” my dad said, with a megawatt smile.

“He’s too old to be a foster kid!” my accusation shot out.

My mom gave me a warning look. “Sure, he’s just about aging out. You guys are nearly the same age...but he’s already in a foster situation. It’s unorthodox to start a new arrangement so close to his birthday, but if everyone agrees...it satisfies the school board and means that Cayden can play on the Hade Harbor team.”

“But I don’t agree!” I was on my feet now. Panic was tugging at the edges of my mind. I was on the cusp of a full-blown spiral.

“Lil – stay calm. I know this is big news. Take a moment to process it.”

My dad’s voice usually comforted me, but today it had the opposite effect. He sounded so decided, it terrified me.

I tried not to look at Cayden as my dad stood and pulled me into a hug, but I couldn’t stop my eyes from colliding with his. The darkly satisfied flicker in his gaze chilled me to the bone.

He got up, his fit body moving lithely out of the low chair. He came around to hug my mom, whose laugh had a girlish edge, and my father slapped him on the shoulder, the two of them sharing a pleased grin.

As he reached me, I shrank back, fighting the urge to run away.

“No hug for your new brother?” he goaded me.

I crossed my arms over my chest stiffly as he leaned in and gave me a one-handed hug.

“You can do better than that, Lillian. Smile for your parents, we wouldn’t want them to think you’re upset.” He spoke just low enough for my parents not to hear.

“I hate you. You’re a psycho, and soon enough I’m sure everyone will see it,” I ground out around a fake smile.

“No, I don’t think they will. Most people aren’t that smart...I think it’ll be your cross to bear, and you don’t hate me yet. Not even close.” He leaned away and gave me a lopsided, handsome smile that would have stopped my heart if we’d never met before. Then he spoiled it. “And soon, you will.”

Cayden



THE WILLIAMS HOUSEHOLD went to bed early. That suited me fine. I lay in the spare room, staring at the ceiling, and waited. No, not the spare room, not anymore. *My room*. It was a plain little room, nothing fancy, and yet it was nice in a way I'd never known. An unstained carpet covered the floor, and the furniture was all smooth and unmarked by cigarette burns or scratches. Real living plants dotted the odd surface, and framed photographs of the family hung on the wall. It was the nicest place I'd ever slept in.

Being fostered was a flimsy excuse to get me on the team, but considering my background, it would hold up. I was enough of a charity case to stop anyone from talking shit about the situation, in case they looked like the bad guy.

Eric Williams had no idea he'd let the real bad guy into his house, given him a key, and was letting him sleep right next to his daughter. Ambition was a dangerous thing. Williams wanted that job at the world-famous HHU, and that had made him blind to the threat I posed to Lillian. Little, untouched Lillian. I was willing to bet her hesitant touch on her sweet-smelling cunt was the only one she'd ever felt. The guys on the team would never go against Coach's wishes and try anything with her, adorable as she was.

I was under no such restriction.

Hell, he was practically begging me to have her, leaving her defenseless and so very close. And Lily herself? She was asking for it, too, with her smart little mouth and mesmerizing eyes.

I tensed when I remembered her eyes on me earlier, seeing every pitiful mark and scar on my wretched body. Had she read the word? I wasn't sure. She probably had. Whether she had or not, one thing was clear... it was time to show her who held the power in our relationship. It was time to put her in her place, preferably at my feet. Little Lily would look awfully pretty kneeling before me, her big, green eyes wide, her freckled skin flushed as I pushed between her plump lips.

I shifted on the bed, getting hard at the thought. I didn't know what the fuck was wrong with me. I didn't get distracted by girls. They threw themselves at me and the rest of the hockey team with embarrassing abandon. Teasing smiles and provocative touches didn't do a thing for me. In fact, they turned my stomach.

I didn't like to be touched. I couldn't stand it, in fact.

The thought of being touched by some blonde with bleached teeth and faux coyness repulsed me. More than anything, it was a serious turnoff. I wasn't the kind of guy who had to worry about getting a hard-on at inappropriate times, watching the girls at lunch licking lollipops like wannabe porn stars or pretending to drop something in class, casting a teasing look over their shoulders while they bent at the waist to showcase their asses. None of that did it for me.

But the thought of Lillian Williams, untouched bookworm, with her glasses, freckles and librarian energy, lying in bed with her hand down her own cotton panties – that had me feeling all kinds of heat.

In my work for my uncle, I'd had women suggest countless filthy things to pay off their debt. Desperate, wretched things offered in the darkness. I'd turned down every single one. Jack had laughed at me, calling me all kinds of names. The words he threw at me when he was drunk-and at his most honest-were the ones that stayed with me.

"You're too fucked up for normal women, golden boy. First your hooking mama and then that couple she stuck you with and the weird things they

liked to do to you... nah, you'll never be normal now. That ship has sailed."

I'd never admit it to him, but he was right. I'd never be normal, and I'd given up trying.

I got out of bed and went to the door, cracking it open and listening for a while. It was silent in the rest of the house. A clock ticked somewhere up the landing, but nothing moved from the direction of Lily's room. I left mine and headed for hers.

The handle turned easily under my touch. No locked doors in this house, luckily, not that I couldn't have picked them. This was faster. I stepped inside and soundlessly closed the door behind me.

The smell hit me first. It was caramel and vanilla, with an edge of salt and pines. It was Lily. Every single time I got close to her, starting at Beckett's party, that scent flooded my senses. It smelled clean in a way I couldn't get enough of. *Pure*. It had my mouth watering.

I stood still for a long moment, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness, and then I moved. First, I approached the bed. Lily was a small shape under the covers. I couldn't make out much. She seemed to be asleep, however, so I went to her desk. Slowly, as silently as possible, I started my search. Lillian Williams might be a very good girl, but I was willing to bet she had something to hide.

I needed leverage over her to even the playing field and feel safe around her. I wouldn't stop until I had it, even if that meant I had to make it myself.

I checked all the drawers in her desk first. Straight-A student, indeed; I'd never seen so many extra reading books or A+-marked assignments. I found plenty of drawings of bug—she liked to doodle—and notes to her friend, Eve, though they held nothing of interest. Next, I searched her backpack, also coming up empty. I made my way to the bed and quietly dropped to my knees, peering beneath. An old stuffed toy and what looked like running shorts had been kicked under. Nothing else. I sat back on my heels and contemplated the girl sleeping innocently in the bed before me.

If I really wanted leverage, I could pull the covers back, work her oversized T-shirt up, and take photos of her body, then use them to keep her quiet. It

was an idea, and one I wasn't above using, but it didn't feel satisfactory. It wasn't real, and I wanted something real. I wanted to know what this girl hid from the world. No one was this clean and perfect. No one.

I put a hand on the mattress and leaned in, bending my head to take a deep inhale of the perfume of her neck. Her hair spread across the pillow like satin ribbons and I stroked it. It was the silkiest thing I'd ever felt. Her scent filled my nose.

Fuck. That was good.

My entire body clenched as her scent rushed into my head, making me dizzy for a second. This room was like nothing I'd ever seen outside of movies. Clean and smoke-free, it was warm and cozy, wholesome in a way that made me ache. What would it have been like to grow up so safe? So loved? It wasn't something I'd ever know.

I slipped my hand under the pillow as I leaned in closer. The skin of her neck smelled so good, I had to taste it.

Just then, my fingers brushed by a hard object. Excitement shot through my belly as I reached for it and dragged it slowly out.

A journal.

Jackpot.

An hour later, I was back in my room. I hadn't been able to move while I read the journal. I should have simply stolen it, but the contents had rooted me to the spot. After all, it wasn't every day someone found themselves the star of the show in the mind of someone who hated them.

I shut the door, wishing I could lock it, and lay on the bed. My phone vibrated with a message, and I quickly checked it.

Golden boy, you're going to pay for the other night. After everything I've done for you, you can't get rid of me that easily. I'll see you soon.

Fucking Jack. I should have killed him when he'd come for me with a knife, but I'd promised myself that I'd never kill—not again. Two deaths were enough to weigh anyone's soul down.

Instead, I'd fought him off, beaten him and gotten the hell out of there before calling Coach Williams. If he hadn't offered to come and get me right then, I might have gone back and finished good ol' Uncle Jack once and for all.

I closed the message and opened my photo app, staring at the diary pages I'd just read. *Holy fuck.* Nothing could have prepared me for the effects of reading Lily's journal. Absolutely nothing. If a twisted sort of interest in my new foster sister had been blossoming in me before, now it threatened to explode into something else entirely.

Obsession, pure and simple.

I flicked through the photos I'd taken of her pretty scrawled pages. With my other hand, I worked my jeans open. I'd been aching and hard as hell since the second I'd walked into her pretty-smelling room, and I couldn't take one more second. I pushed my jeans and boxers down my hips and palmed my cock. I could hear her voice reading her words in my head.

I dreamed of him last night. I know it was him. If anyone asked me to my face, I'd deny it, but I can't deny it here. I dreamed of Cayden West holding me down and pushing inside me, and I woke up wetter than I've ever been. Is that normal?

I moved my hand up my cock, circling the head and then sliding back down the shaft. I made my grip tight, just like I imagined Lily's little virgin cunt

would be.

He was holding me down, his hand pressing my throat hard. There were stars behind my eyes, but his breath in my ear was steady. I knew he wouldn't hurt me. I knew he was only going to make me feel good.

Just that line had my tip leaking precum. When was the last time someone had trusted me with their safety? Especially someone as perfect and special as Lily? I groaned low in my throat. I couldn't help it. I pumped my cock lazily from root to tip, lightly arching my hips into the movement.

He touched me all over; his fingers were hard, but they felt so good. Then, he pushed between my legs, and his skin was so hot. When he pressed inside me, he was so big, I could barely breathe. He covered my mouth with his hand, and I couldn't make a sound. I could scream, and no one would hear. He was breaking all the rules, and no one, including me, could stop him.

Fuck. I was gonna come. I was going to blow my load on my stomach just from reading Lily's dream journal, and it was going to be the hardest I'd ever come, I could tell. I stroked faster.

He whispered in my ear the whole time he was fucking me hard into the mattress. He told me I was being good for him and I was perfect. He told me I could do no wrong. He told me that no one could stop him, that he didn't care who saw us, that he'd claim me any time and any place - that I was his property, to fuck whenever he felt like. He told me he'd fill me up with cum and let me walk around school that way, so everyone would know I was his.

I was losing it. The absolute, shocking filth of my Lily's imagination was driving me forward, and nothing could stop me now.

He used my body for his pleasure, taking me roughly and forcing me to come on his cock, again and again. He made me come so many times, holding me down through it, forcing me to peak until I was shaking, and when I

thought I couldn't take one more orgasm, he came, too, filling me up, just like he'd promised. His cum was so hot inside me - it felt so real.

With a groan that I felt down to my toes, I came. Hot ropes of cum splashed up my hand and across my belly in jets, striping me with white. My cock pulsed uncontrollably, jerking out of my grip, and my balls were as high up as they could go, emptying themselves so thoroughly, I'd have to shower to clean up. I pumped my hand up and down my slick shaft a few more times, until only dribbles of cum were left, leaking from my tip, and it was too sensitive to continue. More sated than I'd ever felt—my muscles felt slack as I relaxed on the bed—I lazily fished the only thing I'd taken from Lily's room from my pocket.

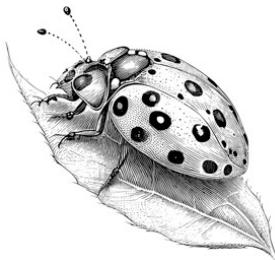
I knew she'd wear cotton panties. These ones had tiny microscopes on them. They were cute as hell and worn. They smelled divine. I pressed them to my face and inhaled deeply before using them to clean the cum off my stomach and hand.

Starting tomorrow, Lily Williams was going to understand that I finally had something on her. She'd realize that our little power struggle was over, and I'd won.

I owned her ass, and now that I'd read her journal, I was looking forward to owning—and enjoying—the rest of her, too.

Don't worry, Freckles, I'm going to make all your dreams come true.

Lily



I WAS LIVING in a nightmare I couldn't wake up from.

Last night, I'd thought a hundred times about going to my parents and begging them to reconsider. I thought about going and telling my father how aggressive Cayden had been toward me and how he'd threatened me. But I had no proof, and my father's future and dreams rested on the arrogant psycho. The dreams I'd cost him.

In the morning, resigned and depressed, I headed down the hall toward the kitchen, briefly forgetting for a second that the spare room was now enemy territory.

I got two steps before strong hands grabbed me and hauled me inside. Cayden slammed the door and pushed me against it, the impact hard enough to wind me. I coughed, choking on my own panic as his hand landed on my mouth, sealing my protests inside.

“Good morning, little sis.”

He loomed over me, fresh out of the shower. He smelled like soap and something sweet, like honeysuckle. His short dark hair was still wet, and I couldn't help but marvel at his beautiful features--the full mouth and high cheekbones, the strong jaw, the winged black eyebrows that gave him a hint of nobility. It was deeply unsettling that someone who looked and smelled like him could hide such malice inside. His beauty was nothing but a facade.

“Sleep well?” He grinned at me like he was in on a secret as I struggled against his hand. “I thought we should go over the ground rules, since we’re going to be living together and all. We wouldn’t want to rub each other the wrong way. Siblings shouldn’t fight.”

His mocking tone had me pushing against his iron-like chest. He tutted and only stepped closer. His hips pressed mine into the door. The ridge of his jeans pushed against my navel, uncomfortable and weirdly intimate.

He’d stepped so close, my hands were trapped against his chest, unable to struggle anymore. Just touching.

“Here’s what we’re going to do. Nod if you’re listening.” He moved my face up and down in a parody of agreement. He towered above me, looking more terrifying than ever.

“You’re not going to say anything to anyone at school about what you saw. You’re going to forget it. Don’t go running your mouth to anyone about the new kid who’s all beat up and scarred. If anyone says anything about that scar...I’ll know it was you.”

I stared up at him. His face was carefully blank, like he was hiding his emotions somewhere deep inside. I was starting to suspect it was all an act. He didn’t like to be seen and he didn’t like to be vulnerable, so he put up this facade of a guy who didn’t care. But I thought he *did* care. I thought he cared a lot.

“If anyone finds out...You’ll be on the hook for it. Do you get what that means?”

I swallowed hard, and his eyes dropped to my throat. He watched my neck, seeming fascinated by the movement. Slowly, he withdrew his hand from my mouth, letting me speak.

“I didn’t see anything.”

He grinned, but his eyes were cold. “We both know that isn’t true.”

“Don’t exaggerate your importance to me. I don’t care enough about you to talk about you behind your back.” I needed space, I couldn’t breathe. He

was too close, and he smelled too good. His body was too strong in all the right places. It was overwhelming.

“Is that right?” His voice was eerily soft.

I stared stubbornly at his collarbones. He took my chin between his thumb and forefinger and tipped my face up, forcing me to meet his stormy gaze.

“You don’t think about me at all...Is that what you’re telling me, Lily?”

“Why would I?” I breathed, caught in the snare of his magnetism. The guy was a magician. Somehow, with a soft tone and touch, he could make me forget his threats and strong-arm tactics. Magic was the only explanation.

I wet my lips, and his eyes seized on the movement. Being this close to Cayden made me feel hot all over, like my skin was shrinking in on me, and I needed to peel it off.

“I’m not going to pretend I want you here, though. Find another place to stay. I don’t care if you play for the Hellions, just stay out of my life.”

Cayden’s mouth stretched into another lazy grin, but this one looked more amused.

“No, I don’t think I will. I think I’m going to be right here when you wake up, when you sleep...I think you and I are only going to get closer, so get used to that fact.”

“I’ll tell my dad everything then. How you threatened me, how you grabbed me...this here right now – all of it!”

Cayden was nodding, looking unintimidated. “You do that, if you feel you have to. If you do, though, then I guess he can kiss his promotion goodbye. He’s getting older, almost at make or break time. I guess he’ll be happy enough staying at Hade Harbor High forever...high school coach is almost the same as college level, right?”

A feeling of powerlessness lodged in my throat, and I wanted to cry.

Cayden’s grin turned predatory as he leaned in and stuck his face in the crook of my neck, breathing deeply. “Don’t worry, it’s not a decision you have to make. I’ll make it for you, Lil. That’s what you like, isn’t it?”

Cold nerves spread across my skin. *What the hell was he talking about?*

“To be clear, I know about California and how guilty you feel about wanting to escape your loving, suffocating parents. I know all about how you resent their smothering love.”

“How—” I started before biting off the words. *My journal.* It was the only way he could know. I hadn’t even thought about it last night with the stress of Cayden moving in for a whole year. I hadn’t hidden it. I hadn’t done anything.

Cayden shifted back, his eyes rapt on my face, drinking in my emotions. He bent down so his face was level with mine. There was no escaping him.

“You read my journal,” I managed to get out. A hysterical scream threatened to burst forth. My blood raced with panic. Then, a new thought occurred to me. If he’d read about California, then he’d read a lot, maybe even the last entries...the dreams.

He laughed when my eyes widened, the realization crashing into me.

“That’s right...I read it all. It was riveting, the best thing I’ve read all year.”

I swallowed down my humiliation. I couldn’t let it take over right now. “So, you really came into my room when I was sleeping and looked through my stuff? Are you insane?”

Cayden laughed. “Now you’re getting it. I came into your room, poked around your things, and got a little peek into that twisted head of yours. Do you really like that stuff? Is that what gets you wet?”

My words strangled in my throat, my face heating to nuclear levels. My diary was full of random dreams, fantasies about wild things that I’d never be allowed to experience in my humdrum life. I was pretty sure other girls didn’t dream of running through town and being hunted down by a man who would take you no matter what, but then maybe they had some sort of freedom in their lives. Maybe they hadn’t been raised to be the good girl, the straight-A student, with zero alternatives. Maybe they didn’t carry the weight of their parents’ failed dreams on their shoulders.

Great, so now I was going to blame my overprotective parents for my kinky virgin imagination. And that last entry...it was damning. For years, my depraved little dreams had starred a faceless man in black, nobody real. My dream man hadn't been real until the last entry. The subject of the last entry stood over me, satisfaction in his gaze. I could barely meet his eyes.

"So, you like stories where the girl is followed and chased...hunted down and fucked without mercy..." he trailed off and gave a raw chuckle. "It's always the quiet ones, isn't it?"

He reached up for my glasses. I tried to turn my head, but he brought another huge palm up and laid it like a necklace across my throat. Not pushing hard, but the pressure was enough to warn me not to move.

"You dreamed of me, Lily. Did you dream of me touching you like this?" His voice was a rasp.

I had the feeling he wasn't joking around anymore. He was stone-cold serious. My heart pounded so hard, I was surprised he couldn't hear it.

I shook my head, feeling a mulish need to deny everything. *No. He can't know. I can't face him again if he's really read that.* I didn't realize I'd spoken out loud until he answered.

"But I did read it, and what's more...I've got the photos to prove it."

My heart sank.

"I see you, Lillian. You saw me...and now, I've seen you," he said quietly.

"I didn't see anything," I whispered.

"It doesn't matter. It's too late to go back. Now I've seen inside." He tapped a finger to my forehead. "I won't hesitate to let the whole school, and your parents, know what lies beneath this straight-A exterior. Got it? Don't forget that I'm at the top of the food chain at HHH, and you're at the bottom. Don't make me have to remind you."

"What are you going to do? Hurt me?" I snapped at him, lunging for my glasses, only to have him squeeze my neck a little harder.

“Whatever turns you on,” Cayden murmured. “Feel free to let me know exactly what that is, or I can just read about it.”

“I fucking hate you,” I swore at him.

He nodded. “That’s smart, but it doesn’t matter. You also want me, and thanks to your little dream journal, we both know it.”

He stepped back, releasing me so suddenly I staggered forward, still half-blind without my glasses.

“Now that we’ve established who’s in charge here, let’s not be late for school. Before you go, and just to remind you of our relationship, I want you to wear these.”

He pulled something out of his pocket and put it in my hand. I stared down at the blurry shape.

The next moment, he carefully slid my glasses back onto my nose, making sure the arms sat perfectly on the tops of my ears. My panties came into focus. Yesterday’s panties that had been in the laundry basket. Heat scorched my cheeks as I turned them over in my hands. The scent reached me first. Earthy musk with a hint of salt.

Had he...come in them? I had zero experience with what a man’s cum smelled like, but I read a lot. It couldn’t be. Surely not. I blinked up at him. He was watching me with bemusement.

“Put them on and get a move on, or we’ll be late.”

“You can’t be serious?”

“I couldn’t be more serious. From now on, you’ll smell like me, so whenever you move, you’ll remember who owns you.”

I shook my head, embarrassment and something else hot and weird moving rapidly in my belly. “No, I won’t do it.”

He leaned in and touched my lips with a finger. “It either goes here, here”—he tapped the panties and then moved his finger to my hips, tapping between my legs—“or here. Your choice.”

The heat of his finger burned through my demure denim skirt.

“You have five seconds to decide.”

“What?”

I panicked as he started to count down and moved a hand to his belt, unbuckling it in one fluid movement. He was serious.

“Wait,” I panted, shoving my hand under my skirt before I could question my sanity, and tugging my panties down. They fell to the floor at my feet, and I kicked them off as Cayden continued to count down. I stepped into the other panties, the ones with his damp cum on them, and shimmied them up, flashing him in the process.

“One.”

His voice was tight and his eyes darker than I’d ever seen them when I finally glanced at him. He was still holding his belt, as if watching me had distracted him from everything else. A muscle ticked in his strong jaw, the only sign of life. The tension between us was a thick miasma. I was scared. I was turned on. That was the cold, hard truth. Fucked up as it might be, this was the sexiest thing that had ever happened to me. The sexiest, and most infuriating.

“Let’s go, before Coach comes looking for us,” Cayden said, his voice ground out of stone.

I nodded, every inch of skin where those panties touched me, burning. How the hell was I supposed to walk around all day with his cum against my skin?

He has pictures of your journal.

Right. I had no choice.

It shouldn’t make me feel better, but it did.

School was a reprieve, since I only had one class with Cayden. However, the student body was rife with rumors about him. I'd heard them all today, from him being the bastard son of a famous Maine hockey player to being in hiding from the mob.

"Wow, so much hype, but then I get it. He's hot, and new." Eve played with the straw in her strawberry milk.

The cafeteria was packed, and I was pretty sure most of the conversations were about Cayden West.

"He might be hot, but he's a menace," I muttered, biting into an apple. My cum filled panties still felt damp. I was probably paranoid. Surely, they were dry by now. Regardless, I'd been certain I could feel him against my skin all morning. The thought was doing something to me. Something I had no experience with.

"Girls like bad boys." Eve shrugged.

"Not this girl."

She raised an eyebrow at me. "I guess that's good, since you two are living together."

"Yeah, that reminds me, can I come stay over tonight? I really need some space."

"Already?"

I didn't get to answer, as a tray plopped down on the table beside mine. Bubblegum-pink nails curved around the tray like talons.

"Can I sit with you, Bug?"

Selena slid into the empty seat beside me before I could refuse, and Winter perched on the only other free seat, beside Eve. The rest of their entourage crowded behind them. There weren't any seats for them, so it looked like they were just going to stand.

"Bug, I'm talking to you. She's completely zoned out," Selena complained, waving a hand in front of my face.

“I’m here. Sorry, what?”

Her irritated expression melted clownishly into a conspiring grin. “I was asking you the deal with Cade. You’ll have the inside scoop, considering you’re Coach’s daughter.”

“I don’t know anything about him.” My flat tone pierced a hole in Selena’s pleasant mask.

“Don’t lie. He’s living with you; you must know something. What’s he like at home?”

“I don’t know. We don’t speak,” I ground out.

Winter watched me across the table, her icy-blue eyes nearly the same shade as Cayden’s, except hers held an arctic chill that never seemed to shift.

Selena snorted. “Well, that I can believe, why would he talk to a loser like you?”

Warmth heated my cheeks as her entourage of hangers-on snickered behind us.

“Don’t be a bitch, Selena. It’s not a good look,” Eve interjected.

“Let’s go. It smells like boiled jockstraps in this place,” Winter muttered, casting a suspicious look at the kitchens.

“We aren’t leaving until Bug tells me something interesting about Cayden. She’s clearly trying to keep all the gossip to herself. She doesn’t want to give anyone an edge in the competition to score the new Ice God first, but I don’t take no for an answer.”

While Selena had been talking, I’d become aware of a growing quiet surrounding our table. Either everyone was listening to our conversation or something else had shut them up. Winter stared over my shoulder. When Eve settled back and smirked at Selena, I knew. We weren’t alone anymore.

“That’s funny. I don’t take no for an answer either, do I, Lillian?” Cayden’s deep voice danced across my nerves, making me even jumpier.

Selena shot up, flushing. “Cayden! Hi. We were just talking about you.”

I could feel Cayden right behind me now. His presence seemed to radiate through me. He was right there.

“Were you? What were you saying?” he asked, nonchalantly sliding around Selena to lower himself into her vacated seat.

That brought him right next to me. He sat with his back to the table, facing me. I stared straight ahead at Eve, ignoring the hot feeling of Cayden’s eyes on the side of my face.

“I-I was just suggesting to Lily that she throw a party to welcome you to Hade Harbor.” Selena was a smooth liar; I’d give her that.

“No need to worry, Selena. Beckett’s got that covered,” Marcus said from somewhere behind me.

I was pretty sure that all four Ice Gods stood around us now. The silence in the cafeteria was deafening.

“Oh, good...” Selena trailed off.

Cayden still watched me. “So, is that all you were talking about? Nothing juicier?”

I shook my head stiffly. Eve raised her eyebrows at me. I was being weird, but I couldn’t help it. I felt like a butterfly being pinned to a board. I was impaled on the needle of my journal, just waiting for Cayden to pull my wings off in front of everyone.

Cayden picked up Selena’s lunch tray and handed it to her. “Here you go.”

Winter blinked at him, clearly surprised by the move, but grabbed her own tray and stood, getting the message.

“Are you sitting here?” Selena asked after a moment of stunned silence.

“Looks like it,” Cayden said.

Beckett and Marcus rounded the table and loomed over the people sitting farther down until they moved. They sat opposite me and Cayden, next to

Eve. Her brother, Asher, swung into the recently vacated seat to the other side of Cayden.

Selena clung on, clearly not believing her eyes. “Um, I’d love to eat with you, get to know you better,” she said, pasting on a winning smile. “There’s a table over on the side where we usually sit.”

Cayden had turned his attention to his tray. “I like this table just fine.”

Selena hung on, clearly not getting the hint. “But there aren’t any free seats at this table,” she pointed out.

I fought a smile as Cayden cracked the lid of his bottle of water, shot a dismissive glance at the resident queen bee, and shrugged. “That sounds like a you problem,” he tossed at her before focusing his attention back on his friends and food.

After an agonizingly long minute where Selena stood behind him, seeming to consider either yanking me out of my seat or stabbing Cayden in the back with a plastic knife, she turned on her heel and left, her entourage following like a gaggle of shocked geese.

“That was something,” Eve muttered in her food.

“Someone needs to knock Selena down a peg and remind her that she doesn’t rule shit around here,” Asher said. He glanced over at me. “Was she mean to you, Lily?”

Cayden tensed beside me. I shook my head. Asher nodded and went back to eating. As Eve’s brother, Asher might be the Ice God I knew the best, but that didn’t say much. I pretty much stayed out of his way. That being said, I knew that he looked out for me a little, as an extension of his sister. Since I was her only friend, he no doubt wanted to make sure nothing upset her, by upsetting me.

“So, Bug, what’s it like sharing a bathroom with this guy?” Marcus said, giving me a grin.

I shrugged.

“Come on! You’ve got to have the inside scoop. Rumor has it he doesn’t shower with any of us because we’d be too intimidated by the sight of him naked to perform in a game...is that true?”

I coughed with surprise at the topic, and water went down the wrong way. I kept coughing, my face turning hot. A large hand landed hard on my back.

“Breathe,” Cayden murmured.

I sucked in a long, slow breath, trying to ignore the desperate urge to cough. I continued to take long, deep breaths as the coughing spell subsided. Cayden’s hand stayed on my back. Not smacking it anymore, just resting there. His palm was huge, spanning the entire space between my bra straps. Everything about the guy was just big.

Marcus leaned in and spoke in a dramatically loud whisper. “It’s the opposite, isn’t it? It’s a micropenis.”

Cayden’s hand was still on my back, and now, it made slow circles, sending a confusing heat through my body.

Cayden kicked him under the table, and Marcus sank back, cupping his knee. “Ow, motherfucker!”

“Are you ready to go? I’m ready,” I stammered to Eve, pushing my chair out and standing.

Eve nodded, looking a little taken aback but getting up. I could always depend on my best friend to follow me, even if it meant abandoning half our lunches.

“Leaving so soon? Don’t worry, you can tell me the shower thing later, alone...” Marcus called to me, laughter in his voice.

I grabbed Eve’s hand, and we moved away from the table.

“Leave her alone. She’s Coach’s daughter. Off-limits, you know that,” Asher muttered to his friend as we left.

We wove through the tables, and students I hardly knew stared at me as we went. Everyone was curious about Cayden, and now me, too, by extension. The new hotshot was living with me. Everyone would have questions about

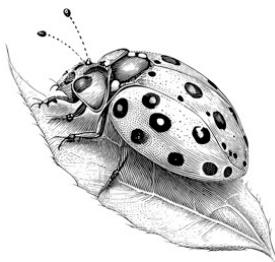
him. We got to the doorway and waited for someone to pass through. I took one last glance over my shoulder.

The Ice Gods were deep in conversation, laughing and joking as they ate. All except one.

Cayden's eyes met mine, sending a shiver through me like a lightning strike.

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Lily



I MANAGED to convince my parents that I had to stay over at Eve's to work on an art project. My dad really wasn't into the idea but eventually relented. While he didn't like that part of the town, he trusted Asher and Eve's mom. I'd head over there as soon as I finished my shift at the local vet clinic where I worked. It was the best experience I could get in the small town of Hade Harbor, in a field that was somewhat related to epidemiology. It wasn't ideal, but I enjoyed it, and I loved the animals.

"Lilypad, there you are," a voice called to me halfway through my shift.

I glanced up. Tyler, the other high schooler who worked at the clinic, leaned in the doorway to the back office.

"Hey, Tyler. How's it going?"

He grinned. The guy had a million-dollar smile. I could say that objectively, even though he wasn't my type. He had the energy of some of the golden retrievers we saw in the clinic. I liked something else in a guy. *A touch of darkness.* The words ran through my mind in Cayden's voice and sent me into a panic. When had he gotten so far inside my head that I heard him even when he wasn't around?

"I can't complain, though Coach is putting us through the wringer to get ready for next month's game, all thanks to your new player – Cayden West, is it?"

I slammed the filing cabinet closed. I couldn't escape the fucker, not even here at work.

"Yep, that's his name."

Tyler didn't seem to pick up on my tight tone. "So, have you met him?"

I laughed, but it sounded off even to me. "I've met him. He's staying with us."

Tyler's eyes got comically large. "You're kidding! In that case, you can tell me all his weaknesses, or put laxatives in his cereal on game day...I'll make it worth your while."

I laughed. I couldn't help it; Tyler had that effect on people. I couldn't imagine him playing hockey. He seemed too nice. He didn't seem to have an aggressive bone in his body, unlike some people.

"Good plan. I'll tell you what – I'll do it for free, that's how much I appreciate him living down the hall from me."

Tyler whistled. "Ouch, someone's ruffled your feathers. Now I've got to meet this guy."

"You'll regret it, believe me."

We headed toward the rooms where we kept the recuperating animals. It was our job to fill the water, clean the cages, and take basic observations. The smell inside the little room was pretty strong as we went in. Earthy and animalistic, it suddenly reminded me of my panties. But Cayden's cum on my panties hadn't smelled bad like this. Not at all.

I blew out a breath. I couldn't wait to get to Eve's and wash the damn things and try to forget how today had gotten so out of control. Forget washing, I'd throw them out completely in a trash can somewhere.

"Earth to Lily, come in Lily." Tyler cupped his mouth and spoke in a loudspeaker tone.

"Sorry, what did you say?"

"I asked if you want heads or tails?" Tyler grinned.

Heads or tails was our way of deciding the jobs. Tails got you cage-cleaning duty, and heads meant you had to refill the water and food bowls.

“Um, you choose, I don’t care.”

“Excellent!”

I hardly slept at Eve’s house. I’d gotten a message at about midnight from an unknown number. It didn’t take a genius to figure out who it was.

Running late tonight, Freckles?

It was a horrible reminder that Cayden could poke around my room as much as he wanted when I wasn’t there. Hell, he’d gone and done it even when I *was* there.

I hadn’t answered. Fuck, now he had my number. I wished I’d hidden my journal this morning, but I hadn’t had a chance, seeing how Cayden had strong-armed me out of the house. And now I’d left him at home with it all afternoon. *It doesn’t matter anyway*, I reminded myself. *He’s already seen what he wants and taken pictures. It doesn’t matter if he has the entire thing now. It’s too late.*

I dragged myself into the school, one of Eve’s hats on my head, and kept to myself as much as possible. Maybe I could come up with a disguise that would make me invisible again? Eve and I ate lunch out at the football field to avoid the cafeteria. Ideally, I would avoid Cayden as much as possible.

The plan was working until my free study period near the end of the day. My last class was art with Ms. Sophie. She was my favorite teacher, and art was my one indulgent subject that I took just for fun. In my free period before class, I worked on my watercolor painting of a leaf. I was sitting at a table outside the back of the school, when a huge hand ripped the paper away from me. I tugged my headphones out of my ears as I stood.

“Hey!” My protest died on my lips when I saw who it was.

Outside in the bright daylight, Cayden looked even better than usual, which was really saying something. He wore the black Hellions training T-shirt. It stretched tightly across his biceps.

“Is this what’s kept you too busy to eat lunch today? You shouldn’t skip meals, Lily, you’re going to need your strength to survive me.”

“Is that a threat?” I glanced around us, feeling scared but also oddly relieved that we were the only people in sight.

“Of course. Didn’t it sound like one?” Cayden folded my painting and tucked it into his pocket.

“That’s my homework, and it’s due next period,” I ground out.

He walked backward away from me, his eyes fixed on mine. “In that case, you better come and get it if you want to keep that GPA up.”

He turned on his heel, his long legs carrying him quickly down a small slope toward the gate at the bottom, and out. Behind the school sat thick woods. Students weren’t supposed to go out there during school hours. Cayden West clearly didn’t care at all about that. I cursed, checking my watch. I didn’t have enough time to put something else together for my homework assignment. I had to get that one back. I started after him, nerves clawing my insides. Breaking school rules to avoid damaging my GPA seemed counterproductive, but a failed assignment was too terrifying to imagine.

I followed him, catching up with him when we were halfway down the slope.

“Please, just give me my assignment.” I made my voice as reasonable as I could.

“I said I would,” he said, not slowing down even a fraction.

We were almost at the woods. He strode up the small trail that would take us into the dark-green shadows waiting just ahead. I stopped in the sunshine just outside the trailhead. Should I really follow him in there? We’d be alone. No one would be able to see us. He turned back and caught me hesitating.

“You don’t really have a choice, do you, Freckles? Get your ass in here.” He tossed the last words carelessly over his shoulder before disappearing into the shadows.

You don’t have a choice. It was easier to follow him if I let myself believe that.

I followed him up the trail and into the woods.

His broad back disappeared as soon as my eyes adjusted to the dim light falling through the thick canopy.

“Cayden, wait! This isn’t funny!” I ran after him. I had no choice. Class was going to start soon, and being late for my favorite teacher was almost as bad as not having an assignment to turn in.

My sneakers moved over the needle-littered forest floor. I reached him and pulled on his arm.

He stopped immediately and spun us both, somehow redirecting my momentum to bring me hard against his chest. My breath puffed out, and the scent of him filled my head.

“Where were you last night, Lillian?”

Lillian. I was starting to recognize his different levels of crazy. When he used my full name, he was annoyed, and serious.

“What’s it to you? You’re not my dad, and I haven’t told anyone anything about you, so what’s your problem?”

“Where. Were. You?”

“At Eve’s house, where else? I know you’re new here, but you might have noticed that I’m not exactly Miss Popular.” My eyes flashed my irritation at him, but he seemed immune to it. “Anyway, didn’t Asher already mention it? He was there.”

I didn’t know why I felt compelled to point that out, but it did something to Cayden. His grip tightened, and his eyes glittered.

“Got a little crush on your best friend’s brother, huh?”

I flushed with embarrassment. Of course, I knew Asher was hot, but he was the closest thing to a brother I'd ever had, considering how close I was with Eve. I'd never seen him that way.

"What thoughts are going through your pretty little head right now? Tell me or I'll make you." Cayden's voice was a low growl.

I forced a scoff. "He's like a brother to me, if you must know."

"A brother? Like me? Am I like a brother to you?" Cayden raised an eyebrow, some of his tension fading. He still held me flush against him. It shouldn't be so comforting.

"Hardly. Everyone knows this foster thing is a sham, an excuse to have a ringer get on the Hellions and win nationals. Now, give me my assignment, I have to get to class."

"And lunch? Where were you hiding then?"

"I wasn't hiding," I protested. It was a lie. I was hiding and I wished I still was. "I wouldn't bother hiding from you. You don't scare me."

Cayden, the asshole, laughed. "Oh, Lily, don't forget I've read your journal, I know that's a lie, and I also know...you like it that way. Don't forget, I see you."

He brought his hand to my face and ran the backs of his fingers down my cheek. "I see you in all your twisted, fucked up glory."

His words stung. I knocked his hand away, staring bloody murder at him. "Give me my painting!"

"Fine, after you give me something."

"What?" I pushed against his chest, needing some air. Being so close to Cayden made it hard to think.

He let me back away but slowly followed.

My back hit the trunk of a tree. He'd been herding me, and I'd fallen for it like an idiot. Now, he caged me against the bark with both hands.

“I have to admit that reading your journal last night, and knowing my cum was touching your cunt all day yesterday, has been on my mind.”

His shocking words stole away my breath. I could only stare at him, stunned.

“So, as payment for distracting me all day, to get your assignment back – I want a taste.”

“A taste?” I nearly squeaked. It was more innocent than I’d imagined and more shocking.

He nodded, leaning down, brushing his lips against mine.

“A taste,” he repeated, using one hand to cup my jaw and hold me in place as he sealed my lips with his.

His lips were soft and insistent at the same time. His mouth moved over mine, biting and sucking, daring me to respond. It was like nothing I’d ever felt before. It was better than I’d ever imagined anything could feel.

When I gasped against his lips, overcome by the onslaught of feelings, his tongue pushed inside my mouth, sliding along mine, wet, and urgent, melting me into his arms.

My first real kiss.

My first kiss was with Cayden West. No. This guy was dangerous, a bully, a psycho. I couldn’t just stand here and let him take whatever he felt like from me. He was threatening me. *He read my journal!* My teeth found their way around his lower lip, and I bit down before I could overthink it. The taste of hot metal filled my mouth, and Cayden jerked back.

“Fuck,” he sighed and touched his mouth. His lip was bleeding, the sudden red a shocking sight on his tanned skin. He traced a fallen droplet with his thumb and slid his index finger back and forth over the cut.

I was paralyzed right there, watching him, his blood still lingering on my tongue.

His blue eyes fell to mine and narrowed. “If you think that’s going to stop me – you’re wrong.” His bloody hand lashed out and pressed against my

neck, circling it like a tight necklace, while his knee slid between my legs, nestling at the apex of my thighs. It was like I'd mounted his knee, and I couldn't move off it without his permission.

"Nothing will stop me, you should understand that now...it'll save you a lot of time later." With a soft growl he leaned in, tightening his grip around my neck, just hard enough that my head spun a little. "Am I doing it right?" he wondered against my skin, his bloody lips brushing my mouth. "Does it feel like you dreamed?"

Am I doing it right? Of course, my dream. The one he'd read about. I wished I could remember all the filthy things I'd written in there.

I didn't have a chance, though, because Cayden lowered his head and kissed me again. This time there really was no escape. The tang of his blood filled my mouth, and he seemed not to feel the cut at all as he kissed me way harder than before. He didn't wait for my lips to part for him this time, he simply forced his way inside, plunging his tongue in and out of the hot cavern of my mouth, making me tremble. It was crude, vulgar even. I hadn't known until this moment that kissing alone could be X-rated.

He kissed me mercilessly, even when spots burst in front of my eyes. I could only breathe through my mouth; his lips denied me all but the briefest gasps of air. I swayed into him, my body warm and weak. He held me up like the unmovable object he was, unbreakable, while I lost my goddamn mind. His thigh nudged against me, his knee right under my pussy. My skirt was rucked up by his leg, and his movements rubbed against me just right. I was so wet. I felt like I was floating, and only his touch tethered me to the world.

In the distance, more than a world away, a bell rang. I should care more about the bell. It was important. The thought was dim, barely registering.

When Cayden pulled away, he was breathing heavily, his hot breath puffing out against my forehead. I clutched his T-shirt, my mind hazy. He held me just like that for a moment, still gripping my throat so tight that I could barely breathe. He took in my half-closed eyes and reddened lips, puffy from his violent kissing, and his blood. It felt like a stain of ownership. Slowly, he released my neck, and air filled my lungs again. I gulped it down

greedily, the stars in front of my eyes staying with me, even as I pushed him away and turned toward the tree, struggling to get my balance.

I sensed Cayden watching me as I tried to come back to Earth. Then the white square of my painting fell at my feet. I glanced up, my hand still pressed to my aching chest, to see him walking away. He left me behind without a second glance.

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Cayden



I WAS LATE TO ART. It was the last class of the day, and I knew Lily was going to be there. I couldn't bring myself to go right away. I needed ten minutes to calm down. I paced the woods until she was safely inside the building, and then followed.

As soon as I walked in, late and unapologetic about it, Lily's horrified eyes had been glued to me. Ms. Sophie, the pretty art teacher, had been understanding of a new student being late and caught me up on what everyone else had been doing. Best of all, she put me in a seat to the left of Lily, just behind her. I could see every move she made. She was tense, her shoulders bunched up under her ears. I wondered if she'd had time to wash off the bloody necklace of fingerprints I'd left around her neck.

"Hey, West," Asher whispered beside me.

I glanced over at him. I was on the fence about the so-called Ice Gods. Sure, it might be the very first time I'd be able to say I had friends, but on the other hand, if they got in the way of me playing my best game, I didn't need them.

"Were you with Lily?" Asher asked.

I glared at him.

"Why?" I didn't like the way he came to her defense. I didn't like it one bit.

Asher shrugged, narrowing his eyes at me. “She’s the coach’s daughter and Eve’s best friend. I don’t want her fucked with.”

A humorless smile touched my lips. “I don’t ask for permission to fuck with anyone.”

Asher raised an eyebrow at me and then shook his head. “Whatever, man, just stay away from Eve. She’s off-limits – seriously.”

“I don’t care about your sister, don’t worry.”

I twisted back around, finding Lily smoothing out her watercolor painting on her desk. It was delicate, just like her, a study in different greens, just like the lush foliage of her eyes. The kiss I’d just stolen pushed itself into my head. *Fuck.* That had been hot. For a guy who’d never felt anything remotely normal for my age, Lillian Williams sure felt like the cure. Holding her had been the most normal I’d felt in a long time. The only other place I felt like that was on the ice. She was too fucking sweet, with her huge green eyes, her slender stalk of a neck bobbing when she struggled to breathe. The way her long fingers pushed at my chest and then pulled, all at the same time. Right now, I could see the freckles on her elbow, hiding behind the veil of her long red hair cascading down her back.

“Be careful, man. That way lies danger,” Asher muttered from beside me, following my gaze.

If I was smarter, I’d listen to him...but I’d never been that smart, and I wasn’t about to start now.

Practice after school cleared my head. We skated around, warming up, and I let my mind drift from the tangled, dark thoughts of Lily to the game. In the game, everything made sense.

“As you all know, the first game is in a couple of days, and it’s against the Pine State Pucks. It’s not the easiest game we’ll play this season, but it’s not the hardest. I want to see you start strong. Let’s intimidate right from the start.” Coach Williams was holding court while we set up drills.

I couldn't wait for game night. I needed the adrenaline, the speed, the smash and crash of it. I was addicted to the thrill of winning and the excuse to wreak havoc. Hockey was the only place where my violent tendencies weren't questioned but encouraged.

Well, hockey, and working for Uncle Jack. He hadn't texted me again since that one warning. Maybe he'd died of internal bleeding and fucked off forever. No, I wasn't that lucky. He lurked around somewhere, festering with resentment, planning how he would get me back, I was sure of it. One day, down the line, if I got into HHU on a scholarship, and later, if I got my shot at playing professionally, I'd have to do something about dear old Jack. I was looking forward to it.

Coach ran through the plays for the game. I was center and I'd have Asher as my right wing. Marcus was goalie, and a damn good one. Beckett was a defenseman and had the build for it. The rest of the team got into their lineup. This was the team that was going to take me to nationals and beyond.

"Okay, get some stickhandling and passing drills – go!" Coach Williams shouted before turning away and looking toward the door at the top of the rink and the figure just entering.

Lily.

She bounced down the steps, smiling at her dad.

A hard check sent me spinning around and glaring at Marcus as he skated past.

"Coach said stickhandling, West. He didn't mean that kind of stick, if you know what I mean." Marcus' smirk was irritating as hell.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning get your head in training and forget about pretty little redheads who could get you kicked off the team. I'm saying that from a place of love." He shot me a shit-eating grin and skated away.

I halfheartedly focused on the drills, maneuvering the puck with ease. I could do this shit in my sleep, but I got the coach's tactic. Get the team to

gel. Ease the new guy in. But I didn't need more time to get to know these guys, I just wanted to play.

Lily took a seat and pulled a notebook out of her bag.

She was staying.

Coach turned back to us and blew his whistle. "Okay, let's get going. Two on one practice, Cayden and Asher take Beckett."

I skated into position beside Asher, my gaze drifting to Lily continuously. My breath fogged in the cool air. Wasn't she cold sitting there?

"Concentrate, man," Asher muttered beside me as Beckett lined himself up opposite us.

When the whistle blew, we rushed him. Beckett skated expertly backward, watching us closely to see which way we were going to play it. Asher passed the puck to me as we spread out, splitting Beckett's attention. I passed back, and Asher moved us forward, getting closer and closer to our objective. Beckett, knowing his friend, clearly expected him to take the shot. It made sense, with his angle and his dominant hand position on the stick. At the last moment, Asher passed to me, with Beckett already too committed to defend. I sank the shot easily and skated away in a wide circle, glancing up at Lily as I went. She watched us, her notebook forgotten on her lap.

"What the hell was that, West?" Beckett's shout echoed around the rink.
"Don't fucking tell me you're not a lefty."

"I am – most of the time." I grinned at him. Being ambidextrous was a big advantage in hockey.

Beckett whistled and gave me a rare grin. "Fucking A. Good to have you with us."

We watched the rest of the team run their drills before Coach set up a scrimmage. I found myself moving to the edge of the rink, right where Lily was sitting. She peeked up and then quickly away. A rosy hue warmed her creamy, freckled cheeks. Fuck, I'd like to see if that blush affected the rest of her skin like it did her face.

“West! Scrimmage – now!”

Lily kept her head determinedly down as I passed her by and skated to the middle of the rink.

It was interesting to scrimmage with the team, getting to know each other's quirks and habits. Maybe it was even fun. I didn't have a lot of experience with that feeling, so I couldn't say for sure.

When we skated off the ice, Beckett appeared at my shoulder. Out of all the Ice Gods so far, he was the easiest to hang with. Probably because he didn't talk that much.

“You know we have to win this game for your welcome party to be any good, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Don't worry, I plan on winning.”

He gave me a grin and slapped my shoulder. “I love that confidence.”

“It's not confidence...it's lack of other options.”

He raised an eyebrow at that. “I see. Well, since you're making sure we win the game, is there anything you want at the party? Let me know, and I'll make sure it happens.”

“I don't know, man. I'm not really into parties.”

“So, you want a quiet place to escape from your own welcome party? Okay, we can do that,” Beckett said.

We were in the locker room now. I dropped down on a bench, intending on waiting until the others were done before showering. I couldn't keep going to Coach's office. It'd raise questions I didn't want to answer. Instead, I dried my blades slowly and methodically while Beckett shed his training gear.

“Is Asher's sister invited to the party?” I asked him.

He paused, his dark eyes narrowing at me.

“Why? You interested in her? She's called Eve for a reason. Forbidden fruit. Asher won't allow any of us to mess around with her.”

There was something in his tone, something possessive. It looked like the richest guy at Hade Harbor High had found something he couldn't buy. Or rather, someone.

"No, I'm not interested in her like that." As soon as I said it, the intense vibes emanating from Beckett disappeared.

Then he grinned, and I knew I was busted.

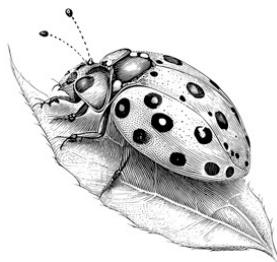
"It's Bug, isn't it? Where Eve goes, Bug follows. Man, don't tell me you have a hard-on for your new foster sister. That's fucked up." He laughed. "I like it."

I blew out a breath and gave him a warning look. "I don't have a hard-on for anyone, especially not the uptight rich girls here at HHH."

Beckett only nodded, wrapping a towel around his shoulders. "Sure, whatever. I have to say, whatever happens, as long as it doesn't fuck with the Hellions, should be entertaining."

He turned and ambled away. I gulped down some water and fitted my skate guards, trying to seem busy and lost in thought. I really was lost in thought. Thoughts of Lily. Really, it would be better if she didn't come to the party. She'd be a distraction there, and she wouldn't hang out with me, anyway. I'd be wondering what loser with a death wish was chatting her up all night. I thought back to the night we officially met, how I'd found her in the kitchen, hiding from me, with Josh, a winger, smiling away at her. No, I wasn't sure at all if I wanted Lily at the party. Unless I literally handcuffed her to me, it'd be torture. Maybe it would be better to have Freckles stay at home, studying in her pretty-smelling bedroom and tucking herself up in bed to dream about me, than out late and surrounded by teenage guys. Guys with bad intentions, just like me.

Lily



I WAS WAITING OUTSIDE at my dad's truck after practice when a couple girls I vaguely recognized drifted by. It had been the longest day in history, and I just wanted to go home, but seeing as I carpooled with my dad, I had to wait until practice ended.

I'd gotten no work done at the rink. The temptation to watch Cayden train had been too overwhelming. I might not be a huge hockey fan, but even I could tell how talented he was. He moved with unnatural grace on the ice and held his stick like it was an extension of him. After only a few minutes, I could see why my dad was so excited about him. He was a star in the making, and Coach Williams was the one in the position to discover him.

I'd watched him and enjoyed every second, a guilty little secret I hid inside myself. What wasn't to enjoy? He was beautiful, and strong, and fast as hell on the ice, and all that power and violence that seemed to emanate from him in normal life suddenly fit perfectly. He was born to play, and sitting there tonight, it felt like I was born to watch him.

How pathetic was that?

“Lillian?”

The voice jerked me from my thoughts. The girls who'd been passing by were now stopped. I struggled to remember their names...Sara and Ellen, that was it.

I smiled quickly at them. “Hey, how's it going?”

“Good. We were at glee club, and it ran late. You?”

“Just waiting for my dad to finish up inside.” I rolled my eyes. “You know how it is with hockey season.”

“Your dad and Cayden West, right? I mean, he’s living with you?” Ellen asked.

I fought a groan. Another round of girls trying to get information about the new hot hockey player? Today was never-ending.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

Ellen frowned, biting her lip. She didn’t seem nearly as excited as the other girls who’d tried to grill me about Cayden. Instead, she was nervous. She stepped closer to me.

“Listen, I don’t know you well at all, so just tell me to get lost if you want...but you should be careful around Cade. He’s not who everyone thinks he is. Don’t let your guard down.” Her words were like a bucket of ice water over my head.

“What do you mean?”

“I used to live in Midnight Falls. I went to high school with him for a few years. He has a reputation in town.” Ellen looked skittish like she might run off at any second. She took a step away.

I reached out and grabbed her arm. “Wait! What kind of reputation?”

She stopped, her hands fidgeting with her bag strap. “It’s not my place to say, I just – I just wanted to say be careful. Your family is so kind, and your dad is such a nice guy...I wouldn’t want anything bad to happen, not when I could have warned you about him—”

“What about him exactly?” I urged her.

A prickling sensation ran across my skin, like a cold, threatening touch. Just like that, we were no longer alone. Sara, Ellen’s friend, gasped and spun away, power walking in the opposite direction.

“Yes, what about him exactly?” Cayden’s deep voice spoke from my right.

I risked a glance that way. He leaned against the back of the truck nonchalantly, his eyes glittering in the darkness.

Ellen ripped her arm from my touch, her face paling, even in the dim light of the parking lot. She squeaked when I took a step toward her and then rushed away after her friend.

I gave Cayden a glare. “So now you’re just going around threatening any poor student who crosses you?”

Cayden shrugged. “I didn’t threaten her. I just asked a question.”

He straightened up, his heavy hockey bag swinging on his shoulder as he sauntered toward me.

“What kind of reputation do you have in Midnight Falls?” I demanded, crossing my arms over my chest, trying to put some kind of barrier between us. The memory of our kiss earlier crowded my head for a moment before I forced it out.

“What do you think?” Cayden asked lazily.

His tone was light, well, as light as he ever sounded, but it was thin. A veil stretched over his anger. I could feel it throbbing beneath the surface. I’d never met someone before who was always just a touch away from violence. It was unsettling as hell.

“I don’t know – local psychopath?”

“Hmm, more like star player and a guy who always gets what he wants.” He stopped beside me and leaned against the truck, his arm brushing mine.

He smelled like the showers, and I wondered if he’d showered alone again. What the hell was the word on his skin that he didn’t want me to see? The image of his bare back floated through my head. It hadn’t been a tattoo I saw; of that, I was sure. It had been letters, though, carved deeply into the skin, and often enough to scar.

“Did you enjoy watching training?”

“I wasn’t watching. I was studying.”

He chuckled quietly. “Sure you were.”

“Where’s my dad, anyway?” I asked, twisting around to look in the direction of the gym.

“Why? Don’t you like being alone with me, Freckles?”

“Don’t call me Freckles.”

“What else should I call you? Ladybug?”

I snorted. “If you think that’s meaner than just Bug, you should know it’s not. It’s cute.”

I jerked, my words dying on my lips as Cayden’s hand reached out and brushed my arm, circling over a patch of freckles.

“Red with spots...elegant, but cute...so fragile and easy to crush. It suits you.”

I watched in fascination as he touched me for a heart pounding moment. His fingers were so thick and long. His whole damn hand was huge. Huge and capable. A shiver went down my spine. How was he able to make such awful threats one minute, then turn around and be gentle the next? I couldn’t get my head around him.

“Sorry to keep you guys waiting!” my dad called across the parking lot. He appeared out of the darkness just as Cayden dropped his hand.

“Lily, what did you think of Cayden?” my dad asked as we got into the truck. “This is your first time seeing him on the ice.”

I sat in the back and grabbed my phone out of my bag, intending to stare at it and avoid conversation all the way home.

“Hmmm, fine, I guess.”

“Fine? He was great.” My dad turned to Cayden. “You, Beckett, Marcus, and Asher are going to dominate the league, I can feel it. Make sure to get your head straight. Nothing matters but this.”

I zoned out of the sound of the upcoming inspirational speech. I stared unseeingly at my phone before popping my headphones on and staring out

the window at the dark street rushing by. Ellen's words played in my head. *Be careful around Cade.* What was she talking about, and why had she been so scared? She'd been worried for my family. It didn't make any sense, but it was terrifying at the same time. Cayden wanted me to stay out of his business and not tell anyone what I'd seen. That only made sense if he wasn't really a serial killer or someone who'd pose a danger to my family. My secret dirty fantasies or a dream school in California were nothing compared to the thought of my parents being in danger. I grabbed my phone and shot off a message to Eve.

Hey. Want to go for a trip after school tomorrow?

Sure, I'm always down for a trip. Where to?

Midnight Falls.

Ew. Why?

I'll tell you on the way.

Shoot, I actually can't tomorrow. I've got to help my mom. Then I have a group project. What about Tuesday?

Tuesday? I'd wanted to go as quickly as possible, but I didn't want to go on my own. I supposed busting Cayden West's secrets could wait till after the weekend.

Okay, let's go on Tuesday. Let's leave right after last period.

We got home just after seven, and I itched to go for a run. My anxiety and tension frothed in my veins like pop. I'd never be able to sleep while I was so jumpy. The thought of the downstairs gym, with its stuffy air and proximity to Cayden, was too much to handle.

I changed in my room into leggings and a sweatshirt, thick socks, and my running sneakers. Cayden and my dad were still in the kitchen talking tactics before the game. I paused at the entrance.

"Dad, I'm going for a jog."

"In the gym?"

"No, outside. It's not that late, and I'm a big girl. It's not even that dark yet," I rambled. Crap. I was going to college next year, and yet I still had to beg for permission to go for a run alone after dark. How exactly my parents didn't see how controlling and overprotective they were, I had no idea.

"Lil, that's why we have a gym."

"Dad—"

"I can go with her, Coach. It's no trouble. I'll make sure she's safe. I was going to go for a run, anyway." Cayden's voice was well-meaning and earnest.

I blinked at him. He even looked genuine. And the psycho actor award goes to...

“Are you telling me that training didn’t kill you? I’ll have to step it up next time. I told you just to call me Eric at home.” My dad slapped Cayden’s shoulder, grinning from ear to ear.

My mom’s voice called through the house, and my dad sighed.

“Okay, kids, I’ve got to go and see the lady of the house. Take care of my girl for me, Cade. See you later.”

And just like that, he disappeared.

I turned on my heel and left the room, hustling for the door. Maybe if I moved quickly, Cayden would be too tired to bother me. Ha, that was wishful thinking.

He was right there beside me as I strode up the driveway.

“So, where are we going?”

“I am going on a jog; *you* can go run off the edge of the cliff at the end of the road.” I started to jog, slow and steady. I hadn’t run outside in a while, and my muscles immediately protested at the incline on the street.

Cayden fell into an easy jog beside me, having no such problems, despite having just finished a two-hour training session.

“Well, that doesn’t sound fun at all. I’ll pass.” He jogged beside me for a few more seconds before veering into me and herding me off the street and down a small alley that ran between two houses. Night was gradually falling.

“What the hell?!?” I protested, pushing against him, my feet nearly stumbling over each other.

No streetlights reached the alley, and I wanted to get back on the road again as soon as possible. I didn’t trust this guy in the shadows.

“Jogging is boring. Let’s make it a little more interesting.” Cayden stood close, his chest pressing against mine.

This guy had no concept of personal space. The kiss in the woods popped unbidden into my mind, robbing me of breath. Damn my hormones. My

skin was already flushing with the memory of his touch.

“I think watching you run over the edge of a cliff sounds plenty interesting.”

“Very funny. I think you need a better workout than this slow-and-steady shit. Nothing burns calories like running away from something.”

Nerves coated my mouth, and I knew with sudden certainty that I’d made a big mistake letting him bring me out here. My dad thought Cayden would make me safer running outside at night? What a joke.

“And what do you want me to run away from? You?” I squared up to him as well as I could, considering our size difference. “I already told you I wasn’t scared of you.”

“But you’re scared of your filthy little non-con fantasies getting out, aren’t you? Normal girls would be...or are you just giving up on pretending to be a good girl?”

I didn’t have words to answer him. He was right. I should be scared of that. It was the most humiliating thing anyone had ever discovered about me. The dreams that I’d never even confessed to Eve because of how shameful they were. Now Cayden, the very star of those dreams, held them over me like an axe to my neck. *I have to get some leverage on him.* Yes, I needed something just as shameful to hold over Cayden’s head. Something that would balance the power between us. I would find it in Midnight Falls on Tuesday. I had to. For now, though, I had to play along.

He smiled at my silence. “Good, I’m glad we understand each other. Since I’m feeling merciful, let’s make it a simple setup. Escape me and get home before I catch you, and you win – I’ll leave you alone, for tonight.”

“And if you win?” My heart felt like it was convulsing as I waited for his answer.

His eyes drifted to my lips. Our earlier kiss was seared in my brain, and I couldn’t stop seeing it. His lip was crusted over. My teeth had done that.

“If I win, and catch you before you get home...I get to kiss you.”

A scoff left me before I could help it.

“A kiss? Are you serious? What are we, five?”

“Were you looking for something more?” Cayden baited me.

A furious blush blossomed in my cheeks. “Hilarious. No, I wasn’t looking for anything from you, but even then, for all your posturing and threats, a kiss is really very tame.”

He leaned in then, his mouth brushing my ear. “I didn’t say *where* I was going to kiss you, though, did I?”

Those words slid through me, sending heat trailing in their wake. God, it couldn’t be normal to be so turned on by someone so terrible. I had a problem. I was sick.

“Now, since I’m feeling kind, I’ll give you a ten-second head start. Ten...”

I pushed away from him, stumbling back a couple of steps.

He watched me with laser-like focus. “Nine... better run, unless you want to get caught.”

I turned on my heel and sprang forward. Racing back to the street, I considered my options. I could immediately turn toward home. I might make it before he finished counting. But then again, he’d probably suspect I’d gone that way. I needed to fool him. I turned right and headed away from home, adrenaline pounding through my veins. I ran up the street and then cut through a well-known shortcut to get to the next street over.

It was silent all around me, save for the pound of my sneakers on the street. Ahead, a porch light came on, and someone pulled into their driveway. It wasn’t late. All the lights on the street blazed in the windows, illuminating people hanging out with friends, watching TV, generally being normal and safe at home. A sanctuary I no longer had. Cayden had taken it away from me.

I ran like my life depended on it, adrenaline lighting up my nerves. Before long, my breath burned in my lungs. I wasn’t steadyng myself; I was sprinting, and I couldn’t keep it up for much longer. I crossed the train

tracks, my sneakers slipping on the rough gravel. Hade Harbor was a safe town, but if you were looking for trouble, you'd probably find it around the train station near Eve and Asher's house.

I crossed the street opposite the station and into the neighborhoods that lined the tracks. Trash littered the streets here, and the cars were old and beaten up. The houses looked dilapidated, too, and some were missing windows. I pushed on, not daring to look back and see Cayden bearing down on me. A dog barked madly beside me, chained in a yard, scaring me into twisting and nearly falling.

“Careful there, pretty girl. Don’t be scared of Nails. He’s just excited to see you.”

I collided with a hard chest. I didn’t fall, that was one thing, but I seemed to have found trouble. A group of older guys hung around on the corner, and I’d stumbled right into them.

“He’s not the only one.” Another one of them laughed.

I took a step back, and the man I’d bumped into shadowed the movement.

“Hey, where are you going? You just got here,” he said, flashing me a creepy grin. His hand landed on my arm. “Stay awhile.”

“I have to go, I’m sorry,” I said mindlessly. Why the hell was I apologizing?

“You have nothing to be sorry for, because you’re not going anywhere, isn’t that right?”

The man’s smile had dropped. His friends crowded close to him. My mouth went as dry as a bone. His head was shaved in patches and balding in others. His brown-stained teeth hinted at drug abuse. His grip bit into my arm, pinching into the skin. I was terrified. This was it. Real terror, pure and simple. I vowed to never again roll my eyes at my dad when he cautioned against running alone at night.

I tugged my arm, but it didn’t budge from the man’s steel grip. He held my arm hard enough to cause bruises.

“Please,” I heard myself say. “I don’t want any trouble.”

The ringleader laughed. "Girlie, didn't you hear? Sometimes trouble wants you." He grinned at me, but then his eyes shifted over my shoulder. His grip lessened a touch on my arm, and he seemed to pull back.

"She said she didn't want any trouble. You guys hard of hearing or what?"

Cayden's deep voice slid over me, enveloping me in relief. Cayden was here. I wasn't alone. I didn't know when exactly the idea of him had become reassuring—especially since I'd just been running away from him, scared of being caught—but my relief was undeniable.

His huge body came to press against my side. The guys in the group eyed him up and down, clearly wondering to themselves how much trouble he would give them.

"We heard. We just don't care. How about you?" The man holding my arm jerked his head up, an aggressive invitation to Cayden.

Cayden chuckled, a low, dangerous sound. "Me? I love trouble."

He jerked me out of the ringleader's hold before punching him square in the face. The fight that broke out was sudden and violent. Cayden was an explosive force of darkness, bending and ducking, delivering punches and kicks like a seasoned street fighter. The guys he fought rallied, taken by surprise but quickly recovering.

Cayden spared me a glance. "Home, now. Run!"

"What about you?" I was panicking. How could he fight off four guys?

"I'll be right behind you," he grunted, bringing an elbow down on someone attempting to take him around the waist.

His eyes shot to mine again, and I understood. He couldn't fight them off for long. He was buying time.

I turned and ran. I made it to the tracks before Cayden caught up with me. I could hear yells and threats from behind us. They were chasing us. My feet slipped on the rubble around the tracks, and only Cayden's hand clamping around mine kept me from falling. He didn't let go when we cleared the

tracks. He didn't let go when we reached the quiet streets of my neighborhood.

We kept running, Cayden's hand was warm around mine, reassuring. He had to be running slower to accommodate my pace, but he gave no sign of annoyance as we sprinted up the street. He kept glancing back.

Are they still following us?

My lungs screamed when my house came into sight. Pain cramped around my chest and I could hardly suck in enough air to continue. I was slicked with sweat, my body flashing hot and cold with fear and exertion.

"Almost there. Don't even think about stopping," Cayden grunted, his hand tightening around mine, like he could tell that I was on the verge of collapsing.

"I can't make it," I wheezed.

"You can, and you will," he said in a resolute tone. "You don't have a choice."

We crested the hill just before my driveway, and I put my head down, gripping Cayden's hand like it was a battery pack that could bring me back to life. I screamed as my legs pumped, propelling us the last feet to cross onto the property, through the gate, and behind the fence of home. Slowing, Cayden let go of my hand as I turned back and stared down the street. It was empty. They'd gone.

"Oh my God," I muttered, my body feeling like a stranger to me. My muscles burned. Everything hurt. I straightened up, and my stomach rebelled. I'd barely turned my head to the front lawn before I started to dry heave. Retching, feeling hopeless and vulnerable as hell, bent over with my hands braced on my knees, I convulsed, struggling to bring something up.

Cayden's huge hand clamped around my hanging hair and pulled it back sharply.

"You need to work on your fitness. You're the coach's daughter, for Christ's sake," he muttered. He held my hair in a punishing grip as he took in every second of my anguish.

This was all his fault. I'd never have run into that shitty neighborhood if I hadn't been running from him and his stupid threats. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and stood, yanking my head out of his grip. He was too close, getting his addictive smell all in my face. I pushed at his chest and staggered away. He was barely breathing hard after that ten-minute sprint, while I felt like I was going to die.

A thousand accusations rose to my lips as I finally looked at his face, and then they died right there.

His lip was bleeding again, badly this time, and his eyebrow was cut. His left eye was already blossoming into dark-purple bruises. He was hurt. He was hurt from defending me.

We stared at each other as I caught my breath.

"You're hurt," I said flatly to conceal my worry. Damn, I was a pushover.

"I've had worse in a friendly practice," he said and shrugged.

"I don't feel sorry for you," I blurted out suddenly, rebelling against the voice in my head that felt bad that he had gotten beat up for defending me.

"I didn't ask you to." Cayden's expression was unreadable. "And for the record, I don't feel sorry for you either." He turned and strode toward the house.

I stared after him. *What the hell did that mean?*

Cayden



INSIDE THE KITCHEN, a note on the table told us Eric had taken his wife out for a surprise dinner. Apparently, it was a pre-season ritual for them. The next few days required intense concentration. We had to win this first game. Getting beat up and running all over town after Lily hadn't been my smartest move, but I couldn't seem to stay the fuck away from the girl. It was becoming a problem.

The first game coincided with my eighteenth birthday, and Lily's. I remembered Coach telling me they were only days apart. Eighteen was the age I'd been counting down the days for, with plans of telling Uncle Jack to shove it and starting a life of my own. Now, it was clear he'd never intended to let that happen.

The foster paperwork was in hand. It was a bit of a joke, joining a new family days before my eighteenth birthday, but Hade Harbor and Coach Eric Williams wanted a win this year, and I'd be damned if the whole town wasn't conspiring to make it happen. He'd told me not to worry about it and just focus on the game. I had no problem with that. I'd never cared about anything other than the game before.

I watched Lily head out of the kitchen as I gulped down a glass of water. *Well, that was a lie.* I had one little problem with focusing solely on the game, and she had freckles, eyes that burned like emerald fire, a smart mouth, and a depraved mind.

Coach was out with his wife. We were alone in the house. I set the glass on the sink and stared at my reflection in the dark window opposite me. I should get some rest. I should leave Lily alone and focus on the game. I should respect Coach Eric's rules for the team and his daughter.

I never was good at following rules.

I went after Lily silently.

She was just closing the door of the bathroom when I reached her, and I shoved out a foot to brace it open.

“What the hell?” Lily muttered, looking down at the floor, her nose wrinkled with frustration as if she was expecting to find a stray shoe blocking the door. She froze when she saw my foot.

I pushed the door open and advanced before she could protest. Shutting the door behind me, I leaned against it, turning the lock with a loud click. It sounded like a starting pistol in the small bathroom. She’d already turned the shower on to heat it up, and now steam curled around us.

“Cayden, what are you doing?” Lily’s voice was carefully measured.

The tension between us felt like a live wire whipping around madly, able to burn with a single touch. She felt it, too. I knew she did.

“Taking what you owe me, remember? Our bet. You lost.”

Lily scoffed, her creamy cheeks flushing red. “I think we kind of ended the bet when we got into more trouble than a nighttime run is worth. It’s all your fault, by the way.”

My eyebrow rose lazily. I enjoyed her prickliness. She was agitated because she could feel what was coming. She wanted to run and hide, but she also wanted to be caught. Her diary had proved that much.

She folded her arms across her slight chest. Her sweater was discarded on the floor. Her tits pressed against her baggy tee, her hard nipples outlined beautifully. Her skin was wet with sweat, and it was making her shirt cling to her, something she clearly hadn’t realized.

“No one made you run across the tracks. You could have just accepted your inevitable defeat gracefully.”

“Never,” Lily rebutted immediately.

A wicked smile crossed my lips. I pushed away from the door and advanced on her. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

She tried to step away but slipped on the towels she’d carelessly dropped on the floor. Her back came up against the counter, and I was on her, closing her in with an arm braced on either side.

“After all, you like it better that way, don’t you, Ladybug?” My voice was a low caress as it left my throat. Lily was becoming far more than a distraction. *She was an obsession.*

She blinked up at me with guileless green eyes, her toffee-colored eyelashes dried in pretty spikes. I couldn’t stop staring at her. I leaned in and nuzzled her neck, then took a deep breath. No one smelled like Lillian Williams.

“Cayden,” Lily murmured softly, a small hand coming to rest on my chest.

“Hmmm?” I licked her neck. I had to taste her skin.

She shivered against me. I wanted to do more than lick her. I wanted to eat her whole. *I wanted to devour her.* It was a sobering realization.

“What are you going to do to me?” Her voice was eager and scared, both and neither.

“Whatever I want.” I latched on to the lobe of her ear and sucked it between my teeth.

The hand on my chest turned into a fist as Lily sank her nails into my damp T-shirt. Pulling me closer. Pushing me away. I didn’t think either of us was sure. This was dangerous. *She was dangerous.* I moved my face away from her neck, trying to clear her scent from my head.

“For today, though, you owe me a kiss for our bet.”

My reminder sent her eyes flying open. I straightened up. She frowned, a tiny line of unease creasing her smooth brow. She didn’t look mad anymore.

“Disappointed?” My goading only made her flush more. I fucking loved her skin. It was like a mood ring, revealing her thoughts to me, even when she kept a perfectly angelic face and lied like a little devil.

“Whatever makes you feel better about chasing someone through the streets until they literally run into trouble.”

“And you don’t want any trouble, do you, Lillian Williams?”

I brought my hand up and laid it against her pulse. She swallowed, her slender neck bobbing with the movement. The pale, freckled column sat perfectly between my thumb and forefinger like it had been designed to fit there. She shook her head, her eyes glued to mine. She looked unsure. She could join the fucking club.

“But didn’t you hear? Sometimes, trouble wants you, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

I leaned in, brushing my lips against hers. She was shaking. Her breath touched my lips, teasing me, tempting me.

“Well, kiss me and get it over with, then,” Lily huffed after a moment of that intense proximity.

I tutted. “It’s not your lips I want to kiss.”

She swallowed hard, and I wondered where her filthy imagination had gone.

“It’s not?” Her voice was just a whisper.

I slipped the sleeve of her overly large T-shirt off her shoulder. The girl seriously needed some clothes that fit. I was beginning to get a shoulder kink, and it was all because of her. She was always so covered up, swathed in clothes that were three sizes too big. I had no idea what her cleavage looked like, but I was intimately acquainted with her shoulder.

She watched my hand as I moved to the other shoulder and slipped the neck of her top off. It cascaded down her body like expensive satin instead of worn cotton. That was the power of a girl like Lily. She was all class. Out of my league, miles above me and beyond me.

But that wouldn't save her.

Her T-shirt pooled at her belly, and I laid my eyes on her chest for the first time. She had on one of those little lacy bralettes, dark red like wine. I was right about her freckles; they spread across her body like little constellations. I wanted to map their formations and follow each and every one, down the dip between her small tits and across the span of her ribs. I slid my finger under one of the bralette straps. I brought my eyes to hers, waiting for a reaction. Refusal. Permission. Something.

Her silence gave me what I needed. I tugged the strap, peeling it down her arm and exposing one sweet tit. It was small and perfectly formed. An apricot with soft, downy skin. Her nipple was large, a soft coral pink, with fawn-colored freckles dancing across the surface. I stared. A rosy blush spread across her delicate chest at my inspection. She was holding her breath, and I realized that I was, too.

“Breathe, Lily.”

It sounded like an order, but it was more of a plea. I needed air just as badly as she did, but she had stolen it all from the room. She took a halting breath, and her naked breast jiggled with the movement. It was the most erotic thing I’d ever seen.

“Sit on the counter.”

“Why?” she asked, clearly getting nervous again.

I slid my hands down her waist and settled them on her hips. Lifting her was easier than my weight reps in training. I sat her on the edge of the counter. Her legs parted naturally around my hips. It wasn’t just my hand around her neck that fit like it was designed to; the cradle of her narrow hips hugged mine perfectly. I was hard, and even the brush of my shorts felt too intense on my leaking head. I stepped closer and pressed my cock against her, slotting it between her thighs, pushing her back on the counter until she was braced on her elbows.

“Because you owe me a kiss, and I’m taking it from here.” My voice was a guttural croak. I wanted to lick her sweet cunt. I bet it was like a peach. I

wanted to taste how much she liked being told what to do by me. I wanted it more than I'd ever wanted anything.

But we'd been running a long time, and Coach Eric was never out late on a school night. Besides, blowing my load in, on, or near Lily so close to an important game wasn't a smart move. If I wanted to make it out of this town and stay at Hade Harbor, in this house with this girl, I needed to win. *Everything comes to he who waits*. It was Uncle Jack's motto and one of the only things he'd ever said that inspired me. Of course, he had no idea that when he said it, I was thinking of the day I'd be free of him. So tonight, I couldn't allow myself her cunt. It was too tempting.

My hand went to the other strap, and I slid it free.

"The bet was for one kiss," Lily reminded me softly, a challenging gleam in her eyes. "Just one."

I stopped in the process of taking off her bralette and found a reluctant grin coming to my lips.

"You're right. We'd better stick to the terms," I muttered before losing the battle to go slow, swooping down and taking her pretty pink nipple in my mouth.

It started as a kiss, but as Lily gasped and moved closer, it became more. My tongue rolled over the puffy point between my lips, curling around the hard bud as I grabbed her other nipple , still encased in lace, and pinched teasingly.

She moaned, her hands sinking into my hair and yanking. I growled against her skin and bit down lightly on the tit in my mouth, threatening her nipple with my teeth. She groaned, a soft, breathy thing that made my wretched, black heart pound.

A sound of rapture like that, from a girl like her, could enslave a man.

She rocked into me, her body instinctively reacting to the hard length pressed against her pussy, only two layers of material away from each other. Her hands tugged the back of my hair, no longer pulling but holding me in place. I laved her nipple relentlessly with my tongue, nipping and circling, worshiping at her unspoiled altar.

I was so hard, I could poke a damn hole in my shorts, but I wasn't about to break my rule about coming too close to a game. I needed that pent-up energy to fuel me. I needed the restless, unfulfilled aggression to dominate on the ice. Instead, I leaned away and tore her other breast free, attacking it with my lips and teeth. I wanted to mark this woman, turn her pretty skin pink and leave my name on it so everyone would know she was mine.

I had to stop. I was too close to coming, and Lily felt too good.

"Touch yourself like you did after you wrote about me in your journal," I grabbed one of her hands and put her fingers into my mouth, wetting them thoroughly. Then I pushed her hand down the front of her shorts. "Make yourself come while I suck on your beautiful tits."

She opened her mouth, seeming like she might try to protest.

I shook my head, leaning my forehead against hers. "It wasn't a request, Lily. Do it, or I will, then I'll fuck your mouth and come so far down your throat that you choke on it."

Her eyes widened, and her hand slid lower, heading between her legs. Her breath fluttered when she found her clit. I leaned away, watching her hand moving under her running shorts. It was wildly hot, the image tattooing itself in my memory for all time. She worked her clit cautiously, like she wasn't exactly sure what to do. Her innocence screamed at me, only turning me on more. I leaned down and took one of her nipples back in my mouth, tugging at it and rolling it, making her rock harder against her hand. She was rising, I could feel it from her increased wriggling.

With my free hand, I massaged her other breast, pulling at the nipple, squeezing the small weight. My hand looked huge against her slight tit, palming it roughly, covering it completely. She was so small, but she didn't complain about the rough handling. Her skin was stained red with my fingerprints, and yet she pushed herself only further into my touch.

It wasn't just her body that was designed to fit me; her filthy little mind was made to complement mine, as well. She was a ball of striking contradictions, and I was already addicted.

Her breath hitched, and she gasped.

“Are you ready to come?”

She nodded.

“Use your words,” I murmured against her skin.

“I’m – I’m going to come, I think,” she admitted sweetly.

“If you’re going to come, you’ll know it.”

A flash of something like fear crossed her face.

“Don’t be scared, I’m here.” I didn’t know why I was compelled to say that, only that when I did, her eyes opened, and she stared right at me.

Her hand moved furiously now, fucking her pussy with her own fingers, her chest pink and marked by my teeth.

“Come on, Freckles, come for me,” I urged and couldn’t resist slipping my thumb between her puffy, parted lips.

She sucked on the digit as I gripped her chin with the rest of my hand, holding her face hostage so she had no choice but to look right at me while she came.

“Come for me and show me everything you’ve got...every single inch. I want it all.”

She cried out, biting down on my thumb for a second, and then her lips opened in a long moan. A wave of pink worked up her neck and rolled over her face, making the green of her eyes sparkle. She was coming. My perfect girl was coming right there and letting me see it. She shook, her eyes losing focus for a long moment as her body clenched. Pleasure danced in her eyes, a flash of pure vulnerability. It took my breath away. I was sure I’d never seen anything as beautiful, and that I never would again.

When her body stopped twitching and cool reality filtered through her face, alarm and shock blossomed in her eyes.

“Yep, that’s right, you just got yourself off and let me watch,” I murmured.

She swallowed, a new flush working over her cheeks. This one was shame. I didn’t care. Soon enough she’d get used to this, and us.

She sat up and pulled her straps back into place, hiding her well-sucked tits from me.

She pressed her hands against the counter and stood. The shower was still running. It was probably cold by now. She pushed against my chest to try to step around me.

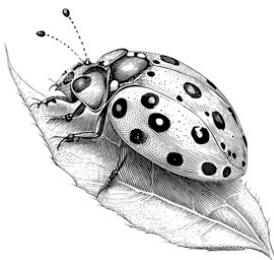
“Can I go now?” Her question was shaky, uncertain. She didn’t wait for an answer before sliding around my side.

I grabbed her hand before she could make it two steps. She glared at me as I took the hand that she’d come on and separated the wettest fingers. Sliding them into my mouth, I breathed through my nose, trying to calm my racing heart as I licked them clean, tasting her, finally. After I’d licked my fill, I let her hand drop.

“Now, you can go.” My voice was rough. I was surprised I was still capable of speech, given the raging want roaring through me, demanding I take this girl now, press deep inside and come for days. Instead, with a self-discipline I’d honed over a lifetime of pain and fear, a lifetime of controlling my urges in order to survive, I stepped back and let her go.

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Lily



I WOKE with a dream still lodged firmly in my head, blinking into the early morning sunlight to try to get reality to filter through my overheated brain.

Crap. Another dream about Cayden. After our encounter last night, I could hardly blame my subconscious for being a little feverish. In the dream, I'd been running through the house in the dark, looking over my shoulder. There was no one else home, I'd been sure of it. I'd run and hidden behind the trunk in the attic, the very same one I used to hide behind as a child. Waiting there, my heart pounding, I'd felt alive like never before. I knew who was hunting me, and I knew that if he caught me, he'd do terrible, unspeakable things to me. I'd worn a white dress (clearly my subconscious wasn't very creative when it came to symbols of purity). I knew that Cayden would mark it with his dirty hands, and as I trembled there, behind the trunk, in my heart of hearts, I wanted him to catch me.

I wanted him to take what he wanted.

I wanted to stop being the good girl for one fucking second, and just be his.

I pushed the thought of the dream out of my head. I needed to work out a new journal situation, as I refused to write down my innermost fantasies anywhere he could read this time, but I still needed a place to offload my troubling dreams.

I turned over in bed, grabbing my phone before the alarm went off again. The date smacked me in the face.

It was my birthday. I was officially eighteen. Yay me. Like all the birthdays before it, it felt anticlimactic.

A commotion came from outside. The sound of a truck door slamming and the low purr of a motorcycle. I heaved myself reluctantly out of bed to go and look down at the driveway. A motorcycle sat there, just unloaded from a flatbed. Cayden stood next to it, while my mom was in deep conversation with the driver of the flatbed. Was it Cayden's? The very thought of the guy on a motorcycle was enough to send me heading to the shower. I'd fled from the bathroom last night before getting clean and spent all night feeling sticky and horrible. I had to shower before school, and most importantly, I needed to calm the hell down. I was eighteen. I was surely too old to give in to the storm of teenage hormones and lust after the resident bad boy.

Maybe if I told myself that enough times, I'd start to believe it.

At lunch, Eve and I sat in the far corner of the cafeteria and kept our heads down. She wasn't really one for hiding from the Ice Gods, seeing as her brother was one, but she would do whatever I needed to do to feel comfortable. Eve was a one-in-a-million friend.

"So, he rides a motorcycle, too? That's hot."

"Okay, Paris Hilton circa 2004. It's normal. At least it means I don't have to ride with him to school anymore."

"Well, unless he offers you a ride on his bike. Now *that* would be hot."

"And dangerous. I don't trust that guy walking past me in the hall, never mind being in control of the bike I'm on. Anyway, let's talk about something else." I picked at my food. I wasn't really hungry.

Cayden had been busy with his bike and early practice this morning, while my mom had made me pancakes for a birthday breakfast. She'd talked on and on about HHU and how I'd still be able to live at home next year when I went to college locally. I'd stuffed my face with the pancakes to avoid answering.

“Something like birthdays!” Eve was immediately distracted. She grinned at me. “Tell me what you want to do, and I’ll make it happen.”

“Ugh, I don’t know. Nothing?”

“Not an option. You only turn eighteen once. We have to do something fun.”

“I don’t know. I don’t care about birthdays, you know that.”

“Still, for me...please?”

“Okay, let’s get takeout and movies and stay at your house this weekend,” I suggested. Any night out of my house and away from the suffocating, confusing presence of Cayden West was a bonus.

Eve wrinkled her nose. “That’s a normal Friday night. It needs to be something different. You know Beckett is having a party after the game tomorrow. Apparently, it’s Cayden’s birthday, too. You should probably know that, since you’re siblings now and everything.” Eve snorted with glee when I elbowed her.

“Tomorrow is really his birthday? My mom did say we were close together.” I chewed my nail, trying to imagine the party. I shook my head. “No, if there’s anything I don’t want to do on my birthday, it’s hanging around the Ice Gods and their minions. How about two-for-one movie night at the Apollo?” The local movie theater in town was one of those little art house places that never seemed to make any money but somehow stayed open. Eve sighed. “Great, popcorn and a movie on an eighteenth birthday. It might as well be your eighth birthday, I’m pretty sure we did the same thing.”

“Don’t be a grump,” I cajoled her. I knew my lack of social graces were a continual sore spot between me and Eve. She liked to be center of attention, and I didn’t. Most birthday things were absolute torture.

“Let’s go to the party...come on.”

“No. It’s my birthday, and I’ll stay home if I want to.”

“You’re the worst,” Eve muttered and slid her phone out of her pocket. Her gasp pulled my attention to her.

“What now?”

She turned a megawatt smile on me and then tilted her screen. “Looks like you don’t have a choice.”

It was an online invitation, fancy as hell and definitely not created by anyone at school. An invitation to Beckett’s party. It seemed Eve had finally managed to get herself a real-life invite. What caught my notice, however, was my name scrolling right beside Cayden’s.

Join us to celebrate our first victory, and Cayden and Lily’s
birthdays – Friday night.

What the hell?

“Let me see that.” I snatched her phone and stared down at the invitation. How extra was Beckett that he’d sent out invites to his parties, and moreover, whose idea had it been to include me?

“Is this your doing?” I asked Eve.

She shook her head, her eyes wide. “No! Like Beckett would ever do anything I asked him to.”

“Asher?” Sure, I didn’t know Eve’s brother that well, but he had a twisted sense of humor sometimes.

“Nope. I’m sure he doesn’t even remember when your birthday is.”

Right, it had to be someone who knew when my birthday was. That only left one person I could think of. Cayden West. Last night’s encounter in the bathroom returned to me, making me feel all hot all over. I’d been avoiding him successfully all day. The game was tomorrow, and he was constantly at

practice. Why would he try to force me to go to Beckett's party? To embarrass me? To play more of his fucked up games?

"So, you're definitely going now, right?" Eve's grin stretched across her face like the Cheshire cat's.

"Absolutely not. Like I'm going to let Cayden West order me around. I'm getting movie tickets. Come or don't. I understand if you want to go to the party."

"It's your birthday! Of course I'm not going to leave you on your own," Eve pouted. She sighed. "I guess we'll just go to the movies."

Her eyes widened and flickered over my shoulder, and it was the only warning I had that we were no longer alone.

"When is this movie night?" Cayden's deep voice brushed against my nerves, and I jumped.

Eve stared at me a long moment, waiting to see if I'd answer. When I didn't, she pasted on a bright smile and angled her face up. I kept my eyes trained on my lunch tray. I felt awkward as hell around Cayden, considering the last time I'd had his eyes on me, I'd been coming.

"For Lily's birthday. It's today, just so you know. Hi, Selena," Eve tacked on, probably so I'd understand that Cayden wasn't alone behind me.

"I know."

A paper bag was placed on the table beside me, the kind that stationery stores used. A rectangular shape was visible through the paper. A present? A bubble of hysterical laughter threatened to burst out. This guy really was insane.

"Happy birthday," Cayden continued.

"Oh my God, you got her a gift? That's so nice, Cade. My birthday is in a month, just so you know," Selena purred.

I made no move to touch the present.

Eve looked awkward, shredding her sugar packet between her black polished fingernails.

“Aren’t you going to open it, Bug? Haven’t you ever gotten a present before? That’s the polite thing to do,” Selena snapped, clearly getting tired of standing around behind us.

“She can open it when she wants to. Are you girls coming to the game?” Cayden interjected, sounding annoyed by Selena’s brittle tone.

Eve nodded. “Of course. My brother’s playing, and Coach likes Lily and her mom to be there for all the home games, at least.”

“And the party after? I see Beckett actually invited you this time, Eve. How kind of him.”

I closed my hand around my plastic knife at Selena’s subtle dig.

“Yeah, so kind. What a guy,” Eve muttered through gritted teeth. “Despite the honor of getting a real invitation, we’re not coming. We’re going to the movies.”

Selena snorted. “Figures.”

“The movies after the big game? I don’t think so,” Cayden said. His voice faded somewhat as he turned his head. “Don’t you have somewhere else to be?” His irritation was directed at Selena.

I stood, the entire thing suddenly too much. I was acting too flustered around Cayden, and Eve was watching me too closely. Not just Eve—I felt like the entire cafeteria was staring.

“Let’s go,” I murmured to my best friend.

Before I could move, however, Cayden’s huge body pressed against mine, trapping me between him and the table.

He moved my hair from my ear slowly, tucking it back. “If you think you can avoid me, forget it. You’re coming to the party.”

“No, I’m not, and you can’t make me.”

He chuckled. “You really don’t want to go head-to-head with me on this. You’ll lose.”

“Why do you care if I’m there? What are you going to do to me?” My eyes blazed into his when I finally risked a glance upward.

He was *right there*. He tilted his head to the side, considering his answer.

Then a cruel, faintly devious grin drifted over his full mouth. He leaned in and spoke in my ear. “Nothing that you don’t secretly want. Stop running away. It only makes me want to chase you.”

His face pressed against my cheek for a second, his skin hot. He smelled so good, a scent that was uniquely Cayden.

“Lily?” Eve’s voice doused us with a cold splash of reality.

The noise from the cafeteria filtered back in, and I stumbled back to find that we were, once again, the center of attention.

“Let’s go,” I repeated my earlier words to Eve and grabbed her hand, shouldering my bag and hurrying away.

Eve mumbled some apology to Cayden and snatched the gift he’d given me off the table as we went.

I didn’t stop or let go of her hand until we were several halls away from the cafeteria.

“What the hell was going on in there? If something happened with him, you’d tell me, right?”

“Of course.” I felt guilty as soon as I said it. How could I tell Eve what’d happened between us without confessing the depraved little dreams I’d journaled about? What would my best friend think of me if she knew that I had such dark and shameful fantasies?

“Here, you left this on the table,” she said and passed me the gift. “I wonder what it is.”

“I know what it is,” I muttered as I ripped open the paper. The new journal was beautifully illustrated and had a smooth, embossed cover. Botanical

sketches covered it, greens and golds, and on a few of the leaves, little red ladybugs sat. I cracked it open and noticed a scrawl of dark ink on the front page.

*You show me yours, and I'll show you
mine - C*

“What a random present. Is it a journal?” Eve wondered.

I shook my head before I spoke. “No.” I clutched the book tightly, my fingernails sinking into the leather. “It’s a threat.”

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Cayden



COACH PROWLED THE LOCKER ROOM. I could feel his intensity radiating across the space. This was it. First game of the season. I meant to start like we would go on. I caught the other Ice Gods' eyes. This was our team, our night, and our victory. This year, we'd go all the way. I wouldn't settle for anything less. The team we were playing shouldn't be a problem, but we had yet to test our teamwork against others.

He gave us a pep talk that I barely heard. Inside my head, I could already hear the roar of the crowd, the swish of my skates on the ice, and the sound that the biscuit made as it hit the net. It was chaotic. I followed the team out of the locker room, toward the rink. The colors of the Hellions were black and purple. The opposing team was green and blue. The rink was split evenly in half. We hit the ice and started to warm up.

My eyes searched the crowd for Lily. She was sitting with her mom, just behind where Coach was standing. Perfect seating. When her eyes collided with mine, she jerked as if I'd physically touched her. Good. I wanted her to feel my presence. I wanted to crawl inside her head, like she'd crawled inside mine.

I watched her as I skated, stretching my legs and warming the muscles. If her eyes left mine, they quickly returned. I held her gaze. I wanted her eyes on me this entire game. I'd play even better if I knew she was watching.

We took our positions for the start. I looked away and at the opposing team for the first time. Tonight, we were going to win, and we weren't going to

stop winning until this season was over. Tonight, I was going to get everything I wanted, and if I didn't get it, I was going to take it.

The buzzer sounded, and I smiled.

“Yes! That’s what I’m talking about!” Coach’s shout rattled the windows of the locker room after the game.

It had been a swift victory in the end. The Pucks hadn’t been able to keep up with the Hellions by the first intermission. We’d destroyed them, and this was only the beginning. The team was in high spirits as they stripped off their jerseys and padding. I hung back, like always, waiting to get the showers to myself.

“If you guys keep this up, Nationals are ours. I’m damn proud of you, and hell, I’m damn proud of myself!”

The players clapped as Coach laughed.

“Now, I know you’re all going to party. I don’t care. Just don’t get so messed up that practice on Monday is a bust. Happy birthday to Cayden—what a great way to celebrate turning eighteen!”

The cheering was thunderous at that. I felt oddly humbled by it. My birthdays usually consisted of getting shitfaced with Uncle Jack and avoiding the hookers he tried to press on me to “celebrate” with. Having friends, ones who actually wished you well, was a foreign concept to me.

Marcus caught my eye and headed toward Coach. I’d asked him for a favor, and he seemed certain he could deliver. Initially, I’d been fine with letting Freckles hide at home during parties, but not anymore. If I had to be there, so did she. She was the only interesting person in Hade Harbor. She was the only interesting person anywhere, and I wanted her close. Tangled with Lily was the highlight of my life, and I was already addicted. It was too late for me.

“Coach, you know that Selena and Beckett are throwing a little party for Cayden and Lily tonight, right?”

Coach frowned, clearly surprised to hear his daughter's name in the same sentence as the others. "No, I wasn't aware. She hasn't said anything."

"Well, you know how she is. She probably doesn't want to upset you by coming, seeing as you don't trust any of us with her," Marcus teased. He was the only one who could get away with talking to Coach like this. "But we all know the rules for Lily. You don't have to worry. You should let her celebrate her birthday with her friends. Eve will be there looking out for her, anyway. The whole school is coming," Marcus lied. Only a select few from the school were coming, those that Beckett could tolerate, which wasn't many.

Coach considered his words, rubbing at his neck. He turned to pin me with a look. "Will you be going, Cayden?"

"Of course. I can watch out for her, if you want. I won't be drinking, sir, and I'll bring her home by midnight, if that's good with you."

Coach blew out a breath, his fatherly concern warring with the need to make his daughter happy. He had no idea that she'd be happiest to go home with him and avoid the party altogether. Sadly, for the birthday girl, that wasn't an option.

"Let's say 11:30," Coach said finally on a pained exhale.

Satisfaction curled through me.

Marcus grinned. "Great, she'll be so excited. Asher will take her and Eve over there, so I guess you can just go on home and celebrate tonight with the missus."

"Watch it, Marcus," Coach Williams warned but smiled, nonetheless.

Marcus ambled over as our teammates headed into the showers. "Well, how was that?"

"A master class in bullshit. Well done."

He smirked. "Well, I didn't do it for free. Put in a good word with Selena for me tonight, remember?"

"I doubt you need it. As far as I've heard, she has a weakness for Ice Gods."

Marcus nodded and shrugged at my judgmental look. “Hey, don’t hate the player, hate the game. Why work hard for it if you don’t have to? Not all of us like to live on the wild side, like trying to get the coach’s off-limits daughter alone. Are you sure you know what you’re doing playing with Bug?”

“No,” I answered truthfully, taking a long swig of water from my black-and-purple Hellions bottle. “But I’m going to do it anyway.”

Marcus laughed and slapped me on the shoulder. “I’ve gotta respect that dedication to a goal. If we ever make it to Nationals, you’re the guy to take us, I have no doubt. I’m gonna hit the shower. You coming?”

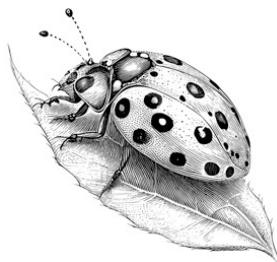
I smirked at him. “Stop trying to see me naked. You’ll only feel bad about yourself.” I was used to deflecting any and all conversation about why I didn’t like to shower with the others.

Tossing his jersey and padding to the side carelessly, revealing his unblemished torso, Marcus smirked at me. I’d long ago stopped feeling jealous of guys who could walk around without their shirts and not worry about people staring. My body and my past had shaped me into the driven person I was today. Those scars were what fueled me to get the fuck out of Midnight Falls forever. I couldn’t hate them, but I could and would hide them. I didn’t need to be the subject of cruel gossip. Only one person had ever seen them besides Uncle Jack, and that was my little Ladybug.

I hadn’t been kidding when I’d written in her new journal. I’d shown her mine, unwittingly, and then I’d seen hers. We were connected, me and her, by our dark secrets. The ones we never wanted the world to see.

Fight it as she tried, the truth was undeniable. I’d seen inside her pretty, twisted head, and now, she was mine.

Lily



MY MOM DISAPPEARED after the game, probably to find my dad and schmooze with the team sponsors. Eve and I talked to a few people and made our way outside to where my dad had parked his truck in the lot. It wasn't there. We headed back inside to look for him. Eve fiddled with her phone as we made our way down toward the locker room and my dad's office. I remembered the moment days before when I'd walked in on Cayden after his shower. I hadn't realized it at the time, but that moment had changed my life.

"So, any news from California?" Eve wondered as we walked past a steady stream of players who'd already gotten changed and were leaving, no doubt anxious to get to Beckett's party.

"No, nothing. At this rate, I might not even get in and then I won't have to worry about telling my parents," I muttered.

"It wouldn't be the worst thing not to get in. You can go to HHU with me. We could be roommates!" Eve elbowed me. "Save money and live with your best friend, what could be better?"

"You know my mom would want me to live at home if I went to HHU, that's the problem."

Eve stopped beside me and crossed her arms over her chest. The silence felt heavy, like she wanted to say something but was holding herself back.

"What is it? Just spit it out already."

“Well, you know that the whole rooming at HHU thing isn’t really the problem, right? The problem is not just telling your parents that you want to live on campus, even if they live nearby. The problem is being scared to tell them the truth about what you want for once. You won’t disappoint them, Lily. You’re the model daughter, a perfect student...it’s time you did something you want for you, and not for them.”

I let out a jagged laugh. “The fact that you’re saying that makes it very clear that we did not grow up in the same house. You don’t get it. They wouldn’t say anything...it’s not what they say or don’t say...it’s the look of disappointment, the expectations – all of it. It’s a lot harder to feel crushed under the weight of your parents’ failed dreams if you’re thousands of miles away.”

“But you love Hade Harbor, and me...and HHU is a great school. It sucks that you have to go across the country when a simple conversation might be easier.”

“It wouldn’t be simple, or easy.”

Eve sighed. “Yeah, well, maybe important things aren’t meant to be easy. Maybe fighting for them is what matters. If your parents knew how you felt, don’t you think they’d feel bad? By going away, you aren’t giving them a chance to understand you, either. It’s like you’re punishing them.”

“Don’t hold back, tell me how you really feel,” I muttered, feeling utterly and horribly called out. Was Eve right? Yes, *and you know it*. Still, it was hard to even imagine sitting down with my parents and telling them that I needed more freedom and less academic pressure. Running away felt a hell of a lot easier.

A loud whistle reached us from the end of the hall. I glanced up. Marcus headed toward us. “You girls ready for the party?”

“We’re not going. I’m looking for my dad.”

Marcus stopped before us, rocking back on his heels. “I’m sorry to tell you, Bug, but I think he went home for some post-game celebration time with your mom. He thinks you’re going to the party with Cayden.”

I blushed at Marcus’ suggestive smile.

“Shut up. Are you serious?” Eve turned to me, excitement leaping in her eyes. “Does that mean we’re going after all?”

“No – I mean, I don’t know.” My father never liked me going to parties. It wasn’t like he forbade me, more like he didn’t encourage it. I usually wasn’t invited, anyway, so it wasn’t a big deal.

“Anyway, I’m hitching a ride there myself. My bike’s in the shop. I think your ride is out back.” With that, Marcus saluted us and left.

Eve turned to me, her tone wheedling. “Please, please, please can we go. Even your dad gave the green light! That never happens!”

“To be fair, I never ask.” *And I haven’t asked this time either.* “How did this even happen?”

Eve’s pretty dark eyes narrowed. “You think Cayden did it?”

My mouth went dry. “Why would he?”

“He seemed pretty into the idea of you going to the party.”

“I don’t know why. It’s not like we hang out or talk to each other if we can avoid it.”

Eve and I walked down the hall toward the parking lot at the back.

“Do you think he likes you?” Eve ventured after a moment.

“What? No. Of course, he doesn’t. He doesn’t even know me, and I’m not the kind of girl guys get crushes on, am I?”

“Why not? You’re beautiful and smart—”

“And you have your best-friend glasses on. I love you, but I’m under no illusions about how I look. I’m nerdy and that’s fine. I’m not trying to be anything else.”

It was true. With my glasses, gawky limbs, abundance of freckles, and milk-bottle skin tone, I knew I wasn’t a contender for any beauty contests. Maybe my kind of pale, red-haired vibe might have been in style in 1800s England, but it certainly wasn’t popular in modern-day America. Eve was the opposite of me in every way and drew longing stares wherever she

went. But with an overprotective brother like Asher, she got to act on the interest sent her way even less than I did.

The school had emptied out, and there was that creepy air of being somewhere you shouldn't after hours. We pushed out of the big back doors and walked down the path leading to the parking lot. The cool night air made me shiver and I was grateful to be wearing jeans and an old hockey jersey from my dad's Hellions days.

As we turned the corner into the parking lot, I came to an abrupt stop. Eve was telling me a funny story from the diner where she worked. She realized I'd stopped walking after a second and looked back.

"What's up?"

I pointed, and she slowly turned and followed my gaze.

Two motorcycles sat at the curb, each with a rider. Beckett was well known for his toys, and the custom Harley was just another example of the fancy rides his parents lavished on him. Cayden sat astride the same bike that had shown up at the house the other day. He already had his helmet on, but I would have known it was him even without the visor up. I already recognized the shape of his long legs and broad shoulders.

"Finally. I know it's cool to be fashionably late, but seeing as I'm the host, I really should get going," Beckett drawled. He held out an extra helmet to Eve.

She stood frozen beside me.

"Get a move on, Cinderella," he said to my best friend.

Cinderella? I'd never heard Eve called that as a nickname, and I'd had no idea that she and Beckett, the richest boy in school, were on nickname terms.

Eve huffed and rolled her eyes. "See you there." She headed toward Beckett, leaving me alone with Cayden.

I walked toward him slowly, considering my options.

“I know what you’re thinking, Freckles, but it’s too far to walk and I won’t let you. Get on, or I’ll put you on.”

I scoffed. “Right, you’d love that, wouldn’t you?”

Cayden grinned. “Yeah, actually, I would. Let’s do that anyway.”

He made to get off the bike, and I rushed forward. The thought of being manhandled by him right now was more than I could deal with.

“Fine, whatever. Has anyone ever told you you’re a bully?”

I reached his side and lifted a leg to straddle the bike. Nearly falling, I had to grab on to his arm to steady myself.

“Never in such a sweet way,” Cayden murmured, twisting around to hand me the helmet. “Safety first, Lily.”

I took it and pulled it over my head. Ugh, it was horribly tight and claustrophobic.

“Where did the bike come from?” I wondered.

“Midnight Falls. I’ve had it a while. Now, sit closer,” Cayden commanded as I loosely put my hands on his waist.

He grabbed my arms and yanked them around his middle, sending me flush against his back, my legs spread wide to grip his hips.

“Hey, too close,” I hissed.

“No such thing. Hold on,” he told me over his shoulder before starting the bike.

It purred to life, and the vibration traveled through my legs. It was startlingly intimate. Damn, *this* was how it felt to sit on a motorcycle? No wonder people liked them. Cayden pulled away, his tires squealing on the pavement. Gradually, the annoyance of the helmet dropped away, and I was able to concentrate on the journey. Cayden drove well. He was confident, handling turns like a pro. I felt safe with him. It was an odd thing to realize. Just like when he’d showed up when I’d run right into trouble on our jog, I felt instinctively at ease.

We headed into the dark, leaving the bright town streets behind and riding along the winding coastal road that led to Beckett's cliff-top mansion. Cayden accelerated, and a strangled cry left me as we surged forward. We were going much faster now, but the road was quiet. A sudden laugh bubbled up in my chest. It felt freeing, somehow, shooting through the darkness, a dangerous bike between my legs with an even more dangerous guy driving it.

I laughed, and Cayden glanced back at me. I couldn't see his face through the visor. I didn't have to, to feel his satisfaction. It radiated off him. He liked that I liked it. Somehow, in our short but dramatic acquaintance, I'd learned to read him just by being next to him.

I straightened up, and he slowed a little, seeming to read my mind. I took one hand off Cayden's waist when we found a straight stretch of road and raised it over my head. It should have felt silly, but it didn't. Squeezing Cayden's hips and the bike harder between my thighs, I let go completely and brought both hands up. I felt like I was flying. He'd slowed down, letting me have my moment. I couldn't figure this guy out. On one hand he was invading my privacy and threatening me, on the other he was protecting me and forcing me to live in a way I'd given up hoping for in Hade Harbor. The dangerous hockey player from the wrong side of the tracks, and the uptight, straight-A student, Coach's daughter. There was no way we fit together, and yet right now, sitting on the back of his bike while he drove us through the forgiving dark, I felt understood in a way I rarely did.

"Okay, hold on, there's some bends coming up," Cayden yelled back over his shoulder.

I reached back around him, gripping handfuls of his jacket to hold on as he tilted us to turn a corner. My heart still pounded when we reached the driveway to Beckett's place and roared past other partygoers and cars. People scattered, some even clapping when they saw the hero of tonight's game arriving at the party.

He pulled to a stop, and the loud rumble of the engine died, quickly replaced by the music spilling out of the mansion.

I yanked my helmet off and got off the bike. Before I could take a proper step away, Cayden grabbed my wrist.

“Not so fast. Where do you think you’re going?”

“To the party. Reluctantly, I might add. I don’t know what kind of weird kick you get out of making me go somewhere I didn’t want to go, but it’s not going to work. I’m going home as early as I can, and you can’t stop me.” I crossed my arms over my chest and watched Cayden clipping both helmets onto his bike.

“Is that right?” He didn’t sound daunted in the least.

“That’s right,” I snapped.

“Lil!”

Eve’s shout was loud and close, and I welcomed it. I turned to her just as she skipped to my side.

“You survived!”

“So did you.” Threading my arm through hers, I stepped away from Cayden without another word, and we started up the stairs. Maybe tonight would be a good time to start drinking heavily?

“It wasn’t that bad,” Eve said.

“Hey, why wasn’t I aware of how close you and Beckett are?”

Eve blushed. “We’re not close at all. I don’t know why you think that.”

“He called you Cinderella.”

“Yeah, probably because I clean his house sometimes. Believe me, if this were the story, he’d be the evil stepmother, not the prince,” Eve muttered. Her tone was loaded with everything she wasn’t saying. There was definitely more there, but it seemed she wasn’t in the mood to share.

“Whatever. Where there are Ice Gods, there’s trouble—except your brother, of course,” I added quickly.

She laughed and rolled her eyes. “Believe me, I am aware of who my brother is to the general student body. He’s a dick, and a bully, and has broken more hearts than any guy has a right to, but...”

“He’s your brother,” I finished for her.

She sighed resignedly and nodded. “So, let’s go and get a birthday drink or something.”

“Sure,” I said easily.

Eve stopped dramatically in the middle of the hallway and stared at me. “Who are you, and where is the real Lily?”

“I can have one drink. Yesterday was my birthday, after all,” I added. What I didn’t say was that I was probably going to need a drink to get through tonight with my sanity intact. Cayden had maneuvered me here for a reason, and there was little to no chance I’d be getting out of here without finding out why.

An hour later, and I might have actually been having fun at a school party. Maybe the sun would rise in the west, too; that was how upside down everything felt.

We were talking to some kids from art class and having a great time. The Ice Gods had disappeared somewhere to hold court with their gushing fans, the music was good, the snacks were amazing, there was a real live personal chef in the kitchen, and the one cocktail I’d had had mellowed me out a fraction and stopped my head from swiveling and looking for Cayden every two minutes.

“Let’s walk around, I need some fresh air,” Eve muttered later, when the crowd in the huge sitting room became too much to bear.

The air inside was heavy and damp, and I longed to feel the cool autumn breeze on my face. I followed Eve out back. The swimming pool was uncovered, and the blue was tempting, despite the chill in the air.

“Come on, let’s see if there’s anyone in the pool house,” Eve said, taking off before I could stop her.

I followed reluctantly. If there was anywhere that Cayden and the Ice Gods would be, it was in there. I had no idea why Eve was eager to run into them, but then, she’d hadn’t had the problems with them that I had. Well, the problems I’d had with one of them. Before Cayden West’s arrival at our school, I’d been invisible to the Ice Gods and most of the student body. I didn’t really know how to feel about the fact that a lot more people knew my name now. I didn’t know how to feel about the reality of being someone, instead of no one, at school.

Inside the pool house the music was quieter, and there was a hum of conversation. As soon as we stepped through the door, I knew it was a mistake to come here.

The Ice Gods sat around the cozy couch area, and several of the rest of the team were dotted about, talking to puck bunnies. Selena sat on the couch between Cayden and Marcus. Marcus flirted with her, flashing his megawatt smile, while Cayden inspected his bottle label like it was the most interesting thing in the world. His whole body seemed to jerk when he saw me standing in the doorway.

Was I upset that he hadn’t sought me out? Of course not. That was crazy. I wasn’t trying to set a new record for some kind of accelerated Stockholm syndrome. Cayden was a threat; he was using the secrets he’d stolen from me to twist me into doing whatever he wanted. More importantly, he was dangerous. Ellen, the girl from his old town, had seemed terrified of him. What was his deal? What kind of guy had my father let into his house while we were sleeping?

“Evie, isn’t it time you started home?” Asher called to his sister, watching her with dark eyes.

Winter, who lounged in a chair by the daybed, deeply engrossed in her phone, snorted loudly. It was a surprising sound, considering the bored blonde never seemed to be listening.

“Got something to say, DeLaurie?” Asher tossed at her.

“She’s your twin, last time I checked, not your little sister. Stop treating her like she’s five.” Winter’s arctic tone was legendary. Tonight, hearing it employed against an Ice God was kind of amazing, and on Eve’s behalf, no less.

“What’s it got to do with you, rich girl? We all know you wouldn’t be here without Daddy’s permission, would you?” Asher’s tone was half teasing, half lethal.

Winter’s eyes flashed with annoyance at the jibe. She looked stumped for a split second, a rare moment of vulnerability. Then her pretty pink lips curled into a cruel smile. “At least I have a daddy, Asher. Leave your sister alone and stop trying to be her dad. Maybe you should look for a non-blood relation you can get to call you Daddy.”

“What, like you?” Asher’s face was hard now; cold amusement and glittering malice lighting up his eyes.

I didn’t know how the hell Winter was holding that terrifying glower. She was made of tougher stuff than I was, that was for sure.

“You wish, Martino. I don’t slum it. I have vibrators worth more than you.” With that last scathing remark, Winter pushed herself to her feet and tossed her hair back over her shoulder, once again the picture of nonchalant nihilism.

She made to step past Asher just as he extended a long leg to block her path. A muscle ticked in his stubbled jaw. “You’ll pay for that, you spoiled little brat.”

Winter’s creamy cheeks heated, a rare sight. She folded her arms across her chest and stared Asher down. “Whatever. Are you done? Selena, I’m going. This party sucks.” She smiled at Asher. “There isn’t a single person here worth staying for.”

“Ouch!” Marcus shouted at Winter’s retreating back, once Asher finally lifted his leg and allowed her past. “What crawled up her ass...except your wishful thinking, Ash.” He laughed at his own joke.

I tore my eyes from Eve’s brother, who stewed silently, taking long pulls from his open bottle. Josh appeared at my side. The player who loved my

dad a little too much.

“Hey, Lily. How’s it going?”

“Fine. You? Congratulations on the game, by the way.”

Josh grinned, his light-brown hair flopping over his eyes. “Yeah, it was a great one. I mean, I didn’t really do much but—”

“It’s a team effort, my dad always says. The team is only as strong as its weakest player and all that.”

Cayden snorted loudly from his seat, making us both turn to look at him. He stood and stretched his arms over his head, and his black T-shirt rode up his flat, muscle-packed abdomen. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from that tantalizing sliver of skin, and worst of all, Cayden caught me looking and only grinned harder. He sauntered toward us, like he had all the time in the world, somehow managing to stand next to me so that Josh had to take a step back.

“I know you aren’t up on sports, Freckles, but it isn’t very nice to call someone the weakest player to their face.”

My mouth dropped open, and I spun to Josh, sticking my hand out to grab his arm. “Oh my God, I didn’t mean it like that. I was just saying random stuff. I really didn’t,” I rambled.

Josh laughed, and I couldn’t tell if he was upset or not.

“It’s cool. I know what you meant. Anyway, the star of the game is undisputed.” He turned to Cayden, the light of hero worship shining in his eyes. He held out his hand to slap Cayden’s. “You were awesome, man.”

Cayden ignored the outstretched hand, his gaze fixed on the place where Josh’s arm brushed mine. After a long, tense moment, Josh dropped his hand and cleared his throat.

“This is boring, you guys! Let’s play a game,” Selena proclaimed loudly from the couch.

Josh turned to the attention-starved queen bee. “Like what?”

“Like...truth or dare,” Selena said, a wicked smile coating her red lips.

“Pass,” I said immediately and searched for Eve.

She was deep in conversation with a couple of puck bunnies I recognized from her diner job.

“To everyone’s relief, I’m sure,” Selena jabbed at me. She laughed. “No offense, but have you even ever had a first kiss, Bug? No one wants to kiss someone that clueless.”

At her words, my eyes skittered to Cayden’s. The kiss in the bathroom played over and over in my mind, an endless loop I couldn’t escape. It was the most shocking, sexy and terrifying thing that had ever happened to me.

I took a step back from the group, and my back came up against an unmovable object. It was Cayden’s arm. He’d braced it on the counter behind me when I wasn’t looking. Now, I was trapped between him and Josh.

“What’s wrong, Lily? Running away again?” His low murmur was for me and me alone.

My eyes drifted to Selena’s. She watched me carefully, waiting for an opening to pounce. She didn’t like how close Cayden was standing to me, that was for sure. Something twisted inside me enjoyed the way her eyes narrowed when I stepped closer to him. Sure, maybe I couldn’t blow holes in her self-esteem like she managed to do to me, but I could still make her hurt, even just a little bit.

Cayden had tilted his face down to watch me. The smell of him filled my nose as I got closer.

“If I am?” I hummed.

His eyes immediately narrowed, and a faint, amused grin passed over his lips. “Then you leave me no choice but to chase. Just like you want me to...”

I forgot about Selena for a moment and looked up at him. “Stop thinking you know me just because you read a few pages of my thoughts. You don’t know me, Cayden.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“Come on, if you play, I’ll play, Lil,” Josh interrupted from beside us.

Cayden shot him a dark look I wouldn’t want to be on the other end of.

“Okay, whatever,” I muttered, stepping forward toward Josh.

Josh was safe. Josh smelled normal and didn’t make my heart pound like I was having an attack.

Selena had organized people into a loose circle. Beckett smoked by an open window and seemed uninterested in playing.

Eve moved to the circle and tugged me down beside her. “You really want to play?”

“I don’t care. I’ve never played before. Maybe it’s a rite of passage.” I gave her a crooked smile.

“You’ve never played truth or dare? Do you live under a rock, Bug? Ha! I guess that tracks.” Selena cackled.

That girl was asking for a slap tonight.

I shrugged, and she only laughed harder, raising her voice to reach everyone. Cayden had settled in a chair, more or less in the game, and Josh had sat beside me.

“Bug’s never played truth or dare!” She turned to me. “I can safely say everyone here has, so I guess that makes you a truth or dare virgin.”

“Not all of us enjoy playing silly little kid’s games at parties,” a deep voice broke in. It was Cayden. His judgmental words quieted the snide comments about me going around the circle.

I risked a glance at him. Was he saying he’d never played either?

He watched me with a look that I couldn't decipher. I quickly averted my eyes.

"Whatever," Selena rallied. She sat, making sure to flash a large amount of bare thigh, and grinned evilly. "Who's going first? I will! It's only right that the new guy goes first! Cayden, truth or dare."

He stared flatly at Selena for a moment. "Truth."

Selena tapped her lip and then grinned. "Is there any girl who has caught your eye at HHH yet?"

Cayden inclined his head. "There is."

Selena sat up straighter. "Who?"

Cayden raised an eyebrow at her. "That's two questions, isn't it? Don't tell me you don't know how to play your own game."

Selena flushed and took a drink of her cocktail. "Whatever. It's your turn."

Cayden looked around the circle, and his gaze landed on me. Nerves writhed in the pit of my belly. He was going to pick on me, I just knew it. I stared down, trying to avoid the inevitable.

"Lily, truth or dare."

What the fuck was the best option to go with right now?

"Truth," I blurted quickly. I was genuinely afraid of what dare Cayden's twisted mind could come up with.

Cayden smiled, and I immediately knew I'd chosen wrong.

He set down his drink and leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees.
"Are you a virgin?"

I stared at him, shocked that he'd gone right to my weakest point. A few whistles sounded around the circle.

"Damn, West came to play! We're only two questions in, too" Marcus laughed.

My face heated to the point where I thought it might pop like an overinflated balloon.

Selena sighed and folded her arms over her chest. “That’s such an obvious question. Look how embarrassed she is. The answer is yes, clearly.”

Fucking hell, how had I ended up here, being asked about my pathetic lack of a sex life in front of all four Ice Gods and half the team?

“I choose dare. I want to change,” I blurted out quickly. I just couldn’t bring myself to confirm the blindingly obvious in front of so many people. Of course, they all knew, but it was different to confirm it and try and not to seem like an embarrassed mess who was about to burst into tears.

“You can’t do that,” Selena protested.

“Fine. I dare you to bring me another drink,” Cayden said, sitting back and looking at me expectantly.

“That’s it?” Selena screeched.

I rose quickly and went to the bar. I grabbed a bottle that matched the one Cayden was drinking, hoping to get this whole thing over before he changed his mind.

“I wasn’t finished.” His voice drifted over to me.

I froze in place at the bar, aware of everyone’s eyes on my back.

“I dare you to bring me another drink, on your knees.”

I turned slowly around, my eyes meeting Cayden’s.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning,” he smirked and set down his empty bottle. “Crawl to me, Freckles.”

Silence met that order, until Selena tittered awkwardly. “Oh, I get it. You mean crawl, because she’s a bug, right?”

Is he being serious? But I knew he was, just like I knew I had no choice but to do what he wanted or answer the humiliating truth. You could just run

away. No, not this time. There was a satisfied look in Cayden's eyes as he watched me. What an asshole. He was determined to embarrass me somehow. He didn't expect me to do it.

A sudden sense of rebellion washed through me. I was so over being the good girl and trying to live up to everyone's impossible expectations. *Not this time.*

Cayden's eyes never left me as I sank to my knees.

Beckett whistled from the corner, stubbing out his cigarette. "This is getting interesting."

Murmurs of shock rippled through the group as I fixed the open bottle in one hand and started toward him on all fours. I could feel the disbelief radiating from our observers, but my eyes were held prisoner by Cayden's. He leaned forward like he wanted to lunge at me. His hands were closed in tight fists, his jaw hard.

He didn't want me to really do it, I realized suddenly. He didn't like everyone seeing. He was just fucking with me, like always.

I nearly grinned then, feeling like I had the power between us for the first time.

The bottle in my hand wobbled slightly, and I had to stop and grip it tighter. I belatedly realized that it wasn't even beer, it was some fancy craft kombucha. He didn't even have the excuse of being buzzed to torture me.

"Don't spill a drop, Lillian, or you'll have to lick it up," Cayden ground out.

Josh whistled. "Is it getting hot in here, or is it just me?"

I reached Cayden and sat back on my heels, raising the bottle to him, my arm brushing his knee. The dark expression in his eyes stole my breath. His fingers slid along mine when he took the bottle from me.

"Okay, enough of this! Lily, it's your turn," Selena nagged.

I turned around and sat back in the circle. Everyone was looking at me, and for the first time ever, I was fresh out of embarrassment.

“Selena, truth or dare?” I said immediately.

She smirked. “Dare, darling. There’s nothing I won’t do.”

Marcus caught my eye across the circle, subtly tilting his head toward Selena.

“Kiss Marcus for ten seconds.” There, that was a classic dare, or so I thought.

Marcus flashed me a sly thumbs-up. Selena seemed annoyed for a second, no doubt feeling that kissing another guy was a wrench in her plan to get with Cayden, but plastered on a smile.

“Okay, that’s a dare I can do.”

She got down on all fours and crawled across the circle. She moved with exaggerated sexiness, slinking like a big cat parody, and several team players laughed. She reached Marcus and shot a glance at Cayden. He was staring at his phone and ignoring the entire thing.

When she got close enough, stretching it out for attention, she stopped in front of Marcus. He grinned and shocked her by reaching out and grabbing her long ponytail, wrapping it like a rope around his fist.

“Stop fucking around. I’m waiting.” He yanked her head to his and kissed her hard.

She nearly fell over, her hands scrambling for purchase on his legs. He kissed her ruthlessly, and I couldn’t look away. Everyone watched, stunned, as they made out with reckless abandon for a whole ten seconds.

Right on time, Marcus pulled back and dropped her hair so suddenly, she nearly fell. Selena panted, her eyes unfocused, her lips red and puffy.

She looked like she was ready for round two, but Marcus’ cold laugh froze her in place.

“Man, that’s what all the hype was about? What a disappointment,” he said and smirked as he settled back and nodded across the circle. “Don’t get your panties in a twist and stop holding up the game.”

His dismissive words sent Selena spinning around and plopping down in her space. She breathed hard, and embarrassment stained her cheeks. I didn't like to see any girl humiliated by any of the Ice Gods, but there was something satisfying about seeing Selena knocked down a peg, considering how often she'd laid into me.

"Whatever. It's my turn?" She shot glittering eyes to me. "Lily, truth or dare."

"I've already gone!"

"Let someone else have a go," Eve protested.

"No. It's my choice, and I choose Bug." Selena raised her chin mulishly.

I fought an internal sigh. "Okay, whatever. I choose dare."

She smiled, and her gaze traveled over to Cayden. She was obviously pissed I'd made her kiss another guy in front of her crush, and that he'd gone and embarrassed her as well.

"Kiss Josh—full make-out—thirty seconds."

I jerked, surprised by her words. My eyes met Cayden's. His were carefully blank, but there was darkness lurking there that I couldn't examine too closely. That way lay madness.

Josh elbowed me gently. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

"Yes, she does! You can't just keep changing the rules for her," Selena protested hotly.

"It's fine, whatever." I twisted to the side to face Josh. "Let's just kiss."

He swallowed hard, his expression turning serious and a little nervous.
"You won't tell Coach about this, right?"

I rolled my eyes. "Of course not."

He nodded with relief and leaned in. "Good. Okay, here I go," he muttered.

His breath was minty and not unpleasant. His lips passed over mine a couple of times before they pressed more firmly against my mouth.

It wasn't a bad kiss. It felt just like shaking hands. It was impersonal and tepid. Absolutely nothing happened inside me at the touch of Josh's lips. Nothing like what had happened when Cayden touched me. Until this very moment, my second-ever kiss, I'd had no idea that the way I'd felt inside when Cayden had kissed me wasn't normal. It wasn't even close to normal, I realized, as Josh kissed me lightly. I wasn't lost. I wasn't hot. I didn't want to sway into him. My body was as unresponsive as a dead fish.

"And that's thirty seconds!" Eve called as soon as she could.

"Thirty seconds of the most boring, virgin kiss I've ever seen," Selena grumbled loudly.

I leaned away, my skin prickling with the feeling of eyes on me. It was Cayden. He bored a hole into the side of my face. I didn't dare turn and meet his eyes.

The game moved on, and thankfully, I wasn't called again. Only ten minutes later, one of the Ice God's minions appeared at the door of the pool house and announced that it was cake time. Cake time? Right, this was both a birthday party and a victory party. Beckett had actually gotten us a cake? I looked over at him as he sat quietly in the corner, smoking again, seeming to be in a funk. I didn't get the guy at all, but then, I didn't really get any guy, especially not the Ice Gods.

We all got up to go back to the main house. Josh talked in my ear as we left the pool house.

"I mean, if you want," he was saying.

I could feel Cayden watching me. He drifted closer. It was like my whole body was attuned to his. I could feel as he approached without even looking.

"Sorry, what?" I asked Josh, suddenly aware that he had asked me something.

"I said we could go to the movies sometime, if you wanted," he repeated. His ears had turned red at the tips.

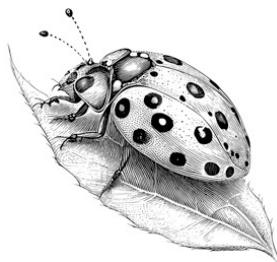
Was he asking me out? I didn't know what the hell to say to that. After the lukewarm kiss we'd shared, I never expected that he'd ask me out.

"I—" I started and never got further.

As we skirted the pool, a hand landed on my hip. I spun, trying to see who was touching me. Then the hand shoved, and I fell.

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Lily



THE WATER WAS FREEZING as it swallowed me whole. It rushed into my open mouth, still frozen in a silent scream, and streamed up my nose. The shock blanked my brain for a long moment.

I was underwater. Someone had pushed me into the pool.

I kicked to the surface, grasping at the lip of the pool until a hard hand closed around my wrist. I was wrenched out of the pool, ungracefully coughing up water and flailing around.

“Jesus! Walk much, Bug? I didn’t know you were such an attention-seeker,” Selena said smugly from the side.

Cayden had hauled me out. He stood holding my arm while I coughed. Eve hovered at my side. Selena’s satisfied titter grated my jangling nerves.

“Not cool,” Marcus muttered at her, and with a hard shove, he launched Selena off the side of the pool and into the water. “I love a little tit for tat.” He was still chuckling as he headed toward the house, leaving a screeching Selena to swim for the ladder by her herself.

“Oh my God, are you okay? You need to change,” Eve worried.

“There are spare clothes in the pool house,” Beckett said lazily, not seeming very bothered that two fully-clothed girls had fallen into his pool.

“She needs a private place to shower,” Eve snapped at him.

Beckett seemed to wake up at her harsh tone. He turned his chiseled face toward her and cocked an eyebrow. There was something vaguely menacing about his demeanor. “Is that right? In that case, she can use my room, if that passes your inspection, Cinderella. Eve knows where it is,” he tossed to me before striding off toward the house.

Eve muttered a curse at my back and tugged me after him. “Come on, let’s go get dry.”

I couldn’t meet anyone’s eyes as we walked through the house. Curious stares followed us, and I wondered what rumor I’d hear about myself on Monday. Probably something like *that loser virgin Lillian Williams got wasted at her first party and fell in the pool*. That would be a fun one to explain to my dad when he inevitably heard it.

We went upstairs. The top floor was even fancier than the ground level.

“I’m dripping on the wood,” I worried as I squelched along.

“So what? Like Beckett cares. He’s a spoiled, angry rich boy who doesn’t care about anything, especially not hardwood flooring.”

“Okay, you need to tell me what’s going on there,” I mumbled, shivering as we made our way to the end of a long hall and stopped at a door. Eve knocked once before pushing it open. “Don’t think I didn’t notice how you knew your way to Beckett’s bedroom without a second thought.”

“I told you, I’ve cleaned here. Go ahead and shower. I’ll leave clothes on the bed for you.”

“Beckett’s clothes?” I winced.

“Yes, who else’s? Believe me, he has enough to spare.” Eve shoved me into the bathroom. “Now go, you’re looking more and more miserable by the second.”

She had a point. My wet jeans and sneakers felt awful, and I wanted to warm up. I locked the door and switched the shower on, marveling at the luxury of the room. Wow. So, this was what a really nice bathroom was like. It was decked out in white marble veined with gold. All the fixtures were brushed gold to match, and the shower was big enough to fit half the team.

Well, big enough for three or four people, anyway. I wondered for a second if Beckett had ever used it to shower with someone else then cringed. Of course he had; he was a hot, rich Ice God. Sometimes even my imagination was a virgin.

I took off my clothes and wringed them out over the sink before diving into the shower. The water was perfect, and the soap and shampoo smelled divine. I luxuriated in it way too long.

After I got out and wrapped a huge towel around my body and another around my hair, I wiped the steam off the mirror to stare at myself. The moment during truth or dare when I'd crawled to Cayden flashed through my mind and I let myself feel it again. A heady excitement that I couldn't deny. That moment between us had been ten times hotter than my dared kiss with Josh. It was the boldest thing I'd ever done. It had felt wicked in a way I didn't know what to do with, except that it reaffirmed what I already suspected. Being around Cayden West was dangerous for me. He made me want to break all the rules I'd self-imposed to be the perfect daughter for my sacrificing parents.

My reflection met my eyes. Skin that was too pale and littered with freckles. I liked my eyes, but usually my glasses hid their color and shape. My hair was too long and way too red. When I was a kid and read *Anne of Green Gables*, I'd never felt so seen. Poor Anne. Poor me. Still, I was healthy and average-looking enough not to be able to complain. *You don't feel average when he looks at you.* That was an undeniable truth. My entire life I'd felt plain enough to blend into any crowd or background. I'd gotten used to being invisible. The only place where I wasn't was in class, and even then, I wasn't exactly eager to raise my hand, even when I was confident I knew the answer.

When Cayden's eyes landed on me, I felt seen. For the first time, I wasn't the background but the focus. That kind of attention was dangerous indeed. It felt like something a girl could get addicted to if she wasn't careful.

"Did you find something for me to wear that isn't ten sizes too big?" I called to Eve as I made my way out of the bathroom—then promptly froze.

Cayden leaned against the closed bedroom door, his arms crossed over his chest, and a bunched handful of material in his grip. “No, but you’ll wear it anyway.”

My eyes darted around the room, desperately searching for Eve. An outfit was laid out on the bed. Basketball shorts and one of Beckett’s hockey jerseys.

“Where’s Eve?”

“Asher needed her.”

“She’ll be back in a minute,” I warned, unsure why I felt compelled to tell him that.

He smirked and shook his head slowly. “No. She won’t.”

“Why are you here?”

“I brought you something to wear,” he said lazily, like that was a normal thing for him to do.

“I think Eve has it covered.” I pointed to the outfit on the bed.

Cayden glanced at Beckett’s jersey and shook his head. “You don’t wear his number. I won’t let you.”

“Why not?”

“You know why.”

His words were delivered with perfect confidence. There was a challenge in his eyes, daring me to disagree. That was Cayden all over. He didn’t hide away from the ugly truth; he simply embraced it. He was daring me to face facts right now, and I didn’t like it one bit. Hiding from reality was my safe space.

“No, I really don’t.” I folded my arms over my chest, clamping my towel in place in case the way I’d tucked it dared to loosen.

He pushed off the door and strode toward me. I was rooted to the spot. There was an instinct to run back into the bathroom and lock the door

behind me that was totally uncalled for. *Is it really, though?* My hindbrain screamed at me to move it, but I couldn't make my limbs cooperate.

Cayden seemed to read that instinct somewhere on my face, because he was suddenly before me, moving faster than I'd thought possible.

"Liar. We need to talk. You broke the rules."

He was so damn tall I had to tilt my head right back to look up at him. I wet my lips, suddenly parched. His eyes followed the movement.

"What rules?"

"My rules. I own you, remember? I know your deepest, darkest secrets." His tone was almost sweet as he reached out and tugged at the towel on my head.

It slid to the side, and my wet hair tumbled free, cool around my bare shoulders.

"According to you, I know yours, too," I reminded him. Whatever he thought I'd seen that day after the shower was clearly terrible enough that he felt compelled to terrify me into submission. I burned with curiosity to know. If I was being punished for seeing, I wished I'd damn well seen properly, and maybe even taken a photo for prosperity.

He chuckled. "That's just the tip of iceberg when it comes to deep and dark secrets of mine, Lily. We aren't even, not even close. Which means...I own your ass and you need to follow my rules."

I bristled at this tone, even while something hot and wet slid through me. Why was this turning me on so much? Ugh, I was sick in the head.

"And what exactly did I do to break your precious rules?"

"You let someone else touch my things. I don't share, Lillian."

"And your things would be?" I asked, though I already knew what his answer would be. A twisted part of me wanted to hear him say it.

"You."

There it was. It should have annoyed me more than it did, and it certainly shouldn't have sent a delicious shiver of want through me.

I scoffed. "You mean kissing Josh? You seriously care about that?"

A muscle ticked in Cayden's jaw.

Disbelief filled me. "You're not jealous, are you?" An incredulous laugh left me, which turned quickly into a squeak when Cayden closed his hands around my shoulders.

With a hard push, he sent me flying backward. My arms reached for him, a last-ditch attempt to stop my descent, but he merely stepped back and let me fall.

I landed with a harmless bounce on the bed. *Asshole*. Unfortunately, the action loosened my damn towel. I was scrambling to pull it back closed when Cayden put a knee on the mattress, right between my legs, and paused over me.

"Leave it," he commanded.

Heat and embarrassment flooded me. One tit was out, and the slit at the bottom of the towel revealed my inner thigh, only inches from Cayden's knee.

"What are you doing?"

"Making sure you understand how I own you," he muttered. He reached up and gripped my chin in a firm hold. "You clearly didn't get it when I kissed your mouth, or your perfect little tits, so...this is on you."

He held my chin for a moment longer before releasing it. Holding my eyes with his, he knelt between my legs, his weight on the mattress rolling me toward him, and put a hand on each of my thighs. Gripping them firmly, he pushed them apart. *Holy hell. Is he going to...?*

I scrambled backward, clumsy in my panic. He grabbed my kicking legs and pinned them in place with his hands. Huge, inescapable hands. Then he pushed them relentlessly apart, exposing every single inch of me. The towel had rucked up to my belly in my struggles. There was absolutely nothing

shielding me from Cayden's eyes. His gaze left mine and slid slowly down my body.

"Don't. Don't look," I warned him, my voice oddly breathless.

"I'm going to do much more than look," he said, just as hushed.

My skin warmed in the wake of his eyes. I felt the moment his gaze hit my pussy like a caress. "Turn the lights off, then," I blurted, my panic making my voice shrill.

Cayden tutted. "Not going to happen. I want to see every pretty inch of my property." His eyes were locked between my legs with scorching intensity.

I couldn't stand it. I'd never even inspected myself too closely down there, never mind anyone else.

"I knew your untouched cunt would be as pretty as a peach."

His voice was rough, and his words surprised me.

I leaned up on my elbows, my towel only unwrapping further. "Pretty?"

"Beautiful," he confirmed and swooped in to press his nose against my folds, sending new embarrassment flooding through me. "Smells just as sweet, too," he murmured.

"Are you making fun of me?"

"You think I can think about making fun of you when your pussy is right here in front of me, begging to be eaten?"

"Eaten?" The squeak had returned to my voice.

"Devoured...fucked by my mouth."

I could only stare; his words had stolen all my thoughts. His finger traced my slit. I hadn't realized that he'd let my legs go. Now I was lying there, splayed open without a single thing holding me in place.

The truth was, I couldn't have moved even if the entire team burst in.

Attraction and curiosity roared through me.

Cayden looked up at me with his first lick against my cunt. His tongue was sinfully hot, a fleshy probe that promised great things to come.

“I was wrong,” he muttered against my skin. “You put peaches to shame. Now, tell me how it feels and what you like, and be descriptive.” He took a deep breath, his warm exhale scalding my thighs. “I’ve never done this before.”

His stunning confession knocked me back on the bed, my elbows giving way so I could melt onto the mattress. Cayden’s tongue licked a long, wet stripe up the length of my cunt before pushing slickly inside me. *I’ve never done this before.* How was it possible that a guy like Cayden West hadn’t sampled all the pussy he wanted? He was a star hockey player, and girls threw themselves at him on the regular. There was no way he hadn’t gotten enough action to last a normal guy for a lifetime, despite having just turned eighteen. Was he lying? No, I didn’t think he was. I didn’t know why I was so certain. It didn’t make sense.

Cayden lightly bit the inside of my thigh, pulling my attention back to him sharply.

“Hey!”

“Use your words and tell me what feels good. I’m not stopping until I taste your cum.”

“It feels – good,” I managed to get out.

“Hmmm, well, that’s not going to cut it,” he murmured against me, then wet a finger in his mouth and placed it at my entrance. It was thick as hell, a blunt tip ready to pierce me. “I have to be the best at everything I do, Freckles, don’t you know? Best at hockey and best at eating your cunt.”

“That’s some claim to fame,” I gasped as his finger nudged inside me.

His tongue slid up my slit, settling on my clit. Sure, I’d come by touching my clit the other night in the bathroom, but that touch had felt like a blunt hammer compared to the sinuous curl of Cayden’s tongue. I nearly shot off the bed as he circled my clit and worked his finger inside me.

“Words,” he commanded, and then sucked my entire clit between his lips.

“Ahh! Better than good. Fucking great,” I panted.

I could practically feel his grin on my pussy. “Good girl. Keep going.”

His finger twisted inside me like he was turning a screw, and my toes curled.

“More like that, just like that,” I begged, my hands falling to his head.

His shorn hair bristled beneath my fingers, and I held his face against me, shamelessly moving my pussy on his open mouth and killer tongue.

“Please, Cayden,” I babbled. I couldn’t control my words; they were flowing out of me without thought. There was something freeing about just talking, saying whatever went through my head without overthinking it.

He growled against me. “Say my name like that again. Beg me, again,” he ordered.

“Please, Cayden. I’m going to...” I trailed off, a touch of embarrassment coloring my pleasure. My hips stuttered their rhythm under him as shame licked up my spine. What the hell was I doing? What would my parents think? And why the hell was I thinking of them right now?

Cayden interrupted my spiraling thoughts. “You’re going to come, Freckles, all over my face. You have no choice, remember?”

He thrust his finger harder into me and then added another, stretching me. I was so wet that you could hear his fingers fucking in and out of my slick pussy. He was driving me over the edge, circling my clit, flicking it, teasing it.

I screamed when I came, I was so surprised and blindsided by the feeling. Cayden clamped his entire mouth over my folds, dragging his tongue relentlessly up and down while I tensed and pulsed around his fingers.

“Fuck, that’s tight. That virgin little cunt is gonna hurt the first time I fuck you, but don’t worry, I’ll kiss it better afterward.”

He pulled back as I was still riding the wave of the hardest orgasm I’d ever had...and the very first given to me by someone else.

He pumped his fingers lazily into me, drawing out the pulses until I was grabbing at his hand to make him stop, the sensitivity too much.

“Oh my God, that was...” I trailed off, staring at the ceiling, my mind hazy and blissed out. There was a pleasant absence of thought in my head. The pleasure had driven everything out. There was only feeling left.

“Just the first time we’re going to do that,” Cayden finished for me. His voice was low and tight. He was kneeling between my legs still, and now, he shifted back and stood. “Now, my turn.”

His hands were already on his belt, ruthlessly pulling it free. I stared, drifting slowly back to reality as I watched him loosen his jeans and send them and his boxers sagging to his knees. My eyes went to his cock, hard as hell and flushed red at the tip. It was big. I didn’t have to be experienced to tell that he was bigger than average. Cocky by name and nature, it seemed.

I sat up slowly, gathering my useless towel around me. My eyes were glued to him. He pumped his shaft, his big hand the perfect size to fit him. How would *my* hand work? I didn’t realize I’d spoken out loud until he rumbled a response.

“It’s not your hand I’m fucking, Lily. It’s your mouth. Open up for me.”

I stared up at him. I was close to the edge of the bed now, and the mattress dipped me forward toward his monster cock. It was glistening at the tip and ribbed with heavy veins. Harsh and beautiful at the same time, just like him.

He gave me no time to get nervous as he palmed the back of my head and guided me forward. I barely had time to part my lips before he was pressing inside.

His width forced my jaw open, and I struggled to tuck my teeth behind my lips. He sucked in a breath as I opened my throat and let him push in as far as he could. He was looking down at me, his eyes stormy. A hand gently brushed my hair from my face then settled on the top of my head, holding me in place.

He moved with a groan, pulling out and thrusting back in, the intrusion almost too much to bear. My hands rested on his thighs, and it gave me confidence to know I could push him back if I needed to. Perhaps it was

false confidence, given how strong he was compared to me, but it was a comfort anyway.

He tasted musky in a clean, salty way I had never experienced before. The way his hands flexed on my head, and the grunts that left him as he fucked my mouth, made me feel powerful. He might be bigger than me, meaner, stronger, but right now, I had him by the balls.

I opened my legs wide, letting him step closer, emboldened by his obvious satisfaction. My towel had fallen away completely now, and he held my head in both hands and stared down at me, fucking in and out my mouth, his eyes soaking up the sight of my lips stretched around him and my nakedness below. Neither of us had a clue what we were doing. There was nothing shiny, or practiced, or pretty about it, but it was honest.

“You really are a straight-A student, aren’t you, Freckles? That’s why we fit. We both have to be the best at everything we do, and no one could suck my cock like you are, and no one ever will,” he muttered. “You’re perfect. My perfect girl.”

I hummed low in my throat, his words making me squirm with embarrassment and heat. I liked it when he spoke like that to me. I felt hot all over.

When he came, the heat of his cum hit the back of my throat in ropes. I swallowed around his thickness as he pumped his load in my mouth. His cock pulsed on my tongue, and his balls were drawn up tight. I swallowed as much as I could until he pulled out and lifted me by my arms. His mouth mashed into mine, uncontrolled and hungry as hell, and the taste of our combined cum mixed on my tongue. He kissed me until I panted for breath, dizzy.

“Wear my jersey. I want to see my number emblazoned on your back, like a goddamn owner’s tag,” he muttered against my lips.

When I was dressed, I stumbled out of the room on uneven legs. I didn’t think I could look at Cayden for the next week, I was too embarrassed.

Different moments of our encounter flashed in my mind like a movie reel. That moment when he'd stroked my face and kissed me. The moment when I'd tasted our combined flavors on my lips, tangled between our tongues, had been unbearably hot and filthy as hell. I didn't recognize myself in his arms. I felt wild and free, untethered by my usual pressures, and he saw it all. I saw him, and he saw me back. It was terrifying. Raw and vulnerable in a way I'd never allowed myself to be.

"Lily! There you are. I wanted to check if you were okay," Josh called to me along the landing as I made for the stairs. He stood at the bottom, waiting for me.

I rushed down the stairs without looking back.

"I'm okay," I muttered, pulling self-consciously at Cayden's hockey jersey. "I just put this on because I have nothing else to wear that's dry." I didn't know why I was explaining myself to him. I just felt so damn awkward. Wearing a guy's hockey jersey was a move usually reserved for girlfriends.

Josh nodded and looked at the jersey. He snorted softly. "Well, it's the least he could do."

Josh had another jersey in his hand.

We descended more stairs, heading for the ground floor.

"Meaning?" I wondered.

As soon as we got to the packed lower floor, people watched me. It was the damn jersey. I felt like it was a neon sign flashing over my head, attracting speculation.

"Meaning, Cayden *should* give you something to wear, since he pushed you in the pool."

I stopped and turned to Josh.

"What? Selena pushed me."

Josh shook his head. "No, Marcus just assumed she did. Cayden pushed you. I saw him."

A bitter laugh left me as I ran a hand through my damp hair. *That fucking asshole.* Acting like a secret white knight, pulling me out of the water and bringing me a shirt to wear. He'd pushed me. He'd wanted to get me alone and he'd found a way. Maybe he'd wanted to punish me, too, for kissing Josh. All the soft, mellow thoughts I'd been having in my post-orgasm haze went up in a puff of smoke.

I couldn't trust Cayden. He was a manipulator and a bully, and I was nothing more than his target.

I needed to get dirt on him and get him out of our lives, now, before something bad happened.

My eyes fell to the jersey in Josh's hand.

He read the questioning look in my eyes. "I thought I'd bring it, in case you didn't have anything to wear...it's dumb."

"No, it's kind. Thank you. I'd change into it right now if I could," I muttered.

Josh laughed and handed me the shirt. "Feel free to take it. It's an old one, and I don't wear it anymore."

I took it, too tired and fed up with the evening to argue. "Have you seen Eve? I'm going to head home."

"She already left with Asher, some emergency with their mom."

"What? An emergency?" I grabbed my phone out of the huge, baggy basketball shorts I'd borrowed from Beckett. It was unresponsive in my hand.

Josh grimaced. "You might need to leave that in rice for a few days, or like a week."

I sighed. "Well, tonight was just as shitty as I thought it would be," I murmured. "I'm going home."

"Wait! Do you need a ride? Your house is so far from here, and Coach wouldn't like you walking home."

Ah, yes, Josh the suck-up.

“I’m heading out anyway,” he said. “I’m meeting someone across town.”

“Really? That would be amazing,” I said quickly. I could feel eyes on me now, and I knew exactly whose they were. Cayden had rejoined the party, and I was going to get the fuck out of here before I blew up at him. He was still right, after all—he held all my secrets in the palm of his hand, and therefore he had all the power.

“Sure thing. Let’s go.”

Josh held out a hand to me, and before I could consider the wisdom of such a move, I took it and let him lead me out through the crush of people.

I felt Cayden’s eyes on me every step of the way.

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Cayden



THE ICE FELT good under my blades. The rink was busy, but not as busy as it would be if we were playing a tougher team. Tonight we were playing a lesser team, and I had no doubt we'd beat them easily. Still, it was good to play and do something with the excess energy that had been building up through the week.

I'd buried my black mood in the party after Lily had run off. I'd ended up drinking too much—a vice I'd promised myself I wasn't going to indulge after leaving Uncle Jack's influence—and slept in the pool house at Beckett's. Thankfully, no puck bunnies had realized I was there and hung around to bother me.

On Sunday, Lily was out at her part-time job all day and then stayed at Eve's house overnight. Asher and Eve's mom was sick, and they were busy taking care of her.

Monday had passed in a blur of boring classes and anticipation for tonight's game, and now, it was finally here.

We were warming up, and I had my eyes trained on the place where Lily and her mom would sit. This was the last home game for a week. The next game we'd play would be a much tougher one, against a team from Portland.

My muscles warmed, my focus honed, I skated alongside Marcus as we lapped the rink.

“So, did you make progress with Selena at the party?” I wondered, uncaring either way, but small talk was something I was trying out.

Marcus shook his head. “Naw, I’m not into it after all. She looks like she’d be a boring lay. And after pushing Bug into the pool, let’s just say I’m not turned on by jealous bitches.”

I kept my mouth shut about the pool incident. I could only guess the reason why Lily was avoiding me was because she knew I’d pushed her. There was only one person, besides Eve, who would have told her. Josh had put his name on my shit list the second he’d kissed her in that ridiculous game on Friday night. And he’d moved himself to the top when he’d driven her home and held her fucking hand. He had it coming and tonight, I’d finally get the chance to make my feelings known.

Sure, I’d pushed Lily into the pool, but the sight of her kissing Josh had snapped something inside me. Besides that, she was proving better at keeping away from me than I liked. It was time to escalate things.

Marcus went off to do his stretches by the goals while I circled the rink. I saw Lily the moment she entered. Her head was bent over her phone, and her red hair gleamed under the lights.

There she was. *My girl.*

I couldn’t pinpoint the exact moment I’d started to think of her that way, but there was no denying that it was a sealed deal. She was my girl; she just didn’t know it yet.

She strode down the stairs in a jersey. The sight of it stopped my heart. *My jersey.* It definitely wasn’t the retro one of her dad’s that she’d worn to the first game. Something eased in my chest at the sight of it. A warming feeling in the cold, hollow place inside me.

Her eyes met mine, even across the distance. She pushed her hair back, the coppery strands magnificent as they cascaded across my black-and-purple colors. A smile that was nearly sweet touched her lips. I came to a stop, frozen to the spot by that look. It was the single most precious expression I’d ever seen. A willing, beguiling smile from the girl I was obsessed with. I felt unworthy and lucky as hell.

Then, she turned around, and that warmth in my chest burned to ashes. It wasn't my jersey. It was Josh's.

I closed in on a tight scrimmage between a red jersey and a black and smashed through. The red player spun away while I continued, driving the Hellion against the boards with just enough strength to hurt. Josh bounced off the board and groaned. I held out my hand to him.

"Shit, you all right, man?"

He nodded, skating slowly away from the board where his body had made a new dent. Little Josh Samuels had no idea that this game was about to get much worse for him. We were ten minutes in, two up, and the only thing I cared about at this point was grinding Josh to dust.

Play started again, and once more, I found a way to make sure Josh was on the receiving end of a hard charge.

"Hey, ease up, you know the black ones are on our team, right?" Beckett muttered to me.

"If he can't take it, he shouldn't be on the team," I ground out in response.

Beckett nodded. "Right, and this has nothing to do with what Lillian Williams is wearing?"

"Mind your own business," I warned him.

"The team *is* my business, and Josh isn't a bad junior player. Stop trying to cripple him."

"If I wanted to cripple him, it'd be done already. This is just a friendly warning to keep his jersey, and his intentions, to himself."

"Cade," Beckett started.

But I skated off, not interested in his words of fucking wisdom. The red veil that had descended over my eyes when I'd seen Lily's jersey hadn't lifted.

The only thing that eased it was the sound of Josh pummeling the boards. He was just lucky I hadn't found a way to slice his fingers off with my skate.

We were headed toward the intermission, and I couldn't fucking wait. Lily was about to answer for her little games. I flew across the ice and checked Josh out of the way to snatch the puck from a red player.

He went down this time, and I continued on to shoot, scoring another easy goal. Fans screamed and clapped as Josh got up and came at me.

"Look, man, I'm not trying to be sensitive, but it feels like you're doing that on purpose," he accused.

I turned to him and put a finger to his chest. "Stay out of my face if you know what's good for you."

"What the hell?" Josh made the mistake of pushing me back.

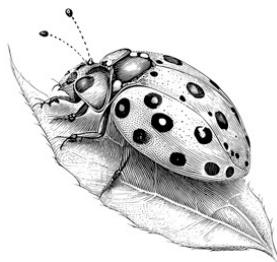
I saw red. I lunged forward, and only Beckett's huge body colliding with mine stopped my forehead from meeting Josh's highly breakable-looking nose.

"Hey! You want Coach to come down on you like a ton of bricks? Fight with the other team if you want to blow off steam, not a Hellion, or go and take it out on Bug."

Beckett's advice reached through the fog, just as Intermission started. *Go and take it out on Bug.*

What a great idea.

Lily



MY STOMACH ACHED from too much soda and nerves. Great, jangling nerves that had been growing in my belly from the second I'd put on Josh's jersey, and then spread like wildfire in response to Cayden's murderous expression when he'd realized.

The buzzer sounded, and people surged out of their seats for snacks and bathroom breaks while I remained glued in my nice and safe seat.

"Honey, are you getting up?" My mom typed away on her phone, answering work emails despite it being after hours.

"No, I wasn't going to."

"Can you grab a bottle of water? I need to take some Tylenol," she asked me.

Of course, I couldn't refuse that. My mom often found that the games gave her a headache after a busy day at the real estate office she worked in. I nodded and stood reluctantly. Eve was working at the diner tonight, so I was alone. Where the hell I'd gotten the courage to wear Josh's jersey here, alone, I had no idea, but I suspected it stemmed from the anger that'd been brewing inside me all weekend.

Cayden had twisted me inside out with his touch in Beckett's room. I'd felt all sorts of things toward him in that moment; weak, soft, forgiving things. Then, it turned out he'd been manipulating the entire thing. I was furious, resentful, and yes, maybe a little hurt. Here I was, my feelings latching on

to the guy who was terrorizing me, and he was just playing with my emotions, and my body, too, whenever he felt like it.

My mind had rationalized that since Cayden was only toying with me, he shouldn't care whose jersey I wore. By the look on his face and the way he'd gone after Josh in the game, I quickly realized I was wrong. For some reason, it bothered him. I had to apologize to Josh. The poor guy hadn't done anything wrong, and he was going to be bruised for days because of me.

I grabbed my mom's water bottle from the vending machine outside the rink and headed back in the direction of our seats. Passing by the women's bathroom, I ducked inside. I was physically incapable of passing a toilet without needing to go.

There were a few other people inside, and one or two cast curious glances at my jersey as I headed for a stall. Great, in my quest to rebel against Cayden, I'd made everyone suspect that I was dating Josh. *Really bright idea, Lily. Brava.*

I'd just finished up when the commotion started outside the stall.

"Excuse me! This is the ladies' room!" someone screeched.

"I don't care. Get out now." Cayden's voice was furious, a deep, scoring line of fury that seemed to lead right to me.

There was slamming of doors and the sounds of mutters and whispers, then the main door banged shut, and we were alone.

I stood in the stall, frozen with tension, listening for the slightest sound.

"Come on out, Lillian, unless you want to be responsible for this door getting broken."

His voice came from just outside my stall. My breath caught, and my heart pounded, sweat slicking my palms. *Fucking hell.* Why had I antagonized him?

A sudden bang on the door shook the entire row of stalls... Crap. He wasn't joking.

“Fine, I’m coming out, no need to break things like a neanderthal,” I muttered, sliding open the lock.

I only just managed to step back when the door banged open, and Cayden invaded the tiny space. He didn’t let me out; he was coming in. He nearly didn’t fit with all his padding on. He took up the entire space, and all I could do was look up at him as he crowded me back against the wall.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he demanded.

“I might ask you the same thing. Don’t you have a game to play? Coach won’t like the fact that you’re out here during intermission.” Trying to get him worried about the game was weak at best, but I had no other defenses right now. “Also, attempting to start fights on your own team is frowned upon, too, which I’m sure you know.”

“Meaning?” Cayden’s furious face was only inches from mine, his eyes burrowing deep like hooks, trying their best to tear into me.

“Meaning leave Josh alone, he doesn’t deserve to be crushed by you.”

Cayden laughed, and it felt dangerous. “You want to be careful about defending that guy to me right now.”

“Why?”

“Because I might decide that there is actually something going on between you, instead of you just trying to piss me off, and that wouldn’t be good for Josh.”

“Why? What are you going to do to him? You can’t fight with him, you’ll get kicked off the team!”

“I won’t bother fighting with him. He’ll just have an accident...and if he’s lucky, losing the ability to play will be the only thing that happens to him, and not something far worse.”

He looked stone-cold serious while he threatened Josh’s safety so casually. It was scary as hell.

“Cayden, be serious, you can’t—” I started, my heart all but in my throat.

"I can do whatever I want. I *have* done whatever I want, and breaking someone's leg would be the least of it. Don't test me, Lily. You don't know what I'm capable of, and you don't want to know," he said quietly, leaning close to me. "After what we shared the other night, you turning around and bringing someone between us won't be tolerated, do you understand? Since you don't seem to care that I could leak your journal, then think of Josh's safety and don't risk it."

"You expect me to believe that 'what we shared' was so special to you. You pushed me in the pool! You orchestrated all of it!" My accusation battered uselessly against his stony resolve.

He nodded, unrepenting. "I'd do that and a hell of a lot worse to get you where I want you. I've told you time and again. Stop. Testing. Me."

Before I could respond, a loud buzzer sounded in the distance, muted by the bathroom door. The intermission was over. I was literally saved by the bell.

"Stop celebrating. I'm not done with you," Cayden suddenly warned.

Before I could stop him, he tugged Josh's jersey up and over my head. I fought him, but my hands were useless against his superior strength as he ripped it over my head and scrunched it into a ball in his hand, leaving me in just a pale-pink bra.

His eyes lowered, his attention fastening on my chest. I followed his gaze. My nipples were clearly visible through the translucent lace, and worst of all, they were hard. Arguing with Cayden up close and personal like this, him in his jersey and padding...my body couldn't take it. I was only human, after all, but right now, my involuntary reaction to him was embarrassing as hell.

I looked up and away when I met his mocking gaze.

"It's cold in here," I muttered.

His chuckle stroked over my skin like velvet. "No, it's not, but whatever you need to tell yourself to justify this, that's fine." His hand reached my tit and brushed against my nipple.

I couldn't push him away, it felt too damn good. Then he pinched the sensitive tip and made me gasp.

"That's for being a bad girl, Freckles. I'll kiss it better later."

I raised my chin, knowing that brazening it out was my only option right now. "Give me the shirt back."

He tutted and stepped back, allowing some much-needed oxygen to reach my dizzy head.

"You don't wear his number, or anyone else's but mine."

"You're such a bully. I'd rather go out there naked than wear yours."

He smirked then, chilling my blood. "Then allow me to make your wish come true. Looks like you're sitting out the rest of the game."

His hand moved before I could stop him, and he tossed Josh's jersey toward the toilet with perfect precision.

"Asshole!" I lunged for it, but it was too late, it had fallen right in and was already soaked through.

"That's right. I'm the asshole who owns you. Don't forget it again."

I straightened up and glared at him as he opened the stall door and somehow got his huge, padded shoulders out.

After a moment, the bathroom door closed, and silence rang.

I gingerly plucked Josh's jersey out of the toilet. It dripped in my hands. Well, I couldn't very well go outside with just my bra on, and this was wet. I had to wash and dry it before I could give it back to Josh, or even put it on to go outside.

I ground my teeth and wished I'd grabbed the drenched jersey and flung it at Cayden before he'd disappeared.

It took me ages to fall asleep that night. Fury at Cayden warred with the tension in my body. Every single time he touched me, he broke something in my mind. I wanted him. I loathed him. I had no idea what was going on between us most of the time, but if it ended in a homicide charge, I had a real insanity defense in my favor. The guy was driving me insane.

Worse, every time he pissed me off, he only crawled further into my subconscious like poison.

That night was no different. I dreamed he was in bed with me, his heavy weight across my legs, my panties slowly slipping down. I was lying on my front, and the cool air on my ass prickled my skin. My dreams were only getting more detailed. His hands gripped my ass cheeks and parted them, exposing both my holes to his eyes. His large finger traced down the cleft and over my asshole, jerking me awake. I'd never dreamed of ass stuff, ever. I just wasn't that imaginative.

My eyes snapped open into the dark of my room, and I realized that the phantom fingertip circling my asshole wasn't a figment of my overheated subconscious at all.

It was very, very real, and very, very thick.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I whisper-yelled at him.

He was a large shadow near my feet, a slice of moonlight falling across his naked torso, illuminating every ripple of muscle on his fine form.

"Reminding you whose ass this is," he murmured back and brought a hand down hard on my ass cheek.

The crack felt like a gunshot. I nearly rolled right off the bed. Only his huge, immovable hand holding my thigh kept me in place.

"Now, shut the fuck up like a good girl and stop pretending you don't like it. Liars get spanked."

A rolling wave of heat went through me as his hand returned to my cleft, his knees shoving my legs further apart. I was facedown and spread-eagled before him, and all I could think was that he was right. I did like it. I liked this. Even though only a few hours ago, I'd been so angry I could have

ripped his head off, now, my body was melting into the mattress. I was such a pushover, it was ridiculous. This was the danger of having literally no experience at the age of eighteen...making terrible decisions as soon as you found someone who made you feel something, anything at all. Anger, fear, hate, and love, they all seemed to bleed into each other right now. I couldn't tell them apart, and at that moment, I didn't want to. I just wanted to feel free again, just for a second, and not care about the consequences.

His finger worked into me, and I arched my back into the feeling. His thumb found my clit, and he rubbed it while finger-fucking me.

I rose quickly. It was too much like my dreams to stop myself. Just when I thought I was about to tip over and come, he stopped, and his other hand smacked my ass hard.

“Hey,” I hissed at him, disappointment about not coming humming through my veins.

“This is for the jersey,” he said firmly, and then his fingers moved again inside me, and the sting on my backside faded as pleasure rose through me again.

Once more, just when I was about to come, he stopped and smacked my ass instead. The anticipation for the spanks was heightening everything. It felt good. It felt amazing. I could never confess that guilty fact, or I’d crumble into dust and disappear forever.

“This is for holding his fucking hand,” Cayden said, pumping his fingers back into me.

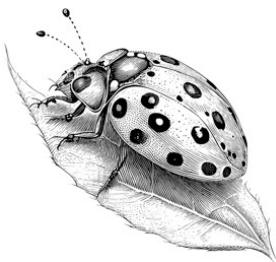
I was a dripping mess, my own juices working down my thighs. I’d never been so wet or so desperate to come.

“Okay, I get it. I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry. Just let me come,” I pleaded, pushing my ass back against him, trying to tip myself over the edge.

Cayden made a noise of sympathy. “I wish it could be over so quickly, Freckles, but remember next time not to do the crime if you can’t do the time.” He leaned in so his hot breath scorched my ear. “We’re just getting started.”

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Lily



THE NEXT NIGHT, I took the first step in fighting back against Cayden. I couldn't think about the hours we'd spent in my bed the night before, when he'd edged me to the point of near insanity. When he'd finally let me come, the pleasure had been so great, I'd been struck dumb for ten whole minutes. During that time, he'd jerked himself off over my bare back, and rubbed his cum into my skin like moisturizer, then left me tucked up tightly. I'd never felt more depraved. I'd never felt freer. Still, it only confirmed that Cayden West was a menace to my sanity, and I needed to even the playing field.

"Tuesday night, Midnight Falls. What will the evening bring us?" Eve spoke in a grandiose tone.

"Hopefully something we can use to put Cayden West back on his leash," I muttered, linking arms with her as we left the bus station downtown.

It was only late afternoon, but there was already an ominous feeling as we headed down Main Street. You could see how run-down the town was, especially compared to Hade Harbor. Trash littered the streets, and a lot of the windows on the main shopping drag were boarded up and covered in graffiti. More than a fair share of shifty looking people loitered on street corners, and every now and again a police cruiser moved slowly along, eyeing the tweakers and dealers but not stopping.

"Well, this is just as nice as local gossip would have us believe," Eve murmured, casting a worried look around. "Thank God I didn't tell Ash I was coming here. He never would have let me."

“Yeah, well, I promise we won’t stay here longer than necessary. Let’s just get some dirt and go. Where should we start?”

Eve stopped in the street, tapping her lip as she thought about it. I became aware of how many eyes were on us. Eve wasn’t an inconspicuous person to walk around with. She was so stunning, she drew attention everywhere she went, and I was starting to think that was a dangerous thing to do in Midnight Falls.

“School’s over, but hockey practice might not be. Let’s head there first. Cayden played for the team, right?”

“Yeah, he did. Let’s head over there.”

We set off toward the local high school. It wasn’t too far, thankfully, and before long we were heading through the glass doors of the rink.

Cayden’s old team was just finishing up. A few girls sat watching the practice. The coach was nowhere in sight. The rink was run-down and depressing. It had that faded feeling of a place that had given up. I could see why Cayden wanted out of here. *Not that I’m sympathizing with him*, I reminded myself sternly.

“Look, let’s ask the girls. We’re here for a reason,” Eve muttered, proving herself to be so much braver than me by approaching the small group of onlookers.

A guy on the ice whistled our way, probably eyeing up my friend. He moved with casual confidence on the ice, and every head turned his way as he skated toward us. He stopped himself by hanging over the boards, then beckoned me closer.

“You go, I’ll try these guys,” Eve said, a woman on a mission.

I started down the stairs toward the player. He was hot, the kind of hot that spelled trouble, just like Cayden.

“Hello, Red. I guess you’re here for me?” He grinned at me as I awkwardly shifted my backpack on my shoulders.

“Why would you guess that?”

“Because I’m the only interesting guy in a fifty-mile radius,” he said with perfect confidence. “I’m Chase, and you are?”

“Lily. I’m actually looking for someone else. Cayden West,” I said. I decided that revealing my intention to dig for dirt might be too upfront, especially if this was Cayden’s friend.

Chase sighed. “That asshole isn’t even around anymore, and he’s still got interested chicks.”

“I’m not interested like that,” I blurted out so quickly it made Chase narrow his eyes at me. “I mean, it’s not romantic or anything.”

Chased laughed. “Well, that’s good news for you, because I doubt that fucker has a romantic bone in his body. I pity the girl who ends up chained to that lunatic.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked too quickly.

Chased seemed amused. “Are you sure you’re not his girlfriend?”

I snorted and indicated myself with a sweeping gesture. “Do I look like someone he would date?”

Chase shook his head. “You should ask if you seem like someone who would lower herself to date him, and the answer is no...you look too smart for that.”

I flushed. “Well, thanks.”

“What do you want with Cayden?”

“I just wanted to talk to him,” I lied, hoping that Chase would give me some information.

He studied me a little longer and then sighed. “I don’t think I should be telling you anything about Cayden.”

“Why not? Are you his friend?”

Chase laughed. “Fuck no, he doesn’t have any friends. What he has are enemies and people who are scared of him, that’s it.”

“People who are scared of him? Why?” My voice was fading the longer this conversation went on.

There was a small voice inside me that whispered at me to turn back. Cayden was mad enough about me seeing him showering and whatever the hell that was on his back. How would he feel if he found out that I’d really dug into his past? What if I found out something I couldn’t forget?

All the more reason to find out. If he’s really dangerous, I have to get him out of my house.

“Because of his past, his reputation, his foster father...his rap sheet. all of it. Take my advice, cutie, and stay far away from him. Guys like Cayden break their toys—they don’t know any other way to be.”

I blinked at Chase. He was solemn now.

I swallowed hard. “I can’t afford to leave it. He’s – he’s living with my family,” I admitted in a rush. It might be a terrible idea to trust this stranger, but I didn’t trust Cayden, and it seemed we were on the same page.

Chase whistled. “Now, that is bad luck. In that case, I’d say you need to know who you’re dealing with. Go and see Uncle Jack at Black Lake trailer park, on the outskirts of town. You’ll find out more than you want to know there...enough to change your living situation, if that’s what you want.”

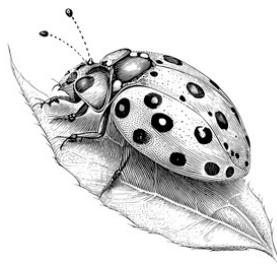
“Thank you. You’ve been really helpful and kind to a stranger.” I summoned a smile for Chase.

He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter to me one way or another., As long as he doesn’t come back here, I’m happy,” Chase said, hitting the ice again and skating away. “Take care at the trailer park, Red; it’s not a place for girls like you. Leave before dark.”

With that ominous warning ringing in my ear, I turned and went to grab Eve.

Before dark? That gave us a couple of hours. It would just have to be enough.

Lily



THERE WERE no cabs or ride-shares that we could find in Midnight Falls, but luckily, we found a bus that passed near the trailer park and hopped on.

“So, what did the girls say?” I asked Eve as we settled in.

“They said he’s so dreamy,” she mocked and sighed. “Seriously, it was crushes all around. Apparently, his bad-boy vibe isn’t new. He’s always been a bit of a rebel, but the kind girls want to climb like a pole. That being said, he’s elusive. No exes at school, which is odd. Maybe he likes older women?”

“I don’t care who he likes. What’s his reputation from, though? Did anyone say?”

“Not really. They said he gets into fights, and maybe deals a little drugs or something. I mean, nothing that makes him the anti-Christ, you know. Maybe you’re overthinking all of this.”

“Maybe. Still, I want to check out this Uncle Jack, the one who fostered him. If anyone knows anything, it’ll be him.”

“Right, this is the foster dad he ran away from in the middle of the night and had bruises all over from? Just checking we’re really thinking this through carefully, you know,” Eve muttered as we finally reached the trailer park.

I'd told her about the bruises but not the odd scarring, and certainly not everything that had happened since.

"Yes, that's the one, but we're just here to talk, and it's still daytime. Don't worry, I'll handle the talking part."

"The talking part isn't what I'm worried about." Eve wrinkled her nose as she took in the dilapidated trailers all around us.

This place had the same air of neglect and general apathy as the rest of Midnight Falls, but on a much larger scale. Broken kids' toys lay in the grass, and a couple of trailers had people sitting out front in loungers, drinking and smoking (and by the smell, they weren't smoking cigarettes). Eyes followed us as we walked through the rows of homes. It felt like we had a huge flashing neon sign over our heads screaming that we didn't belong here.

"Hey, girlies. Need help?" a booming voice called to us. A large lady sat on a sagging porch. She waved her arm at us, and we drifted over to her.

"Good afternoon, we're looking for an Uncle Jack," I said.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "And why are you looking for him? He don't do business from the park. Everyone knows that."

"It's not for business, it's about his foster son, Cayden."

She shuddered and crossed herself. Eve and I exchanged glances at that.

"That boy left here and put his uncle in hospital that night, after everything that Jack's done for him. Good riddance, I say." She turned and spat, and the sight turned my stomach.

"Okay, good to know. Do you happen to know which trailer Jack is? We'd love to stop by and give him our best wishes for recovery," Eve said, pasting on the smile and sweet voice she used for customers at the diner.

The lady jerked her head to the left. "Last one of the row, triple-wide, you can't miss it."

"Thanks!"

I tugged Eve's arm, and we both moved off at record speed.

"Wow, she was lovely," I whispered.

"Wasn't she? What a fun day trip you planned for us!" Eve giggled.

Despite Eve's lighthearted demeanor, the lady's words rang in my head. Cayden had put his foster father in the hospital? And why did she cross herself? Cayden wasn't Damien all grown up, was he?

We got to the last trailer, and sure enough, it was wider than the others. It was just as run-down as the rest, however, and the peeling paint and broken-down lawn furniture outside made my heart ache a little. *This was where Cayden had grown up?*

Eve marched to the door and knocked as I stared at a broken dream catcher wedged in the dirty front window. The threads were torn, and the feathers plucked bare. Who had hung it there? Had it been Cayden? A little boy trying to stop nightmares?

"Who are you?" The trailer door pushed open roughly, and a man stood there, presumably Cayden's foster father. He wore a stained white shirt with a brace on his arm. Was that what had sent him to hospital? Had Cayden done it?

Eve gave him her patented winning smile. "Good afternoon, sir. We're here from Hade Harbor High and-".

"You here about the boy?" Jack cut her off and leered at her, his thin lips parting as he scanned her up and down. "In trouble already, is he?" He chuckled lowly, and the sound was distasteful somehow, like he was enjoying himself. "Come on in, ladies. Let Uncle Jack pour you a drink and tell you all about who you've let into your clean, safe little town."

Inside the trailer was exactly like the outside had promised it would be. Dimly lit, with drawn curtains for the most part. Dust motes floated above us, and a stale smell hung in the air. Cigarettes and old sweat. Jack pointed to a faded bench seat before a small table and went to the fridge.

"Nothing for me, thanks," Eve said quickly as he pulled out a can of beer.

“Me neither. It’s a school night,” I said and smiled to soften the refusal.

Jack snorted and popped a can for himself. He wandered toward us and sat way too close to Eve. She quickly scooted along the seat and pressed into my side.

“So, you going to school with Cayden? Watch yourselves, pretty little things like you...” Jack swigged from his bottle and then chortled to himself. “Though, I don’t know if girls are golden boy’s thing. He’s never indulged in any of the attention he’s had over the years. Damn waste.”

“Um, are you Cayden’s foster father?” Eve asked and elbowed me in the side.

Right, I’d better get my questions asked. I couldn’t stop my eyes from wandering around.

“Sure am. Been fostering his criminal ass since he was eight years old.”

“Eight, wow. You must be close,” I heard myself say for want of something better.

Jack laughed. “Close enough, I’d say. I know every thought that goes through that boy’s head. I made him the man he is today, and what did he do? Run off to play hockey for a swanky school like HHH – no offense. Full of idiots with more money than sense,” Jack said, his expression telling us that he clearly meant offense.

“None taken. Did you guys get along?”

“As well as anyone could get along with a boy like that. He’s... damaged, deep down. Dangerous, too.”

“Dangerous how?” I asked, my heart all but leaping into my mouth.

Jack leaned forward. “Well, since you’re not from here, you won’t know the rumors, but it’s said that when he was eight, he killed someone. Two people, actually.” There was definitely a light of amusement in Jack’s eye. He was enjoying himself. Was this all a joke? Was he just trying to fuck with his former foster son, or was he being serious?

Killed someone?

“What? How can that be?” Eve asked, her voice subdued.

Jack shrugged. “That’s what happens when you get a bad apple in the bunch. As an adult, I’ve tried my best to keep him on the straight and narrow, but anyone around here could tell you stories about him...he’s violent, unpredictable. He attacks pimps, hookers, and addicts and takes money off them. He’s put rival hockey players in the hospital after a game once or twice.”

I could only stare as Jack rattled off terrible things about the boy living down the hall from me.

“Social workers always went easy on him, considering his first foster family and what they did to him before I came along. Still, I don’t see how that can excuse it. He’s a danger to society as an adult, as big as he is. Though, I don’t know what anyone expected...his mother was turning tricks when he was just a baby, and she OD’d when he was five, then three years with the other ones... the cutters...anyone would lose their minds, I suppose, but that don’t mean he should be out there, living among normal people. He came at me a while ago and tried to knife me. I nearly broke my arm trying to defend myself.”

Jack continued to talk, and Eve shot me an appalled glance. My heart had slipped from my mouth and felt like it was down by my toes now.

What the hell? I’d come here to dig up something on Cayden to level the playing field between us, but instead, I’d found out way too much. I’d overstepped, I’d seen too deep into his traumatic past, and holy fucking hell, it was terrible.

“So, you took him in when he was eight?” I managed to find my voice somewhere.

“Sure did. With all the hubbub about him, no one else was going to take the chance, but I knew I could hold my own.” Jack got up and went to a stack of yellowed newspapers. He pulled one out and looked at the front page, nodding to himself. It was the *Midnight Falls Chronicle*, and a black-and-white photo stared at me when he put it down on the table.

"I thought I kept that. You can take it if you want. Show the coach in Hade Harbor or the principal or someone. Someone should know what that boy's capable of," Jack said.

He tapped the picture as the headline screamed at me.

FOSTER SON ONLY SURVIVOR OF HOUSE FIRE THAT SEES BOTH PARENTS DEAD. POLICE SUSPECT FOUL PLAY.

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Cayden



LILY WAS AVOIDING me again after the bathroom incident at intermission. Or maybe it was because Josh got temporarily benched after someone attacked him in the parking lot and broke his nose after the game.

Poor boy. Only the satisfying feeling of his nose breaking under my fist had soothed my anger. I had no idea if he suspected me. It had been dark, and I'd been careful. I was more than used to doing violent things in the dark. It had once been my bread and butter in my job for Uncle Jack. Now, I realized how different my life had been before, living with the Williamses.

I lay in my room next to Lily's and stared at the ceiling. There was nobody who I was scared of in this house. There was nobody I needed to hide from here. I was safe. *Safe*. What an odd word. Only now, I finally saw that it was something I'd never, ever felt before.

There weren't the frightening noises of my mother entertaining her "friends" like there had been when I was small. Those memories were the worst, and luckily the faintest. But I did have a few good memories of my mother, and they were the most precious things I could call my own. Snatches of time with the one person who had ever tried to love me.

Some days, when she was high and feeling good, she'd get dressed up and we'd go to a nearby diner and have ice cream sundaes. At five years old, I hadn't seen how her lipstick was smeared over her teeth, or that her pretty party dress was torn and dirty. I hadn't noticed how often she'd snuck away

to the bathroom, or how everyone in the place had looked up at me in pity, sitting alone, with my chocolate sundae, beaming with excitement.

Those were the good days.

Later that year, I'd found her cold in her bed, her eyes staring at the door, never to move again. I'd never forget the last look in her eyes as she'd stared longingly at freedom, so close, but forever out of her reach. She hadn't wanted to be what she'd become. The door might have been right there, but she'd been unable to open it, a born addict.

After, they'd sent me to the other couple. Ironically, considering their hobbies, they'd been called the Cutlers. My nightmare had truly started then and never stopped. While my treasured memories of my mother were hazy, the memories of the Cutlers were vivid and detailed. I remembered every single second in that house, and I wished I could forget them all.

I pulled the photos of Lily's journal up on my phone and settled down to read my favorite words. Oddly, it wasn't just the dreams about me that I enjoyed. It was all the rest. The days and months of my Ladybug's innocent, sweet thoughts. Her jokes with her friend, the things she'd learned in class, how she dreamed of being less restricted and free to be herself and make mistakes if she needed to.

An entry about trying a new cake recipe was a bedtime story for me. Like a vampire sucking the pure, brilliant life from the ordinary little tales. Stories I'd never come close to experiencing. I closed my eyes and pretended I'd been there with her, safe inside this warm, welcoming house, far away from the monsters in my dreams.

Like always, though, when I slept, the warmth faded away and the nightmares returned. After all, I hadn't left my demons in Midnight Falls.

My monsters lived in my head, and there was no escape.

We played an away game that week, and the team was all business. We walked the win, and Coach talked about the road that would lead us to

Nationals. It was going to happen, I could feel it. For once in my life, something I'd planned and worked hard for was going to happen just like it was supposed to. I couldn't let anything get in the way.

I decided to shower back at home, despite how gross I felt, because I didn't want everyone waiting on the bus for me just so I could shower alone at the end. I might be used to being eccentric about my shower habits, but I didn't want to rub it in everyone's faces. It would only invite speculation, and I wasn't in the mood.

I ended up first at the bus, seeing as everyone else was busy in the locker rooms. I perched outside on a low wall, looking at my phone to kill time. That was when the message came in.

Boo. I see you.

I stiffened immediately and stood, leaving my hockey bag on the ground. I turned just as Uncle Jack appeared in the open doors to the rink.

“Miss me, boy?”

Annoyance, anger, and a healthy dose of nerves ran through me. What the fuck was he doing here?

“Become a hockey fan all of a sudden?”

Jack laughed. “Not in the slightest, but I thought I should come and see you, considering our relationship.”

“We don’t have a relationship.”

“That’s right. We don’t, do we? You signed it away to a nice family from Hade Harbor...like that could save you.”

“Save me?” I snorted, glancing around to make sure that no one else from the team was around. “From you?”

“No, boy. From yourself. Nothing will ever be able to save you from yourself. You’ve already started to fuck up here.”

“And how would you know that?” I asked, bored with his empty, pathetic threats.

“A little birdie told me. They flew all the way over to Midnight Falls to ask about you.”

A little birdie? Normally I would tell Jack to fuck off, recognizing his lies and attempts to bother me, but today, something in his tone warned me that he wasn’t lying.

“Let’s see, what was her name, she had red hair, and a button nose...”

He trailed off, and I didn’t need him to continue to know.

“Lily.” My hollow tone satisfied Jack, and he beamed, sensing my weak point.

“Yes, Lily, that’s it. A pale, thoroughbred-looking girl. Don’t worry, I filled her in on you. Told her all about our time together,” he started and choked off when I grabbed him.

Rage like nothing I’d ever felt before filled me, startlingly hot, burning a path of destruction right through my mind and blotting out all rational thoughts.

“What the fuck did you tell her?” I growled at him, giving Jack the reaction he’d been waiting for.

He grinned at me, his spit flecking my face as he laughed. “Everything. Every sad, sorry little thing about your pathetic life. I even showed her your bedroom growing up. Pretty Lily left quickly after that. If she wasn’t scared of you before, I’m sure she is now. In fact, I’m sure she’s on her way to warn all the relevant people who exactly they’ve welcomed into their nice little town.”

His words were a sucker punch. I released him, shock slackening my muscles. *Everything.* He’d told Lily everything. She knew everything.

“Why?” The word slipped past my lips before I could call it back.

Jack sneered at me and then shrugged. “Because you, golden boy, shouldn’t get to be happy. You bit the hand that fed you, and now you’ll deal with the consequences.”

He stepped back and straightened his jacket. Peering past my shoulder, he whistled. “Looks like your teammates are about to join us. I’ll go. I wouldn’t want to embarrass you, boy. You’re doing that just fine yourself.”

With that, he turned and walked away, leaving me bleeding.

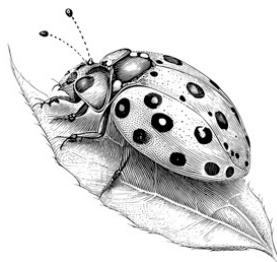
Lily had gone to Midnight searching for dirt on me, clearly, and in return, she’d found out everything. My whole, sorry life, laid before her for her to scorn. For her to pity. For her to fear. My heart twisted; my chest ached. It hurt. It actually fucking hurt. Right or wrong, it felt like a betrayal, and there was only one way to answer it.

Retaliation. My little Ladybug had claws after all, and I’d underestimated her. She had information on me now, damaging information that could see my dreams come shattering down. I couldn’t let her use it.

This time, I wasn’t holding back. She needed to fear me, and this time, she would.

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Lily



I STUDIED HARD for a test I had on Thursday and kept my head down. Cayden was busy at practice before the away game, and after, I'd barely seen him. Now it felt like he was the one avoiding me.

His secrets lay inside me like undetonated bombs. I didn't know what to do with the information that I'd gotten on him. I felt sick when I thought about it. The newspaper was rolled up and hidden inside a sock, in the back of an old box in my wardrobe, and right now, I'd be fine with never seeing it again.

Had Cayden really killed his foster parents when he was eight? The newspaper had seemed to imply that the public sure thought so. And what had Jack meant about his foster family being cutters? Was that what the scars on his back were from? And his mother OD'd? There was too much trauma to unpack, and I couldn't handle it. Instead, I went through the motions of normal life while my brain felt like a broken record, returning again and again to Uncle Jack's rancid trailer.

On Friday, at lunch, me and Eve ran into Ellen outside the cafeteria. The girl who'd started my journey to Midnight Falls in the first place. She was talking to Josh, who had a bandage across the bridge of his nose.

"Oh my God, Josh, are you okay?" I asked immediately. I hadn't noticed that he was injured before.

He shrugged. "Sure, it was a few days ago, it's just annoying now."

“A few days ago?”

“After the game on Monday,” he clarified.

Something that felt like fear skittered down my spine. “How did it happen?”

“I was mugged in the parking lot. Except the mugger didn’t take anything.”

Josh’s tone was hard to read. Did he suspect Cayden? After how aggressive he’d been toward Josh in the game, it was hard not to suspect him.

“Before you ask, I didn’t get a look at the guy.”

“Oh, that’s a shame. Anyway, don’t let me keep you. I have your jersey in my locker, freshly washed.”

“I’ll get it next time. I still need to grab food before lunch is over.”

He and Ellen walked off, and I watched them go.

“I didn’t know they were friends,” Eve remarked and slid her arm through mine, steering me toward our lockers. “Do you think it’s odd timing? You wear Josh’s jersey, Cayden loses it, and Josh ends up with a broken nose?”

“No, I mean, it’s probably just a coincidence,” I muttered, trying to convince myself as much as her.

“Right, like that family’s house burning down.” Eve snorted.

Fear shot through me. I pulled her to a stop in a secluded alcove.

“Look, I don’t think we should talk about that, at all, especially not here. First of all, what eight-year-old can be responsible for anything? Eight is a child. Second, if it’s really true that Cayden is dangerous, I don’t want you on his radar.”

“Asher is my brother, I’ll be fine. I’m more worried about you,” Eve argued.

“I’ll be fine. My dad is there at home all the time, and besides, he doesn’t know we went there. Just don’t give it away, and he never needs to.”

“Roger that.” Eve checked her phone and sighed. “Looks like I have a double shift tonight, so I have to take a rain check on the sleepover.”

“Really? I could just come to the diner and wait for you to finish.”

She studied me. “You really don’t want to be at home, do you?”

I shook my head, words rising and falling behind my lips. I couldn’t find the ones I wanted, because I didn’t know how I felt about any of it.

“I’ll hang out here as long as possible and work on my biology project and then head to the diner, what do you say?” I urged.

She sighed and shrugged. “It’s your night to squander, if that’s what you want.”

The school library was open until nine on Fridays. There was plenty going on at HHH until that time, with all the sports clubs, band practice, and even glee club.

I left the library as late as I could and wandered toward my locker. I shoved the biology project I was working on inside and headed for the bathrooms.

When I got out, someone was playing the drums down the hall, and a janitor was emptying trash cans. I waved hello to him before swinging open my locker. I hadn’t bothered locking it. Advanced-level biology projects weren’t exactly a hot commodity worth stealing. I had to remember to take it home, though, because I needed to work on it over the weekend. I stilled as I realized that my lock didn’t look quite the same as it had a few minutes ago.

The project was gone.

“What the hell?”

“Your friend took it for you. Over to the rink,” the janitor called over to me, being helpful.

Your friend took it? Ice ran through my veins. It seemed my standoff with Cayden was coming to an end. He was initiating contact, or more like provoking it.

If the damn project hadn't been so important, I'd have just left anyway and gone over to Eve's diner, but I couldn't. I had to get it back. What was he up to? After days of the silent treatment, he was forcing contact. After everything in Midnight Falls, I had no idea what to think about him anymore.

Reluctantly, I headed toward the rink. A light drizzle hit my face as I walked across the school grounds toward the separate building. It would be winter break soon, and the weather in Hade Harbor was getting rough. In my hurry to go and get my project back, I'd left my coat in my locker.

I shivered, gripping the straps of my backpack tighter. *Don't be so nervous. He doesn't even know you went to Midnight. As far as he knows, you've just been avoiding him. That's all. Relax. He can probably smell fear.*

With that daunting thought in mind, I pushed through the doors of the rink, surprised to see the foyer dark.

A glow of light came from the corridor leading to the rink. I followed it. The lights blazed over the ice, and John, the guy who drove the Zamboni, was just finishing up. He waved to me as he jumped down and headed off. Practice was over, then, and everyone had left. Well, not everyone, because clearly Cayden was here somewhere. I walked around the side of the ice, just as the lights went out.

I froze.

"John? I'm still here!" I called. Why would John turn off the light when he clearly knew that? My nerves from earlier returned full force. It hadn't been John. It was Cayden, and he was here somewhere, in the dark.

"Hilarious, Cayden. Give me my project," I called into the darkness.

"Come and get it, Ladybug. I've left it for you in the neutral zone." His deep voice boomed around the rink.

I couldn't tell where it was coming from. My eyes were gradually adjusting to the darkness, and the white square of ice was lighter than other places, but I couldn't make out if there was something there or not. The neutral zone in hockey was the middle of the rink. He wanted me go out onto the ice.

"I sure hope it isn't made of paper or anything else that will get damaged sitting out there," he prompted me.

Damn him. I stepped out onto the ice, my sneakers sliding a little until I got my balance. I wasn't a stranger to ice, thanks to my dad, but still, whatever game Cayden was playing, I was pretty sure he wanted to put me at a disadvantage, so the ice worked well.

I inched forward, arms out, wobbling as I went. It was quiet, and I could only hear my breath fogging in and out. I was cold from getting wet outside and shivered involuntarily. I really didn't need to get sick right now.

As I moved at a snail's pace toward the middle, I heard it. The faint *swish-swoosh* of blades on ice. I stopped, wrapping my arms around myself. The air moved against me, and I knew Cayden had just blown past. My eyes were still adjusting, bit by bit, and I could make out his black-clad shape shooting like a bullet in wide laps.

"Cayden," I started.

"Have fun on your trip to Black Lake trailer park, Lillian? Uncle Jack had such sweet things to say about you."

He knew. *He knew*. Genuine terror gripped me. I scanned the center of the ice. There was nothing there. All of this had just been to get me here, vulnerable. I whirled around and started to run toward the edge of the rink. My feet were sliding madly, and Cayden wove his way closer and closer to me, passing by with small touches that sent me spinning around. *Fuck*. If he wanted to freak me out, it was working. It was really fucking working.

I fell hard on one knee when he checked me particularly hard as he passed. Pain radiated up my leg as I pushed myself to my hands. My sneakers glided uncontrollably, and I went down again. This time, my hands grazed the ice surface and stung.

“Stop it. Cayden – stop! You’ve made your point.” I tried to sound calm when I was anything but.

He chuckled coldly, the sound skipping to me across through the darkness. “I clearly didn’t make my point, though, did I? You didn’t believe me when I said I wasn’t someone to mess with. You really should have, Lily.”

I slapped a hand down on the ice and attempted to stand again. A shower of ice cascaded across my hand. Cayden had come to a full stop from his great speed, his skates slicing the ice hard, just beside my hand. Any closer and the blade would have touched my skin.

My knee throbbed, and my whole body was sore from falling over repeatedly on the hard surface. I was shaking with cold now. My backpack had fallen off one shoulder, pulling me to the side. I slowly and steadily got to my feet. Cayden made no move to help, simply looming over me in his intimidating black jersey, pads on and all. Blood dripped down from the hole in my leggings to the ice, a quiet drip.

I stood, balling my shaking hands into fists. Finally steady enough on my feet, I brought my eyes to meet Cayden’s. The blue was like a stormy sea, ready to wreck me against rocks at any moment.

“I didn’t believe you, you’re right. I’m sorry,” I said quietly. “But I believe you now.”

My words seemed to take him off guard. His posture softened a fraction, though I could still feel his anger. It swirled around us. I’d never seen him so angry. His fury seemed to burn the air. I had to get the hell out of away from him until a cooler head could prevail.

I edged my bag further onto one shoulder and waited until Cayden shifted his weight on his skates. As soon as he did, I acted. I swung my bag with all my might at his head. He slid to the side, surprised by the sudden move. It didn’t come close to knocking him off his feet, but it distracted him enough for me to turn and run again. This time, my feet managed to keep my balance until the edge of the ice, and I stepped off and sprinted between the seats toward the door at the top of the rink. Cayden had to take his skates off. He couldn’t catch me. He couldn’t.

I burst through the doors leading outside and was hit with pouring rain. The drizzle had turned into a downpour, and it soaked through my T-shirt immediately. My leg hurt, and my nerves felt frazzled as I ran through the puddles of the parking lot. Most of the cars had left already, and there was no one around to ask for help.

“Lillian!”

Cayden’s wild shout sent a sob of fear from my mouth. I turned to see him running toward me, feet bare, the rain glancing off his padded shoulders. I wasn’t looking. I didn’t see the hole until my foot fell right into it. Sharp pain lanced up my leg as I went down. My ankle throbbed. Tears joined the rain on my face as I sat there in a puddle and succumbed to my fate. He was going to catch me. He had been all along. There was no point in running anymore. He was already on me.

“Get up,” his hard voice ground out.

I shook my head, holding my knees to my chest like they could somehow protect me.

“Get up now, Lillian.”

“I can’t.”

His legs were right in front of my eyes. His bare feet shiny and wet. He must have pulled everything off in a bid to lose his skates as quickly as possible.

Then his arms were under mine, and he was lifting me. I gasped when I put weight on my ankle. It wasn’t terribly sore, but it stung. I couldn’t run right now, that was for sure. I was so, so cold, my teeth chattered.

“Look at me.”

My eyes remained stubbornly fixed on the Hellions logo on his jersey. I shook my head.

“Look at me now,” Cayden ground out.

Slowly, my eyes drifted upward. I was so cold I couldn’t feel my lips. I blinked through the rain at Cayden. His stormy eyes were black pits in the

rainy dark. He stared hard at me for a moment. I shook uncontrollably now. He swore under his breath and bent suddenly, hefting me over his shoulder like I was weightless.

“Where a-are w-we going-g?” I asked past my chattering teeth.

The rain continued to soak us through as Cayden carried me back in the direction of the rink.

“No – no, I don’t want to go in there,” I protested weakly. I was freezing, hurt, and scared, but there was also resignation there. Cayden West was determined to have it out, and I was fresh out of energy to escape him.

Besides, there might have been the tiniest part of me that was curious. The tiniest part of me that wondered about this person who had burst into my methodical, orderly, sheltered life, and exploded it from the inside. What was the real story behind all the things I’d heard about him? I couldn’t help but wonder.

We reached the rink, and instead of heading toward the ice to torment me some more, or slice off pieces of me, he headed down toward the locker room.

It was dark, and inside the locker room was darker still. Cayden felt around on the wall and flipped on one of the overhead fluorescent lights.

A weird sound filled the air. It was a gibbering sound of some kind. With horror, I realized it was coming from me. It was the shivering; my mouth let out an involuntary gasp with every shiver.

Cayden headed past the lockers and straight into the shower room. It was a big open space with a row of metal showerheads dotted along the tile.

“Hold on,” he muttered, turning on three of the showers and twisting the temperature to hot. After a moment, steam rose into the air. He carried me over to the shower in the middle and walked straight under the spray.

The hot water sank through my wet clothes and glanced off my back. I hissed. It was so hot it nearly hurt. Cayden shifted me down his body. Every single inch of me pressed against him in a slow slide until my feet hit the

floor. I held on to his shoulders for balance as I raised my hurt ankle slightly. Hot, steaming water poured down on us.

“Are you trying to drown me this time?” I asked, my teeth finally stopping their uncontrollable chatter.

“Your lips were blue.”

It was delivered shortly, but the look in his eyes was anything but. It was unfathomable. Bottomless, really. I could fall into those eyes forever. It was then I realized that it wasn’t really anger driving him. It was fear. Now that I knew who he was and where he’d come from, I could see under his cruel, aggressive mask to the boy beneath. Sure, he might have just terrorized me, and I might have let my fight or flight instinct carry me away, but now that I’d had time to study him, the desire to run faded.

The water brought me back to life, warming me through. Something else flickered in my chest, an uncomfortable weight that had lodged there since I’d seen the hopeful little dream catcher in Jack’s trailer with its broken strings. Going to Midnight Falls had changed everything, because I no longer thought about trying to get Cayden kicked out of HHH. It was a truth too big to admit, even to myself.

He watched me as my shivering gradually stopped, his hands sliding up and down my arms. When he spoke, his voice was tired and devoid of anger, like he’d burned through all his fury and all that was left were ashes.

“Why do you hate me so fucking much?” His deep voice nearly broke on the last word. “Is it just about the journal or—”

“You pushed me in the pool and threatened me – you’ve done everything you can to get under my skin and scare me!”

He swallowed hard. “I needed to scare you because I can’t go back there.”

Those quiet words broke through my resentment and anger toward him like none of his hardhanded tactics had managed to do.

“I’ll die first.” That rough admission seemed to cost him, his jaw clenching in anguish.

“I don’t hate you,” I blurted out.

He flinched like he had expected me to say something else, then his eyes flickered to mine, disbelieving.

“I was worried you’d hurt my family,” I continued.

The slight vulnerability he’d shown faded as his mask slipped back into place. “Yeah, well. And now you’re sure, right? What else can a guy like me do?”

His words were filled with self-loathing, and I hated to hear them.

I shook my head slowly. “You’re the one who just chased me across the ice. You’re the one trying to scare me into submission. Why are you trying to be the bad guy?”

“I don’t know how to be anything else.”

“Really? You seem to be getting on with the other Ice Gods just fine. I should be asking you why you hate me so much?” I echoed his question.

“I don’t hate you, Lily. I really, really don’t fucking hate you,” he said solemnly.

Something about his intonation kindled a different kind of heat in me.

“I haven’t fucking hated you since the moment we met.”

“But you threatened me! You tried to scare me.”

“Because you saw too much about me...I didn’t want to look at you knowing that you’d seen it all.” His lips twisted bitterly. “But then you went and found out the rest, anyway. Admit it, you were never that afraid of me then. Not like you are now.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. How could I tell him that he was right, that I hadn’t been scared of him then? But was I scared of him now? No. I didn’t know why, but I really wasn’t. All I knew was that I was drawn to him. I couldn’t keep myself away. Nothing felt normal around him.

“You’re right. I’ve never really been scared of you, Cayden. And I’m still not scared of you now.”

He jerked like I'd slapped him. His eyebrows pinched together, and he leaned down so our height difference wasn't so unnavigable. Water ran in tendrils down his golden skin, sticking in his long, dark lashes, trailing over his full, sensuous lips. He was beautiful.

"So, it's not fear now, but pity—is that what you're telling me?"

His low tone held a warning, but it wasn't one I was capable of hearing right now.

I snorted, water going up my nose at the gesture. "Fuck pity. You don't need my pity. You have everything you need to change your life, and you're doing it. Why would I pity you?"

He seemed taken aback by that, unsure how to react to my words. He stepped closer.

He cupped my face and rubbed his thumbs over my cheeks. "If that's true, then there's only one obstacle to getting everything I want...and that's you, Freckles. Only you have the power to ruin my chances here."

I swallowed.

"I should hate you. It would be easier," he muttered, leaning in and pressing his lips to my forehead in an almost sweet kiss.

I swayed into him. In that moment of connection, my ankle fell away and my stinging knee. The fear I'd felt on the ice was gone. In its place was a different kind of fear -- the fear of opening your heart to someone. I could tell that Cayden was scared, too. We were just two scared souls tossed around in a world that seemed determined to crush them.

I tilted my face up just as he pulled away and caught his chin with my lips. It should have been awkward, how clumsy and unpracticed we were. It should have felt ridiculous, but it didn't.

He narrowed his eyes at my upturned face, his hand pushing the wet strands of red off my forehead before he swooped in and kissed me on the lips. This kiss was nothing like the ones before. This kiss was hesitant. A question.

I parted my lips in answer, letting him inside. I was burning for this guy, and I had been since the moment we'd met. Everything I'd found out about him had only stoked the flames of my obsession. He could be dangerous, but I didn't think he'd hurt me or my family, and that was the truth. He was a fiery ball of anger and ambition, talent, and hurt. He pulled me to him wherever he was, like a magnet I couldn't escape. I was caught in his trap and I was tired of fighting it.

I was tired of the rules imposed on my life. I was tired of being Coach's good little girl. Cayden was everything my parents had warned me away from all my life, and now, in his arms, I'd never felt more alive. Just like that, I fell.

His tongue pushed eagerly into my mouth, sliding along my own, and he moaned quietly against my lips. His hands gripped my waist, backing me ruthlessly into the wall behind us. The impact jolted me and took my breath away. Cayden wasn't gentle, and I didn't want him to be.

His hands went to the collar of my wet T-shirt, and with a sharp pull, tore the thin material right down the middle.

His huge, calloused hands tugged my bralette from my tits and pushed it up my body, and it felt painful when our lips had to part to get it over my head. He leaned back, steadyng me against the wall and watching the water run down my bare chest. His hands cupped my breasts, making them appear even smaller under his huge palms.

"You – I want to see you," I urged, tugging at the bottom of his jersey. There was no way I was getting that off without his help, considering he still had on his enormous shoulder pads.

Thankfully, he wanted to be bare against me just as much as I wanted to feel him. He pulled his jersey off, seamlessly maneuvering it over his padding, and tossed it aside. He shed his pads, slowly revealing his muscled torso piece by piece. As soon as he was naked on top, he lunged back toward me, capturing my mouth with urgent kisses. I pressed myself against him, delighting in the feeling of my nipples rubbing his hard chest.

I wound my arms around his middle, his muscular frame preventing me from fully embracing him. His lips moved from my mouth down to my

chest, and I traced a hand over his back.

Hard ridges of scar tissue met my fingers, and I stilled. Cayden seemed to freeze for a moment.

His mouth spoke against my skin. “Don’t.”

I ran my fingers along the word carved into his flesh, because that was what it had to be.

“Don’t... please.” His voice didn’t sound anything like him.

I dropped my hand from his back and brought it to his face instead. His eyes were lowered to the floor. I cupped his strong jaw, so tense compared to only moments before. I leaned up on my tiptoes and kissed his lips chastely.

His eyes snapped to mine, as if he was surprised that I still wanted him after being reminded of his scars. I still didn’t know what they said, but he thought I did, and that was what mattered.

“Please, don’t stop,” I told him quietly. “Don’t stop touching me.” It sounded like a plea, and maybe it was. I felt like I’d die without his hands on me.

He held my gaze, his hand moving down my hip to the waistband of my leggings. He tugged them down slowly, and I held on to his shoulders as he gently pulled them from my feet. I tugged at the laces of his hockey pants, but he brushed my hands aside to do it himself. His hockey pants fell to the floor, and we were both naked.

The water was still hot. We were probably using up the school’s entire supply, but I couldn’t bring myself to care right now. Not when Cayden West was naked in front of me and looking at me like I was something precious. He straightened up. My gaze ran over him, drinking in the full sight of his glorious body. The bruises that he’d had were nearly all faded, but he also had some new ones, probably from hockey. He paid them no mind as he lifted me into his arms and urged my legs around his waist. My back met the wall as I pressed myself into his arms. Fuck, it felt good to be held by him. He held me effortlessly, his head tilted back to kiss me. His hands were under my thighs, and his cock brushed against my entrance. He

was so close. I squirmed in his arms, trying to nudge the head of his cock inside me. Even the tip stretched me.

He growled low in his throat. “If you don’t want me to have all of you, you shouldn’t do that, Lily. I’m only human.”

I looked down at his face, my arms holding tight around his neck. I didn’t want to stop. It was a sudden revelation. From the moment he’d read my journal, or maybe even before then—since I’d seen him at Beckett’s party, and he’d chased me into the kitchen and cornered me—he’d been the one in my head when I imagined losing my virginity.

It had to be him. There was no one else I wanted. As fucked up as that might be, it was an undeniable truth.

I squirmed more, dropping my weight as much as I could, sending the fat tip of him deeper.

He grunted, cords of muscle straining in his neck. “Lily, this isn’t your dream journal. If you want me to fuck you...you need to tell me.”

“I want you to fuck me,” I blurted before I could overthink it or get embarrassed.

He stared hard at me, studying me like I was a puzzle he was determined to solve. Then his lips curved into a dazzling smile and my heart skipped a beat. Cayden West might be the sexiest, most brooding bad boy around, but his smile was a heartstopper. He looked younger in that moment, free of his usual burdens.

“I’m on the pill,” I said quickly.

He raised an eyebrow at me.

“For painful periods,” I explained. It felt wrong to let him believe I was sleeping around every weekend when nothing could be further from the truth. He was my first, and he should know it.

He swallowed hard, his hands holding me poised on the tip of his cock, keeping me perfectly still, trapped between him and the wall.

“Do you have a condom?” I prompted after a second, my mind skittering to diseases and lack of protection. I should care about it more. I should make us stop until he had a condom on. I knew all this, and yet the thought of stopping was painful.

He kissed me slowly, lightly bouncing me on his cock, not impaling me, not yet, just teasing. Then he shook his head. “I don’t carry them.”

My heart fell with disappointment. He didn’t? I was pretty sure guys like the Ice Gods were ready to throw down at any time, considering the female worship they received.

He sighed against my lips. “I’ve never met anyone I wanted to do this with before, so I’ve never needed them.”

His words jolted me. “You mean you’ve never...” I trailed off, the words too ridiculous to say.

Cayden shook his head, and then a crooked smile touched his lips. “So, go easy on me, Freckles. You’re nearly too much for me to handle.”

“Too much what?”

He was lowering me slowly now, and my muscles ached as he parted them.

“Too much everything. Over and above me, all fucking around me, everywhere I look, it’s you.” His words were raw, pulled from a place of complete truth.

I wrapped them tightly in my heart and willed my body to relax.

He groaned as he pushed his cock further inside me. “So fucking tight. Are you going to let me in, Lily?”

“I’m trying. I’m starting to think this isn’t going to work. You’re too big, and I’m just tiny really, when you think about it,” I rambled. The stretch hurt but felt good at the same time. My head was spinning from the dual sensations.

“I’ll fit. I was made to fill you,” he murmured in my ear. “And you were made to take me.”

His words only relaxed me more, and slowly, his nudging thrusts got longer, reaching deeper, until his hips met mine. He was all the way in, and I'd never felt so full. I wasn't aware of any pain, other than the dull ache of being filled in a place I'd never had filled before. It was a heavy feeling. I clung on as Cayden rested a moment. I was pinned to the wall by his cock; I couldn't have moved if I'd wanted to. The thought of it turned me on, just like it did in my dreams.

He kissed my ear, nipping the lobe lightly as he started to move.

"You're going to destroy me, I can already tell."

I couldn't speak. His words were my words. We were each other's mutual destruction, but right now, I couldn't think about that, not with what had to be a nine-inch cock sliding in and out of me, parting my untested muscles, drilling me to the wall. He fucked me just like that, the top of my back resting against the wall, his hands pulling my hips against him. I held on, biting my lower lip as the stretch faded and gave way to pleasure.

He cursed, his lips brushing over my neck. "Fuck, I can't fucking hold it. You're too much."

I was startled by his confession. He was going to come. I had pushed Cayden West over the edge. *Me*. The power was heady.

He pulsed inside me, filling me with warmth. *He'd come inside me. His cum was inside me.* Just the thought made me feel wicked. He was sunk deep, his entire weight pressing me into the wall. I kissed his neck, fighting the urge to squirm on him. It had felt good, but not like when he'd eaten me out. The stretch sensation had gotten in the way.

I moved my leg, feeling like I should probably climb off his dick if we were done, when his hands tightened on my thighs.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going, Freckles?"

"Um, aren't we done?" I wondered.

He shook his head, straightening off the wall and pulling me with him, still sunk deep. "We aren't even close to finished. You haven't come yet, and we're not leaving here until you do."

He turned us, leaning his back against the wall this time. He lifted me and lowered me, and I gasped. He was still hard, and inside me was wetter than ever, his cum lubricating the delicious drag of his cock.

“You like that?” he asked, watching me with rapt attention as I moaned, my head falling back.

I was slack in his arms. I wasn’t even holding on; his strength had completely taken me over. He lifted me faster, dragging me up and down his cock, all the ridges and veins on the long length rubbing me inside just right. He somehow managed to grind me against his hard pelvic bone, and the movement felt like it zapped my clit with pleasure. I stiffened, rising higher and higher.

“That’s right. Fall apart on me. Come on my big cock. Let me ruin you like you ruin me.”

He picked me up and slammed me down, pushing me higher and higher, until my body spasmed and pleasure blasted out. Shocking waves of heat and euphoria jolted through me, reshaping my neural pathways, remaking me as a person addicted to this very feeling, and this man. *Only him.* I clenched down hard on him, and a deep groan left him as I contracted so hard my pussy became like a vice. He stiffened, and with his groan still on his breath, he came again.

“Fuck me, I can’t hold back, I can’t keep anything from you, and I’m done trying,” he panted in my ear.

I knew just how he felt.

Cayden drove me to Eve’s diner on his motorbike once the rain had stopped. I was wearing his sweats and a hoodie from his locker. It smelled like him, and I never wanted to wash it.

“Can you take the long way?” I asked as he approached me with the spare helmet and pulled it gently down on my head.

“With you? Anytime.” He grinned.

I couldn't get used to seeing that content expression. It was so different from the serious, intense guy that I'd known before.

I wrapped myself around him as he drove us down the dark winding roads surrounding Hade Harbor. I let my arms fly over my head again and felt freer than I'd ever felt before. I didn't know what was going on between Cayden and me. I didn't know if what had happened tonight would ever happen again, even if I wanted it to. It had been just as soul-baring as it had been physical, and I had no idea how to move forward from it.

I only knew that I'd done something I wanted, when I wanted, with the guy I wanted. Now, I had a perfect memory to treasure forever. I'd also decided to lay my amateur investigations into Cayden to rest. My will to go against him had broken when I'd seen the trailer he'd grown up in. It was too late to hate him, especially now that I'd seen so much of his life before Hade Harbor. I couldn't forget it. I didn't want to.

He roared into town and let me off outside the diner.

"Are you sure you're staying with Eve tonight?"

"Yes, we already made plans. Don't worry, I'm not going to say anything. As far as I'm concerned, I never went to Midnight Falls." I didn't bother telling him that Eve had been with me. There wasn't any point making things more complicated.

Cayden raised an eyebrow at me. "I guess I'll just try my best to believe you. After all, I still have your journal pages on my phone."

I frowned at him, climbing off the back of the bike and hopping to the curb. "Don't remind me. I was hoping we could move on from the constant threats."

He chuckled. "How about this...we can move on, but you need to write down some more dreams in it. I'll do my best to make them come true." He was sitting astride his bike, looking hotter than sin. The original bad boy, temptation in a leather jacket and boots, his hair still wet from the shower.

Oh God, the shower.

I flushed and looked down at the sidewalk. The shower room was too fresh in my mind, and my body was still too sore for him to be looking so hot right now.

“You can keep that one, I guess, as a spoil of war. You gave me a new one, remember?”

He nodded slowly. “When it comes to you, Lillian Williams, I remember everything.”

I had nothing to answer that outrageously romantic statement, and my heart wheezed, desperately in need of some distance from this guy. If I wasn’t careful, I was going to end up with a lot more than a great first-time story. I would end up with a raging, unrequited crush, and seeing as I’d nearly survived high school without dying over any of the Ice Gods, I didn’t want to start now.

“I’m going to go now. Have a nice weekend and everything,” I said, backing away, suddenly unsure how, exactly, to form normal sentences.

“You, too, Freckles. Stay out of trouble...or try, at least.” He shot me one last grin before flipping down his visor and starting his bike.

I watched him ride away, enjoying the sight.

Yep, that was the good stuff.

I headed inside the diner, thinking how ironic his last words were. Before he’d come to town, I’d never had the slightest bit of trouble with anything. Not with my friends, not with boys or schoolwork or my parents. Now I had him, and no one had ever personified trouble like Cayden West. I couldn’t even be mad about it.

Like they said, sometimes trouble wants you. In this case, I wanted it right back.

Cayden



ON SUNDAY, I headed to an extra practice and pushed my body to the limit. We had a game coming up with real competitors, for the first time. The locker room at the school rink had me hard within moments of stepping inside. I couldn't get the time I'd spent with Lily out of my head. Everything in there reminded me of her. Considering that was worn benches, cracked tiles, and the smell of old jockstraps, I planned to make sure that next time was more comfortable.

Maybe I'd simply crawl into her bed when she was sleeping and wake her by sliding inside her tight cunt, just like in her dream. I could cover her mouth, so when she woke, no one would hear her cry out.

"Hey, man, what's going on? You're a million miles away."

I stared at Asher for a long moment before my brain was able to refocus. The image in my head of recreating one of Lily's illicit fantasies was enough to short-circuit it.

"Just thinking about the Leopards. This Thursday's game is going to be our first real challenge," I muttered.

Asher nodded and sank down on the bench. "Yeah, good thing we've had time to play together." He yawned widely.

"Late night?" My mind went instantly to the fact that Lily had stayed over at his house last night.

He nodded. “Eve and Bug came home late and then played music and talked until God knows when.”

Had Lily told her friend what had happened between us? I couldn’t imagine it, but then, it had been a long time since I’d had what anyone would consider a real friend.

“Is Lily that noisy at home?” Asher asked.

I shrugged. “I haven’t really noticed.”

Just then, the door to the changing room banged open and Marcus charged in. The sudden sound sent all eyes to him. He gripped his phone like it was an undetonated bomb. He looked right at me and jerked his head to the side. Tension gathered in the pit of my stomach as I stood and followed him.

“What’s up?”

“Have you been on the student community board this morning?” he asked immediately, dispensing with a greeting.

I folded my arms over my chest, leaning on the wall. “I never go on that damn thing.”

The student community board wasn’t a thing in Midnight Falls, but it was huge in Hade Harbor. A place where important notices, party invites, and salacious gossip was posted about HHH students, by HHH students. It was practically a lawsuit waiting to happen.

“Well, this isn’t the best time to start, but I think you need to see this.” Marcus put his phone in my hand and gripped me comfortingly on the shoulder before leaving me alone in the hallway.

I looked down at the phone, everything in me clenched against what I was about to see. Did someone I used to intimidate for Uncle Jack come forward? Someone who wanted to slander me and make up stories?

It was photographs of a news headline and an article from the *Midnight Falls Chronicle*. The poster was anonymous. The headline slapped me in the face.

FOSTER SON ONLY SURVIVOR OF HOUSE FIRE THAT SEES BOTH PARENTS DEAD. POLICE SUSPECT FOUL PLAY.

Underneath, the post began with:

How well does everyone really know Hade Harbor's new hotshot? The real face of Cayden West.

I tightened my hand on the phone hard enough to crack the screen. It was my whole sordid past—at least the incident that happened when I was eight and had landed me at Uncle Jack’s—and all the speculation about the fire. At the end of the article there was a passage about suspected physical abuse in the home, and some allusion to evidence of such being found on the body of the foster kid. *Me*.

The world tilted. My breath felt short. In that moment, I wanted to run away from Hade Harbor and never look back. I wanted to disappear, but I couldn’t. Not unless I was willing to forget my one shot to make a better life for myself.

Several teammates approached, their voices dying as they walked past me. They’d been talking about me. They’d been talking about *it*. I could tell. Fury burned through me as they passed. I turned to the wall and braced my hands on it, taking deep breaths. I was a cornered animal, snarling and biting to escape, but I had nowhere to go. Everyone knew my deepest and darkest secrets. *Everyone*.

And there was only one person who could have told them who also had access to the student community board. It wasn’t only fury that bit me but hurt. I’d trusted her, I’d opened myself up to her, and she’d betrayed me.

Lillian.

Freckles.

I'd make her pay for all of it.

I didn't go home after practice. Instead, I sat in Coach's office while he talked about the article and gingerly probed for the truth before sighing.

"To be honest, Cayden, this is none of anyone's business. You were a minor, the police investigated, and whatever happened, happened. It doesn't change anything in the here and now."

I let out a bitter laugh. "Funny, it feels like it changes a lot."

Coach shook his head. "Only if you let it. Whispers, rumors, let it be water off a duck's back. Don't get affected. Who cares? You're here to win, correct?"

I nodded, my hands clenched into fists on my knees. I didn't want to be having this conversation with him. I didn't want to be doing any of this. I couldn't get a grip on my emotions, and that was dangerous. I had to be careful right now. A lot of eyes were on me.

"So, win. That's how you quiet the rumors. Well, that and getting the hell away from Midnight Falls, getting into HHU, and then the NHL. That's your solution right there."

Coach sat back just as a knock at the door sounded.

"Dad? I'm ready to go if you are."

Lily's sweet, hesitant voice was like thorns rubbing against my skin. I couldn't look at her, I couldn't bring myself to.

"Okay, Lilypad. Go to the truck, I'll be out shortly."

"Okay." Lily's eyes brushed past me, and then she turned away.

"The most important thing you have to realize is that no one at home cares about this. You still have a place with us. None of this is something that's

going to change your living situation or how we feel about you, Cade. Okay?"

"So, you're not scared of me?" I challenged, my fear and anger bubbling too close to the surface.

Coach paused, his eyes drilling into me. "Should I be?"

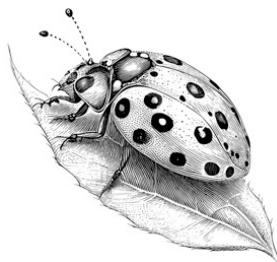
I swallowed, lost for words.

He sighed. "No matter what happened, you were a child. I'm not scared of you, Cayden, none of the Williamses are, and that won't change. You're no longer the person that article is talking about. Let's leave it at that."

He got up to leave, and I followed him. He was wrong. I was still that person, damaged beyond repair, ready to lie, cheat, and steal to survive, and there was one Williams who should be scared of me. If she wasn't already, soon, she would be.

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Lily



MY BIOLOGY HOMEWORK took longer than usual because I was distracted. The weekend had been full of Eve and work and more homework. Then Monday was a blur of a pop quiz and catching glimpses of Cayden in the hall. Oh, and the dreams. Every single night I'd dreamed of him, and now, they were only more detailed.

Most of all, I was distracted by the email that had landed in my inbox bright and early this morning. Early admission into my dream school and an invitation to an exclusive summer program, in California.

It was an even better offer than I'd dreamed of. Oddly, my first feeling when I'd read it had been disappointment and a healthy dose of anxiety. What that said about me was clear. Even when my dreams came true, I'd find something to worry about. In this case, however, I had a lot of reasons to worry, and every single one came back to the two people standing in the kitchen when I entered for dinner later.

Cayden was setting the table. There seemed to be a black cloud over his head, and he didn't meet my eyes as I joined in laying out the flat wear. My father was tense; I could tell by the fact that he'd already popped a beer. Usually, he saved drinking for the weekends or after a victory.

“You want one, Cade?” he offered.

“Eric!” My mother scolded.

I was shocked by the offer. My dad was hardly someone who encouraged underage drinking, but it went to show how he had different rules for his team than for me.

“What harm is it going to do? One beer...I think we all deserve one after today.”

My ears perked up. “Does that include me?” I teased my dad.

The tension in the room was heavy.

He pinched my cheek on the way past. “No way, Lil.”

“Unfair.”

I became aware of a hot feeling on the side of my face and turned toward it. Cayden looked away before our eyes could meet.

“I’m good, Coach. I’m not much of a drinker,” he said quietly.

“You’re a better man than me,” my father continued and sat.

I helped my mom carry the serving plates over to the table and sat across from Cayden. “So, what happened today that was so terrible?”

“Let’s not talk about it at dinner, okay? Let’s just enjoy our meal,” my mom said firmly, squashing any further questions.

We ate in uncomfortable silence. I felt Cayden’s eyes on me time and again, but when I looked at him, he glanced away. It was starting to make me nervous, considering the last time I’d seen him, he’d kissed me on the forehead outside the diner while his cum was still damp on my thighs. Was this what guys were like after sex, or was it something else?

Wait, did he know about California? No, it couldn’t be. How could he? My thoughts whirred through my brain, desperately trying to puzzle out his odd behavior. If he did know, why would he be acting like this? If wasn’t like he really cared where I went to college. The only thing he cared about was the leverage that the secret gave him over me. I’d thought we were past that after the other night. I’d thought we didn’t need to threaten each other anymore. A lump lodged in my chest. I ate sparingly and left the table as soon as I could.

Cayden stayed behind, helping to tidy like he always did. I hung about in the hallway outside his room. His shadow slid along the wall toward me before I saw him. He stopped as soon as he saw me.

“What do you want?” His cold question hurt a little after what we’d shared.

“I just wanted to talk to you. Am I not allowed to?” I was aiming for bright and breezy with my voice but failing miserably.

He was quiet for a moment. “I don’t have anything to say to you.” He made to push past me.

“Cayden, stop,” I reached out and grabbed his arm.

He stilled, looking down at the place where our skin touched.

“What’s going on with you? I thought after the other night...I thought we’d made peace.”

“Are you really asking me that?” His voice was cold.

He towered over me, and his anger seemed to wrap around us both, stealing my breath.

“I don’t understand.” I took a deep breath and tried to face my fears. “Did you find out about me getting into California?” It was a long shot, but I couldn’t think of anything else that had changed between us.

He stared at me, not answering.

“Why do you care where I go to college?” I pressed. My heart was beating hard, a foolish kind of excitement running through my veins. After the other night, my first time, all these tendrils of feeling kept leaving me and latching out toward Cayden. I couldn’t help it. I was getting attached. It was so predictable. Now, my heart was looking for any sign that he cared about me further than the other night. My first time. *Our* first time.

“I mean, it’s not like we’re really friends,” I trailed off. My fishing for some kind of reciprocal emotion from him wasn’t going well. I was acting awkward as hell, and if the floor decided to swallow me up at that moment, I wouldn’t have minded.

Cayden was silent for a painful second. “What are you playing at, Lily? What do you want from me?” He sighed, sliding his hand over his short dark hair, battling for control.

“I-I don’t know,” I admitted. *More*, the voice in my head whispered. *Everything*.

“I’ve got homework to do,” he said dismissively and moved toward the door of his room.

“Are you – will we talk again tonight?” I asked, breathless. Suddenly, the thought of him sleeping next door, upset about something while I wasn’t able to help seemed unbearable.

He just stared at me.

“You could – come and see me, later, when my parents are asleep,” I offered.

He remained silent, until my blood rushed to my face, embarrassing me.
“Whatever. Come, don’t come, it’s up to you.”

With that, I turned on my heel and scurried toward my room.

I dreamed of him again. His dark shape filling the doorway and then sliding into my bed. He was naked, and his hot skin scorched mine.

Since we’d been together, my dreams had taken on such a feeling of reality, it didn’t dawn on me that it wasn’t just in my head until his hand closed over my throat.

I tried to sit up, the dream falling away, but that palm kept me pinned to the mattress.

Cayden tutted in my ear. “Where do you think you’re going? You invited me, remember?”

I moaned as his weight settled on me. He’d tugged my shorts down while I was sleeping. I was wet. I didn’t know if it was from the dream or if he’d

already been touching me. Whichever it was, I was more than ready for him to be inside me. My skin was burning up, sizzling in every place he touched. He was so strong, his body kept me immobile as he lined himself up and sank inside me, his hand still gripping my throat. It hurt. The stretch was immense, and I whimpered. He captured my mouth in a kiss, stealing the sound.

He pushed inside me, not stopping until he was deep. My muscles spasmed around him, trying to force out his invasion for a moment before going slack. He rested there, sheathed to the hilt, his head lying on the pillow beside mine. I should have felt crushed by him, it should have been scary, but it wasn't. I liked it. It was every dark fantasy I'd ever had come to life. No choices, no escape, just the man I cared about, taking everything he wanted from me. I wasn't a bad daughter or a slutty puck bunny. I wasn't any of the things my mother worried I would become. I simply had no choice.

I wrapped my arms around him and held him to me, lifting my hips to squeeze him more as the pain faded. A growl rumbled deep in his chest as he moved.

He slid out of me in a long, fluid draw, and then plunged back in. I gasped, and his free hand clamped down over my mouth.

“Not a fucking sound, unless you want your dad to walk in here and see you getting fucked,” he warned quietly in my ear.

I protested against his hand, but he didn't remove it. Of course he didn't. He'd read my journal after all; he knew just how much I liked to imagine his rough touch. He fucked me hard, keeping me pinned by the throat the entire time. He stared down at me in the dark when I came, pushed over the edge far too quickly by his touch. He pressed my throat tighter, restricting my breathing. Stars exploded before my eyes, and I clamped down hard on him. I couldn't move, couldn't breathe. I fell endlessly through pleasure, not trying to push him off or move his hand even once. I felt him watching me, even as my face turned hot and my lungs burned. When he finally let go, I gasped for air, filling my shocked body with much-needed oxygen. The whole thing had only made me come even harder.

“How can you let me do that? How can you trust me after what you’ve done?” His deep voice seemed to be coming from far away.

In that floating place where he’d sent me, I couldn’t make sense of his quiet words. He was still hard inside me, and I rotated my hips against him, tugging him back toward me. He resisted, keeping his distance, even while his cock was still buried deep.

“I guess I just trust you not to hurt me, no matter what,” I murmured, stroking my fingers down his bare arms and over his back.

When I touched the scar tissue, he tensed. With a grunt, he pulled out, and the sudden loss was jarring.

I tried to sit up, confused why he hadn’t kept going. He hadn’t come yet. He yanked me back down and pushed me to my front. My breath left me again as he parted my legs roughly and draped himself over my back, his cock sliding right back inside me from behind. His hand clamped down over my mouth again, smothering my cry as he penetrated me from a different angle. This one was so much deeper.

“I’m not done with you yet, Lillian,” he murmured in my ear before sitting up.

His weight left my back as he straddled my thighs and fucked me prone. Grabbing an old bunny toy that was near my pillow, a sentimental remnant of childhood, he stuffed it into my mouth, gagging me with the well-loved plush.

“Now it’s my turn to take whatever I fucking want from you,” he muttered and caught my wrists with a huge hand, holding them at the small of my back while his other hand seized a handful of my hair and tilted my head back.

The position made me arch my back to keep my hair from pulling too tight, and he only slid deeper. I moaned wildly against the toy in my mouth. It was nearly too much. All the points of pain warred with the pleasure building inside me.

“You love this, don’t you, Bug? You love being used like a fuck toy,” Cayden’s voice was low and harsh. His hips snapped against mine, drilling

in ruthlessly deep.

Bug? I had to have heard wrong. He never called me Bug.

Yes, I do love it. I love it. Thankfully, the stuffy in my mouth stopped me from begging him out loud.

His deep voice turned me inside out.

“My fuck toy, to do whatever I want with. Do you imagine other guys fucking you like this? Asher? Beckett? Maybe both of them at once? Do you fantasize about them covering you in cum and sending you home to Daddy?”

The toy fell from my mouth as I came again. I tensed, and Cayden growled low in his throat as my pussy tightened all around him.

“No,” I panted, lost in sensation. “I only fantasize about you. Just you.”

“Fuck!” He spat and let my hands go to grab my ass cheeks, his fingers sinking into the fleshy globes as he came inside me.

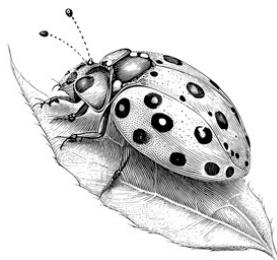
His cock pulsed inside my channel, and the hot, wet feeling only made my orgasm stronger.

“Fuck, you milk me so well. This cunt was made to take my cock and hold my cum,” he muttered.

I trembled beneath him, my body awash with liquid pleasure. He took a moment, catching his breath, his cock still sunk deep, before he pulled out and shifted his weight off the bed. I twisted my head to watch him as he stood. He was leaving already? He stared down at me in the dark for a long moment. I could feel his cum welling out of me and dripping down my inside thigh. I’d have to be the one who washed these sheets so my mom didn’t get suspicious. He reached for the covers and pulled them up over my lower half. He stretched down and pushed the covers in around the sides, sealing me up.

Then he turned and left me there, full of him, spent and panting, tucked in like a good girl.

Lily



“WHAT’S UP? Three calls before breakfast is a little excessive, even for you,” I said to Eve as I joined her in the parking lot the next morning.

She was paler than usual, and there was a jumpy, anxious quality to her that I rarely saw. I had barely raised my head from my books yesterday, given my important test, so it was nice to see Eve and get filled in on all the gossip of HHH that I wasn’t a part of.

“So, you saw my calls and just decided not to call me back?”

“I was in a hurry, and I knew I’d see you here.” Truthfully, I’d overslept and then had to shower for obvious reasons before breakfast and sort the sheets out in case my mother decided to be helpful and go and change them while I was at school.

Eve blew out an impatient breath and pulled her phone out of her pocket. “Whatever, we don’t have time to talk about why you’re so bad at answering the phone. Look what was posted on the student community board yesterday. It was taken down pretty quickly, but lots of people screenshotted it.”

She passed me her phone, and a heavy weight landed in my gut.

It was the article from the *Midnight Falls Chronicle*. The one about eight-year-old Cayden. There were a whole lot of replies underneath, though clearly the screenshot hadn’t captured them all. Most of them were shocked,

skeptical, and some were demanding answers or saying that their parents wouldn't want him at school in Hade Harbor.

“How can you trust me like this after what you’ve done?”

Oh my God. The truth finally clicked into place and made sense.

“He thinks it was me.” My voice sounded hollow. “Cayden thinks I leaked this.”

“Did he say something to you about it?”

I shook my head.

Eve’s face scrunched. “Why wouldn’t he? I’d want answers from you if I were him.”

“He doesn’t need answers. He’s already decided that it’s me...” I broke off and took a couple of steps away from Eve. “I need to speak to him.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? He’ll probably be really angry,” Eve pointed out.

Suddenly, his quiet behavior last night was terrifying. If he was going to get angry, he would have already done so, like the night on the ice rink. No, he wasn’t angry, not like that. A terrible, terrifying thought occurred to me. I recalled what he’d said to me when we’d first met.

“When someone crosses me, I don’t get angry – I get even.”

I rushed into the school. The fastest way to the rink was through the main school building, and I couldn’t afford to waste any time. I had no idea if Cayden was still getting dressed after practice, but it was a place to start.

I was in the foyer when it registered.

White, fluttering sheets of paper were pinned to the bulletin boards and blowing around on the floor. Students were picking them up and reading them, laughing. Some people pointed at me, and I suddenly knew, before I’d even looked at one, exactly what that paper was.

“Lil,” Eve whispered, still at my shoulder.

I turned to her, feeling like the world was moving in slow motion. I glanced down at the paper in her hand and saw my own writing.

I dreamed of Cayden West again. Taking me, holding me down, filling me up so full I could feel his cum sliding down my leg all day.

No, no, no, no. I grabbed the paper and scanned it. Not only was it the most explicit and nonconsensual of all the things I'd written in my journal, but I talked about California in it, too. Both my terrible secrets exposed in front of the entire student body.

The paper crumpled between my fingers, and I dropped it on the floor. Pain filled me like nothing I'd ever felt before. Embarrassment, shame, and fear scorched a path through me.

I started forward, ignoring the laughter and shocked murmurs of those watching me.

"Lillian! Wait up," Eve said, hurrying after me.

"Don't follow me. I need to speak to Cayden alone," I ground out.

"Wait, I'll come with you," she insisted, dogging my steps all the way down the front entrance stairs to the school and toward the rink.

"Don't be seen with me, people will talk about you, too, that way," I warned her.

She scoffed. "You think I care what people say? Lily! Stop!"

I spied Cayden's bike sitting at the curb near the rink.

"Eve!" Asher's voice reached us. He was heading out of the sport's building, his bag over his shoulder and his eyes trained on his sister.

"Where is he?" I demanded.

There wasn't any need to specify, I could tell by the look on Asher's face that he'd already seen the journal pages.

“Inside.” He jerked his head toward the building.

“Wait out here or go to class,” I advised Eve.

“No, I need to come with you,” she started, until her brother grabbed her.

“Evie, they need to talk alone, clearly,” he said quietly.

I didn’t hear anymore, the roaring in my ears was too loud. I blasted through the ice rink doors, my gaze glossing over the display of sports equipment displayed at the entrance, celebrating all the sports that Hade Harbor excelled at. An empty hockey mask hung over a baseball bat, mocking me.

I turned on my heel and made for the locker room. When I got there, Beckett was just stepping out. He paused on the threshold, holding the door open. I stormed toward him, too embarrassed to meet his eyes. He’d read the pages, probably, just like everyone else. He knew what I dreamed about, all my twisted little fantasies.

I paused before entering.

“He’s alone, if you’re wondering,” Beckett offered.

I nodded. If even cold-as-ice, rich-boy Beckett was pitying me, I had to be pitiful indeed. I pushed inside, and he let the door close behind me.

Cayden sat on a bench, his padding still on. He stared at the floor, lost in thought. For a guy who had just exploded my life, he didn’t look too satisfied.

I stood and stared at him for a long moment, taking in the defeated slope of his strong shoulders and the fading bruises on his torso. My heart squeezed. It hurt. His betrayal actually physically hurt.

“Why?” I asked, my voice ragged.

He flinched, his eyes shooting to mine. There was a second where I saw his hurt, too, and it matched mine. Then cool indifference coated his features. He shrugged, leaning back against the lockers behind him, his beautiful body a picture of nonchalant strength.

“I could ask you the same.”

“Yeah, except I never told anyone—”

He held up a finger to me. “Don’t. Don’t lie to me. I had enough of your poisonous lies last night.”

“I’m not lying. I would never have done that to you.”

He exhaled in a harsh snort and stood. “The time for talking about this, and having a chance of being believed, is behind us. Get out of here and leave me alone, unless you want me to fuck you in the shower again. This time, though, I might not let you come up for air.”

He pulled his pads off and tossed them on the bench.

Frustration coursed through me. “So, you won’t listen to the truth?”

“I won’t listen to anything you have to say, because you’ve fucked with my head enough.” He let out an incredulous laugh. “Well done, though, Bug. You played me, you really did. I never saw it coming. Shy, geeky little Lillian, innocent, sweet...I bought it all. I never thought a girl like you could look at me, knowing everything there was to know, and want me anyway. Turns out I was right after all.”

I swallowed a lump of emotion in my throat.

Cayden’s eyes narrowed on mine. “Congratulations. You’ve managed to do what the Cutlers and Uncle Jack never managed to do – break my fucking heart and endanger my future. Now, get the hell out of here before I lose it.”

Break his heart? My own trembled at the confession, but then frustration reared up. He wasn’t going to listen to me. He wasn’t going to believe me, and he’d fucked my life up just as hard.

My terrible hurt turned to anger in a flash. “Before you lose it? Is that supposed to scare me? What are you going to do to me? Are you going to hurt me?” I stepped closer to him, getting in his face.

He put a hand on my chest and held me back. “Don’t.”

“Why not? You’ve already humiliated me in front of the entire school and let everyone know about California! My dad will know...” A sob forced its way up my throat. I beat at his hands, pushing him as hard as I could. “I hate you! I never did anything to you, and you’ve fucking killed me!”

“Don’t touch me, Lily, and don’t bother crying either. Your tears won’t work on me. You’re dead to me. You don’t exist. I don’t care what happens with you and your parents. I don’t care if everyone thinks you’re a fucked up little slut. I don’t care if you go live out those fantasies with half the hockey team – just stay out of my way.” He delivered the last words with stone-cold finality before shoving me away.

I staggered back a few steps, my feelings flashing between hurt and anger.

Anger won.

I turned on my heel and went for the door, fury brewing in my veins. I stormed through the rink, toward the foyer. The display at the entrance caught my eye. I plucked the baseball bat off its perch before I could stop myself and charged outside.

My eyes fixed on the bike at the curb.

I drew the bat back and lined myself up. The first hit took off the side mirror. I circled around and demolished the second one.

“Lily!” Eve’s voice screamed at me.

The sound of feet rushing toward me didn’t distract me as I raised the bat over the taillights and smashed it down, again and again.

Strong arms went around my middle, lifting me.

“Lillian, that’s enough,” Asher’s firm voice spoke in my ear.

“No, it’s not. It’s not enough until this thing is rubble!” I screamed, twisting in his arms.

Despite my wild movements, I couldn’t get away. Asher dragged me from the bike, and Eve pulled the bat out of my hands and tossed it to the ground.

“Get off me. I have to do something. I have to hurt him—”

“Like he hurt you? I think he’s hurt enough,” Asher said.

He had me turned away from the bike and the rink, facing the school. Everyone stared, and some had their phones out.

“It wasn’t me. I didn’t say a thing about him,” I fumed.

“Eve told me. Still, he thinks you did.”

“I don’t care what he thinks. He doesn’t believe me,” I ground out.

“Yeah, well, trusting others doesn’t come easily to some people... And if you read that newspaper article, you might understand why.”

“Don’t!” I managed to wriggle down from Asher’s hold. I pointed an accusing finger at him. “Don’t try and make me feel sorry for him, because I won’t.”

“Lillian Williams!” a loud voice thundered behind me.

I turned to see the principal staring at me from the top of the school stairs. She looked at me and then at the bike. Cayden had come out of the rink and now stood next to it, his face expressionless.

“Cayden and Lily – both of you, my office, now!”

I was bristling with anger as I sat next to Cayden in front of the principal. Cayden seemed like he might have been carved from ice. Not even a muscle ticked in his jaw, nothing.

Principal Smith blew out a long sigh. “Look, I know things can get out of hand when you’re a teenager, but destruction of property and whatever this is,” she waved a copy of my journal page, “we don’t have time for it at school.”

She turned her attention to me. “Lillian, are you aware that Cayden could press charges against you for destruction of private property?”

My face heated. "Well, then, I guess I'll press charges against him for libel, or slander, or distribution of confidential information."

Principal Smith gave me an exasperated look. "Or you could both decide to let things go. I'm sure Coach Eric will cover the bike repairs, considering the vast number of witnesses who saw you cause the damage, Lily."

I shrugged. "I wouldn't count on it, as my parents are probably never going to speak to me again."

Cayden snorted. "Don't be so dramatic."

I shot him a deadly look. "Don't speak to me. I don't exist, remember?"

"Whatever. Can I go?" Cayden made to stand.

"No. Sit down, Mr. West. Did you distribute these papers?"

"Not that I recall," Cayden drawled. "Besides, if Bug wasn't acting like a kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar, no one would even suspect that it wasn't just a prank. The way she's acting is only confirming that it's her journal entry – if only she was smart enough to figure that out."

My anger choked me, and I could only glare wordlessly at him.

"So, if that's all, I need to get to class. We have an important game this week, and I was at practice at five a.m. and didn't get much sleep last night."

The reminder of last night only angered me even more.

The principal sighed, sounding like she was completely over idiot teens and their problems. "Are you going to press charges about the bike?" she asked, all business now.

Cayden shook his head.

"And do you want to make a complaint about this 'joke' of a journal entry or just laugh it off and de-escalate this entire thing?"

I shrugged. They were right, laughing it off would have been the smart thing to do, but I'd seen red.

“De-escalate it, I guess.”

“Good, okay, I’ll say we’ve looked into it, and it’s just a silly prank, made-up junk. Cayden, Coach Eric will get your bike fixed. I don’t want to hear about you two being at each other’s throats again. It’s senior year. It’s too important to waste time on this nonsense.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Cayden said as we all stood.

I glowered at him, but he strolled out, unbothered by my anger.

I followed him into the hall and waited until Principal Smith had closed her door before shoving him from behind.

“How could you?” I started, furious tears forming again. I’d never been so angry or upset.

I pushed him again, and he grabbed my arm, whirling us both so we ended up against the wall, hidden behind a huge fake ficus.

“Don’t start a fight you can’t win, Bug. We go our separate ways, that’s for the best. It’s merciful for you.”

“And who said I wanted your mercy? You really think I’d be grateful that you decided not to go after me, after what you’ve done?”

“It wasn’t unprovoked, and you know it,” he said quietly, emotion gleaming in his stormy eyes.

It hurt to see, and my own heart’s betrayal only made it worse.

“Right, you claim I broke your heart? Like you even have one.” I stabbed a finger into his chest right over said organ. “It’s just an empty cavern in here, isn’t it? Tell the truth. Don’t pretend to feel things like normal people do. I was right, I guess, when we first met, and I called you a parasitoid.”

His face tensed at that, and I could feel the hurt radiating off him. He was sensitive as hell about that word, I’d found that out the first time we’d met. In my anger, there was no weapon within reach that I wouldn’t hurl. It was a horrible thing to find out about yourself. I tilted my face up and stared at him, knowing he was too amped up to speak right now. He was working for calm, but it was slow coming.

“An organism that eventually kills the host it feeds on. That’s you, isn’t it...?”

He took a deep breath, and I saw the moment that he mastered his anger.

A cold smile slid across his full lips. “Careful, Bug. I don’t want to crush you, but I will.”

“I told you, I don’t want your mercy. Go ahead and crush me. Thanks to you, I have nothing to lose.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. There’s always something,” he said with perfect confidence. The kind that made me nervous as hell.

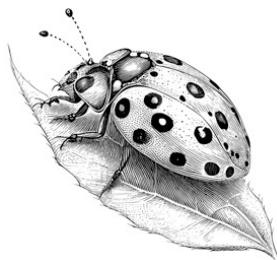
Despite that, I couldn’t back down; I simply wasn’t able to. My anger was too great, and my pride, and fuck, my disappointment, too. I felt stupid and betrayed and annoyed at myself for feeling anything at all for such a monster.

“Do your worst, Cayden... that’s all you’re capable of anyway.”

I shoved him back, and this time, he let me. Escaping out of the side door, I walked away, my cheeks blazing, tears threatening, and a flurry of loud murmurs following me wherever I went.

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Lily



THE REST of the day after gym passed in a blur of humiliation. I kept my head down and powered through. Luckily, I was pretty used to being ridiculed, though usually it was just girls like Selena who threw barbs my way. Now, everyone was looking, and some of the teachers, too. Hopefully the principal's story about it being a prank would get around quick.

A kind janitor got rid of the printouts quickly, but I was sure people like Selena had stashed them away to torment me with later.

When I got to my room that night and flopped down on my bed, I felt like a hundred years had passed since I'd left it this morning. I was a different person than the Lily who'd headed off to school, happy and light.

I closed my eyes and dozed, the terrible day pressing me down and wearing me out. I just wanted to sleep and pretend that none of it had happened.

Later, a knock at my door woke me.

"Lily, sweetheart, it's dinner time," my mom called through the door.

"I'm not hungry. I don't feel well. I just want to sleep," I called back.

She was quiet for a long, torturous moment. "If you're sure. We're here if you want to talk."

Oh God. She knew. My dad must have heard about all of it: the bike, fighting with Cayden, maybe even the journal entry. No, if she'd heard

about the journal entry, she'd be having it out with me about California. It couldn't be that. It had to be the bike thing.

I heard Cayden come to his room later and the door close. It felt excruciating to know he was right next door, feet away, and yet oceans apart. He blamed me, he'd hurt me. He was the first boy I'd ever kissed, and the first I'd ever slept with, and now, he was the first boy to break my heart as well. He was really ticking off all the boxes for me.

He blamed me and wouldn't even hear me out, but that didn't change the truth. I didn't leak anything about that old newspaper article to anyone and I knew Eve wouldn't have, either. I sat up in bed and reached for my laptop. Opening a browser, I prepared to dive deep into *Midnight Falls'* past.

I might never be able to forgive what Cayden had done to me, but that didn't mean I couldn't clear my name.

I didn't out him, but someone did, and I was going to find out who.

The next few days at school sucked. People talked about me wherever I went, despite the fact Principal Smith had ordered them not to. Thankfully, my father had believed that it was a silly prank gone wrong. That, at the end of the day, was the only thing that mattered. If I felt like my parents had read my words, and believed them, I couldn't stand it.

My locker was vandalized daily with quotes from my journal, and wherever I went, there was a barrage of notes pelted at me, all with my own words reflected back at me. Teachers confiscated them in class, their faces turning pink after reading them, before ordering other students to stop. Selena and her cronies were the worst of the bunch, predictably – well, all except Winter, who seemed bored by the entire thing, as per usual.

Eve stuck to my side like glue, but she couldn't be there all the time. My backpack got stolen at least once a day and ended up in all kinds of odd places, like the school roof or the bottom of the pool. I lost assignments that way, textbooks and countless notepads full of my neat rows of words.

Cayden walked around the school with his head held high, the Ice Gods at his back, and stared anyone down who dared to mention the newspaper article about him. He was the hunter, and I was the prey. I had no power at HHH, and I felt it more acutely than ever.

In gym on Thursday, Selena kicked the bullying up a notch. We were playing dodgeball, and most people were playing as unenthusiastically as I was. It was late afternoon, and no one felt like trying. The gym session was at the same time as another class, and the teacher had split us up by gender. Cayden was there, across the other side of the hall, playing basketball with some guys.

I wasn't paying attention to the game. I was far too focused on Cayden. I had barely looked at him all week, and now, I could watch him unobserved. Was I the pathetic girl heartbroken over lack of attention from her bully? Yes, it turned out, I was that fucked up. Still, knowing that he believed I'd betrayed him burned at me. I wanted to prove my innocence, just so I could see his expression when he realized what he'd done in retaliation had been completely unwarranted. I imagined all sorts of reactions, but deep down, I feared that he wouldn't care either way. He'd said I was dead to him, that I didn't exist, and this week it had certainly felt like that.

"Hey! Watch out!"

A sharp shout came from my left as I tore my eyes from Cayden and focused back on the game. Selena had just taken a shot, and like the bitch she was, aimed right for my face. It was too late to move. I only managed to shut my eyes as the ball sailed toward my face and met my nose with a sickening crunch. Pain radiated through my head as the teacher blew the whistle.

"Selena, sit down over there," she barked.

"It was an accident! I didn't know Lily wasn't really playing, just staring moodily around, *daydreaming*."

Her cruel words sent a ripple of chuckles through the rest of the girls watching.

I was so over it. I clamped a hand to my nose as a rush of warmth moved downward quickly. Blood dripped out and splattered my white T-shirt.

“Lily, do you need to see the nurse?” the gym teacher called, distracted by another student asking her something.

I shook my head. “Nope. I’ll just go to the bathroom.” The last thing I needed was to end up in the nurse’s office with tampons stuffed up my nose.

I whirled on my heel and ran to the girls’ bathroom.

“Sorry, Bug!” Selena called behind me, laughter in her voice.

I got to the girls’ bathroom and stared in the mirror. My nose was really gushing.

Grabbing a few paper towels, I wadded them up and held them beneath the flow, then tilted my head back. Was that the right thing to do for a bloody nose?

“Ready to give up, Bug?”

Cayden’s deep voice sent me spinning around, nearly slipping on the wet floor. Blood ran down my arm from where the paper towel had slipped.

He leaned against the wall of the bathroom, arms folded, one foot braced against the wall, looking as uncaring as could be.

“Give up what?” I asked, my voice all muffled.

“Your declaration of war against me... wouldn’t it be better just to pretend that the other doesn’t exist?”

He pushed off the wall and approached me, tutting as he took in the mess I was making of my face. He rested a heavy hand on the back of my neck, and I backpedaled, trying to get away. He simply tightened his grip and guided my head down so the blood was no longer going down the back of my throat.

“Lean forward for a nosebleed, not back,” he muttered, grabbing a fresh bunch of paper towels with his other hand and pushing away the bloodied

ones I clutched in my fist. He held a clean paper towel firmly under my nose, the red smearing against his fingers immediately.

“It’s getting on you,” I muttered, unsure what to make of him right now.

“I’m a hockey player. You think I’m grossed out by blood?”

“Nose blood,” I reminded him.

“Any blood. It doesn’t bother me, and besides, I’ve shed blood from far more intimate places from you, Bug.”

I reared back and glared up at him. “Don’t.”

He smirked and raised an eyebrow at me. “Don’t remind you of how we both cleaned your virgin blood off my cock after I fucked you in a room just like this?”

I swallowed hard. The look in his eyes was difficult to read.

“Yeah, well, as I seem to remember, I wasn’t the only one getting their cherry popped on that occasion. Maybe that should be the next rumor to go around school,” I threatened him.

He only smirked more. “Good luck getting anyone to believe that.”

“But it’s true,” I pointed out mulishly.

“Yes, and truth has little to do with what people will believe. Put your head back a little now,” he instructed.

I followed his orders, just because he seemed to have stopped the bleeding, and there weren’t many ways to resist his strong grip.

He wet a tissue under the tap and wiped the crusted blood from my lips.

“Yeah, you’re right about that. I’m telling you the truth about that newspaper article, and yet you don’t believe me. The truth really is meaningless, it only matters what people believe.” My words were quietly defeated. Cayden paused.

His eyes met mine.

“I’d respect you more if you just owned it, Bug. Confess, and maybe the truth will set you free,” he murmured.

His words pissed me off. I grabbed the tissue from his hand, his gentle touch at odds with his cruel words, and jerked my face away.

“Right, and what good would that do me?”

“Once the sinner has confessed, they can repent...” He stroked a finger along my chin, wiping a streak of watery blood from my skin. “I could be inventive with the methods of repentance, and all the trouble at school would stop.”

I met his eyes in the mirror, my heart thumping erratically. Gathering my courage, I shook my head.

“I’m not lying to make my life easier. I didn’t tell anyone, and I will never pretend that I did. One day, you’ll realize that you punished the wrong person.” I threw out the red-soaked paper towels and turned to him. “I’d like to think you’ll feel bad when you find out that what you did to me was under false assumptions, but I’m not sure you’re capable of it.”

Then I stepped around him and strode from the bathroom, head held high. I felt Cayden’s eyes on me the entire way.

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Cayden



“I MEAN, you can tell she’s not normal just by looking at her. Oh God, I can’t believe she actually came in here for lunch! I’d go home, I’d be too ashamed.”

Selena’s fucking annoying voice grated on my nerves. I didn’t understand why we had to put up with her or her minions at lunch. I was beyond over it. Everything was irritating me today. Thanks to the gossip about Lily this week, the rumors about me had nearly completely died out.

I should be relieved.

I wasn’t.

I glowered at Selena as she stood to get a better glimpse of the object of her torture.

Lily had entered the cafeteria, Eve at her side. Her waterfall of red hair shielded her face from me. If I saw she’d been crying again, I’d fucking lose it right now. It had been bad enough the other morning in the locker room. That dashed-away tear that had escaped her eye would haunt me for the rest of my life.

I’d caused that.

If I’d ever needed more confirmation that I was a bastard, that tear fit the bill. I’d told her that she didn’t exist to me anymore. What a joke. I couldn’t

get her out of my head, she'd taken over my thoughts completely. She was the only thing that existed for me; that was the truth I couldn't escape.

"Did you hear Principal Smith? It was a prank that got out of hand. You really think Lily is leaving her journal around for just anyone to copy?" Marcus snorted.

Selena sighed at him. "She didn't just leave it around, obviously. Cayden took it, didn't he?"

I sensed her turn to me, her satisfaction curling off her like the stink of old cheese. "Didn't you? You got sick of seeing her at home all the time, being weird and annoying, and decided to teach her a lesson."

"Are you fucking deaf? It was a prank, end of story." Asher's snap had a bite to it, and it managed to silence Selena for a whole minute.

"Well, Bug doesn't look like she found it very funny, and neither do you guys, so I doubt it was a prank."

The irritation that had been simmering in my blood overflowed, and I jerked my chin at Selena and shoved her lunch tray. "This table's too fucking crowded. Get lost."

Stunned silence met my words.

"Excuse me?"

I fixed her with a look. "I said there's one too many people at this table, and it's you. You're boring, and I'm fucking sick of hearing you run your mouth. Fuck off before I stop asking nicely."

"You're such an asshole," Selena said after a moment, standing and crossing her arms in front of her. "I think you're just sore because Bug's upset, for some reason, I don't know why. Maybe because you leaked her diary."

"Talk about the fucking journal again, or Lillian Williams, and you won't like the consequences," I ground out. Crap, what was I doing now? Threatening random mean girls. What could I even do to her? Breaking

Josh's nose and threatening the queen bitch of our class. Lily had me all kinds of fucked up, and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it.

"You think Lily has dark secrets that are embarrassing to expose? I'm sure you have some, too, and if you don't shut the fuck up and keep her name out of your mouth, I'll make it my mission to find out what they are, and make sure everyone knows." I nearly growled at Selena.

She blinked at me, tears forming in her overly lined eyes.

"And don't call her Bug anymore while you're at it," I added.

Selena spun on her heel and stormed away. Her anger and crocodile tears did nothing for me. I wasn't going soft, after all. It was only the sight of Lily's tears that bothered me. Freckles, the only person I'd let inside in so long. Ever, really.

This week had been a slowly unfolding nightmare, and I was ready to wake up. Leaking the journal had been rash, an impulsive act born of anger and hurt, and now, I couldn't take it back. So, Lily had let everyone know about my past...it was all true, after all, and public record. Now, thanks to my shot at her, every fucking loser in the school thought they could have a crack at her. The memory of the droplets of blood on her white T-shirt haunted me.

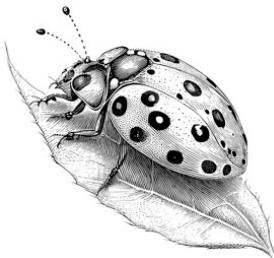
"Isn't that a little bit like closing the gate after the horse bolted, when you're the one who let it out in the first place?" Marcus raised an eyebrow at me.

I shrugged uncomfortably and then stood. I couldn't help my eyes going to Lily and Eve. They huddled at a table near the back, eating quietly. I turned away before she could see me staring at her.

"Man, you've hardly touched your food."

"I'm not hungry. See you at the rink." I tossed my tray on the way out and didn't look back.

Lily



“GOOD MORNING, I’m calling from the *Hade Harbor Herald*, and I wanted to ask you about finding articles published about ten years ago. I wasn’t able to find those online, so I’m wondering how I can get access to those?”

I scribbled down the address the lady gave me over the phone. The secretary at the *Midnight Falls Chronicle* was more than helpful and thankfully didn’t ask for any press credentials.

“Okay, and I can just pop in there and browse through the old editions? Great. I’ll come by later.” I was more than willing to skip tonight’s game to go to Midnight and see if I could figure out who had accessed the article.

“They’re closed on Fridays, dear. Come on Saturday... the third Saturday of the month has open hours.”

“Okay, will do.” *The third Saturday of the month?* It looked like the achieve didn’t get many visitors.

I hung up and tucked away the address of the small library that housed every edition of the *Chronicle* since its creation in the 1960s. It looked like I was going back to Midnight, but this time, I was going alone. I’d dragged Eve into enough of my shit. I needed to stand on my own two feet. Besides, I didn’t want Cayden’s wrath to extend to her. This was between me and him.

The rest of the week had been uneventful. I’d mostly hidden away in various classrooms, thrown myself into studying, and tried to blend in with

the scenery as much as possible. Strangely, people were getting over it pretty quick. For some reason, they seemed to buy that it was a prank. My wild reaction to it should have spread like wildfire, but it just hadn't caught on. Soon enough, the talk turned back to Cayden and his mysterious past.

Tonight was a big game. The winners would officially get closer to Nationals than Hade Harbor had been in a decade. My dad was anxious, hell, the entire school was anxious.

It happened to be against the Volcanoes, the team my coworker Tyler, played for. He was keyed up as hell and had been texting me all day.

I didn't want to go and had already told my dad as much. Unfortunately, the disappointed look on his face had broken the remaining parts of my heart to pieces, so I was hanging out on the stairs of the rink, waiting for my mom to arrive. Eve had work, so I had to face watching Cayden play alone.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. My mom was running late. Perfect. Not only that, my dad wasn't answering his phone, and she wanted me to go and find him to tell him good luck. Another little superstition before a game: my dad's head wouldn't be in the right place if he didn't get a good luck from my mom before the buzzer.

I headed inside, moving down toward the locker rooms and my dad's office reluctantly.

Players drifted about, some just arriving, others already dressed. Tension was in the air tonight. Josh was hanging out by the stairs. His nose wasn't bandaged anymore, but his eyes were still bruised.

"Hey, are you looking for your dad? He just went into his office."

Josh's smile reassured me a little. It was nice to see a friendly face when I was so nervous.

"Thanks. Yeah, I have to deliver a very special good luck to him." I gave Josh a small, tentative smile, my first since Tuesday, it felt like.

"Oh really? From who?"

“Is it me?” a loud voice boomed behind me, and suddenly arms surrounded me, picking me up and twirling me around.

I knew that damn voice.

“Tyler, put me down,” I protested. The last thing I needed was more gossip about me flying around.

Tyler complied, and Josh stared at him, starstruck.

“You’re Tyler Owens, right? From the Volcanoes. You’re a great player, man.”

Tyler grinned. “Thanks, dude, that’s always nice to hear. Lily never says it, like, ever.”

“Bug doesn’t really follow hockey,” Josh said.

Tyler frowned at him. “Bug?”

“Oh, it’s her nickname here,” Josh said, backpedaling.

Tyler looked at me. “Well, I guess Hade Harbor miscreants aren’t as creative as they like to think they are, right, Lil?”

“It’s fine, it doesn’t bother me. I’m used to it.”

“It doesn’t bother you, or you’re used to it?” Tyler pressed.

“I don’t care, seriously. Anyway, I need to go and see my dad real quick. Good luck tonight,” I said to Tyler and spun on my heel, crashing straight into an unforgivably hard body.

Cayden towered over me, a specter in black. He didn’t even sway when I bounced off him, reminding me of the first time we’d met and how he’d knocked me on my ass in the parking lot without even lifting a finger.

Tyler whistled loudly. “If it isn’t the star player himself, Cayden West. We’re more than ready for you this year. Your team might have changed, but that’s not going to help you,” he goaded.

Cayden was completely silent.

I glanced up at him. He stared at Tyler with a vaguely menacing look.

I stepped out of his shadow, and the movement drew his eye. He seemed anxious, a line pinching tightly between his eyebrows. His shoulders were bunched, and his lips were thin. When, exactly, I'd learned to decipher Cayden's emotions just from his posture, I had no idea, but it couldn't be a good thing.

"See you later," I called in Tyler and Josh's direction.

"Let's hang after the game, Lil." Tyler grinned at me.

I didn't dare look at Cayden again as I left.

I hurried to my dad's office and knocked.

"Come in!" His voice sounded harried.

I poked my head around the door. "Mom's running late, and you're not answering your phone. She says good luck."

My dad grinned to himself and nodded. "Okay, now I can concentrate."

"You're crazy with all these superstitions and rituals."

"Don't knock it till you've tried it, and besides, I know you have your own little rituals on test days. Different pencils with different levels of sharpness, and whatnot."

I nodded, admitting that much was true.

"I'll see you in there, Lilypad."

"See you."

I turned back to the hall and noted how it had started to empty out. Tyler was gone; he probably shouldn't have snuck away from his own team to begin with. Josh was gone, too, and there weren't many people left in the hall. Despite the small numbers, I couldn't have counted them if I'd tried, because one in particular was left. Cayden stood in the middle of the hall, intimidating in his padding and jersey. His eyes hit mine and felt like a touch.

Raw feelings bubbled up from where I'd stuffed them inside my chest. His gaze on me still felt like electricity. How long would it be before my dumb heart understood that he had written me off, just like that? How long until I got it through my thick skull that he was done with me? I hoped it was soon. I needed it to be soon. I couldn't cope with the long, unfading disappointment, spiked by sharp betrayal.

He walked toward me, taking long, measured steps. My heart picked up its beat, nerves gathering in my belly. *Is he going to speak to me?* He paused just beside me, his dark eyes sweeping over my face. Tension rose between us like an oncoming storm. *What was he going to say?* His eyes were a mix of hurt and anger, just like mine. Before I could get too excited, he looked away, the unspoken words never leaving his mouth. He continued past me, leaving me alone and longing in his wake.

There was something wrong with Cayden. From the second the first buzzer sounded, he was off his game. It started when he crashed into Tyler, the Volcanoes' centre, and they both went careening into the boards. My gaze stayed on them, even when Beckett picked up the puck and raced down the ice, sinking the first goal of the game. The stadium erupted into cheers, even as Cayden was given a warning and allowed to take his place in the center again.

As soon as the play was back in action, he hooked the puck to Asher, who raced down the side. Again, my eyes were pulled to Cayden, who'd once again gotten in Tyler's face. Tyler ignored him, skating away and watching the play, until Cayden purposely bumped into him. Tyler turned to him, and soon enough, the two were fighting. Their teammates pulled them apart, and only Cayden was sent to the penalty box. He watched the game, his expression thunderous, as the Volcanoes made the most of the Hellions being shorthanded and evened the score.

When his five minutes were up, he burst out and scored in the first thirty seconds. Then he seemed to focus on Tyler again. After another collision sent them both into the boards, Beckett got up in Cayden's face, and it

looked like the two Hellions were about to throw down. My father was pulling his hair out, gesturing wildly from the edge as he watched.

Cayden and Beckett both got sent to the bench for a shift change, and their argument seemed to continue. Beckett stabbed a finger in my direction, and Cayden tensed even more.

When they got back out onto the ice, Cayden seemed withdrawn. He didn't fight again with Tyler, but he didn't score either. It was like he was muted and couldn't switch back on. The Volcanoes took the lead.

As soon as the first buzzer sounded for intermission, I headed down to catch my dad before he went to the locker room. He was tense, his jaw clenched, his lips pursed. This game was important, and it wasn't just the team's hopes of Nationals that rested on it, but my dad's future goals to coach college hockey.

"Dad, what's happening?"

"I don't know. It's Cade. He's distracted, and we could lose like this. He has to get his head back in the game, and now. Keep your eyes open for me—I can't find him anywhere, and I need to speak with him before the end of intermission." My dad hustled away.

I took my water bottle from my bag, just as my mom came running into the crowd.

"Oh, thank God, I thought I'd missed more than the first period."

"No, you're fine, which is more than I can say for the Hellions."

"Are you serious? Cayden is still so upset?"

I shrugged. "He's been in the penalty box nearly three times already. I'm not sure if that's upset or unhinged."

"Upset, of course. He's been upset all week, ever since that unfortunate article came out. You can understand why. Now everyone is talking about him, and he's a private person. It must be hell."

"Yeah, invasion of privacy is the worst. Sometimes people get what they deserve," I muttered, my mood turning sour when I thought of my journal.

“I’m just going to get some air, okay? I need to cool down.”

I left the busy seating area of the rink and headed for a side door. With one push, I was outside at the back of the building, blissfully alone. The cool night air calmed me, and I took long, bracing breaths. I tilted my head back and stared at the purple evening sky. Night was creeping in, and I stood in the dusky twilight. I wasn’t going to feel sorry for Cayden. Nope. Not me. So, his dreams were going up in smoke. It wasn’t my fault, even if he thought it was.

There was a slight scraping noise, and I realize that someone was leaning against the wall beside the door. Eyes fell on me. Familiar eyes. I wasn’t even surprised that he was here. It was like we just couldn’t stay apart. We kept getting pulled together. I was stuck in his orbit, a small, pale moon to his blazing sun.

I turned and looked at him, curious how he was faring after the first period of the game. He’d inflicted a lot of damage, but he’d taken a lot of hits, too.

His head leaned against the wall behind him, his eyes unreadable as he watched me. I thought of the confession he’d made when we were fighting in the locker room, about how I’d broken his heart and endangered his future. Even though it wasn’t true that I had spilled his secrets, the truth remained that he was distracted and unfocused, and if he wasn’t careful, the chance to play college hockey would slip through his fingers.

It wasn’t my fault, I knew that, but still, seeing him right now, defeated and wretched, I couldn’t help but feel the tiniest bit sorry. His dreams could die tonight. No matter how mad I was at him, I didn’t want that. The little boy who’d hung the torn dream catcher in the window of Jack’s dirty trailer deserved more than that.

“You’re choking, West.” My voice came out strong. Meeting Cayden in general had made me stronger in a lot of ways. Nowadays, I apologized far less than I used to, which was a dramatic improvement.

“I’m aware,” he replied quietly.

“So, do something about it.” I folded my arms over my chest and stared him down.

“Why do you even care? You should be happy. I’ll go back to Midnight Falls, and your little boyfriend, Tyler, can celebrate his victory.”

I frowned at him. “Tyler isn’t my boyfriend.”

Cayden snorted. “He wants to be.”

“Yeah, right. Stop trying to start fights with him and concentrate.”

Cayden pushed off the wall and came toward me. “Concentrate on what? The fact that everyone in the audience is thinking about my past, about how I don’t belong...that I’m a killer, a wolf in sheep’s clothing knocking at your door in the night...” He trailed off when he reached me. “It’s not easy to concentrate when everyone is waiting to see what you’ll do, if you’ll blow, if you’re normal.”

“Then stop thinking about everyone. They don’t matter.”

“And you, Freckles? I didn’t peg you as the type to move on so quickly... Tyler Owens must have just been waiting for his chance, biding his time.”

I rolled my eyes. “What does that matter to you? I broke your heart, remember? I don’t exist.”

His eyes drifted closed at my words, and he swallowed hard. Sweat broke out on my brow. Was he regretting his harsh words? Did I want him to? It was best to change the subject.

“I thought that nothing matters but your dream, right? Stop fucking it up. I thought you were the best?”

My goading tone could have annoyed him, but it didn’t seem to. Instead, his eyes shot open and narrowed, a hint of challenge lighting up the blue pools.

“I am the best.”

“Prove it.” I shrugged and headed inside. I couldn’t get too close, or I’d lose the battle to stay cool and aloof. I felt his eyes on me the entire way inside. It warmed me in a way I hadn’t felt all week.

Cayden



WHEN THE FINAL BUZZER SOUNDED, I'd never been so relieved. After talking to Lily outside at intermission, I'd gotten my head back in the game. We'd been down, and it had taken every second of coordinated plays, sweat, grit, and luck to scrape a one-goal victory.

The rink exploded into cheers from the Hade Harbor side as soon as the buzzer sounded. My teammates hugged me, cheering, just as relieved as I was. I stared at the scoreboard, unable to process that we'd managed it.

Coach had sweated right through his polo, despite the cool temperature in the rink. His smile could have lit up the entire place. My eyes searched behind him for a flash of satin red. Lily stood beside her mother, clapping like everyone else. A small smile lit her beautiful lips. I didn't deserve that smile. I hadn't deserved her inspiring words, and yet she'd given them to me anyway.

“Fuck, that was close.” Marcus took off his goalie mask and wiped sweat from his eyes. He looked exhausted, and I knew how he felt.

“Too close,” I muttered, feeling responsible. I’d let Tyler Owens get into my head. It wasn’t the first time I’d played the Volcanoes, but it was the first time I’d ever been on the winning team. My team in Midnight Falls had never made it far on the strength of one good player. Well, two if you counted Chase Elliot, which I preferred not to.

Tyler had barely goaded me, in all honesty. It was the fact that he knew Lily that had thrown me. He’d touched her, made her laugh. She was close with

him. Thick, black possession had crowded my head like smoke, and I couldn't see clearly through it, not even when we'd started the game.

Fucked up as it was, considering the chunks we'd ripped off each other, Lillian was mine.

Mine.

“So, are we celebrating?”

“Fuck yeah, why not? It’s Friday, we won...what’s not to celebrate?” Marcus was all easy smiles at my elbow.

My gaze fell on Tyler Owens, skating toward the coach’s bench. Lily waved to him and stepped down the stairs to speak to him. Another gut punch of possession and jealousy like nothing I’d ever felt before roared through me, followed by a wave of aggression I knew I couldn’t act on.

I had no right. I’d given it away.

“Cade, man. You down to party?”

I jerked my head back toward the other Ice Gods and then shook it. “I’m beat. I’m gonna head home early tonight, I think.”

“Seriously? You’re going to go to bed without getting your dick sucked after that amazing comeback?”

I clapped Marcus on the shoulder. “Look, man, you’re nice and all, but you’re not my type.”

He simply grinned wider. “Yeah, well, a guy can dream.”

Beckett cut in with some comment about where to go, and Asher headed toward the locker room, too. I trailed behind them, tearing my eyes from Lily and Tyler with difficulty.

Lily let Tyler drive her home. He had a nice, shiny new truck. He probably had parents who gave a fuck if he lived or died. He made her laugh, not cry.

He was a better person than I was. Despite knowing it all, I sat in her room and waited for her to come home.

Her parents were out celebrating. It was quiet, and the room smelled like Lily. I could have sat in there for hours in the dark, breathing her in and pretending that I didn't break everything I touched.

The journal I'd bought her for her birthday laid on her desk, untouched. I sat on the edge of her bed and grabbed a framed photo sitting on her nightstand. In it, she and Eve were laughing about something, bent double at the waist. Lily wore shorts, and her slim thighs drew my eyes. I could remember how they'd felt in my hands. I could remember the freckles sprinkling her inner thighs.

I took a deep breath and stuffed my feelings down where they belonged, in the dark, with the rest of my ugly soul. I reached for the journal and flipped to the first blank page. My hand closed on a pen. I didn't think about what to write. I didn't think she'd ever read it. This journal was a present that reminded her of how terrible I'd been to her. Threatening her, blackmailing her with her secrets, exposing her when she'd disappointed me.

My hand moved over the page, the ballpoint scoring deep into the unblemished surface. A scribble destined to never be seen, and the most honest thing I'd ever written. I tucked the diary into my back pocket to take back to my room. The confession in it was too damning.

After, I lay down on her bed, my entire body aching after the game. Tyler Owens packed a mighty punch when he slammed you into the boards, and I knew I was going to feel it for days. The smell of Lily rose around me, and I turned my face into her pillow and breathed deep.

She came home exactly an hour after the end of the game. I tried my best not to think of where she'd been with Tyler that whole time. It didn't work. I left her room as untouched as I could, slipped back into mine, and closed the door just as she came down the hall.

She didn't pause outside my door. I took out the T-shirt that I'd stolen from her room. It was from some science summer camp she'd gone to and was huge and shapeless. Regardless, it smelled like Lily. She often slept in it.

I lay down on my bed and put the T-shirt next to my face on the pillow. If I closed my eyes and let my mind drift just right, it was like she was there.

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Cayden



WE FELL into a routine of sorts over the next week. I pretended not to watch Lily, and she pretended not to notice my eyes on her. Selena and her cronies were tough on her at first, spray painting shit on her locker and posting excerpts of the journal all over group chats and scrawling them on scraps of papers and sticking them to noticeboards despite Principal Smith's warnings. That seemed to have stopped when I kicked Selena's irritating ass off her table and iced her out. Gradually, things quieted down.

The game the next week was the first home game where Lily's face wasn't staring down at me from the stands. I didn't know how she'd gotten out of it, considering how much Coach liked his rituals—and having his daughter attend was certainly one of them—but she had.

Had Eric talked to his daughter about the journal? He hadn't said a word to me about it, despite the contents featuring me heavily. Maybe he hadn't seen it. It would have been a fucking miracle if he hadn't.

I was almost disappointed. Revenge on Bug was only good if it hurt, and having it out with her parents would sting her the most. She was hiding her real self from them, and it was time to let it out. I wouldn't let her hide anymore, not when she hadn't extended me the same courtesy. If things went like she feared, they'd blow up at her about going to college out of state, and then she'd be shamed into staying.

She'd have to attend HHU, just like me, and then I could keep an eye on her.

Her little escape route would be blocked, and she'd be mine, plain and simple. I couldn't stand the thought of her leaving, fucked up as that was.

After another game, and an easy win, Coach called me into his office.

"Sit down, Cade, I have some news." His smile lit up the room.

I dropped my heavy sports bag and dropped into the seat in front of his desk.

Eric steepled his fingers and grinned at me. "How do you feel about the upcoming game against the Maple Maulers?"

I shrugged, my nonchalant expression masking the excitement stirring within me. "Should be a cakewalk, like everyone else."

Eric laughed. "I was hoping you'd say that. Well, let's hope you're right, and let's make sure you look good. HHU is coming to scout the game. They'll be watching the Ice Gods in particular. This is it, Cayden—your big shot."

His grin was infectious, and I found myself smiling back. Scouts for HHU, and then, after I dominated on the college team, the NHL. It was happening. Finally, something in my life that I'd worked hard for was actually happening. It felt too good to be true.

Eric launched into game strategy, and I listened eagerly. I had to train, I had to stay focused. Nothing else mattered.

"Cade, before you go – I wanted to ask you about Lily."

I froze in the doorway, on the cusp of escaping after our talk.

I turned back to him. "What about her?"

"I mean, I know what happened with your bike." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I still can't believe Lily would do that. Why didn't you bring the bill to me?"

I didn't know how to answer that. *Because I deserved it* wasn't what he wanted to hear. I simply shrugged.

"I saw the journal, I know some kind of thing went on with her. Girls and high school, I don't know what to do or say in these situations. I guess it was made up, like Principal Smith said."

"It wasn't all made up," I heard myself say.

Coach frowned and crossed his arms. Darkness gathered in the pit of my belly. Was I really going to blow Bug's cover about applying for an out-of-state college? Yes, I really was.

"She did apply and get into that other school...the one in California."

Eric sank into his chair. He seemed winded. His disappointment radiated thickly through the room. A twinge of guilt stabbed in my gut, but I pushed it aside. She deserved it. She couldn't get away that easily. She couldn't leave. I wouldn't allow it.

"She wants to leave, but she's too scared to tell you."

Eric's gaze landed on mine, and the look in his eyes was hard to meet. *So, that's what it was like when someone you cared about was hurt.* I recognized the expression from Lily's green eyes when she'd confronted me about the journal. It didn't get any easier to stomach, it turned out.

"If that's all, I'm going to go," I said to Coach.

He nodded, distracted, and picked up his phone. Was he calling his daughter right now? Was Bug's life about to fall down around her ears, like she'd brought mine down?

I shouldn't care. I shouldered my way out of the office and gripped my heavy bag. Making my way down the hall, I shoved my roiling emotions down, far into the dark depths that lived inside me.

I shouldn't care, and I wouldn't. Any second now, I wouldn't.

After the game, I went with the Ice Gods to Eve's diner. Asher liked the food there, and he and his sister often lived off the leftovers. It was a retro

little diner, low-rent as Hade Harbor went, but it was cute. It was miles above anything in Midnight Falls, that was for sure. Eve smiled at her brother, her grin quickly turning into an arctic glare when she saw me.

“Ew, you brought him?” she asked pointedly, throwing a cleaning rag over her shoulder and squaring up like she might actually try to fight me.

“Be nice, or no tips for you,” Asher grumbled and ambled down the aisle to a booth seat.

I’d just slid in when I recognized a distinctive red head coming out of the back and heading toward a seat. The sight was a kick to the stomach. Lily was here. This is where she’d been hiding instead of watching the game.

I was out of the booth before I could stop myself.

Eve was at Lily’s table, and they whispered furiously.

“Don’t let him scare you away,” Eve was saying in a venomous tone.

“Why not? I’d rather not be around him, and I don’t care what that looks like. It’s bad enough I have to see him at home.”

I’d missed the sound of Lily’s voice, I realized, as I leaned against the wall beside the booth, unnoticed.

“Yeah, well, you didn’t do anything wrong. Running away and avoiding him makes you seem guilty, and it’s not fair,” Eve continued.

“I don’t care what’s fair anymore, and I don’t care if he believes me. Even if he did, I’d never, ever forgive him for what he did—” She broke off as her eyes connected with mine, and her lips slammed shut.

“Don’t let me disturb you, though I must say, my ears were burning.” My voice was uncaring and blasé, and yet being this close to Lily after days of silence made me feel anything *but* uncaring. I’d missed tangling with my clever little Ladybug, even if I wanted to throttle her sometimes.

“What do you want? Get back to your friends, you’re not wanted over here,” Eve said fiercely, putting her hands on her hips.

“Bug, call off your guard dog, or I’ll embarrass her in front of the entire place.”

“With my brother right there? Good luck,” Eve goaded.

She had a point. Asher was very protective of his sister. A customer called to Eve, and I nodded toward them.

“Better do your job and keep your nose out of my business.”

“Fuck you, West,” Eve sneered and then strode away.

I turned back to Lily. She was looking down at her phone with a fierce concentration I immediately hated. Who the hell was texting her all the time? Tyler Owens?

I plucked her phone out of her hand and slid into the booth across from her.

“Give it back,” she ground out, glaring at me.

“Why? Got something on here you don’t want me to see?”

“I don’t care what you see, I just want my phone back.”

Her phone was still open, and I scrolled through her messages.

“Cayden, give it to me.” She moved around the booth, reaching for the phone.

It wasn’t hard to hold it higher than her reaching hands. She leaned against me, a soft crease pressing between her auburn eyebrows. She was so close, I could count the dusting of freckles across her nose. I couldn’t stop staring at them.

“Stop being a dick, if you actually know how, and give it to me,” she demanded, falling into me when I let her think she might grab the cell, and then jerked it away.

Her chest pressed into mine, her forehead glancing off my chin. She was tumbling into me and couldn’t stop herself. I made no move to help. Her hands landed on my thighs as she tried to brace herself from falling right into my lap. Her small hand felt like a brand on my upper thigh. She froze there when she realized just how close we were. The edge of her hand was

brushing my goddamn dick, and all I could think was how I wanted her to move an inch over and palm me. I was hard as hell and could have easily bucked against her touch and got off in my pants, right here in the diner, just from the reluctant pressure of her hand against me.

Nobody affected me like Lily. I'd rarely felt desire before her, and now that I'd been inside her and stretched her tight, virgin little pussy out to fit me perfectly, her body was the only thing that turned me on. I'd learned to want by worshiping at her altar, and she was the only thing I saw, even though anger filled me every time I looked at her, and even though she hated me right back.

"What don't you want me to see, Bug?"

A muscle ticked in her jaw, but she held her tongue, giving me nothing in return.

"Have you been breaking my rules? Remember, I don't share my things."

"I'm not yours, Cayden. I should think the last week has made that pretty obvious."

I shrugged. "Not to me."

Her mouth pulled in a humorless smile. "Oh, really? So, you always treat your things like shit?"

"No," I murmured as I lowered her phone and let her take it. She was still so close I could feel her breath against my lips. "I always break them. Be grateful I haven't broken you yet, Freckles."

She swallowed, and my gaze fell to her beautiful neck. I'd fantasized about strangling her enough these past few days, but now that I was so close to the delicate column, I wanted to leave my fingerprints on her creamy white skin; not to hurt, but to mark – a brand of ownership for all to see.

"Who says you haven't?"

Her soft words hurt a little when they dug their claws in. She let me see her hurt for one shining moment, and it stole my breath.

“The fact that you think publishing your dirty little diary broke you only gives me ideas for the future, Bug. Be careful,” I teased her...or was it a warning? Maybe it was both. I couldn’t say for sure. I hadn’t planned on seeing Lily tonight, and I certainly hadn’t planned on speaking to her, and yet in the last ten minutes, I was happier than I’d been all week. Toying with my food had always been a hobby of mine, and now that Lily was my dinner it was endlessly enjoyable. She was the most fascinating person I’d ever met. Being around her relaxed something in me. A place of tension that was always simmering when she wasn’t around.

Her phone vibrated between us, and she jumped. I wondered if she’d been as lost in the spell between us as I had been. There was nothing in the world like the magic that sprang up when Lily was within reach.

She glanced down at her phone, and I followed, my gaze running across the message before I could stop myself.

We need to talk. Come straight home. Dad.

Right, the poisoned dart I’d set in motion before coming out for dinner was already speeding toward us. Lily’s face paled, her eyes widening and growing more vivid somehow, against her pallor.

She glanced up at me, biting one full lip with her white teeth.

“Sounds like Daddy dearest knows about California.”

My words sent even more color from her cheeks. Her green gaze burned into mine, accusation etched in those forest depths.

“You had to tell them sometime...it looks like that time is now,” I reminded her.

“And you just had to decide that for me?”

I shrugged. “What are you waiting for? It’ll only get harder. Does it feel good to lie to them every day?”

My attack left her speechless. Her eyes glittered. She was angry and upset at the same time. She could join the fucking club.

“I’m not lying to them.”

“It sure sounds like you are. Do you have any idea how hard your dad is working to get into HHU – for you?”

“That’s not the only reason,” she muttered.

“But it’s a big part, and you know it.”

“Yeah, well, maybe I don’t want him to.”

I chuckled. “I know you don’t. I’ve read your journal, remember? The real question is when are you going to grow a pair and tell them the truth? When are you going to stop being such a fucking coward? It’s not a crime to want some space – except from me.”

She scoffed, her expression hardening. “You’re so into the truth, but you hate the idea that I told everyone the truth about you,” she pointed out.

My expression turned into a glower. “Was that finally a confession?”

She huffed a pained laugh. “I don’t care if you think it was. I’ve given up trying to get through to you. I officially don’t give a fuck what you think, do, feel – any of it.”

Her words hit like boulders against my feeble shields. Nobody bothered me or upset me like this girl. She knew all the buttons to push.

We stared at each other, at an impasse.

“Better hurry on home.” My voice could carve ice.

She pulled back, and the loss of her proximity chilled my skin. She stood and moved around the table, avoiding my eyes, stuffing her notebooks in her bag. I watched her go.

She paused before she left the table. “Is this it – the breaking of your toys?”

A raw laugh left me at that. “Didn’t you break me first? I’m just returning the favor.”

She shook her head slowly, a sadness in her eyes that made it hard to hold her gaze. She leaned in toward me, resting a hand on the tabletop. Her hair rushed down in a waterfall over her shoulder, sending a delicate perfume my way. It was the same addictive smell of her T-shirt, the one I slept with every night.

“One day, you’re going to realize how wrong you are. You’re going to understand that I never betrayed you and that I always wanted the best for you, but by then it’ll be too late. The one person you opened up to will be gone forever.”

“What makes you think you’re the one person I opened up to?” I challenged, but there was nothing behind my words. We both knew they were true.

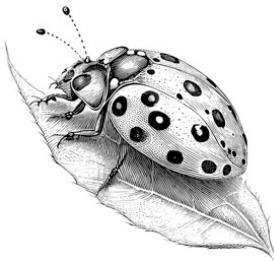
She smiled, and it was devastatingly beautiful. “You might know me well enough to fuck with me, Cayden, better than anyone else, but don’t forget that I know you, too.”

I leaned in, getting right in her face, so close that the temptation to kiss her was a physical ache. Christ, I missed her. I missed her touch, her body. Most of all, I missed her smile. Nothing could make me feel like Lily could with one smile. When she smiled at me, I was invincible. Salvageable.

“Just confess, and we can put this behind us...just tell me the truth and never lie to me again.” *And I can trust you again.* I didn’t say the last part out loud, it was too damning. Had I already forgiven Lily? Maybe I’d forgiven her that moment in the locker room, when she’d cried so prettily and the sight of it had broken my heart. But I didn’t know how to go back. I knew better than most that the past could never be undone.

“But you see, Cayden...even if I did confess, and you accepted my apology, I’ll never forgive you. I’ll never forget. Ever. So, none of this matters, really, in the end.” She delivered the last words in a soft, lethal tone, then turned on her heel and strode out of the diner.

Lily



THE HOUSE WAS quiet when I let myself in a little later. I'd gone over what I'd say to my parents a hundred times, and it hadn't made me feel any better. No magical answer had appeared inside my head, so I was at a loss as to what to do. No, that wasn't true. I knew what to do. I was just afraid.

I'd spent so much of my young life afraid, and I'd never even realized it until I met Cayden. Now, I had nowhere to hide. He was forcing me out into the open, and I'd never been more terrified. I'd been scared of disappointing my parents and my teachers, damaging my father's reputation at school, and failing to meet the expectations of those who had pinned all their hopes on me. I didn't feel ready to confront that boatload of issues, and yet, thanks to Cayden fucking West, I had no choice.

"Lily? We're in here." My father's voice drifted to me from the kitchen.

I slipped my shoes off at the door and padded along the hall, toward judgment.

Inside the kitchen, the light was on over the table, and my parents were both sitting there. As soon as I met my mother's hurt gaze, I felt like crying. Damn Cayden to hell for forcing this on me. *It had to happen sometime.* I ignored the voice of reason in my head and pushed my hatred toward the only figure I had to blame. Fucking Cayden.

"So, a lot happened this week, and I think we need to talk about it," my dad said carefully.

“That whole journal thing was just a prank,” I began, but my mother didn’t let me get far.

“Did you really apply to college in California? Couldn’t you get farther away? Doesn’t Hawaii have a good epidemiology program?”

Ouch, her opening shot was fiery. This conversation wasn’t going to be easy.

“Honey, let Lily talk and explain herself.” My dad’s tone was full of the false confidence of someone who was convinced there was a reasonable explanation for everything.

“What’s all this about?” he continued. “Did you really apply for school in California?”

My mouth too dry to speak, I slowly nodded.

My mother gasped out a tiny, pained exclamation.

“Okay, it’s okay.” My dad patted her hand. “Why did you, honey? Can you tell us?”

I stared at them, words crowding my head, rising and falling, every single one inadequate.

“Lily? Why aren’t you speaking?” my mother burst out.

“What are you waiting for? It’ll only get harder. Does it feel good to lie to them every day?” Cayden’s annoying voice played in my head.

“I-I don’t know what to say,” I admitted. “I could pretend that I just love the idea of the sun and Cali living, or that the college is my dream school and the program is better than the one here, but it would be a lie.”

My parents were shocked at my words. Whatever they’d been expecting, my outburst hadn’t been it. But Cayden’s words had shaken something loose inside me that had been tight for so long. *When are you going to stop being such a fucking coward?* Today, I finally replied to him in my head. *I’m stopping today, come what may.*

“Lily,” my dad started.

“I didn’t want to tell you because I didn’t want to upset you. My whole life, upsetting you has been the thing I was most scared of.” I let out a tense laugh, trying to shift the fear strumming through me. “Not bad grades or being unpopular or getting made fun of... disappointing you was my nightmare. I only cared about my grades, because you cared. You both cared so damn much.”

My parents stared at me aghast, like I was a person they didn’t know. I forged on.

“I’m not blaming you or saying that it was a bad thing. It was an amazing thing. It pushed me to work so much harder than everyone else and to achieve so much more. I have my pick of colleges to go to and I can study something I really love, and that’s because of you guys. You always believed in me, and it helped me to believe in myself.”

My dad cleared his throat after a moment. “But?”

“But...” I blew out a long breath and braced myself. “But I know the librarian better than my classmates, and I have a million facts in my head, but very little in the way of memories of school that will make me smile and laugh. Silly moments, parties, friends, first kisses...”

Both my parents blanched at that.

“Yes, before you say anything, it’s normal for an eighteen-year-old to date and kiss a few guys. It doesn’t mean I’ll get pregnant and drop out of college.”

“Lily, believe me, these things happen before you can even realize, and then your whole life changes.” My mother’s voice was so painfully sad.

I reached out and touched her curled fist on the table. “Mom, I know, believe me, you’ve told me enough times, but sometimes, when you do... what you don’t realize is that it sounds like my existence ruined your life.” My voice broke on the last few words.

My mother’s face tightened, shocked, and then crumpled.

“I wish I could change it for you, but I can’t. I’m here, and I’m sorry about that – but I can’t do anything about it.” Tears ran down my face now, and

the looks on my parents' faces broke my heart.

My mother was crying. I'd made my mother cry. I shoved back the chair and stood. I had to be alone. I couldn't take their sadness. It was all my fault. It was always all my fault.

I fled the room, closing the kitchen door and sticking my feet back in my sneakers. I pushed out the front door, sobs racking my body.

I barely had time to realize I wasn't alone when I collided with a hard chest. Cayden's arms went around me and pulled me against him. He smelled like leather. He was wearing his motorcycle jacket, his helmet gripped in one hand. He'd had the bike fixed a few days ago; I could make out the shape of it parked just behind him. He'd come home earlier than I'd expected him to.

"What happened?" he asked soberly.

Despite our words to each other only an hour ago at the diner, his presence suddenly made me feel less alone. I looked up at him, blinking through my tears. My eyes swam; I couldn't focus. Another huge sob wrenched my chest. His jaw tightened, a ticking muscle showing his emotion, before he stepped back and pulled me toward the bike.

"Here, get on," he instructed curtly, tugging a helmet over my hot, blotchy face.

The sound of my sobs was deafening inside the helmet.

He got on the front of the bike and guided my arms around him, urging me to hold on tight, and then he was moving, rolling us carefully forward before accelerating. We shot off in a spray of gravel, just as the front door opened and my father appeared. Cayden didn't slow, he simply rode off, taking me with him.

We hit the winding roads outside town that led toward the Anderson mansion, curving around cliffs that overlooked the sea. I held on and let the excitement of the ride soothe my tears. I took a deep breath, and then another one. It helped a little, but knowing I had to go back home soon and face my parents only set me off again.

We rode for nearly an hour before Cayden turned us off the road and right through Beckett's fancy gated property. He stopped and took my helmet off and then his own. As soon as the rumble of the bike died, the silence screamed in my head.

"Get cleaned up before you go home looking like you're at your own funeral," he said flatly. "Follow me." He turned on his heel and walked away.

The house looked dark and uninviting. I followed Cayden.

He took me to the pool house. Inside was softly lit, and the blinds were all drawn. As soon as I stepped through the door, the reality of the horrible, ungrateful things I'd said to my parents crashed over me again, and the sobs escaped once more, sounding like they were being ripped from my very soul.

Cayden tensed, whirling around and reaching for me before I could sidestep. He pulled me into his chest in a tight embrace.

"Shh, Freckles. It's okay."

His soft murmur only made me cry more. He held me firmly as my emotions raged. There was pain and guilt over hurting my well-meaning parents, and then there was a sickening sense of relief at having finally spoken my mind. All of it stormed inside me, making it hard to breathe.

"It's okay, I've got you...you did it. You were brave, and now, it'll all get better." Cayden still held me tightly, one hand running up and down my back, giving me comfort that I didn't want.

I tensed in his arms. "This is all your fault, don't you dare comfort me when you did this," I snarled at him, wriggling to get out of his strong grip. I only managed when he loosened the cage of his arms. I leaned back and slapped him hard. The sound rang out in the small room.

"I don't want comfort from you, you fucking lunatic. You want to hurt me and then kiss it better? What kind of twisted psycho are you?"

"The very same kind as you, it turns out. The one who tried to destroy my future and then gave me the strength I needed to win the game all in the

same few days. We're the same, Lily; fucked up, twisted liars, cowards through and through."

"No, I'm not like you," I ground out and pushed his chest as hard as I could. His hands were still fastened around my hips like pincers, and I couldn't shift them. "I'll never be like you – I'll never shoot first and ask questions later. I'll never just write people off and refuse to listen to them." I was crying again and shoving hard at Cayden's chest. When he failed to budge even an inch, I settled for hitting that huge, muscular chest. I pounded it with my balled-up fists so hard that the reverberation shook my arms.

Cayden held me fast, unmoved by my blows. "I'm a monster, a nightmare, I know...tell me how terrible I am, if it makes you feel better."

"No, it doesn't make me feel better. You don't make me feel better. I hate you," I spat. My tears had felt like a bottomless well, but struggling with Cayden, trying to escape him, was wearing out my strength.

"I know, Bug."

I landed a particularly striking blow and gasped as my hand throbbed. He yanked me closer then, somehow backing me against the wall at the same time. He trapped my hands between us, and his hard body pressed into mine. His eyes were intense, staring down at me with all the same emotion as the locker a room a week ago, when he'd accused me of breaking his heart.

"If it makes you feel any better, I hate me, too." He cupped my cheek.

My skin burned where he touched me.

"If it helps at all, know that no one, you included, will ever hate me as much as I hate myself." He ran his thumb under my eye and wiped away the stinging salt. "Does that make you feel better?"

My head was shaking before I could stop myself. "No. It's too sad."

My murmur was faint, but he caught it.

He leaned in, his hot breath blowing over my wet skin. "You are the only person I've ever met who'd feel bad for me even after all you know about

me, and after all I've done."

"So what? You think that makes me as fucked up as you?" I challenged, but my words had lost their steam because he was looming over me, pressing against me in all the right places, and his eyes were locked on my lips like they were the most beautiful things he'd ever seen.

No one had ever looked at me like Cayden West did, and I suspected that no one else ever would. Just him.

"Maybe it does, or maybe I just wish it did...because then I could have you."

I couldn't puzzle out his meaning right now, not with the way he was staring at me. I was torn up inside, and all of a sudden, I wanted to stop thinking and just feel. I wanted him to hold me, and push me, and fuck me so hard I couldn't think. This guy, my enemy, and the only one who understood all the little, ugly parts of myself that I tried to hide from.

He saw it all, every single bit, and he was still gazing at me like I was something special. Something rare and precious. *His*.

I couldn't tell who reached out first. Did he lean in, or did I reach up? There was no way to tell in our mutual want who crossed the line in the sand that anger had drawn between us...only that we crashed together somewhere in the middle.

He kissed me forcefully, and I met him every inch of the way. His lips on mine after the rough week we'd had felt more comforting than I wanted to admit. I bit his lower lip, and he growled against me, his hands roaming over my body. He pinched my nipples sharply, and I cried out into his open mouth, arching my back into his brutal touch. He wasn't gentle, and I didn't want him to be.

He lifted me into his arms with his usual ease, and the ridge of his hard-on nestled against my pussy, only separated from him by our clothes. He spun us, searching for a surface with an urgency we both felt.

The pool table met my back as he laid me on it and reached for his belt. His blue eyes fastened on me as I wriggled my pants and underwear down my legs, kicking them off my feet and leaving my lower half bare. He palmed

his cock, spreading the precum welling from the tip around the wide, rounded head of him before advancing toward me.

I opened my legs for him, welcoming him, and he stepped between them, lined himself up, and sank mercilessly inside. It burned where he stretched me, and I liked it. I wanted this. Rough and unforgiving. I wanted everything in my head driven out by his brutal thrusts. I wanted to feel pinned and helpless. I wanted to lose control. I trusted Cayden somehow, enough to let everything else go. How fucked up was that?

He growled when he met his end inside me, my pussy sheathing his entire length, and leaned down to kiss me. The pool table was hard under my back, but I didn't care. I wanted it to hurt, to feel bare and vulnerable, angry and real.

He moved inside me, pulling out on a long draw and then thrusting sharply back inside. I cried out, the feeling too much, and his fingers worked inside my mouth, quieting me and giving me something to suck on at the same time.

He fucked me ruthlessly, holding my knees apart, spreading me wide the entire time, until I felt like I was going to come. He must have felt it, because he changed his angle, pushing his cock upward in a motion that pressed against the front wall of my pussy and made my knees weak. His fingers found my clit, and he circled it quickly, in time with his thrusts.

“Come for me, Freckles, let me see you fall apart,” he urged.

Freckles. The name reminded me of before everything had gone to shit. That brief and shining moment where I'd allowed myself to feel a whole lot for the enigmatic guy who'd moved into my house and into my heart, pretty much at the same damn time.

I came suddenly, and it felt wetter than ever, worryingly wet. I pushed the thought aside, as Cayden didn't seem put off at all. Waves of pleasure rolled over me, bulldozing my senses. Cayden grunted, the veins on his neck popping as he ground against me, dragging out my orgasm.

“Fuck, that was hot,” he groaned, rotating his hips and then suddenly going rigid.

Warmth filled me, pulse after pulse of slick heat as he came inside me.

He held himself there, unloading what felt like a bucketful of cum inside me, pressed in to the hilt, like a stopper in a bottle he never wanted to uncork. I was still twitching and pulsing with pleasure, when he pulled out, I groaned low in my throat, disappointed to lose the full feeling of him being inside me. When he was inside me, I couldn't think about anything else. I was free of everything. It was perfect.

His finger replaced his cock, pumping lazily inside me. It felt damn good all over again.

"What are you doing?" I wondered, leaning up on my elbows to watch as he put three fingers inside me and circled my clit with his cum-smeared thumb. Fuck, it felt good. It felt *too* good.

"I want to see you lose control again," he said determinedly. "Do you think you can soak the table again?"

"I soaked the table?" I asked, suddenly worried. If I wasn't just about to come again, I'd be a lot more concerned about the state of the baize.

Cayden grinned, and it was filthy. "You sure did, and I've never seen anything hotter. I want to see it again, but this time, I want your pussy to be full of my cum."

And so he did see it again. Two more times.

After, he brought a towel from the bathroom and wordlessly cleaned our combined cum from my wet thighs and aching pussy. We silently got dressed and headed out to the bike. I wanted to fuss over the pool table, but he could take care of it. Beckett was *his* friend, after all.

We rode back home as darkness fell firmly over the countryside. He slowed expectantly, and I knew he was waiting for me to put my arms out and fly, like I'd enjoyed doing before. Whatever was between him and me, it wasn't easy to understand. It felt bigger than both of us as we rode into the darkness, with only each other to hold on to. I couldn't explain it, but after

talking to my parents, and the pool house, and Cayden's brand of rough comfort, I felt physically and emotionally spent. I was ready to go home.

We pulled up outside the house, and the door opened immediately. My dad stood there.

"Lily, can you come in and talk?" he asked, not sparing a glance for Cayden.

I nodded and handed my helmet to the boy I was supposed to hate, the one who was always there for me, even when I had no idea what I needed.

I followed my dad into the house and back to the kitchen. My mom was sitting there, in the same place I'd left her. Her eyes were red; she'd clearly been crying. I felt like an asshole all over again. I'd made my mom cry and then run off to process my own emotions. I was selfish to the end.

I sat, and my dad took the seat across from me. It was them on one side of the table and me on the other, alone.

"Lily, I wish I didn't have to say anything like this, but I don't think we've been fair to you," he started.

I blinked at him, surprised by his opening words.

"We might have been full of cautionary tales and determined to make sure you understood what to prioritize, but we never wanted to make you feel like that was the only way to be. We never meant to make you feel like you ruined our lives or that now we're desperately trying to get them back, through you."

I shifted awkwardly. Hearing the words I'd harbored in the darkest places of my heart for so long was unsettling.

"We had you young, yes, it's true," Mom said. "We had to give certain things up, yes, but we got you out of it. You might not believe me, and if you don't, that's my fault, but I wouldn't change that. Our lives worked out, including you, Lily...I'm just always scared because our situation isn't the norm. It's rare for people to win, even if they've messed up like we did. It's rare for people to have a daughter like you. My perfect girl."

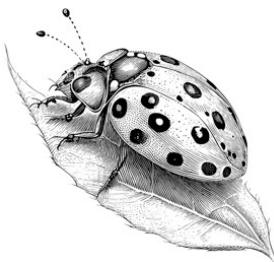
I risked a look at my mom.

She was smiling now. She reached out and took my hand. “You’re always brilliant and you always would have been, even without all your accomplishments. Just being you makes you wonderful.”

She took a deep breath. “And if you really want to go to California, we’ll make it work. It’s your life, Lil, and your dream...I’m sorry if you thought we didn’t care about that. We *only* care about that.”

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Lily



I FELT like I skipped into school on Monday morning. I was lighter than I'd ever been and I couldn't keep the smile off my face.

Eve bounced along beside me. "And that's it? They're cool with it?"

"They're cool with it," I confirmed, heading for our lockers.

Eve considered my words, tapping her lips before giving me a wicked smile. "In that case, just ask them to be cool with going to HHU and staying on campus...after the threat of California, it'll feel like winning."

I laughed at her enthusiasm as I grabbed my books from my bag and stowed them in my locker. For the first time in a week, there was nothing mean scribbled on the metal. Things were blowing over, finally.

"I'm not sure they'll see it quite that way, but I can't lie, it feels good to be more honest with them."

Eve fell into step beside me as we headed for class. "I mean, I could say I told you so, but there's no point. We both know it."

"I feel like you just said it," I pointed out.

She laughed. "Well, okay, but I'll only do it once." She gave me a sideways look. "What about Cayden? How are things between you?"

I couldn't bring myself to confess my lapse in self-control the other night in Beckett's pool house. I'd been emotional, a live wire of tension, and he'd

been there. That had been the only reason it had happened. Why he wanted to be there, I had no clue and I wasn't about to start reading into it. Guys like Cayden West didn't end up with girls like me, that was obvious. Besides, I was going away for college, and if he got his wish, he'd be here, at HHU, and then, off playing somewhere for the NHL. Our lives were going in opposite directions, and there wasn't any point clinging on to the remnants of the weird, unexplainable attraction between us.

"We are back to the natural order of things. Mutual hatred and icy disinterest. It's the only normal thing between us really, when you think about it."

We reached the door of our art class, and I peered inside. Cayden was already in his seat, just behind mine, and when I walked in, his eyes immediately lifted and pinned me with his gaze.

"Hmm, I wouldn't be so sure about that," Eve whispered to me. "That look isn't icy disdain in my book."

"What do you know? You date less than me," I whispered back as we entered the room.

Eve nodded. "Fair enough, you have a point there, my friend. Just picture the two of us at HHU, finally free to date and flirt and live free of scrutiny and uptight authoritarians."

"Your mom lets you do whatever you want."

"I was talking about my brother." Eve sighed.

We split up, and I went to my seat. I was horribly aware of Cayden sitting just behind me. Thoughts of the other night in the pool house pushed into my head and wouldn't leave. I felt like my face was on fire.

Class passed in a blur, and I was barely able to concentrate. As soon as the bell rang, Cayden and the Ice Gods headed out, and I lingered, packing my things slowly. My art teacher, Ms. Sophie, came to stand near me, looking down at my sketch for the day.

"This is excellent, Lily. Remember if you decide that microbiology isn't your thing, you could have a very promising career in art."

“Are there really a lot of careers in art? Sorry, that’s what my dad would say,” I muttered.

Sophie laughed. “I can just picture Coach Eric’s expression when he said it, too. Believe it or not, I know a little something about going against your parents when deciding what kind of future you want.”

She leaned a slim hip on the desk beside me, and I watched her, fascinated as always. She was one of those enigmatic women who carried an aura of mystery wherever she went. Poised and always graceful. There was something about her that made me think she had a world of secrets hidden behind her beautiful smile. Of course, the fact that she’d recently gotten married to a terrifyingly handsome Russian had been the talk of the town. The rumors that had gone around about Ms. Sophie’s husband were wild, and by the look of him, I was inclined to think they might be true. They ran the gamut, from him being a mobster, to an oligarch, to a secret agent undercover. He showed up frequently to pick his new wife up from school, and he caused a stir every single time.

“You have to follow your heart. It will lead you in the right direction if you let it.”

“What if your heart is a coward?” I countered.

She laughed. “I know a lot about that, too. When the time comes, you’ll find your courage, or it will be forced on you. Just don’t hide from what you want. I can’t help but notice tension between you and Cayden. It can’t be easy having a new person at home all the time.” She changed subjects smoothly.

“Yeah, it’s not easy, but it’s okay. He – he’s not really interested in a girl like me,” I heard myself say.

Sophie was quiet for a moment and then tilted her head to the side. “If that were true, I’d say it was a good thing, perhaps. I know men like Cayden, burning balls of anger and hurt...they can be difficult to deal with.”

My eyes collided with hers. She was staring at me in a way that felt like she could see right through me.

“I...” I trailed off, unsure what to say.

Sophie nodded. "It's already too late, isn't it?"

Her quiet question was shatteringly insightful. Yes, it was already too late to stop my heart from being affected by a guy like Cayden.

She reached out and put her hand on my shoulder. "If you ever want to talk about it, or you need help with anything... you have my number."

Right. I did have her number. I'd recently had to message her about an assignment being ruined when someone threw my bag into the school pool.

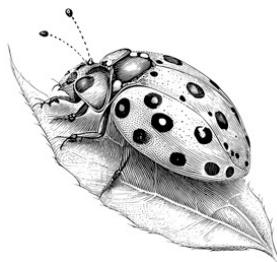
"I could warn you away from bad boys with trouble written all over them, but I'd be a hypocrite." She continued, giving me a sympathetic look.

I raised an eyebrow as I processed her words. "Are you confirming the rumors that your new husband is exactly like that?"

She smiled and leaned in to whisper her response, her dark hair tickling my ear. "No, not at all." Her eyes twinkled when she laughed. "He's so, so much worse."

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Lily



SATURDAY AFTERNOON, I caught the bus to Midnight Falls after my shift at the clinic. I might have no idea where I stood with Cayden, but I still wanted to prove that I hadn't leaked his secrets. It was a warm late afternoon, and the sunlight slanting through the bus window was comforting. I needed all the comfort I could get, going to Midnight Falls. It hadn't been the best experience last time; in fact, I didn't think I'd ever be able to forget the things I'd learned in Black Lake trailer park or the smell of Cayden's childhood home.

I got off the bus at the Main Street stop and headed toward the address I had written down. The library with the newspaper archive was located just off Main Street. I found it easily, relieved to see it was still open.

Inside smelled like old papers, coffee, and breath mints. I waited at the reception desk for an older lady to shuffle into her seat.

"Can I help you, dear?" She gave me a kind smile.

"I hope so! I'm here to look up some old issues of the *Midnight Falls Chronicle*." I crossed my fingers under the desk that she wouldn't ask for press credentials.

She peered at me over half-moon spectacles. "Oh, is that right? Let's see here...I have a log for you to sign. If you just put your name, and then you can go on through."

Relief flooded me. "Great!"

I tried to dial my enthusiasm down a notch as she blinked at me. I needed to ask this lady some questions, after all. I wasn't really here to see the archive.

"Do you get a lot of visitors?" I aimed to sound nonchalant.

"Some. Sometimes there's a project at school and students need to do some research. These papers aren't on the internet, you know."

"Ah, I see. Have there been any projects like that recently?" I asked.

She reached over for the visitor's log with glacial slowness, giving me plenty of time to dig for information.

"Oh, I'm sure. I was off last month, though. We work in rotation around here," she continued.

Damn. That was probably the exact time I was looking for.

"Oh, really? Who else works here, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Oh, you can ask, but I don't know who was on. I could check, I suppose," she said faintly, glancing back at the open door to the office behind her. She put the visitor log down before me and turned that way. "Wait here, I'll go and see."

"Thank you so much!" I called after her departing back. I pulled the visitor log to me and scribbled in the corner with the ballpoint pen attached to the book, until ink came out.

I headed down the list, about to put my name, when I saw it.

Of course. The visitor's log. Damn, I wasn't very good at this research spy stuff.

The archive really didn't get many visitors, and that's why the name stood out so clearly.

Last month's date was printed in small capitals, very neat and clearly, as was the name beside it.

Josh Samuels.

Josh? Josh had been here, just before the article had been leaked on the student community boards. *Of course.* If I had to make a list of the people at HHH who had it out for Cayden, except myself, Josh had to be right at the top of the list.

I suddenly remembered seeing him outside the cafeteria with his bruised nose and Ellen on his arm. Ellen, the former resident of Midnight Falls, the one who had tried to warn me about Cayden. The one who knew all about his past and could have pointed Josh in the right direction.

It was so obvious, it was a slap on the face, and yet it hadn't occurred to me until this moment.

The receptionist was just on her way back as I took a picture of the visitor's log and backed toward the door. I didn't know what to do with this information. Should I tell Cayden? What would he do to Josh? I didn't want to be responsible for actual murder. On the other hand, if I didn't tell Cayden, he'd keep thinking it was me.

"Thanks so much for your help! I have everything I need," I called to the kind receptionist.

She raised an eyebrow as I stepped out of the door and waved quickly. Now that I had the information, I wanted to get the hell out of Midnight Falls as fast as I could.

I walked back to Main Street just as a shiny black car pulled up at the curb. A girl got out, and I recognized her immediately.

Ellen. The girl who had warned me about Cayden in the first place. The one who used to live here.

Dread pooled in my gut as the driver got out the other side and rounded the front of the car, immediately moving toward me.

"Bug? What are you doing in Midnight Falls?" Josh wondered, looking around. His eyes narrowed as he took in the small side street I'd just come from. Realization dawned in his eyes.

"I was just visiting a friend," I hedged and made to go around them. I jumped when Ellen's hand landed on my arm.

“You went to the archive, didn’t you? It’s okay. I know you have to hate Cayden just as much as us. Everything he put you through this month alone is enough to hate him, even without knowing what else he’s capable of.”

“I...” I trailed off, not knowing what the hell to say.

“Come for coffee with us, and let’s talk about it. We should stick together. We’re all victims of his. It might make you feel better to know more about what he’s capable of,” Ellen said.

Josh watched me with an unreadable expression. He didn’t seem as sold on the fact that I’d be happy to expose more about Cayden than had already come out.

“More? What more is there?” I wondered.

Ellen nodded. “A whole lot more. We’re just getting started. Are you coming?” She gave me a hopeful smile. “Come on, Josh, let’s take her to the nice place with the cold-brew stuff.” Ellen launched into a spiel about different coffees as she headed back to the car.

Josh stared at me, and I met his gaze unflinchingly. They were planning on exposing more about Cayden? I had to stay and find out what.

“Are you with us, Lily?” Josh asked quietly.

“Looks like it, doesn’t it?” I asked, avoiding answering. I was a terrible liar. It was best not to risk it.

He nodded and jerked his head toward the back seat. “Get in then, let’s go.”

The coffee place was nowhere near as nice as Ellen had hyped it up to be. As soon as we were sitting, it became awkward as hell. I didn’t really know either of them, so suddenly having coffee together was uncomfortable. Not only that, but I wanted to get home and think about how to tell Cayden about Josh. Well, that had been the plan. Now, I had no idea. Clearly, I couldn’t trust Josh not to make things worse, and I couldn’t trust Cayden not to kill him when he found out.

“How come you guys are here? Do you still have family in town?” I asked Ellen. She had been living in Hade Harbor a while now.

She flushed as she nodded. “My mom lives here. I live with my uncle in Hade Harbor.”

“Oh, ok.” When she didn’t say anything more, I changed the subject. “So, you knew Cayden well when you lived here?” I asked, sipping on black coffee that tasted like tar.

“Not really, but my dad did. He was one of Uncle Jack’s best customers.” Ellen let out a bitter laugh. “Uncle Jack was Cayden’s foster father and a well-known guy around these parts. He and my dad were pretty close. My dad passed away last year.”

“I’m so sorry, I had no idea.”

She shrugged, her eyes glittering for a moment. “He wasn’t a bad person, he was just sick. If it hadn’t been for his addiction and Midnight Falls, he’d still be here. If it wasn’t for Cayden West, he’d still be here.”

“How was Cayden involved?”

“Because he came calling when my dad was late on payments. He didn’t just ask for the money.” Ellen let out a humorless laugh. “He was violent. He withheld more product until the account was settled. You know it’s dangerous to come off the hard stuff abruptly. The withdrawal can kill you. It killed him.”

Horror slid through me. It was a truly horrible story. The pain in Ellen’s voice made it clear that she was a long way from having dealt with the trauma of it all. It was also clear that she blamed Cayden for all of it, even if it sounded like he merely worked for his foster father.

“I’m so sorry to hear that. Cayden’s former foster father, Jack, was the supplier?” I asked carefully.

It seemed obvious to me that Cayden had just been doing his uncle’s bidding, but Ellen didn’t look like she agreed.

She nodded and wet her lips. “He’s not so bad, he pays my mom compensation and helps her with her habits. He’d never cut her off, he knows it’s dangerous.”

My heart broke for her, even as angry as I was. She was torn and twisted by the terrible things that had happened to her family, and put all the blame on the wrong person. Well, maybe Cayden was to blame as well, but the truth remained that he was just young then and acting on his foster dad’s orders. Ellen seemed determined not to acknowledge that, and I got it. It was easier to turn a blind eye to Jack himself, since he was supplying her mom.

Josh interrupted, growing impatient with any discussion that wasn’t about vilifying Cayden. “Cayden is a dangerous person to have in Hade Harbor. He’s a dangerous guy to have on the Hellions. We’re only doing the responsible thing by bringing his past to everyone’s attention. People should know who they have to go to school with – who they live with,” Josh added. “Doesn’t it scare you?” he wondered.

I shrugged, numb. It did scare me, but not entirely for the reasons they meant.

“So, we’re going to make sure everyone knows. That way, he’ll get kicked off the team and can slither back here. You won’t have to see him in your house anymore, either.”

“But if you have real concerns, wouldn’t it be best to go straight to the police, or at least Principal Smith, instead of just dragging his name through the mud? They’ll investigate it properly.”

As soon as I’d spoken, Josh exchanged a glance with Ellen.

“What?” I wondered.

He was still looking at Ellen. “I told you she was on his side. I told you there’s something between them.”

“I had to know for sure,” Ellen said grimly.

I squirmed on my seat, feeling exposed. “I’m not protecting him – I just think there are right and wrong ways to do things.”

“Yeah, and you think that whatever we do, Cayden shouldn’t suffer for it, right? It wasn’t his fault, not his choices...so predictable. I really thought you were better than the other puck whores who hang on the Ice Gods’ every word, but I guess you’re the same after all. Even after he treated you like shit, you defend him.”

His words struck against the barriers around my heart, piercing just hard enough to hurt.

“I’m not hanging on his words, or defending him – I just think it’s weird that if he’s to blame for so many things, how come he’s not in trouble with the police?”

Josh sighed and sank back in the booth. “I don’t know why this guy gets a pass, but I think in time, you’ll see what we see if you knew more about him.” Josh had been fiddling with his phone, and now, the furtive way he kept glancing over my shoulder was making me nervous. I had to get out of here. My instincts screamed at me to get going, and I pasted an understanding smile on my face.

“Let me think about all of this. I really need to get going,” I started.

Josh silenced me by slamming his hand on the table. “This is all Cayden’s fault,” Josh burst out. “If he hadn’t been such a superstar and stolen the team, and all the attention... and then broken my fucking nose, none of this would have happened. Don’t look at me like I’m the bad guy.”

I stared at Josh. Cayden’s actions had ignited a chain reaction that had fucked up both our lives, it was true, but Josh’s jealousy and resentments were festering sores that might have led us to the same place, anyway.

“He didn’t make you come here to dig dirt up on him. You should have just gone to my dad about the attack. That’s the way it should have been handled.”

Josh scoffed. “And your dad wouldn’t have done a thing. He’d have protected his golden boy, his one shot at moving up in the coaching world, and we both know it.”

“Well, maybe you should just focus on yourself and stop sucking up to my father. Your skills can speak for themselves and get you noticed.”

Josh stared between me and Ellen, a muscle working in his jaw. “Whatever. You guys don’t understand the pressure of making it in the Hellions. We have a ton of talented players, and getting noticed was already next to impossible before West showed up. Now – forget it.” He let out a bitter laugh and waved his arm. “Especially now.”

“It’s not Cayden’s fault that he’s better than you.”

A red flush worked up Josh’s neck at my flat statement.

He shook his head and checked his phone before nodding to himself. Apprehension rippled up my spine at his solemn look.

“Whatever, keep being delusional. He doesn’t care about you, Lillian, he only cares about himself. It’s a shame you can’t see that. I have someone for you to meet who might be able to change your mind. He’s been waiting for you to come back to Midnight. He’s happy you’re here.”

“Who? I can’t wait around to meet anyone, I have to get home,” I started and shuffled toward the end of the bench.

A body blocked my exit, sliding into the booth and trapping me.

“Ouch, that hurts my feelings,” Uncle Jack said.

So, that was who Josh had been texting.

I stared at him, suddenly afraid. “I have to get home, my parents are waiting for me; they’ll come here to get me if I’m not back in time.”

Jack tutted. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to tell lies, girl? I’m betting that you didn’t tell anyone where you were going today, a shameful little trip to Midnight Falls. I’m sure your parents wouldn’t even agree to let you come here at all, never mind alone.”

I had no comeback for that. He was right, after all.

“What do you want with me?” I asked quietly.

Jack sighed and cracked his knuckles. “Nothing, I’m serious, I want nothing from you. I just miss my foster son, and he isn’t answering my messages or taking my calls. No one just weasels away from Uncle Jack like that...so I

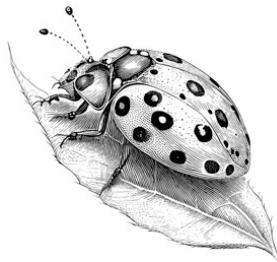
have a way to make him answer my calls.” He grinned at me, exposing brown teeth. He tapped my phone sitting on the table in front of us. “You call him and ask nicely. I bet he’ll come running for his pretty little foster sister.”

I wet my lips, my mouth as dry as hell. “He won’t come. We don’t talk to each other anymore. He doesn’t care about me.”

Jack raised an eyebrow and then shrugged. “Let’s see, shall we?”

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Lily



WE WERE GOING to Uncle Jack's trailer. I felt invisible. When we'd left the coffee shop, I'd told the waitress I was going somewhere against my will, and she'd looked right through me. Uncle Jack ruled Midnight Falls, and no one was going to help me. The other patrons in the coffee shop had glanced away as I'd resisted getting into his truck.

Luckily, they had been slow in confiscating my phone, and I'd had a chance to text someone. A lifeline. I couldn't text Cayden, not when Uncle Jack clearly wanted me to do just that. I couldn't text my parents or Eve and drag them into this whole mess. Instead, Ms. Sophie's number had come up at the top of my new contacts, and I'd written a simple message before Jack had taken my phone away.

Midnight Falls. Black Lake.

"This is kidnapping, you know? This could fuck up your entire life," I said to Josh as he opened the car door for me and pointed inside.

"Get in, Lily, no one is going to do anything to you, so stop being dramatic."

"Josh, your nose is nearly healed, you're back on the team...if that's why you're so pissed at Cayden, have it out with him the normal way, or go and tell Coach that he was the one who did it. Don't participate in whatever is going on between Cayden and his foster dad."

Josh sneered at me. “You think I only care about my nose? How about the fact that Cayden West breezed into HHH and became the star player in the middle of the season? How about the fact that your father worships the ground he walks on? Everything just comes easy to some people.” He let out a jaded laugh.

“Comes easy? You wouldn’t say that if you knew what he’s been through, where he grew up...I mean, look at his foster dad!”

Josh’s face hardened, and he shrugged. Anger filled me suddenly, and my patience snapped.

“The truth is that you’re just not as good as him, and you can’t stand it. Even with all the money and privilege in the world, the best equipment, private lessons, he’s still better, even though he had none of that, and it burns you up inside.”

My words were like a whip, lashing Josh with the truth he didn’t want to face.

He stared at me a long moment, his expression dark, and then pushed me toward the car. “You have no idea what I’ve had to put up with since starting this whole thing. Jack – that guy is crazy. I don’t want anything to do with him, but he won’t leave me alone. You’re going to help bring Cade here, and then it’s over for us, we wash our hands of it. Get in the fucking car, right now.”

When we got out of the truck at Black Lake trailer park, I scanned around wildly for someone else who might help me, but it was useless. No one was going to go against Uncle Jack. In the distance, a storm brewed. The clouds rolled in off the sea, clearly visible from the nearby cliff top. A broken fence separated the drop into the sea from the trailer park, a shitty, ineffective barrier.

I could taste the salt whipping into the air. It was going to rain, and a lot.

“Come on inside, girl,” Uncle Jack said, gripping me hard by the arm.

Ellen hesitated as she peered around the trailer park. “I’m going to go now, since we’ve done what you wanted.”

“Please, call someone, the police – anyone...” I pleaded with her.

She looked miserable as she shook her head.

Jack chuckled, patting her arm. “Ellen’s a good girl and she takes care of her momma. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure she has what she needs,” he said to Ellen, who only nodded.

Ellen shook her head sadly at me. “I’m sorry, I can’t. Don’t worry. Jack doesn’t need anything from you, just getting Cayden here is enough, then you can go, too.”

I didn’t see her leave before Jack pushed me into the trailer. The same smell of hopelessness filled my nose as I sank down on the faded bench seat in the kitchen.

“Now, let’s see if he’s replied,” Jack said, taking my phone out of his pocket and checking it. He held it out to me. “There’s a notification. Unlock it.”

I pressed my finger to the sensor, and Jack snatched it back.

“Aw, a message from Mom. ‘Hope you’re making good progress at the library. That’s my future Cali superstar.’ I think Mommy dearest doesn’t know you’re here at all.” He frowned at the screen. “But still nothing from Golden Boy. You better hope for your sake that he comes.”

“Why? What are you going to do?” I challenged and looked at Josh, who lingered uncomfortably by the door. “What are you going to do to me?”

He scowled at me. “Nothing, I told you. He’ll come. I’m sure.”

“We’ll see. Now, I’m going for a nap, had a late one last night. You watch her. Put the TV on or something,” Jack said and got up.

I watched him leave with relief. I could work on Josh, he wasn’t a hardened criminal like Jack. I had more chance of getting him to let me leave if Jack got lost.

He left us alone. Josh ventured further into the trailer and searched for the remote. He clicked a button, and a soap came on.

“Here, watch this until Cayden shows up.”

“Are we seriously just going to sit here and watch TV? You know this is wrong...Josh, what would my dad think?”

He grimaced at that. “He won’t know anything about it. Cayden will come, and you and me will leave. I’ll drop you off at home, and Coach will never know about any of this. Fucking Jack will leave me and Ellen alone, and it’ll all be over. You won’t tell the coach either, because it’ll open a whole can of worms about you and Cayden. Now, let’s watch TV.”

Josh turned to the TV, determined to be interested in the random show. I sat next to him, teeth clenched, hands balled into fists.

I had to get out of here, one way or another.

What if Cayden didn’t come? *He’ll come.* I knew it without a doubt. That was the scary thing. What the hell did Uncle Jack want with him when he came? What would he do to him?

I couldn’t sit around and wait to find out.

I had to get out of here, before Cayden came.

Josh’s eyes drifted closed for the third time, and his head nodded forward. Unlike the other times, this time, they stayed closed. I sat motionless beside him. It had been more than an hour. The evening had slid past. Uncle Jack had gone out for a second about half an hour ago, leaving me and Josh in the trailer. I was surprised that Josh hadn’t had second thoughts by now. It seemed that the information he’d gotten from Jack had tied him to the old man, and Jack wasn’t the type to hold back on exploiting weaknesses. Now Josh was just as entangled in all of this as I was.

Unfortunately for me, he seemed as committed as ever to keeping me there, waiting for Cayden, even if the likelihood of him showing up was lessening

by the minute.

A small electric heater had warmed the trailer. It would have made me sleepy, too, if it hadn't been for the adrenaline pumping through my veins.

Josh's head dropped forward even more.

He was sleeping. He was actually sleeping. I waited an excruciating ten more minutes to make sure. If he wasn't deeply under, and a noise woke him, then he'd catch me, and I probably wouldn't get another chance.

So, I waited.

After ten minutes, I made my move. I didn't have my phone since Uncle Jack had taken it, after forcing me to text Cayden while hovering threateningly over me the entire time. I didn't have to see it to know that Cayden hadn't replied.

I made my way silently across the trailer. I didn't have my watch on and had no way of knowing how long I'd been sitting beside Josh, madly trying to plan how the hell I was going to get out of here.

When I opened the trailer door as quietly as possible, a wind blew sharply through the doorway, and I hurried down the stairs and shut it softly behind me. That storm that had been brewing was nearly upon us, and the wind pulled at me, a slight shower of raindrops blowing against me as I staggered away from the trailer.

My legs felt numb from sitting for so long. I just had to get to the road. There was a bus stop down there, and I could get the hell away from Midnight Falls. I'd tell Cayden about Josh and Ellen and what his uncle was doing. I'd explain that they were victims, just as much as I was. After that, it would be his problem. I wasn't going to get involved in any of his shit anymore.

Lights appeared down the road that ran through the trailer park. It was a car. Too late, I turned to see where Jack's truck was. I wasn't sure if Jack had gone out in his truck or on foot.

Now, I noticed that his truck was missing from its space.

The vehicle rolled closer, and I took in the distinctive black stripe down the side. It was him. I immediately veered off the road and into the gathering shadows on the side, hiding in the overhang of someone's trailer. A sharp rap at the window sent me jumping a foot in the air. Someone wagged their finger at me through their window, telling me to move on. The truck had stopped outside the last trailer, and Jack got out.

Had he seen me?

"Come on, girl! Don't make me chase you," he hollered, answering my question.

At the sound of his shout, the door banged open to his trailer, and Josh stumbled out, rubbing his eyes.

"Where've you been? She's getting away, goddamn it!" Jack shouted at Josh before turning this way and that, looking for me.

Another rap at the window pulled their attention. I couldn't stay here.

I turned from the trailer with the irate neighbor and took off across the uneven ground out the back of the park.

"She's over there!"

Josh's shout sent fear coursing through me. I ran faster, my head down, making for the cliff edge. I'd run along there and hopefully come to Midnight Falls before long, or somewhere I could hide better. The entire cliff top was exposed, leaving absolutely no hiding places.

Behind me, was the sound of pursuit. Jack might be unfit as hell, but Josh would catch me. Sure, he had an injury, but it wasn't a broken leg, and he was motivated. I had no doubt that he would catch me.

My lungs burned. My breathing was unmeasured, rasping in and out of my chest painfully.

The ankle I'd injured weeks ago ached as I sprinted across the hard ground. One wrong step, and I'd go down. The awareness burned through me.

In the distance, Jack shouted to Josh, just as another sound filled the air.

A low, aggressive whine.

The sound magnified, and I tried to work out what the hell I was hearing, when a light came into sight. A bobbing, white circle, a single light in the deepening dark, rushing toward me at a great speed. More than one, actually.

What the hell were they?

I didn't have time to find out before Josh's hand snagged my arm and he wrenched me backward. I nearly lost my footing and fell into his chest as he grabbed me.

"Very clever, Lillian, but give it up now, you're caught," Josh ground out.

"*You* give it up! He's not coming for me, Josh. Accept it!" I shouted in his face. My heart pounded with the excitement of nearly getting away and a healthy dose of fear about what would happen now that I'd been caught again.

Josh sneered. "Hurts, does it? Not being important to West? That's the kind of asshole he is."

The whine only got louder when Jack caught up with us. He was panting hard and purple in the face.

"You stupid bitch. You think you can just get away so easily," he wheezed, looking like he might collapse at any moment.

I wished he would. I wished he would drop down dead, and I could run him over to make sure. *Run him over.* At the thought, the noise that had been playing on the edges of my consciousness suddenly clicked into place.

I fought against Josh and spun around, searching for the sound.

The lights were closer now, closing the distance between us.

Motorcycles, four of them. They sped across the grass and gravel that led up the cliff.

I recognized Cayden's distinctive helmet first. He was leading the charge. He had his bike turned toward me and Josh, and he wasn't slowing down.

“Fuck!” Josh shouted, pushing me to the side as Cayden roared past the place where we stood.

My breath jumped from my chest, leaving me dizzy for a second as I stared at the dark sky. The sound of motorcycles turning and revving filled the night. I sat up. Josh had fallen to the other side, and Cayden was off his bike. His bike lay on the ground near Josh, discarded like a worthless thing, from the way Cayden ignored it.

He faced Josh. I couldn’t see his face, only the tension in his body. Behind them, the other Ice Gods had stopped their bikes and gotten off. Beckett approached Josh in three long steps and hauled him around.

“Samuels? You’re fucking kidding me,” he growled at him.

I tried to stand, and Cayden looked in my direction, just as a hard hand landed in my hair, grabbing a handful.

“Don’t come close, boy, I’ve got insurance.” Jack’s gloating tone sent a shiver down my spine. He hauled me up and held me against him. His hot breath fogged my ear.

“And here was poor little Lily, thinking that Golden Boy wouldn’t bother coming for her...So, I was right after all, right, pretty girl? He came, just like I wanted him to. Take the helmet off,” he barked at Cayden.

Cayden stood motionless, staring at us. I wished I could see his expression. Then a sharp point pressed beneath my jaw. A knife. Jack had a knife. I was totally fucked.

At the sight of the knife, Cayden seemed to still even further, something I’d have thought impossible. Slowly, he raised his hands to his helmet and took it off. The sight of his familiar face nearly made me cry. I’d been so scared for hours; I’d never felt so alone.

But I wasn’t alone.

In the end, he’d come for me.

He’d come.

“Your problem is with me, Jack, not her. Let her go, you’ve fucked up her day enough.” Cayden’s voice was unwavering.

His eyes were dark in the falling night, and he stared a hole through Jack. There was a promise of violence I’d never seen in him before. No, it wasn’t a promise. It was a guarantee. I knew without a doubt that if I got away from Jack, Cayden was going to hurt him.

“That’s rich, considering you’re the one who made her wait all night.”

A muscle ticked in Cayden’s jaw. “I was in a closed practice for the night and left my phone at school. I had to go back for it.”

His eyes connected with mine, and I saw that his words were for my benefit. He hadn’t seen the message. He hadn’t made me wait.

“Well, that’ll teach you to be more responsible in the future, won’t it?” Jack chuckled. “Not that this sweet little lady will want anything to do with you after today.”

“That’s her choice. Let her go, now, if you want me to stay.”

“I don’t think I will. You seem worked up, so I think she should stay around until you calm down.”

“Jack! I’m warning you.” Cayden’s sudden shout jolted me. He was the picture of controlled menace, but I suspected he was far less composed than he seemed. In fact, he was agitated as hell.

“Let her go, or what?” Jack goaded.

He pressed the knife point into my neck, and I gasped. It wasn’t the point that hurt, it was the way his knuckle was pushing into my windpipe. Cayden’s body only tensed more at the sound, and then he was nodding. His eyes flew to mine. He held my gaze in his, reassuring me. *I wasn’t alone. He wasn’t leaving without me.*

“Okay, tell me what you need me to do, and I’ll do it.”

“I think you need to make it right. You left me after all I’ve done for you. You need to make up for that.”

“Okay. I will. What do you want me to do?” Cayden’s voice was taut with anger and frustration.

Jack considered and turned us so Beckett, Asher, and Marcus could see the knife under my chin. “I want you to kneel, and your little friends better stay back, or else the coach’s daughter will have an accident she won’t recover from.”

Cayden held out a hand to his friends. “Stay back, don’t try anything... this is between me and him.” Then he met my frantic eyes and slowly sank to his knees on the scrubby dark grass.

It hurt to see him capitulate to his monstrous foster father.

Gloating filled Jack’s voice as he spoke to Josh. “Give the boy a knife, there’s one in my boot.”

Josh paled, his fists clenching. “You were supposed to let Lily and me go as soon as Cayden showed up.”

Jack laughed, and the knife bit in. “Are you talking back to me? I’ll let you go when I damn well please, you stupid, spoiled fuck. I guess brains are hard to come by in Hade Harbor.”

“As fun as watching all this is – if it’s money you want, I can provide it,” Beckett interrupted confidently. “Name your price.”

Jack shook his head. “We’ll talk about that later. Right now, I want to see the boy bleed. He’s good at that. The knife,” he reminded Josh.

Josh took the knife from Jack’s boot, avoiding my eyes as I stared murder at the side of his face. He crossed to Cayden and threw the blade near him on the grass and then backed away.

“Please, don’t do this,” I pleaded, wriggling against Jack.

He pulled my hair hard enough to bring tears to my eyes.

“Shut the fuck up. Now, Golden Boy, let’s see how well you remember how to write.” He jerked his chin forward. “Lose the jacket.”

Cayden complied, stripping off his thick leather jacket and revealing a black T-shirt beneath.

He gripped the knife in his hand. “Well?”

“Hmm, now, let me think. I think the Cutlers were too kind, hiding their handiwork on your back...I think it should be right there on your arm, for the world to see. Worms should know their place. Write it, and make it good, or I’ll write it on her neck after she bleeds out.”

My stomach revolted as I realized what was happening. Jack wanted Cayden to carve a word into his arm with the knife. The same word that his previous foster family had written in flesh on his back.

“No! No – do something!” I screamed at Josh, Beckett, anyone who could help.

“No, don’t do anything,” Cayden said, his voice commanding as hell. He met my eyes. “He’s not playing. He’ll hurt her. No one does anything that endangers Lily.”

Holding my gaze, those heartbreakingly words ringing through my head, Cayden put the tip of the knife to his inner arm and pressed in. Blood welled up. Josh staggered to the side and vomited on the grass. Asher tried to push forward, but Beckett held him back, his face solemn. Tears poured down my cheeks. The knife below my chin seemed less of a threat now, compared to the horror of watching Cayden write a word in his arm. I was so horrified and angry, I felt sick. My head spun.

I couldn’t make out what Cayden had carved, there was too much blood to see. His face was pale, but his eyes were determined.

He had sunk down on his haunches and seemed to cave inward as he moved to the next letter.

“Well done, boy, make it nice and big so everyone can see,” Jack goaded.

My sobs were the only sounds breaking the black stillness around us, until suddenly a clap sounded. Clap after clap, drawing closer, followed by a long whistle.

“You know what they say about size...if you care too much, you’re overcompensating for something.”

Jack spun me around, the knife digging in, to see who had joined us.

A man strolled over the rough ground, looking like he had all the time in the world. He was dressed in leather and dark jeans, shitkicker boots, and had a shaved head that had started to grow out. Even then, the hair couldn’t hide the tattoos on his skull. He was covered in them. He stopped a little way off and crossed his arms, seeming for all the world like a guy just out for an evening stroll who’d come across a perplexing sight.

I recognized him immediately.

My art teacher’s husband. Hade Harbor’s new mystery man.

The terrifying one.

“Don’t let me interrupt, go on about your business.” He waved his hand over the scene. “I should introduce myself, however...where are my manners?” He patted his pocket and pulled out a small rectangle. “I’m Nikolai Viktorovich Chernov. Take a card.”

Jack grunted and then chuckled uneasily. “I don’t want your fucking business card, get lost. We’re busy here.”

Nikolai shrugged and tucked his card away. “No one ever wants a card. I suppose manners are truly dead.” Then he gave a smirk that was cold and lethal as hell. “Let’s just get right down to business, in that case.” He jerked his head toward Cayden. “Let the kids go, and you and I can have a little chat. Fail to do so, and you’ll put me in a mood.” He laughed, and there was something unhinged about the sound. “You wouldn’t like me in a mood. I have a temper.”

Jack was bursting with annoyance by this point. “I don’t know who you are, wise guy, but get the fuck out of here or I’ll cut this girl’s throat.”

Nikolai tutted, his jovial expression dropping in an instant. “Manners. Think about our influence on these youthful minds. Shame on you. I guess since you don’t have any, I’ll have to teach you.”

His hand went back to his pocket, and in a second, he pulled a gun. Jack blanched at the sight. Nikolai cocked it, released the safety in one fell movement, and pointed it at Jack's head. "Let the girl go, or she'll be picking fragments of your skull out of her pretty hair for weeks." He looked at me. "Apologies in advance, sweetheart."

"You're crazy, where the fuck did you come from?" Jack grunted, backing away and dragging me with him.

The knife dug in and made me cry out.

Nikolai's face hardened at the sound. "Your worst fucking nightmares, old man. You have the count of three to let her go. One—"

Jack dragged me back again, and I stumbled, gasping as the knife dug deeper into my skin.

"Two," Nikolai continued, advancing on us.

He never got to three.

A heavy weight barreled into us, hitting Jack in the side and knocking the knife out of his hand. I fell to the grass and rolled, just in time to see Cayden grappling with Jack.

Jack landed a lucky punch and staggered up, stepping on Cayden's hurt arm. He swore before lunging at his former foster father. He plowed into Jack, bulldozing him back off his feet.

I crawled away from the fray as they went at each other.

"Shit, Lily, are you okay?" Marcus was there, helping me up.

"I'm okay," I muttered, twisting around to see the scene.

Beckett had punched Josh out, and he lay motionless on the ground near his feet, right next to his own vomit. Asher stood beside his dirty bike, his jaw clenched. Nikolai watched the fight with interest.

"Do something – shoot him!" I pleaded with him. I pulled away from Marcus and swayed to Nikolai's side.

He turned a thoughtful expression to me. “Oh, don’t worry, I will. First, though, I need to let your boy work out some issues.”

“He’s getting hurt,” I argued.

“He’s getting vengeance. Believe me, he needs it. Cheapest therapy there is.” He jerked his head to Marcus. “Take the girl away from here.”

“What! No, I can’t leave,” I started, just as Marcus pulled at my arm.

“Cayden can take care of himself,” he pointed out. “And he has backup.”

“I’m not leaving,” I protested, fighting against Marcus’ strong arms.

My eyes were glued to Cayden and Jack. They fought tooth and nail. Cayden was superior in every way, but Jack had a knife, and he kept swiping it menacingly at Cayden, forcing him back.

He lunged in and nearly caught Cayden’s middle. He was only wearing a T-shirt, and the material tore under the blade. My audible gasp drew Cayden’s attention.

He looked toward me, worried at my sound of fright. His concentration was compromised for just a second, but it was enough.

As Cayden’s worried eyes connected with mine, Jack lunged in again and buried the small blade in Cayden’s side.

“Cayden!” I screamed.

Marcus nearly lost control of me.

Nikolai nodded to me, seemingly unconcerned that Cayden had just been stabbed. “Time to go, sweetheart. My wife is invested in your safety, which means so am I. Get out of here, and I’ll take care of your boy for you.”

“Please, I need to stay to make sure he doesn’t get hurt.”

“He’s already hurt, he’s been hurt for a long, long time...But I’m betting he’d like you safe. Take her.” His firm instruction left no room for disagreement.

Marcus tipped me over his shoulder and carried me to his bike, putting me on, despite my protests. I fought him trying to put the helmet on my head.

“You’re distracting him. Do you want him to get more hurt?” Marcus demanded.

His words sank through my panic. He was right. It was my fault he’d been hurt just now. I could see that he’d rallied and was back to fighting Jack, ignoring the cut in his side.

“We have to go. He’ll be fine if we go. Beckett and Asher are here, and that other dude, too,” Marcus reminded me.

“Ms. Sophie’s husband.”

“That’s our art teacher’s husband? Holy shit, remind me never to hit on her again,” Marcus mumbled.

I ignored him, staring at Cayden fighting Jack. Nikolai had settled back, stopping Beckett and Asher from joining the fray. He said he was giving Cayden room to slay his demons. Maybe he was right. I had no idea.

As I stared numbly at the sight, Marcus shoved my helmet on my head and got on the bike.

“Hold on,” he muttered and hauled my arms around his waist.

“We need somewhere to go, somewhere quiet, somewhere with medical stuff,” Marcus was saying. “What about that vet place you work at? Can you get in?”

“What? Yes... Yes, I can,” I sighed, trying to make my brain work again. I wanted to jump off the bike and run back to the fight, but what if I only made it worse?

“Good. Cade’s going to need someone to patch him up, and we can’t afford your dad hearing about it. Let’s go and get ready for it.”

Cayden



JACK WAS TIRING OUT. He wasn't fit, and his lifestyle was catching up with him, but hatred gave him strength he didn't deserve.

He feinted right, and I saw it coming. Marcus had gone, carrying Lily off over his shoulder to his bike. I'd been so hyperaware of her that now that she was gone, I could concentrate on Jack and settling the score of a lifetime.

Anticipating his move, I kicked toward his rising knife, and the blade flew from his hand, disappearing into the grass somewhere. He looked down wildly, searching for it without results.

"Seems like it's an even fight now, isn't that right, Uncle Jack? Finally, you can pick on someone your own size," I goaded. My side hurt vaguely, the pain registering in a distant part of my mind. I couldn't think about it and get distracted. This confrontation had been ten years in the making.

I couldn't believe he'd taken Lily. Lily. Sweet, smart Lily. Uncle Jack had known me better than I'd thought in the end. He'd immediately seen the one person I'd be attracted to and used her however he could. When I thought about her being in his clutches all night, I felt rage, a spiraling, never-ending darkness, taint my mind. Whatever Josh had had to do with it all, I'd find out shortly. Right now, I was just glad that Lily hadn't been alone with Jack.

Jack swung for me, and I ducked under him, straightening up and lifting him off his feet. I pushed him back, and we crashed through the broken

fence that kept the trailer park kids from the cliff.

I landed hard on Jack, crushing him under my weight. He slammed a hand into my injured side as we rolled over. The waves crashed below me. There was a storm coming, and electricity sizzled in the air.

Maybe this storm had been brewing since the day I'd started a fire in my foster parents' kitchen. The day when I'd hoped that firefighters would carry me away and no one would take me back to the Cutlers. The day I hadn't known that they'd been passed out in their beds and never even moved when the flames had taken the house.

"Are you enjoying yourself, boy? Hurting people is what you do, isn't it?"

"Shut the fuck up, or I really will kill you," I grunted, punching him two times in the face before he managed to get a hit in to my side. I rolled away, the pain making me want to vomit.

"That's what you're best at, isn't it, Cayden? What you were born to do. Just like me, you feed on the weak and grow stronger."

"I'm nothing like you," I gasped out.

"You fucking liar. You *are* me," Jack hissed, managing to move away from me while I was clutching my side.

I rolled onto my knees as he staggered to his feet, out of reach.

"You were born broken, and you'll die that way. You destroy everything you touch, and that girl is no exception...you're a cancer, a poison – *a worm*."

I moved without thinking, the word a trigger that I'd never been able to control. With a roar, I closed the space between us and checked Jack hard, with all the strength that I'd use to send a defender into the boards on the ice.

But here, there were no boards to stop him as he flew backward. There was nothing at all.

His face was a picture of perfect surprise as he fell off the cliff. Time seemed to slow, and I knew I'd never forget that last look he gave me. I ran

forward, acting on instincts that I didn't know I had. I grabbed his hand and stopped his downward motion.

He swung from my grip. His hand was sweaty.

"Help us! Pull us up!" I called to my friends, and just like that, they were there.

We fell backward onto the grass, and Jack crawled away from us, coughing. Beckett kept an eye on him while I slowly gained my feet.

You fucking liar. You are me. Jack's words sounded again and again in my head. *No.* I finally answered. *I'm not.*

"Well, that was anticlimactic," the man said from the darkness beside us.

He'd introduced himself as Nikolai. He approached, and it took everything in me not to take up a defensive stance. Trouble knows trouble, and this guy was dangerous like no one I'd ever met before.

Jack curled up on the floor, groaning with pain. "Who the fuck are you, anyway?" he spat at the newcomer.

"Just a concerned citizen and local business owner. I've heard all about you, Jack of Midnight Falls, a stain on the good reputation of this area. You see, I live here now, my wife lives here...my son lives here. I can't have fuckers like you giving the area a bad reputation. And I really don't like the competition. I have a simple solution for competition. Want to hear it?" He swooped down and grabbed Jack in a sudden burst of violent power that was awe-inspiring to behold.

He held him up by the neck. A dark tattoo on his hand spelled out a word in Cyrillic.

"Who are you?" Jack mumbled again, clearly trying to get his tiny mind around the fact that he'd just lost, maybe for the first time in his life.

"I'm the *Palach* – and I'm about to share with you my method for dealing with competition. Are you ready? Listen up, you can't get this kind of hands-on practical expertise just anywhere." Nikolai, the *Palach*, sounded amused by the entire scene.

Jack nodded, finally realizing just how fucked he was.

Nikolai smiled, and my blood went cold, then his arms exploded forward, throwing Jack backward, into the darkness and the nothingness beyond the broken fence. The world seemed to still for a long moment, and Jack was frozen in the air. His eyes touched mine, and the expression of surprise etched itself permanently into my mind.

Then he was falling, arms pinwheeling, into the inky darkness where the night met the black sea.

A scream pierced the air and was suddenly cut off.

I ran for the cliff edge, panic tearing through me. I paused on the crumbling edge and looked down.

There was nothing but raging dark waters below, crashing against midnight rocks.

Uncle Jack was gone.

“He’s finished, Cade, don’t fall, man,” Beckett’s commanding voice called to me, and then he was there, pulling me back.

The horror of the events of the evening washed over me, and the pain of my injury suddenly registered. I staggered to the side, and Asher was there.

We turned our shocked eyes to Nikolai, who picked a blade of grass off his cuff, seeming totally unconcerned.

“Well, boys, what’s the story?” His lazy tone held no hint that he worried we might go to the police. He was supremely confident.

“It’s a dangerous cliff and the fence is broken...it’s a hazard. Anyone could fall from there,” Asher said coolly after a moment.

“I can’t believe it takes a tragedy like this, a local man slipping to his death, to bring attention to this safety hazard.” Beckett’s voice was forceful. Decided.

I glanced between them.

Nikolai chuckled. “*Maladetz*. I’m impressed.” He nodded toward an unconscious Josh. “You want to chuck him over while we’re here?”

“No. Not him... Just Jack. Jack deserved it,” I added quickly.

Nikolai nodded and then jerked his head to me. “Walk with me, kid.”

I complied, because I had never met anyone who would say no to a request from this guy. We headed away from the edge.

I walked stiffly. The place where Jack had stabbed me ached, but the cuts on my forearm that I’d done myself were worse. Nikolai cast a glance at my arm.

“You okay?”

A dry chuckle left me. “Not even remotely.”

“You will be. You know, I see a lot of myself in you, kid. Fucked up, angry, aggressive. I know what’s inside you. I know how it growls.”

We stopped a little way from the cliff edge, and I tried my best not to look down and imagine Jack’s broken body somewhere below.

“What you have to do now is decide if you’ll let it control you, or you tame it.”

“I want to tame it, but I don’t know how,” I replied immediately.

Nikolai stared out over the dark sea. He’d just killed a man. I’d never seen someone so laid-back about anything.

“You can’t tame something you’re afraid of. Take lion tamers, for instance —they show fear, that’s it, they’re breakfast. You need to look those animals in the eye and master your fear.”

“You’re telling me to face my fears. I hate to break it to you, but I think that slogan is trademarked at this point.”

Nikolai smiled and turned an approving grin on me. “Humor is good. Facing your demons is good. They can’t control you if you don’t let them. There is a girl out there who deserves a whole man, not a husk.”

Lily. Lily had been hurt because of me and by me.

“She deserves more than me, even if I was a whole person.”

Nikolai nodded, allowing me that. “Maybe so, but she wants you. Believe me, I know women who have a weakness for monsters. It’s too late for her.” He stuck his hand in his pocket and brought out the black business card from earlier. “The only thing you can do now is be a better monster. You’re young. You have time.”

I swallowed hard as he held out the card to me. “Who are you?”

“Your art teacher’s husband and a new resident of Hade Harbor,” Nikolai said lightly.

“I mean, who are you *really*? ”

He smirked. “A fellow monster.” He tapped the card in my hand. “You need something, you come to me. Now, I’ll be seeing you around town, kid. Don’t hit on my wife if you want to enjoy a long life expectancy.”

He saluted before he turned and walked away. I stared at the business card. It was matte black, with black letters, only visible when you turned it just right, a shine rippling across the word, and a number below.

Palach.

I made my way back to the guys.

“I don’t want you to have to lie for me,” I started and stopped when Beckett snorted.

“What lie? A guy fell over the edge of the cliff. It’s a damn shame, but thank God it wasn’t anyone else, a kid or something,” he said and jerked his chin toward the unconscious Josh.

“What are we going to do with Samuels?”

Beckett frowned. “Leave him here. He made his bed, he can lie in it. We need to get your side looked at.”

“If I go to the hospital, I won’t be able to play in the game the scouts are going to be at,”

I said as we walked toward our bikes. Mine was surprisingly undamaged, considering how I'd used it like a weapon.

"Don't worry, Marcus has it covered. Let's get the fuck out of here, before someone sees us," Asher said and snapped down his visor.

"You okay to ride?" Beckett asked, helping me pull my bike up.

My side hurt like hell, and I was bleeding pretty badly, but going to a hospital wasn't an option, and I couldn't leave my bike here and have questions come from it. My brain felt oddly hazy. I was pretty sure it was shock. Getting away from here before it wore off was probably a good idea.

"I'm good, I'll be fine. Let's go."

We parked around the back of the animal clinic in Hade Harbor. I'd tied a tourniquet around the wound to slow the bleeding, but it was a relief when I dismounted my bike.

"Why are we here?" I wondered, looking up at the back door and the dark sign above it with a cute cat and dog. "There's no one here."

"Not true," Asher muttered and rapped on the darkened door.

It opened to Marcus' relieved face. "Thank fuck you guys are here. I was starting to get worried that the wrong guy fell off the cliff." At my dark expression, he shrugged. "Hey, I'm an Ice God, too. Don't withhold the good stuff from me. That fucker had it coming."

We went into the small waiting room, and the harsh smell of cleaning products and something faintly medicinal filled my nose.

The fact was that a huge secret now bound me to these guys. I'd never been so scared and so relieved at the same time. Uncle Jack was dead. Gone forever. It hadn't sunk in yet.

"Why are we here?" I had been picturing doctoring myself in the bathroom at the Williamses'. It wouldn't be the first time that hot water, a straight

alcohol dousing, and duct tape had gotten me through a stab wound.

“Because you need to be patched up, and apparently going to hospital isn’t an option,” a soft, female voice called to me.

It was her.

Lily. She was still here with us. With me. Despite it all.

Her sweet voice was like a balm to my tattered heart. I turned toward the sound, like she had tied a string to my heart and I couldn’t stay the fuck away. I’d never been as scared as when I’d seen the message from her, or her standing in Jack’s grip. I’d thought that in my life, I’d learned what fear was, but now I knew I’d never experienced it truly until I’d seen Lily in danger. That was fear. That was real.

She crossed the room toward me, and I braced myself. I felt like what she did next could break me. Clearly, I’d been wrong about everything, just like she’d warned me. I hadn’t listened. I’d reacted too quickly. I hadn’t trusted her. I’d embarrassed her in front of everyone. She hated me now and she deserved to.

Being Lily, she didn’t act at all like she should have. Her slender arms reached around me, and I disappeared into her embrace, lurching forward into her arms. The reality of everything that had happened threatened to wash over me, but holding on to Lily, like an enduring rock in the sea, I clung on and knew I could survive it. It was a power unique to her.

“Are you okay?” I asked her immediately. “Did he hurt you?”

She shook her head against my chest, and the smell of her hair rose around me. It smelled like what I thought home might, if I’d ever really known one.

“I should be asking you that.” Lily pulled back, her eyes searching my body for injuries, a deep crease lining her forehead. “Come on,” she muttered, picking up my injured arm.

It had stopped bleeding, but the letter I’d carved in was weeping dark blood.

“It’s okay. It doesn’t hurt that bad,” I lied. Nothing hurt after seeing she was safe. Nothing hurt after the way she’d held me, like seeing me whole and

relatively unharmed had been the most important thing to ever happen to her. If she found a smile for me, I was pretty sure nothing would ever hurt again.

She led the way into a small exam room.

“Here, get up here, and lose the shirt.” She pointed to the paper-lined table.
“Sit here.”

I complied, undoing my belt that I’d tied around my side and unsticking the T-shirt from the blood.

Lily hissed, her eyes narrowing at the sight. I took off the shirt and dropped it to the floor. Now that I was here, sitting with Lily, seeing her safe, the adrenaline was wearing off, and my side hurt like a fucker. My arm burned too, but I didn’t even want to look at it and see the damage my cutting had caused. At least I’d only gotten one letter done.

“I have to clean it first before I can see how bad it is. You might still have to go to the hospital,” she warned softly.

I nodded, though I knew that going to the hospital was basically the same as giving up my position in the next game. The game that the HHU scouts would be at. I couldn’t let that happen.

She bit her lip as she assessed the damage, and I watched her. She doused cotton balls in alcohol solution and wiped away the excess blood, getting closer and closer to the wound, starting with my arm.

“This is really going to hurt,” she whispered, her eyes flickering to mine for a second.

“It’s okay. I deserve it,” I murmured back.

She swallowed, her slender throat bobbing forcefully with the movement.
“No. You don’t. No one deserves *that*.”

Then she poured the antiseptic over the wound.

I gritted my teeth and grunted. It burned like a motherfucker, but I wasn’t a stranger to pain. I’d be okay. I’d manage this without the hospital, I could already tell.

A pressure closed around my hand, and I opened my eyes to see Lily's small hand gripping mine, her knuckles white. Her face was drawn. It hurt her to hurt someone else. That was the kind of angel this girl was.

"It's okay, it's over, it's over," she was muttering over and over.

I wondered if she was telling me or herself. The feeling of her sweet comfort made the burn of the antiseptic fade into insignificance.

She blew out a breath, trying to clear a lock of red that had fallen over her eye. I reached for it before I could stop myself, guiding it into place behind her ear.

"Are you really okay?" she asked. Now that she'd cleaned it, the cut was clearly visible. A line-like shape. I hadn't cut a *w*. There'd been no way Jack could have made me without coming over himself to check, and I'd already planned to stab him with his own knife, in that case.

No, I'd decided that I wouldn't write that cursed word on my body ever again. I'd decided that if I had to write anything, it would be something I wanted. Luckily, I hadn't cut for long enough for Lily to distinguish the letter as an *L*, the beginning of her name. She was already freaked out enough tonight.

I shrugged. "I'm a guy who just cut a letter into his own arm. I don't really know how to answer that. Are you?"

She let out a raw laugh. "Nothing about today's been okay."

Guilt punched me in the gut. She'd gotten into this situation because of me. Her life had gotten worse since I'd come into it. She might be an angel to me, a sudden gift of grace that I'd never even imagined, but to her, I was a curse.

"I know. I'm so sorry. You should never have been there or gotten on that asshole's radar. It's my fault."

Her voice trembled as she let out a shaky exhale. "Then it's my fault your arm is like this. If it wasn't for me, you'd never have gone there or had to hurt yourself. I'm sorry." She lifted her green, tear-filled eyes to mine. "I'm so sorry."

“Don’t. You’re not to blame for the evil of someone like Uncle Jack.”

“Neither of us are,” she said quickly.

I nodded slowly, agreeing with her, even if I knew in my heart, Lily being there was my fault.

“Josh Samuels,” I started.

Her eyes narrowed. “Nothing will happen to Josh.” Lily’s voice was firm. “Nothing. Too much violence has already happened. It has to stop somewhere, and it stops here.”

I thought about Nikolai Chernov’s words, about taming the monster inside, even while it hungered to be fed. I could go and fuck Josh up. He had dragged Lily into all this, too. And yet it would only go on and on. I could only guess that Josh had gotten involved in the first place because of me. Because I’d broken his fucking nose, for no other reason than petty jealousy and possessiveness. Because the darkness inside had held no relief, and what was one more shitty act of violence after the life I’d led? Karma was certainly a fucking bitch.

“Okay,” I heard myself say.

Lily blinked at me, surprised by my easy agreement. “Okay?”

“Okay. You’re right. It stops here. If you ask me not to go after Josh, I won’t.”

She studied me for a moment, and then the crease between her eyes eased and she smiled. It felt like a benediction. After all she’d been through today, she was still making good choices and doing the right thing, even for people who might not deserve it.

Lily might have been down, but she wasn’t beaten. There was a spine of steel buried somewhere beneath her straight-A-student exterior. Something wild, and headstrong, and far braver than anyone I knew.

“If I’d seen your message earlier, I’d have been there sooner. I came as soon as I saw it.” I needed her to believe that. “I know you don’t really have a reason to believe me, but the guys can back me up.”

She continued to blot the extra blood from the wound on my arm before dabbing on antiseptic and then smoothing a clean, dry bandage over it.

Lily held her silence as she moved around me to my side. The stab was shallow, his angle hadn't been right, but it still hurt, and it'd still need cleaning.

She was looking at my side, prodding with a cotton ball, pressing the alcohol deep inside to root out any potential infection, when she finally spoke. "Why do you care if I believe you or not? I don't exist to you, remember?"

The reminder of the harsh, unforgiveable things I'd said to her in the heat of my anger was a slap.

"Lily," I began and jerked as she put her finger to my lips. Her skin was so soft, I wanted to kiss it.

"Don't. I was just teasing you. After tonight...let's just leave the past in the past. It doesn't matter now."

"How can you say that after what I did?"

"What you did was horrible, we both know it...but it forced me to confront some hard truths, and I don't regret that now."

I leaned down to peer at her. She stared down at my side, dabbing it with cotton balls soaked in cleaning solution.

"Seriously?" I wondered.

She nodded. "I had the best conversation I've ever had with my parents, and at the end of the day, that was because of you."

A grin of relief touched my lips. "I suppose I should say you're welcome."

She poked me a touch harder for a second, her green eyes flickering to mine. "Don't push it."

A chuckle left me. How could I be chuckling when the last few hours had been some of the worst in my life? I had no idea. I only knew that I felt

lighter than I ever had, sitting here with Lily, her smile gracing my unworthy face.

“Because of you, I can be honest with my parents about what I want.”

“And that’s going to California?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking.

She hummed an agreement, and I wanted to press her further, but she didn’t give me a chance.

“I think we’re done here, well, as much as I can be anyway.” She picked up the bloodied cotton balls and put them in a metal dish, then walked behind me to put them in the trash.

Her footsteps carried her to the trash can and then halfway back before suddenly stopping.

Oh, right. I’d been so distracted; I’d taken off my T-shirt without even thinking about my back.

The word the Cutlers had given me to remember them by forever. Not that it was a secret from her.

She was silent, unmoving.

I glanced at her over my shoulder. “It’s okay. You’ve already seen it, right?”

“No. I told you...I never really saw it,” she said quietly.

Fuck. I hunched forward, suddenly feeling exposed. She really hadn’t seen it before? Now, her reaction became the most important thing in my life.

It was so quiet, I was sure she could hear my heart pounding.

Then, a touch so soft, I wasn’t sure if I’d imagined it. Like the brush of an angel’s fingers, her finger traced over the word.

WORM

She outlined every letter, and I let her. I owed her that, after all. I’d shared her secrets with the world; it was only fair that I showed her mine.

“They were my first foster family, the ones who took me in after my mom died. The ones who died in a fire.” I took a long, steady breath. “The fire I started.”

The silence couldn’t have been thicker. I could have felt awkward right now. Being seen like this should have been excruciating, but it wasn’t. It felt like a heavy weight was lifting off me as I confessed to my sins before the only judge I cared about.

“When you were eight,” Lily finally said.

I nodded, my heart lifting with the compassionate tone filling her voice.

“When I was eight, yes. I killed two people.”

“I don’t think I’d call them people.” Her voice was strong as she rounded me, her hand falling from the word and appearing in front of me. Her green eyes glittered and those perfect toffee-colored lashes were stuck together. Her cheeks were wet.

She was crying.

Crying for me.

“It’s not your fault, Cayden. They got what they deserved,” she whispered, and a long tear streaked down her cheek.

I reached for it, brushing the salt from her cheek with my thumb. She was close now, her slim body cradled between my thighs. So close I could smell the heavenly scent of her skin, even over the antiseptic and blood.

“Don’t cry for me. I don’t deserve your tears, and we both know it.” My voice was a raw murmur.

She shook her head. “Maybe not, but that eight-year-old boy does.”

I cupped her face, wanting to kiss her more than I’d ever wanted anything. I brushed her tears from her skin in gentle circles over her cheeks.

“He’s gone. Don’t worry about him,” I reassured her.

She shook her head again and placed a hand on my bare chest, just over my heart. “He’s not gone. He’s in here...be kind to him, okay?”

I couldn't take not kissing her for one more second. She was too much, and she saw me too clearly. I leaned in and pressed my lips against hers—chaste kiss, considering all the things we'd done together—but it felt intimate in a way I'd never experienced. No one who had ever really *seen* me had ever wanted me. No one except her.

She pulled back just as the kiss deepened. "I have to bandage your side. You're lucky, the knife didn't go too deep."

She stepped away, and it felt like a physical blow to lose her softness.

She took another bowl from the counter and brought it to my side. It was filled with gauze and tape.

"You're good at this," I observed as she worked, bandaging up my side.

She shrugged. "I've worked here for years. The basics have rubbed off on me...well, the animal basics, anyway."

"Are you calling me an animal?" I teased her, but my words only made her wince, and I knew she was thinking about the word on my back, carved time and time again into a terrified young boy's flesh.

"Is that why you were so upset...when I called you a parasitoid?" she wondered quietly.

I nodded. "I guess it hit a little too close to home, not that you could have known that."

"I guess if I'd just called you a jerk, like a normal person...maybe everything would have been different between us. We would have just been strangers to each other. People who lived next door...our worlds passing, but never colliding."

She patted the neat, dry dressing she'd placed on my wound.

I grabbed her wrist before she could turn away. "No, you're wrong. You and I were destined to be more than strangers. We were always going to be more. We were born to collide."

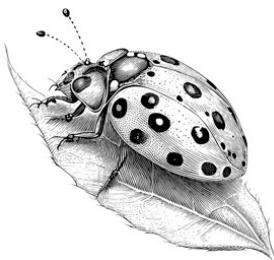
She stared at me, her green eyes as lush as ever. I wanted to wander into that sweet, calm forest and live there forever. Then she yawned, and I

realized how exhausted she must be.

I nodded and stood, my side only aching a little now. “Come on, Freckles. I’m taking you home.”

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Lily



I LAY IN BED, watching the moonlight tracking across the ceiling. I fingered the Band-aid on my neck covering the place where Jack's knife had pressed in. Thankfully it had been a small cut, despite how scary it had felt at the time. My parents hadn't even noticed the skin-colored Band-aid on my neck, under my hair. Cayden's bruises had been a lot more noticeable, but they were more than used to hockey players' injuries. He made up a random sparring session with the other Ice Gods, and my dad bought it. As long as Cayden wasn't bleeding out, he probably wanted to avoid getting involved in his players' personal lives.

I couldn't sleep. The horror of the day was too fresh in my mind. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw horrible demons. Jack and the smell of the trailer. The word resting in scar tissue on Cayden's back, a monument to abuse that could never be erased. I tossed and turned. Sleep was miles away, and my mind couldn't stop going to Cayden. I wondered if he was asleep. I didn't think he would be.

The things I'd found out were disturbing as hell for me, but it had to be even worse for him. I knew I'd hate to be alone with those kinds of memories dragged out into the light, not to mention whatever had gone down between Cayden and his former foster father after I'd left. A man was dead, if he could even qualify being called a man. When I finally fell asleep, a pallor of death clung to my dreams, scaring me into restless wakefulness.

I found myself at Cayden's door before I could overthink it. It was like my feet had carried me there without my knowledge. I opened the door and stepped inside. He was sitting up in bed, his broad back leaning against the headboard, as far from sleep as I was. The blinds were open, and from the spare room window, you could see the moon hanging over the sea in the distance.

He turned to me, his face unsurprised. It was like he'd been waiting for me. There was that feeling again between us, an inevitability that there was no point in fighting.

I crossed toward him wordlessly, and he sat up straighter to meet me, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. I stopped before him, suddenly afraid to touch him. He reached for my waist, nearly circling the entire thing with his broad hands and long fingers. His chest was bare, and the white of the bandage on his side stood out in the darkness.

He tugged me closer so I had to kneel on the bed, straddling his lap. I moved carefully, not wanting to jostle his injury, but he pulled me to him like he couldn't feel pain.

It seemed the spell that I was under extended to him, too. Of course it did. Since the second we'd met, there was a strange kind of magic that only seemed to exist between us.

I lowered my weight onto him, his hardness immediately pressing against my inner thigh. As I felt his long, stiff cock, I suddenly knew exactly what I was looking for. I wanted him inside me. He was the only guy I'd ever wanted inside me, and right now, my body knew what it needed to say to him more than my mind did.

He flexed his hips against me as I gently rocked on him. He tilted his head back to watch me. I spread my fingers over his high cheekbones and down the planes of his chiseled jaw, stroking over his stubble. His dark eyes never moved from mine as I rubbed myself on him. Even just rotating my hips and dragging my panty-clad pussy across his cock felt like coming home. I gasped softly as he nudged upward against me, sending wetness blossoming inside my cunt.

My head fell back as his lips found my neck and he dragged his teeth down my skin, kissing and licking as he went.

His hand gripped my ass cheek, sliding between my legs and hooking my panties to the side. The stretchy cotton went easily. The wet tip of his cock slipped just inside me. He was naked, I hadn't realized. He paused there, waiting to see if I pushed him away. Instead, I angled my hips just right so that his first thrust took him deep inside.

He growled against my neck as I rocked myself on his cock, perfectly impaled on him.

His hands squeezed my ass, lifting me carefully up and down his length, setting a pace that made my pulse pound. He felt so good inside me like this. Best of all, the empty place within where the nightmares had been hiding was filled now. He overwhelmed my senses with his scent and the hot touch of his hands. I had no space to be scared in his arms.

We moved slowly together, without hurry, until I came. It was a slow, unfurling spread of pleasure, and comfort, as familiar and reassuring as the sight of the shore after getting lost at sea.

He didn't follow me, not yet. Instead, he stood, picking me up, and then lowered me onto the bed and crawled over me, all while still sunk deep. He fucked me slowly as I relaxed back against his pillow, the sleepiness that had eluded me before suddenly unable to be ignored.

"Sleep, Freckles. I'm right here. You're not alone," he murmured in my ear, his cock sliding languidly in and out of me.

It felt so good, and I was so tired, overwhelmed and weary from anxiety, I let my eyes close and drifted.

I didn't feel him come, so I had no idea how long he fucked me through the night, only that when I woke up, I was wet as hell inside and still stuffed with him. His cock had softened a little, but the tip was still inside me. He'd turned us so he was spooning me from behind. When I moved carefully off of him, a rush of cum slid free, so much it seemed to break some kind of record. He'd been fucking me and filling me all night long. Maybe he'd needed the comfort just as much as I had.

I crept from the room and headed for the shower, after tucking the comforter in around him, and smoothing the worried lines from his forehead.

I sat next to my dad in the front seat of his truck the next morning, and Cayden sat in the back. I could feel his eyes on the back of my head.

“I don’t know if Cade’s told you, but scouts will be at the game from HHU.” My dad’s smile was present in his voice.

I twisted to him, shocked.

He grinned from ear to ear. “To channel Captain Obvious for a second, this is a big deal for the team, and me. We’d better be on our game.”

“But you guys aren’t even champions yet.”

My dad shook his head. “When you dominate every game, scouts take notice. They don’t want to wait around until there’s more interest and have to lure you to them. They want to lock down future stars today. They will especially be looking out for Cade, Asher, and Marcus.”

“Not Beckett?”

“Beckett’s father donates so much money to his alma mater, he can walk onto the team with a broken leg and they’ll all welcome him with huge smiles.”

“Wow, nepotism for the win,” I muttered, and I peered at Cayden in the mirror.

His face was hard to read.

“Well?” Dad asked Cayden. “Aren’t you excited?”

Cade turned his blue gaze to him and slowly nodded. “Can’t you tell?”

His deadpan voice sent my eyes rolling.

My dad just chuckled. “I guess that’s what focus looks like.”

We drove on and soon pulled into the huge gates of HHH. Now that everything was out in the open about California, I felt lighter than I ever had, despite the terrible events in Midnight Falls.

“Thanks for the ride, I’ll see you later,” I said to my dad as he stopped in the staff lot.

I hopped down from the truck.

“Don’t thank me. I’m cherishing every single ride we have like this, now that our days might be numbered,” my dad called to me.

I stilled in the doorway. “Might be numbered?” I repeated.

He grinned. “I’ve not given up hope that you’ll still decide to stay. After all, HHU is a great school...at least as good as your other pick.”

I huffed, suddenly aware that Cayden might be within earshot.

“Dad,” I started.

He chuckled, waving me away. “I know, don’t nag. I’ve got it. But a man can hope, can’t he? See you later, Lilypad.”

I got two steps before a huge hand landed on my shoulder and my backpack was plucked off me.

“Hey!” I whirled around, already swinging for it. My hands hit the wall of Cayden’s chest.

“Calm down, Freckles, I’m just carrying it for you. You’ve got so much in here, you look like you’re about to tip over.”

“I can carry my own bag just fine, and besides, if you care to remember, you have a stab wound in your side.”

“A flesh wound, you said so yourself,” Cayden said and actually grinned at me.

I stopped, my momentum halted by the unusual sight.

He walked backward away from me, still holding my pink bag on his shoulder.

“Cayden, give it back,” I protested.

He shook his head. “No, I don’t think I will. I think if you want your stuff today, you’ll have to come and ask me for it.”

“Are you being serious right now?” Heat filled me, a writhing sort of excitement from interacting with Cayden again. Despite everything we’d been through together, he gave me one cheeky grin, and I was melting. Feminists should use me as a cautionary tale. I needed to donate my brain to science for research on illogical decision-making.

“Seems like it. I guess I’ll be seeing you between each period today.”

“Cayden!” I snapped. “Can you stop?”

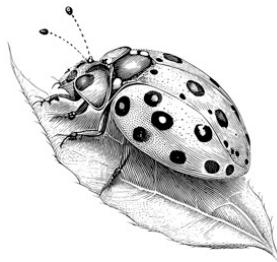
Cayden sighed, his shoulders falling. He tipped his head to the side and narrowed those sea-blue eyes at me. “No, I don’t think I can. When it comes to wanting you, I can’t seem to stop.”

He rummaged around in my bag while my heart was lodged too firmly in my mouth to talk. He took out a thick textbook and my favorite notebook and handed them to me.

“You have Physics first, don’t you? Here. I’ll see you after.”

I blinked at him. Just how well did he know my schedule? I didn’t get to ask him, though, as he was already turning and walking away, taking my bag with him.

Lily



“LILY, just for you, I’m taking tails tonight,” Tyler said as we let ourselves into the small animal recovery room at the vet clinic.

“Really? To what do I owe that honor?”

“I don’t know, I’m just feeling generous, I guess, considering what you have to put up with at home, living with a maniac and all.”

“He’s not a maniac.”

“But he is an arsonist, at the very least. I mean, that much is proven.”

“I don’t think you understand what proven means. A shocking headline in a local rag and no police charges doesn’t mean something is true.”

Tyler studied me, slipping on gloves and assembling the cleaning products for the cages.

“If I didn’t know better...I’d say you have a soft spot for the guy.”

“A soft spot? Me? For him?” I sounded like a cartoon character right now, but I couldn’t find a way to make myself stop.

“Yes, a soft spot, you, for him,” Tyler parroted and laughed. “I’ve seen it all now. The ultimate good girl falls for the quintessential bad boy, and to be clear, in this case, bad boy means murderer.”

“He didn’t murder anyone...” I trailed off, Jack’s face flashing through my mind. “You don’t know him.”

“And you do?”

Yes. Absolutely.

I shrugged. “We understand each other, sometimes...the parts no one else sees.”

Tyler was quiet a moment, cleaning a litter tray, and then he sighed. “Well, shit. I was just teasing you, and you go and get real about it. Okay, I don’t know the guy, but I know you – the common, public basic bits, that is – and I know...” He pointed at me. “You deserve the best.”

“Don’t say that. You sound like my dad.”

“Huh, triggered the Daddy issues, eh?”

“More like ‘failed parental hopes and dreams’ issues, with a side of ‘only child pressure to please’ syndrome, if that’s a thing.”

I divided cat food into bowls and avoided Tyler’s eyes.

“It’s definitely a thing. I might know a little something about it, too,” he admitted.

I raised an eyebrow at him. “Is that right?”

Tyler smiled. “I mean, I haven’t found my own arsonist to fall in love with, but yeah, I can relate a little, I guess.”

Love. Fall in love with.

I scoffed, and Tyler grinned at me.

“Mark my words, Williams, HHU next year this time. I bet you and Cayden are a thing, and I’ll have to tease him mercilessly for it when we’re on the same team.”

“You want to be a Hellion?”

“Hells yes, I have a brain, of course I want to be a Hellion, but a green-and-black Hellion, not a purple one.”

Purple and black were the colors of HHH Hellions, and green and black were the college colors. The teams of Hade Harbor were both called Hellions, so the different colors helped to differentiate them.

“Hm, I could see you in it, actually, and for your information, Cayden and I won’t be a thing at HHU.”

“No? Are you planning on upgrading to me? I’m in.” Tyler gave me a flirtatious smile.

“Hilarious. Actually, I’m not going to HHU.”

It was the first time I’d said the words out loud. They sounded wrong somehow. I didn’t like it.

“What? You have a world-class college on your doorstep, your friends, your family, Maine beauty all around...why would you want to be anywhere else?”

It was a good question, and one I didn’t have an answer to.

I got home late from the vet clinic, the supplies I’d stuffed into my pockets feeling like lead weights as I’d hurried home.

I went to my room first and unloaded my pockets, checked in with my parents, finding them already asleep, and then went to shower. I stood under the hot spray for a long time, washing the day off. The last forty-eight hours had been utterly exhausting, and I needed a moment to catch my breath. Life was rushing by so quickly after years of slow motion.

I shut off the shower and groped for the towel. Damn, I’d forgotten to put it on the rail. I shook off, squeezing out my hair as best I could before stepping out onto the mat.

Then I noticed the figure standing against the door.

Cayden was shirtless, with low-riding shorts on, the kind that only *just* seemed to stay up, hooked on the V-shaped muscles of his lower abdomen.

I tried not to stare, but it was tough. He had my towel clutched in his fist. So, I hadn't forgotten it after all. Heat rose over me in a wave.

"You left the door unlocked," he said, moving toward me.

"Really?" That wasn't anything unusual. I was used to privacy on the bottom floor of the house, but since Cayden had moved in, I'd been more conscious of his presence. My cheeks heated at his slow inspection of my wet, naked body.

"Really." He took the towel in his hands and approached, wrapping it around my shoulders, his strong hands rubbing the terry cloth over my skin in broad strokes. He was drying me off.

"How's your side? We need to change the dressing," I rambled as he finished drying my back and moved down to my ass and thighs. The towel rasped over my sensitive skin as he dried me slowly and thoroughly.

"Spread," he instructed thickly as he slid the towel between my legs.

I braced my arms on the counter and parted my legs. The towel slid between them, rubbing over my tender inner thighs and making me hot and bothered all over. His fingers left the towel for a moment and dragged up my skin, brushing against my pussy in a scorching caress, and then he went back to drying my legs. Teasing me.

"Good girl," he muttered low in his throat before tapping my ass with his towel-covered hand. "Turn."

I turned, feeling exposed before him. The towel started up my legs and this time spent a lot more time "drying" my slit.

"It's the strangest thing," Cayden muttered, his face level with my core. "Every time I dry this spot..." He reached out a finger and placed it on my folds, sliding it up and down the opening. "...it just gets wet again straight away. I wonder why that is?"

His finger circled my clit, and I jerked, holding on to his shoulders as he slowly caressed my pussy.

“See, there we go...wet again. How can we fix this?” His eyes glinted with desire, a hunger that made me weak in the knees. Playful Cayden was something else entirely.

“Maybe use your mouth to dry it,” I suggested softly, a furious blush coating my cheeks.

Fuck, had I really just said that? Me, Lily Williams, the coach’s daughter? If it was anyone else kneeling before me, his face level with my cunt, I’d have burned up with shame, but not with Cayden. He was my first everything, but I had all of his firsts, too. I was completely myself, awkward, inexperienced, and horny as hell with the guy, and there was no embarrassment, only acceptance. Was that normal in a relationship? No. My inner voice spoke immediately, but I pushed it away. *We aren’t in a relationship*, I reminded myself harshly. *Get a grip, Lily, and enjoy this for what it is, while you can.*

He grinned and leaned in, yanking one of my legs onto his shoulder. Before I could worry about his wounds or how heavy I was leaning against him, his face was right there, his tongue pressing against my clit. His hand reached around behind me, and two fingers slipped inside my entrance. He pumped them steadily in and out as his tongue circled my clit, pulling it into his mouth, rubbing his tongue against it ruthlessly. I held on to his head, my body threatening to fold in as he ravaged me. The only thing holding me up was my grip on his hair and the counter behind me.

I came quickly. He gave me no way to avoid it. It was like his body had learned exactly where to touch mine, how hard, how fast, and how long, and now, I was an instrument he could play with expertise. I cried out, shoving a fist into my mouth to silence myself as I came. What if my parents heard? While I was drifting on a sea of post-orgasm glow, Cayden stood and pressed me back against the counter, kissing me hard. I tasted myself on his tongue as he swirled it against mine.

“I don’t think that worked, Freckles. I think I’ll have to use something else,” he teased, returning to our game.

He grabbed my hand and placed it over his cock. His hard-on was impressive, tenting his silky gym shorts, pushing insistently against my

palm. I gripped him over his clothes, cupping the head and squeezing.

“Hmm, I think so, too, but first, we need to fix the dressing on your side... it’s come off,” I noted, eyeing the hanging white square of gauze.

“Hmmm, has anyone ever told you how sexy you are when you’re playing nurse?” he muttered as I pumped his hard-on a few more times through his shorts.

God, he was hot as hell, and I couldn’t stop touching him.

I laughed and shook my head. “Considering the only things I’ve ever played nurse to are animals, that would be a no.”

“Are you really going to leave?” His next question caught me off guard. We went from playful and close, to sudden, jagged tension.

My hand loosened on him, and I looked up and caught his blue gaze. So, he *had* heard my dad’s comment this morning about California.

“What? Where is that coming from?”

“I need to know. It sounds like your parents are cool with it...so does that mean you’re really going? You really won’t be at HHU?”

I swallowed the sharp pain that blossomed in my gut at the thought.

“Disappointed? You’ll have to find someone else to torment.” I was going for teasing, but it wasn’t turning out that way at all.

After everything that had happened between us, I couldn’t pretend that Cayden and I were anything ordinary. Whatever was between us at this point could only ever be rare and special. We weren’t only each other’s firsts, but I’d seen the guy drop to his knees and write a word into his skin for me. He’d never be just a normal person to me, and I suspected that I couldn’t be that to him either. I wasn’t sure where that left us.

“When were you going to tell me?” he wondered.

“You already knew. You knew first, remember?”

“I thought your dad would stop you. I thought your parents finding out would kill it dead and you’d be going to HHU instead.”

“Really?”

“Really. Why else did you think I told him?” Cayden said the last words without remorse.

I stared at him. There was so much to unpack in that sentence, I didn’t even know where to start.

“You told him? You mean you put my journal out there, and he read it,” I clarified.

Cayden shook his head. “He wasn’t getting it. He never read the journal, so... I told him,” he confessed.

“You dickhead,” I protested after a moment and pushed at his chest.

He didn’t budge even an inch but simply nodded, agreeing with me.

“Why would you do that? You wanted to mess up my future that badly?”

He nodded again. “Yes. I wanted to mess up your future and keep you here. I wanted you to be stuck with attending HHU for the next four years.”

Something about his look stole my breath. “Because you were mad at me? You wanted to bully me all through college?”

He shook his head slowly.

“Then why?”

He took a second to answer. “I pretended it was because I was mad at you. I tried to make myself believe it, but that’s not the reason.”

My mouth was drier than hell right now, my voice only a croak. “It’s not?”

He shook his head again.

“Then why?”

His strong jaw clenched as he loomed over me, battling with himself about what to say. After a long moment, he let out a hard breath. “Because I just wanted you. The thought of you leaving made me livid.” He tucked my hair

behind my ear. “I want you to forgive me, Freckles. I want us to start over. I want you to let me back in.”

“What?” I was shocked by his words.

He leaned in. “I want you to trust me again. I want you to sneak into my bed every single night, and write me stories to act out in your journal. I want you to stay here and go to HHU instead of leaving for California...I want you, all of you, every single bit. I just want *you*, and I can’t think of anything else.”

His words blanked my brain. I stared at him until I could speak again, and he waited for me.

“What? So now you have proof that Josh—”

“I don’t care about that fucker. I wanted you before I knew it was Josh who leaked the article. I wanted you when I was furious at you. I wanted you when I thought you’d broken my heart. I don’t think I’ll ever stop. I don’t think I’m capable of that.”

I had no reply. There were no pithy comebacks or accusations I could make right now. I had no teasing jokes or ways to lighten the tension between us. I could only stare.

“Since we’re being honest with each other, you should know that I intend to change your mind about leaving, however I can. Love like ours isn’t something ordinary, and I’ll fight for it. You should be ready for that,” he finished and then finally took a step back, giving me space to breathe.

Love?

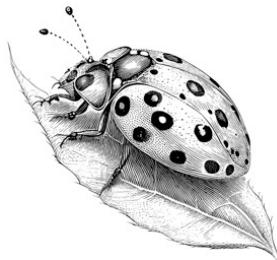
“What does that mean? Are you declaring war on me again?” My heart was in my throat, yet it felt light for the first time in a while. His words were turning me inside out, and I could barely help the smile that blossomed on my lips.

“I guess so,” he confirmed, but then quickly shifted gears. “You wanted to change my dressing?” he prompted after a moment of me staring dumbly at him.

“Oh, right,” I said faintly, trying desperately to get my head to work again. Cayden had just thrown down the gauntlet, and I had no idea whether I wanted him to win or lose.

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Lily



“So, let me get this straight. He knows it wasn’t you who leaked his info? Has he apologized?” Eve stared at me, agog. She lived for this kind of gossip.

I supposed if it hadn’t been about me, I’d probably find it more entertaining.

“Yep,” I said, and took a long pull of my water. The cafeteria was busy and noisy as hell. It was the first time in a week where I’d walked in and nobody had bothered looking at me. It seemed the gossip had finally died down, thank God.

We were eating in a back corner and hoping that the peace lasted. I’d seen Ellen come in with Josh, both of them casting us sheepish glances before sitting. What the hell? Were they just going to pretend that none of that had happened? Did they even know what had happened to Jack? Though to be honest, I didn’t care much about Jack’s death myself. Not after everything he’d done to Cayden.

“And he straight up said he wants you to stay and go to HHU?” Eve asked, looking enthralled. I’d finally caved and told her everything. We had stayed up all night talking about it.

“Yep,” I confirmed.

“Man, I’m changing teams. I’m Team West now.” She took a big bite of her sandwich.

“I thought you hated him?”

“Yeah, I did, but that was before the other night. That was before he bled for you. The guy could have a scar there for the rest of his life...for you.”

“Thanks for the reminder,” I muttered, guilt wedging in my throat. I couldn’t unpack the guilt and blame of the situation, it was too convoluted. I had to let it all fade into the past. It was the only way to move on and not go crazy.

“Now that his goals align with mine, I’m switching sides. If he can get you to go to HHU with me, then he’ll be my hero forever,” Eve said with a grin.

Right at that moment, the chair next to me pulled out, and a huge shadow loomed over me for a second before lowering into the seat. I didn’t have to look at Eve’s entertained face to know Cayden had joined us. The sudden hush that had fallen around us would have achieved that on its own.

“Started without me, Freckles?”

He pushed my lunch tray over a little to make room for his own, which was heaped with food.

“Are you seriously going to eat all that?”

“I’m a growing boy with a big game coming up,” Cayden quipped.

The rest of the Ice Gods descended on the table, and Eve looked like she wished she had some popcorn to eat while she sat back and watched the show.

“What are you doing here?” I muttered quietly to Cayden.

“Eating lunch, what does it seem like?”

Marcus eased into the chair on my other side, all easy smiles. “Bug, you need to start sitting with us, because hiding here at the back of the room really isn’t my style, not at all.”

Cayden leaned forward, his arms resting on the table, to pin Marcus with a look. “I told you not to call her Bug anymore.”

Marcus grinned and shrugged. "What can I say? It's a habit. Anyway, Bug doesn't mind." He glanced at me. "Do you?"

Cayden's eyes narrowed at his friend. "Call her that one more time. I fucking dare you," he threatened darkly.

Eve choked on her strawberry milk, her eyes wide. A ripple of whispers exploded around us after Cayden's muttered threat. Everyone was listening and drawing whatever crazy conclusions they wanted to.

"It's fine, I seriously don't care. Stop making a big deal," I rushed out. "What are you doing?" I twisted in my chair and glowered at Cayden. "People just stopped talking about us, about me...and now they're going to start again."

He nodded, a frown pinching his brow. "You're right. They're probably wondering where we stand, if we're together or not."

"Together?" The word left me on a squeak. "I guarantee that nobody is wondering that."

"Really?" Cayden looked even more perplexed for a moment, and then shrugged. "Well, I can fix that."

His arm tightened against my back and yanked my entire seat toward him, the legs loudly screeching against the tile floor. I fell into his chest, but he wasn't finished. His other hand cupped my jaw, holding it in place.

"Let's make it crystal clear."

Then he kissed me. The bastard kissed me, hard, right there in front of everyone, and it was...*amazing*. His lips were demanding, parting mine without consent, and then his tongue slid along mine. I knew his touch, the shape of his mouth; I knew the way his breath tasted when he whispered my name. Everything I knew about physical desire and intimacy, I'd learned in this guy's arms, and still, his kiss shook me to my toes. I'd been frozen in ice until he'd arrived in my life. And now, his mere presence sparked a raging inferno of need inside me, and every touch made the flames burn brighter. But sneaking into his room at night was one thing. It was secret, taking place somewhere between dreams and awake, where fantasies of all

sorts could thrive. It wasn't like kissing in front of the entire school, in broad daylight, in the cafeteria. That was far too real.

Marcus clapped, a loud whistle leaving him as I pulled back, finally kicking my brain into motion again.

"What are you doing?" I was panicking. I could feel it happening. I pushed back my chair and stood. I was attracting even more attention, but I couldn't stop myself. I'd been in the spotlight more in the last few weeks than I'd ever been in my life and it was all getting to be too much for me. I was the invisible girl. A leopard couldn't change her spots this fast.

I rubbed my fingers over my lips. Everyone was talking now, and I could just imagine what they were saying. They thought we were together. *A couple.*

"Well, that was entertaining as hell. I'm glad to see that some people seem to have learned the error of their ways, and just so you know," Eve said and smiled at Cayden, leaning in and whispering loudly, "I'm on your team now."

"I'm honored," Cayden responded in kind and laughed when I whacked him in the gut, then promptly freaked out when I remembered his injury.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry! Are you okay?"

He caught my hand where it hovered over the wound in his side. "No, you'll need to kiss it better."

"Very funny."

He was still holding my hand, and now he put it to his mouth and kissed the back. Right there, in front of the entire freaking school. "Relax, Freckles, I'm tougher than I look."

Eve smiled indulgently between us.

"What?" I asked her a little defensively. Cayden had tucked my hand into his, and it felt awkward to move it, so I left it there.

"Nothing, just planning my side of the room at HHU...since it looks team Stay in Hade Harbor has a new member," she said innocently, then laughed

at my expression and wisely changed the subject. “So, any special game plans for the scouts watching you guys?” She directed her question toward her brother. If anyone needed a scholarship into HHU more than Cayden, it was Asher.

“You’ll just have to come to the game and see,” Marcus interrupted and then nodded toward me and Eve. “Are you two looking forward to cheering for us next year when we rock the Hellions at HHU?”

Eve shrugged. “I’ll be there to cheer you on, but Lily won’t.” She gave me a sad smile. “She’s leaving us for California, isn’t that right, Lil?” She was goading me to agree.

Marcus whistled loudly. “Seriously? You’re skipping town?”

I felt Cayden tense beside me as I nodded. “Yeah, maybe. I talked to my parents about it, and they’re supportive. I’m in, with a full ride. I’d be dumb not to take it.”

Eve shrugged. “Being smart is overrated. Of course she’s rethinking it, because she’d miss me too much.”

“We can visit each other,” I reminded her.

“Not that often, though, right? How much are tickets to California?” Asher interrupted suddenly, making me pause.

“I don’t know, but we could make it work somehow.” The words rang false, even to me.

“Sure, these things start out with the best intentions, but we all know Lily’s gonna forget all about us,” Marcus quipped.

I gave the group a lopsided smile, aware of the tension radiating off Cayden, and forced myself to eat lunch.

After a Sunday morning skate at Miller’s Pond with my parents, Eve, and Asher, I collapsed in my mom’s car and grinned at her as she got in. She

had an excited air about her today, and it seemed like there was more to it than just nerves about the game.

“I have a surprise for you,” she said quickly as she pulled out onto the busy road, well, as busy as Hade Harbor ever got.

“Really?”

“Really, and I just can’t keep it in!” She beamed at me. “Okay, I’ll tell you. I called your dream school the other day and managed to wangle us an early admissions campus tour,” she said, chuckling at the stunned expression on my face.

“When?”

“We have to leave tomorrow afternoon,” she said.

“Tomorrow? But the game is tomorrow, the important one,” I said, my chest feeling hollow.

“I know, but your dad understands. As long as I call him before and say good luck, he’s fine.”

“I don’t know what to say.” My voice was muted. It felt like it was coming from very far away.

“Say you’re excited!”

“I’m excited,” I parroted and then flushed. “I really am, honestly.” I was aware that I sounded anything but. “I just thought Dad really wanted us at the game. The scouts are there to watch him, too, right?”

“Yes, they are, but these campus tours don’t happen all the time, and you don’t have long before you have to accept your early admission spot. You need to be sure...you’re just as important as Dad, sweetheart,” she reminded me.

I nodded. My throat felt constricted. The truth was, I’d been looking forward to going to the game. The thought of flying across the country tomorrow felt jarring and unwelcome.

“You need to see the place, walk the halls, see if you feel at home there,” she continued.

I nodded, the subdued feeling not fading as I watched the countryside pass by outside the window. I should be excited as hell to get to go and see my dream school tomorrow, shouldn’t I?

That night, I sat in my bed and smoothed the cover of my faded journal, the one that Cayden had read and published. All my secrets exposed. Everyone seemed to think it had been a cruel prank, and that was fine. It had blown over. Still, I could remember the white-hot terror and hurt that I’d felt when it had been exposed. It had been a moment of change for me in so many ways. Sure, it had embarrassed me, but it had also forced me to find my voice. Could I really forgive Cayden for what he’d done? *Hadn’t I already?*

Tonight, he’d gone to his room early, exhausted from training and trying to prepare for the big game. He was still injured, and now he had to play his most important game to date.

I opened my journal and sighed as I took in the last thing I’d written, the entry from before Cayden had set his sights on me and exploded my world.

I felt like a different girl than the one who had written those dreamy, guilt-ridden fantasies and panicked about her parents finding out about the early admissions application.

Everything had changed in a matter of weeks, including me.

A soft knock pulled me from my thoughts, and my heart leapt at the thought that he was at my door.

My foster brother.

My bully.

The boy I loved.

Loved? Yes. Loved.

I got up and pushed that thought aside, opening the door quickly. The doorway was empty. I fought my disappointment as I went to close it, then noticed the glitter of green and gold coming from the floor.

It was the journal that Cayden had given me for my birthday. I picked it up, realizing that I hadn't seen it in its place on my desk for a few days. I hadn't even opened it since that first day when Eve and I had read his birthday wish. I took it into my room and closed the door. My heart beating oddly hard, I sat and opened it, flipping to the first page, and his message.

Show me yours and I'll show you mine -

C

The next page was blank. I flipped again and stopped. There, scrawled in blue ink, dark against the creamy page, were two words.

I'm sorry.

I somehow had the idea that this message was old, written a few weeks ago, when things between us had been at their worst. I was the kind of nerd who knew exactly which of my pens were in rotation on my desk most weeks, and that color was definitely a few weeks ago. I turned to the next page, and there was another note, in a different pen this time.

Forgive me, Freckles.

Swallowing a lump in my throat the size of a golf ball, I turned another page, and this time, the entire length of it was covered in spidery black pen strokes.

Last night, I dreamed of Lily. Those are the good nights. I wish I could live in those dreams. In the dream, she took my hand and smiled at me. She kissed me and laughed with me. She loved me, and it was everything I'd given up hoping for. All the while, I knew it was a dream, because Lily is literally my dream girl, and I fucked everything up so badly, there's no way she'd look at me that way in real life.

In real life, I'm the villain of her story. The bad guy. The rotten apple.

So, lately, I've been sleeping late and going to bed early.

I'll try anything to see more of Lily's smile.

A tear dripped down my cheek and splashed on the page. I turned, and there was more. Entry after entry of dreams.

Last night I dreamed I was inside my Lily. She was holding me close; her smell filled my head. Her body clasped me tightly, her cunt narrower and sweeter than anything I could have imagined. I've never wanted someone as much as I want her, and I'll never want anyone ever again with even a fraction of that desire.

Lily is the sum total of my desires and dreams, all in one devastatingly smart and beautiful package. In my dreams, she reaches for me when she wakes and finds me inside her.

Slipping into her arms feels like a homecoming. In her embrace, I finally belong. I am at peace.

More tears fell, and I dashed them away.

I turned one more page and found it nearly empty, except for one small scrawl.

I love you, Freckles. I know I'm unforgivable...but if anyone can try to forgive a parasitoid like me...it's you, my love - C

And I lost it.

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Cayden



I sat in the locker room before the game, cracking my knuckles, my mind blank and empty. I was way early for the game. I needed to get into my stuff before anyone could see my injuries. Coach poked his head in the door and spotted me.

“I thought you were here. You missed dinner,” he said.

I hadn’t wanted to go back to the house after school today, seeing as Lily and her mom were going to the airport. I couldn’t bring myself to watch her leave for the campus visit. She was going to go there and love it. She was going to accept the offer and make plans to move, and soon, I’d never see her again. I felt frantic when I thought about it, and I couldn’t afford that right now. If I’d been home, I was pretty sure I would have snuck out to let the air out of her mom’s tires so they couldn’t make their flight. It was safer to stay at school.

“Hungry? I’ve got dinner covered.” Coach smiled at me from the locker room entrance. “You can’t play on an empty stomach.”

Right. I hadn’t eaten. It was weird how things with Lily had made everything else pale in importance.

“I didn’t know you cooked, Coach,” I observed as I followed him to his office.

He let out a bark of laughter. “I don’t, but my ordering skills are top-notch.”

Two boxes of takeout pizza sat on his desk, and the smell made my stomach growl.

“Is this the dinner of champions?”

“You’re young and fit, it doesn’t matter what you eat, only that you do,” he replied with a grin.

I sat across from him, and he put on the TV that was mounted on his wall and brought up the latest footage we had of our opponents.

“Come on, let’s study the competition one more time while we eat,” he suggested.

I grabbed the pizzas.

We ate, and I watched the game. It was nice. I wondered if this was what normal kids did with their fathers. I’d never had anything even close to it.

Coach checked his phone now and then and finally smiled at a message he got.

“They’re at the airport and checking in,” he reported.

I nodded, my belly clenching at the update from Lily. She hadn’t messaged me. I had a long way to go to get back into her good graces, it seemed, and it was all I could think about.

“Aren’t you worried she’ll want to really go there? It’s so far away,” I remarked after a moment.

Eric sighed, and I knew it was something he’d wrestled with a lot.

“If she wants to go, I can’t stop her. I won’t stop her. I love her, and I just want her to be happy.”

“Even if that means only seeing her during the holidays?” I hoped my desperation didn’t sound too obvious. It certainly felt fucking obvious.

“Even then. When you love something, let it go, or whatever the adage is.”

My instincts rebelled against the very thought of that. I loved Lily, or was as close to love as someone like me could be, and I was more and more

against the idea of letting her go. If you loved someone, surely you held on to them through thick and thin. That made a lot more sense to me.

“Are you nervous about tonight?” Coach asked me.

I shrugged, the game less on my mind than Lily was. “It’ll be fine. I might not end up going to HHU, who knows?”

“What the hell? Of course you’re going to HHU,” Coach said dismissively.

“Maybe I was thinking of somewhere with a warmer climate,” I muttered and took a long drink from my water bottle.

“A warmer climate for hockey? HHU is perfect for you, Cade, and we both know it.”

“It’s not so crazy to want to see the country, is it?” I offered after a moment, smiling at him to break the rising tension. I could hardly say to him that since his daughter was moving across the country, and I had to be with her, and making her stay was apparently unloving, that it looked like I was just going to need to go after her, wherever she went.

“That’s what vacation is for,” Coach deadpanned. “Here, at HHU, I’ve got you, Cayden. Together, we can get you into the NHL. You move schools, you’ll work with coaches who have different favorites, who aren’t your fan, for whatever reason, and you risk getting sidelined.”

“I know,” I muttered, shoving another piece of pizza in my mouth so I didn’t have to speak.

“You should stay here, work hard, work smart, and get drafted. Then you can do whatever you want with your career. But get there first.”

“I know,” I repeated, unable to say anything else.

The whole truth was that going to HHU, going pro and all the riches and celebrity that came with it, had lost its shine now that Lily wouldn’t be there. It felt like she was leaving me behind, and suddenly, nothing else seemed to matter.

The game tonight was all anyone had been talking about for a week. Everyone knew there would be scouts there, and every single player on the team wanted a shot at catching their eye. For all the locals, it was a dream to play for the Hellions. Getting to stay in their beautiful small town of Hade Harbor and go to an internationally recognized university was a dream come true for most students. Just not Lily, apparently.

We shot onto the ice before the game and started to warm up. My muscles burned as I pushed myself, forcing blood through my tired body. Ever since that night on the cliff top, I had barely slept. Now, it was finally time to get into HHU, the goal I'd come to Hade Harbor with, and I was distracted. The cause of my distraction was sitting on a plane, moving farther and farther away from me with every moment.

When the first buzzer went off, I quickly saw that this wouldn't be an easy game. The defensemen made for me, quickly blocking me off. I was clearly the target to watch in this game, and usually that would only fire me up, but my distraction pulled my attention away. Not only that, but every time one of the hefty defensemen slammed me into the boards on my wounded side, all the air left my lungs. Josh was also playing, which was yet another distraction. The fucker hadn't dared look me in the eye since the cliff top.

We played well, but it was a fair fight, and I wasn't at my best. By the end of the first period, we were down two.

The first intermission flew past, and we were into the second play. I was banged into the boards more often than I could count and was flagging. There was too much riding on the game. The pressure was getting to me, and I was choking. Or maybe it wasn't just the pressure but the thought of losing the little redhead who held my battered heart in her small hands. The pain in my side was also getting worse. Gratefully, I skated off for a shift change at my turn and lowered myself to the bench. Josh followed and had no choice but to sit next to me. We hadn't spoken at all about that night at Black Lake trailer park.

"The way I see it, I can run interference on their left defenseman. He's a big bastard. They won't expect that, and it'll give you a window to break through," Josh suddenly said to me.

I turned to him, surprised by his words.

He was nodding, studying the game. “It’ll work, and as soon as we even the score, we can change the tide.”

“What, you want to win that badly? You know the scouts are here to see me. I’d have thought that losing tonight would suit you fine.”

A muscle clenched in Josh’s jaw, and he shook his head. “That’s not me. It’s not who I want to be, anyway...and I’m no good at apologies, and I sure as hell didn’t owe you one when I started all that shit, but I owe you one now, and this is it. If you want it, that is.”

He turned to me and met my eyes for the first time since that night at Uncle Jack’s.

A new respect for the guy grew in me. Sure, I was still mad as hell, but Lily wanted it to stop, and the fucker was basically apologizing.

“I want it. Let’s do it,” I replied finally.

He grinned. He looked like a kid when he smiled.

“Come on, then. Seems like there’s someone in the audience who came here to see you win, not lose.”

“You’re wrong. She’s not here.”

Josh gave me a grim grin. “Isn’t she?”

Something dangerously hopeful shifted in my chest. I twisted around, but I couldn’t see from where I was sitting. My leg bounced, my skate cutting into the ice as I waited impatiently to get back out there.

When our shift came, we shot onto the ice. I turned and looked behind the coach’s bench. Brilliant red hair met my gaze, sending my heart thumping hard.

She’s here. She’s come. She isn’t in California. My thoughts jumped around like live wires in my head.

She’d just arrived and was in the act of taking her jacket off, standing and easy to make out. She stilled when her eyes connected with mine. Even

from a distance, I could feel the moment she sensed my gaze on her. Suddenly, she dumped her jacket off her shoulders and twisted around. She was wearing a Hellion jersey.

It only took a second for the number on her jersey to register with me.

It was my number.

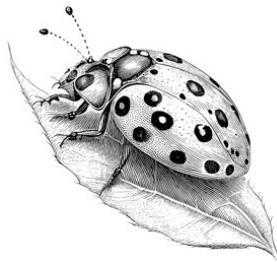
My girl had on my number, and she didn't come here to see me lose.

I was Cayden West, and there was no way in hell I was losing with my girl watching.

No fucking way.

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Lily



I'D MADE it all the way in to the airport before my feet stopped working. We'd parked the car and made it inside the terminal. My mom was rushing ahead, wheeling both our suitcases, while I slowly walked behind her.

My mind was on HHH and the game tonight.

It was on that journal and those haunting words that had burrowed inside my heart and taken root.

It was with my best friend, who desperately wanted me to be by her side through college.

It was with my dad, who had worked hard his whole life to move up in the coaching world and might finally make it. He wanted to work at HHU and be on the same campus as me. After seeing Cayden's childhood home, it felt terrible to resent being loved too much by your parents.

Most of all, my mind, and heart, were with the boy who'd stolen it, a burning ball of anger and emotion, the only person in my life who had ever seen me, inside and out, every single piece, and loved me anyway.

"Let's go, we're early for our flight, and I want to check out some of the stores." My mom hustled on as my legs got slower and slower. "And I have to call your dad to say good luck before the game."

I thought of Hade Harbor High rink, all lit up like only a game night was, with fans streaming through decked out in black and purple, and the general

air of mayhem and excitement in the air. I'd really miss being part of that. I didn't want to miss it. I really didn't want to.

"I know, you just know how your father gets," my mom continued. "He's so anxious about tonight and the scouts. This is a really important night for Cade, too."

"He's grown on you, huh?" I wondered.

She nodded and shrugged. "He tries so hard with us, he's so polite, so helpful. You can tell he's never really had anyone in life to look up to. No one who treated him with respect. I like the kid, but not as much as you do." She gave me a sideways glance at that.

I jumped guiltily at the words, my cheeks instantly flushing. "What do you mean?"

My mother just smirked at me. "Oh, honey, Cayden might be a polite boy, but the way he looks at you leaves no doubt. He likes you, Lily. I'd say he's head over heels."

I stared at her, speechless.

"Of course, if he were to get into HHU and you were to stay...I could see you two together. You'd make a cute couple," she said, her tone innocent. She clearly had no idea what had been going on under her roof and simply thought Cayden had an innocent crush on me. She'd die if she knew the filthy things her daughter and the boy in the room next door had gotten up to.

"Mom, I can't believe you. Machiavelli had nothing on you."

She laughed. "I'm kidding, well, partly. What matters the most is how you feel on campus. If it feels like home. Lily?"

I'd stopped just before security, and I couldn't seem to make myself move forward.

My mom stopped and came back to me, her forehead wrinkled in concern. "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

“Mom...don’t be mad,” I started. “But I don’t think I want to go on the campus visit.”

My mom’s face went through shock to concern, and then the smallest excited smile turned her lips up at the edges. “Really?”

I nodded. “I don’t think I have to go...I don’t think I have to go to California at all. In fact, I’m sure I don’t want to.”

We left the airport and got back into the car that we’d just parked.

“I’m sorry about the flight.”

“Don’t be. It was a steal and it was worth it if it made you want to stay here,” my mom said, wreathed in smiles. “You’re worth it, honey.”

As we drove home, I turned to her, the things I’d been avoiding saying jumping off my tongue. Now that I’d decided what I wanted, I couldn’t seem to keep it inside. I wasn’t scared anymore.

“If you want me to stay here, then there are some things I need to happen, like staying on campus,” I opened with, and in the end, it had been so much easier than I’d expected.

She agreed to them all, and best of all, had expected most of them. I felt like an adult. I felt like she saw me. It was a precious feeling, and one I hadn’t realized I needed so badly until it happened.

We missed the first period but got there during the second, just as Cayden came off the bench and got back onto the ice. He looked up in my direction, and I did the only thing I could. I showed him the shirt I’d slipped on at home before the game.

After that, the rest of the game was a blur. The Hellions dominated. Cayden was the star. I was surprised to see Josh intercepting some of the hefty defensemen, leaving Cayden clear to shine.

The Hellions took the game four to two, and the scouts lined up to speak to my dad as soon as the last buzzer sounded.

The rink exploded in cheers and applause. Hellions fans were losing their minds, and I was cheering and shouting right alongside them. I hugged my mom, and she held me especially tight. She was crying with happiness when she pulled back, and I knew it wasn't just the win and my dad potentially going to coach at HHU that had her emotional, but the conversation we'd had on the drive over.

This was home. California had been the place I'd planned to run away to so I could avoid difficult conversations for the rest of my life. But truthfully, I didn't want to leave Maine. I wanted to stay right here. I'd just needed to be brave.

After the game, I headed down to the locker rooms and ran into Marcus.

"Tell me you're coming to Beckett's party tonight, Lil?"

"Sure, I can come for a bit," I said, laughing at his raw exuberance.

"A bit? Damn, girl, you're hard to bring around. Well, lucky for you that you have a boyfriend who's just as antisocial as you are."

"Cayden's not my boyfriend," I protested, more a reflex than anything else.

"You might want to tell him that, because he sure thinks he is." Marcus grinned and jerked his head toward my dad's office. "He's in there, talking to the scouts."

"Seriously?"

Marcus nodded. "I'm up next, then Asher. It's just introductions at this stage, but...it's promising." He was grinning so hard it was impossible not to reciprocate.

"Tell him I'm waiting outside for him by his bike, will you?"

Marcus nodded, walking backward toward the offices. "Will do."

"Lil!" Eve's voice called out to me, and after a moment, she threw herself into my arms.

“That game was awesome! Did you see? How come you’re here? I thought you’d already be in California by now.”

“Do you know how long the flight to California is?” I teased her.

She rolled her eyes. “Not exactly, seeing as I’ve never even been on a plane, but seriously, why are you here and not there?”

“Because I don’t want to be there. I’ve officially decided. I hope you haven’t found another roommate already and the position is still free...” I trailed off, not getting further as Eve jumped on me.

She squealed loudly enough to break my eardrums. “You’re shitting me! You’re staying!”

“I’m staying,” I laughed, spinning her around until we were both laughing.

She slid out my arms, grinning at me hard. A dark figure lurked behind Eve. It was Beckett. He had a hip perched on the banister of the staircase and watched us.

“Congratulations on the game,” I called to him.

He inclined his head. “Congrats to you, too. It sounds like you made a big decision tonight, and you, Cinderella, look like you’ve managed to scare up someone who’d like to live with you.” His last words were directed at Eve, who flushed and glared at him.

The tension between them was thick, and I didn’t know what to do with it. I needed to go and talk to Cayden. I felt like I couldn’t wait one more second.

“I have to go, but we’re going to the party later, right?”

Eve looked surprised at my words.

Before she could answer, Beckett spoke. “Yes, she is.”

Okay, then.

“I’ll see you over there, and we can talk about HHU as much as you want.” I squeezed Eve’s hand and headed out to the parking lot.

I left the rink, the success of Cayden's game circling around my head. Tonight, for some reason, everything felt clear. Decisions felt easy. Sometimes it felt like the path was laid out under your feet, and you just had to walk it.

I sat on the low wall next to the parking lot, a few feet away from Cayden's bike.

I sat there and breathed in the fragrant pine and salt of Hade Harbor's air. I felt peaceful. Decided. Content. It was an amazing feeling.

"Are you really here, or did I get hit in the head harder than I thought?" Cayden's voice reached me just before he picked me up from behind, pulling me effortlessly over the low wall and into his arms.

"Hey, be careful. You're hurt, remember?"

"I can hardly forget. It might be time to go to the hospital, now that the game is over." He grinned. "You were watching, right?"

"Yes, and yes, you played amazingly tonight...so well I'd never have suspected that you have a hole in your side. You really do have to be the best at everything, don't you?"

"Hmm, why are you here?"

His sudden question took me off guard.

"Why do you think I'm here?"

"Your flight was cancelled? You decided you don't need a campus tour and already accepted the offer?"

"Wow, you need to work on your pessimism."

"True, so...why are you here?"

I took a deep breath and brought my chin up. "I've decided that HHU is my destiny, and my home, and everything I want, really. It's my turf. If you've got a problem with that, then you should go...not me."

Cayden stared at me for a long moment, his expression unreadable. "You're not fucking with me, are you? I don't think I'll ever recover if you are."

I laughed. "I'm not fucking with you. HHU is mine. If you have a problem with that, you need to go somewhere else."

He chuckled and leaned in, hugging me tightly, his forehead pressed hard against mine.

"You're hazardous to my heart health, Freckles," he murmured. "I just played the most intense hockey game of my life and barely felt it, but this conversation is giving me a heart attack."

"Sorry," I teased.

He shook his head. "Don't apologize to me. You never need to apologize to me. You – I don't have all the words to describe you. Everything I think and write falls short." Then he grinned, and it was stunning. "You should know, in the spirit of full disclosure, that I was never planning on letting you leave me here alone. I was going to be where you were, even if I was just driving the Zamboni at your fancy school."

I burst out laughing at that image. "I thought you wanted to go to HHU? It was your dream," I reminded him.

He stared down at me, smoothing his thumb over the apple of my cheek. "Dreams change...I have a new dream, and if she wanted to be in California, then I'd be in California."

I was lighter than helium. "A person can't be your dream. What if they disappoint you?"

"Impossible." He leaned in and kissed me lightly, brushing his lips over mine. "I know everything about you, good, bad, and ugly, and you know everything about me...there is nothing you could ever do, or say, or feel that would disappoint me. It's impossible."

What could I say to that?

His lips met mine, and he tugged me against him, lifting me off the ground and spinning me around. He kissed me hard and then pulled back, only to stare at me and kiss me again.

I laughed at his dazed expression, my heart feeling like it was bursting out of my chest.

“Put me down before everyone sees,” I murmured to him.

“Let them. Let everyone know you’re mine and I get to keep you.” He grinned.

“Even my dad?” I wondered.

His lips stretched into a sideways smirk, and he gently lowered me to the ground. “Maybe I’ll put you down, for now.”

“Hmm, good idea. If he finds out, he might make you move out for the rest of the year, or at least put a padlock on my door so you can’t creep in there at night.”

“But you love it when I creep in there,” Cayden protested softly. “I’m just making your dreams come true.”

“Let’s not explain that to my parents,” I laughed.

Cayden shrugged. “I can move in with Beckett if it’s a problem. Us dating and living together, I mean. I don’t want to hide it from anyone, including your parents.”

“Seriously?”

He nodded. “Seriously. I’ve never had very good parental figures in my life. I don’t want to start out on the wrong foot with my future in-laws,” he said with perfect seriousness.

I smacked his chest, shocked and thrilled at the same time. “You’re crazy.”

“Absolutely certifiable.”

He hauled me against him again, his hands sinking into my ass, and I squirmed in his grip. Jesus, he was rock-hard, right there in the middle of the parking lot with people drifting past, staring at us.

“Have I told you how good my jersey looks on you? I can’t wait until it’s the only thing you have on. Wear it to bed tonight without panties, Freckles.”

I pushed at his chest, heat making my face turn pink. “Okay, time to go to the party before you get us in trouble.”

He grinned in a lighthearted, truly happy way I’d never quite seen from him before.

He handed me the spare helmet, and I pulled it on. In the few weeks I’d known Cayden, my entire world had changed. I’d felt more and done more in that short time than in all the years before it. Sometimes life was like that. People came into your world who forced change. Cayden would always be a force of nature who had blown my life apart at the seams, and yet the new one I’d built in the aftermath of his destruction was a life I wanted. One I was proud of.

I hopped on the back of the bike, and he guided my arms around him. Life had lost its predictable safety and sometimes felt like riding along a dark highway with only the moon overhead, my arms trailing in the air.

Terrifyingly free.

But I wasn’t scared anymore.

“Can you take the long way?” I asked him.

His hand slid over mine. “With you, Freckles? Anytime.”

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Lily


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EPILOGUE

6 months later

WHEN THE HELLIONS OF HADE HARBOR HIGH won Nationals, the party at Beckett's house was like nothing I'd ever seen before. If I'd thought that Beckett had been over the top before, it was nothing compared to now. A circus theme had descended over the house, and I could barely recognize the people from school in their elaborate costumes.

There were trapeze artists hanging from the upper stair levels, fire-eaters, and contortionists wandering through the party. The noise in the main house was deafening, and I was pretty sure the entire town knew about the party and didn't care one bit. The Hellions were finally champions again. I was pretty sure that the rest of Hade Harbor was celebrating just as hard.

"Hey, Lily, truth or dare," Marcus called to me. Although the entire senior class of HHH was in the main house, or maybe because of it, the Ice Gods were in their usual spot in the pool house, which was also Cayden's place these days. After a long talk with my dad, Cayden had suggested living with Beckett, so our relationship didn't make my parents uncomfortable.

I shook my head at the Ice God playboy. "Nope, I'm not playing."

Cayden's arms tightened around me. I was sitting on his lap. Sitting might be a generous term for the sprawl of my body on top of his, but I was past

caring.

Marcus rolled his eyes. “Come on. I wouldn’t give you a hard dare.”

I shook my head firmly, and he turned back to the rest of the students, most of whom were puck bunnies who were hanging on his every word.

In the corner, Beckett sat in his usual spot, smoking moodily and staring out at the pool. Asher and Eve were nowhere to be seen, but she’d promised she’d stop by at some point.

“Truth or dare, Freckles,” Cayden’s deep voice murmured in my ear.

“Hmm, dare,” I replied recklessly. The game was over, Cayden was a star player, officially, and had a full ride to HHU lined up. And he wasn’t the only one. My offer from HHU had been more than generous, and I couldn’t wait to hit the famous campus in the fall, dive into my classes, and immerse myself in college life as the leaves changed all around us. There was nowhere like Hade Harbor, and I’d never regretted staying, not even for a second.

I was right where I was meant to be.

“Dare? I’m so happy to hear you say that,” Cayden muttered. There was a wicked note to his voice that sent heat rushing through me. “I dare you not to make a sound.”

“What?” I wondered, as Cayden reached for the wide cashmere throw sitting on the chair next to us. “I’m not cold,” I protested mildly as he draped it over us. It was summer, and graduation was just around the corner. It was warm in the pool house, and I had on a short denim skirt. Awareness prickled over me as Cayden caught my earlobe between his teeth and bit down, tugging it just enough to send even more heat rolling through me.

“I know that, Freckles. You’re the hottest thing I’ve ever seen, and will ever see, and you’re all mine,” he murmured in my ear, flexing his hips up so I felt how hard he was beneath me. With our bodies safely hidden beneath the blanket, his hand slid up my bare thigh, heading straight between my legs.

“Remember the dare. Don’t make a sound.”

His fingers delved into my panties and over my slit.

Oh. Oh.

With the rest of the room occupied with playing truth or dare, watching a replay of their own game on TV, or brooding, no one glanced our way as Cayden slowly fingered me beneath the blanket, right in front of them.

His fingers knew every single inch of my body. He'd touched it all, kissed it all, and marked it all in some way. Now, he unerringly sank two long fingers inside me, while his thumb went to work on my clit. I shuddered, my body responding to his touch with ease. I had a Pavlovian response to this man's hands. He touched me so often, got me off so much, even the brush of his fingers in the general vicinity of my cunt was enough to have me barreling toward an orgasm. A muscle memory that he had spent months training.

"Cayden, someone might realize," I muttered.

He pinched my thigh, and I bit down a gasp.

"Your dare was to be quiet, remember?" His tone was full of enjoyment, and his hand had stopped moving. Suddenly, nothing mattered more than getting his hand to move again.

I nodded, holding my tongue, and after a long pause, he moved again, finger-fucking me, while I fought the urge to writhe on his lap. Fuck, I would not last long like this.

He pressed his face into my neck and his chest expanded as he inhaled deeply. "Fuck, you smell amazing. Don't utter a single word until I say so, or I'll spank your pretty little ass bright red before I fuck you in Beck's shower, got it?"

His words only made me wetter. Playing with Cayden was everything I hadn't known was missing from my life until a year ago. I'd play with him any day.

He brought me right to the edge just like that, his finger sunk deep. If I listened closely, I could hear my wetness sucking up his fingers every time he thrust them into me.

“Hey, Lily,” Marcus called again. “Settle this for us, will you?” He turned to me just as Cayden’s hand sped up.

I stiffened, fighting the fierce heat in my face as I met Marcus’s eyes.

He narrowed his in return, watching Cayden and I suspiciously. I was totally covered. All Marcus could see were various lumps of unidentified limbs under the throw, and yet, from the wicked smile he gave us, I knew he suspected something.

“Never mind, I’ll ask you later, you filthy animals,” he laughed and turned away, just as Cayden hit that spot inside me that made me weak every time. I pretended to bite my nails and bit down on my fingers.

“That’s my good girl, coming hard on my hand, and not letting anyone know. You’re soaking my jeans, Freckles...drenching me. I hope you plan on taking me up to Beckett’s shower and cleaning up the mess you made,” Cayden murmured in my ear, tipping me over the edge.

I stiffened when I came, biting down a yelp, and crushing Cayden’s hand between my legs with my thighs. The bastard didn’t stop there, though. He finger-fucked me through it, drawing out the pleasure without end.

“Cade, man! Great game tonight.” Tyler had entered the pool house. He wandered over to us and held out a fist to Cayden. Like an utter madman, Cayden held out his free hand, and bumped Tyler’s fist. The two had become close since they’d both been scouted for HHU. Tyler would be an HHU Hellion next year along with Cayden. Tyler stood over us, talking about a specific play in the final that had sealed the win, as I came and came.

My body pulsed all around Cayden’s hand, and I was trembling with the effort of not making a sound. I couldn’t meet Tyler’s eye, though he seemed to have no idea that I was currently coming, right there on my boyfriend’s lap, in front of the entire room.

“Lil, are you ok? You look flushed,” Tyler said after a moment, as I drifted back down to the world.

I opened my mouth to say something, just as I remembered I wasn’t supposed to break my silence. I didn’t have permission yet. While I stared

at Tyler, Cayden gently pulled his fingers from me.

"Is she? We'd better get some air," he said, subtly pulling my skirt down and then tossing the blanket aside. I jumped off his lap like it was on fire. He grabbed my hand before I could get even a step away.

His blue eyes sparkling with mischief. "You wanna get some air, Freckles?"

I swallowed the knot of frustration and want in my throat, and simply nodded.

Cayden moved to stand before me. He was hard as hell, and it was pretty obvious, but he didn't seem the least bit embarrassed as he stretched his delicious body. He brought the hand that had gotten me off to his lips and sucked on a finger.

"I don't know what you two are up to, but I feel single as fuck right now," Tyler grumbled, giving us a grin before ambling away.

We headed outside to the pool area, which sat between the pool house and the main house. Cayden wrapped his arm around my shoulders.

"You taste—fuck. I'm going to need you to sit on my face before we even make it to the shower," he muttered to me as we headed toward the house.

"Any objections?" he teased, enjoying that fact that he hadn't allowed me to speak yet. *Stupid dare.*

I pulled us to a stop beside the pool. What a difference six months had made. Standing there, in the warm Maine evening, in the heart of summer, I felt overwhelmed with happiness.

Cayden brushed my hair out of my face, and I grabbed his arm. It was the one that his former foster father had made him cut. The long slash he'd cut that night was still there when I ran my fingers over it, but it wasn't really visible. The ink that surrounded it had covered it too well. That long straight cut Cayden had dug into his arm to stop Uncle Jack from hurting me was now the first letter of a word.

Lily.

He'd told me, while the tattoo gun had buzzed, that it was exactly what he'd intended to write. My name sat right there, on the Hellions' star player's forearm, for the world to see. The tattoo had been the impetus for Cayden moving out. My parents might have been okay with the idea of us dating, but a tattoo of my name at the grand old age of eighteen had freaked them out. They were slowly recovering. There weren't going to be any teen pregnancies or shotgun weddings anytime soon for us. Cayden was on track to get drafted by the NHL, and I was on course to study the subject of my dreams and later, kick ass in the science field. We didn't have to give up our dreams to be together. We were going to achieve every single one together.

"Have something to say, Freckles?" Cayden goaded me. His wicked smirk made my heart flutter in my chest.

I nodded, and he leaned in immediately, his hands coming to brush my hips.

"You can break the dare, if you need to...I'll think up a good forfeit for you," he murmured, anticipation already curling in his satisfied tone. "Maybe that matching tattoo...my name stamped on your ass so no one can ever get any ideas about who it belongs to."

I glared at him, and he laughed, and tapped the skin just over my heart. "How about here? Would that be better? This is mine too, isn't it?"

My breath caught. His eyes stared unflinchingly into mine. My heart felt like it swelled three sizes in my chest, so I did the only thing I could to get my balance back.

I nodded slowly and leaned up on my toes to brush a kiss against his lips, my hands falling to his chest.

Then I pushed as hard as I could.

His face morphed into shock for a second as he fell toward the clear, glassy surface of the water, just before his hand snaked out and grabbed my wrist.

"No!" I cried, as he yanked me into the pool with him.

The cool water rushed over us both, shocking me and making me feel alive at the same time.

“You-,” I pushed at his broad chest as soon as I surfaced, and he only laughed and pulled me toward him.

“Me what?” He teased me.

“Hey! We’re in the pool already?” It was Marcus’s voice, and it was the only warning we had before he cannonballed into the water beside us.

“Lil!” Eve’s voice was next. She was standing on the edge of the pool, her hand clamped over her mouth, eyes wide with surprise. Beckett wandered out of the pool house beside her and approached the pool. When he got closer to her, he suddenly lunged out and grabbed her around the waist, before walking them both over the edge and into the water beside us.

Eve surfaced after a moment, spluttering, and I swam toward her.

“What are you crazy people doing?!” She demanded, smoothing her dark hair out of her face. She cast an unreadable look at Beckett as he swam past us. “I hope HHU is ready for all of us.”

I laughed, my eyes catching Cayden’s. That same sentiment might have bothered me not too long ago. A new place, new classes, new rules—it would all have been a source of anxiety. Not anymore, though.

“Don’t worry, we’ll work it out. We’ll be together,” I reminded Eve, pulling her into a hug. “There’s nothing we can’t work out.”

Marcus appeared to chase Eve, and she shrieked and dove under the water to escape him. Cayden popped up beside me, his hands gripping my waist, and turned us into the wall. “Hilarious, Freckles, but you do know that technically, you failed the dare. I have to think of what to do with you.”

I shrugged, biting my lip in anticipation of what Cayden’s filthy imagination would come up with.

He grinned. “Hey Beck, you mind if we use your shower to freshen up?” he called over his shoulder.

“Knock yourself out,” Beckett called back.

Cayden’s grin only became more wicked as he leaned in. “You hear that? Now, you’re mine. And there’s nothing you can do about it, just the way

you like it. Now, and forever.”

Lily has a mask fantasy in her dream journal...
[Grab the scene](#) where Cayden acts it out

We aren’t done with the Hellions yet! Check out Beckett and Eve’s story in
[Dark Delights](#).

If you want to see more of Nikolai Chernov, new bratva resident of Hade Harbor - he has his own [duet here!](#)

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About the Author

I'm obsessed with cats, coffee, and anti-heroes just the right side of insane.

I write dark and dirty romance with the alpha-holes of your most filthy nightmares.

I only write SAFE stories, there is never a place for another woman in my hero's sights, once he's caught the scent of the heroine, and there will always be, no matter how dark and twisted the story might be... a HEA guarantee xx

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MAFIA

Vicious Vengeance Duet

Wicked Heir

Savage Throne

Made of Mayhem Duet

Malevolent King

Runaway Queen

Original Sin Duet

Unholy Vows

Twisted Testament

BULLY

Hellions of Hade Harbor

Bad Intentions

Dark Delights

Wicked Ends

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